

## Chapter Thirty-Six

The next day, Maeve got up extra early to make sure she got all the morning chores done around the farm. Despite how early her father needed to wake to head out for a day's fishing, she was always up before him. She wanted him to have a nice breakfast in his belly as he went off to work, then she usually began the morning chores with cleaning the dishes.

Not today.

Today she had extra work.

Near the middle of the morning, she struck out for Doc's. It was a healthy hike to get there, but nothing Maeve wasn't used to. She walked everywhere, mostly due to the Tully's only having the one vehicle, but also partly because she never saw the need to drive places. Sure, the majority of folks' residences were spread out around their little town, but once you got to

Drumdowney proper, everything was stacked together. On those very rare occasions where she'd shopped beyond her carrying capacity, she would go down to the dock, use the trucks extra set of keys and take it. If Ben saw it gone when he got back to shore, he knew why and would just walk himself home, usually with a stop at O'Reilly's first.

Doc was sitting in a chair next to the stranger. He looked up as she entered. "Oh, hello, Maeve. I wasn't expecting you, was I?"

"No. I thought I'd come by and see if you needed any more help with our patient."

"Oh, thank you," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I could use some time away."

"It's not a problem. Why don't you go get some rest, then? You look exhausted."

"I will, right after I make some house calls I postponed." He yawned as he stood and began gathering what he'd need into his bag. "I'll be back in a couple hours. If you need anything, or if anyone shows up needing immediate attention, you have my number."

After Doc left, Maeve sat in the chair he'd vacated. She looked at the man lying there, hooked to a monitor, an IV in his arm, his bandages recently changed so only a small spot of blood stained each. She remembered Doc saying his driver's license claimed his name was Max Calvert. It might not be, but that was all she had to go on right now, so Max Calvert it was.

The surgery was gruesome.

Doc had worked on the left side wound to start in case the bullet had come close to his heart. It hadn't, but that didn't mean it hadn't been difficult to reach. Doc said it had traveled at an odd angle, lodging in some of the muscle tissue under his armpit. He ended up having to make an incision on the man's side to reach the bullet and the tiny fragments around it.

The other wasn't any easier to reach. It had lodged just behind the upper part of the lung. Doc said another few millimeters and it would've punctured the lung, and Max probably would've been dead before her father had reached him.

It was amazing how well Doc had performed seeing that his office wasn't exactly equipped for such a major procedure. She wasn't sure if it was the lacking facilities or simply the usual for such a surgery, but the one real detail she could remember clearly was all the blood. A shiver made its way through Maeve's body. She had seen plenty of blood in her time on the farm, it was the nature of owning animals you raised for food. She had never seen that much come from a human, though, and that's what really got to her about the whole ordeal. Doc almost went through his entire supply of O negative. He not only had to order more from IBTS, but he told her he'd be contacting those among the community, asking for a donation to cover him until the shipment arrived. "There aren't that many of them," he'd said, "but it's more than one might expect in a town this size."

Maeve looked at Max's face for a long time, lingering over its features. Questions circled around in her head. Who is this man? What was he doing on a yacht? Most importantly, was anyone missing him or even looking for him?

She had brought a book to pass the time. All they had in the house was her mother's collection of classic literature. If you asked Maeve how many times she'd read them all, she would have no idea the exact number. For some, though, she knew it was bordering on triple digits. She cracked open the well-worn copy of *Wuthering Heights* to her bookmark and continued from where she'd left off last night before bed.

Then a thought occurred to her.

She flipped back to the beginning and began reading aloud, "'1801—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with.'"

Doc returned in the late afternoon. Maeve hadn't heard him enter the premises, so he stood in the doorway to the exam room, listening to her narration. When she paused at the end of a chapter, he cleared his throat.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, closing the book. Her cheeks flushed the faintest of pink, but still noticeable. "I didn't hear you enter. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize, dear girl. That was lovely, by the way."

The color in her face deepened at the compliment. "Thank you. I just thought it might be nice for him. Nobody likes complete silence, right?"

Doc shook his head. "I know I despise it." He smiled and continued, "I tell you what. Why don't you come 'round every morning? You can be my temporary nurse until he wakes."

"Oh, I don't know..."

"It would be a great deal of help to me, as well as to him. I'll have patients to see every day, and this way I wouldn't have to worry about trying to also keep one eye on him."

Maeve looked at Max lying there, helpless. "If you're sure it's no trouble?"

"None at all. Besides," he said, with that warm smile that could calm the most stubborn patient, "I do enjoy the classics."

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Every morning around nine, Maeve arrived at Doc's to start her shift. He showed her the basics she'd need to know to take care of Max: how to change the IV and colostomy bags, how to read the monitors and what to look out for in their readouts, how to change the dressings on his wounds. Otherwise, all she did was sit and read to him.

Having just the one exam room wasn't a problem for Doc. He would take patients back to his kitchen, instead. By the end of that day Ben brought him ashore, everyone in town knew about the man they called The Stranger, so people were fine with the change of examination venue when he explained why.

After a week had passed, not only had Maeve moved on to *Pride and Prejudice*, but Doc had decided it was safe to move Max. Ben accompanied Maeve to her “work” that day and helped Doc move the patient into the spare bedroom.

One evening, after a mediocre day of fishing, Ben and his crew popped into O’Reilly’s Pub. They took a table near the front corner and Ben offered, “To make up for this shite day, first round’s on me.”

No one was about to object, and Ben made his way up to the bar.

“Four pints, there, Dinny. Make one a lager.”

“Right up, Ben.”

Two seats away at the bar sat Mick Shanahan. He slipped over onto the stool next to where Ben was standing and greeted him, “Ben.”

“Mick.” Ben tolerated Mick, and the feeling was basically mutual. It had been that way their whole lives. There was no real reason to it, it was what it was. Some folks take to others, some don’t.

“Say,” Mick asked, “how’s it with The Stranger, now?”

“He’s doing okay, I guess. Least Doc says so. Hasn’t woken up, yet.”

Mick took a hearty slug from his glass. “So, still no idea who he is, then?”

Ben wanted to come up with something snarky, but he was too tired. “Nope. No clue.”

Dinny set the four beers down in front of Ben right at that moment, mercifully freeing him from the conversation. “There you go, Ben.” Ben paid the man, but as he started to gather the glasses together, Dinny said, “Say, Ben, let me help you carry those.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got ‘em.”

“I insist.” Ben caught the look from Dinny and nodded his assent. Dinny picked up two of the drinks and moved out from behind the bar. Walking across the room, he asked, “Ben, I’m not complaining or anything, but have you a plan yet for the bloke in my freezer?”

“Sorry. No. I want to wait until the fella wakes up, see if he knows who it is. If it’s a friend, he’ll probably want to bury him, or something. If he’s not a friend, then I’ll just take him out on my very next run and let the fish have at him.”

“Okay. Like I said, not complaining. Just, if Health comes by for a surprise inspection, I don’t know if I’ve a good excuse to why I’m storing a dead man, is all.”

They set the beers down in front of Ben’s crew, and the captain patted the barman on the shoulder and assured him, “Soon as I know, you’ll know.”

A couple more weeks went by.

Besides the healing his wounds had done, there was no change in Max’s condition.

Maeve continued to come in and tend to her patient. That was how she’d come to think of him since he was moved into the bedroom. Not as the Doc’s patient, but *hers*.

She finished attaching a new IV bag, then picked up the sponge from its place next to the bowl filled with water she kept on the night table next to him. She dipped it into the cool liquid and dabbed it on his lips. His mouth was always open the slightest little bit, so she also squeezed a small amount from the sponge into the opening. She finished by mopping the sweat from his brow and cheeks. She rung the excess water from the sponge back into the bowl and placed it back on the table.

She sat in her chair and picked up their latest novel. They were partway through *Great Expectations*. “I knew to my sorrow,” Maeve began, “often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be.”

She paused for a breath.

The breath caught in her throat.

A hand had reached out and grasped the book, taking it from her and closing it, laying it gently on his stomach.

Maeve was frozen in shock as the man she’d been tending to for weeks said, in a raspy voice, “Thanks, but I’ve always been more partial to *Oliver Twist*.”

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ben and his crew came bounding into Doc's place. Call reception was spotty when he was asea, so Maeve had texted. Doc was in the middle of examining Max when they entered. Maeve was standing at the doorway into the room.

"I got us back to shore fast as I could," Ben told Maeve. "How's he doing?"

"Not sure," she replied. "Doc's still looking him over."

They all stood and waited.

Eventually, Doc patted Max on the shoulder and said, "You appear to be healing up nicely. It's going to be a while before you feel one hundred percent. Your physiological self will

need time and a lot of work to get back to the shape you're used to. Not to worry, though. We'll get you there."

"Thanks," Max said. He looked up at the people in the room.

Maeve took the lead and commenced with introductions. "Max, this is my father, Ben, and his crew. This is Kieran, Liam and Fin." They all nodded in turn.

"I understand I have you guys to thank for saving me."

Ben waved it off, responding, "We did what most would in that situation."

"Regardless, thanks just the same."

Ben took a moment, then asked, "If you think you're up to it, I...we've...heck, the whole town's got questions."

"I kind of figured you might. Go ahead, ask away."

"Well...for starters...who exactly are you?"

"Doc told me he checked my wallet, so you know my name."

"So, that's really your name?" Fin asked.

"It's not movie star quality, I admit, but it's what I ended up with. Though, I could've gone with Maximilian, but it always felt so pretentious. I'm definitely more of a Max."

Back to Ben, "Why did the people on the yacht try to kill you?"

"That's a long story..." which he proceeded to tell. He left out some details, specifically Moone's name. He still didn't know these people well enough to know if he could either trust

they weren't under Moone's thumb, or if he would be endangering them by pulling them into his little web.

When he mentioned Rich, Ben interrupted, "So, that man *is* your friend?"

"Wait," Max stated, "did you pick him up, too? Is he here?"

"No. He's down at O'Reilly's Pub, in their freezer."

"Ah." Max felt silly about momentarily thinking his friend might have survived. The entire incident came flooding back to him in a flash. He took a second to compose himself.

Doc looked at him with concern. "Should we take a break for a bit?"

Max shook his head. "I'm okay." He finished up his story and said, "...which is, I'm guessing, where you came in."

Ben nodded and told Max his side of the account. After he concluded, there was a lull. Ben finally broke it by asking, "I assume you'd like to bury your friend."

Max smiled wanly. "That would be nice. Yes."

"Like I said," Doc interjected, "it will be plenty of days before you'll be up for walking anywhere too far from the house."

"Dinny won't be pleased to hear that, but he'll live."

"Hell," Liam joked, "it's not like it can make his food taste any worse. Am I right?"

The men of Ben's crew all laughed.

Doc, who had moved close to Maeve during Max's story, whispered in her ear, "I think I know someone who'd be more than happy to help."

Maeve turned to look out the doorway into the rest of the house, hiding her blushing from her father.

Doc spoke up, "I think the patient needs some rest, now."

"You mean, I haven't had enough over the past weeks?"

"Nevertheless, you wouldn't want to take two steps back on your first day?"

"No. I guess you're right."

"Good. Alright, everybody out."

The crew said their goodbyes, and Max thanked them all, once again.

Without saying a word, just giving Max a small smile, Maeve left the copy of *Great Expectations* on the night table before exiting.

After everyone was gone, he picked up the book and read some. It wasn't long until he fell back asleep.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

The next day was Rehab Day One.

Doc and Maeve helped Max to the edge of the bed. When Max had awakened that morning, one of the first things Doc did was give his legs a thorough massage, trying to get the blood flowing. They did feel better to Max than they had yesterday, yet standing was still a task.

At first, he couldn't even push upright on his own, his legs all gelatin. Once his blood and knees figured out what he was attempting, they cooperated, and Doc and Maeve were able to let go of his arms for seconds at a time. Finally, he felt sturdy enough to try walking a few steps. They were difficult, to be sure, and his lungs didn't appreciate being utilized after such a long respite, but he pushed himself and made it to the doorway.

He stabilized himself by holding the jamb and took a moment to catch his breath. After he felt well enough, he made the return trip to the bed. He was exhausted by the time he got there, so he carefully climbed back under the sheets.

Doc began to check the monitors. “Everything looks to be in the normal range.”

Max was scootching around, trying to get into a comfortable position. “Trust me, it feels *far* from normal.” He slid a little wrong, aggravating the wound on his right side, and drew in a sharp breath.

“You did just fine today. While you can’t rush recovery, you’re relatively young—”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“—and healthy,” Doc continued. “The healing of your wounds is coming along faster than I’d anticipated, so I feel comfortable in saying your rehabilitation will follow suit.”

Doc went back to checking the monitors, and Maeve began to step out of the room.

“Maeve,” Max called. She stopped and turned back to him. He held up the novel and asked, “Do you mind continuing to read for me? My inner voice isn’t nearly as nice to listen to.”

Maeve smiled and said, “I don’t mind, at all.”

As Doc retrieved a new IV bag, he couldn’t help smiling to himself.

Within two weeks, Max was able to walk all the way around the outside perimeter of Doc’s house multiple times, adding one or two laps each day, depending on how he felt. Each

day was different, yet he was feeling a lot better, even using some resistance bands Maeve brought from her house to restrengthen his chest muscles.

One morning, Ben accompanied Maeve. “I hear someone’s getting up and about without too much trouble.”

“And getting better each day.”

“You certainly look a hell of a lot better than you did the day we hauled your ass in here.”

“I should hope so. I have to at least be leaking less blood than I was.”

Ben chuckled. “Very true.”

“Thanks for checking up on me, by the way. It’s nice of you.”

“I’d say you’re welcome, but I come with an ulterior motive. Since you’re doing well, I thought it might be time we talk about what to do with your friend.”

Max’s mood instantly shifted, and his head drooped. “Yeah. That. I’ve been thinking about it, myself.”

Ben sat down in the chair Maeve usually did. “Far as I see it, we’ve two options. There’s a nice field just behind the house, here. Doc and I could dig the hole. Have a nice, small ceremony. You can say a few words.”

“Sounds nice. What’s option two?”

Ben cleared his throat, then said, “Well, there’s a clearing about halfway between here and my house. We can set things up for a cremation, if that’d be a way you’d like to go. I have an old picnic table...”

Max didn't hear the rest. The image of Rich and Vanessa's car exploding smashed into his third eye so hard that he flinched.

"No," he blurted, immediately realizing his tone was more aggressive than he meant it to be. More calmly he restated, "No. I...I think burial will be just fine."

Ben reached out, placing a hand softly on Max's shoulder. "Okay. I'll make the preparations."

Two days later, after Ben and Doc had finished digging the hole, they held a funeral for Rich. Maeve carried a folding chair out in case Max needed it.

He stood the entire time.

After the coffin—which Ben had made over the week following Max waking up—came to rest on the dirt floor, Max spoke:

"While we're laying one physical body to rest here today, we're really saying goodbye to two. Two that were one. My heart will always see them together. My mind will always remember them as a single entity. Rich and Vanessa. Hand in hand. Soul in soul. If someone had come to me as a baby and asked me to describe my perfect friends, I couldn't have come up with anything nearly as special as these two people. No matter how many miles separated us or how many years passed between visits, they were the beacon that guided me, kept me going in my darkest times. I know that they are now truly gone because I can no longer see that light." He paused to wipe his eyes. "I hope that wherever they are, they're together...and happy."

Everyone bowed their heads and stood in silence.

Ben had also made a wooden cross for a marker. The day before, he'd brought it to Max along with a wood burner and he carved Rich's name in the crossbar. Ben hammered it into the ground at the head, then he and Doc stayed to fill in the grave while Max and Maeve returned to Doc's house.

It wasn't until they were more than halfway back that he noticed she was holding his hand.

## Chapter Forty

Before long, Max and Maeve were taking longer and longer walks, both with and without Doc...though mostly without. During one of their first unescorted walks, Max asked, "So, what should I know about Maeve Tully?"

"I'm not sure there's much to know."

"Come on. Everyone's got their story. It may not be Dickens, but it's still a story."

She thought for a minute, then began, "Well, I never knew my mother. She died giving birth to me."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

She smiled at him. “Thank you. We had some family back then, so Dad didn’t have to raise me completely on his own, but they’ve all since passed. It’s basically been just the two of us since I was seventeen. I’ve looked after the day-to-day of the farm while Dad goes out fishing.”

“And thank God he does.”

“Yes,” she laughed. “Well, actually, thank God for the bigger fishing companies moving into the area. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been out so far.”

“What do you mean?”

She filled him in about the business, the regulations and why Ben fishes where he does.

“Wow,” Max said after she finished. “I never thought I’d ever owe my life to capitalism.”

They walked a little farther before she asked, “How do you feel? Shall we turn around?”

He hated to admit it, but his legs were starting to feel wobbly, the sign he’d been using that he needed to begin the return stage. “Probably not a bad idea.” They did so, and after a while he inquired, “Is there anything else I should know about you? Do you have any big dreams or plans?”

Maeve thought for a second. “I don’t know. Not really. I know a lot of the people I grew up with wanted to move away as soon as they could, and some did. I never really thought about it that much. This is my home. I’m pretty content with everything. The farm. Dad. I don’t know what I’d do somewhere else. I like it here.”

“You know something? I like it here, too.”

They walked in silence a little more, then Maeve asked, “Are you going to share with me, now? Tell me about Max Calvert?”

Max had another flashback, the past few months played at extreme fast forward. He had to take a deep breath and hold it a bit to calm his nerves. “Tell you what, let’s save my story for another walk. Okay?”

Max had trouble sleeping that night. Every time he closed his eyes, he was thrown into a chaotic miasma.

One moment he’d be crouched behind the car in Toronto, bullets screaming, whizzing past.

The next he’d be back in the Sandbox, soldiers dying all around him.

Then back on Moone’s yacht, watching his best friend’s blood seep between his fingers.

Running for cover in a house that had been blown apart long ago.

The INTERPOL agent gasping for help through a mouthful of blood.

Falling into the water, unable to swim away from the boat, undertow dragging him down.

Being inside the Humvee as it exploded.

*His* hand dropping the grenade into Vanessa’s lap.

*His* finger pulling the trigger to kill Rich.

The yacht disappearing into the darkness above him as he sank down.

Down.

Down.

Onto the floor, as he fell out of the bed.

Sweat pouring.

Heart pounding.

Breath nearly gone.

He got to his feet and walked out of the house. He never consciously thought about his destination, just walked.

When he reached the wooden cross, he collapsed next to it, wrapped his arms around it tightly and wept. It was a cathartic, hard, heavy cry, draining every emotion from him. In the midst of all this, he sobbed, “Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorry...”