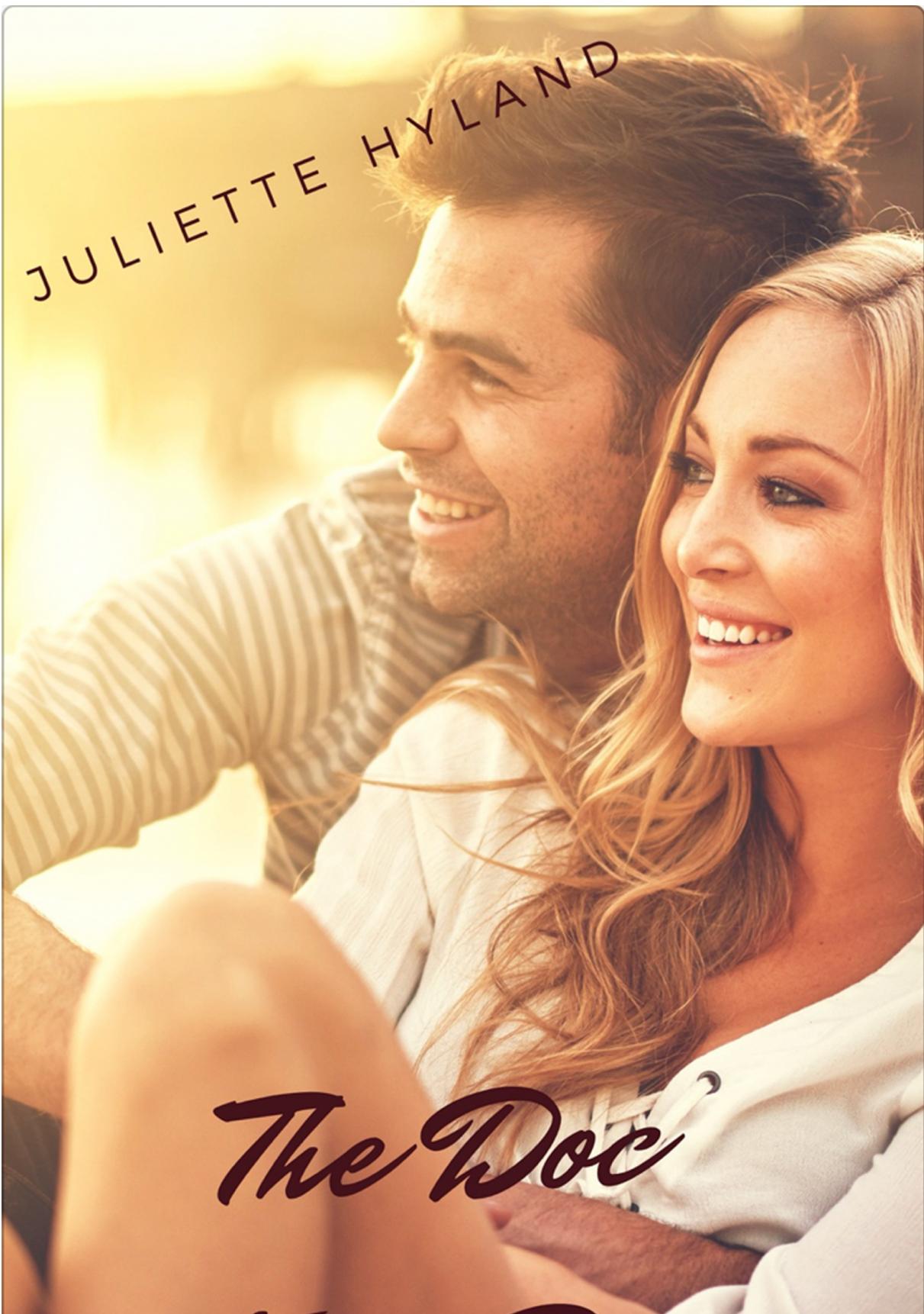


JULIETTE HYLAND

*The Doc*

*Next Door*



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# THE DOC NEXT DOOR

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## CONTENTS

[The Doc Next Door](#)

[About the Author](#)

## THE DOC NEXT DOOR

*D*r. Sadie Evans stared at the red light and barely controlled the frustrated need to push the gas pedal to the floor as soon as the light turned green. She was already running late for dinner; getting pulled over would only slow her up further.

And getting pulled over was far from the worst way to be delayed.

During her twelve-hour shift in the emergency room at Mercy General, she'd treated four crash victims. One was still fighting for her life when Sadie transitioned her cases to the next shift.

Pulling on the end of her long ponytail, Sadie sighed. Some days she wished she'd gone into family practice or something where she saw less tragedy. But those specialties had their bad days, too.

At least tonight she was having dinner with the Strigen family, and the monthly dinner was at her best friend, Jack's house. A mere sixty feet from her own front door. Something that they'd counted out when the "for rent" sign appeared last year.

The two-bedroom home advertisement had read “cute,” which translated to tiny. But it was adorable, and the landlady had let Sadie make it her own. Each upgrade coming off her monthly rent. It might not be the fancy house on a hill most expected a doctor to have, but it was hers.

*Mostly.*

Sadie and her mother had moved from one apartment to another throughout her childhood. Usually, one step ahead of the eviction notice. To say her mother paid little attention to her daughter was an understatement. She’d heard more than once that her father was a “random fling” that had left her mother with an eighteen-year contract.

When she was thirteen, her mom had moved places while Sadie was in school and forgotten to mention the change of address to the teachers or her daughter. If Jack hadn’t convinced his aunt to take Sadie in, she’d have ended up in the system. Her best friend had saved her.

Her phone rang, and her stomach floated a bit as Jack’s ringtone echoed in the car.

Hitting the speaker phone paired on her cell, she smiled as some of the day’s stress evaporated. “I know I am running late.” Better to get the words out before Jack asked. “But I am almost home. Then I need fifteen minutes to shower, and I will be there. Promise.”

“I’m holding you to that, Sadie. If you’re this late, it means you’ve had a long, and I suspect, hard day.”

“Jack.” She sighed out his name. “You know me too well.” After three decades of friendship, there was little they didn’t know about each other. They’d met on their first day

in kindergarten and argued over who got the yellow crayon, then drew a picture together. It was a silly story, one they each knew by heart. Their friendship origin story.

She might not share their name, but the Strigen family was her family. Which was why the butterflies that had taken root in her stomach over the last year whenever she was near Jack, or thought of him, or heard his ringtone, or dreamed of him, were less than welcome.

It would pass. It would. *It had to*. Though repeating that mantra to herself over the past six months had done little to strip the tingles from her skin whenever she was near him.

“I *do* know you well,” Jack chuckled. “See you in a few.”

His deep laugh punched through the tangle of emotions from her hard day and created a whole new web of feelings. She was not having these thoughts about her best friend. She wasn't!

Jack was more than her best friend, though. He was part of her. And if she acted on the emotions pooling through her, and it didn't work out...

The simple idea caused her fingers to tighten on the steering wheel and her heart took off. She'd thought she'd found forever once, only to have it ripped from her by infidelity.

Jack was the most faithful person she knew. But many relationships—most relationships—ended. And if that happened. Well, it wouldn't be like a regular heartbreak. She'd lose so much more than a boyfriend. And losing Jack and his family was not an option.

Pulling into the one-car driveway, she grabbed her backpack and dashed to her front door, raising an eye at the lack of cars in front of Jack's place. At least she didn't have to worry about being the only late arrival.

Jack was the oldest of four—and the only brother. He was the family's protector, a role he took seriously. The monthly dinner was a ritual on the first Saturday of every month. And everyone hosted, from his parents to his youngest sister, who usually made pasta and threw some pillows on the floor of her one-bedroom apartment. The meal didn't matter. Though when Amelia, the oldest daughter and sous chef at Cafe Delish, cooked, it was like eating at a four-star Michelin restaurant. Otherwise, it was the company the family sought, and she was grateful to always be included.

The warm water sliding down Sadie's back felt delectable, but she was already late. Even if Jack's family was running behind, too, she wanted to get there. And spending more time with Jack—alone—wouldn't kill her.

Well, it would probably keep her tossing and turning through the night, but she'd deal with those aftereffects later.

Pulling her wet hair into a messy top knot, Sadie smiled as she looked at the clock. Exactly eleven minutes from when she hit her front door to when she was walking over to Jack's. Perfect.

The door opened as she stepped to the stoop. Jeans and a blue t-shirt never looked so good on a man. It shouldn't make her mouth water. But...

“I made it.” She offered a playful curtsy before giving him a soft peck on the cheek. The kiss was too much and not enough all at once. A gesture they’d done thousands of times over the course of their friendship, but since moving next door everything seemed different.

Seeing him every day. Laughing with him, being such an intimate part of his life, left her wanting more. And she worried that risking it could cost her everything.

“Where is everyone?” She moved past him, but his fingers caught her wrist. The heat tore through her as she met his liquid blue eyes. God, he was gorgeous. “Jack?”

“They aren’t coming.” Jack’s voice was barely above a whisper and his neck was stained pink.

Sadie felt her lips tip up and immediately hated the happiness bubble that they’d have the night to themselves. “Is everything okay?”

“We’re about to find out.” Jack squeezed her hand.

Sadie looked at him. Really looked. Jack’s eyes were soft, but the lines in his forehead deepened as he stared at her. Worry coated his features. “Jack. What’s wrong?”

Dipping his head, his lips brushed the side of her cheek and the platonic kiss felt like anything else. “I think it’s time we address the elephant in the room.”

“Elephant?” Sadie pulled her hands from his and stepped into the living room. Dozens of candles lit the way to the kitchen. The small dining room table had two more candles and a bottle of wine sitting in the middle. “Jack?”

Her heart screamed, urging her to jump into his arms. But this was a huge step. A giant leap. Jack had always

been her safe place to land when those leaps failed. If this leap failed, he wouldn't be there to catch her anymore.

"Sadie. I..."

Before he could say anymore, she held up her hand. "Don't." It was the wrong word. She knew it as soon as it escaped her lips.

His face shifted and the lines in his forehead deepened further.

She'd hurt him. That was the last thing she wanted. She needed Jack—always. That was why they couldn't risk this. "Jack, you're my best friend."

Putting his hands in his pockets, Jack rocked back on his heels. "Friend. Never thought I'd hate a word so much."

"Jack." His name floated from her lips, but she couldn't think of any more words.

"Sadie," he closed his eyes and shook his head before looking at her. "We could be so good together."

"Maybe. But I thought the same thing with Kenny, and you thought so with Michelle." They'd each gotten engaged right after college. Each thought they'd found their other halves. And then nursed their heartbreaks together when Kenny and Michelle declared their love for each other.

"God, Sadie." He pushed his hand through his hair. "That was ten years ago, and we are not them."

"I can't lose you." The truth slipped between them. "If we tried this, and it failed."

"And if it doesn't fail?"

Then it would be perfect. Sadie kept that thought to herself as she looked at Jack. Her heart nearly

overwhelmed her brain's protective barriers, but fear trickled down her spine.

"I don't want anything to change." Even though it felt like everything already had. But they could put it back together. Go back to how they'd been.

*How had they been?*

The thought wormed its way through Sadie's head. They'd been able to complete each other sentences since high school. They'd been their emergency contacts for years. They'd been Jack and Sadie, but never Jack *and* Sadie. She'd never been jealous of his girlfriends.

Though he hadn't dated anyone seriously since she moved in next door. How would she feel if, when, he started dating? She would not wander down that path.

Tears threatened as she wrapped her arms around herself. "Do you want me to leave?" She braced herself for the answer.

"No." Jack stepped next to her and opened his arms.

She stepped into them and relaxed a little. "What did you cook?"

"Baked chicken, salad and veggies. Something easy to rewarm if you were running late." He laid his head against hers, then stepped back. "Let's open the wine and eat." He blew out a few candles on his way and gestured to the rest. "Want to extinguish the fire hazard while I warm everything up. Wouldn't want to burn the place down."

He let out a soft chuckle, but it sounded off.

Sadie nodded, though with his back turned towards her, she knew he hadn't seen it. She didn't want anything to change.

But it had—long before tonight. So what did she do now?



The alarm on his phone echoed in his room, but he'd been awake for hours. Jack turned the buzzer off, then went back to staring at his ceiling. God, he wanted to kick himself. Wanted to scream. Wanted to cry. Wanted so many things. Mostly he wished he was waking next to Sadie.

Or that he'd kept his feelings to himself.

Last night had been an unmitigated disaster. When Sadie had asked if he wanted her to leave, he'd almost said yes. Almost begged her to vacate the romantic scene so he could try to put back the shattered pieces of his soul.

But he hadn't wanted her to go. Not really. And that knowledge was seared into his brain. Despite the years of pining for the literal girl next door, he'd known if he asked her to leave there'd be no coming back.

Sadie wanted things to stay the same.

And *he* wanted Sadie happy. Throwing an arm over his face, Jack tried to figure out his next move. He'd been in love with his best friend for years. Since just after their failed engagements, maybe before. That was what Michelle had accused him of when he'd found her and Kenny in bed together. She'd said she wanted someone to look at her the way he looked at Sadie.

He'd said it was just because they'd known each other so long. But as he helped Sadie get over Kenny's infidelity, and his quick marriage to her best friend's ex-fiancé, he'd

had to admit that the depth of his disappointment wasn't nearly as deep as Sadie's.

But it had taken him years to work up the courage to lay it out. And it had been an epic failure. He'd kept his feelings buried for so long. Looking, hoping for any sign that the shift that had happened for him all those years ago had finally happened to Sadie.

And he thought it had. Had he really misread all those looks? The accidental touches?

"You going to come out of that room?" Amelia's voice carried through the door.

Groaning, Jack rolled off the bed. He was not in the mood to deal with any of his sisters, but Amelia was the closest to him in age and the most stubborn. "What if I'd had company, Amelia?"

That she was here so early meant that she'd expected last night to go exactly as it had. That stung.

"But you don't have company. So, I assume that surprising your best friend of thirty years with the fact that you're in love with her on a night when she's expecting to hang with the family and relax went as poorly as I told Vanessa it would?"

"A little heads up would have been nice, if you were so sure." Jack narrowed his eyes at his sister but relented as she held up an everything bagel piled with cream cheese.

"You wouldn't have listened," she shrugged. "You had the entire plan laid out, trick her and try to overwhelm her with candles and," she opened the fridge, "baked chicken. Baked chicken!" Amelia crossed her arms as she turned on him.

“Most of the family didn’t go to culinary school.” Jack took a bite of the bagel before trudging to the door of the fridge and pushing it closed. He was not in the mood for a lecture on food quality this morning. “I did not trick her.”

The words slipped out, and Jack hated his sister’s raised eyebrow. Sadie had spent her teenage years with his Aunt Sarah. But before that she’d moved at least once a year, usually every few months with no warning from her mother. She did not appreciate tricks...or surprises.

*God. His sister was right. And she knew it.*

“So did you come here to gloat?” Jack asked as his sister jumped and sat on the edge of his counter. A habit his parents had never broken.

“Of course not.”

Amelia frowned, and for a second, he felt bad asking. But he was supposed to be the one wallowing. “So why are you here?”

“To check on you. And to tell you that you have two choices.”

It was too early for this conversation, and he spun to fix a cup of coffee. “Only two?” Honestly, that was more than he’d come up with this morning.

His sister grabbed two travel mugs out of the cabinet and slid them across the counter. “Sadie likes things simple and secure.”

“I know.” He hadn’t meant the words to come out like a growl, but he knew his best friend better than anyone. Though now that he was looking at it rationally, last night’s surprise was overwhelming and a misstep that he should have expected. But he’d had so much hope.

And now he had a broken heart.

“One. Convince her that nothing is really changing. And if it does, then you won’t leave her life. That we won’t leave her.”

Except everything would be changing. And could he honestly make that promise? If they took this step, could he promise not to let anything come before their friendship? He wanted to say yes, but a bead of uncertainty pulsed through him. But he kept those thoughts to himself.

“And the other option?” He felt his body relax a little as the coffee dripped into the pot.

“Option two is to move.”

“What?” Jack spun. That was not an option. He loved his house. Loved being close to Sadie. He bit his lip as that truth settled within him. Leaving simply wasn’t an option.

“It’s not the choice I want either.” Amelia tapped his shoulder before she hopped down. “But if you stay here, you’ll never live your life. And that is not the life I want for you, big brother.”

He hated the touch of pity in her eyes. But leaving wasn’t the answer.

She grabbed her keys, and he held up the mug of coffee, “Here’s your coffee...to go. Apparently.”

He offered her the mug, and she shook her head. “That wasn’t for me. It’s Sunday and Sadie’s day off. So you bring her bagels and coffee.” She held up a bag that he hadn’t seen and nodded to the clock. “You want to prove you’ll be there for her no matter what?”

Jack nodded.

“Then it starts now.”

She was right.

Raising his mug to his lips, he took a deep sip then bowed his head. "You're a good sister."

"I'm the best. Be sure to let Livia and Vanessa know!" She winked before taking her leave.

Jack looked at the coffee mugs and bagels, then glanced at the clock. If this was a regular Sunday, then he'd be at her place in twenty minutes, with coffee, bagels and his hiking gear. They had a standing date to head to Silver Springs State Park, if the weather permitted. The prettiest place in all of Oregon, in Jack's opinion.

They knew each of the trails by heart, but there was never a boring moment in the park. Sadie craved security, the trust that she controlled and safe life she'd carefully built around herself was secure. He just needed to prove to her that taking a chance on them wasn't a risk.

They'd be perfect together. That was the one other thing he knew deep in his soul.



Sadie pulled her hair into a ponytail and barely bit back the sob in her throat. She'd gotten up and readied for her regular hiking day with Jack. But she doubted he was coming.

He'd wanted to ask her to leave last night. She'd seen it hovering in his eyes and her heart had nearly shattered. She needed Jack. *Always*.

They'd made it through dinner, but the awkwardness had coated everything. In the end, most of the chicken

went uneaten, and she'd been home and in bed before ten. A new record.

Sleep hadn't eluded her, but her dreams had tormented her. Jack had filled each one. And in each she'd danced into his arms, kissed him, and told him she loved him too.

Her fingers danced along her lips. *How did Jack kiss?* That was a question her body begged for an answer to, and her subconscious had delivered. But the deep emotions and wandering feelings evaporated in the morning light. And they were not satisfying.

"You know he isn't coming." Sadie crossed her arms as she looked in the mirror. "And now you're talking to yourself."

She threw her hands in the air and marched to the kitchen. The doorbell rang once, then twice more. It had been their silly signal since they were in grade school when Jack decided they needed a secret code. She still remembered his mother remarking it was fun, but maybe a code that didn't disrupt everyone in the house. But he'd never stopped.

"Jack." Tears threatened, but she pushed them away as she opened the door.

He held up two mugs of coffee, and a bag of bagels, and his backpack was on. Just like this was a regular Sunday. Like any day would be normal now.

"Sustenance for our hike." He smiled, and it was nearly normal.

But she could see the cost the action brought. Reaching for the coffee, her breath caught as her fingers brushed his.

The electricity that had been there for months...maybe longer if she was honest with herself, raced through her.

Gripping the travel mug with both hands, she urged the warmth into her body, despite the heat of the morning. He was really here. "I thought maybe you might want to cancel."

"Nope." Jack winked as he moved past her. "We belong in each other's lives, Sadie. I've known that since we were five sitting in the show and tell circle at school. If what you want is to remain best friends, then that's where we stand."

"You mean that?" Her heart broke as her brain rejoiced. Part of her, a bigger part than she realized, had wanted him to argue with her. Wanted him to fight her decision. That wasn't fair; she knew that. But it didn't change the cravings in her soul.

"I do." Jack tilted his head, "But, I love you, Sadie. That hasn't changed in years, and I don't see it changing. Last night I surprised you. That was a mistake. I know you like control."

"Stability." Sadie bit her lip as she interrupted. Control was such a heavy word. It was true, she wanted to control as much as possible. But that was because she'd grown up with no stability, no control over where she laid her head until her teens. And even then, she'd feared that her mother might regain custody, and also hoped she would sometimes. It was a tough place for a kid.

And now she watched chaos occur on every shift in the ER. She finally had stability. Was it so wrong to just want to bask in the glory of that and not risk rocking any boats?

“Stability, then.” Jack set his coffee mug on the counter and reached for her hands. “But no matter what happens between us. Whether or not we take this leap, I will always be here for you. You’re family. And that isn’t something we get to walk away from, no matter what happens.”

Hope poured through his eyes as he looked at her. His lips were so close. It would be so easy to lift her chin. So easy to push past the last bead of worry building in her. So easy to answer the question of how Jack kissed.

But rather than give into that desire, she squeezed his hand and stepped back. “Which trail are we taking today?”

*Coward!*

Jack’s look held more than a hint of hope. How long would he wait for her to be ready to leap? What if she never was? That wouldn’t be fair, either. Her soul rushed through so many emotions. She couldn’t process all of them. Not yet.

“How about one of the more off the beaten path tracks? We’ve seen the waterfall twice this month and by the time we get out to the trailhead, it will be packed.”

She grabbed her hiking bag and picked up the coffee mug. “Off the beaten path it is. Do you have bear mace?”

“I do.” Jack confirmed as he picked up his supplies too.

The Silver Lake State Park advertised that bears and cougars roamed the park, but every year a few tourists, and even some locals, got complacent. Or worse, saw the animal in the distance and rather than exit the area swiftly tried to capture the experience with a selfie.

It never ended well.



The fresh air felt good as it raced through Sadie's lungs, but it did nothing to calm the butterflies racing through her stomach. This hike had been uneventful. No declarations of love, no uncomfortable conversations. Jack was just being Jack.

Her Jack.

For the hundredth time in the last hour, she asked herself why she couldn't just tell him she felt the same way. Why was she such a coward?

He was her constant. The one thing she could cling to in a world where nothing else had stayed in place. When her mother left her places, Jack had swooped in to find a safe place for her to live. When Kenny had fallen into bed with Michelle, Jack had sat by her as she wrote out thank you notes for the wedding gifts she was returning.

And when they'd gotten married on her and Kenny's wedding date, Jack had purchased two tickets to The Innocent Pilgrim's concert in Savannah and suggested a road trip, so there was no chance she'd see any of the guests that should have been arriving for her nuptials.

Everything she thought was certain in this life had fallen apart. Except her friendship with Jack.

"Want to go up Stone Ridge or down to Fallen Creek? We've got about an hour before we need to turn back. Don't want to get caught out here in the dark." Jack smiled as he pulled out their water bottles, handed hers over, then took a swig of his. His skin glistened in the sun, and her knees and resolve weakened a bit more.

“Let’s head up Stone Ridge. It’s less popular on days like today.” She took a drink of water, grateful for the coolness slipping down her heated body. There weren’t a ton of people on the trails they’d chosen, but Stone Ridge was the most difficult and least visited trail head.

“Looking for some alone time with me, huh,” Jack winked before starting up the hiking path.

“I always want to spend time with you, buddy.” He looked over his shoulder and she saw the flash of hope and embarrassment hovering in his eyes. It was a skit piece she’d helped him practice for his senior year theater project. The play was terrible, but they’d had a blast rehearsing and laughing together.

Over the years, they’d delivered the simple lines thousands of times. Now she wondered how many times he had made that statement hoping she might respond differently. With words not drawn from a play.

“Jack.” Her voice was soft, but it carried on the quiet trail.

“Yeah?” He answered but didn’t turn around.

Emotions she still wasn’t sure she was ready to speak into the universe clogged her throat. “I...I...”

“You don’t have to say anything, Sadie. We’re just enjoying the hike.”

How could she not love the man walking on the trail just a little before her? He was her person.

She opened her mouth to say...something. But before any words made their way forward, a scream rippled up the trail, followed by a roar.

Jack reached his arm around his backpack and grabbed the bear mace. "Stay here."

"I can't. Someone is hurt." Probably gravely. But she left that thought unstated as they carefully made their way up the embankment to their left.

As much as she wanted to run to the patient, the sound had come from off the path. And it was too dangerous to hurry. There was already one injured party on the ridge, there couldn't be more.

Two large rocks caught her eye, and she grabbed them. Banging them together, she and Jack walked towards the area where the cry had come from.

"Hello?" Jack's voice carried on the wind.

"Help." The high-pitched voice echoed from a few hundred paces in front of them. "Please, help!"

A middle-aged woman was lying on the ground, and Sadie could tell from the position of her left leg that it was broken in at least two places. A compound fracture, on an out of the way trail several thousand yards from the actual trail. Evacuation would take at least four hours.

Her eyes wandered to the sun and her stomach twisted. It would be nearly dark by the time the rangers could reach them and then a night rescue. But there wasn't time to think of the risks now.

Pulling her backpack off her shoulders, she grabbed the small med kit and bent next to the injured woman. "I'm Dr. Sadie Evans, and this is Jack. What's your name?"

"Ursula Stevens." She shifted, cringed, and her head lolled to the side.

“Ursula, I need you to stay still. I don’t want you going into shock, if we can help it.” Sadie cradled her head and looked at Jack. “Find a long stick, sturdy. I need to brace the wound after I get the bone realigned.”

“You’re going to set it out here?” Jack asked as he dropped his pack next to hers.

“No. I can’t set a compound fracture in the wild but realigning the bone will help prevent nerve damage.” She reached for the unused water bottle in her pack and sterilized her hands before meeting Ursula’s gaze. “I need to sterilize the wound. I wish I could tell you this won’t hurt...”

“But it’s going too.” Ursula sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Rather than offer a platitude, Sadie moved quickly to sterilize the area. “Take another deep breath,” she instructed before gently pulling her left leg straight.

Ursula let out a scream, but Sadie didn’t judge her. If she was in the ER, she’d administer heavy pain medication before straightening, but avoiding nerve damage was the primary goal. And it couldn’t wait hours.

Jack raced back up towards them carrying a long stick. “Sadie, does this work?”

Sadie took the stick from his hands and laid it next to Ursula’s leg. “This is nearly perfect.”

He waited for a moment, then squatted next to her. “I’ve got to go back down the trail.” He handed her the bear mace and sucked in a deep breath. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Jack,” Sadie stood and grabbed his hand. “Any chance you have an extra can of bear mace for yourself?” He’d be on the trail on his own for at least an hour, unless he got lucky and ran into another hiker. She glanced at the hills as a shiver ran down her back.

“No. And if I did, I’d leave it here.” He kissed the top of her head and squeezed her hand. “Stay safe. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Take my rocks at least.” She squeezed his hand again before dropping it, hating the emptiness that echoed through her with the loss of connection. Bending, she grabbed the rocks and put them in his hands. “Not great against cougars and bears, but better than nothing.”

“Thanks.” He held them up then turned.

Sadie wanted to watch until he was out of sight, but Ursula needed her attention. Turning, she smiled as she sat next to her patient and lifted her wrist. “Your pulse is stable. That is a good sign.”

A very good sign. Her med kit was more than the average hiker carried, and she had eight years of emergency medicine in her tool kit, but there were limits to what she could accomplish out here. A fact she was diligently trying to avoid thinking about.

“I was supposed to come here on my honeymoon, three years ago.” Ursula let out a soft whimper.

Sadie pulled off her light coat and folded it before gently placing it under the woman’s head. There wasn’t much she could do to comfort her, but she’d do her best.

“It sounds like you didn’t make it then,” Sadie stated. She didn’t want to press Ursula for details on a difficult

time, but keeping her talking would help them pass the hours and let her track subtle changes that she might not notice if they sat in silence.

Ursula let out a bitter chuckle. "I didn't make it down the aisle."

"I didn't either. Though it was close to ten years ago. My fiancée 'fell' into bed with another." She placed air quotes around the word fell and enjoyed the small grin that flitted along Ursula's face. So many people faced broken engagements, but people rarely talked about it, rarely acknowledged its frequency. She might not always discuss the exact reasons for her and Kenny's failure to reach the altar, but she wouldn't act as though it hadn't happened.

Rotating her head, Ursula looked at her, and her features shifted to real pain. Not air quotes. Not jokes. While Sadie knew her leg hurt, she also suspected this pain went far deeper. Picking up her hand, Sadie held it and offered her a small smile.

"My ex and I set three wedding dates." She pursed her lips and started to move her head back and forth before Sadie put a hand on her head.

"You need to stay as still as possible."

"Three wedding dates set and broken." The words poured out of the woman, and Sadie didn't know what to say. She'd heard many personal thoughts and confessions in the ER. People in pain and scared often rattled off things they might not say otherwise.

"That must have been hard." She kept her tone light. Three dates set and reset was more than she'd dealt with.

Once she'd found out about Kenny's infidelity, she'd severed the connection—completely.

"It was," Ursula swallowed. "For my fiancée." She let out a sob that racked her body and had to have hurt her leg, but the tears forming in her eyes didn't fall. "I was so worried that the marriage might end. That we might break up or get divorced. My father married seven times before I turned eighteen, my mom was wife number three and is on her third marriage too. Though it seems to have stuck for her this time at least."

"I created a self-fulfilling prophecy by letting worry for the future rob me of happiness in the present."

Sadie sucked in a breath but said nothing. Couldn't say anything. The emotions turning through her made her ache. She instinctively looked over the ridge where Jack had disappeared, knowing it would be hours before he reemerged.

"Oliver tired of waiting. I can't really blame him. He got married this weekend. So I came out here, saw a cougar on the trail, freaked out, ran, and broke my leg so bad, I'm now laying on the ground pouring out my soul to a stranger." She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked at Sadie. "Not that I'm not grateful you're here."

"I wish we weren't sitting here waiting for rescue too," Sadie offered. "Though, I'm glad I was on the ridge today. Glad Jack still wanted to come after..." She let the words fall away as her eyes tracked to the ridge again.

*Jack.*

She refocused on Ursula. "I'm sorry you feel lost." The words were meant for herself as much as they were for the

woman on the ground before her. They were both lost, but Sadie didn't have to be. Not anymore. Her guiding star was making his way down the trail, or maybe had even found a ranger by now. "But I hope you find your path. On both feet."

"Me too." Then she looked to the sky. "Any idea how long we'll be here."

"No." Sadie shifted a little on the hard ground before looking around them and moving the bear mace so it was just a little closer. "This area could manage a helicopter rescue. Jack should be able to describe our location well enough. The man's an excellent computer programmer with an eye for detail that many miss. So hopefully only a few hours. But I don't know if the helicopter pilots will fly up here in the dark. Not so sure about the qualifications for it."

She knew they were different because pilots landing at the hospital had mentioned it. But she didn't know for sure if they could fly into the state park at night with little light to guide the way. They'd know in a few hours, she supposed.

"How long have you and Jack been together?" The question was quiet, but it cut through the air.

"We aren't." The words hurt. But she said them, accepting the pain they brought.

Ursula raised an eyebrow. "He loves you. Even a stranger having one of the worst days of her life can see that."

"He does." Sadie confirmed as she wrapped her arms around herself. "And I love him. But..." The words died

away as the air cooled around them. There were dozens of reasons to add behind that but, but Sadie didn't want to give voice to any of them.

"Don't worry about the future at the expense of your happiness."

Sadie picked up Ursula's hand and patted it. "I won't." A promise made to a stranger didn't have to mean much. But this was a promise Sadie planned to keep. As soon as she saw Jack. No putting off happiness out of fear.



Jack paced the rangers' office and stared at the vacant helipad. He'd given the directions and counted his paces from where they'd exited the trail head to where Sadie and Ursula were located. His notes had impressed the rangers. But his heart had constricted when they told him he didn't need to be in the helicopter.

That it would be best, since he'd given such good directions, if he stayed here. And with each passing moment, he was growing more and more worried.

The helicopter had taken off nearly an hour ago. It had radioed back that they'd located Sadie and Ursula about 20 minutes ago, but there'd been silence since then. The ambulance was parked and ready to transport Ursula to Mercy General. Where he was sure Sadie's colleagues would patch her up nicely.

But he just wanted to see Sadie. To make sure she was safe. Rationally, he knew the odds of an animal attack were

small. They'd be making enough noise to keep most beasts away. But every once in a while...

He gripped his sides as he strained his ears. The whirl of wings echoed in the distance. Or at least he thought they did.

The radio crackled to life, and the ranger at the desk answered.

"In bound in ten. Have the EMT's ready to load the patient." Then the radio went silent.

The ranger patted his shoulder as he moved passed Jack to alert the EMTs that their patient was nearly here.

Jack understood radio communications needed to be limited. This wasn't the time for long drawn-out conversations. He knew it was a good thing that they did not mention Sadie. It meant that she was fine. That she didn't need medical attention. But his heart would hammer in his chest until he saw her step off the helicopter.

The beat of the helicopter wings picked up. A few more minutes. He rocked from side to side. The hardest thing he'd ever had to do was walk away from her on that ridge today. But she was fine.

"I need you to stay in the station until we have the patient loaded."

Jack opened his mouth, but the ranger held up his hand. "I know you're concerned about your girlfriend, but priority has to be the injured woman."

He nodded, understanding. Though he didn't like it. He also didn't correct the ranger. Sadie wasn't his girlfriend, but Jack would not open that can of emotions to a stranger.

For a moment on the hill today, he thought she might say something, thought she wanted too. But that might just be hope and fear pulsing through him.

The helicopter touched down, and his chest loosened as he watched Sadie exit the side and walk beside Ursula on the stretcher. She was talking to the patient and nodding to the EMTs, clearly explaining what had happened. Probably going over the medical treatment she'd been able to offer in the wild.

As they loaded Ursula into the ambulance, Sadie raised a hand, then turned towards the ranger station. Her blonde locks were tangled. There was dirt on her cheeks and knees. But she was the prettiest woman he'd ever seen.

His fingers itched to run along her chin. To prove to himself that she really was here and fine. But he'd meant what he said this morning. Whatever Sadie wanted this relationship to be, it would be.

"Jack!" Her voice echoed through his soul as she pushed the door to the side.

Her body was soft as she stepped into his arms. Jack pulled her close.

"I love you, Jack."

The air evaporated from the room as the words struck his heart.

When she raised her head, his knees nearly buckled. Before he could say anything, Sadie's lips met his, and the world exploded. This was perfection, true happiness. Her lips parted and his mind drifted into blissfulness.

She tasted of sun and hope. *Of Sadie.* He never wanted this moment to end. When she pulled back, her smile

banished the last shards of doubt left from last night.

“I love you too.” The words felt so right as they departed his lips. “I love you so much.”

Sadie grinned before she laid her head against his shoulder. “We should probably let the rangers have their station back.

“Looking for some alone time with me, huh?” Jack let the silly phrase that they’d rehearsed and kept as a catch phrase float between them, but the look in Sadie’s eyes sent a raft of happiness through him.

“Absolutely.” She grinned as she changed the script for the first time since high school. “And a lifetime of time after that.”

He pulled her into another kiss, not caring if the rangers were watching. Jack needed this moment with her. He’d craved it for so long. When they finally parted, he grabbed her hand. “A lifetime is just my starting point, Sadie Evans.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juliette Hyland believes in strong coffee, hot drinks and happily ever afters! She lives in Ohio, USA, with her prince charming, who has patiently listened too many rants regarding characters failing to follow the outline. When not working on fun and flirty happily ever afters, Juliette can be found spending time with her beautiful daughters, giant dogs or sewing uneven stitches with her sewing machine.

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