

USA Today Bestselling Author

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NEVER

let
go



SOMERSET
HARBOR

MACMILLAN BROTHERS BOOK 3

NEVER LET GO

A SOMERSET HARBOR NOVEL

CHARLOTTE BYRD

CHARLOTTE BYRD

dangerously addictive

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About Charlotte Byrd

Also by Charlotte Byrd

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PRAISE FOR CHARLOTTE BYRD

“Twisted, gripping story full of heat, tension and action. Once again we are caught up in this phenomenal , dark passionate love story that is full of mystery, secrets, suspense and intrigue that continues to keep you on edge!”
(Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

“Must read!” (Goodreads) ☆☆☆☆☆

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“Just WOW...no one can weave a story quite like Charlotte. This series has me enthralled, with such great story lines and characters.” (Goodreads)
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“Charlotte Byrd is one of the best authors I have had the pleasure of reading, she spins her storylines around believable characters, and keeps you on the edge of your seat. Five star rating does not do this book/series justice.”
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“Charlotte Byrd is a brilliant writer. I've read loads and I've laughed and cried. She writes a balanced book with brilliant characters. Well done!” (Goodreads) ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

“Hot, steamy, and a great storyline.” (Goodreads) ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

“My oh my....Charlotte has made me a fan for life.” (Goodreads)
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“Wow. Just wow. Charlotte Byrd leaves me speechless and humble... It definitely kept me on the edge of my seat. Once you pick it up, you won't put it down.” (Goodreads) ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

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ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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Not into you Duet
Not into you
Still not into you

Standalone Novels
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Debt
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ABOUT NEVER LET GO

Meet Beckett Macmillan, the mastermind behind the construction of Somerset Harbor Resort, and Cole Kendrick, his best friend and site foreman. They've been through thick and thin together, but when Sophie Kendrick, Cole's annoying little sister, returns to town as an emergency room doctor, everything changes.

A workplace accident brings Beckett and Sophie back into each other's lives, but this time, it's different. Sophie blames Beckett for her brother's injury, and the tension between them ignites a spark in dry timber. But amidst the anger and resentment, something unexpected begins to bloom - a connection neither of them saw coming.

Cole, the protective big brother, has always wanted to shield Sophie from Beckett's playboy reputation. He knows the risks involved with a man like Beckett, and he won't stand by while his sister gets hurt.

Meanwhile, Beckett, who kept his distance from Sophie out of respect for his friendship with Cole, finds himself drawn to her in a way he never expected. Long-buried feelings resurface as he sees her in a whole new light, and the once-annoying little sister becomes an irresistible woman.

As Beckett visits his injured friend in the hospital, he can't help but connect with Sophie while she practices medicine. Forced proximity brings them closer together, and the sparks between them ignite a passion that neither can

deny.

But can they overcome their past and the disapproval of a protective brother to find love in the most unexpected of places?

- Brother's Best Friend
- Enemies to Lovers
- Forced Proximity

Join Beckett and Sophie as they navigate the twists and turns of fate, battling old grudges and newfound desires. "Never Let Go" will keep you captivated from start to finish, with emotions that will tug at your heartstrings. Grab your copy today and embark on a rollercoaster of drama, steamy scenes and an unforgettable story.

BECKETT

“**T**hat’ll do it,” Cole says, slipping his yellow work gloves off.

I smile and nod, while I look over the jobsite and take off my hard hat. Months of work have gone into the foundation of my family’s newest venture. A resort, nice enough to rival the biggest names in the industry. Now, with the underground piping and electrical completed, it’ll be on to the next phase. But for the moment, I take it all in. “Hard to believe it’s actually happening.”

Cole laughs. “With your brothers at the helm of the project, you mean?”

“Yeah, maybe.” I love my brothers, but Beau and Cormac make things complicated. It’s not their fault—it’s just their nature. Thankfully, I get to deal with my best friend on a day-to-day basis. Aside from my brothers, Cole Kendrick is the best guy I know. He’s also our site foreman. My throat is parched. “I think we need to have a meeting about the hydration issues we’ve been having. Could be detrimental if we don’t get it under control.”

He smirks. “Cold ones are in the back of the truck.”

I grin and pop his tailgate down. There, in the pickup bed, is his ratty old red cooler. It was older than the both of us, but it kept beer icy cold. “You’re a god among men, Cole.”

He laughs. “Don’t forget that when you’re four beers in, and I’m cutting you off.”

I toss him one and crack mine open. “Why would you go and do something mean like that?”

“Because you still have to drive home, genius.”

I shrug and smile before hopping onto the tailgate. Nothing quite as good as a frosty beer at the end of a long day. Or in the middle of a day when we finish early. Cole leans against the tailgate next to me. It’s been a week since I saw his sister at the job site, and I’m inclined to ask him about her. But I can’t. He already shut that down when he saw me eyeing her. *Maybe if I go at him sideways about it...* “So, now that this is all over and you won’t be as busy with work, we should see about getting you a girl.”

He laughs. “What?”

“You’ve been single a while, man. When was the last time you even had a girlfriend?”

“Shit, I don’t know. It was Cassie. So, not too long ago.”

“Cassie was three years ago.”

He shrugs and knocks back his beer. “I’m not exactly in a rush about it.”

“We are not getting any younger, Cole.”

“I’m twenty-nine. I have time. So, do you.”

But I shake my head at him. “The older I get, the faster time seems to go. Doesn’t feel like I have time.”

“Is that why you keep dating every girl you see?”

“That’s not true—”

“Bullshit,” he teases. “Bet you can’t even remember the last one’s name.”

I roll my eyes. “Jessa.”

He laughs. “Uh, try again.”

Shit. “Tessa.”

He laughs harder the second time. “I knew you didn’t remember—”

“Teresa.”

By the third name, he’s clutching his stomach from laughing so hard. “Damn, man. I thought you mighta had it that time.”

“Give me a hint.”

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

“Clarissa?”

“If you can tell me what she looked like, I’ll give you a hint.”

“This is ridiculous. She was a blonde—”

He shakes his head again.

“Had blonde streaks in her brown hair—”

He coughs, “Redhead.”

“Oh, right, right. Wait—her name *was* Jessa!”

“Jessica.”

“You dick!” I punch his shoulder as he laughs. “I was close! And in all fairness to me, we only went out a couple of times while I was also seeing a girl named Teresa.”

“Tamara.”

“That’s what I said. And Tamara had the blonde streaks in her brown hair.”

“It was black.”

I roll my eyes at him. “How do you keep track of all the women I date?”

“It’s easy to treat women like human beings, Beckett.”

“I *do* treat them like human beings.”

“And then you never call them again.”

Huffing, I crush my can and grab another. “I believe in the power of positive thinking. We have a good time, and then I’m positive I never want to see

them again. Is that so wrong?"

"Some would argue yes."

"Good thing none of those people are here right now."

He laughs. "Look, it's fine as long as everyone is on the same page."

"And I learned that lesson the hard way in high school, so now, I make it very clear to my dates what I am interested in them for. We go out, have fun, and that's that. It doesn't have to be more than that."

"Right. Which is why Ivy Hanson is not allowed within a five-hundred foot radius—"

"Not my fault if a woman can't take rejection. I told her exactly what I wanted with her, and she had to go and get all stalker about it."

Cole grabs another. "I agree that she's the one who made the bad call on that —"

"Thank you."

"But if you could keep it in your pants for five minutes, you'd attract a lot fewer stalkers."

"I only have one."

"Gillian Martinez."

I laugh. "That was high school. Doesn't count."

"Keep telling yourself that." He stretches and thinks for a moment.

This conversation hasn't gone the way I wanted it to by a long shot. "You know, I am capable of more than a one-night stand."

"Sure. I remember one girl lasting at least two nights."

I throw my empty beer can at the back of his head, and he erupts into laughter again. "What I was going to say is, for the right girl, I could be a stand-up guy."

"All evidence to the contrary?"

“Seriously. I could.”

“I’m sure you could. The question is, *would* you?”

I nod. “Yeah. She’d have to be special. Hot as hell. Smart. Like *really*, smart. Funny. A real—”

“And *you’re* her prize for being perfect?”

I slug his shoulder again. “You are on a roll today, aren’t you, funny guy?”

“I’m just saying, it sounds like you want a perfect woman, and perfect doesn’t exist. And you can’t expect her to be perfect when you’re not.”

“Sure I am.” I grin at him.

He laughs, shaking his head again. “You’re the brother I never had, but you’re not perfect, Beckett. You can show a woman a good time, but I don’t think you’ve ever had breakfast with one.”

“So, breakfast is the only thing keeping me from being perfect? Or is there more to your theory?”

“No need to be defensive—”

“No, I’m interested, Cole. What would make me a perfect boyfriend? From your perspective.”

Cole scrubs his hand over his face, trying to sort through his thoughts. “Okay, breakfast, for starters. Remembering her first *and last* name. Good boyfriends also remember things like birthdays, but they forget age. They take a girl to a movie because she would like it, not because he wants to see it. He opens doors for her—I know it’s old-fashioned, but plenty of women still like that. He pays—”

“I’ve got you there—I always pay.”

“I was going to say he pays *attention* to her. The subtle things. The things no one else notices. He does because she is the best thing he could pay attention to.”

“Oh.”

He crosses his arms. “Like, I had a girlfriend a million years ago, Talia Brigham. Remember her?”

“I can’t remember my own. You think I remember yours?”

“Right, well, she was one of those quiet girls. It was hard to get to know her. But I noticed, when we were watching a documentary set in Georgia, the interviewees had daisies growing on their front step. Now, I’d gotten her roses before, but she hardly noticed them. When she saw the daisies on the screen, her face lit up. So, a week later, I surprised her with daisies...” He grins at the memory. “And she surprised me by showing me how her yoga classes had been going. Find someone who does yoga is what I’m saying, Beckett.”

I laugh. “Right. I’ll add yoga to the list of perfect traits for her to have.”

“My point is, pay attention to her. Treat her nicely. Do things for her. The response you get will blow your mind.”

“I’d settle for her blowing—”

“Hey, boss,” Chuck says, as he joins us. He’d worked as our crew chief for the cement guys, but for the day, he’d helped with the plumbing. A real jack-of-all-trades. “The seals are in place. We’re good to go.”

“Thanks, Chuck. Want one?”

“Nah, I’m heading out with the guys. You coming?”

I shake my head. I still need to trick Cole into being cool with me dating his sister. “Thanks, but I’ll take a raincheck.”

“Suit yourself. Cole?”

“Heading home after this.”

He nods, then leaves.

“So, say I pay attention to my perfect woman...”

“Yeah?”

“What then?”

He smiles to himself. “Then you thank me for making it all happen for you.”

I chuckle. “I plan to.”

-

Chapter Two-Sophie

THE HOSPITAL CAFETERIA is swamped like always, but Hope and I skirt through the crowds like experts. Without her, I'd be lost at Somerset Harbor Memorial Hospital. I was lucky that she took me under her wing my first week here. She had seen me struggling through the lines in the cafeteria and took mercy on me.

Being residents, our lunch time is earlier than everyone else, and that is the deciding factor on which line to get into. Thanks to her, I know to avoid the sandwich line entirely. This early in the day, they skimp on meat and cheese to make their supplies last throughout lunch. But the salad bar ladies pile it on, because no one goes to them before noon, and they want to run out of food before the real rush shows up.

We grab bottled coffees from the coolers instead of hitting the coffee bar, and we're in and out in under five minutes. Which is good, since we only have a half an hour to get to the cafeteria, choke it all down, and get back to the ED. Assuming they don't page us back early.

SHMH is a small town hospital, and for some reason, they think that means they can run the place with a barebones staff. I've been here for almost a month and it still shocks me how understaffed and small the hospital is.

The Emergency Department has only twelve bays, which are usually enough for Somerset Harbor, but every Friday night, we end up with patients in the halls and nowhere near enough staff for each patient. Which means we are almost always paged back early. From meals, from breaks, from home. Becoming an ED doctor means sacrifice, and I knew that going into it. But that doesn't make it easier.

Flipping open the white Styrofoam container of salad, I sigh at my food. "I don't think I remember what hot food tastes like."

Hope laughs. "Pretty sure I don't remember what sleep feels like."

"Oh god. Sleep. I remember sleep. It was great."

"Yeah. I shouldn't have tried to avoid all those naps when I was in kindergarten."

I snicker. "Same here. Sleep is wasted on the young."

"Who was your favorite patient so far today?"

I grab a forkful of lettuce, trying to stab a piece of chicken and missing it. "Probably the kid with the toy car up his nose."

"Foreign object cases are always fun."

"Except his mom was almost in hysterics. I kept trying to tell her the car couldn't go up any further, but she was convinced it was going to get lodged in his brain when I was digging around up there for it." I roll my eyes.

"You?"

"Hmm," she says, thinking while she picks at her salad. "Haven't had anything good today. No major traumas, no fun foreign object cases. Not even a false labor. Just a fender bender, a chest pain that turned out to be nothing, and a girl who collapsed at school."

I perked up at the last one. "Anything interesting there?"

But she shakes her head. "Maybe for Psych. Turns out, she didn't want to take a test, so she faked it."

I laugh. "Wow. That's different."

“It’s the third time she’s done it, apparently.”

“Kids.” I shrug and pile more food in. “It’s wild. I always thought that if I worked hard and got good grades and graduated at the top of my class in med school, I’d be treated to long lunches and BMWs and spending sprees in the city. Maybe that girl has the right idea. Collapse and skip your tests. Why not?”

“And give up the chance to work ninety-hour weeks for what works out to be minimum wage, while you’re a resident?”

“Only to *hope* you get hired on...? Yeah, I—”

“THE HOSPITAL WILL HIRE you after residency, Sophie. You grew up here. It’s us New Yorkers who have to worry about the small town politics.”

I shake my head. “I grew up in Somerset Harbor, but my family is not one of the well-to-do families around here. We Kendricks are all working class. My dad worked construction for decades before he died, and now my brother does, too. That’s why I had to work so hard in school—I needed the scholarships. We couldn’t afford something as expensive as med school.” I pause for a moment. “I think they’ll hire *you* because Cardiology hates you and the Administration hates Cardiology.”

She laughs. “If Cardiology wanted me to be nice, he wouldn’t have yelled at me for calling him for a consult.”

“But you committed the sin of calling him after he got home and had taken his pants off,” I say facetiously, “how dare you!”

She giggles and I join her. “Steve will never forgive me for sharing that minor detail with everyone.”

“Screw him. If he hadn’t told you that over the phone, you never would have known.”

“It’s almost as if people can’t be polite enough to wait for their heart attacks until Steve has his pants on. They should apologize between their chest compressions.” She laughs again, then sighs. “I apologized to him, but when

he kept blathering on the phone about me putting him out, and I reminded him that people were dying around me so subsequently I didn't care about putting him out, that did not help."

"Maybe not, but it was fun to see the look on his face when everyone kept offering him pants."

She laughs. "Yeah. That was a good week."

I check my watch. "Only ten hours to go, before we get to sleep for four hours and do it all over again."

Hope's head drops and her long black hair almost falls into her salad. "Don't remind me. Let's talk about something more pleasant."

"Like what? Seminars?"

"No, something to take my mind off of this place. Something personal. Like, dating. When was the last time you went out?"

I laugh. In my best old lady voice, I tell her, "It's been eighty-four years..."

She rolls her eyes. "No, seriously. When was the last time you had a date?"

"Damn, uh..." I have to think. Hard. That's probably not a good sign. "My love life is pretty much a non-entity at this point. What about you?"

"Just me and my vibrator, but I don't think he counts."

I snort a laugh. "Hey, at least he's not going to disappoint you."

"True."

"God, I think the last time I had sex was a year ago. How sad is that?"

"It's not great—"

"What's sadder is, the last time I was in a relationship was in college. Which feels like it happened during the Jurassic Period."

Hope sighs. "I remember dating. That's where you shower and put on clean clothes and a guy takes you to a fancy restaurant, right?"

"If I remember correctly, that is the gist of it. But they might have changed

dating since the last time I did it. Not sure what the kids are into these days.”

She giggles, then frowns. “And it’s not like guys our age are lining up to date doctors. We work too many unpredictable hours.”

“So then,” I close my salad box and chug my bottled coffee, “I suppose it’s a lifetime of battery-operated boyfriends for us, huh?”

“Batteries? What is this, the nineties? Mine is rechargeable.”

“I should get a rechargeable one. Mine takes one of those weird flat batteries that are impossible to find.”

“Oh my god, that’s such a pain in the—”

Our phones go off at the same time. “That’s not good.” Checking my phone, I sigh. A three-car accident, which in Somerset Harbor, might as well be a twenty-car pile-up. “Looks like we’re on.” We rush to toss our containers and head back to the ED. “If you’re lucky, maybe your next boyfriend will be in this car wreck.”

Hope laughs. “Oh maybe. If he can’t walk, he can’t leave me, so I guess that’s a plus.”

I giggle. “I think this place is warping our sense of humor.”

“Oh, just wait. You know, it only gets worse as the day goes on.”

“Our sense of humor or the cases?” I scan my badge and shove through the doors.

She smiles. “Both.”

Chapter Three-Beckett

“So, uh, how is Sophie doing at the hospital?” I ask as innocently as possible.

“Good. I never see her—she works too much and too hard—but she says she likes it.”

“She was always the smart one between the two of you.”

He chuckles. “Not so sure about that. I’m out here, enjoying a perfect day with some beer, while she’s probably sewing some guy’s arm back together or something. Pretty sure I’m the smart one at the moment.”

“Fair point.” I screw up my courage to build into it. “Haven’t really seen her much since she got out of school, so that makes sense if she’s working all the time. Bet she doesn’t get to go out much.”

Cole shakes his head. “But she was never really the type, either. Sophie’s a good kid. Only ever dated a few people. And she’s not into yoga.”

“Huh?”

He levels a look at me. “I know where you were heading with all that, and I’m gonna cut you off right there. You are not the trouble she needs.”

“Never said I was. Can’t a guy just ask about his friend’s sister without it being more than—”

“Beckett.”

I huff. “Okay fine. You caught me checking her out once. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal if you think I’m about to let her get involved with someone who treats women like...” He pauses and squints.

“Someone who treats women like what?”

“Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“The high-pitched—”

Suddenly, something booms at the opposite end of the job site. We run as fast as we can toward the sound. Most of the time, construction sites aren’t eventful. Of course there are accidents, but it’s usually something like an electrocution or a struck-by. Explosions are not commonplace. So when we heard that, it was sheer adrenaline that got us across the job site.

Being faster than Cole, I get there first. My boots hit a deep puddle before I figure out what happened. Water gushes out from the edges of a cement slab meant to be a part of the foundation. Chuck’s seal had been applied wrong, and it had blocked the flow, causing a pipe to burst. Prior to bursting, it had leaked beneath the slab, as well. Water is everywhere. I snap, “Fuck!”

I’m already looking for the shut-off by the time Cole gets there. He huffs at the mess. “You have got to be kidding me!”

“Looks like we aren’t getting out early today.”

“Fucking Chuck,” he grumbles. Just as he turns, he slips on the wet hardpack and his foot slides out from under him. He whacks his head on the gushing pipe as he goes down.

“Cole, quit fucking around. You alright?”

But he doesn’t say anything.

“Hey, man. You—”

Blood pours in a steady stream into the rushing water around his neck. His face isn't in the water, so I'm not moving him.

I pull out my phone and dial 911 as I crouch next to him. I shout, “Help!” to any of the guys within earshot.

“911, what's your—”

“I'm at the construction site for the MacMillan Resort. There's been an accident. Head injury. He's bleeding pretty bad.”

They ask for more location information and I pass my phone to one of the guys, so I can apply pressure to the gash on the back of Cole's head. But it doesn't seem to help. The blood just keeps coming.

Nick says, “Turn him over so you can—”

“Do not fucking move him! His neck might be broken!”

“Alright, alright,” he says, stepping back.

The seconds tick by like hours and blinks. It all happened so fast. The guys helplessly hover nearby. One of them turns the water off at the shut-off, and I'm grateful, but I can't speak. It's almost like I'm not in my body anymore—like I'm watching this thing happen to someone else's best friend. Someone else's best friend's blood running over someone else's hand. This can't be happening.

My heart hasn't beat since he fell. I'm sure of it. The words choke in my throat. “Cole, you can't do this to me, man. I'm gonna need you to get your shit together right the fuck now! You hear me? We still have a lot of trouble to get into, and I can't do that if you're not with me, so snap out of it! This shit is not an option. You get me?”

But he just lays there. Breathing. But not moving. Eyes focused on nothing at all.

An ambulance siren sounds in the distance, and I'm angry it's not closer right now. That he's not in the hospital with doctors and nurses and life-saving equipment this instant. How can they not be here yet? Why the fuck does it

take this long to get emergency help in a town with a handful of stop signs? This is ridiculous! I want to scream when the ambulance pulls up, to shout that they took too long and they're killing him!

But I don't.

The EMTs come to us and I answer their rapid-fire questions as they work. They brace his neck and carefully, yet brutally, lift him onto their stretcher. They let me pile into the back of their vehicle, but I feel too big in such a small space. Like it'll be my fault if they can't reach something they need to save him. The tiny cushion I'm sitting on feels fragile—like I'm crushing it. I've never felt so detrimental and out of place in my life.

The EMT in the back does his best to keep Cole breathing and keep me calm, but I mumble, "I'm fine."

"That's good. You said his name is Cole, right?"

Numbly, I nod.

"Cole, I know you can hear me, buddy. We're gonna take you to the hospital just to get you checked out. Nothing to worry about—just a routine couple of X-rays and they'll get you patched up in no time. Just need you to stay calm and keep breathing like a champ, okay?"

What is he talking about? This is way worse than needing an X-ray. I mutter, "I don't think he can answer you."

He smiles at me like I'm a confused child. "No, but it's likely he can hear us. So, we're gonna keep talking to him for now. No one likes to be ignored when they're in the room."

"I don't think he's here right now. At all."

The EMT says, "All the same, we're going to talk *to* him. Not *about* him."

"Oh. Okay." But then I see his blood on my hands and realize I got it on the tiny cushion. "Sorry for the mess."

"Hey, yeah, look in my eyes."

I look up at him.

He passes me a bottle of water. “Don’t worry about the mess. Drink that. Right now.”

“Okay.” I chug the water. It’s abrasively cold. But at that moment, I finally feel my heart beat again. Almost like I’m back in my body. I’m nauseous, too. And dizzy. “I don’t…”

“You look a little green.”

“He’s my best friend.”

The EMT nods. “Keep drinking that. We’re almost there.”

I finish the water as we pull up to the hospital. There’s no place for me to toss the bottle, so I shove it in my pocket. I hope it’s there when Cole wakes up. I’ll get to make a crude joke about having a bottle in my pocket or am I just happy to see him. He’ll roll his eyes and we’ll have a laugh, and the doctors and nurses will probably tell me to stop riling him up. He’ll smile, glad that I’m there to cause trouble.

The rear doors open, and I fight the urge to clutch onto the stretcher. I can’t stop them from taking him—that would be stupid. But I want to scream at him for getting hurt and for making me plan a dumb joke for when he wakes up. He has to wake up so I can tell it to him. *Cole, you have to wake up.*

C hapter Four-Sophie

“GOT A HEAD TRAUMA COMING IN,” Janet says excitedly as she breezes past me for the doors. She’s the best head nurse according to everyone I work with, but all I’ve seen of her is a brusque efficiency that does not equate to a good bedside manner. More than once, I’ve apologized for her to patients who were put out by her style. From what I’ve heard, I’m not the only one. But Janet knows her stuff, and that lets her get away with a lot.

Hope makes a face behind her back. “Better get ready, I guess.”

“At least head injuries are interesting,” I note.

“Sometimes, they’re a little too interesting, and we have to call in specialists...” Her lip curls when she says *specialists*.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“One of the neurologists we usually call for head injuries is an ex of mine, and I really hope we don’t need him to come here. It’s never good.”

“He’s not good at his job?”

She sighs. “That’s not the problem.”

“You two hate each other that much?”

She sighs. “Not exactly.”

“You miss him?”

“No. Absolutely not. But if we call for a specialty neuro consult, and we get Dr. Maynard, just make sure I don’t wander off with him. Can’t seem to stay out of the housekeeping closet when he’s around.”

I pause for a flash. “You mean, you two hook up in the—”

“Don’t say it out loud. It’s like Beetlejuice. You say it, and it’ll happen.”

I snicker as the double doors fly open. EMTs are always barging into things—understandably—but I think they do it mostly for the drama. Every EMT I’ve met at this hospital loves to have all eyes on them. Drama queens, every single one of them.

The patient is on the ambulance cot, his neck in a cervical collar and his head in the immobilizer. Every item is covered in blood. Head traumas always bleed like fountains, but this is excessive. This case is going to be more exciting than I thought. “Slip and fall head trauma on the job site, struck his head on a water pipe.”

I nod, and just as I’m about to tell them where to take him, something strikes me when I look into the head immobilizer. Oh, God. My breath catches in my chest, and the world stops for a blink before it swirls around me. “That... that’s my brother.”

Hope blurts, “What?”

“Cole!” I shout frantically. “Cole, wake up!”

But he doesn’t listen to me. Because he can’t.

Hot tears rush down my face and onto the immobilizer. “Cole! Get up!”

Strong arms pull me back, and I struggle in them while he’s rolled away from me. Suddenly, Hope is in my face, and the arms let go. “Sophie! Sophie! I need you to come with me!”

“I have to help—”

“This isn’t your case anymore.”

“What?” I look past her toward where they took my brother.

“Hey!” She snaps her fingers in my face.

I blink at her.

“He’s your brother. You cannot work on his case. You know this.”

Vague memories of rules and regulations come to mind, and I don’t give a flying fuck about any of them. “He is my brother—”

“And how can you help him while you’re crying?”

“I…” She’s right. I know she’s right. But I want to help.

“Hope, get in here!” Janet shouts from Cole’s room.

“Go,” I whisper to her. “I’ll stay out.”

She zips away, sneakers squeaking on the floor as she runs.

The noise of the ED rushes in around me, like Hope’s presence had held it all back, and now that she is gone, there is nothing to stop it from overwhelming me. Everything is so loud. The lights are too bright. People move too fast. The ED, which had started to feel like home after working there for a month, is now a harsh environment I want to disappear from. And I can’t.

Because Cole looks dead.

The thought guts me, and I’m dizzy. I lean on the nurse’s station for something stable to hold onto. As loud as everything is, when an older nurse asks if I need to sit down, I can hardly hear her. She’s stocky and has a kind face—Lana, I think—and she guides me to the ED Waiting Room. “Dr. Kendrick, just take a seat here, alright?”

“No. It’s not alright. Nothing is.”

She smiles sadly at me. “I’m going to bring you some juice. Wait here.” She toddles off.

I think I’m nodding. But it might be that the world is bouncing. Can’t be sure.

Can't be sure about anything anymore. Cole, my big brother, is...God only knows. Seeing him helpless and unconscious is a shock. I'm in shock. Am I in shock?

Symptoms—tight chest? Check. Shallow breathing? Check. Sick?

I run to the bathroom and vomit, barely making it to the toilet in time. When I finish up, my whole body is shaking. I grip the sides of the sink for stability and try not to heave again. The mirror tells me the depth of it. I am pale as hell. Vomiting so hard left my eyes a little pink, though that might be the crying I can't seem to stop. So, I splash some cold water on my face and try to calm down.

There is no calming down. Not right now. Not until Cole wakes up.

The urge to rush to his side is palpable. But if I do that, it would only slow everyone down. I know better, and I still want to do it. Hope is right to keep me out of there. I would have done the same thing in her shoes. It's the right thing to do. And I hate it.

I hate everything right now.

I wet a paper towel and put it on my neck to cool down or help me feel less sick or both. It's not doing much for me—I'm too unwell for it to help. But it gives me something to do. I need something to do.

When I come out of the bathroom, Lana is there with a cranberry juice. "Here you go—"

"I need a case."

But she shakes her head. "No, you don't. You need to drink this."

"Fuck juice. I need something to do."

"Sophie, you're going to drink this juice. Then you're going to sit in the Waiting Room, alongside all the other patient's families. Because that's what you are right now. The patient's family. You're not a doctor for the rest of the day."

"But I need something to do." My voice shakes when I say it a second time. More tears. God, why can't I stop crying? This isn't like me. It's

embarrassing. *She'll never give me a case if I can't stop crying.*

"Juice. Sit. Now."

"I'll be fine." I wipe my eyes. "See? I'm fine. Give me a case."

But she guides me back to the Waiting Room and opens my juice for me.

"Here."

"Thanks," I tell her numbly and sit.

"Drink."

I huff and knock back half the tiny cup. "Better?"

"It's a start. Promise me you'll stay out of the ED."

I nod. "Yeah."

"If I see you back there—"

"You won't. Not until I'm called."

"Thank you." She rushes back. Without me.

"Sophie," a deep voice says behind me.

I turn, and it's Beckett MacMillan. Cole's boss. His face is worn and grim. I want to punch it.

C hapter Five-Beckett

THE POOR GIRL looks as bad as I feel. I walk around the double-sided waiting room bench and sit next to her. I'm not exactly sure what to say at a time like this. "They made you sit out?"

She only nods.

"Probably the right thing—"

"What happened to my brother?" her voice shakes on every word.

"I'm so sorry, Sophie—"

"Tell me what happened."

"A pipe that was supposed to be sealed off and secured wasn't. The pipe burst under the pressure, and when we ran to see what the noise was, he slipped and hit his head on the pipe."

She gulps. "His hard hat?"

"We thought we were going home early. We took off our hats and were having some beers—"

“And that’s why he’s bleeding out, right? It’s not just head trauma. It’s the alcohol, too...”

“He’s bleeding out?” I ask with a dry throat.

She mumbles, “I knew that was too much blood for a head injury.”

I don’t know what to say. There are no words that will make this better. But I can’t stop myself from trying. “I’m so sorry, Sophie—”

“You should be,” her voice sizzles with rage.

“I am. I can’t tell you how sorry I am—”

“This is all your fault,” she says in disgust. “If you hadn’t been so irresponsible—”

“Wait—”

“Cole wouldn’t be in there trying not to die!”

“Sophie, I’m sorry, but—”

She stands up over me. “It’s your fault, Beckett! You always get Cole into trouble! You always have! Even when you two were boys, you dragged him into scheme after scheme! When you got suspended, Cole was right there with you! Only our family didn’t have the money to get him out of trouble! But you never cared about any of that, did you?”

“You’re upset, I get it—”

“Do you?” She pauses.

“Yeah, I do—”

“Because you never seemed to care about consequences before!”

“Sophie,” I tell her as I stand up, “take a seat.”

“Fuck you, Beckett! I don’t have to listen to you!”

I see the same look on her face as I saw on mine in the bathroom mirror a few minutes ago. She’s angry, and she needs an outlet. She wants to pick a fight, so she has something to do or something to fix. It’s a distraction. Nothing

more. But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt to take the force of her anger.
"You're not alone in this—"

"He's not *your* brother!"

"No, he's not. He's my best friend. He's not my brother, but I *chose* him as my brother—"

"Oh, fuck you! You don't know what this is like! You can walk away! Isn't that what you always do, Beckett? You just walk away anytime things get complicated. You leave women behind like they're nothing to you. And you're gonna do the same to Cole!"

I grit my jaw, trying not to yell at Sophie. It would be shitty of me to yell at her at a time like this, but she's pissing me off. "I'm not going anywhere. I have never left him in a lurch, and I'm not going to start now. Which one of us stayed up with him all night when he had mono and his fever was so bad that he thought he was going to die, huh?"

She scowls. "What?"

"That's right—you were in college. He didn't want to bother you with it, but he was sick for three weeks with mono. I'm the one who brought him food every day. I'm the one who sat up with him all night, while he swore he wasn't gonna make it—"

"Why the hell didn't you bring him to the hospital for that?"

"He didn't want you to find out about it, so he kept trying to pretend he was fine. He didn't want you to interrupt your studies for him."

Her angry face crumbles into tears. "That stupid son-of-a-bitch could have died."

I wrap her in my arms to let her cry it out on my shoulder. But she pushes me back, gently shaking her head. "Okay."

"Can't breathe with you on me." She wipes her eyes. "How bad was his fever, then?"

"Didn't go past a hundred, or I would have brought him here."

“Thanks for taking care of him.”

I nod. “He would have done the same for me. Sophie, I’m not going to abandon Cole. Not ever. Whatever happens from this…” My stomach flips with every possibility. “I’m in it for the long haul. Whatever help he needs, whatever it takes. I’m not going anywhere.”

She takes a deep breath and sits back down, so I do the same. “I just...I just got back into town. Been here less than a month, and now this. I thought I’d have more time with Cole—”

“You will. Don’t start talking like that. We’re not going there.”

“Can’t help it. Comes with the stethoscope.”

I smile, trying not to let my imagination run into dangerous territory.

“Understood. Look, I know this is a nightmare right now, and it will be for a while. Do you need anything? A candy bar? Something from the cafeteria—”

“No. I can’t...I already threw up once. I don’t want to do it again.”

“Be right back.” I make my way to the vending machines. To my surprise, it’s not all junk. Not that I think I could keep anything down right now. But I suspect Sophie might need something. I’m embarrassed when I realize I don’t know what to pick for her. Seems like a thing a guy’s best friend should know. Or maybe I’m just looking for something else to blame on myself.

I spent so much time at his house when we were growing up that I should know what she is like. But their age difference means we never hung out with Sophie when we were kids. She was his annoying little sister until she got older. Then she became his mysterious little sister, the kind of girl who could spend days in her room if no one came around to bother her.

I had asked him about it once, and he said she was studying. At the time, I laughed. The idea of staying in my room to study for days on end sounded like a joke. But it wasn’t. She spent her childhood in books and went to college thanks to loans, grants and several scholarships. We spent our childhood getting into trouble. We didn’t have much in common back then.

Now, we have this.

I sigh and buy too many things from the vending machine, just in case she changes her mind. When I return with three candy bars and pockets full of other things, she almost smiles when she looks up at me. “Stress eater?”

I huff a laugh. “Something like that.” Laying them on the empty seat between us, I offer, “If you change your mind, grab something.”

“Thanks.” We’re quiet for a moment, before she says, “I’m sorry about—”

“Forget it. I have.”

She takes a quick breath. “Thanks for that.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it when I said he was bleeding out. That wasn’t a diagnosis. Just an overreaction. I don’t want you to worry.”

“Slim chance of me not worrying right now, Sophie.”

Sophie nods. “Same here. The good news is, if he were going to bleed out, they would have come to tell me by now.”

“Good to know. Thanks.”

“If you want to go home and change, I’ll be here—”

“I’m not leaving until we know something.”

She takes a breath and looks away. “It’s just that you have so much of his blood on you...”

I glance down and see it. She’s right—I am covered in Cole. “Oh. Um—”

“I’ll be right back.” She scurries away.

It’s odd. I’m not sure if I adjusted to seeing the blood, or if I just didn’t see it anymore. When I’d gotten into the waiting room, I had washed my hands and arms and face until I didn’t have him on my skin, but I hadn’t thought twice about the blood on my clothes. No wonder the other people in the waiting room keep giving me odd looks.

Sophie returns with a plastic bag. “If you want, you can change into these and

put your clothes in the bag.”

I open it up, and inside is a set of navy scrubs. “People are gonna think I’m a doctor.”

“They’ll think you’re a nurse. Doctors here wear the pale blues.” Like she has on.

“Oh. Okay. Yeah. Thanks. Be right back.” The waiting room bathroom is large enough for me to change, and the scrubs are more comfortable than I’d expected. A size too big, but I don’t mind. It’s nice to not be in the other clothes. Part of me wants to throw them away, but I don’t. For some reason, it feels like I’d be throwing away a part of Cole.

When I come out of the bathroom, Sophie is munching on a Reese’s cup from the pile of candy I’d bought. At least I did one thing right today.

-

C hapter Six-Sophie

HOPE COMES FROM THE ED, and I'm on my feet without a thought. "News?"

"Let's go to one of the private rooms."

I know what that means, and my knees go weak. But Beckett catches me and keeps me on my feet. I whisper, "Hope—"

"Cole is alive. But we need to talk."

I nod and look at Beckett. "Come with us."

"Sure."

The three of us walk to one of the two private rooms near ED Waiting. We usually reserve them for giving families the worst news or if the family needs to be quarantined for some reason. When people are stressed out, they react in all kinds of ways. Could be violence or could be they need to wail out their grief. Never thought I'd need one of these rooms.

She unlocks the door with her badge and holds it wide for us. The room is small, with two couches facing each other and a window overlooking the parking lot. Hope sits across from us, elbows on her knees, while she speaks

with her hands. “He’s stable, but the injuries are substantial. There is swelling on the brain—

“Oh, God,” I whisper.

“His spinal cord has been impacted as well. We’ve put in for a neuro consult, but this isn’t like anything we’ve seen here. I’m—”

“Who is the best for neurology?” Beckett asks. “Someone amazing and close enough to get here quick.”

She hesitates. “There is a Level One trauma center in Boston that has the best of the best for neurology, but Cole won’t be able to make that trip. It’s remarkable that he got here as intact as he did.”

“Then I’ll bring Boston here.” He pulls out his phone.

“They won’t come—”

“Yes, they will.” Beckett walks away with his phone and leaves the private room.

She asks, “Who is that guy?”

“Beckett MacMillan. Cole’s best friend. His family has more money than God, so I imagine he thinks he can make it happen. Plus, I think he’s feeling guilty that Cole got hurt on the job while working for his family.”

“Oh. Well, whatever it takes, I guess. My ex is good, but when I sent him the imaging, he wasn’t hopeful. There’s a subdural hematoma...” She goes on and I try to register all the information, but I don’t want to believe any of this is happening to my brother. It’s too awful. The things I studied for years are a list of nightmares happening to my family. I want to plug my fingers into my ears and scream at her for telling me.

But instead, I gulp against the knot in my throat. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Of course. Once Beckett has someone in mind, let me know and I’ll send them the imaging so they can get a head start on things.”

“Okay.”

“Sophie, I swear we are doing our best here—

“I know.”

She nods. “We’ll be transferring him to the ICU shortly. Can I get you anything? A sandwich? A warm blanket?”

But I shake my head. “I ate half a Reese’s cup. I’ll be fine.”

She smiles. “Most days around here, that’s a balanced meal. But this isn’t most days. If you think you can eat something, do it. If you think you can sleep, do that. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“I have to get back. Stay here as long as you want, okay?”

Slowly, I nod. She pats my shoulder on her way out, and I have a moment to myself. I don’t want to believe any of this is happening. But, whether I believe has no bearing on the matter. It’s happening.

Between me and Cole, I’ve always been the one who accepted reality as it came to us. When Dad died, I handled the funeral arrangements. Mom and Cole were too distraught. Both went through bouts of denial. But when a man in his late sixties drops dead of a stroke, there’s nothing to deny. It happens all the time. My therapist says I try to get a jump on processing things to make it faster, but that doesn’t change the speed of processing them.

This time is different, though. I’m not good at denial, but I’m sure as hell trying to learn it.

Cole has always been my reliable, strong, older brother. He is smarter than he gives himself credit for, and that self-doubt led him to a lifetime of construction work. He says he loves it, but I have my doubts. Otherwise, why would he go fishing every chance he gets? You don’t need vacations from a job you love.

That said, I’d love a vacation right about now.

Beckett knocks on the door—I see him through the small window in it. I let him in, and his energy is different. He charges into the room. “I made some calls. Dr. Sal Lombardi from Boston is taking a helicopter and should be here

in about an hour and a half—

“How did you make that happen so fast?”

“My mom is best friends with someone on the board at that Level One trauma center, and my mom loves Cole like one of her own.” He swallows hard and tries not to cry, but his eyes well up, anyway. “It was hell telling her what happened. I had to beg her to stay home. The hospital isn’t big enough —”

“Oh, my god! My mom! I didn’t think to call her...” And I’m crying again. The thought of telling her is too much.

“I’ll call her.”

“Are you sure?” I choke out.

“Of course. Be right back.” He leaves the room again.

I plop back onto the sofa and grab a tissue to clean myself up. But it doesn’t do much—hospital tissues never do. Between blowing my nose and wiping my eyes, I have to use half the box just to feel okay. By the time Beckett returns, I’m sure there’s bits of tissue on my face. Not that I care.

His eyes glisten. “I sent Beau to pick her up. They’ll be here soon.”

I’m confused. “Why is your brother picking her up? She can drive—”

“Could you? Right now, I mean.”

“Oh. Right. Good point.”

He glances away to stare out the window. “Shouldn’t be long now.” But it feels like forever before Mom and Beau get there, and once they do, it feels like an even longer wait for the neurologist. He was supposed to arrive in an hour and a half, and I know my watch says it’s only been ninety minutes, but I’m sure it’s been a year by the time he arrives.

We’re all piled into Cole’s private ICU room as Doctor Lombardi comes in. He introduces himself, and I snap, “Where have you been?”

“Boston,” he says with half a shrug. “I got here as soon as I could, I assure you. I’ve looked over everything, and this is what we know.” As he speaks,

he examines Cole, testing different spots, poking others. “There will be temporary paralysis—no way around that. But what we don’t know at the moment is how temporary it will be—”

“So, he’s going to live?” Mom asks.

“It would appear so.”

She goes limp and buries her head into my shoulder, sobbing.

I try to keep it together for her. “Go on, Doctor.”

“Unfortunately, they have done all they can here. Worse than that, it’s not much different from anything I would have done in Boston with all our facilities available.”

“Which means there’s nothing more to do right now, right?” I ask.

He nods once. “At this point, all we can do is wait for him to wake up. So, this part of things is up to Cole. The good news is he’s young and healthy, which means the odds are in his favor. I am going to stick around for a few days. I’d like him to wake up before I leave Somerset Harbor.”

Beckett sighs. “What can I do to help?”

Dr. Lombardi gives a slight shrug. “If you’re a praying man, now is the time. If not, get yourself something to eat. All we can do is wait.”

“No more tests to run? No more imaging?”

I know the answer, but I let the doctor speak for himself. “No. They did everything before I arrived.”

It feels like everyone in the room sighs together this time. I gulp and set Mom back in the chair next to Cole’s bedside. “Thank you for coming, Doctor Lombardi.”

“Of course. Is there anything else I can do for you folks at the moment?”

I tell him no, and he leaves us to our quiet. But it’s not real quiet. Not with Mom sobbing to herself. I pat her back and try to keep my shit together. Beau and Beckett speak in hushed tones near Cole’s feet. Beckett tells him, “This is all my fault. I shouldn’t have let my guard down.”

“I thought you two were having beers—”

“That’s what I mean. It was foolish to be drinking on the job. If he hadn’t been drinking, he might not have slipped.”

Beau sighs. “I know you want someone to blame, but this was an accident. Accidents happen.”

“And they’re more likely to happen when you’ve been drinking.”

He pats his brother’s shoulder. “I know I can’t talk you out of feeling bad, so I’m not going to try. But Cole doesn’t need to hear you go on about your guilt right now, okay?”

“You really think he can hear us?”

I pipe up, “I know he can. Whether he remembers it is another thing, but he hears us. Sometimes people in comas remember entire conversations people had in their rooms. We don’t understand everything about head injuries. Not by a long shot.”

Beau picks up from there, “So, keep your guilt rants to yourself for now. For his sake.”

Beckett sighs and stares at Cole. “Yeah. Okay.”

Mom tells Cole, “If you can hear me, you get up right now.” When he doesn’t move, she cries harder.

“It doesn’t work like that, Mom.”

“I know,” she says between sobs. “But I wanted to try.”

Then an odd noise echoes on the hard surfaces of the room, and the three of them stare at me. “What?”

Beau huffs a laugh. “I think you’re hungry.”

“Huh?”

My stomach growls like a beast in response.

“Oh.” Not that I can eat right now. “Just ignore it.”

But then Mom turns back to Cole. “My boy...”

Her cries make me choke the air from my lungs. “Mom, I’m gonna step out for a minute.”

She nods, not taking her eyes off of him. “That’s fine, dear. Why don’t you get some food? I’ll stay here with him.”

“Why is everyone trying to make me eat?” I snap.

She looks up at me. “Because you’re rail thin, Sophie. You’re pale as a ghost, and you look like death right now.”

I gulp and leave the room without another word.

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C hapter Seven-Beckett

I KNOW she didn't mean that as a criticism of Sophie, but I worry she took it that way. "Mrs. Kendrick, if you don't mind, we're gonna step out for a bit."

She nods absentmindedly as she watches Cole.

I motion toward the hall, and Beau comes with me. Once out there, he asks, "What can I do?"

"I do not know right now. Thanks again for picking her up—"

"Of course. And Nick brought your truck from the jobsite, by the way." He passes me my keys.

"Damn. I didn't even think about that."

"I had to tell him and the other guys to go home. Wouldn't be surprised if they're lingering in the parking lot, though."

"They're a good bunch of guys. I wouldn't be surprised, either. But if you see them, send them home."

"Will do." He pauses. "Do you want me to stick around? I mean, he's *your* best friend, but you know I love that guy. I'm happy to stay. But I don't want

to be underfoot, either.”

“I appreciate it. But I know you have work—”

“Oh, fuck work. This is way more important.”

I smile. My older brother is pushy and right now, I don’t mind it. But, “There’s nothing else to be done. You heard the doctor. This is going to be a long process, and everyone needs to be rested for when he wakes up. Or as rested as we can be. I doubt I could pry Mrs. Kendrick away from him, so I’m going to make sure the couch in there folds out or get her a folding cot. Beyond that, I don’t know what else needs to happen in the next few hours. But I’ll keep you posted.”

“Okay. If you need anything—anything at all—you call me or text me. I’ll have my ringer on, so I’ll hear it.”

“I don’t want to wake Elsie—”

“She’s in the city for a few days for work. No worries. All I have is time right now.”

“Thanks, Beau. For everything.”

He nods and heads out.

As Beau walks away, I realize what a dick I’ve been to Sophie about Cole. About how he is my *chosen* brother. If something happened to my biologic brothers or sister, I would have been just as angry as her, just as protective.

Sophie is right, technically speaking. I could walk away from all of this. It’s my MO. I’ve always left when things got complicated. But the thought of leaving Cole behind makes me sick. It’s as impossible as walking on the sun.

Cole Kendrick has always been the Sundance to my Butch. The Murtaugh to my Riggs. We met in junior high and from that moment on, we were inseparable. He shot the back of my head with a spitball which was gross and made me laugh. That was that. Instant best friends.

We’ve done everything together ever since, even coming to work for my family’s corporation together. He’s the best foreman I’ve ever worked with, hands down. More than that, though, he’s good. All the way through. Cole

doesn't have a mean bone in his body. He loves unconditionally with his whole heart. I've always envied that about him.

I lean against the wall and try to ignore the overwhelming fear in my gut. It's hard not to think about all our years together as the summation of a life. I don't want to think about things that way, but it's impossible not to wonder if I'm mentally preparing his eulogy.

No. Dr. Lombardi says he will make it. No point in thinking the worst.

Maybe not, but the thought lingers. Even as nurses give me strange looks in the hall, I'm distracted by the worry that Dr. Lombardi is wrong. Being in the hall means feeling like I'm in the way again, though, so I head down the hall for an unknown destination. On the way to nowhere, I note more stares from the staff. It's odd, but maybe it's because Cole's case is something different for them.

Somerset Harbor is known for yachts and boutique shopping, not construction accidents. It's a tiny tourist town with a reputation for catering to the elite. We have a great bed-and-breakfast, a middle-of-the-road hotel, and homes along the coastline that start at several million dollars. Most of the time, the hospital sees diseases of affluence, not blue collar accidents. So, I guess I shouldn't be so surprised that people are paying attention to me.

But when I pass by a glass wall and catch my reflection, I realize why they're staring at me. I'd forgotten I'm wearing scrubs. I chuckle at myself and keep walking, but down the next hallway, I hear crying. Peeking around the corner, I see Sophie bawling her eyes out near a window. Immediately, I go to her and wrap her in my arms. I can't help it—it's just that instinct again. I want to hold her and tell her everything is going to be alright.

At first she pushes back, but it's different from before. A weak attempt. I loosen my grip, but she leans into me this time. So, I hold her close, and she bawls on my shoulder. I pet her back and let her sob until she finishes. She laughs awkwardly and tries to hide her face by looking out the window instead of at me. "Sorry for that—"

"Sophie, don't."

She sighs. "I'm not..." A hard swallow, and she says, "This stuff. I'm not

good at this stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“The emotional thing. It’s never really been my talent. Cole’s the one who does the emotional thing. Not me. And now, I’m just...” She gestures at her face. “I’m a mess.”

So, I stare out the window next to her. If I look directly at her, she’ll feel uncomfortable. But standing next to her seems like something she won’t object to. “Cole has always been good with the emotion thing. It just comes naturally to him. Definitely better at it than I am.”

Her laugh is a little too knowing. “Uh, yeah. I’d say so.”

“Gee, thanks.”

She nudges my arm with her shoulder to let me know she’s teasing me. “Oh, come on. You have to know he told me about your exploits.”

“Exploits? You make it sound so tawdry.”

She giggles. “Well, he did, too.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. Go on. Be tawdry.”

She laughs, and I’m so happy to see her do it. I might not be able to make Cole wake up, but at least I can do this for her. She stares out over the parking lot. “I don’t know how to do this, Beckett.”

“Standing? Nah, you’re a pro.”

She smirks and shoots me a look before the smirk fades into a sad smile. “I mean, being here. In this. Mom...she’s falling apart.”

“She’s scared.”

“I am too, but I’m not telling her she looks like death!”

“It’s not your fault.”

She blinks at me. “What?”

“What’s happening to him, why he can’t wake up, all of it. None of that is

your fault.”

Her lips wriggle and her eyes sparkle with tears. “I didn’t say it was.”

“No, you didn’t. But when she said you look like death, I saw the guilt on your face. You think you should have been able to fix him. Only, this isn’t something you can fix. Not even the best neurologist can fix him, Sophie. It’s not your fault.”

Her voice falls. “Yes, it is.”

But I shake my head. “It’s not. Not at all. It’s mine—”

“Don’t do that,” she says, choking back tears. “If it’s not mine, then it’s not yours, either. I shouldn’t have said all that before. I was angry, and I was wrong. If—”

“Okay. How about this—instead of going back and forth about whose fault this is, we go get a pizza?”

“I’m not hungry—”

“We all heard your stomach, liar. Maybe your brain isn’t hungry, but the rest of you is, and remember, I’m a stress eater, so come with me for pizza. I need the company and if you’re there, I won’t eat three by myself.”

“Three slices?” she asks with a laugh.

“I wish.”

“You mean you ate three *pizzas*? You can’t eat three whole pizzas—”

“Challenge accepted.”

She laughs again, and it’s the only thing I want to hear the rest of the day.

Chapter Eight-Sophie

WE GO BACK to Cole's room. Can't leave without Mom knowing. Not right now. "Hey, Mom. We're going to go for pizza. Do you want to come with us?"

She smiles and shakes her head. "Thank you, but the nurses already brought me a dinner and an overnight bag with a toothbrush and everything."

"Are you staying here tonight?"

She nods. "I'm not leaving until he wakes up."

"Okay. I can't sleep here, so I'm going to go home for the night after pizza. But I'm just seven blocks away, so if you need anything, let me know and I'll bring it, alright?"

"Thank you, Sophie." She looks to Beckett. "Don't let anything happen to my little girl, understand me, young man?"

"I promise, Mrs. Kendrick." Then he marches to the couch and folds it out. "They'll get you sheets and pillows and all that, but I didn't want you to have to do that yourself."

She smiles at him. “Thank you, Beckett.”

We leave, and I am dying to change clothes. “I hate to do this to you, but I need to hit the locker room and change.”

“Why would that bother me?”

I point to his clothes. “You’re all scrubbed up.”

He chuckles. “For me, this *is* a change of clothes. No worries.”

“Okay then.” Once we’re near the back halls, Beckett has to wait outside the locker room for me. “Be right back.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

I go in and get to my locker fast. Keeping him waiting feels rude, since he’s the one who’s about to pay for dinner. I change back into my clothes—jeans, a long-sleeved red sweater, and a black peacoat. My black scarf has a red stripe in it that ties everything together. Being early November, I need all the layers I can throw on.

Once I’m out, I ask, “Are you sure you won’t need more clothes than just the scrubs?”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

But as soon as the cold air hits my face, I see it on him. He’s chilly. “Good thing Renaldo’s is across the street.”

“Yeah, I’m starving.”

“Thought you’d be cold,” I say as we cross the parking lot.

“Nah. The cold doesn’t bother me.”

Must be all the muscles keeping his core temperature up. “I’ve never been a fan. That’s why I went to Stanford.”

“Oh please. You went to Stanford because it was the furthest you could get away from your mom.”

I laugh. “No—I mean, that didn’t hurt Stanford’s chances, but it wasn’t the

whole reason.”

We cross the street and run into Renaldo’s Pizzeria. It’s a small shop, like most on Main Street. Only eight booths and a counter where we order. The soda fountain is self-serve, and there are pictures from the local little league on the walls. I order a slice of cheese, but Beckett orders a medium Hawaiian. After we get our sodas, we pick the booth in the corner and wait. He asks, “So, what was the whole reason for Stanford?”

“Cole never mentioned it?”

“No. He said you wanted to go someplace you’ve never been.”

I smile, grateful for his discretion. “Okay, so part of the reason was Mom—she can be intense—

He laughs. “Um, yeah.”

“What?”

“I still remember when she found out we had been skipping school. We heard her yelling at Cole outside your house.”

I wince. “Yeah. Well. Don’t skip school.”

“Never again, I promise,” he says cheekily.

“The other reason is, I’d just broken up with my high school boyfriend after I found out he cheated on me, and I really wanted to get the hell out of Somerset Harbor.”

“What asshole would cheat on you?”

“Terrence Milner.”

“That’s a nerd name.”

I laugh. “Actually, he was the quarterback.”

“Really? Wow.”

“Yeah, and he slept with the captain of the cheer squad, so at least that stereotype still holds true.”

“Ugh,” Becket says, his dark blue eyes hopping toward the counter. “Our order is up. Be right back.” He retrieves our food. “Okay, so where can I find this Terrence, so I can kick his ass?”

I laugh and take a bite of my cheese slice. Not bad. Doesn’t make me want to throw up, so that’s a plus. “Last I heard, he’s running his dad’s car dealership out near the interstate.”

“So the little punk is rich, too? Jeez. Why didn’t Cole tell me? We could have beaten the crap out of him.”

I smile up at him.

“Oh. That *is* why, isn’t it?”

“I think Cole was out of the *beating guys up* phase by then, and he wasn’t that big on it in the first place.”

Beckett nods. “He’s always been a softy.”

“What about you? How come you stayed in Somerset Harbor?”

He shrugs his big shoulders. “It’s home.”

“That’s it?”

“What else is there?”

“Pardon my crassness, but Beckett, you’re filthy stinking rich. I’m pretty sure you work because you enjoy working—not because you have to. So, for those of us who do not have those kinds of options, it’s a little weird.”

He smiles and shrugs again. “I don’t know. I mean, I travel when I can, so it’s not like I’ve never been to other places. But Somerset Harbor is home. I know the town, the people. I like the weather. People are decent here. I don’t really see a reason to move.”

I sigh and ignore my jealousy. How easy it must be for him to just...exist. I’ve never seen Beckett MacMillan be anything other than content, for the most part. Today aside, of course. He’s handsome and affable and wealthy. Why wouldn’t he be content? He’s never had to work for anything in his life. He’s never known what it’s like to need a break from his life or had anyone

hurt him. Largely, because he never gets close to anyone.

Except Cole.

With that thought, I realize I'm not the only one here who doesn't know what they're doing emotionally. Beckett's always had Cole to help him with that kind of thing. Hell, I still remember Cole telling me about the time he broke up with a girl for Beckett. In Beckett's mind, saying, "Okay, well, this was fun. Gotta go," was a break-up. When the girl kept calling him, he was confused. Cole ended up being the one to do the deed for him, fearing he'd upset her.

So right now, neither one of us knows what to do, because our emotional crutch is unconscious.

"I guess that makes sense, Beckett."

"What was med school like?"

I smile instantly. "It was hell."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"I loved it."

He chuckles. "Explain."

"Staying up all night to study, the intellectual discussions, the arguments—"

"Arguments?"

"Oh yeah. People are passionate about their fields, and sometimes the professors would pit two opposing viewpoints against each other for us to argue out the best course of treatment. It was always fascinating to watch."

He frowns. "But it's medicine. Isn't there, like, a right way or death?"

I laugh hard. "No. There are a ton of ways to treat a case or to see a presentation of a disease. For instance, what's the number one way to know a man had a heart attack?"

"Pain down the arm, right?"

“Nope.”

“Weighty feeling on the chest?”

“No.”

“Sweaty? Short of breath?”

“They drop dead.”

He blinks at me. “Oh.”

“Everyone wants to think they’d spot the heart attack case right off the bat, but the truth is, for a big percentage of people, their first symptom is their last. And let me tell you, when a professor asked that same question, everyone shouted out the same answers as you. Everyone wants to believe they’d spot the symptoms because everyone wants to be the hero and save the patient. But the reality is much grimmer than being able to spot the symptoms, and everyone in the classroom wanted their specialty to be the reason they saved the imaginary patient in question.”

“What is it for women?”

“Huh?”

“You said for men, the symptom is dropping dead. But women?”

I smile. “Good catch. For women, it’s still the number one symptom, but women are more prone to confusing symptoms ahead of time, because everyone knows the symptoms for men, and because a woman’s symptoms can be easily confused for other things. Usually, it’s nausea and pain in the jaw.”

“Good to know. So, why did you come back here?”

“I missed Cole. And Mom.”

“In that order, I’d imagine.”

I chuckle. “Yeah. But with my residency, I don’t have time to see them. Hell, I barely have time to shower.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t going to say anything but...” He waves his hand in front of

his nose, like he's trying to waft away my scent.

"Hey!" I kick his shins.

He laughs. "Ow. And I'm kidding, you smell great."

"Oh sure, like I'll believe anything you say now."

"No, really. You do." He says it with such earnestness that it makes my breath catch in my throat.

"So, um, anyway, like I said, my schedule makes everything more complicated right now. I've been gone for so long that all my old friends are too busy with their new friends or they moved out of the harbor years ago. Trying to make friends is almost impossible, but I'm lucky enough that Hope took me under her wing at the hospital. We're usually on the same shift, so that helps. And forget about dating." I laugh and shake my head as I dip my crust into some ranch dressing. "Guys do not want to date a girl they can't just call up whenever they want."

"I get that."

"Yeah, right."

"No, I do."

I arch an eyebrow at him. "How so?"

"I work all the time, and with the resort really getting underway, it's only going to get worse."

"But you work for your family, Beckett. It's not like anyone is looking over your shoulder at your time card."

He laughs. "Are you kidding? You think that means I can slack off?"

"Well. Yeah."

"Absolutely not. It means I'm under the microscope even more."

"How's that?"

He sits up, and I realize he's eaten nearly his entire pie. "My family doesn't

slack. When we do something, we work at it until it's done, and then we double check to make sure it's done right. We didn't get to where we are by letting things slide. We did it by working hard. There is no one looking over my shoulder—that's true. But that's only because everyone is looking over everyone's shoulder. If any of us slacked off..." He shakes his head. "They'd never hear the end of it. When you're a MacMillan, it's a competition to see who can put in the longest hours, do the most work. If you're not sweating, you're not a MacMillan."

"So, that's your excuse as to why you don't date anyone seriously?"

He laughs. "Isn't it yours?"

"Fair point."

"I don't date seriously, in part because of time constraints, but also because I haven't met the right girl. The last serious girlfriend I had was years ago—

"You had a serious girlfriend? You?"

He laughs again and there's a hint of pink in his cheeks that is adorable. "I am capable of dating seriously, as much as Cole thinks otherwise."

"He always said you're a hound."

"And he's not entirely wrong. But I'd like to think I have more depth than that."

I'd like to think so, too. Sitting across from him in the booth at Renaldo's, I can't help but remember the crush I had on my brother's best friend when I was a girl. Twelve-year-old me would die right about now. But I'm not a child anymore, and Beckett has broken more hearts than I can count. No matter how nice it is to sit here with him and talk about the old days, I'm past that crush. He's just Cole's best friend. Nothing more.

But when he smiles at me, my inner twelve-year-old is giddy.

C hapter Nine-Beckett

SITTING WITH SOPHIE, I can't help but think about Cole. Logical though it might be, it's uncomfortable to think of him while I'm with her. Thankfully, they look nothing alike. She's a brunette, his hair is sandy blond. She's gorgeous and thin, and he's got a beefier, tall frame to him. But just being here with her feels off. Like he'd be mad at me for it. Probably because he would be.

No. He wouldn't be. He'd understand. At least for now.

It doesn't help that she's gone from his annoying little sister to a brilliant, caring doctor. That bookish girl is now a dynamic, passionate woman. No wonder he wanted me to stay away from her. She's too magnetic. I'm drawn to her.

When she runs her finger along the rim of her cup, I can't help but notice the way she does it. The gracefulness of her movements. The lingering stroke. It's wrong to wonder what her hands would feel like on me. Repugnant to think about such things at a time like this.

And yet.

Maybe Cole is right. Maybe I am incorrigible. Or maybe it's that I'm in a

high-stress situation and that one of the two things I've always turned to for stress relief isn't available at the moment. I clear my throat. "I should get another pizza."

"Seriously? You just ate a whole medium by yourself!"

"So?"

Carefully, she says, "Beckett, for *normal* people, that's a lot."

I shrug. "Said nothing about being normal. Be right back."

But she reaches out for my hand. "Okay then, I want a slice of mushroom."

"You got it." I order another Hawaiian and her slice, then return to the table.

"So, any pets?"

"No time for a pet. I had a cactus—you're not supposed to be able to kill them with neglect, but," she laughs, "I managed. You?"

"No pets. No time. One day, though, I'd like to get a dog."

"Oh? What kind?"

"I was thinking something I can horse around with. Maybe a boxer."

She grins. "They are such fun dogs. A friend of mine in high school had one."

"They're great. Good sports, lots of energy. I want to be able to take him to the beach and stuff. A real outdoors dog."

"Boxers are the way to go. Though with this weather, maybe a husky is a better fit."

I chuckle. "It's not that cold out."

"Says you."

Our pizzas come, and I'm halfway through a slice when I ask, "So, you said you live seven blocks from the hospital. Is that on purpose?"

She nods. "I enjoy being able to walk to work. Plus, living in downtown is nice. Everything is close."

“Sounds convenient.”

“Where are you these days?”

“I have a house on the south side of the harbor. Not too far from here.”

Sophie rolls her eyes. “Of course, you do.”

“What?”

“Of course, you have a place in the most expensive part of Somerset Harbor.”

I shrug. “It’s home for now. But who knows what the future will bring? If I ever start a family, we’ll need a bigger place.”

“If? Not *when*?”

“Life is too unpredictable to speak in absolutes. I might end up with someone who doesn’t want kids, or I might end up single forever. Although, if I’m not married by the time I’m fifty, I might adopt a kid myself.”

“Really?”

I nod. “I know it’s weird or whatever, but I’ve always thought of myself as someone who was meant to be a dad. Or a mentor or something like that. I figure, if I adopt, I’ll adopt an older kid, because most people want babies and the older kids get overlooked until they age out. And that’s not fair to them. So, I’ll adopt an older kid, and we’ll have more of a buddy relationship, probably.”

“You were right.”

“About what?”

“That you have more depth than I thought.”

“Now, now, you go saying that around here and you’ll ruin my reputation as a hound.” I chuckle and refill our sodas. “Anyway—”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Why do you act like a hound when you’re obviously not one?”

I frown at her. “No, I’m definitely—”

“Cut the crap, Beckett. Look, I know you’ve been around, but a guy who only thinks about getting laid isn’t also thinking about the reasons behind adopting an older kid. You say you have depth, but you brush it off when I agree with you. It’s bad manners, and it’s cowardly, and you’re better than that.”

“Damn.”

“What?”

“You might not have Cole’s gift for emotional maneuvering, but you sure as hell have no problem calling people out for their bullshit.”

She winces. “Sorry. I’m—”

“No. I like it. It’s refreshing, truthfully. Cole is too polite to just say stuff like that.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m not offended, Sophie. Just impressed.”

She smiles and finishes her slice. I’m relieved to see her eat more than one—I’d worried she had become one of those girls who is embarrassed to eat in front of a guy. She was a little heavier back in high school, and seeing her eat now, I imagine the weight loss has more to do with time management than embarrassment. I’m even able to talk her into a third before we leave, but she only makes it halfway through before giving up. “I am done.”

“Cheesecake?”

“No, I think all the cheese on my pizza did enough for my cholesterol today. I don’t need to add cheesecake to the list of offenses. But you go right ahead.”

As much as a slice sounds good, I restrain myself. “Nah. I’m good. For now.”

She giggles. “I haven’t seen someone put pizza away like that since college.”

“Wanna walk it off with me?”

“Sure.”

We head outside. The sky is orange, and the sun is low over the harbor. “Do you want to check on Cole before going home?”

She yawns. “No. They’ll call me if there’s any change, and Mom will call me before the hospital has the chance to. You?”

“Same. I’ll walk you home.”

“Are you sure? It’s freezing out here.”

I shrug. “I have two medium pizzas keeping me warm. No worries.”

“Alright,” she says with a laugh as she pulls her coat tighter to herself.

“Are you too cold? I can go get my truck.”

“No, I moved this close to work so I can walk. I have to get used to this sometime. Might as well start now before winter really hits.”

So, we start down the sidewalk. The temperature isn’t bad, but the wind picks up and it smells like snow, which is to say, it smells like nothing. Perfectly clean, crisp air. “I love this time of year.”

“What’s to love about it? Frostbite?”

“The crunchy leaves on the sidewalks, pumpkin pie, the utter lack of mosquitoes—

She giggles. “Okay, I’m with you on the last one.”

“It’s my favorite time of year. You?”

“I’m more of a spring person, I think. I like the rain.”

I nod. “Oh yeah. Rainy days are great.”

“Except I’m pretty sure I’ll hate them, come next year.”

“How come?”

“Rainy days are usually when EDs get busy. All the car accidents.”

“ED?”

She smiles. “Emergency Department.”

“I thought they were called ERs.”

“Some places still call them that, and others use the terms interchangeably. But I’m used to calling it an ED.”

“You doctors and your fancy talk.”

She laughs. “I’m sure you construction guys have your own language, too.”

“I refuse to talk shop outside of work. Count your blessings.”

“That sounds like a good rule. Speaking of work, do you like what you do, Beckett?”

“I love it, to be honest. To take a project from an idea to a building, there’s nothing like it.” I wonder... “And you? Do you love what you do?”

“It’s the best worst job in the world.”

I laugh. “What do you mean by that?”

“In a perfect world, my job would not exist because no one would have emergencies.”

“Ah.”

“Don’t get me wrong—I love helping people. That part of things is amazing. I wouldn’t give it up for anything. But seeing people at their worst moments is rough.”

I nod. “I can’t imagine doing what you do every day, Sophie.” In truth, I admire her for it. But saying that feels like it would be awkward. Especially since spending the day with her has thrown gasoline onto my smoldering crush. She is strong and smart and so hot that I’d happily burn for her.

Sophie slows her pace to a stop just as the first few snowflakes of the season fall onto her black coat. I smile and peel one off. “Make a—no. It melted.”

She laughs. “I’ve never been one much for wishes, anyway.”

A snowflake lands in her long eyelashes and I reach out for it, too, without a thought. It feels natural to touch Sophie. As though I’d touched her a

thousand times. Before I realize it, my hand cups her cheek. She looks up at me with her big brown eyes on my lips. I pull her to me and she's up on her tiptoes to reach me, meeting me halfway for an illicit kiss. Her soft lips quell all doubt the moment they touch mine. Forbidden or not, this feels so right.

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C hapter Ten-Sophie

IT HAS BEEN TOO long since I was kissed last. That's the only logical explanation for what I am doing right now.

But my body tells me logic doesn't matter right now. The press of Beckett's firm, warm body on mine intoxicates me. *I want this—wait. Do I?* When his hands go around my waist and pull me tighter to him, I know the answer. *Yeah. I really do.*

It feels so good. So right. Like this is who was supposed to be holding me all along. It's just my schoolgirl crush speaking, I'm sure of it. But I can't help myself. This is what I've wanted for years.

Sure, we're different people now. We're adults with jobs and cars and responsibilities. But somehow, none of that registers at the moment, and I just let him hold me as we kiss. But when the kiss comes to its natural end, the questions begin.

Do I invite him in? Is that too much? Would he even want to come in right now? Okay, I see that look. Yeah, he would come in right now. But is that what I really want? Today has been the worst day of my life. I deserve something good to happen, don't I? If I just—

“I just wanted to kiss you, Sophie. No pressure for anything else, okay? It’s been a hell of a day, and I don’t think either of us is able to be thinking beyond a kiss.”

I smile up at him. “Thanks for that.”

“That was the best dinner I’ve had in ages. I’d like to see you again. And to be clear, I don’t want to wait for another disaster to strike to see you again.”

I laugh. “Yeah, um. Okay.”

He smiles. “Good. With everything being what it is, we’re going to bump into each other a lot for a while. I don’t want to hide...whatever this is when we’re around other people. If that’s okay.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cole will wake up soon. I’m sure of that. And he’s very protective of you. So—”

“You’re worried he’ll flip out?”

He nods. “But I’m also not about to hide things from him. I never have.”

“He’s a big boy. He’ll get over it.”

“Okay. Goodnight, Sophie.”

“Goodnight, Beckett.” I want to do the cute thing and watch him walk away, but I’m freezing, so I jet inside. Once there, everything hits me like a ton of bricks. Cole. Mom. Beckett. I am simultaneously exhausted, terrified, and elated, and the guilt that comes with the last one threatens to drown me in my shower.

Maybe I shouldn’t feel guilty, but I do. It’s almost as though I feel like I shouldn’t have any joy on a day like today. But after everything that’s happened, I also don’t want to wait for the appropriate time for joy. That seems foolish. Still, part of me says I shouldn’t be starting something with Beckett.

Is it because Cole won’t approve? Could be.

Whatever the case, the hot water feels amazing after being so cold, and

thankfully, my apartment building is pretty old, so the hot water never runs out during my long showers. By the time I hit my bed, there isn't a part of me that isn't worn out.

In the morning, my alarm springs me out of bed like usual. Only this time, I remember, I don't have to wear something that's fast to change in and out of. Sometime in the night, my boss had texted to tell me to take the rest of the week off to deal with Cole's situation. I'm grateful—being such a new employee, I wasn't sure what was going to happen. But when I walk into the hospital, I get sympathetic nods and greetings from the staff. Their sympathy makes me dreadfully uncomfortable.

Sympathy always has.

It's weird, I know, but it's always felt like sympathy belongs to other people. That other people have actual problems and mine are minor. I remember thinking that when Dad died, because at least he didn't suffer. Now, with Cole in the hospital, I keep thinking I don't need sympathy, because it could have been worse. He could be dead. Which is just as ridiculous, only in reverse.

My therapist is going to have one hell of a field day with all of this.

I grab coffees from the cafeteria and the checkout lady says, "No charge, dear."

"Um, are you sure? I've got—

"We help our own in a crisis. Go on."

Something about the kind old lady's pity makes me want to cry, which brings me back to being uncomfortable all over again. Hooray for being emotionally stunted.

When I enter his room, Mom is half asleep in the chair next to Cole. The couch has pillows and sheets, but it looks like she never made it there. She smiles at me when I pass her the coffee. "You're the best daughter I ever had."

"I'm the only daughter you've ever had."

“Makes it an easy contest.”

I roll my eyes and sip my coffee. “Anything? Any changes?”

“Not yet. How was dinner?”

“Good. We went to Renaldo’s.”

She smiles and nods, her eyes never far from Cole. “Did Beckett eat you out of house and home?”

I laugh. “What?”

“That boy has always had an appetite that would make a sumo wrestler blush. You don’t remember?”

“Not at all.”

“You were young,” she says with a shrug. “But he used to eat everything in the cabinets when he’d come over back in the day. To be honest, it was expensive feeding him. I think Cole must have said something to him about it, because one day, it changed.”

“How so?”

“All of a sudden, he was paying for delivery for all of us. I think you were in junior high when it happened—the boys were seniors. Every time he came over, he insisted on paying for delivery for the household. I think he felt bad for all those years of eating all our food.”

I laugh hard. “Oh, my god. He was just a kid—

“A *MacMillan* kid. Not like it was his money he was so generous with, but then again, he’s a sweet boy, so he probably would have been generous, even if it were his money. Anyway, your dad didn’t feel right about it at first, but Beckett kept insisting until he caved.”

“He’s a good guy.”

She nods. “Good kisser?”

“What? Oh my god, Mom!”

She smirks up at me. “That’s a yes.”

I giggle, unable to hold it back. “Uh, well—”

“It’s okay, sweetie. I’m happy for you.”

“Even though he’s...not exactly known for being great at dating?”

“Cole calls him a hound, but I think he’s being delicate for my feelings. In my day, we just called them sluts.”

“Mom!”

She laughs. “Well, we did. And that’s okay. As long as you know what you’re getting into, I’m not going to interfere.”

I take a breath. “You and I have never really talked about my dating life before. Why are you okay with bringing it up now?”

She sighs and looks at Cole again. “Because I want my kids to have a life before it’s taken away from them. I know you know that because of your job and everything, but life is so short, Sophia. Don’t let it pass you by. If you can find some kind of happiness with someone, grab onto it and don’t let go.”

“Thanks, Mom. I will.”

C hapter Eleven-Beckett

THIS FEELS WRONG. It's the thought that haunts me all the way to the golf course. I shouldn't be there. Not now. Not with Cole still in the hospital. And yet, I park and grab my golf clubs, just like it was any other day.

It's chilly, but not frigid. Lately, that's just been the nights. Beau and Cormac are already there, waiting for me. Both of my brothers look worried when they see me, so that's a plus. Beau asks, "You sure you're up for this?"

"Not at all. Let's do it."

He claps my shoulder, and we hop onto the golf cart. Cormac whisks us away to the first tee. Once there, it begins. Cormac goes first—he always goes first. But this time, he says, "I know what you said yesterday about him, but how is Cole today?"

"The same," I say with a shrug. "Nothing yet."

He nods, then swings. It's an excellent shot. "I know we're here to get your mind off of everything—"

"Yeah, I don't think that'll happen. So, if you two have questions, go ahead."

Beau nods and takes his shot, before he asks, “Tell us exactly what happened.”

I sigh and prep my ball. As I tell them the details, I swing. And it goes nowhere. “Wow. I haven’t whiffed that hard since I was a kid.”

“Practice swing. Go again,” Cormac says.

I’m inclined to deny the pity, but given the circumstances, I take it. The ball soars all of a hundred feet, but it’s better than nothing. “Thanks.”

He nods once and smiles. “Don’t mention it.”

“So, that’s it?” Beau asks.

“What?”

“That’s what took Cole down? An exposed pipe?”

I close my eyes and nod. “That’s it.”

“Shit.” We finish up the hole in silence. It’s as though none of us want to talk about it more. But there’s nothing else to talk about. We pack up for the ride to the next hole. Beau says, “It’s so odd—he’s an outdoorsman. You two go fishing and camping all the time. For him to be taken out by a freaking pipe is just...”

“Beyond weird,” Cormac finishes. “I know construction sites are dangerous, but I always thought it’d take a bear or a cougar or something to take Cole Kendrick down.”

I chuckle and nod before cracking open a beer from the cooler on the back of the golf cart. “Same here.”

We roll up to the next tee, and Cormac sets up. “As far as liability goes, we’re exposed.”

I nod. “I’m aware. He had taken off his hard hat on the jobsite, and I did, too. We had beers on the jobsite. This whole thing could be a massive disaster. If it weren’t Cole.”

“I don’t like to bring up the ugliness,” Beau begins, and I know exactly what he’s going to say, “but we have to be realistic here. Do you think his family is

going to sue us?”

I almost laugh. “It seems highly unlikely. He and I are best friends—have been since school. His mother is my second mother. His sister—”

“Yeah, okay. I know you’re close. We all love Cole to death. But the fact remains that people get weird when stuff like this happens.”

“Well, I’ll just put it this way—I’d be completely shocked if this became litigious.”

Beau nods and sighs. “I’m just...trying to think of any potential outcome and prepare for it. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just a shitty situation.”

Cormac adds, “Easier to think about logistics than what’s actually happening. The neurologist update anything?” Then he swings.

“Not yet. And he’s supposed to be the best, but I’m looking into flying someone else in, just to have all bases covered.”

“That seems smart,” Beau says. “The more you do for him now, the less likely his family is to sue us.”

Cormac and I whip our heads around at him.

He holds up his hands. “I swear, I’m not trying to sound like an asshole.”

“Just comes naturally,” Cormac says with a smirk.

Beau laughs despite himself, before he turns a little green. “Yeah, I guess so. It’s just...worrying about that kind of stupid shit lets me ignore things. I can’t...when I picked up his mom, she just wailed in my car the entire drive there. It was awful. Like just fucking awful. I can’t let myself think about it. And the thought of being trapped in your own body in a hospital bed for days on end is...it’s just too much. So, if I think about things that will never happen, I can stop thinking about that.”

“It’s a shit coping mechanism, but I won’t begrudge you of it,” I say, shrugging. “I, too, have shit coping mechanisms. But none of them really prepared me for taking over Cole’s job.”

“How is that going?” Cormac asks as Beau takes his shot.

“Okay, I guess. Yesterday was rough, much like where Beau’s ball just landed.”

His voice is clipped. “Shut up.”

Cormac chuckles as he opens his beer. “Go on.”

“The guys cleaned things up for me, thankfully. There was so much blood that I honestly thought...well...we know what I thought. Point is, the guys cleaned things up and now it looks like it never happened. Which is good. But also bad. Because it makes it feel like Cole is missing for no reason. Does that make sense?”

Beau nods. “Almost too much sense.”

“Are the guys listening to you out there?”

“Yeah. They’ve been great, truthfully. Everyone is going the extra mile, like if they work harder, then Cole will be okay. It’s kinda sweet of them.”

Cormac smiles. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“But it still feels weird to be in charge of his crews. Wrong, somehow.”

Beau sighs and slugs his beer back. “I know it feels wrong, but it’s also what Cole would want.”

Cormac nods. “He’s right. You know that, right?”

“I know. Cole is dedicated to his work. He wouldn’t want us to slow down now. He’d do the same if I were in the hospital bed.”

As we play through, I hit a second beer, and I’m on my third by the time we leave it. Beau gives me a judgmental look. “So, is that your shit coping mechanism?”

“Occasionally,” I look at the can in my hand, “though recently, no.” Then I finish it.

“You’ve developed a new shit coping mechanism recently?” Cormac asks as he parks us near the next hole.

“Hard to say. Went on a date—”

“Oh, here we go,” Beau teases. “Tell us, oh horny one, what’s this one like?”

“Does she have a name or just a hair color?” Cormac says with a laugh.

“Actually, she’s great. She’s funny and smart—”

“Wait—those aren’t physical attributes,” Beau says with dramatic faux caution. “Could you actually know something about her?”

Cormac chuckles. “Nah. This is Beckett, we’re talking about here. I’m guessing Funny and Smart are what he named her tits.”

Beau laughs, and just as he’s about to pile on, I cut him off. “It’s Sophie.”

“Sophie?” Cormac asks without recognition.

But Beau’s eyes bug out of his head. “Cole’s sister?”

“What?” Cormac shouts.

I nod once. “And—”

“You better pray he never wakes up, because he will kill you,” Cormac advises.

Beau huffs. “You’ve had some bad ideas in your time, Beckett, but this is easily the worst.”

Cormac says, “You cannot go banging Sophie—”

“I’m not. It’s not like that. Guys, calm down.”

“What do you mean it’s not like that?” Beau asks incredulously. “It’s always like that.”

“Not this time, guys.”

“What do you mean?”

“I like her.”

They exchange a glance. A confused Cormac says, “You mean you like her in bed, right?”

“It hasn’t gone that far. We’ve only kissed. One time, after we went out for pizza. After everything happened.”

“You went on a date with his sister and kissed her after he went into a coma?” Beau asks, frowning.

“It wasn’t an official date or anything. She was hungry, even though she didn’t seem to notice it, and I was starving because I’m a stress eater, so we went for pizza. And we had a really good time. It was just...everything felt right. We have this connection outside of Cole, and I don’t know. We fit.”

“Really?” Cormac asks.

“Yes. After that, I walked her home, and we kissed.” Sharply, I point out, “And that is *all* we did. As much as I like her, it wasn’t the right time or place for us to do anything more than that, and I was already feeling kind of guilty about Cole—”

“Kind of?” Beau bursts. “This is the last thing he would want right now. Or ever.”

“I hate to say it, Beckett, but he’s right. You have never been the guy to be happy with one girl for any length of time, and Cole would never want you and Sophie—”

“Look. I know. I know my history better than either of you. But may I point out that you both have a sketchy history with women? Bad behavior runs in the family, or at least it did until you found the right woman. Cormac, you’re about to get married to Lily, and Beau, I’ve never seen you as happy as you are with Elsie. So don’t pretend to be some virtuous examples of chivalry, because I know better.”

They were silent for a beat, before Beau said, “Stop being right. It’s unsettling.”

“It was bound to happen one day,” Cormac teases. “Do you think Sophie is the one to stop you from your baser instincts?”

“That’s a lot of pressure,” I say with a laugh. “This is too new and things are way too stressful to be thinking about that. All I can say is, I like her. A lot. I

want to see where this might go.”

Beau clinks his beer can to mine. “Good luck with that. Just don’t tell Cole too soon after he wakes up. He’s been through enough.”

The thought clenches my stomach tight. “Yeah.”

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C hapter Twelve-Sophie

SITTING with Mom while Cole lays in his hospital bed is made a little easier by reading on my phone. Doesn't seem to matter what I'm reading. The news, books, a personality quiz that asks about my favorite desserts, anything. I don't care. Seeing the words go by on the page is enough to keep the primal part of my brain distracted and not thinking.

Because when I think, I cry.

Every second that ticks by feels like another second that Cole is missing in his life. Every minute is a minute he won't get back. It's been two days since he was himself instead of a shell. Dr. Lombardi has consulted with colleagues around the world on his case, and all of them say the same thing, except for the asshole who said Cole is lucky to be alive. We hate that guy.

How can *this* be lucky? Sure, he's alive and breathing on his own, but that should not be where the bar is when it comes to luck.

Mom sighs and grabs her phone. "I'm going to get a coffee. Do you want anything?"

If she actually goes, it will be the first time I've seen her leave his bedside. I have to resist the urge to offer to go for her. She needs the exercise—her

ankles have swollen from disuse. “A coffee would be great. Cream and sugar, if you don’t mind.”

“I thought you take it black.”

“I like cream and sugar in my coffee when—”

“When she doesn’t feel good.”

Mom drops her phone and throws herself onto Cole to hug him.

“Mom! The IV!” I shout as I run to the other side of him.

She stands up fast and clears the line, before hugging him again. “Oh my god!”

He coughs, and we back off to give him air. His coughs worsen, and I call the nurse. Between coughs, Cole chokes out, “I’m okay.” But the nurse races in and checks his vitals, as she pages the doctors. Cole insists, “I’m fine. What is going on? Why am I in a hospital?”

I gulp and try to find the words. But the nurse says, “You’ve had a nasty fall, Cole.”

He frowns. “What are you talking about?” But when he tries to move, panic shoots across his face. “The fuck?”

Mom cries and prays and cries some more, and I’m inclined to join her. But instead, I text Beckett. The doctors rush in, thankfully, so we don’t have to explain things to Cole. Dr. Lombardi takes charge of the situation and tells him everything, ending with, “...your paralysis is likely to be temporary. But there is a chance that it won’t be. You may never walk again, Cole. I’m sorry.”

He stares off at nothing, and I’m scared he is slipping away again. But then he mumbles, “It was just a fall.”

Dr. Lombardi sighs. “This was one of the worst-case scenario falls. I hate to say this, but it’s almost miraculous that you woke up at all. You’re a fighter, and your family has been by your side this entire time. I wish I could say the same of all my patients.”

He smiles up at us, and it's a little more crooked than usual, which makes me worry for him even more. "They've always been by my side."

"Thought your sister was going for my throat when I didn't get here fast enough."

Cole chuckles. "Sounds like her."

"You have a lot of physical therapy ahead of you, Cole. We're talking at least a year. I won't sugarcoat it. This is going to be grueling. But if you walk again, it will be because you worked hard for it."

"I'm not afraid of hard work, Doc. It's all I've ever known."

"It shows." Dr. Lombardi nods once. "That's why the fall didn't kill you. I'm sure of that." He pulls up imaging of Cole's neck on his phone. "You see here? The posterior is covered in muscle, and that took a lot of the impact of the pipe. Without that muscle built up as much as it is, your spine and skull would have taken it, and they don't take hard steel as well as muscle does. They would have been shattered, and I would still be in Boston right now, because I never would have been called in for this."

Cole blinks up at him. "Boston?"

"Your friend called in some favors—"

Beckett rushes into the room. "Oh my god! You asshole!" He brushes past the staff and carefully hugs Cole. With his face buried in Cole's shoulder, he orders, "Don't you ever fucking do this to me again!"

Cole laughs. "Didn't try to in the first place!"

When he stands, Beckett has tears streaming down his face, but he's smiling. "I was gonna have a water bottle in my pocket when you woke up, so I could say something about—"

"Is that a water bottle in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?" Cole asks.

Beckett laughs. "I knew you'd get it. And I'm happy to see you."

"You, too."

He turns to Dr. Lombardi, who gives him the rundown of what's ahead. During the discussion, his mood shifts from joyful to grim to dominant. "Okay. Where is the best physical therapy on the East Coast?"

"You're fortunate to be so close to Manhattan. Dr. Jane Amdahl is a specialist in Neuro PT, and if I were Cole, she is who I'd want to see."

Beckett turns to Cole. "Consider it done."

"You don't have to—"

"It's done. Doctor, what else?"

They run through some more things for Cole, but I'm torn between listening to the conversation and joining Mom to speak quietly to my brother. I end up next to her. "Hey."

He smiles, but it's restrained. "Hey."

"You scared the shit out of us. You know that, right?"

"Didn't mean to."

"No kidding. How are you feeling?"

"Kinda nauseous. And fuzzy. I know the doctor said a bunch of stuff, but it doesn't really click for me. A year of physical therapy? Did I hear that right?"

I nod. "But we will be with you every step of the way."

He exhales loudly. "Bad turn of phrase."

It takes a moment. *Oh. Because he can't step.* I wince. "Sorry."

Mom assures him, "I'm sure you'll be on your feet again soon, honey."

"I guess."

"The good news is, you're alive," I start, "and you're speaking. And they're going to let you eat soon." The mere mention of food sends my stomach growling. "Which is something I should do, too. Apparently."

He smirks. It's still crooked, but I have to get used to that for now. "You should go eat before your stomach comes after us all."

I roll my eyes. “It wasn’t funny the first time you said that to me when I was a kid, and it’s still not.”

Mom teases, “It’s a *little* funny.”

After a while, Dr. Lombardi leaves, with the promise he will return tomorrow for one last check. We talk to Cole about exactly what happened when, minus me having pizza with Beckett. It goes unsaid between us not to mention it to him just yet. But soon, my stomach snarls and the whole room snickers at me. Beckett says, “Let’s get you fed. And maybe a drink to celebrate.”

“I don’t want to leave—”

But Cole says, “Yeah, go eat. Please. It’s getting late, and I’m not going anywhere. Go have some fun. You’ve been through enough looking after me.” Then he mouths, “And Mom.”

“I saw that,” Mom says.

“Saw what?” he asks innocently.

“My eyes work just fine, young man, and you’re not too old for me to punish.”

“But I just woke up from a coma.”

“That was two hours ago. You don’t get to use that excuse forever.”

He giggles. “Sure, I do.”

She smiles and kisses his forehead. “Okay. You do.”

“Alright, I’m going to make Sophie drink too much and eat too much,” Beckett says, putting his arm around me to usher me out.

“Thank you,” Cole says, relieved.

“Why do I feel like I’m getting ganged up on?” I ask rhetorically.

They laugh, and we leave. As soon as Cole’s door shuts and I know he can’t see me, it’s as though someone cut my strings. I fall onto Beckett and sob in his arms. He holds me the whole time and pats my back until I calm down again. Only then do I feel how hungry I am. Quietly, he asks, “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

We drive to a bar near my house—it’s too cold to walk the distance, and I just don’t have it in me. I gobble down fries with malt vinegar and chug a chocolate stout. Beckett grins, surprised. Around a mouthful of fries, I ask, “What?”

“Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Huh?”

“That’s the second order of fries and your third beer. I’m just pleasantly surprised, is all.”

“I require every carb in a ten-foot radius. Pass me your onion rings.”

He does so while laughing. “Have at it.” He orders another batch, along with a burger. When it comes, it looks so good that I snatch half of it. “Be my guest.”

“Thanks.” The word is muffled by a bite of food.

“You’re eating like you haven’t in years.”

I wash down the bite with more beer. “Relief is a powerful appetite stimulant for me. When I was in high school, it was like this after grades came out every semester, and same for college. Why aren’t you on your third one by now?”

He chuckles. “Stress is my appetite stimulant, remember?”

“Oh right. Are you gonna finish those cheese curds?”

“Knock yourself out.”

After too much food and way too much to drink, we play pool for a while. I’ve never been any good at it, but he’s worse, so I feel better. But when he stands behind me to help me line up a shot, I feel something else. I can’t put my finger on it. Then I bend over to get the angle, and he bends with me.

A few sensations fly through me. Familiarity. Comfort. Definitely not a water bottle in his pocket, but damn near, guessing by the size of the bulge. Slowly, I stand up and he stands with me. When I turn around, he’s right there giving

me that look again. I tip my head up, he tilts his down, and—"

"Beckett!" Someone shouts from nearby.

It's one of the guys from the construction crew, and they chat for a minute before Beckett makes an excuse to take me home. We zip out of the bar and into his car. The drive is less than two minutes, but it feels like forever. He walks me to my door and sees that I'm freezing, so he rubs his hands up and down my arms. And there's that look again. This time, I don't hesitate.

"Do you want to come inside?"

"Yes."

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C hapter Thirteen-Sophie

AS SOON AS we cross the threshold, I pull him to my lips. The kiss is just as good as it was two nights ago—no, it’s better. Because now we’re in my apartment, and I’m not stopping this. I have wanted Beckett MacMillan my whole life, and I have him. I’m not letting him go.

He pulls me tight as he kicks my door shut behind himself. I can’t help but melt against him. He smells so good. Woodsy and fresh. I want my sheets to smell like that in the morning. I kick off my shoes and he does the same, kissing all the while. It’s like we can’t stop.

But suddenly, he pulls back. His half-shut, tense blue eyes tell me he’s in this. *So, then why did he pull away?* He clears his throat as though it would clear his head. “Sophie, why don’t you show me around?”

“Do you really want to see my apartment right now?”

“No. But I feel like one of us should slow this down?”

“I thought we were celebrating.”

He takes a breath. “We are. But I don’t want to celebrate and, come the morning, feel like you regret...*celebrating*. With *me*.”

“I could never regret anything I do with you, Beckett.”

“You sure about that?”

I smile and nod, then snake my scarf from my coat while I look in his eyes. “Absolutely.” I unbutton my coat and lay it over the back of my couch. “But if you’re worried *you* might regret *celebrating* with me, then—”

He closes the gap between us and kisses me again. His hands slip beneath my hair and hold me to him. His touch takes my breath away. He murmurs, “I will never regret you, Sophie.”

I stare into his eyes as I take his hands and lead him to my bedroom. Once we’re there, he kisses me again. This time, it’s sweet and so tender I could cry. Maybe it’s the beer, maybe it’s the stress of the week, or maybe it’s that we’ve known each other forever, but this feels so different from any other moment I’ve had like it. This feels solid, like two pieces of a puzzle coming together to complete a picture.

Beckett peels off his sweater overhead and throws it near the door. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him shirtless, and he was just a boy then. Now, he has a man’s body, rich with muscles built from hard work. I want to run my tongue along every dividing line between them.

He kisses me again before he grabs the hem of my sweaters and lifts them over my head. I peel away layers until I’m in my underwear and bra in front of him, and he takes a moment to appreciate me before he backs me to the bed. I sit and standing between my legs, he unbuttons his jeans. Dark blue boxers beneath.

If I focus on every detail, then I won’t get in my head about this. Or so the theory goes. But he’s taking things so slowly, I’m going to get in my head about this. He’s making me crazy. After all the stories I’ve heard about Beckett, I’d expected him to be fast passion. Not this careful, considerate man who is going so slowly I could die.

He works his jeans down as he stares at me. To my surprise, as the jeans go down, so does he. Beckett kneels between my feet, eye level with me. He looks like there is so much he wants to say.

“What is it?”

He gently shakes his head and gives me a slight smile. “Just keep waiting for my luck to run out. But you keep not stopping me.”

I giggle and kiss him. “Is that why you’re going so slowly?”

He laughs. “I want to give you plenty of chances to back out.”

“Listen up. I am not backing out of this. Since I saw you at the construction site when I came back to town, I have fantasized about exactly this. I have touched myself thinking about you. I have wanted you since I can remember. So, if—”

“You mean that?”

“Yes!”

He kisses me and wraps his arms around me to pull me up onto my bed with him. He backs me up until my head hits my pillows, and I wrap my legs around him. His kisses make me dizzy and blissed out, and I want more, but then he moves down my body, licking my throat and chest, and I’m going out of my mind from it all. “I’ve wanted you, too.”

“Since the other night?”

“Since you came to the construction site.”

I laugh. “But you’ve played it so cool since then.”

He laughs, too. “Can’t go giving the game away when I figured you’d want nothing to do with me.” He reaches beneath me and unhooks my bra with one hand, before he palms the fabric over my tits and feels me up while scooting the bra off of me. It makes me moan for more. Once topless, he stares for a moment. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

His maneuver reset my brain for a moment, but then I remember what he said. “Why would you think I’d want nothing to do with you?”

He continues his slide down my body. “Thought you’d likely heard all the stories...knew my reputation.” He winds his fingers into the sides of my panties and kisses just below my navel. “Thought you might hate me a little. Feminine solidarity and all that.”

“You’re too well known for a woman not to know what she’s getting into with you.” But then I see it. He winces, just slightly. My words stung him. “I didn’t mean that as a bad thing, Beckett.”

“Is that...what you want from me? A fun night or two, and then nothing?”

Time to pick my words carefully. “I want whatever you’re willing to give. If all you want is a fun night—”

“No. I want more than that. I like you, Sophie.”

Can’t help the smile on my lips. “I like you, too, Beckett.”

“Now that’s settled...” He finishes pulling my panties off and tosses them aside. Then he lays between my thighs, and I’m not sure exactly what he has in mind—fingers, tongue, just looking—but then he brushes over me with his tongue, and I’m on fire. Something in his technique or maybe it’s because he’s him, but a shock of pleasure comes in waves from his mouth. It isn’t long before I’m shaking from it. I dig my heels into the bed when his fingers slip into me. Curses fall from my lips as much as breaths. Heat rises inside, and I’m astounded. I’ve never enjoyed the act this much. But Beckett knows what he’s doing more than most men.

Must be all the practice he’s had.

Just then, I tip over the edge and come, writhing all over his face. He stays on my spots with ease, milking every last ounce of pleasure from me until I beg him to stop. As I catch my breath, he pulls his boxers off and climbs up next to me. His erection presses against my hip when he kisses me, and I was right. Not quite a water bottle, but not far off.

When I reach for him there, he grabs my hand and laces his fingers with mine. He pants, “Condoms?”

“Top drawer behind you.”

He grabs one and gets it on fast. Once in place, he returns to my side, kissing me again. His tongue and his teeth are etched in my memory, yet every kiss surprises me. I throw my leg over his hip, aching for him to be inside of me. I pull him on top and he moves with me, our lips locked together. But before I can aim myself at him, he breaks the kiss and whispers in my ear, “You’re

sure?”

“Yes!”

He drags himself over me there, making me squirm. But then he starts in. It’s too big, too good, too much, and I want it all. Beckett leans down over me, and I pull up for another kiss while he enters me. I’m breathless from it. Every sensation lights me up. By the time he’s all the way inside, I’m on the verge again.

He wraps his arm beneath me, pulling me closer still. I cling to his body, desperate for more, for anything he wants to give me. I meant what I said about that earlier—I know his history. There is no illusion in my mind about that. But if he is open to more, so am I.

And right now, I’m shaking for him yet again.

Beckett lays me back and puts his weight on me. I love that feeling. He buries himself deep, then stops and looks me in the eye. “You okay? You’re shaking.”

“Close,” I gasp.

He smirks that cocky smirk guys have when they know they have you, and he whips his body into me, speeding everything up. I break on him, crashing and coming. He growls proudly and pounds me into the mattress.

When I struggle for breath, he slows down long enough to scoop beneath me and roll us over, so I’m on top of him. He’s made me dizzy again.

Thankfully, he doesn’t expect me to do much—he grabs my hips and uses them like handles to push and pull me up and down his length.

But when I’ve caught my breath, I take over. I grab his hands and lace my fingers with his, pinning him to the mattress while I ride him. He groans and his head digs back into the pillows. He murmurs, “Yes, fuck!”

I like having him undone like this. It pulls another climax closer. Inches of his length brush up against my spot, and that adds to it all. I’m shaking but determined. I want to make him come, too.

He gasps deeply, and his words are choked. “Baby, soon.”

“Same,” I pant.

His eyes pop open and he sits up, wrapping his arms around me. He bucks beneath me, sending me over the edge once more. Just as I gasp to scream, he pulls me to his mouth and devours my scream as I come. His howl follows when he comes, too.

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Chapter Fourteen-Beckett

THIS IS a woman I could become addicted to.

It's the thought I carry with me to the bathroom. The thought I think when she goes to the bathroom after me. And the thing in my head when she comes back and nuzzles into the crook of my shoulder. I breathe her in and kiss the top of her head. "You were gone for too long."

She giggles. "It was a minute, tops."

I wrap her in my arms. "A minute too long."

"Didn't know you'd become so clingy after."

I laugh. "If you'd like, I can get up and leave—"

"Don't you dare."

I grin and hold her tight. "Right answer."

She takes a deep, satisfied breath. "Beckett?"

"Yeah?"

"I like you in my bed."

“Good thing, because I like being in your bed.”

She giggles again, and it makes my heart thump. “No, I mean, I like having you here. With me.”

If anyone else had said that kind of thing after the first time we had sex, I’d make a respectable excuse and leave. But it only makes me want to be here more. “Me too.”

“But I want you to know I have to go to work early.”

“That sounds like an excuse I’ve used before—”

“No, no,” she squirms from my arms to look me in the eye, “not at all. It’s just that, with everything this week with Cole, I’ve missed work. My boss told me to take the entire week off, but that’s already made the other doctors have to pick up the slack, and there aren’t enough of us to go around as it is. Plus, I’ll be Cole’s ride to physical therapy in Manhattan, which means I’ll be leaning on my brand new coworkers a lot soon, so I have to build up some brownie points with everyone. So, I volunteered to work a seven-night rotation starting tomorrow. Sorry.”

“A seven-night rotation?”

“I’ll be working from five p.m. to seven a.m. for the next seven nights. Some nights, there’s almost nothing, but other nights, it’s like hell itself opens up, and all the demons are in the ED.” She chuckles to herself. “So, whatever I need to get done for the next week needs to happen tomorrow. Laundry, grocery shopping, my hair appointment, all that kind of stuff. Then I have to get in a nap before my shift starts, so I’m not a total zombie when I clock in.”

“Woof.”

She nods. “So, I’m not using an excuse. I swear. It’s just that the next seven nights are going to suck, and I need to do anything I can tomorrow to make them better.”

I nod and pull her to me, where she lays her head back on my chest. It just feels right to hold her like this. “Well, I’ll be busy for a while, too. I get it.”

“How’s that?”

“With Cole being gone, I’m pulling double duty. Also, with Cole being gone, I want to make sure that everything is up to par. No, scratch that. Beyond par. When he comes to visit the job site, I want to impress him.”

She kisses my chest and nuzzles me again. “You’re a good friend to him. You always have been.”

“I hope he sees it that way. I just want him to know he has nothing to worry about. His only job is to get better. Which means my job is to work sixty-plus hours a week until we’re done.”

“That sucks, but I get it.”

I sigh. “Sounds like we are both going to be swamped for the near future. But what I’m hearing is, you’ll be waking up in the afternoons to get ready for work, and I, being my own boss, can take time off in the afternoons, so…”

“What are you getting at?”

“Any chance I can stop by for a little…you know.”

She giggles. “If you want it, then you can say it.”

I kiss her, and her lips part for me in an instant. When her tongue glides with mine, it almost retunes my brain. But I manage to remember I had a point.

“That.”

“Just kissing?”

“Definitely not.”

She grins. “Yeah.”

“Good. But not exactly the ideal way to start things off between two people.”

“Okay sure, but it’s not like things between us are starting on page one, you know? I mean, I’ve known you practically my whole life, Beckett. We don’t have to play Twenty Questions to get to know each other.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. Sophie, I’m learning new things about you all the time. And I really like that. It’s like I get to see you in new ways every time you open that sexy mouth of yours.”

She giggles. “I don’t have a sexy mouth.”

“You have a sexy everything, thank you very much.”

“You already got what you wanted. You don’t have to keep kissing my ass.”

I laugh. “Haven’t kissed it yet, but I’d like to.”

Her giggles are a song I want to play on repeat. “You’re a very silly man sometimes.”

“You have no idea. But you will.”

“I hope to.” She yawns.

I tease her, “You can’t be tired after all that exercise. I thought it was supposed to invigorate you. That’s what all the doctors say.”

“Those doctors are liars.” She cuddles against me.

“Just those doctors, huh? Not the doctor with her elbow dangerously close to my favorite part?”

She scoots her arm up across my chest. “Sorry for that. And yes. Just those doctors.”

“If you need to sleep, it’s okay. But I hope you don’t mind if I stay over.”

She cracks an eye open. “I’d be disappointed if you left.”

I smile, happy to hear that.

“You can’t leave. You’re very warm, and it’s so cold outside.”

“You’re just using me for my body?”

With too much seriousness, she says, “Yes.”

“Oh, that is it, missy. I am out of here, and I’m taking my warmth with me.” I move as though I’d ever leave her ass.

“No!” She says as she holds on tighter.

I laugh hard and lie back. “Okay, you’re too strong for me. Guess I’ll stay.”

She gets comfortable again. “You stop that teasing, mister. Otherwise, I’ll never fall asleep.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Sophie. Promise.”

Her breath catches in her throat, and I hope I haven’t said the wrong thing. But she nuzzles and wriggles until she’s content, then lets out the sweetest little sigh. “Good.”

Lying on her bed, I take in the sights. The bed itself had to have been a splurge—it’s nicer than my own. King-size and firm, perfect for any kind of bedtime acrobatics. The green flannel sheets are warm and soft, and I want to live in them. Her bedroom itself is pretty standard for this kind of small apartment building—brick outer walls, wood floors. Nothing fancy. But it’s a corner unit, so there are two windows on the outer walls. The bedroom is large enough for her massive bed and a small sofa near one of the windows.

I hope to do something fun on the sofa with her sometime. Hell, I hope to do something fun with her on every surface of her apartment anytime she wants.

When her little snores kick in, something settles in my chest. Despite the number of women who have fallen asleep on my chest, I’ve never felt that before. But it’s there, all the same. Sophie brings me a peace I’ve never known.

She’s right—we aren’t starting on page one. But I’m right, too. I’m learning things about her I never thought possible. For that matter, I’m learning about myself, too.

Never thought I’d be a guy who was happy to just lay there after sex. Or, god forbid, fall asleep with her. Usually I am out the door right after. Before Sophie, it was so easy to go from hot and heavy to dressed and driving home that it was second nature. Only two minutes of cuddling, because they tended to get the wrong impression if it went longer than that. I refused to lead a girl on. It was one thing to bedhop, it was another to lie about it. I never lied. I was always upfront about what I wanted. If they willfully misunderstood after that, it was their choice.

I was not at fault for their choice.

And now, I’m making the choice to stay. I almost chuckle at the thought of it

being a choice. Really, it's not. I couldn't leave her if I wanted to.
I might be addicted to Sophie Kendrick already.

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Chapter Fifteen-Beckett

AFTER LEAVING Sophie's place in the early morning, I definitely did not text my favorite By Any Means Necessary delivery guy in Manhattan to transport a dozen of Cole's favorite donuts all the way to Somerset Harbor out of guilt. I did it because I am sure he could use some cheering up. Sure. That's the only reason.

Not guilt.

I rush home, shower and shave, and I'm out the door again, and on the way to the hospital before work. In my haste to make last night happen, though, I forgot to bring up the idea of keeping things between me and her for a little while yet. Not that I want to hide what we're up to, but I don't want to spring things on Cole this soon after his waking up. Yesterday seemed rough on him—of course it was. Compounding that kind of trauma onto him just seems wrong right now. So, I text Sophie on the way. "Cole doesn't need to know about us yet, right?"

She quickly responds, "Definitely not. Meant to mention that last night."

Thank god, we're on the same page. "Okay, good. Seeing him soon."

"Me too."

I nearly slam on the brakes. “Want time alone with him?”

“No.”

And so, I resume driving. “See you there.”

She sends a smiley face.

I’m dating someone who uses emojis. And I don’t mind it. Weird. I park and jog into the hospital. It’s getting too cold outside to ignore, especially when the breeze picks up. Inside the hospital, I see the evidence of my guilt—my goodwill—all around the employees. Donuts everywhere. The receptionist, the nurses’ station, even a few doctors and patients have donuts. When I open Cole’s room, I see the reason.

There is a stack of donut boxes on the couch. It’s as tall as his mom.

“Hey!” Cole says, powdered sugar on his lips.

“Did you fall into a pile of cocaine again?” I tease. “We’ve talked about this.”

His mom says, “Oh, you stop that. Thank you, but I think this might be overkill, Beckett.”

“Well, you know me. Never under-kill. Only overkill.”

I pull out my phone and check the text message I sent to the BAMN delivery guy. Somehow, “A dozen donuts,” was auto-corrected to, “Ten dozen donuts.” *Huh. Time to get a new phone.*

But I smile when I look up at them. “So, how are things today?”

Cole says, “Better, now that I have enough of Adeline’s donuts to bribe the hospital staff.”

I laugh. “Well, I had to make them feel better about having you on their roster.”

He laughs, and Mrs. Kendrick says, “Beckett, would you mind sitting with him while I get a proper breakfast? It won’t be but a minute—

“Please go feed yourself. I’ve got this.”

She smiles and tells him, “I’ll be right back, Cole.”

“Mom, if you want to go home for a while, I’ll be okay.”

“Not on your life. Be right back.” She leaves us.

“She’s driving you nuts—”

“Out of my mind,” he says with a laugh. “But at least she cares. Sit, stay awhile, grab a donut. While you’re at it, grab me one.”

“You got it.” I pick a chocolate iced, mint crème filled for me, and a powdered mulberry jelly for him, before settling in his mother’s chair by his side. “So, how are you holding up? Really.”

He sighs, which blows some of his powdered sugar onto his other hand.

“That about sums it up, I guess.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Um, about what happened, Cole, I’m sorry. I should have—”

“Don’t. Don’t ever do that again. This was not your fault, Beckett. I’m sure Beau would feel better if I gave that to MacMillan Corp in writing, but—”

“Did he say something to you?”

He chuckles. “No. But I know him. I’m sure he’s terrified of the lawsuit that will never come.”

I can breathe easier for a moment. “Glad he hasn’t. I’d hate to have to kill my brother, but if he so much as starts that sentence, I’ll end it *and* him.”

“Relax. No one needs to threaten violence on my account. I’m just happy to be breathing for the time being.”

His words cut too close to the quick, and I have to gulp a hard knot in my throat. “So...about all that. How are you dealing?”

“It comes and goes. Some moments, I’m nose deep in the world’s best jelly donut. Then, a moment later, I realize just how close I came to never having a donut again. Kind of a roller coaster.”

“Yeah. I bet. The guys on the crew miss you.”

He smiles. “Well, sure they do. I’m not a hard ass like you.”

I laugh. “Missed you, too.”

“Yeah, same here. And it’s weird, but this kind of thing gave me some clarity. I know everyone says that about near-death experiences, but I mean it. When I get my life back, I’m not holding anything back anymore. I am going to live my life to the fullest, whatever I decide that is. And I want you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“You won’t either. You will live every moment like it’s your last, because... well, you just don’t know.”

If ever there was a better segue into me and Sophie...I gulp again, this time from nerves. “I promise. And there’s something I should tell you.”

“What’s that?”

“I kind of started that idea a little sooner than you might have thought.”

“Huh?”

I screw up my courage. “The night you fell—

The door flings open, and it’s Sophie. “Hey, guys!”

My heartstrings zing when I see her, but now, I’m shocked into silence.

“Hey, Soph. Want a donut?”

She laughs. “I heard about the donut invasion on my way in. Hell yeah, I want one.” She helps herself.

Cole prompts me, “You were saying?”

“Uh, right. What was I saying?”

“You said the night I fell...”

Sophie shoots me a glance, but tries to keep it casual. “Uh, Beckett, which donuts do you like? I don’t want to steal your favorite, and I know how when you’re stressed, you like to shove your feet in your mouth. I mean, food.”

Okay, she has a point. “Right, um, I like all of them, so don’t worry about it.”

Cole chuckles. “Donuts, women, is there anything you don’t like all of?”

I cannot look at Sophie when he laughs at his own joke. “Uh, you’d be surprised. The night you fell—”

“Beckett,” Sophie begins.

I blurt, “I ate too much and embarrassed myself in front of Sophie.”

Cole frowns. “By eating too much?”

“Well, I was stressed out, and you know how I get—”

“Oh, yeah.”

“And well, I demolished two Hawaiians right in front of her.”

His frown deepens. “Do you mean the people?”

“The pizza!”

He laughs. “Oh! Well, I’d hardly call that living life to the fullest, but okay. Yeah, I mean, whatever it takes to make you feel like you’re really living. And Sophie, I want that for you, too.”

“Hawaiian pizzas?”

“Living life to the fullest. When I get out of here and done with PT, I’m going to take life by the balls. I want you to, too.”

“See, Sophie? That’s what he wants for us.” *Hint, hint.*

She smiles professionally, and I feel an icy wall between us. “I’ve seen this before. People survive something big, and it gives them a whole new outlook on life. But Cole, the high of that is almost always followed by a crash. So, I want you to be prepared for that, okay?”

I nod. “I’ve heard of that—post-event blues or something like that?”

“Basically yes,” she says as she comes to the other side of his bed. “So, some awareness of that will do you good.”

He grins. “I love seeing you two getting along.”

We share an uneasy smile, and guilt gnaws at my insides. I almost slipped up. Even though the moment feels right to tell him, I know it’s not, because she’s not telling him right now. I cannot be that naïve again. This is a delicate situation, no matter how good it would feel to tell him. She was right to steer me away from telling him—this should be her decision, too. I cannot be that selfish, not when he’s still not quite himself. It’ll take time, and I will give Cole all the time he needs.

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Chapter Sixteen-Beckett

COLE HAS to come back to work pronto. Why is it that when you stare at spreadsheets long enough, all the lines and numbers blur together? And why does Cole's job involve spreadsheets? I'm ready to tear my hair out, and it's not even noon.

My office is a trailer on the job site. Nothing fancy, but I wouldn't want anything fancy, anyway. I get enough of fancy when I visit my parents' house. The trailer is a standard number, off-white with a gray short pile carpet and a basic brown desk. I keep a bottle of Jack in a drawer and a coffeemaker on the table near the door. I stocked my fridge with protein shakes and water. Spartan and standard, just the way I like it.

But today, I don't like anything.

Taking over Cole's responsibilities has been hell. It's shameful to admit, but I honestly thought his job was easier than mine. By a lot. Turns out, I had that backwards.

When someone knocks, I'm simultaneously pissed off by the interruption and eternally grateful for it. "Come in."

Beau smiles. "Is this a good time?"

“Not at all. What do you need?”

“I’m sorry. Would you mind taking the venom out of your voice for a moment?”

I take a breath and let it out slowly. “Sorry for that. I’m just...struggling.”

He closes the door behind him and sits across from me. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“Cole. Or rather, Cole’s job. He’s fine, don’t worry. It’s his work. I did not know it was this intricate.”

“He makes it look easy.”

“Too easy. And he was ahead! How was he ahead? Seriously, we have not been paying him enough. I mean it, Beau, he deserves a huge raise for the shit he does.”

He nods. “Take it up with Cormac. He’ll handle it.”

“I will.” I try rapid-fire blinking my eyes to make them focus again, and when I look at the spreadsheet again, I sigh. Everything goes blurry again. “This is just so much.”

“Sounds to me like you need a drink.”

My head drops, and I growl, “Yes!”

He chuckles. “Let’s hit McLaren’s for lunch. My treat.”

“Whatever you say. Just get me away from my computer.”

I let him drive us there. He has a sweet Aston Martin, and he likes to drive the hell out of it, so rides with Beau are always fun. Once we enter McLaren’s, I take in the sights. They’re dead on a Tuesday before lunch, so we get our choice of hardwood booths and grab one near the bar. The place smells like beer and the servers are friendly. The best thing about them is their onion rings, so my lunch is already decided.

After we order, I realize, “I didn’t ask why you came to my office. What’s up?”

Beau takes a deep breath. “I’d like to wait until our drinks arrive, if you don’t mind.”

“But you were going to tell me in my office?”

“You have Jack Daniels in your office.”

I laugh. “Must not be great news if *you* are willing to drink that.”

It’s then I see his tells. The strained smile. The line between his brows deepening. Whatever it is, it’s not good. “I simply believe these kinds of things require a bit of liquid courage to facilitate a proper—”

“Beau, cut the crap. What’s going on?”

But then our drinks arrive—his martini and my pale ale. He sips while I chug. Then Beau says, “I do believe I will propose to Elsie soon.”

“What!”

He chuckles. “You may wish to keep your voice down—”

“You’ve been dating for like three months!”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“It’s so soon!”

Beau smiles and nods. “Yes, and I would have asked sooner had Cormac and Lily not been going through all their wedding festivities. I do not wish to steal focus from their happiness with my own.”

“You’re seriously sure about this?”

“Beckett, you know me. Have I ever spoken of proposing before?”

“Not ever. Which is part of the reason I’m shocked.”

But his smile grows. “Which should tell you just how serious I am about this. Elsie is unlike any woman I have ever known. She is fierce and bright and at the top of her field. Not to mention gorgeous and well-traveled, and...” He gets this star-struck look on his face that makes me think of Sophie. Not sure why. “I have never laughed the way I do with her. I’ve never been so moved

by someone as she moves me. It's as though she's unlocked this part of me I didn't know existed. I'm sure it doesn't make sense to someone like you—"

"No. No. I think I get it, actually."

"I can think of no better way to spend the rest of my life than to do so with her."

I smile, both because I am happy for him, and also to hide my extreme jealousy. Not that me and Sophie are anywhere near this kind of talk, but still. The jealousy bubbles up.

It wasn't that long ago that Cormac had told us he wanted to marry Lily. Now Beau is heading for the aisle. Or he will be once Elsie says yes. In some ways, it feels like the end of an era. But it's also the beginning of a new one.

"Man, I am so happy for you."

"Thank you for that. How goes things with Sophie?"

"It would be better if things had not started with Cole's accident as the makeshift catalyst."

"Of course—"

"No, I mean, because of his accident, we haven't had much time together at all. She's working to make up for lost time, and I'm covering everything because he's not there. So, we hardly have any time for each other."

Beau sighs. "That sucks. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too. But the bright side is, he's alive and awake and still a smart ass, so they're thinking his brain damage is minimal at most."

"That is excellent to hear."

"And he's not suing us."

That earns an automatic smile from Beau. But he tries to cover. "What makes you bring that up? I wasn't worried about that."

I raise an eyebrow at him, and he turns his attention to his martini to avoid me. "Anyway, he's in good spirits, or he was this morning. So, if you want to visit him, I'm sure he'd like that."

“I will then.” Our food arrives, and we dig in. “What is it about his job that perplexes you so?” After giving him the long and the short of it, he pointedly says, “Sounds like you could use an assistant.”

“We’ve been over this.”

“Yes, and it always comes down to you needing an assistant.”

I huff. “It’s only been a few days. I’ll get the hang of it.”

“Why are you so contrarian on the matter? Me and Cormac have them, and most of the time, they are a boon.”

“And what about the times they’re not?”

“You have always said that you don’t need one. That your job doesn’t really require assisting, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, but—”

“And now?”

I huff. “Still don’t need one. I just need time.”

He closes his eyes. “It is your call entirely, but Beckett, how long before Cole returns to work?”

“We’re not sure.”

“And can you see yourself dealing with all of this for an indeterminate amount of time?”

He has a point, and I don’t want to admit it. So, I dip my onion ring in the house made sweet and sour and savor the bite instead of answering him right away. “McLaren’s really has perfected the onion ring. Batter, not breading. Sweet and—”

“Beckett. Answer the question.”

“No, okay? I don’t.”

“I’ll text you the number to the temp agency we use. Honestly, I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn about this.”

I sigh, and the answer makes my stomach knot up. “Because if I hire an assistant now, then it’s like telling Cole that I think it will take a long time for him to return. He knows I never wanted an assistant, Beau. If I do this, he’ll know what I really think about his recovery. That it will take months or longer. And that might send him spiraling.”

He takes a beat with his martini. “Ah. Now that, I understand.”

“I don’t want to be the reason he loses hope.”

“And I don’t blame you for that. Not one bit. The ugly truth is, we must all be realists in this. Cole is down for now. Not forever.”

“The doctor said it’ll be a year of physical therapy, and even then we don’t know if he will walk again—”

“He will.”

I frown at him. “He’s the best neurologist—”

“Cole will walk again. Mark my words.”

“What makes you so confident?”

“You two are friends, in part, because you are so much alike. You’re funny, charismatic peas in a pod, right?”

I shrug. “Yeah.”

“Well, if *you* were the person in the hospital instead of him, I’d put all my money on you walking again. One of the other things you two have in common is an unbelievable stubborn streak. I have a feeling his stubbornness will repair his spine just to baffle the doctors on principle.”

I chuckle. “That sounds like us.”

“Back to me. In regard to my impending proposal, I have something special in mind, and I need your help.”

“Oh sure. Get me liquored up, then ask for a favor? That’s fair.”

“Since when does our family play fair?”

I roll my eyes and ask, “How can I help?”

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C hapter Seventeen-Sophie

“ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER FENDER BENDER,” Hope whines as we sit down to lunch. But with lunch near midnight, is it really lunch?

“Could be worse. Could be interesting.”

“What I wouldn’t give for an interesting...” But then she catches my judgmental eye. “You know what? You’re right. Sorry.”

I take a breath. “It’s weird. I used to love the *interesting* cases. And then Cole happened.”

“Yeah. How is he doing?”

“You got your donut yesterday, right?”

“Oh, hell yeah.”

I laugh. “Then I imagine you saw him.”

“He was sleeping.”

“Well, he’s doing okay, I guess.” Just thinking about him made me feel guilty, though.

“Something up?”

I hadn't told Hope about Beckett yet. The only other person who knows anything is Mom, and that feels odd. This is the kind of thing I should share, right? Maybe? “Not really up, so much as...Well. Sort of. Yeah. I don't know. No—”

“That's a whole lot of capitulating.”

I take a breath for courage. “Okay. But if I tell you—”

“I take it to my grave. Spit it out.”

“The night of Cole's accident, his best friend Beckett—”

“I met him that day, remember?”

I chuckle at myself. “Right. Uh, well, after Cole was finally settled in the ICU, I was famished, and so was Beckett. Turns out, he's a stress eater. So, since Mom was staying with Cole—”

“You slept with the bodybuilder?”

I laugh, and heat rises in my cheeks. “Not that night.”

“But you did—”

“Yes. After Cole woke up and we knew he'd be okay.”

“Oh, I'm so happy for you!”

I put my hands up to cut her off. “It's not like that.”

“Wait, why am I happier about this than you are? Was it not good?”

After a deep breath, I admit, “It was the best sex I've ever had.”

“Then what's the problem? He looks like a Greek god. You said he has more money than God, and it's the best sex of your life? This should not be making you make that face.”

“It's not a big deal. To him, I mean. We're just friends with benefits, Hope.”

“Oh. Well, that doesn't mean you can't enjoy it, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She frowns, confused. “But you want it to be more?”

“No, it’s not that. He’s Cole’s best friend.”

“Yeah, so he should be happy for both of you—why are you shaking your head?”

“Cole’s opinion of me is too high, and that means that there is no man good enough for me.”

She rolls her eyes. “He will get over that.”

“Cole’s opinion of Beckett is too low, when it comes to his dating history. He adores the man in every other realm, but not that.”

“Why?”

“Beckett MacMillan has been around the block a few—”

“Oh, come on. He can’t hate him for that.”

“Hundred times.”

Her eyes widen. “You mean he’s dated—”

“Most of Somerset Harbor. And a good chunk of Manhattan. The other boroughs. Long Island...I could go on. The point is, he’s been busy. And Cole would never want us to date. Ever. In fact, he’s apparently tried to make sure that would never happen.”

“Oh.”

“So, now when I see Cole, I feel like I’m lying to him. And I don’t lie to Cole. Neither does Beckett, so that makes being around my brother very awkward. And when he comes to visit Cole and I’m around—”

She winces. “Yikes.”

“Exactly. But I’m not ready for him to know.”

“Is that for his benefit or for yours?”

“Can’t it be both?”

She shakes her head and smiles. “He’s going to have to accept it at some point, right?”

“He’s too fragile. And it kills me to say that about my big brother. He’s always been the guy who protected us. Took care of us. Well, kind of. And —”

“What do you mean, kind of?”

“When our father died, I was the one who stepped into the caretaker role for Mom and Cole. They both fell apart. Not that I blame them. But one of us had to decide everything for the funeral, and that fell on me.”

Hope nods. “Death affects everyone differently. It was like that for me when my aunt died. She raised me and my sister, and I lost it. But my sister was like you. Strong.”

“I don’t know if I’d call myself strong, but—”

“No, you are. I see it all the time here. Like when that kid came in with the spiral fracture, and you had to get his dad out of the room while we worked...” She chuckles under her breath. “Never saw a fifty-year-old, six foot tall, two-hundred-and-fifty pound man cowed by a teeny young woman before. And that was your second night here. It was impressive as hell.”

“If he didn’t want to deal with the consequences of breaking his son’s arm, then he shouldn’t have done it.”

“What did you say to him, anyway? He was pale as a sheet when we got to him in the waiting room.”

I smirk to myself. “That it was only my second night in the ED, so I didn’t mind having to start over someplace new, and that if I ever thought he laid his hands on his son again, they wouldn’t find enough of his body to identify him by dental records because I have a boat and like to shark fish, and I always need chum.”

Hope’s eyes bulge. “You are my hero.”

I shrug. “I don’t have a boat. Never gone shark fishing.”

She giggles. “Yeah, well, here, that is a legitimate hobby. So good on you for the quick thinking.”

“I know it’s one of those things we have to deal with here, and I probably shouldn’t have threatened him if I want to keep my job, but I just hate bullies.”

“Okay, so back to Cole. How long do you plan to keep this from him?”

It’s a good question. “I’m not sure. Maybe if things become something more than FWB, I’ll tell him then.”

“And how long do you think you can actually keep it quiet?”

“Probably not that long. Mom knows.”

Her eyebrows reach for her hairline. “Your mom knows about your friends-with-benefits situation?”

I laugh. “No. She knows we kissed. That’s all.”

“Oh. I mean, I was close with my aunt, but I could never imagine telling her anything like that.”

“I want to tell Cole. But it will piss him off in several ways, and I’m just not ready to deal with that. Plus, I don’t think it will do him any good to get that upset right now—”

“Cop out.”

A smile hits me fast. “Okay, maybe. But am I wrong? If you woke up from a coma and found out your sister was dating someone you disapproved of, who happens to be your best friend, would you handle it well?”

“Dating? I thought you said this was a friends with bennies thing.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do you?”

I open my mouth to defend my previous statement, but it doesn’t come. Do I know what I mean? Is this just FWB, or is it something more? He stayed over. That’s never happened with any other FWB situation. But before I can

point that out, my phone alarm goes off. “Time to make the donuts.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know. It’s something my mom always said when she had to go to work.”

“Crap. Now I want donuts. The ones Cole had were amazing.” We scrape off our trays and head back to the locker room to clock in.

“They’re from Adeline’s. Beckett had them delivered from the city.”

She sighs. “I know he’s just a friend, but damn. That’s really sweet of him.”

“Yeah.”

“When you’re done with him, I get dibs.”

I laugh hard. “What?”

She grins at me. “Just kidding. Mostly.”

“You have spinach in your teeth, funny girl.”

“Oh, shit.” She checks the mirror in her locker. “I do not.”

“Call it vengeance for dibs.”

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Chapter Eighteen-Sophie

THE ONLY GOOD thing about night shift is it makes the time fly by. Kind of.

Without seeing light through the windows, I don't really know what time it is. Could be nine, could be four, because the sky looks the same either way. I don't get that with day shift.

But I get to live a relatively normal life when I work days, and I miss that.

Still, I try not to get too bogged down in what's ideal. As an ED doctor, there really isn't anything ideal in life. No one comes to see us because they want to. Except for the pill heads, but that's not really their choice. They have a problem—it's just not one we can solve.

So, when I clock out for the sixth night of my seven night rotation, I attempt to pretend to have a normal life. If I had a regular life, I'd check on my brother after work, and that is exactly what I'm going to do. But when I get to his door, I worry he'll be asleep. And I don't want to wake him. It's only five after seven.

But I peek into the window in the door, and see he's watching TV, so I knock and walk in. "Hey there."

He smiles. "There she is. Want some truly awful oatmeal?"

"Huh?"

He points to the tray on his table next to him. "Seriously, one of the worst things I have ever put in my mouth."

"Sorry. How about I get you something decent from the cafeteria?"

"Nah. I complained to the nurse, and she brought me two blueberry muffins in place of it."

"Two? Sounds like she has a little crush." I plop onto the chair where Mom had haunted his room.

He chuckles. "You know me. Always charming the seventy-year-olds."

I laugh. "Yep. That's definitely your move."

"So, what brings you by?"

"I wanted to check on my big brother. Make sure everyone is treating him right. Where's Mom?"

"I finally convinced her to go home last night. Hopefully, she's sleeping for the next two days. I know she didn't sleep while she was here."

On our couches? Definitely not. "I'm shocked she left at all, but given this chair, I don't blame her."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse." I pause for a moment, trying to think of what to say. "How was the coffee?"

"Decent enough. Shouldn't you be getting breakfast by now?"

I shrug. "I'm at the end of my shift, so—"

"The end?"

"Yeah. I'm working nights for a little while. I mentioned it the other day."

"Oh. Must have forgotten."

That doesn't sound right. I'm on my feet with my penlight in his eyes before I can even think about it. My other hand finds his. "Give my hand a squeeze."

He rolls his eyes, which makes them very difficult to examine. "I'm fine. They said I'd have a little trouble with memory for a while."

His pupils dilate just fine, no signs of trouble. His grip strength is good. I test it again with both hands when I tuck my penlight away. "Yeah, okay. You're good. For now." I sit back down. "You just need to practice using your memory. It'll help. I can get you some flashcards to work on it."

"Sophia. I am going to be okay."

Don't know why a knot suddenly forms in my throat. Swallowing is tougher than it should be. My eyes wet a little, too. As much as I needed to hear him say that, I didn't like the other part. "Sophie. Not Sophia."

He smirks mischievously. "Maybe I need those flashcards. How could I forget that?"

"You're a dick, you know that?"

He giggles like a damn child, and I roll my eyes at him. "And I don't need flashcards. I watch game shows all day. It's great for my memory, because I remember watching these same shows with Grandma Imogene when I was a kid. Still know some of the answers."

I laugh. "Wish I remembered her better."

"I wish you did, too. She was great. She always snuck me extra dessert when she came over."

"Is that the real reason you used to go to her place after school? Dessert?"

He smiles at the memory. "No. I mean, it helped. But no. I enjoyed hanging out with her. She was feisty. I think you get that from her."

"Maybe. But Mom is also feisty, so that might just be her."

"Must be why Dad liked Mom. She reminded him of the best parts of his mom."

"Funny how sometimes we end up with people like our family. It sounds

gross when I say it like that, but I mean, you grow up around these people. And learning to appreciate them and their eccentricities helps you to be able to do that with people like them.”

He nods. “Yeah. Whoever I end up with will not be a wilting flower, I can assure you.”

“I cannot picture you with a wilting flower, Cole. Not ever. You’d be bored out of your mind.”

“Without a doubt. I want a woman with a spine. And hips. And long legs. And—”

“This is about to get gross, and I do not need to hear it.”

He laughs. “I wasn’t going to get gross. I was just going to say a sweet—”

“Cole!”

“Disposition.”

I shoot him a look, and he cracks up at his joke. “Always the funny guy, aren’t you?”

“Unlike you, she’ll appreciate my tasteless humor.”

“As long as you understand it’s tasteless...”

“What about you, Sophie? What kind of guy do you think you’ll end up with?”

I almost choke on my spit. After coughing a bit, I clear my throat. “I’m fine. Um, to answer your question, probably someone...calm. I’ll need that after long days and nights here. Someone who doesn’t mind cooking sometimes, because I don’t have the time to. Someone who cooks, too. Someone who—”

“You want a wife from the 1950s?”

“Can you blame me?”

He chuckles. “No. Not at all. It sounds great until you realize those women were pepped up on pills.”

I shrug. “We all do what we have to, right?”

“I guess.”

I pause for a moment. “You really scared me, Cole.”

“I’m sorry for that. Scared me, too. I’m thankful to be alive.”

“Not sure how much you know about that day, but I was here. I was the first contact the EMTs had when you were rolled in.”

He frowns. “What’s that mean?”

“I was the doctor who first saw you as they brought you in.” There’s that damn lump in my throat again. I take a breath to calm myself. “When I saw it was you, I said so, and they pulled me off your case instantly.”

“That seems mean.”

But I shake my head. “It’s protocol. Basically, unless you’re the only doctor around, you’re never supposed to work on your own family.”

“How come?”

“Well, for instance, once I knew it was you, I lost my shit, and that would not have made for a good outcome for you. Can’t exactly operate when you can’t see because you’re crying.”

He nods. “Oh. That makes sense.”

“So, they made me go to the waiting room, and there was Beckett. After everything the EMTs told me about how you got hurt on the job, I blamed him for what happened—

“It’s not his fault, Soph.”

“I know that now. But at the moment, I was furious, and I had all these emotions with nowhere to put them, so I threw them at him. He took it like a champ.”

He smiles sadly. “Because he’s a good guy.”

Now might be a good time to bring it up. I nod. “He really is.”

“He’s always been loyal. No matter what. He’s always been there for me. In all our years as friends, he’s never screwed me over, never even cheated at cards. Hell, he’s even covering all my medical expenses, my other bills, everything. I can’t believe he flew that guy in—”

“He loves you. Of course, he did.”

Cole smiles. “He’s the best.”

Now or never. “Sounds like the perfect guy.”

He chuckles and sighs. “Unless you’re a girl. Then he has his fun and dips out. I don’t know why he’s like that with women when he’s the exact opposite with me. But that’s Beckett. An enigma.”

Okay, maybe not now. “Think he’ll ever settle down?”

He laughs. Too hard. “Absolutely not. That’s why I always tried to keep you two apart. I love him to death, trust him with my life. Obviously. But with you? Nope. He wouldn’t mean to hurt you, of course. It’s just what he does. Like that story Grandma Imogene read me about the scorpion and the toad. It’s just in his nature.”

“Sounds like he needs a better nature.” And I mean that.

“Yes, he does.”

C hapter Nineteen-Sophie

JUST IN HIS NATURE? That's such bullshit. I wasn't about to argue with Cole. He's still fragile, as far as I'm concerned. But *his nature* is a weak excuse guys use to feel better about their friends being assholes.

Cole hadn't told me anything I didn't already know, but the way he said it bugs me. It bugs me so much that I can't sleep much during the day, and that was difficult enough already. I didn't need challenges. So, I text Beckett, hoping we can talk about things to put my mind at ease.

It's weird that he doesn't text me back.

When I go into work that night, it's the last of my rotation, which should make me happy. Only, it doesn't. Things feel odd. It's been hours. Beckett should have texted me back by now. I figured he got busy—we all get busy. But it's after ten at night and nothing.

Janet comes to me with that look, and I know she wants something. Normally, I'd find any excuse to dodge her. Hell, I've changed bedpans to avoid that woman. But tonight, I'm distracted. She puts on a fake smile. It must be something big. Crap. "So, it's your last night on this shift."

"Yep."

“Garcia is looking for someone to cover his shifts for the next five nights. Any chance that could be you? He covered two of your days when Cole was first injured. Might be nice if you would pay him back.”

My first thought is of Beckett. That I want to be available when he’s got time off of work. He was right—being so busy at the start of things isn’t good for a new relationship. That’s probably why I’m being so weird about him not texting me back.

But then I realize he hasn’t texted me back. Screw that guy.

“Yeah, I’ll take it.”

“I can put you down for two to make it even?”

Might regret this, but right now, I do not care. “All five.”

She’s quirks a look at me. “Are you looking to come onto nights?”

“No. But I want to help. And I appreciate what he did for me.”

“Okay. I’ll put you down for all five.” She walks away.

No need to tell her I’m avoiding dealing with something else. I don’t like it when coworkers get into my business. If this even is business...

I text him again. “Everything okay?”

When I haven’t gotten a text back by the time my shift is over, I’m glad I took Garcia’s shifts. Let Beckett miss me. He doesn’t deserve my attention after not responding. Let him come to me.

But after two whole days and nights of not hearing anything from him, I’m pissed. And Hope notices it at our midnight meal. “What did that lettuce ever do to you?”

“Thinking me and Beckett was just a fluke or something.”

She frowns. “How come?”

“He hasn’t called. Or texted. Or sent a carrier pigeon. No smoke signals, either.”

“That seems especially odd.”

“What makes you say so?”

She shrugs. “He’s your brother’s best friend.”

“So?”

“So, I’d think it would be super weird for him to ghost on his BFF’s sister. I mean, he probably had to work up the courage to make a move on you in the first place, considering everything he has to lose here.”

But I shake my head. “I told you, he’s notorious for this. I shouldn’t have thought I’d be any different to him. He’s just Beckett being Beckett.”

“Do you really think he’s ignorant enough to do that to you and expect there’s no consequences?”

“Not ignorant, Hope. Arrogant. He’s a MacMillan, after all.”

She shrugs. “You mean about his family’s money?”

I nod. “Never really saw it in him before, but that kind of money skews your perspective. People are disposable to people like him. Guess I am, too.”

“Don’t say that. You don’t know what’s going on with him. Maybe just take a step back and—”

“Why are you defending him?”

She swallows. “I just think you’re being extra harsh on him because you’re tired and stressed out about Cole. I don’t want to see you go off the rails because he’s taking his time.”

I stare into her eyes and she looks away. “Who?”

“What?”

“Not what. Who? Who’s the guy, Hope?”

Her cheeks flush red. “We consulted with neuro for the kid who fell off his bike without a helmet.”

I gasp. “You and Dr. Maynard again?”

“I can’t help it. I’m weak.” She shakes her head, and I giggle. “I do not understand why I can’t stay away from him. It’s a sickness. A curse. A—”

“A really good time?”

“Oh my god, Sophie. That man can do things. It’s unnatural.”

I keep giggling at her, as she tells me details enough to make me blush, too. “Sounds like he’s more than made up for his lack of bedside manner.”

“But he’s such an asshole!”

I shrug. “A lid for every pot. Isn’t that the saying?”

“I cannot marry an asshole! The only time we get along is when we are halfway to Happy Town, and you can’t build a marriage on sex.”

“Who says?”

“Stop encouraging me. I don’t need it. I promise. He is all the encouragement I ever need.”

“Sorry. It’s just, I’ve never seen you so defensive of a guy as now. Especially a guy with very questionable morals.”

She sighs. “I’m still coming off the high. It’ll fade. Don’t take any of my advice right now.”

“By that logic, I shouldn’t take that advice, either.”

“You will not win this with semantics.”

In the lull of our chat, my thoughts turn back to Beckett. “He stayed over, Hope. I thought players didn’t do that.”

“None I’ve ever known. It’s wham, bam, door slam in my experience.”

“So, why stay over? Why make me feel like it was more than it was, and then don’t return my texts for two days?”

“It’s weird. But guys are weird. Dr. Maynard likes it when I call him Mr. Rogers.”

“What?”

She shrugs. “I don’t question it. I just do it, and for my troubles, he makes me come screaming like a madwoman. Fair trade.”

“Brings a whole new meaning to, ‘Won’t you be my neighbor.’” I cannot stop giggling.

She whispers, “He says that when he comes.”

And I lose it. Oh, I needed this. I laugh until I cry. “He does not!”

“Yes, he really does. It was unsettling at first, but now, I can’t even look men in cardigans in the eye. It was hell in autumn. Thank god for winter.”

“I hope you’re teasing right now.”

She smiles and sighs. “Wish I was.”

“Oh my.”

After the high of our chat comes the low of work. It’s nice to be distracted from my own thoughts, though. I don’t much care for them right now. It’s ugly in my head at the moment.

Cole was right. I was wrong. Beckett is a womanizing jerk. I’ve always known that about him. It’s not as if any of this is a genuine surprise. I just... thought I was special. And god, that is so embarrassing. I should have known what this was. Just a fling. A one-night stand. No big deal.

I am no big deal to Beckett MacMillan, and I was dumb enough to let feelings for him take root.

Well, I’ll rip that weed right out. I would delete his number from my phone if I didn’t want to contact him about Cole in the future. That seems imprudent. Better I just change his contact ID. I erase his name and replace it with, “The Biggest Jerk I know.”

Maybe it’s petty, but it makes me feel a little better.

C hapter Twenty-Sophie

FRIDAY NIGHTS ARE hell in the ED. It might be date night to everyone else, but to us, it's amateur hour. Worse when it falls on a holiday, though. Thankfully, tonight is just a busy Friday night. A few drunk driving accidents, a fist fight, and a pizza delivery guy who got T-boned by someone who has never driven in the snow. The usual, but en masse. Seems like everyone has become restless in Somerset Harbor, and they went out despite the weather. And when they go out, we get swamped.

The good thing about nights like this is that they breeze by. It's my eleventh night in a row, and I need that. Badly.

We get notification of an accident right before my first break, so I race to the vending machine to cram a protein bar down before the ambulance arrives. I need the chocolate one. It's the best thing in there.

"Hey, I've got it," Hope says. "Go take your break."

"No, I'll be—"

"We're not arguing. You've been a machine lately. You need to take your breaks. Take it."

I sigh and nod, and she dashes off for the outer doors. Now that I don't have to rush, I debate a bag of chips, too. Salty and sweet sounds pretty good right now.

"Sophie."

Every muscle in my body tenses. I know that voice. I loathe that voice.

"Yeah?"

"Got a minute? Hope said you're about to go on break."

Damn her. I turn around and there's Beckett, looking devastatingly handsome. I know, because I'm devastated by seeing him. "Go away." I order my protein bar, and it sticks between the shelves and the glass. "Shit."

"I got it." He reaches over me and shakes the machine. The protein bar falls, and he passes it to me.

"You know, lots of people die every year from falling vending machines like that. You could have killed me." I snatch it from his hand.

He smirks. "I live on the edge."

"I hope the view from there is nice when you're all alone. Bye." I start, but he follows.

"What is going on?"

"Leave me alone."

"Sophie, what the hell?"

I don't want to have a fight in the halls because that would be humiliating, and he's already humiliated me enough. So, I drag him into one of the empty private rooms for families. As soon as the door shuts, I start in on him. "What is going on is that I don't want you here unless you're here to visit Cole. Are you here to visit Cole? Because visiting hours are over."

"No—"

"Then leave."

He blinks at me, utterly confused. "I don't know what's going on, Sophie."

Are you okay?”

“Do I sound okay?”

“Not even a little. Is Cole okay?”

“Yeah, he’s doing better every day.”

“Then I reiterate, what the hell?”

I huff and pull out my phone, hoping he sees what I changed his name to.

“This, Beckett. This is the hell. See all those texts I sent you? See how you never, ever responded? Do you get it now? Leave!”

He takes a deep breath and huffs it out. “Okay, you showed me yours. Now, I’ll show you mine.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out nothing.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“No. I dropped my phone in wet concrete a couple days ago. My replacement isn’t coming until tomorrow, because it’s on back order due to supply chain issues.”

I blink up at him. What does it say about me that I want to believe that? “You could be lying.”

“Who lies about being such a klutz that they drop their phone in wet concrete?”

“Guys who get what they want and don’t bother with you again. In other words, guys like you!”

He takes a beat and sighs. “I realize we don’t know each other well, Sophie. So, you should know this about me. I don’t lie. Not well, anyway. Keeping us from your brother has been eating me alive, because I am not a liar. It’s not who I am. It’s not what I do. As far as getting what I want and not bothering with you again, if that were the case, then why would I be here now?”

I had to admit he had a point there. “Come for a little fun?”

“In a hospital? Isn’t that kind of weird?”

“You’d be surprised what people do in hospitals.”

He shrugs those meaty shoulders. “You’re right. I would be. But I guess it takes all kinds to make the world go round. I try not to judge.”

“So, you lost your phone and didn’t bother to come tell me?”

He huffs, and I hadn’t noticed it until then, but he looks bone tired. “With Cole on the DL, I have been working...” He glances at his watch. “What month is it?”

I roll my eyes. “November.”

“Yeah, unless I’ve been here to see him in the morning, I’ve been there working seven to seven or eight most days. And I know that’s nothing by your standards, but for us mere mortals, that’s a lot. So, I’m sorry I haven’t been able to come tell you about being such a klutz that I destroyed my phone. The lack of sleep might have had something to do with that. And I’m sorry I dropped my phone and missed all your texts. And I’m sorry I couldn’t tell Cole to let you know about my phone, but I was worried he’d figure things out.”

I sigh. *Crap. I’m gonna forgive him. Even though he could be lying. Even though I know he’s a serial womanizer.* “Given your history with women, can you blame me for thinking the worst?”

“No. But will there ever be a point in the future when you don’t use my history to think the worst of me?”

Dammit, he has a point. But I shrug. “History is all I have to go on.”

“All you have to go on for now. But I’d like to give you more to go on. If you’re up for that.”

“I’d like that, too.”

“You sure you don’t hate me?”

I grin. “For now.”

“I can work with that.”

“I might let you.”

“And maybe one day you can change my name on your phone.”

“You’ll have to earn your name on my phone.”

He smirks. “Oh, I plan to. There could be gifts involved. Possibly even a weekend away, if you’re into that.”

I sigh at the thought. “*Away*. It sounds like such a magical place.”

He chuckles. “I was thinking someplace with a really nice spa.”

“You’re into that?”

“I might be a manly man, but I like a good deep tissue sports massage now and then.”

“Oh, well—”

“Who am I kidding? I want the most luxurious, most decadent thing on the menu. I want to feel like a pampered, spoiled queen when I go to a spa.”

I giggle. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Not at all. But it’s a secret. You can’t tell Cole I told you.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“Can I tell you another?”

I shrug. “Sure.”

“And you can never, ever tell him I told you this.”

“Pretty sure we have a few secrets from him right now. You can trust me.”

“He got me started on it.”

I blink way too many times. “What?”

“He is the biggest girl at the spa. Cucumbers on the eyes, manicures, pedicures, facials, all of it. And if they have anything to do with chocolate, that’s the first thing he goes for.”

“Oh my god, no!”

He nods rapidly. “You should have seen him at the spa at the Hershey Hotel. He was a literal kid in a candy store. Thought I’d never get him out of there.”

But it was my treat for his birthday.” He shrugs.

“I...I do not know what to say to that. My beer-swilling, rugged outdoorsman brother gets pedicures?”

“Look at his feet the next time you’re in his room. Tell him it’s something to do with his condition. You’ll see.”

Cannot wait to tease him about that. Just can’t tell him how I figured it out. “So. Do you hate me for jumping to conclusions?”

He shakes his head. “Not if you don’t hate me for not calling. Pretty sure both issues were kind of out of our hands.”

“That’s generous of you.”

“I’m a generous guy.”

My phone buzzes. “Shit. I have to get back.”

“That’s okay. I’ll hang out until your lunch break.”

“In the hospital?”

He nods. “It’s not so bad.”

“Okay. Gotta go. But you should find someplace else to hang out.”

“Will do. Go get ‘em.”

Never had a cute boy wait for me at work. As we step out of the room, and Hope catches a glimpse of us, I know I will never hear the end of this. And I’m good with that.

Chapter Twenty-One-Beckett

THERE GOES the woman of my dreams, running toward a man cursing and swinging his fists at EMTs. It takes everything in me not to beat the crap out of him for doing that near her, but he’s already bloodied from whatever put

him in such a foul mood in the first place, and it's plain that he is drunk. In seconds, she has him calmed down and cooperative. No clue what she said to him, but he looks scared of her.

I am falling for that woman.

I laugh at myself and head to the ED waiting room. It has the best snacks, and I think this is going to be a long night. Just wait until I tell our kids about the moment I knew I was falling for their mom. I can picture it now... "Well, Sophie Junior, it was when she made a random bloody drunk into her bitch."

Shaking my head, I consider an energy drink to help me stay awake while I wait for her. Wouldn't mind a little caffeine buzz to keep me conscious. It's going to take time for me to think she believes me about my phone, so I get the energy drink and two protein bars to keep myself alert. I had checked before I came to the Ed—the cafeteria is only open for staff at night. A little foresight and I would have thought to bring food with me, but foresight has never been my talent. Time feels like a construct after working so long for so many days in a row, and I am not thinking clearly as it is.

I could call my BAMN delivery guy—nah. Energy drinks and protein bars are plenty right now.

From the ED Waiting Room, I can watch some of the activity in the ED, if I lean over just a little. Friday night chaos, and Sophie flows through it like water off a duck's wing. She's incredible to watch—maneuvering, nagging, giving the right person the right motivation to keep them moving. It's like art.

I've always enjoyed watching someone who is good at their job. Could be an ice skater or a person at a tackle store threading a lure or someone using a backhoe. It doesn't matter. If they are good at what they do, I am fascinated. It's how I've lost whole days watching extreme carpet cleaners online. So, seeing Sophie do her thing at work, I am mesmerized.

Before I know it, she smiles and joins me. "Hey, it's a swamped night—"

"I'll go. Sorry to bug you—"

"No, no. I was going to say, it's a swamped night and now is my lunch break, but I'll be on-call throughout it. If you'd like to join me in the doctor's lounge area..."

I grin. “Sure.”

Following her through the labyrinth of the hospital, I’m surprised it’s this big. From the outside, the hospital doesn’t seem so intricate, but there are all kinds of back halls only staff can access. The doctor’s lounge is next to the cafeteria, accessible by badge only.

“Wow. It really has been a busy night,” I say as I turn on the light to the small room. There are only five tables, but they have their own vending machines and a coffee machine. No window. It’s a little stuffy in there.

“Yeah. Um, since you can’t buy anything at the cafeteria at this time of night, what would you like?”

I chuckle. “I’m fine. Had two protein bars and an energy drink when we separated, so don’t worry about me.”

“That was three hours ago, Beckett.”

I frown and check my watch. She’s right. Shit. “Maybe a burger or a sandwich, if they have anything like that.” Being a hospital, I never have high hopes for food quality. Flexibility is key to never being disappointed.

“I’ll see what I can do. Be right back. If anyone comes in, just tell them you’re waiting for me.”

“Okay.”

She darts out, and I take a spot in the rear corner, so I can watch for when she returns. To my surprise, it doesn’t take long. She brings back a salad for her and a burger and fries for me. “They don’t have onion rings. Sorry.”

I chuckle. “This is more than I really hoped for, so I’m thrilled. Thank you.”

“They try to keep the staff happy here, so they spoil us with three whole options at night,” she says sardonically.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to tell you sooner about my phone. With everything going on, I barely even noticed it had been so long since anyone had texted me.”

She smiles and tips her head to the side. “I thought we were past that.”

But I can't help it. "I still feel bad about what you must have thought about me. After everything Cole has told you—"

"Stop. Just stop, Beckett. It's like you said. I have to stop holding your past against you. If I'm going to do that, then I need to let go of what Cole told me about your dating life before me. If that's what we're doing. Dating, I mean."

"If that's what you want, I am interested."

She smiles. "We'll see."

"Oh, sure, play it cool after I put myself out there. Be that way."

She giggles and steals a fry before returning to her salad. "How have you been?"

"So busy I don't have time to work out. I hate when I can't get to the gym. It just messes with me. It's like therapy for me, and I need to get back there."

"Is it far from your house?"

"It's downstairs."

She laughs. "Then how come you can't get there?"

"It's *all the way down* in my basement."

She laughs again. "Come on, if it's that important, then I'm pretty sure you can climb some stairs."

"I have an elevator."

"What?"

I shrug. "When I was building my place, I didn't want to have to disassemble my weight rack, carry it down, then rebuild it. Easier just to have an elevator. It's a good thing, too—if I get Cole to my place for any of his rehab, we don't have to worry about that."

"Oh, that's a good idea. I didn't think of it that way." She sighs. "I suppose he will have to do rehab here, too. Not just with the neuro PT."

"I've looked into some of the medical equipment he will need when he comes

home, and the rehab stuff. Your mom's house is on the small side, so I've been stocking my house with the rehab stuff, so there will be room for things like his bed and all of that. Has she brought any of this up to you?"

She shakes her head. "Not at all. But I've lived here for the past eleven days, so I've been out of the loop."

"I've had the guys make some alterations to her house—with her approval, of course—so that Cole's wheelchair will fit. Her house being so old as it is, it's all narrow doorways and tiny bathrooms and stairs. She doesn't want to move because she's lived there forever, and I get that, but you should have seen the look on her face when I offered to buy her a wheelchair accessible house—

"You what?"

I laugh and point at her face. "That's the face she made, too."

She swats my hand down. "Beckett, that's too much."

"It's not enough. There is nothing that will ever be enough for what happened to Cole."

Sophie sighs and takes my hand. Her touch is warm. "Life doesn't work that way, and you know it."

"What do you mean?"

"I see it all the time, doing what I do. There is no balance to the scales. No amount of nice things you can buy a person who lost something so fundamental to them. It's not fair, and it sucks, but that is just how life is. You could buy Cole all of Somerset Harbor, and it still won't make up for the fact that he cannot walk for now."

Her words hit in a way that I don't expect them to, and I want to be angry at her for saying them, but I can't be. I know she's right. This is a problem I cannot throw money at. And I hate problems like that.

I let go of a deep breath and give her hand a squeeze before returning to my food. "Thanks. I think I needed to hear that."

She smiles and goes back to her salad. "I hope it helps."

“I’m still retrofitting your mom’s house, though. So, don’t be shocked if it doesn’t look like the place you grew up in when you see it.”

“I appreciate that more than you could ever know. Thank you.”

Somehow, hearing her say such a heartfelt *thank you* feels like the thing I needed most in the world. “You’re impressive, by the way.”

“Huh?”

“I was watching you in the ED. It made the time fly by. The way you move through the place, like the captain of a boat or a teacher on a field trip. You’re in your element in that crazy place.”

She laughs. “Um, thanks?”

“It’s like it’s the thing you were born to do.”

She smiles, then leans in close. “Pretty sure *you* are the thing I was born to do.”

I laugh, and she kisses me. Since it’s just the two of us in the lounge, I’m inclined to let the kiss last longer than it should. So, I do. If we weren’t at her job, I’d take it further. She lets out a little moan as she relaxes into it, and a rush of heat runs low in my body.

The door opens, and we pull apart fast. Thankfully, it’s only Hope. She smirks. “Well, hello, you two. Nice to see things are back on track.”

Sophie’s face turns eight shades of red and she sputters, “Um, I’ll head back —”

“It’s okay. Things have calmed down for two whole minutes.” She grabs a Kit-Kat from the vending machine. “Just had a craving for one of these and the Waiting Room is out. Bye.”

After she leaves, I can’t stop myself from laughing. Sophie gives me a look. “It’s not funny.”

Which makes me laugh harder.

C hapter Twenty-Two-Beckett

“THAT IS A MINIVAN,” Cole says, as I wheel him through the hospital parking lot.

“My minivan. Or rather, it’s your mom’s new minivan, but she isn’t confident enough to drive it in the snow, so I am your chauffeur for the day.”

“You bought us a minivan? Beckett, come on. This is—”

“Too much, yeah, I’ve heard. In we go.” I raise the lift, and he slides into the minivan. To my surprise, it hardly strains under the weight of his chair. Once we’re on the road, I’m a little more relaxed. It feels like old times, in a way. Cole usually preferred it when I drove us places. “Now, I should warn you—your mom’s house is going to look a little different. We made some adjustments to her place, so you’ll have access to everything you need.”

He draws a long breath and lets it out slowly. “I’m just glad to be going home.”

“No doubt. Hey, remember when Phoebe Dormer threw up at prom?”

Cole laughs. “Of course, I do. I was her date, and she threw up on *me*. What made you think of that?”

“Yeah, sorry for that.”

“Why are you sorry? You didn’t make her do it. Jägermeister did.”

“Uh, well, I gave her the Jägermeister.”

He laughs again. “Why?”

“She was nervous about her date with you, and I thought it would calm her down. I swear, I was just trying to help.”

“I miss seventeen-year-old Beckett’s logic,” he says, chuckling. “That guy always had the best worst ideas.”

“Yeah, he was not the brightest.” I pull into his mom’s driveway. “Well, here we are.”

Cole takes another deep breath. “Yep. Here we are.”

I hit the lift button. “I’ll be right there to wheel you over—”

But Cole pushed himself to the lift. “I got it.”

“The doctor says you have to be careful while you’re still learning how to use your chair. You could have hurt yourself.”

He shoots me a look. “On what? The van is nerfed for people... like me. I’m fine.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

He uses the controller to lower himself. “Come on, man. It’s colder than a popsicle in the Arctic.”

“Right, right.” I race around the minivan and follow him into the house.

Even though I’d warned him about being shocked about the changes, it was me who was surprised by the inside of the Kendrick house. The site of half my childhood was hardly recognizable. Cole stops just inside the entry, and I almost walk into him. He’s just staring at the changes, and I don’t blame him.

“A split-level house is not particularly wheelchair friendly, so we had to—”

“No, no. I get it.”

“Your mom will be here soon. She just wanted to grab some fresh groceries.”

Cole nods and rolls in the rest of the way. “Okay. Cool. And there’s a hospital bed in the living room.”

“It’s great. It lowers and raises down to wheelchair level, so you can transfer on your own.”

He pulls up next to the bed. “And the sex swing above it?”

I laugh. “That’s a Hoyer lift. It makes it easier for you to get in and out of bed by yourself.”

“Huh. Okay. Yeah, I get it. That’s...pretty cool.”

“It’s a lot. I know.”

But he smiles. “It is. A lot of changes. All at once. But that’s life, right? It’s just how things go sometimes. It’s unpredictable and takes left turns you never even thought of.” He shrugs. “Like me moving back in with my mom.”

“It’s temporary. Don’t forget that.”

“Yep.” He sighs. “But seeing the remodel... it all feels very un-temporary.”

“I know. I tried to get her a new house, but—”

“Beckett.”

I sigh. “I have already been told that’s too much. You don’t need to say it.”

He smiles. “I was going to say thank you. You’re right. It is too much. And it’s exactly the thing I’d expect out of you.”

“Damn. And here I was trying to be unpredictable.”

He laughs. “So, I was out of the world for a while. Did I miss any good movies we can stream?”

“Something scary?”

“I don’t know. Life is kind of scary enough, right?”

My gut knots up. “Sorry, Cole. I didn’t—”

He laughs. “Just fucking with you. Something scary sounds great!”

“You dick.”

He laughs, and we scroll through the options for a few minutes before picking a slasher. Once it’s on, he asks, “So, that walker over there. Seems a little premature. Maybe a bit too hopeful.”

“Nope. Beau is right about you. You’re too stubborn not to walk again.”

“Ooh, she’s not,” he says, pointing at the screen at the first victim.

I laugh. “How about some delivery?”

Staring at the screen, he says, “Sounds good. Nothing red. Or chunky.”

“Lo mein and egg rolls?”

“Perfect.”

I order, and the movie gets better as it goes on. “Aw, they’re a cute couple. I hope they live.”

“Do happy couples ever live?”

“I know the rules. It’s usually just the girl, if at all.”

“So, you seeing anybody?”

Shit. There’s the question. But Sophie and I have agreed not to tell him yet. Still, I hate lying to him. “Uh, no.”

He winces at the next death, and I fight the urge. It’s brutal. “Woof. How come?”

“How come what?”

“How come you’re not seeing anyone? Don’t you know I have to live vicariously through you? Hearing about your girls is the only non-death or game show related entertainment I can handle.”

Oh god, he is so going to regret saying that when he finds out. “Well, um, with you on the DL, I’ve been way too busy with work to really date anyone.”

He huffs a laugh. “Since when do you *date* anyone? It’s not dating when it’s just fucking.”

I try to laugh it off, but his words are too close to my former truth. “That’s true, but—”

“I mean, not that I want to encourage your bad behavior by any means, but if any good can come from it, and by good, I mean you entertaining your invalid best friend—”

“You’re not an invalid, Cole. You are temporarily on the DL. Happens all the time. We’ve watched enough football to know people come back from that kind of thing every day.”

He sighs. “You know what I mean.”

“And I hope you know what I mean.”

He smiles. “Yeah, I do. Honestly, I’m just glad I can use my arms. I plan to walk again. I do. But I think it’s going to take longer than everyone says.”

My eyes fall on the walker. “I was thinking the walker would be motivation, but do you want me to take it with me? I can put it in the minivan—

“No. It’s fine. It’ll give Mom a chance to decorate it. You know how she loves her glitter.”

“Remember the year she bedazzled all the Christmas gifts?”

He laughs hard. “Poor Sophie got the worst of it. That jean jacket was awful. But she refused to ever complain and wore it for weeks until she *lost* it on a school trip into the city.”

“It was good of her to lie about that.”

“Yeah, but Mom told me she knew. Sophie is a terrible liar. Mom appreciated Sophie trying to lie to save her feelings, though. So, she didn’t say anything to her about it.”

I sigh. “Your mom is one of the most decent people I have ever known. Sophie, too.”

“It’s cringe-worthy to say it, but Sophie is my hero. She is so smart, and all

she has ever wanted to do is save people. And now, she's doing it." He smiles. "I am so proud of her."

"Me too."

"Oh?"

Fuck. "I mean, she has worked so hard to get where she is. Seeing her in the hospital, she's on her shit. It's striking." God, I hope he lets that go.

Cole nods and stares at the screen. "A shame she let go of that knife. Never drop your weapon until you get them in the head. And even then."

I nod knowingly. We've watched enough horror movies to know better than to do that. "Aaand that's why she's dead now. R.I.P."

"Yeah, but at least she got the best death so far."

"Definitely."

"Well, you gotta start dating again, if that's what you want to call it."

I chuckle, and the delivery arrives. After plating, we restart the movie. "These egg rolls are perfect."

"Yeah. Speaking of perfect, you can date whoever you want. Just not Sophie."

I choke on my egg roll. "Wait, what?"

"Anyone but my baby sister. That's the rule."

I sputter, "What, um, how—"

"Thought I remembered saying something before my accident. My memory is fuzzy around that time, and I wasn't sure."

"Yeah, you already told me."

He nods, then his eyes go wide. "Wow! A blender to the head? Damn!"

"Gnarly kill."

"Nothing compared to what I'd do to someone who hurt Sophie."

I chuckle, trying to blow it off. “That’s fair.”

Just then, the front door opens. It’s Sophie, looking frozen in headlights.
“Hey, guys. How is it going?”

“Good. Take a seat, grab an egg roll. Beckett ordered, so there’s way too much like always.”

“How are you feeling? Any—”

He smiles and shakes his head. “I’m fine, Sophie. Go make a plate.”

She nods and when he turns to the TV, her smile falls to nothing but tension. I shake my head a little to let her know I haven’t said anything about us. She takes a deep breath and heads for the kitchen.

And now, sitting next to Cole feels like a lie, too.

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Chapter Twenty-Three-Sophie

A DAY OFF. I finally have a day off. I'm going to see Beckett, and he does not know I'm coming.

Last night, there was no way for me to tell him anything while we were with Cole, and he left before I did, because of his early morning. Before I could text him, though, I thought better of it. I've never surprised a boyfriend at his job before, and since he surprised me at mine, it feels like it's my turn.

Not that he's my boyfriend.

He admitted he wanted to date me, and that's almost the same thing, right? Sighing as I blow dry my hair, I wonder if that is the same thing. Should I use the title in front of him, or is that going too far? I would hate to say it and have him freak out on me.

Does it really matter? Okay, yeah. It does. I cannot pretend to be one of those women who doesn't care about that kind of thing. No one who knows me would ever accuse me of being a Cool Girl. I've had my fair share of FWB situations in my life, but I cared about them. At least a bit. I cannot sleep with someone I don't like. I am not Hope.

Once the hair is done, I move on to my outfit. Warm, but cute...I thumb

through my closet until I settle on just the right one. When I'm not in scrubs, I like to feel presentable, and my little red sweater dress is just right for the occasion. Bright, toasty, and it goes perfectly with fleece tights and knee boots. And my even warmer black wool peacoat. And a black scarf.

Dressed, I'm a thousand degrees after a hot shower and blow drying my hair for half an hour. But as soon as I leave my apartment, I am glad I'm so layered. I crank up the heat in my car and tool through downtown on the way to Beckett's jobsite. Christmas decorations cram the windows of the shops, and I don't mind it in theory, but it feels like everyone skips right over Thanksgiving, which is my second favorite holiday.

When I get to Beckett's jobsite, something odd is going on. The workers have gathered in a circle around the base of a crane, and the worst thought shoots a panic through me at first. But then I see laughing.

No, someone is not injured. Beckett's okay—he has to be. But why is everyone hanging out by the crane?

And then I see him. He's laughing with the group, and I can breathe again. I get out of my car and walk up to them. Beckett hasn't noticed me, even though I'm right beside him. He's too focused on what they're doing, but I can't see past the cluster of tall men. So, I ask, "What's going on?"

"We're—hey!" He laughs when he sees me. "Didn't see you sneak over here."

I grin up at him. "You should probably know by now that I am stealthy when I need to be. What's all this about?"

"Guys, make a hole."

They part in front of us, and a strange contraption sits on the ground in front of us. It's huge—a sort of hibachi-style table, the kind with a hole in the middle for where the chef cooks. There's a flattop grill and everything. Only this one is quite small, and instead of being set up for a crowd, it's set for two guests sitting across from each other. Above all of that is a frame structure around a sheer roof, and the crane has enormous chains strapped to it.

I frown. "Is this some kind of restaurant thing for the resort you're building? On the roof or something? Seems a little premature, don't you think? You

don't even have the buildings up yet.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “My brother Beau is proposing to his girlfriend, Elsie. He asked for my help in making it special. She’s been all around the world, done all kinds of things. She is into adventures, so he knew he had to do something she will never forget.”

I stare at the whole thing again. “And... they’re going to get engaged on top of the resort?”

He laughs. “No, silly. We’re going to take them up in that.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“It’s called dinner in the sky. There’s an entire business that does it. They have them around the world, but this one we made custom, just for two people. The businesses that have them seat around two dozen guests, give or take. But Beau wants it to be more intimate than that, and I don’t blame him. And there will be a chef here for them, too, taking care of the meal and wine, all that. It’ll be a night she will never forget. Very romantic.”

And I keep staring at it. “Wow. *Romantic* is not the first word that comes to mind when I see that thing.”

“Well, what is?”

“Terrifying. Does *death trap* count as one or two words, because really, it’s a complete phrase, and—”

He laughs much harder this time. “It’s not a death trap, Sophie. They’re going to wear harnesses—”

“And do those harnesses include a parachute?”

“No.”

“Then I was right with a death trap. I’m sticking by that description for this.”

His eyebrow arches. “Sounds to me like someone needs to be convinced of the possibility of romance in the sky.”

“Would that be you? Because I require no convincing whatsoever. I promise you that.”

“Come up on it with me.”

“Ha!”

He smiles, trying to be cute. Or maybe he is cute and extra cuter when he smiles. I’m not sure which it is. But then he ruins it when he says, “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Look, I appreciate the fact that you’re covering Cole’s medical bills, rent, and everything else for him. I really do. But your family probably won’t pay my family my life insurance payout when I die from going up in that thing, and I forgot to renew it, and I really don’t want to leave them high and dry, so —”

“We’ll compromise. We harness in, go up forty feet, and come right back down. You’ll see. It’s not scary at all.”

I smile at him. “Do you want to know how high up I will go?” I hop in place. “That was it.”

“Show me again.”

So, I hop in place again.

“One more time.”

I almost do it, and then I realize he’s staring at my boobs when I jump, and I smack his arm. “You’re a pervert.”

He smirks and shrugs. “What can I say? I appreciate a good jump now and then.”

“And I appreciate the solid ground beneath my feet.”

“Thirty feet up?”

All I do is look at him.

“Twenty?”

Crap. I’m gonna do this, aren’t I? “You don’t quit, do you?”

“Well, I’ve never tried it before, so let me give it a shot.” He folds his arms

and stares at the death trap. “Nope, I quit quitting. Come up in the sky with me, Sophie. I promise it will be worth it.”

“You quit quitting? You really think you’re cute, don’t you?”

He chuckles. “No. But I think you are, especially when you give in to what you really want to do. And I can see it in your gorgeous eyes. You’re curious about this. What kind of man would I be, if I were to stand by silently as you gave up on your curiosities? A monster, that’s what kind. My mother raised me better than that.”

I cannot help but laugh at him. “You are a serious mental gymnast to work all that out as you doing me a favor. Ever consider going pro?”

“No. I stayed in the minors, so I could perform mental gymnastics in the Olympics.”

I snort a laugh, and my cheeks heat from embarrassment. “Well. That was unattractive. Guess I should leave—”

“Not on your life, missy. I’m not that easy to get rid of.”

“Damn. If you were, I wouldn’t be agreeing to go up in that thing right now.”

He grins. “I knew you were curious.”

Chapter Twenty-Four-Sophie

“ARE YOU SURE IT’S TIGHT?”

“Didn’t think you’d want to talk about our private time fun in public,” he says with a cheeky grin.

“The harness,” I hiss at him.

But Beckett only smiles at me as he tests my harness strap for the tenth time, before strapping himself in his own at his seat across from me. “It’s tight. You’re not going anywhere. I promise.”

His words won’t mend my broken bones, but it’ll have to do for now. I gulp, trying to keep my stomach from leaping out of my throat. “Have you tested this rig before?”

“I have, the guys have, and we are all much, much bigger than you. If the line were going to snap, it already would have.”

“Why would you say that? Don’t say s-n-a-p right now. It’s bad luck!”

He laughs. “I would have thought a woman of science didn’t believe in luck.”

“I believe in any force that keeps me from dying right now.”

“We haven’t even left the ground, Sophie. John will stop the crane wherever I tell him to, see? Wave at John.” He waves, and the man smiles.

“He’s missing a tooth.”

“So?”

“If he can’t even keep his teeth in his head, how can we trust him to keep us from dying?”

Beckett shakes his head. “You realize one has literally nothing to do with the other, right?”

“Okay, sure, but I will feel better if I know how he lost the tooth. If he’s clumsy, I don’t want him taking us into the sky. That seems imprudent.”

“His boxer head-butted him when they were playing.”

I frown up at him. “He boxes? I don’t want to go up with someone who has suffered head injuries. Their cognition isn’t great.”

“The dog, Sophie. A boxer *dog*.”

“Oh.”

“She bounced on his bed and had too much force going when they were playing, and boom. Down one front tooth as of yesterday. I told him to take today off to get it fixed, but he couldn’t get in with his dentist and refused my help in getting him into one in the city. Says he will get it handled tomorrow with his dentist.” He pauses, and I’m not sure what he’s waiting for. “So, is it okay if he takes us up?”

“I guess.”

“Are you sure? I know I can be pushy, but I don’t want you to ever do anything with me you’re not sure of. So, tell me now if you don’t want to do this.”

I take a breath to calm myself down and close my eyes. “We can do this.”

“You’re sure?”

“If you keep asking, I will be less sure. Just rip off the bandage.”

“Okay, here we go.”

To my surprise, I hardly feel any movement at all. “I expected to be jerked into the air or something. This isn’t bad.”

“Open your eyes, Sophie.”

When I do, I see we haven’t left the ground. “Huh?”

He smiles. “Just wanted to make sure you weren’t going to change your mind. Ready?”

That was sweet of him. “Ready.”

He nods at John, and we move. It’s not a jerking sensation or the light and dizzy feeling of an elevator lifting. In fact, it feels almost like nothing at all. Beckett has him take us up ten feet to start. “How are you feeling?”

“It’s not bad—

“Why are your fingers digging into the armrests?”

“Just in case it gets bad.”

Beckett smiles. “If you want to, you can hold my hand and dig your little claws into me for revenge.”

I giggle and reach out for him to take his hand. “That sounds like a good plan.”

“A little higher?”

“Okay.”

The next stop is at twenty feet. “I think your claws grew.”

I try to relax my hand around his. “Sorry. Wait—what do you mean?”

“The other night, when you were digging them into my back, I thought—

“I didn’t!”

He smirks. “Oh, you did. I’ve got the marks to prove it. Wanna see?” He pulls his hand away to unclip his harness, but I snatch it back.

“You’ll die if you do that!”

“I won’t die, Sophie. Not from that, anyway. I’ve been up on this thing while it was in the air, tweaking bits here and there for the past two days. I know my way around it like the back of my hand.”

“Please don’t do it.”

He smiles and holds my hand again. “Okay. I won’t. Do you think you can do higher?”

“I can do lower.”

“We can go back down, if you want to.”

But I can tell he doesn’t want to. He wants to go higher, and I’m inclined to bend to his will for some reason. Beckett is so cute when he’s happy, almost like his cuteness is my reward for making him happy. It’s official—I have lost my mind. “A little higher is okay.”

“We will go back down whenever you want.” Then he nods to John, who lifts us another ten feet. “How is that?”

“I thought it was cold on the ground,” I say, trying not to shiver.

He plucks his black skull cap off and tugs it down onto me. “Aw, you’re precious in that.”

“You flattened my hair.”

“Totally worth it. You are so fucking adorable in my hat.”

I roll my eyes and smile at him. It’s still freezing up here, and I’m still terrified. But somehow, being up here with him isn’t so bad. In fact, it’s kind of beautiful. As long as I focus on the view of the harbor and not the cleared jobsite. Watching the water, I can finally take a full breath. “I am going to admit something, and you may not use it against me.”

“Never.”

“The view is spectacular.”

He laughs. “I’m glad you like it. Want a better one?”

“Does that mean we go up higher?”

“Yes.”

My pulse reacts to that almost as much as it does to his smile. But I’ve made it this far. Plus, a fall from thirty or forty feet does about the same amount of damage to the human body, so what the hell? “Okay.”

He gives John the nod, and we go up a little more. Now I can see the shape of Somerset Harbor—the harbor, not the town. It’s a crescent, with a few outcroppings. I always knew that. Growing up here, you see it on the maps everywhere. But knowing it and seeing it are two very different things.

I was never one much for the water. Some of the kids liked to swim in the harbor, but I was convinced the moment I stepped in the water, sharks. Sharks galore. I know humans are not on their menu, no matter what the media makes it out to be. And I know the statistics on attacks. But it doesn’t change the fact that I was convinced I’d be one of the unlucky few. So, I appreciated the views of the harbor, but I never enjoyed being in it.

But now, maybe it’s not so scary.

From here, it’s breathtaking. “Wow.”

He smiles and nods at the corner of my eye. “I was really hoping to share this with you.”

“Why me?”

He lets out a small, offended laugh. “Because I like you, Sophie. And I like sharing the good things in life with the people that I like. Why else?”

But I shake my head, turning to him. “I didn’t mean it to sound aloof...it’s just that...” I laugh at myself for a moment. “Well, I guess that was aloof. I’m just not used to guys who do stuff like this for me.”

“What are you used to, Sophie?”

I sigh slowly and thoroughly. “Let’s see. There was Kyle, who thought romance was passing me the after sex towel after he had already used it. Wes, who was way too into his physique and worried about the fat content of water —

“No!”

“Yep. Kenny, who was so insecure about me paying for things that he begged me to slip him my credit card under the table, so it would look like he was paying for us. Jasper—

“Stop. Oh my god, please stop.” He is aghast.

I snicker at him. “Be glad you’re not a woman, Beckett. It’s rough out here for us.”

“That is nightmare fuel. Holy hell.”

I shrug and look over the harbor again. “This isn’t. I mean, it’s scary as shit, don’t get me wrong. But it’s also completely worth the fear and the frozen nose to see this.”

“Not your poor nose!”

I giggle. “I’ll be alright. What about you with no hat?”

“I’ll survive.”

We take a moment to really absorb the view, and a worry hits me. “Beau expects a yes from Elsie, I imagine.”

“Oh yeah. Going through all of this, he is pretty damn confident. But Beau is always pretty damn confident, so hopefully, he’s right about her.”

“Let’s suppose she says yes. How are they going to kiss, if they’re both strapped in like this?”

“Well,” he says, slipping his hand from mine. “We have to test it.”

“What do you mean?”

He unclips his harness.

“Beckett, what are you doing? You can’t climb over here. Why are you climbing over here? No, no, no,” I say repeatedly until he’s in the chef’s station. To my surprise, the rig doesn’t even budge with the shifting weight. But I can’t stop myself from saying, “No, no, no—

He interrupts me with a kiss. His lips are cold like mine, but we warm up quickly. The stress of it all has me wound up tight. Feeling the press of him on my mouth makes me open for him, and when his tongue touches mine, I am lost in him. The fear falls away and all I am left with is Beckett MacMillan on my lips.

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C hapter Twenty-Five-Beckett

I NEED SOPHIE RIGHT NOW. There is nothing else in the world at this moment. Just the woman who heats me up with little more than a kiss.

I pull back and signal John, but she panics. “What—why are we going down? Are we falling?”

In more ways than one. “He’s lowering us. It’s okay.”

“Put on your harness! It’s not safe for you to—

I kiss her again as we are lowered, and her soft moan sends my blood downward. I am extremely glad my winter coat goes down to my thighs, or I would never hear the end of it from the crew. Erections are not all that common on a jobsite. At least, not at any job I’ve worked.

As soon as we touch the ground, I unclip her harness and take her hand, leading her to my office trailer. The moment I shut the door, I have to have her. I throw the lock and pin her against the back of the door, kissing and biting my way along her lips, her jaw, her throat. When her nose presses against me, I find she was right. *Poor thing is frozen. I’ll warm her up.* She smells incredible—like vanilla today. I want to devour her.

What a good idea.

Instead of slipping her scarf off or unbuttoning her coat, I grope her tits over all the layers of clothing to drive her wild. She moans again, which does the same for me. But when she reaches for her coat button, I pin her hands behind her back. She whines, “What are you doing?”

“Keeping you warm.”

“But—

I drop to my knees and lift the edge of her sexy red dress. Beneath, she has these black tights, and they have to go. I look up at her as I pinch the fine material and tug it down below her knees. She watches in silence. But I want to know if she’s on board with this. “I need to taste you.”

She bites her lower lip and nods.

I dive between her thighs and take a taste. And another. And another. I cannot get enough of this woman. Before long, I bury myself there, my tongue on her clit, my fingers deep inside. I want to make her come—no, I need to. Her orgasm is my oxygen. When she digs her claws into my scalp and pulls me against her there, my cock aches for her. Somehow, she makes the whole world disappear.

All the worries, all the thoughts, all gone. There is only Sophie. Only this moment.

When she comes on me, she slams her fist against the door and bellows curses, one after another, until her body goes weak on me. I’m not ready to stop, though, and I go after her again. But she grabs a fistful of my hair and forces me to look up at her. Panting, she murmurs, “Need you.”

I get to my feet and kiss her again and again while I get my clothes out of the way. And then it hits me. The problem. “Um, Sophie, I fucked up.”

“What?”

“I don’t have any condoms in here.”

She giggles. “That’s not a fuckup, Beckett.”

“Maybe not, but it’s poor planning on my part.”

“My last test came back negative about two months ago, and you’re the only person I’ve been with in that time. You?”

“Got mine back right before we went for pizza. Negative.”

She smiles deviously, and it’s so fucking sexy. Sophie is not a devious person, so that look on her innocent face calls to my every wicked impulse. “I’m on the shot, so we don’t have to stop right now.”

I have always been a stickler for protection, both because of possible pregnancy or catching a disease. Other girls have offered to skip condoms with me, and I have always insisted. I have no interest in having a baby with a stranger because if I were to have a child, I want it to be with someone I love and be there to raise him or her one hundred percent.

The only time I’ve ever had condom-free sex was my first time, and my brothers gave me hell about that, drilling it into my head to never be that reckless again. And they were right to do it.

This is not one of those times.

Sophie Kendrick would never do something like that to me. She’s a doctor. She knows the risks better than I do, and she would never do anything to hurt me. Especially not that. I know it in my bones.

I kiss her harder than ever and pry myself free of my clothes, grateful I always keep the blinds shut in my office. While I strip, so does she, just as eager as I am. When we’re naked, I pick her up, hoisting her legs around my waist. She groans in my mouth when my cock brushes up against her wetness. I do, too.

It’s been so long since I’ve felt that sensation.

I walk her to my desk, and she sits at the edge, but I lay her back on it. I want to see her. All of her. After I bring her legs up against my chest, her breaths rise and fall fast. She’s too on edge. I have to bring this down, or it’ll go too fast.

Slowly, I press myself into her there. But I can’t even watch that. I’m

captivated by her eyes. They flutter when I touch her, and I love knowing that I'm making her feel good. I sink into her gradually, both for her benefit and for mine. Never really understood when people said they could die happy in the middle of something, but I get it. Inching my way in, I could easily die happy right now.

She's shaking already, so I ask, "Cold?"

"No," trembles out of her lips.

I have seen no one shake quite like Sophie. But this is the second time she's done this with me, and I get it now. She cannot control herself when I'm inside of her.

Good.

I plunge all the way in, and we both growl for it. She feels too damned good, and I am too far gone to hold back now. I bounce her on my desk, and she grips the edge, arching on the wood. Her voice is weak when she whispers, "Oh fuck!"

So, I press my palm to her stomach and thumb her clit while I pound into her, and soon, her whispers become full throated shouts as she comes on my cock. She squeezes on me there, working me to the edge as she climaxes. So wet. So tight. It's too much. I'm almost there. Heat floods its way through me as she whines, "Beckett, don't stop!"

"Never," I swear and hold off as best I can.

Her eyes pop open in shock, before half-shutting as she purrs, "Yes, oh!" This time, she squeezes even tighter on me, and now I understand her shaking.

It's all I can do not to—

"Come for me," she begs.

Pleasure bursts so hard that I see stars as I come deep inside of her, roaring wordlessly. I pull her up to me, feasting on her sweet, warm lips for a long while. We pant at each other so hard that my breath moves her hair. At least, the hair not at the edges of my hat. I press my forehead to hers. "You're

amazing. That was...amazing. Think I lost all my other words.”

She giggles sweetly and pants. “Yeah. Amazing. You...that. All the things.”

“Wow. Didn’t know I could fuck a doctor stupid.”

She laughs, which makes her squeeze on my cock. An interesting sensation. I kiss her again, and after we clean up and dress, she curls up onto my lap. She fits there perfectly. Like they made us for each other.

Not the first time I’ve thought that about Sophie.

Those used to be the kinds of thoughts I ignored or denied, and back then, it was easy enough to do. But she is undeniable. Our connection both burns and soothes, and I don’t understand any of it, but I am grateful for it. Maybe stick with things I understand for now. The other stuff...I’m not equipped for it. I’d hate myself if I say the wrong thing right now, because I am pretty sure I am falling for Sophie Kendrick, and that’s out of my expertise. So, I ask, “Hungry?”

“Famished. You?”

“I’m thinking pizza.”

She giggles. “Hawaiian?”

“Yes.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six-Sophie

IN THE MORNING, I wake up to Beckett's slumber lumber against my lower back. He spooned me all night long, and I could get used to this. So toasty warm in my flannel sheets that it feels decadent. I stretch and wriggle against him, and he kisses the back of my neck, before he murmurs, "Good morning."

"Good morning to you, too."

Then he nibbles me there, and it makes me shiver.

"Thought you'd have to pee or something. You—"

"Did that right before you woke up. You didn't feel me get back into bed?"

I smile and shake my head. "Must have been out. I sleep too good when you're around."

"I like the sound of that." We had slept naked last night, since we had the two of us to keep each other warm. Which makes it easier for him to grab my hip and pull me backwards. "Know what else I like?"

"Pizza."

He laughs. "Guess again."

"Um, daring me to do really stupid things that could get me killed?"

He pulls me onto my back to look me in the eye. "Do you really think I would ever put you in harm's way?"

"No. I was being facetious."

"I will never hurt you, Sophie."

Reaching up for his cheek, I nod. "I know that, Beckett."

"Good." Then he flips me onto my stomach so abruptly that I laugh at the shock. He pulls my hips up and kisses my right cheek before he strokes my pussy from behind. "Your body is made of my dreams."

I whimper, "Could say the same of you."

As he speaks, he wedges between my legs. "I want to be inside of you, with you, every morning, every day, every night...you have me, Sophie Kendrick. For as long as you want."

My heart swells from his words. I want to believe them, and a part of me does, but his history keeps creeping up in the back of my mind, filling me with doubt. Thankfully, his cock wipes my memory clean every time he touches me with it. When he works his way into me, I draw a blank why I was so worried a moment ago. I'm too full of him to be full of anything else.

His length glides along my G-spot and each time, it lights me up. I throw my hips back to meet him, but then he lies on top of me, flattening me with his weight. Beckett laces his fingers with mine and gently rocks himself into me, while he kisses my shoulder. This new, slower pace somehow works me further faster, until I tremble beneath him. He murmurs, "That's my girl," between kisses, and I'm lost in the pleasure of it. Beckett works me up, and I come, biting the pillow and mewling.

He groans, "God yes," as he keeps on that steady pace. His right hand pulls from mine and wedges beneath my hip until he finds my clit to get me from both sides. But I shake my head as I gasp, and he stops. "Want me to pull out?"

I nod, so he does. Gasping, I roll over. “Like this.”

He nods and enters me, again taking his time. He kisses me all over as we make love, and it’s so crushingly intimate that I never want him to stop. The wave crashes over me, and I’m coming on him again. I cling to his body—I need him on me. Our tongues intertwine, and I wrap myself around him tightly. I want Beckett as close as I can have him.

He groans on my lips, driving himself deeper and faster. It’s like he cannot stop himself from doing it. He grabs my thigh for leverage and soon, our bodies slap together in rhythm with our hearts. Still making love, but now, it’s so much more. I jut myself up at him, and he does the same, making me one with the mattress. His face goes red the way it did last night, and he gasps, “Fuck, baby, yes—

“Now!”

He growls out his orgasm, his body throwing him deeper with every sensation until he finally collapses on me, all his strength sapped. We kiss until our lips are crushed and swollen. *If only we could do this all day. Stupid job, interrupting this...whatever this is.*

I have never felt this way before. For me, my career was my solace in the world. The thing I had worked so hard for, the thing that got me out of bed. Now, I hate that it’s pulling me out of bed. This is everything I have ever wanted, and our kisses fall apart because I keep smiling. When he sees it, he smiles, too. “Yeah.”

I giggle and nod. “Exactly.”

After we clean up and scoot back beneath the sheets, I put my head on his shoulder and just breathe him in, ignoring the clock. “Beckett, I—

“Sorry to interrupt, but I need to know something.”

“Um, sure.”

“Our relationship...where do you see this going?”

I blink at him. “Isn’t it usually the girl who asks that?”

He gives me a cheeky grin and teases, “Do not hold me to hetero-normative

standards, young lady. I am a modern man, and I do not care what that kind of thing sounds like. Hell, I already confessed about the spa, Soph. I would have thought you knew me better by now.”

I laugh. “Well, okay. It’s a fair question. Should we agree to titles?”

“What titles?”

“I was thinking of you as my boyfriend, but if that’s too soon—

“Good, because I’ve been thinking of you as my girlfriend, but I didn’t want to say that and freak you out.”

I smile and kiss him again. “You’ll freak me out to take me up on the rig, but not to tell me how you think of me?”

“If I told you how I think of you, you could hate me and never talk to me again, then that is way more to lose than just falling to my death.”

I laugh. “Pretty sure you have that backward.”

“Nope. I’ll take death over humiliation and regret any day of the week.”

“Those priorities are completely misguided, and I understand them.”

He laughs, but then falls quiet for a beat. “What about telling Cole?”

I let out a deep breath. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Not just yet. He’s still fragile.”

“Whenever I leave here, I am going to see him at your mom’s place, and the last time I saw him, he looked good. I think you’re underestimating him, baby. He’s stronger than you think. Yeah, he’ll be mad at first, but that’s only because he has never seen me serious about someone before, and—

“You’re serious about me?”

He laughs again. “Yes. Without a doubt, yes.”

“I mean, I knew since we’re bumping ourselves up to titles and everything that it’s more than a fling for you, but I wasn’t sure if that means something serious for you.”

“How to explain...” He sits up, so I do, too. “I’ve had two girls I’ve called a girlfriend before you. Two. Out of...” He is tallying them up right in front of me.

“A thousand?”

He rolls his eyes. “Not a thousand. But more than you might expect of someone my age. The point is, it’s not a title I throw around lightly. And I would like to share our happiness with Cole. He’s the guy I tell all my important stuff to, and what’s more important than telling him I’m in love?”

“Um...telling *me*.”

He laughs at himself. “I’m an idiot. Oh, my god.”

“You’re in love with me?”

Beckett takes a swift breath and lets it out. “Yes. But don’t let that freak you out. I live with my feet in my mouth and you know that, so—

“I’m falling for you, too.”

“Really? You’re not just saying that—

I kiss him, and again, the kiss is ruined because I can’t stop smiling.

“Beckett, I love you.”

“I love you, too, Sophie.” He kisses me and soon, the kiss becomes horizontal. He hardens up against my thigh, and as much as I love where he’s heading with this, I can’t.

“Baby, I have to go to work.”

He peels the blankets back from his head and looks up at me. “I think we might have a medical emergency here, so you can’t leave.”

I giggle. “Your erection is not a medical emergency.”

“They say if it lasts over four hours, then it is.”

“Has it been going on that long?”

“Not yet, but we can work on that.” He dips back down my body.

I snort a laugh and bop him on the head with my pillow. “You’re a goofball.”

“You catch on quick,” he says just before he kisses my inner thigh.

“I have to go to work.”

“Call out.” He licks me all over.

I moan for more, but know it cannot go on. “Beckett, come on—

“No, it’s your turn to come.” My god, this man’s tongue.

“I cannot call in, citing orgasms.”

“Not with that attitude, missy.” He goes after me relentlessly.

I tell myself that I’m helpless to stop him. It’s absolute nonsense, but I’ve had too much seriousness in my life. A little nonsense might do me some good.

C hapter Twenty-Seven-Beckett

CAN'T BELIEVE I got her to take a whole day off. I'd be prouder of myself about it, if only I hadn't pulled a muscle in my back while trying a new position on her little window couch. That thing has no bounce whatsoever. I am going to replace it—it'll be the first proper gift I'm buying her.

Although, the first proper gift I buy my girlfriend should probably be more of a gift for her than for me, right?

But the question still makes me smile. *Girlfriend*. We're officially official. I even showered at her place this morning. Don't want Cole to suspect anything, and I shower before work every morning. I'm dressed in clothes from two days ago, but since I hadn't seen him two days ago, he won't know.

On the drive over to his mom's place, I check for any telltale markings. No hickies anyplace he can see them, but a few where he cannot. Sophie is quite happy about our new status. So am I. I've always heard about the so-called honeymoon phase of a relationship, but almost none of mine lasted long enough to have that, and this is far better than advertised.

I'm in love with a woman who could suck a watermelon through a garden hose. And she's in love with me. Honestly, is there anything better in the

world?

That question carries my mood through two stoplight cycles at the same light because the guy didn't bother looking up from his phone. I don't even honk at him. Who knows? Maybe his girl just texted him she loves him, and he's elated, too. I'm not going to ruin the possibility of his good mood over that. Instead, I turn my music up and get into it.

But when he doesn't go after the second cycle, I have to honk. There's only so much waiting I can do.

He waves an apology, and we drive on. When I pull up to Mrs. Kendrick's house, I'm still tapping my toes to the music. It's one of those crisp fall days when the sky is so blue that it looks like deep water and there're no clouds at all. The breeze is brisk and bracing instead of jarring. And I am in love with the best woman on the planet.

And she's in love with me.

I hadn't thought I'd get everything I wanted out of life. Not really. I mean, who does? But I always figured that I'm wealthy, reasonably good-looking, and I wasn't born with one of those permanently sour moods, so that was as good as things could get. Might have been a part of why I never took dating seriously. I always thought love was not in the cards for me, because who the hell gets to be that lucky in their life?

Never knew I would be. And now, I get to see the best guy in the world.

But as soon as I walk in, something is off. Cole isn't looking at me. "Hey, man. Brought you a bagel and schmear. Are you hungry?"

"No, thanks."

I set the bag down on the end table near him, in case he changes his mind. But when I get a better look at him, he can't hide it. Something is wrong. "What's going on? How's your head? Double vision? They said that can happen. How many fingers am I holding up?"

"You sound like Sophie."

I fight a smile at the mention of her name. "Cole, how many—"

“Makes sense that you’d sound like her, I guess. You’re spending so much time together.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens when people come together over someone they care about. How—”

He holds up his phone, and on it, there’s a picture of me and Sophie kissing on the rig.

Oh, fuck. “I can explain.”

He glares up at me. “Have you been fucking her since she came back or just since I was in a coma?”

“It’s not like that, Cole.”

“No? You’re *not* fucking my baby sister?”

Sheepishly, I admit, “Well, I mean—”

“Fuck, Beckett, I trusted you!” he barks as he rolls forward, brushing past me.

“Wow, you’ve really gotten good with the wheelchair. Didn’t even hit my toes.”

“Not good enough. I missed,” he growls.

“Just let me explain—”

“That you betrayed me? That you’re setting my baby sister up to be hurt, all for your own edification? Was it not enough to lie to me, but you had to do this in front of my employees, too? Is this some kind of sick game to you?”

“Stop. Just stop. First of all, I didn’t betray you.”

He laughs angrily. “I told you not to get involved with her. What did you do? You got involved with her. Sounds like betrayal to me.”

“And I’m not setting her up to get hurt. I’m in love with her.”

“You’re in love with everyone, Beckett! You go from one girl to the next—”

“When have I ever told any of them I loved them?”

He frowns. "I don't know. That's not the problem here—"

"Never, Cole. The answer is never. And I told Sophie that I love her yesterday. Because I do. This is the real thing. It's not a fling or a one-night stand or like anything else I've ever done. She's amazing and so smart and —"

"Do not stand there and tell me about my sister like I don't know her. I do. Better than you do. She is tough, but she cannot take having her heart stomped on, which is exactly why I have always tried to keep you two apart! Her childhood crush is getting her in way over her head, and you're taking advantage of her!"

"She had a crush on me? For real?"

Cole's scowl cuts me to the bone. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

"No, I just... I didn't know she really did." It's sweet.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that? I always knew you had a selfish streak, Beckett. But I always thought you limited it to your flings. I never thought you'd hit me up with it. I was fucking naïve." He shakes his head at himself.

"This isn't me being selfish, Cole. I love that girl. I'm not going to hurt her."

He huffs a solitary laugh. "That's amazing."

"What is?"

"You say it with such conviction that I can see why all those girls fall for it. Is that how you hooked Sophie, too? You gave her the earnest, 'I'll never hurt you,' before you got her into bed, right?"

"Stop before you say something you're going to regret."

He folds his arms. "I'm not the one with regrets, remember? I treat women like human beings."

"And I do that with Sophie."

"You expect me to just sit by and watch while you practice that on my baby sister? Fucking really? That way, you can hone your new skills on her, right?"

On someone who is overly patient and her job keeps her busy, so you have plenty of time to find something on the side—"

"Hey! I am not a cheater. I don't do that."

"Yeah, well, there's a lot of things you say you don't do, aren't there?"

I grit my jaw to stop myself from saying things I shouldn't. It's hard to put myself in his shoes, but if I thought someone was going to hurt my sister, I'd be angry at them, too. So, I try to keep that in perspective. "You are going too far. I get that you're angry, and I'm sure that picture was a shock, but Cole, I am serious about Sophie, so you need to think about what you're saying and doing right now."

"We have been best friends since I can remember. Or, at least, I thought we were. And then you go and do the one thing I asked you not to. And you lied to me about it. What else have you lied to me about?"

"Nothing. I swear to you, absolutely nothing."

He shakes his head and glances away. "And how would I know?"

"Okay, fair, but—"

"Get out."

Two simple words that knock the wind from me. "What?"

"Get out. I don't want you in this house ever again. I might not be able to keep you from Sophie, but you will respect my wishes in my own house. Get. Out."

"You don't mean that."

But when he looks up at me, conviction is the only emotion on his face. "Get the fuck out, Beckett. I don't ever want to see you again. You're an asshole who waited until I was on my deathbed before you fucked my baby sister. You took advantage of me, of her, of my mom. You leveraged your position in my life to get into her bed, and I will never fucking forgive you. Leave."

He's angry. He'll cool off. But it's weird. I don't know how to take this. We've never fought, except for that time in high school when I touched the

radio in his car. He set a boundary by smacking my hand, and that was that. I never did it again. Beyond that single incident, we've never so much as argued. Now, all I can think about is that I have to give him time. "Okay. Yeah. You know how to reach me."

"I do. I won't."

It takes all the strength I have to walk out of his door, get into my car, and leave.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight-Beckett

SITTING IN MY OFFICE, I am not sure what to do next. My head is jumbled. Breakups are weird. Even when it's just being dumped by a friend. Maybe that's what's so weird about it.

In all the films I've seen, all the books I've read, I've seen no breakup between friends. All the breakups in media are romantic relationships. Why doesn't anyone portray what happens when friends breakups? Seems like an underserved market. Someone should really get on that. Because I do not know why I feel so strange today, and I don't know what to do about it.

Romantic breakups in media usually involve ice cream and junk food and crying to your friends. Or getting drunk and throwing down in a bar fight. On the odd occasion, there's a fuck montage of all the people you sleep with after the ex to help you get over them. Three straightforward solutions, no waiting.

But this? Nothing.

Even when friends hit the skids on TV, it's usually resolved by the next commercial break, or barring that, the other one becomes a super villain for the rest of the season until the good guy fixes them and they're best friends

again. Why can't real life be more like TV?

My parents have friends they've known for decades. No drama. Cormac and Beau aren't terribly close to anyone aside from family, but they've always been close to each other. No drama there, either.

It's part of the reason I glommed onto Cole when we met. Cormac and Beau are closer in age, and I was one of their two annoying little brothers so, I had to make my own friends because our youngest brother, Everett, was always off doing his own thing. So, I have Cole—"

No. *Had*. I *had* Cole.

I blow out a breath while I test the cameras we secretly mounted on the rig. They run a feed to my computer, and I can hear everything on them, so I hope that by the time Beau and Elsie arrive, the wind dies down, because the mics are very sensitive and they pick up every breeze. After running the test, it's all set, so I watch out of my office window for Beau to pull up. Now, for the waiting—"

Nope, there's Beau. Right on time. Which means he's early. He's chronically early to most things, unless he doesn't want to be there, at which point, he shows up fashionably late. Always has to make an entrance.

According to him, he told Elsie we want to test the dinner in the sky idea for the resort before we make the effort of building the infrastructure for it, and he thought she would love it. Being that she's the architect of the resort, she has to know what goes into the whole thing, and it's a nice excuse for them to have a romantic dinner on the company's dime.

A great cover story, if I do say so myself.

I hop back to my computer and watch as they get harnessed up. We reconfigured the rig, so Beau won't have to get out of his harness to kiss her when she says yes. *If* she says yes. After today's... debacle, she better say yes. One of us needs a win today.

But people can surprise you. She could say no, in which case, we never need to speak of this day ever again.

The sun went down an hour ago, so all they have for lighting is what we put

on the rig. There are candles in hurricane lamps, too, so it's all romantic and pretty for the cameras. The chef is a guy from the city who owes me a favor. Chef Remy also owns and operates a very fancy French bistro in Manhattan, so I know the food will be spectacular.

They go through the courses, each one more mouthwatering than the last, and end on a maple walnut pot du crème, and I'm ready to eat my hat, I'm so hungry. There better be extra pot du crème. I have been through the wringer, and I deserve something delicious—

No. We have a beautiful woman to impress with our body. No stress eating.

But what if she dumps me, too? I could have been more discreet about us. I should have been. Instead, I was moved by the moment to pounce on her, and I let myself get carried away. This is all my fault, and if she dumps me to be in solidarity with her brother, I can't argue that. They're family.

And I'll be all alone.

After they finish the desserts, Elsie smiles brightly at Beau. "This was incredible. I agree, the resort needs it. Yes, I was hesitant at first, but you know me. If I haven't done it, I don't want to put my name on it. Thank you for this."

Beau smiles, and I'm not sure I've ever seen him this nervous. *Is he sweating? In this weather?* He clears his throat, and Chef Remy backs away as much as he can on the rig. The signal. I tense up and make sure the cameras are rolling. Beau says, "I'm glad you like it. When I saw it, I immediately thought of you. You're so adventurous and well-traveled."

She chuckles. "I suppose."

"Better traveled than anyone you grew up with, that's for certain."

She laughs. "Um, that's not saying much."

"Yes, well, I think it's impressive. I don't say this to malign the town you grew up in—"

"Go ahead. Malign away. I hate it there."

He smiles again. "Given where you come from and where you are now, it's

impressive. I have known no one like you, Elsie. To go from a town where a stop sign is a new-fangled invention to being the top architect in the best firm in Manhattan, it's beyond ambition. It's art. I am so proud to be the man on your arm. You are the most incredible person I have ever known. You make me feel like I can do anything. I love you more than I knew was possible."

Tears glisten in her eyes. "Sweetie—"

"Elsie Braudel, will you marry me?" He flips open the ring box lid, and for a moment, there's so much light hitting the camera that the screen whites out. But his hands are shaking, so that fades away fast.

"Oh my god, yes!" She yanks him to her for the kiss, knocking the ring box from his hands. It falls from the screen, and my stomach flips. But Elsie laughs. "Oops. It'll be there when we get down. But for now," she kisses him again.

Beau laughs and the pair makes out, while I scramble out there with a flashlight to find the ring box before the rig lands on it. There isn't much time. I flash the light at John, but his eyes are on the rig as it's coming down. Just before it's on my head, I spot the box and grab it, rolling out of the way of the rig as it lands. I'm on my knees in the dirt when Beau and Elsie see me. While I hold up the box, Elsie grabs it and teases, "Yes, Beckett, I will marry you!"

Beau laughs, but there's little humor in it. "Hey."

She grins at him and kisses him again. "Kidding."

Chapter Twenty-Nine-Sophie

I'M on my way to work when I get a call from Mom. "You okay? You never call me. Is Cole okay?"

"Not really."

I slam on the brakes and nearly get rear-ended. After some angry honks, they leave. "What's wrong? I can be there in ten—"

"No, no. Not health stuff. Well, mental health stuff, I guess. It's just that—"

"Out with it!"

"The boys are fighting. About you."

"Huh?"

She sighs. "Cole and Beckett had a fight. Cole knows."

"Oh, shit."

"And he didn't take finding out well. All day, he's been grumbling about being betrayed and how you can't trust anyone, and well, he wasn't doing great to begin with."

“How did he find out? Did you tell him?”

She laughs, offended. “I most certainly did not. It’s not my business, and I am not a gossip, young lady.”

“Fine. Sorry.” I drive on and pull into work. “But how?”

“One of the crewman sent him a picture of you and Beckett kissing on some contraption.”

“Oh my god. The rig.”

“I suppose. Anyway, he’s not taking it well. When I took him to his rehab appointment at your hospital, he insisted I go home. He didn’t want anyone from the family around. He’s very cross right now. I told him it was important that someone is there with him, on account of his memory being compromised, but he was having none of it.”

I sigh. “He’s just being a stubborn baby. I’ll talk to him.”

“Good luck. He’s angry with Beckett, Sophia. Says he ended their friendship forever.”

“Oh god. Okay. Thanks for the heads-up, Mom. I appreciate it.”

“When you talk to him, be gentle. He’s not quite himself right now.”

I nod. “Believe me, I know. Talk later.” After hanging up, I barge into the hospital on a mission. I will not be the reason he and Beckett are not friends. This cannot happen on my watch. Or ever.

Cole sits in the waiting area of the rehab office, getting his shoes on and being frustrated.

When I walk in, I smile. “Hey there.”

“Oh. Hey. You don’t need to be here for this.”

“I’m not here for this. I’m here for you. Need help with that?” I smirk to myself when I see his bare foot. Beckett was right—he does take care of his feet.

“They told me I need the practice.” But he’s steaming about something. He

huffs. “Nice of you to show up for me. Finally.”

“Excuse me?”

“When normal people go through something like this, they don’t use it as an opportunity to satisfy their childhood crush.”

“Oh. So, we’re going to do this now? Great. Have at me. What else would you like to get off your chest?”

He stares at me. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a child.”

“I’m not. You’re acting like you peed on Beckett to claim him, and now you’re mad that I’m in your territory, so explain to me what I did wrong, you know, since you’re not a dog and he’s not the stuffed animal you like to chew on.”

“Wow. You threw that metaphor into the cement mixer, didn’t you?”

“Can it, Cole, I am not in the mood for more of your jokes. You don’t own Beckett. Stop acting like you do!”

He frowns, confused. “Is that what he told you?”

“No. We haven’t talked since yesterday, and he had Beau’s engagement thing last night. Mom told me about how you were going on about betrayal, like this was fucking Macbeth or something, you big drama queen—”

He closes his eyes and mutters, “Mom.”

“Don’t be mad at her! She is trying to help you.”

“I’m not mad that you betrayed me, Sophie. I’m mad at Beckett for betraying me.”

It’s my turn to frown. “Huh?”

“When you came back to town, I told him to stay away from you. If I remember right, I mentioned something like that to you, too, but I get it. Beckett is a fucking menace with women, and they just seem to do whatever he wants, so I’m not mad at you. Just frustrated—”

“Wait, wait, wait. I’m going to need you to unpack all that for me.”

He shrugs. "Okay. What?"

"You told him to stay away from me. You told me to stay away from him. And you're putting all the onus onto Beckett, because he's just that irresistible to women, and I'm helpless to fight it? As though I'm not a full-grown adult who makes her own choices?"

"Calm down. It's not an insult. It's just what Beckett does. He plays you. And you fall for his lines. I've seen him do it hundreds of times—"

"You should have quit while you were ahead, Cole."

He huffs. "I am not arguing about this. He uses women until he's done, and then he moves on. Period. That's what he does. That's what he's always done. What, you think you're special to him or something?"

That phrasing pulls up too many emotions. "Yes, I know I am."

He laughs at me. "You have got to be kidding me. If you're such a full-grown adult who makes her own choices, how can you not see through his bullshit? Sophie, you are smarter than this. You're not special to him. You're just another hole for him to—"

"Shut your mouth right now, Cole. I won't slap a man in a wheelchair, but I am damn close to it. If you ever talk to me like that again, I will break that rule. I am your sister. I deserve more respect than that. You hear me?"

He gulps and sighs. "Yeah. Sorry. I'm just angry. I'm angry about everything!" He throws his shoe across the room.

I fetch it for him. "At least we know your hand-eye coordination is good."

"Nah. I wanted to break that window." He takes the shoe and tries again. This time, he gets his foot into it and ties the laces.

"Be glad you didn't. Hospital glass is expensive."

He scrubs his hand over his face. "I'm sorry, Sophie. I shouldn't have said that. No matter how true it is."

"Seriously? You're just looking for a fight today, aren't you?"

"I'm just telling the truth. He's a liar and a cheat, and he will leave you in

tears. It's what he always does."

I grind my teeth. "Cole, I am sorry that *we* lied to you. However, if you didn't pretend that my dating life was any of your business, this wouldn't be happening in the first place."

"You're my baby sister. That makes it my business!"

"You are not my father, and even if you were, it still wouldn't be your business! Did you miss the part when I grew up? I can date whoever I want! Maybe I'll dump Beckett and go screw a football team! It's not up to you, Cole!"

"I am the man of the family! It's my responsibility to make sure you're protected!"

"Oh." I hadn't seen that coming at all, and the absurdity of it makes me laugh. "You are my brother. Not my keeper. Get that through your incredibly thick skull by the time I see you again, 'kay?" I turn on my heel and walk out.

C hapter Thirty-Sophie

A FEW DAYS of letting Cole cool off have not helped. But I can't focus on his whiny baby bullshit. Beckett scored us reservations at Moonlight, a romantic spot on the south side of town. I think he's going to ask me to finally stay the night at his place, which would make for a nice change. Hell, I haven't even seen his place since we were always trying to be close to the hospital for Cole. But he's stable and at home, so there's no real reason for us to be there. It'll be a good change of scenery, even if I'm a little tense about it.

I like my place. It's where all my things are. But that's just my control freak tendencies rearing their ugly heads. Maybe it's a family trait.

So, I dressed for the occasion, and Beckett picked me up. To say the car ride was stressful is to underplay the situation. But once inside, seated, and with drinks ordered, the mood is significantly better. The restaurant is elegant without being stuffy. Above, the ceiling is black with tiny twinkling lights in it to look like a night full of stars, and the outer wall is nothing but seamless glass, overlooking the harbor. The tables are far enough away from each other that we hear only the murmur of other conversations.

After the drinks are delivered and we order our entrees, Beckett says, "It's nice being here *officially* together." He raises his Jack and Coke.

“Cheers to that.” I smile and clink my gin and tonic, and we drink. “How did you get reservations? This place is usually booked for weeks out.”

“I got a guy.”

“Of course, you do.” I roll my eyes and wonder how much money it takes to always have *a guy*.

“So, how is work going?”

I shrug. “Good, I guess. Since I did that multi-day overnight stint, everyone loves me, so that’s good. Even the crankiest nurse we have is happy with me, and I’ll take that any day. What about you?”

He sighs. “It’s a lot. But I’m managing. I might be pissed with him now, but Cole is amazing at his job, and there is no replacing him. Not ever.”

“He loves that job, Beckett. Pretty sure the thought of returning is what’s pulled him through.” I pause. “Until now.”

“I just wish... I don’t know. That we had told him ourselves. I think he would have taken it better.”

“No putting the toothpaste back up the tube. He knows. We just have to deal with that.”

He smiles and holds my hand. “You’re amazing, Sophie. I don’t know how you do that.”

“Do what?”

“You just... take whatever life throws at you and maneuver with it. You don’t wallow in what-ifs and all that. No regrets for you, huh?”

“What’s the point? Life will throw things at you. You have to know how to dodge or catch. But ignoring reality or wishing it were different doesn’t change anything.”

His smile grows. “I love that about you.”

“Thanks. But do you have any ideas about what we do with him?”

And his smile fades. “I’m not sure there is anything we can do. He’s

convinced himself that I'm an asshole who will break your heart. The only way I can prove otherwise is to not do that and give him time, I guess. He's such a stubborn bastard about things. I wish he could just get over it and be happy for us."

I sigh and nod. "That would be nice. Instead, he thinks you're some irresistible sex god and I'm just your victim."

"That's insulting as hell for you, and way too complimentary for me. I do not understand that man sometimes."

Our food comes. Once our server leaves, Beckett digs in, but I'm not feeling it. The whole thing is a good deal fancier than my stomach wants right now. "I should not have ordered the bearnaise sauce for the steak. It's a bit much."

"Do you want to send it back?"

I chuckle. "God no. I picked it—"

"That doesn't mean you should suffer with it." He scans the room for our server.

"Don't bother them. It'll be delicious. I'm just being a baby. I'll get over it."

Beckett frowns. "You sure?"

"Yes. Thank you, though."

He shrugs and dives into his lobster. "Anyway, Cole is going to have to grow up sometime. I guess that might as well start now."

"What do you mean?"

"He acts like we're a bunch of kids in the schoolyard, as if you aren't an adult who decides things for herself. I mean, you chose to be with me. I didn't force anything, so it's really condescending of him to be like this."

Even though I'd made some of the same points, it rubs me the wrong way to hear it out of him. "Wrong as he is, he's just trying to look out for me. It's kind of sweet."

"Sweet? Really?"

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I didn’t think you would feel that way, but... I guess I can see it.”

I smirk. “No need to mollify me, Beckett. Let’s talk about this. He’s trying to protect me. It would be worse if he didn’t care, don’t you think?”

“Sure, but aren’t you just the littlest bit mad that he’s treating you like a child?”

Yes. “He’s trying to do what he thinks is best. It’s hard to fault him for that.”

“I can fault him for it.”

“I don’t think I need to remind you he’s been through a hell of a lot lately, and that this situation is a big shock for him, and your attitude will only make this worse.”

Beckett takes a beat. “I’m not trying to make things worse, Sophie. It’s just a surprise to hear you agree with him when you’re the one he’s patronizing.”

“I’m not... I don’t...” I huff at myself. “It’s not that I agree with him. It’s just that I can see both sides of this. And I don’t enjoy being in the middle of your fight. Or the cause of it.”

“You are not the cause, baby. Not at all. Cole is the one who has decided that he can’t be happy for us. *He* is the one who has chosen to have a problem with us. That puts the cause squarely on his shoulders.”

“I agree in theory, but we can still take his circumstances into account, can’t we? One of the things we learned in med school is that when someone has gone through a massive trauma the way he has, they might not react like themselves for a long time. They might not feel like themselves, either. Trauma makes people do all kinds of things that are out of character. I’ve been trained to deal with people having a trauma response to things, and you haven’t—”

“Sorry,” he cuts in, “I will defer to your judgment on this. You’re the expert between us.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I only meant to say that I’ve had the training, and you haven’t, so I’m used to dealing with people in these situations, and I still

lost my temper with him the other day. So, I'm not sure how someone without my training would handle it, but from what I've seen, you're doing a great job."

He smiles sadly. "Thank you. I appreciate that. Not sure if giving him space is the right call, but I'm trying."

Dinner falls silent for a little while, and it's not one of those comfortable couple's silences, either. There is a subtext to every scrape of the fork and every sip of a cocktail. We skip dessert and when we get to his car, I just want to go home. "Um, do you mind taking me home?"

"Not at all. But I had hoped we could go to my place."

"I have a very early day tomorrow."

"Oh. No problem." As he changes the route, it feels like a problem. He walks me to my door, and we kiss as I fumble for the key.

"Um, maybe it's best if you don't stay over."

His face falls. "Because of your early morning?"

"Mm, hmm."

"Sure. Okay."

I smile up at him and pull him down for another kiss. "Thank you for understanding. I don't trust myself not to pull an all-nighter with you."

"Right. Because I'm an irresistible sex god?"

"Something like that."

He smiles and kisses me. "Good night."

"Good night." As soon as I'm inside my place, I ask absolutely no one, "Why the hell was that so weird?" It's hard to pin down, but things are off between us, and I'm not entirely sure why.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE-BECKETT

“THERE IS no excuse for how we had been paying Cole and covering his expenses is the absolute least we can do for him. What we should actually do is send him a ridiculous bonus for all he has done for us,” I write to Cormac. The email has gotten longer than I planned, but I want to be clear. I attached graphs and charts of all the things Cole has done for us, and though it might be motivated by guilt, the fact remains that we have been underpaying him for years, and I did not know. Don’t think Cormac did, either. After I hit send, I sit back in my office chair and sigh.

It might be too little too late, but we owe him anyway.

My mood has been foul for days since that disaster of a date, and I’m not sure how to move forward from it. We’ve texted a few times, but nothing significant. I’m out of my depths with her. The only other girlfriends I’ve had weren’t people with years in my life. Apologizing to them about something that wasn’t my fault would never happen. But this is a totally different situation. Sure, the strangeness between us wasn’t my fault, but I still want to apologize for it, and that makes it unique in my life.

Not that I’m never at fault for things— I am sometimes, absolutely. But apologizing just to make peace feels wrong, and even though I’m sure it could fix things, I don’t want to fuck it up and make things worse. I’ve never been anxious before, but I’m pretty sure this is what that feels like, and it sucks.

My phone’s text signal lights, so I check it, in hopes of a distraction from my conundrum. But it’s a text from Mrs. Kendrick. I click it immediately and find a video of Cole standing. A laugh escapes me, not because it’s funny, but because I’m in delighted shock. I had no idea his progress had come along this far. When he sees her filming him, he flips her off and loses his balance, sliding into his wheelchair, and I laugh again, because karma got him for being rude to his mom. I could almost cry, I’m so happy for him.

She calls a few seconds later. “Did the video come through?”

“Yes, thank you for sending it. I can’t tell you how good that was to see it. No matter what else is happening, I still love that guy.”

She speaks like she's talking to someone else, "Yes, well, I didn't get to take a video of his first steps when he was a baby, so this will have to do."

In the background, he snipes, "Mom!"

She giggles, then returns to me. "He's not walking yet, but they're hoping he will soon. The fact he can stand so close on the accident timeline apparently means something to them as far as his progress is concerned."

"That is fantastic news, Mrs. Kendrick."

"How are you holding up, Beckett?" She knows something. I hear it in her tone. It's the same tone she used when we got caught skipping school, and she already knew.

This time, instead of lying badly, I decide to head it off. "I'm sorry if he's being cranky with you because of me and Sophie."

"Oh, he'll get over it. I wanted to make sure the video came through and to thank you for using your connections to get him in with the neuro PT here in Manhattan. She's a genius."

"I want him to have the best of the best. If that means he needs to go someplace else, just let me know."

She sighs and lowers her voice. "You still didn't answer me. How are you?"

"I'll be okay." Probably.

"Beckett." An edge of warning in her voice makes me feel like I'm fourteen again.

"I'm mad at myself for not listening to my instincts. I think he would have taken the news about us better if it had come from us instead of a picture."

She pauses. "Possibly. But the cat is out of the bag, and he has to grow up. Besides, you two have been best friends your whole lives. It was about time you had an argument."

I chuckle and shake my head. This is where Sophie gets her pragmatism.

"Guess that's true. What about you? I know all of this is hard for you, too."

"I'll get by. Always do. And seeing my baby boy on his feet again is exactly

what I needed.”

I hesitate to ask, but I need to know. “Is Sophie doing okay?”

“I think so. She’s seemed a little off the past few days, but as I understand it, you two had an off night, so that makes sense.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m surprised she told you.”

“So was I, truth be told. But her friend at work is...what did she call it? Dick-matized? Is that a thing?”

I snort a laugh, hearing that out of her. “Um, that *is* a term people use.”

“Anyway, she says Hope is giving out terrible advice, so she mentioned to me you two are working on something. I know it’s not easy— you two started things on shaky feet. But I hope you can work it out. I’ve never seen either of you quite so happy as when you’re together. Even when you were trying to hide it, you were terrible at it.”

I laugh again. “That sounds like us.”

“Ah well. I have to go. Someone here has no patience.”

Cole huffs in the background. “I told you I’m mad at him. He doesn’t get a play-by-play.”

“He is my other son, and you will not get between us, Cole. Not now, not ever. Deal with it.”

“Well, your other son is dating your daughter, and that’s gross.”

She puts her hand over the phone and I catch a muffled, “It’s not like he’s making it sound— she’s dating his best friend.”

“Oh,” some woman says.

Mrs. Kendrick gets back on the line. “Talk later, Beckett.”

“Okay, bye.” I snicker and set my phone down, replaying the video of him standing. My heart warms with the sight of it, and I know in my soul that I have to fix us. All of us. Whatever it takes. Because, more than anything else, I know that I should have been the one to take that video.

It should be me to take care of Cole right now. His poor mother is capable, but she's getting up there. She doesn't need to make the trips into the city all the time. All that aside, it feels like this should be my job. Not hers. I'm the one who...

No. He's an adult who drank on a jobsite where bad things can happen fast without warning. I didn't make this happen to him.

I take a breath and let it out slowly. Every day Sophie and I are off is another day that I feel responsible for fixing everything around me. It's not fair that I'm out and living my life, and his life has become physical therapy and horror movies and delivery food. Nothing about this is fair at all.

For that matter, it's not fair to me, either. I didn't do anything wrong. Not really. Not with Cole or Sophie. I didn't make him drink, and I didn't make that pipe burst and I didn't make him hit his head, and sometimes, I have to repeat that all to myself over and over. One day, I might believe it.

But with Sophie, maybe I did something wrong. I had thought I'd be commiserating with her over his paternalistic approach to our relationship. After all, he is the one in the wrong about us.

But she is his sister. They've always been close. I don't want anyone to think I'm trying to come between them, because I'm not. I had thought for sure that she was going to be pissed with him. Instead, she's both-sides-ing the whole thing, and I don't know how to align with that.

Maybe I don't have to align with that. Maybe I should just align with her.

I drum my fingers on the desk and an email from Cormac comes through, so I click it.

“You're absolutely right. I've wired the money to him. See you Saturday.”

With any luck, this will brighten Cole's day almost as much as standing. Now, to extend an olive branch to Sophie...

Chapter Thirty-Two-Sophie

AS HOPE BUZZES past me in the locker room, she's humming the Mr. Roger's theme song. Again.

"How is Dr. Maynard doing?"

"What? Hmm? I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"You were humming—"

"Oh, god, not again." Her head drops against her locker door.

I giggle at her. "You suck at covering, you know."

She strips down to get into her scrubs. "Yes, and thank you for waiting until we were alone to bring him up." She pulls her scrubs on artlessly, mussing her hair while she's at it. "I'm just... I don't know. It's complicated."

"Why is that? You like him, he likes you—"

"I am not the only one he likes. Not to mention he's—"

"An asshole, yeah, I remember you saying that a time or two. But you obviously like him on some level. Why not try it?"

She sighs. “It’s like I said— I’m not the only one he likes.”

“Do you know who the competition is?”

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Janet says as she comes into the locker room from the adjoining bathroom. She parks in front of her locker to get ready for the day.

I shrug at Hope and mouth, “I didn’t know.” Then, out loud, I tell her, “Nice to see you, Janet.”

Hope just shakes her head. “Not sure about competition. Doesn’t matter. How are you and Beckett doing? Get past the weird thing yet?”

“No. We’ve texted a— oh wait. Just got another one. He wants me to go to his brother’s wedding rehearsal dinner Friday night. The wedding is the next day, and I’m supposed to go to that, too. But honestly, I’m not sure. It just... everything feels wrong between us still.”

Janet cranes her head in our direction. “Can’t help but overhear, and may I offer some unsolicited advice?”

I shrug. Couldn’t hurt. “Yeah, sure.”

“Either you feel a thing, or you don’t. If he doesn’t give you butterflies, then he’s not the one.”

“I’m not sure it’s that simple.”

She chuckled. “It is. Does he?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Then dig your claws into him and don’t let go. Whatever is wrong with you, fix it. That shit doesn’t come along often, and sometimes, it comes from the strangest places, and that is all the more reason to make things work.”

I smile. “You might be right. My parents worked through a lot of stuff for decades and they were the happiest people I’ve ever known.”

She smiles, too. “Whatever the weirdness is, just be open-minded. Guys... they grow up with some odd, formative things, and sometimes, there’s just no explaining it.”

Hope laughs bitterly. “You’re telling me.”

“My point is, don’t judge him, don’t pick on him. If he’s sharing that kind of thing with you, that means he trusts you intimately, and that’s huge for a guy —”

“It’s not a weird sex thing, Janet. He’s my brother’s best friend, and my brother is being weird about us, and it’s made things awkward between us. That’s all.”

She stands up straight. “Oh. Well, forget all that other stuff I said then. If he makes you happy, then make it work. Your brother will get over it.”

“That’s what everyone says. I just hope it’s true.”

She smiles. “See you on the floor.” As she walks past us, she hums the Mr. Rogers theme song, and my heart drops for Hope.

But, as the mean nurse reaches the door, Hope asks, “What’s got you thinking about Mr. Rogers, Janet?”

She chuckles, and her cheeks glow bright red. “You know what? I can’t say. A... friend reminds me of him sometimes. Gotta go.” Then she zips out of the door.

Hope is left blinking at the closed door, and I’m not sure what to say. But before I can speak, she squeaks out, “Janet is my competition? Janet? Little Miss Rules and Regulations?” Then she laughs and plops on the bench next to me. “She’s so much older than me.”

“Not to mention meaner.”

She nods, still too surprised to say much. Abruptly, she smiles deviously and stares at the door. “I am so going to win this.”

I laugh. “Yes, I am sure you are.”

“See you out there. Don’t leave Beckett hanging.”

“Right.” I go back to my phone as she leaves. Janet has her issues, but she’s not wrong. Beckett makes me feel things I never have before. It would be foolish to let him go so easily. So, I tell him yes, I will go. He responds with

a smiley face, and I know he's nervous, because that man does not use emojis. The fact he's nervous makes me smile. It means he cares enough to be nervous.

The rest of the week goes by in a blur, and it's Friday before I know it. A simple black sweater dress, boots, and my nice coat, and I'm out the door. The rehearsal dinner is at his parents' house and they are hosting the wedding, too, so he's just staying the night there because he's in the wedding. All of that adds up to me driving myself to the MacMillan mansion.

It. Is. Huge.

I've never been one of those easily impressed people. Somerset Harbor is laden with millionaires who flaunt their money, and I've always found that tacky. The MacMillans don't flaunt—Beau aside—and I respect that. But their home is another story. In fact, it's three stories.

Vines grow up the sides and lights illuminate the bushes and topiary, still trimmed to perfection even in winter. Behind the house, there are some trees, but it also has its own stretch of beach, and I would guess that's where the wedding will be. With the sun setting soon, it's gorgeous. Everything is perfect, a vision executed to someone's distinct orders. The scene makes Cormac and Beau make so much more sense now.

Most of my experience with the MacMillans has been with Beckett, so when I had met his older brothers, I was a little taken aback by their comparative formality. Beckett's always been like Cole—more laid-back, fast with a joke. He's never taken life too seriously.

Now, seeing this mansion, I have no idea how he grew up in this place. But, maybe that's why he spent so much time at our house.

When I ring the doorbell, a butler answers. I almost laugh at the sight of him. The places I go and the people I know do not have butlers. But he smiles and guides me to the lounge after he takes my coat. Beckett's eyes are tense, but he smiles and joins me as I enter. "I'm glad you could make it. Let me introduce you to everyone."

"Great." I have never met his parents before, and I'd put them out of my mind as a part of this until now. But seeing them makes my stomach knot up.

“It’s so nice to meet you.”

His parents are elegantly dressed for the occasion, but they smile easily when they shake my hand. His mother has neat ash blonde hair and a relaxed way about her that sets me at ease just with a look. “I have heard so much about you, Sophie.”

I smile. “Hopefully, it’s been all good?”

She chuckles. “It’s been glowing. He’s rather fond of you—”

“Mom!”

She smiles mischievously at me, and her husband does, too. He notes, “Beckett can’t stop talking about you—”

“Dad!”

“And I’m glad to hear it. About time he found a woman who can keep his attention for more than five minutes.”

I laugh. At least his family has no illusions about who he is with women. “Well, that just means that I’m a very lucky woman to have found him.”

Just then, the dinner starts, so we part for a formal dining room. The toasts feel endless, and though I’m trying to stay present, it’s hard. I’m still frustrated with Beckett over everything, and sitting here won’t fix anything. But maybe I’m wrong about that.

He takes my hand under the table, and when people say something sweet about the happy couple, he smiles and gives me a squeeze. I want to let bygones be bygones between us. I’m just not sure how.

Not when Cole is still fragile and needs support. Even when he’s wrong about everything, he’s still my brother. Between listening to a story about Cormac stuffing a dead fish into Beau’s pillow when they were kids and hearing them tease each other, I can’t help but think of Cole, and how much I miss the man he was.

Somehow, I have to fix all of this. My big brother needs me.

Chapter Thirty-Three-Beckett

LILY SMILES at Cormac as the hour gets late, and they do that silent conversation thing that couples do and I've never understood. He smiles at her and with a nod and says, "Sleep tight, love." Then she says her goodnights and leaves. It's such a little thing, but it astounds me.

He was never like that with his first wife.

Sure, they loved each other, but it wasn't a sweet, intimate thing. Not on the outside, at least. They always seemed like warm friends more than anything else, so it wasn't a surprise to anyone when they agreed to a divorce. They've been amicable friends and great co-parents to their kids ever since.

But with Lily, it's there. It's the real thing this time around. I'm so happy for him. And so miserable for myself right now.

I shouldn't be thinking about how things between me and Sophie are uncomfortable. I should celebrate my brother's union-to-be. But every toast and every kind word makes me wonder if we're headed to the same place he is or not. It shocks me I'm even thinking about that— we're too new a couple to think about these things.

But then I see Beau and Elsie share a look between them, and I know it's

never too soon to think about it.

The party winds down, and I whisper to Sophie, “Come with me to the terrace?”

She smiles and nods, and after we bundle up in coats and scarves, we take our drinks out there. I love my parents’ terrace. It’s where we usually have family brunches or pool parties, so it’s always been a happy place for me. Maybe if I get her out there, I’ll know what to say.

A garden grows nearby in the spring, and a thin forest lines the space between the house and the beach. Waves crash nearby, and the moon glitters on the waves through the bare trees. Tomorrow, it will be the sight of the reception, so it’s set up for that—tall tables at the edges and a currently bartender-less bar. Thankfully, we’ve had a few days without snow and that pattern is expected to hold up through their wedding weekend.

We walk to the marble railing overlooking the empty garden. Sophie sighs. “Glad there’s not much of a breeze tonight.”

“Are we really going to talk about the weather right now?”

“What would you like to talk about, Beckett?” The way she says my name makes it sound like a curse.

Which makes it my turn to sigh. “I didn’t mean anything by that. I only meant to say, I think we have more important things to discuss. Like...” What the hell do I say now? That I’m sorry I didn’t do anything wrong? “Like, I’m sorry I misspoke the other day.”

She sips her drink and stares out at the ocean, like she’s ignoring me. Or that she doesn’t want to look at me. Either stings. “I’m sorry you decided to pick on my brother when he’s down.”

“I did not!”

“Yes, you did! You called him patronizing and—”

“Because he’s being patronizing! He’s acting like you can’t make your own choices, Sophie! How can you defend that?”

Her glare cuts through me. “I wasn’t defending that. I was defending my

brother.”

Shit. I take a breath and close my eyes. I can't look at her when she's this angry. After I have another sip of my Jack and coke for courage, I can't shake the feeling that I'm going to say something that will piss her off. But I also can't stop myself. “I love Cole like he's my brother. But he's not. I know that. And if someone were calling my brother patronizing, even if he were being patronizing, I'd probably defend him, too. I'm sorry, Sophie. It must have seemed like I was attacking him, and I don't feel like I was at all, because in my heart, I would never attack Cole. But he's your brother, so you have to defend him. I get that now.”

She takes a breath and looks unsure. Of what, I don't know. “Thank you for that.”

It feels like the most natural thing in the world to put my arm around her, and when I do, she leans against me. Maybe we can put all of this behind us. For a moment, things are quiet, but they don't feel as odd. I kiss the top of her head and murmur, “I've missed you.”

“I've missed you, too,” her voice cracks as she speaks.

So I turn her to face me, and I see a tear on her cheek. “What's wrong?”

She wipes it away. “Us.”

“I thought... I said I was sorry. You said thank you. I thought things were improving.”

She huffs, and a sick feeling takes hold. “It's just that... this week has been rough, you know? Things are wrong between us and between me and Cole, and I don't know how to fix any of it. I'm a freaking doctor. I can fix broken bones and bring people back from the brink of death, but somehow, I can't fix this? It doesn't make any sense!”

I laugh and shake my head at the ludicrousness of the comparison. But I also get it. “Well, I create and fix buildings, but this alludes me. I know it's not quite the same thing— pretty sure people are a bit more complicated than buildings— but a similar idea, I'd guess. And this whole relationship thing is new to me, if I'm entirely honest.”

“You’ve had girlfriends before.”

“None who I have cared for as much as you, Sophie. What we have is miles more important to me, and I don’t want to fuck this up, and I feel like that’s all I’ve been doing.”

She bops her head on my chest, then hugs me, so I pull her tight to me. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“It’s so weird.”

“What?”

“How, even when you say the truth in a relationship, you can still end up in trouble.”

She stiffens up and pulls away, setting her drink on the railing. “What’s that mean?”

“Well, obviously, you know Cole is being patronizing—you’re brilliant, of course you know he is—and when I said it, I ended up in trouble. Just like if the shoe were on the other foot, you’d be in trouble with me.” I chuckle. “Just strange, is all. Family is like one of those invisible fence collars for dogs. I crossed the fence, and I got a shock.” I chuckle and shrug.

But that glare is back in her eyes, and I mentally scramble, trying to figure out what I did wrong this time. “Did you just... you’re unbelievable, Beckett.”

“Can you not use my name in place of a curse word?”

“I’m gonna go.”

“What? Why?”

Her hands ball into fists a couple of times, like she’s trying to calm down. “Because if I don’t go now, I will say something I will probably regret one day.”

“What did I do wrong now?”

“I can’t believe you don’t even know. You’re smarter than that.”

“I called you brilliant—”

“You called him patronizing *again*, and then, in the most bizarre thing of all, called me your owner!”

I huff. “Sophie, I didn’t mean it like that. Please, just—”

“I’m leaving.” She turns to stomp away.

In a panic, I ask, “Will I see you here tomorrow for the wedding?”

That stops her in her tracks. “I don’t know.” Then she walks away from me, and with every step, something in my chest fractures.

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Chapter Thirty-Four-Beckett

ALMOST AS IF ON CUE, the breeze picks up after Sophie leaves. I pull my coat tighter, but I'm not ready to go inside yet. Maybe it just feels colder because she's gone, and I don't know if she's ever coming back. But my Jack runs dry, and that's almost enough to get me to go inside.

The terrace door closes behind me, and I spin around, hoping she's changed her mind. But it's Cormac, carrying two drinks. He smiles on his way, and his eyes line with an upturned look. Pity. "Saw Sophie leave, and I thought you might need this."

I take the second drink, and it's Jack, straight. "You're a good big brother."

He laughs and sips his wine. "So. Would you like to talk about it?"

I shake my head and stare at the beach. "Not sure there's much to say, really."

"You could start from the beginning."

"Cormac, it's the night before your wedding. I'm pretty sure you don't want to hear about my romantic troubles."

“On the contrary, I am in the perfect spot to hear about them. My kids are asleep. Lily, too. I have had far too much wine to be able to hold back my opinion, and I am in a stellar mood, your troubles aside. What better time to hear you out?”

I can’t help but smile at the total lack of logic in his statement. “You are really drunk, aren’t you?”

“I’m the groom. It’s my job to be drunk the night before my wedding.”

We laugh, and I’m so glad he’s here. “Why didn’t you want a bachelor party again?”

“The first one. Remember that disaster?”

“Oof. Yes, I do. But we wouldn’t have invited Everett this time—

“Can’t leave a brother out of a bachelor party, no matter how disruptive he was to the first one.”

I chuckle, remembering that night. “I’m still not sure how he corralled a tour group into coming into our hotel room, thinking it was an exhibit on their tour. And where did he get that monkey?”

He laughs. “I was afraid to ask. The monkey wore the signed Saints helmet from that one bar we’d been to earlier, and I knew there were at least four or five laws broken. I didn’t want to be complicit when he was caught.”

“He’s Everett. No one ever catches him. That said, New Orleans is a hell of a town.”

“Pretty sure frozen drinks played a role in all of that.”

“As they should.”

He nudges my shoulder with his. “Tell me about Sophie.”

I sigh and drink before I begin, and once I start, I can’t stop. “...and then, well, you saw her when she left. How did she seem?”

“Not great. Polite, but she was obviously upset.”

“I hate this so much, Cormac. How do I keep getting in trouble by telling the

truth?”

He laughs and claps my shoulder. “You’re not getting in trouble by telling the truth. You’re getting in trouble by telling the truth as you see it to the woman who doesn’t want to hear your version of the truth.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“Not even close. Did you ever take debate in school?”

“No.”

He nods. “In debate, they teach you to consider your audience *before* you craft your message. You already know what you want to say. But you have to think about how the audience will hear your words. For instance, I could tell you that your hair is getting a little shaggy—”

“Sophie likes it a little shaggy, so I—”

“Let me finish. I tell you that, and you take it in stride. But if I told Beau his hair was getting shaggy—”

I laugh. “He’d be a little bitch about it.”

“Exactly. For Beau, I’d ask if he missed a trip to his stylist, because something looked off. Shaggy *to you* isn’t an insult. Shaggy *for him* is just plain rude.”

“Okay. I see what you’re saying. But I thought I had fixed things between us, and then I said the wrong thing again. I’m not sure how to stop, and I don’t know how to fix things with Cole, either.”

He pauses for a beat to think. Cormac’s always been more thoughtful than me, and maybe that’s my problem. I speak before I think. He sips his wine, then says, “In very different ways, you love both of them with all your heart.”

“Yes. Without question.”

“Which is why you get ahead of yourself when you speak to them.”

“Huh?”

“You thought things with you and her were settled, so you thought it was safe

to reiterate your point about Cole. The thing is, you don't need to reiterate it. She heard you the first time, and that's the whole problem. So, for her, it felt like you were attacking him after you had attacked him already."

"Oh, shit," I mumble as that hits me. "She thought I was kicking him while he was down."

"Exactly."

"Fuck, I've got to call her—"

But he snatches my phone out of my hand and pockets it. "Nope."

"What are you doing? I need to tell her I wasn't—"

"She won't hear you right now, Beckett. Let her cool off."

I huff and finish my drink. "You sure about this?"

"Absolutely. She's angry and hurt and confused. Let her breathe. Then, after she's had some time, go to her and make this right."

The question I don't want to ask bubbles out of me. "What if I fuck it up, Cormac? What if I make her hate me? I feel like I keep bashing my head against the wall when I talk to her. Isn't chasing her the wrong thing to do?"

He pats my shoulder. "Chasing love is never wrong. You love her. She obviously loves you—"

"Obviously?"

"No one is that upset about a fight if they don't love the other person. It's the same reason your fight with Cole hurts so much for both of you. Beckett, you are luckier than most people in the world. You have some amazing people who adore you, present company included—"

I laugh at him. The dick.

He smiles. "And the thing you have to do now is to figure out how to speak to Sophie and to Cole. This situation won't get better until you sort that out. Don't wait too long, either. Discomfort is like a dead fish. It stinks worse over time."

“Beau would know.”

He laughs hard. “Yeah.”

“I’m still not sure if she’s going to show up tomorrow. If she doesn’t... should I think we’re through?”

“Not until you hear it directly from her. If she doesn’t show, it could just be that she needs more time away from you to cool off, and being at a wedding with your entire family would be too much for her. Understandably.”

Nodding, I try not to panic at the thought of her dumping me. “I can’t lose her, Cormac.”

“Then that’s what you focus on. You screwed up, even if you think you didn’t. Love is dumb and complicated like that. But love isn’t about being right all the time. Figure out if you love being right more than you love being with her.”

“I don’t give a shit about being right. That was not why I said what I said. I just don’t know how to talk to Sophie right now.”

“Whatever happens, when you do talk to her, try to see things from her perspective. It’s the only way you won’t screw up again. And going forward, don’t always say the first thing on your mind. We love you, Beckett, but your id has always had a hold of you.”

I grunt. “I’m not that bad.”

“Oh really? How many women have you—”

“More than you. By a lot.”

He laughs. “You know, I used to be jealous of you on that score. But it seems like that’s the problem here. You never had to develop any skills with women, aside from the bedroom.” Sadly, he’s right.

“A blessing and a curse, I guess.”

“I will give you your phone back tomorrow. In the meantime, I’m freezing my balls off and I’m going to bed. You should do the same, or you’ll end up with frostbite on your nose and that will ruin my wedding pictures.”

I chuckle. “Well, we can’t have that.” When I walk into the house with him, it takes a moment for me to stop staring at the front door. Where Sophie left. I imagine her hand on the doorknob and wish she had turned on her heel and come back to me, instead of turning the doorknob and leaving. With that depressing thought, I climb the stairs to my childhood bedroom and fall like a tree onto the bed.

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Chapter Thirty-Five-Sophie

STARING at the ceiling in my lonely flannel sheets, I don't know what to do. The wedding is soon. But I'm furious at Beckett. It's cold outside. I don't want to leave my bed.

This sucks.

I've dillydallied for far too long about everything, and a part of me doesn't want to care. Sure, Cormac and Lily seem like a nice couple, and I don't want to insult them by not showing up. But if I see Beckett and he looks good and is sweet, I am liable to forgive him. I almost did last night. But he had to go and call Cole patronizing again, and I just...

I sigh at myself. I'm an idiot.

The whole thing is so stupid. Beckett's right about Cole, and I hate that my brother is being patronizing. But some familial reflex makes me angry when he says anything negative about him. It's not helpful, and I don't know how to stop it.

But each time he says the word, I can't help but think of Cole getting wheeled into the ED. How helpless and broken he was. It's hard not to treat him like a glass flower now, even when I know better. Mom had sent me the

video of him standing for the first time and it brought me to tears. He's not a glass flower. He's a man who went through some terrible shit, and he's getting back on his feet faster than anyone really expected him to. I know all of this.

And yet the urge to protect him lingers.

It's hard not to feel defensive about family, I guess. Maybe that's why I went into overprotective mode when Dad died. Mom and Cole crumbled, so I handled everything. And now that Cole is hurt, I want to handle everything again. But I can't handle his broken body. I can't fight this for him.

I've been looking for a fight I can win, and if I win against Beckett, I'll lose everything I've built with him.

That thought springs me out of bed. I'm in the shower before I can talk myself out of this, and I'm blowing out my hair faster than ever. Not looking for perfection, just looking for suitable. I grab the dress I spent too much money on for the wedding and slip it on while I step into my heels. Crap. I forgot tights. I'm in too much of a hurry, but I need the tights to stay warm and have to make an exception so I can wriggle them on.

Heels again, and I'm out the door, speeding through town and praying no cops pull me over.

When I get to the MacMillan mansion this time, the front courtyard has a valet. Who the fuck has a valet at their own home? But I get it— there are dozens of cars around, and it looks like there's more off to the side of the property. I valet my car and race inside, where I'm directed to the beach for the ceremony.

A stone walkway decorated in black and white flowers leads me to the wedding. A black and white archway stands at the end of the aisle and their officiant is a woman in a black suit, waiting patiently. The string quartet sits off to the side of the front, and they play quiet background music. White wooden chairs with black ribbons sit on the sand, and I'm instantly regretting the heels because they will sink in. Thankfully, the chairs are on packed sand, so it's not so bad. The officiant presses her finger to her ear, and I presume she's being told something on her headset. She takes it off and looks down the aisle, signaling the quartet to play something more official.

Most of the chairs are taken, and I sit in the back row, hoping not to interrupt. No one notices me, but I see Cole on the edge of the aisle near the middle in a PVC wheelchair with fat tires for the sand. Mom must have decorated it—there's black ribbon wrapped around the pipes. I'm glad he's here. He's always been tight with Beckett's brothers.

I don't hear them, but I see them. The sand muffles the groomsmen's footsteps until they're right beside me. Mr. MacMillan first, followed by Beckett, and Beau, then Cormac. If Beckett saw me, he doesn't show it when he's at the arch. He doesn't even scan the crowd, instead concentrating on his brothers as they mumble in-jokes to each other to keep the mood light.

He looks so damned good in his tuxedo. It's not fair. I'm so forgiving him, aren't I?

I roll my eyes at myself, and a classical piece comes on that I recognize, but don't know it. Everyone else must, too, because they all turn around. The bridesmaids are next, all in black with black fur shawls to keep warm. I don't know any of them, but maybe one day I will. Right now, I kind of wish I was one of them. The shawls look cozy and warm.

Then Lily arrives. She slowly glides past us, the picture perfect bride. I wasn't sure she could pull it off, to be honest. She's a chef and kind of rough around the edges, which I like about her. But to see her now, you'd never know she has a mouth like a sailor.

Her long brunette hair is in a smooth bun at the nape of her neck. The long white gown has a lace overlay in gray, and her black fur coat is cropped just enough to show the lace off perfectly. She looks gorgeous and happy, and I'm so excited for her, which makes me tear up. Weddings always make me cry, so I always skip eye makeup. Waterproof is a cruel joke, as far as I'm concerned.

The officiant begins, "Welcome, friends and family. We are gathered today to witness the joining of Lily Olson and Cormac MacMillan. A wedding is a celebration of love, not only the love of the happy couple, but the love you all have for them, as the coming together of two people is not something that happens out of thin air. It is the culmination of a community's lives. Without any single person here, these two may have never met. So, today begins the

next chapter in their lives, and they are grateful for the presence of each one of you.”

The officiant’s words send me careening into my thoughts. Without Cole’s accident, would Beckett and I have ever gotten together? I can’t say. But his accident was a stark reminder of how fleeting life can be. To seize every moment... it’s shameful to admit to myself, but I see reasons to seize every moment all the time. Everyone who comes into the ED is a reason to not hold back. But it took seeing Cole like that for me to finally get off my ass and go after what I want.

I’m still mad at Beckett, though, and I don’t know how to get past it.

She continues, “It is with the hopes and dreams of this community that Lily and Cormac will build their future. They are two individuals who will walk one path together. It takes patience, dedication, forgiveness, and most of all, humor, to stay on that path.” The audience has a few chuckles, and I can’t help but think of Beckett and his silliness. I need that in my life, and the thought makes me cry silently.

“Poets and songwriters make love into an ephemeral, flowery thing, but it is not. Love is not a fire, nor is it all you need to make a marriage work. Love is a choice you make every day on your path. It is the laughter, and it is the tears. The failures and the successes. It is every time he takes her dish to the kitchen, and every time she gets his oil changed. It is the thousand things you do every day to take care of your partner without being asked. Love is, above all else, the map you use to navigate your path together. Follow the map, and you will never be lost.” The vows begin, but I’m still stuck in my head.

I love Beckett with all my heart. But I don’t know how we get through this. I don’t need a love map. It’s too confusing. I need instructions. I need love GPS.

Chapter Thirty-Six-Beckett

AFTER THE WEDDING, I'm struck when I see Sophie walking the stone path back to the terrace. I hadn't even realized she'd made it to the wedding. This has to be a good sign, right?

There's more wedding hullabaloo, and as a groomsman, I'm supposed to be interested in whatever anyone is saying right now, but I cannot focus on any of that. Not when Sophie is here.

The bride and groom had opted for just a few toasts before opening up the dancefloor. The meal is a casual thing, mostly hor d'oeuvres to keep people moving and mingling instead of freezing. There are outdoor heaters on the terrace and they help considerably, but it's still winter in New York, and there's only so much they can do.

As soon as people dance, I make my way toward Sophie. She stands next to Cole at a bar table, and as nervous as I am about seeing them, none of that holds a candle to how happy I am that she came. Him, too. Maybe there's hope for us yet.

He's in one of my old suits that I gave him a few years back. Looks better on him than it ever did on me. His shoes are shiny and new, and I wonder when

they'll have scuffs on them. When, not if. He will walk again. I'm sure of it.

I smile and nod at him, and he returns the gesture as he looks up at me from his wheelchair, but there's tension and judgment on his face. One problem at a time. I turn to her. "Care to dance with a man with two left feet?"

"Well..." Her hesitation kills me. "Okay. Sure."

Whatever. I'll take it. I lead her to the dance floor and take her in my arms. It feels like where she belongs. Now, I have to convince her of that. Start with the important stuff. "Sophie, I am sorry I've been putting my two left feet in my mouth."

She smiles sadly. "Well, it's a big mouth, so I get why you might think they should go in there."

I laugh hard. "Fair enough."

"It's just...I'm not good at this, either, Beckett. You might have almost no experience with a girlfriend, but I haven't exactly been loaded with boyfriends. I've always been too busy with school or work to bother with maintaining a relationship. So, I might be too sensitive when it comes to my family because I haven't had that rough edge sanded yet."

"I'm a great carpenter."

She snorts a laugh and puts her head on my shoulder. "The problem is, I don't know if I want that rough edge sanded. My family has been through hell. They need someone to protect them."

"I get that, and I want to help you with that. I screwed up. Repeatedly. It should have been obvious to me, and it wasn't, and that's my flaw—that I didn't see things from your side of it. But I love you, and I want to make this work, Sophie. I promise not to pick on Cole like that ever again."

She looks up at me. "He needs a protector, and that's my job. It has to come first for me."

"I get that."

"*He* has to come first for me, Beckett."

“Why does that sound like goodbye?”

“I just— I love you, too. But he needs me—”

“Can I cut in?”

We both blink at a standing Cole. No rail for him to hold, not even a cane. Her voice cracks, “You’re walking?”

He smiles proudly, then thumps my chest with the back of his hand. “Yeah, well, this guy got me the best of the best for my PT, and I want to try something out. See if I can dance with my little sister. If he’ll let me.”

I step back, smiling at him. Fear, sadness, elation, and joy hit me all together, and I don’t know how to handle any of it. She was just about to end things—I know it. But I’m so fucking happy to see him walking and wanting to dance, that I get choked up. “Uh, yeah. Of course.”

He gives me a nod and dances with Sophie. But as I walk away, he says, “Don’t go anywhere. I have something to say to both of you, but dancing with the two of you at the same time might start some uncomfortable rumors.”

I snort a laugh and nod. “Sure.”

His steps are unsteady and she takes the lead whenever he stumbles, but if I weren’t looking for it, I wouldn’t notice. He’s doing so well so soon that I’m in awe of him. Cole says, “I am sorry. To both of you. I had thought this whole thing was just another of Beckett’s long, long, *too long* line of conquests—”

“Hey,” I interject.

She says, “Yeah, what he said. You think I’m just something to be conquered?”

“I don’t think that’s a word,” he teases her.

“You know what I mean!”

He smirks. “It was presumptuous of me to think that of him and of you. Given his checkered and slutty history, I think it was a fair presumption of

him—"

"Hey!"

He laughs. "But I was wrong. About all of it. Beckett, I was wrong to assume the worst of you. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt, and we have been friends long enough that I should have known better. You were absolutely right."

I smile and shrug, and fight every urge to tell him, "Told you so!" Instead, I tell him, "Forgiven."

"And Sophie, I was an absolute jerk to you about this. You are my baby sister, and you will always be my baby sister, but that doesn't change the fact that you are an adult who gets to make her own— sometimes questionable— choices."

"Hey!" we say together.

He laughs again and shakes his head. "God, you two really are a couple. Beckett, for all his flaws, is the best guy I know. He cares about you— otherwise, why the hell would he have fought with me this whole time over you?"

She wipes a tear away. "Wish you had thought about that when you found out about us."

"Not to be *that* guy, but I did just go through some mildly crazy shit, so maybe cut me a teeny bit of slack?"

She laughs and gently punches his shoulder. "Okay, but that's the last time you get to use that excuse."

He teases, "Jeez, you sound like Mom."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

He hugs her. "I need to get off my feet before I fall and take you with me. You two, fix this. Whatever part I played in your stuff, I'm done playing it. I love and support you two, no matter how weird this might be for me. My brother is dating my sister," he shudders, "but I'll get over it."

I laugh. “You’re such an asshole.”

“Yeah, I love you too, man.” He grins, then hobbles to his wheelchair.

Sophie smiles cautiously at me, and I take her in my arms again to dance. She asks, “So, how mad are you at me?”

“Zero percent.”

“How?”

“Why would I be? I’m the one who screwed up.”

But she shakes her head. “I should have—”

I kiss her, and she lets me, which gives me relief on par with seeing Cole walking again. “We should have. Whatever you’re about to say, we should have done it. This isn’t me or you. This is us. If you still want that.”

She smiles up at me, and that face is my entire world. “Yes, I do.”

“I love you, Sophie.”

“I love you, too, Beckett.” We kiss, and my fractured heart comes back together like magic.

“You’re a really good doctor. Do you heal all your patients by kissing them? Because I will take issue with that.”

She giggles. “What?”

“You fixed me with a kiss.”

She smiles bashfully, and we dance the night away.

Chapter Thirty-Seven-Beckett

WAKING up in my childhood bedroom with Sophie next to me is the absolute best way to wake up. I spooned her all night, just happy to have her in my arms again. She must have washed with her vanilla shampoo yesterday, because I woke up craving sugar cookies. And donuts. And scones.

Yesterday's stress is catching up to me and my stomach snarls to tell me about it.

She giggles, still half-asleep. "Good morning, Beckett's stomach."

I kiss the back of her neck and bury myself in her hair. "Good morning, Sophie's hair."

She laughs and rolls onto her back to look at me. "Hi."

"Hi, there."

"Hungry?"

"Oh yeah. Couldn't eat yesterday."

She blinks at me. "You were that happy for Cormac?"

“No. I was so stressed out that I couldn’t eat. Which has never happened in the history of me.”

“Aw, how come?”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Might have had something to do with the obtuse woman in my bed.”

“Really?”

“When you left the night before, I was convinced you were done with us, Soph. I couldn’t eat all day long, thinking about it.”

“My god. Well, then we should get you fed, sir. You missed like, seven meals.”

I laugh and kiss her. “Smart ass.”

“It runs in the family. Speaking of family, is yours going to be weird about us staying the night together in here? Did we break some rule or—”

“No. It’ll be fine. There’s going to be a pajama brunch to see Cormac and Lily off for their honeymoon, so you can borrow some of mine. Don’t worry — it’s not on the terrace. The happy couple decided it was too cold for that, with everyone in pajamas.”

“Your clothes will swallow me whole.”

I shrug. “You’ll be extra cute.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes, but when she tries on one of my flannel pajama tops, it’s a tent on her. “Maybe if I belt it—”

“You’re adorable.”

“You’re delusional.”

I grin and nod. We dress, and as we walk down the stairs to the dining room, Beau and Elsie taunt, “Wooo!” like teenagers.

Sophie laughs. “Oh, because you just got here, Elsie? Those pajamas look just as borrowed.”

She laughs, too. Beau's clothes drape unflatteringly on her, as well. "Yes, well, we scandalous women have to keep these men in line, don't we?" She throws her arm around Sophie and the girls walk ahead of us to the dining room.

Beau quietly says, "I'd call myself a lucky son of a bitch, except I respect our mother far too much to call her that."

I chuckle. "Same here."

"But we *are* lucky. Don't ever forget that luck can run out, and that's when work kicks in."

I stop in my tracks. "What makes you say that?"

"Cormac mentioned you and Sophie had hit the skids, and he was worried about you two."

"We had a hell of a fight. Or argument. I don't really know how to gauge these things yet. But I thought we might not be together after all was said and done. It was rough. But we got through it, and we might head down the aisle after you and Elsie. If I have anything to say about it, we will be."

He smiles. "I am so happy for you, Beckett. I hope you get everything you want."

"Thanks. Same to you. Elsie is a catch and a half."

"Believe me, I know."

We join the family in the dining room, and one hell of a spread sits, buffet-style, on the table. No longer sitting in designated couplings, Sophie and Elsie have piled next to Cormac, and his kids run around the dining room with their toys, while Lily attempts to get them to eat. Mom and Dad haven't made it downstairs yet, but they usually sleep in after hosting parties. It's a free-for-all—the joyful chaos of a family who enjoys each other. Brunch is almost always like that for us, and I'm glad Cormac and Lily get to be sent off with happy memories of our— *what the fuck?*

The same beat-up truck as the last time I saw him. Has to be...I squint out the window and smack Cormac's shoulder, then point. "Did you know he was

coming?”

“Not at all. I’ll be damned.”

Sophie asks, “Who is it?”

“Mom will be pleased,” Beau says.

Lily asks, “Pleased about what?”

The front door opens and a second later, our baby brother pokes his head into the dining room. He’s grinning at Cormac. “Hey, man!”

“Hey,” Cormac says as he stands to hug Everett. “Glad you could make it.”

He turns to Sophie, still grinning. “You must be Lily. So sorry you’re shackled to that guy—”

She laughs. “Um, well, no. I’m—”

“I’m Lily,” the bride says as she leaves the kids. “And I’m not sorry to be shackled to him just yet, stranger.”

Cormac smirks. “This is Everett, the youngest of the brothers.”

“Oh, you mean the guy who didn’t bother to come to our wedding?” she asks, smirking, too.

He gives a sheepish smile. “Sorry for that. Wildfires wait for no one, but I came as soon as I could.”

“Wildfires?” Elsie asks.

“I’m a firefighter on a hotshot crew—we specialize in forest fires. It’s interagency, so we go wherever we’re called to. Unfortunately, that means I miss a lot of important events. My apologies, Lily.”

She smiles. “I was teasing. Don’t worry. Being shackled to that guy means you have a long time to get to know me.”

He chuckles. “Looking forward to it.”

“I thought people who did those jobs were called smokejumpers,” Sophie says.

“Sure,” he says with a shrug. “But some people don’t know the term, so I usually go with firefighter. And since you’re not Cormac’s wife, you’re...”

I smile. “My girlfriend.”

His eyebrows leap. “Oh.”

“Don’t look so surprised.”

“I’m not, it’s just that... if I remember right, the last time we talked about it was at Cormac’s bachelor party. You said that if you ever had a girlfriend, we were supposed to throw you into the ocean, so you could clear your head and break up with her, because you were never, ever going to be tied down like that.”

“That’s right,” Beau says, mischief on his face. “I believe we owe you a dip in the ocean, Beckett.”

“Like hell you do. Get that look off both your faces right now. I was drunk, so it doesn’t count.”

“If only everything we did drunk that weekend didn’t count,” Everett teases. “But I still have the tattoo you made me get.”

“You made your brother get a tattoo?” Sophie asks.

“I didn’t make him. I just encouraged him.”

“Liar!” Everett barks, laughing. “You said you three were going to get them, too!”

She gasps. “That’s so mean! What’s the tattoo?”

He pulls up his sleeve to show her the anchor on his shoulder, then drops the sleeve. “I’d thought they were all in on the trick, so I had to get them back, and I did.”

“How?”

“I borrowed a monkey and—”

“What?” The girls all shout.

“And liberated a football helmet for him to wear— can’t very well have him going around naked, right? Anyway, after that, I carried the monkey with me and convinced a tour group their hotel room was on the tour, when I knew the guys were super hungover. Of course, the tour group was a group of high school drum line, so I had them play *When the Saints Go Marching In*, as we paraded around their half-dead bodies.”

They laugh as bits of that morning come rushing back. “Where did you get the monkey, Everett? I’ve always wondered.”

“If I tell you, then you’re culpable, and I’m not sure the statute of limitations for monkey theft is up. All I’ll say is every big city has a zoo and shockingly lax security. Or well, security that’s easy to bribe anyway.”

Sophie teases me, “And here I thought I was dating the silly brother.”

“Speaking of silly,” Cormac begins. “I kind of think you need that dunk in the ocean.”

“Nope. It’s freezing out there, and it is warm in here, and Sophie would never allow such a thing. Right, Sophie?”

She bites her bottom lip, and being my only hope, I really wish I didn’t see her devious smile right now. “Sounds to me like you might need it. After all, if having a girlfriend is some horrible thing, you should be sure you want me around.”

“Get his legs!” Everett says as he grabs my shoulders.

Beau and Cormac each take a leg, and I’m off the floor in a flash. “Okay, guys, you’ve had your fun—”

“Someone get the back door!” Everett says, while they carry me out.

Sophie races past us, opening the door. “Sorry, honey, but this is for the good of our relationship.”

“You are so going to pay for this!”

She giggles and waves. “I hope so.”

On the way to the beach, I’m freezing and begging, “This was funny in the

house, but now, it's just cold. Come on, guys!"

"A promise is a promise," Cormac says.

"And I have the tattoo to prove it," Everett teases.

"Faster, gents, he's not getting lighter," Beau declares.

The sea spray shoots up their legs as they walk into the ocean, and Everett counts, "One, two, three!" and they drop me in. It's colder than I thought it would be, and when I come up, I yank them all in, too. Everett's too fast, though, and he's on shore by the time they're on their feet.

"We're not letting him stay dry, right, guys?"

A sopping wet Beau is torn between being pissed at me and including Everett. But Cormac is already halfway to him. Everett tries to escape, but Sophie blocks him, as the others join us on the beach. "Where are you going, Everett?"

"Uh, back to the house—"

"Nope," Cormac says as he grabs his shoulders. Beau and I grab his legs and we hoist him into the ocean, too. Once the four of us are drenched, the kids want to go in. For them, Cormac says, "Sure. Go ahead."

Lily's eyes bulge, but he smiles as he watches them. The moment their tiny feet hit the water, they run back.

"Okay, everyone back to the house to warm up," Elsie says.

As the rest of my family shivers their way back inside, I hold my arms out to hug Sophie. She squeals, "No!" But she lets me hug her anyway, getting her soaked, too. "Oh my god!"

I kiss her hard with frozen lips. "Thanks for that."

"Still don't want a girlfriend?"

Not now. Now, I want a wife. "I think you changed my mind about all that."

"Even now?"

“Especially now. I love you, Sophie.”

“I love you, too. Even though you froze me.”

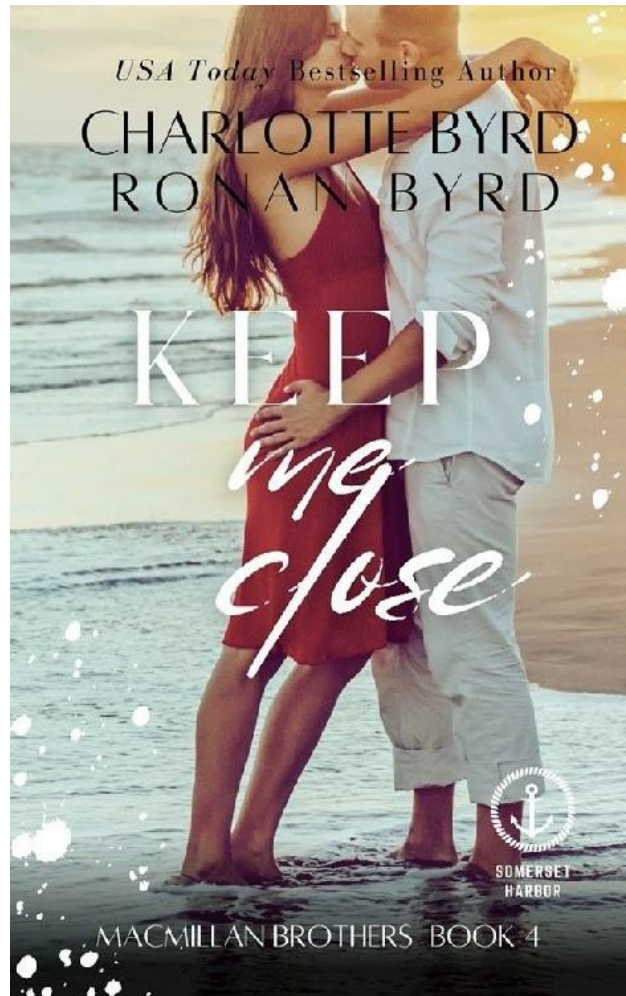
I pick her up and carry her back into the house. “I promise to keep you warm tonight in my house.”

She grins. “I’d like that.”

-

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ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

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