

MY  
SECRET  
TO TELL

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# PROLOGUE

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Emmie?"

My name lands somewhere between a hiccup and a sob, and my feet stall out on the sidewalk in front of my house. I adjust my grip on the phone, hoping I misheard her tone. This doesn't sound like Chelsea. This voice is breathless. Frightened.

"I'm here," I say. "What's up? You don't sound right."

"I'm not." She takes a shuddery breath.

My shirt's sticking to my back and cicadas are click-buzzing the end of another blistering day, but I go cold. Something's wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

"It's my dad, Emmie," she says. I can tell she's crying.

I grab my chest. It's too tight. Burning. "What happened?"

Her words all tumble out on top of one another, interrupted by shaky breaths. I try to pick out pieces that make sense. "He's hurt—bleeding—we're behind the ambulance and I can't—he's not—someone attacked him."

I start climbing the porch steps, because she'll need me. I'm her best friend, so I should be there. I need to change clothes and go. "You're on the way to the hospital, right? They'll help him there."

Another sharp breath. “I don’t know if they can. He’s so bad. *So* bad.”

My heart clenches. “Where are you?”

“We’re almost there. Joel’s with me.”

“Okay, good. I’m coming,” I say, crossing my porch and hauling my front door open. “Let me just call Mom. I’ll borrow the car.”

Chelsea’s still crying when I storm down the hallway toward my bedroom. “Emmie, I can’t find Deacon...”

“Your brother never answers his phone,” I say, pushing open my door. “I’ll run by the docks first and—”

“No. No, he was there. He was at the house.”

Chelsea makes a strangled sound, and I notice the liquid-thick heat in my bedroom. The kind of heat that tells me the air conditioner is broken. Or my window is open.

My gaze drags to my fluttering white curtains, to the dark smudge on the windowsill.

Chelsea’s voice goes low and raspy. “He ran, Emmie. God, he was there with Dad. He was in the house, but he *ran*.”

I swivel with an invisible fist lodged in my throat. My bathroom door is open, a red-black smudge beneath the knob.

My mouth goes dry, my pulse thumping slower than it should. Then I see the blood on the floor by my sink, and my heart tumbles end over end.

“We’re here. I’ll call soon,” Chelsea says and hangs up.

I see him, his back to my tub and his dark head bowed on one bent knee. Oh God.

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He's covered in blood. It's on his legs, his hands. Dripping onto my white tile floor. He looks up, and my heart goes strangely steady.

I take a breath that tastes like purpose.

“Deacon?”





# CHAPTER ONE

.....

Eight Hours Earlier

Where is my green pen? I check my inbox basket again, but it's not there. Everything is as it should be. Phone on the right corner. Laptop dead center. A single inbox on the left, and a phone message pad—a relic from some prehistoric time—in front of me. No green pen though.

I slide open the meticulously organized drawer, moving a pencil that's shifted. Everything's arranged like a box of chocolates. Rubber bands, paper clips, and extra staples in tidy heaps. My pens are lined up: blue, black, empty space, highlighter. I chew my lip and try to reach for the blue pen, because who really cares about ink color?

Me, that's who.

I stand up and sit right back down. Check under the desk, under my rolling chair.

Then I stand up again, hands sweaty. Joel's leather office chair creaks in the next room. He's leaning back. Probably trying to figure out why he extended this internship to a girl who's popping up and down like a jack-in-the-box. I plop down with a sigh.

Once upon a time, I was a normal person. I miss that.

“All right there?” Joel asks.

“Sure, I just...” Yeah, I just *what?* Lost my super special pen? Spiraled down the drain of a green ink fixation?

*As if that’s my only fixation.*

I need to dial it back a notch. A lot of notches. Joel is *paying* me for this. More than that, he’s giving me a recommendation letter for the dean of admissions at Duke. I can just imagine telling my parents this story. “Mom, Dad, I’m sorry I lost my job and might not ever go to law school, but I had no choice, because blue is for file notes. Black is for supply lists. Phone messages have to be green, see?”

They’ve already had one kid trash his future, so I grab the blue pen.

“Sorry, I’m good,” I finally say. It’s all breathy Southern charm, just like my mom. I button on a smile for good measure. “Lost a pen. It’s nothing.”

This would be easier if Joel would take advantage of the eleventy billion options cell phones and computers offer for relaying messages. Something I might say if he wasn’t practically my best friend’s uncle *and* the lawyer/manager/advisor of their family business.

My blue pen hovers over the paper, and I wince. Maybe one last check. Super quick. I crouch under my desk, patting around the floor under the drawers. Carpet, carpet, the paper clip I knew I was missing yesterday—

“You looking for this?”

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I freeze, still on all fours, under the desk.

*That's not Joel.*

Dread rolls over me in a slow wave as I sit up, careful not to hit my head.

Yep, definitely not Joel. Too tan. Too sweaty. Too hot.

But every bit as familiar.

“Hey, Deacon,” I say, taking the green pen from his fingers.

“Hey back.”

I take a breath and look down, because I've learned it's best to avoid eye contact with my best friend's brother. For most girls, it's his looks—a hormonally lethal combo of Venezuelan coloring and boat-boy physique. He's eye candy for them, but he's something much more dangerous for me. Something a lot like gravity. Because being around him feels like falling. Every. Single. Time.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

He nods. “One of the charter boats has a problem. It's no big deal, but we all know Dad can't tie his shoes unless he checks with Joel first.” He pauses, his smile barely more than clenched teeth. “So here we are.”

Holy family tension. Chelsea warned me it was ugly between them, but *wow*. Outside the window, his dad is waiting on the sidewalk, phone to his ear and the quiet residential street behind him. Deacon follows my gaze.

“Not getting along, huh?” I ask.

He smirks at me. “When do we ever get along?”

He leans over my desk. I catch a whiff and make an awful face.

Hot or not, this boy is fresh off the boat, and he smells like a dead fish wrapped in a sweaty T-shirt.

“That bad?” he asks, flashing Chelsea’s smile at me.

“Worse.” I glance briefly at his face where I can see a red-purple shadow down the side of his cheek. “Did you hit your head?”

He grins. “Took a corner too fast in Chelsea’s car. Smacked my head into the door when I clipped the light pole. And before you even start, at least it wasn’t my bike.”

I drop the paper clip I’m still holding in the pile in my drawer, but I don’t *start* anything. Why bother? Deacon’s been creating his own personal version of *Fast & Furious* up and down the Carolina coast since he got his license two years ago. And he was a daredevil long before that. Ever since they lost their mom really. You’ve got to pick your battles with him.

“Hell, I do reek,” he says.

“Reek might be too kind. I hope you’re keeping the tourist girls at a distance.” Not likely. “They’d probably dive off the boat if they got a whiff of you.” Even less likely.

“I’ve got charms to make up for the stench,” he says around one of those devil’s grins he’s famous for. “One of these days, you’ll let me flirt with you long enough to find out.”

“You’re hysterical,” I deadpan, ignoring the fire that’s shooting up my neck. I uncap my green pen, focusing on the message for Joel.

*Call Mr. Trumbull about his overnight charter arrangement.*

I add a date and a time, though neither are necessary. It’s a stall tactic so Deke doesn’t see that I’m annoyed. I shouldn’t be. He

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doesn't even know I'm into him. Still, we've been friends for forever. Seniority alone should exempt me from the flirty comments he tosses at a revolving door of dit-dotters (our local word for "tourist") from the Midwest. I'm not with him, but I'm not temporary either.

He plants his hand on my desk. He's going to leave fingerprints. "Hey, are you mad? I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine." I might have convinced him if I hadn't cut him off.

His hand slides forward, and I forget about the prints. My stomach wads up. Shrinks tight. The vanishing distance between our fingers pushes me closer to that invisible edge.

"Emmie." His tone is one I've never heard.

Joel's chair creaks, and Deacon's hand is gone. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. By the time I look up, Joel is beside me, shaking Deke's hand across my desk.

"Hey, Dink. Everything all right?"

He's Dink. I'm Eddie. Everyone who matters gets a Joel nickname. Deacon could have it worse. Chelsea is Chickadee, for God's sake. Their dad is *Daffy*.

They're talking about the boat now—something to do with a broken compartment, I think. It's all "storage" this and "hinges" that, but the only thing that interests me is the hateful look Deacon's shooting out the window. Mr. Westfield is still on the phone—probably a customer—but he looks worried. It's his business, so I get it, but Deacon's eyes might as well be slinging bullets.

Joel must notice too, because he catches Mr. Westfield's attention through the glass and gives him a wave and a smile. Then he points at Deacon and gives a thumbs-up, like Deke had the

solution all figured out before he even walked inside. Which is probably the truth.

Joel puts a hand on Deacon's shoulder. "Before you know it, he's going to see what you're capable of, Dink."

He scoffs. "Doubtful. He's been unbelievable all morning. He's blaming this whole thing on Thorpe and Charlie. It's insane."

Joel laughs that makes-it-all-better laugh. It's a little too loud, but it works. "He just takes pride in the business. Let me get my keys and see if we can't smooth things over."

"I'll hang outside with the kraken." Deacon smirks and heads to the door, looking back at me before he leaves.

He and Chelsea have the kind of eyes that stop you in your tracks. Not green, not brown, but something way better than hazel. They make me think of old pennies and dark secrets. He doesn't speak, but he gives me a smile that curls like fire through my insides, and then he's gone.

He disappears on the porch stairs, but then I see him on the sidewalk with his dad. Joel bought one of the run-down cottages in the historic district for his office, so we don't have to deal with as much tourist traffic. There's no water to see, but it's quiet and convenient. We all live in this several block stretch, a section of old white houses with porch swings and well-tended flowerbeds. It's also as small-town as a place gets, so this fight the Westfields are having on the front sidewalk? Everyone will know about it by dinnertime.

Mr. Westfield adjusts his hat over graying blond hair and points at Deacon. The air conditioner is humming, so I can't

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hear what he says or how Deacon responds, but it's pretty obvious there are plenty of four-letter words involved. Deacon turns, face dark with rage, and then he's storming across the street.

"They're at it again," Joel says at the edge of my desk.

"Chelsea told me it's been bad." I grab Joel's arm. "Which reminds me, you're picking her up, right?"

"Oil change this evening. I've got it," he says, chuckling. "Aren't you headed to the shelter at two?"

"Yeah, but I can check the supply list first. Mr. Christopher's monthly weekend is coming up, and I want to make sure you have enough reels on board." I start wiping at a smudge on my desk. Deacon's doing, no doubt.

"Do it tomorrow," Joel says. "You're organizing this office to death, you know."

"Is it annoying?" I gnaw my lip and stop wiping. "It *is* annoying."

Joel's hand pats mine on the desk. "You're doing a lovely job, Eddie. But you can go easy." He glances outside with a sigh. "You kids all need to go a little easier."

"I wish Deke would go easy with his driving," I say, though Joel probably has more right to gripe about it. Being the lawyer, he's the one left to clean up the mess.

"That boy's got to let up on the throttle in more ways than one." He claps a hand on my shoulder and smiles. "But *you've* got to stop worrying."

"Oh, I know. No sense in worrying about things you can't change, right?" I add a smile, because this is my best lie. It's also the easiest, because it's the one I almost believe.

\* \* \*

“Seth and I were talking,” Chelsea says midstride. “You came up.”

She met me at the office to walk with me to the shelter. And now she’s stirring the very tired pot of Seth drama, so she’s obviously bored out of her mind.

“Are we really back on that? I stopped seeing him months ago.”

“For no reason.”

I scoff. “I had a reason.”

“Uh-huh. And does that *reason* leave socks on my bathroom floor and a string of broken tourist hearts on the decks of our boats?”

Chelsea has a smile like bottled sunshine, but I shut it down with a glare. “It has nothing to do with Deke. Give me some credit.”

“Okay, then why?”

The sun’s beating hard enough to make my shoulders tight when I shrug. “He was getting attached, and I’m not ready for that.”

“Oh sure. That’d be crazy. Future veterinarian. Honor roll. Great arms. Seth’s *terrible* boyfriend material.”

I step off the curb and smile at a mom with a double stroller before answering. “I’m not looking for boyfriend material, Chelsea. Why don’t *you* date Seth?”

She ignores my barb and swirls her coffee, looking a little smug. “Your mom likes him, doesn’t she?”

Good guess. I don’t tell her she’s right, but I don’t need to. We fall in step again, and she turns with me toward the animal shelter, where practically a third of our high school volunteers.

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Community service is required for graduation, and puppies beat out old people any day of the week.

It dies down over the summer, but Deacon, Seth, and I are still regulars. Community service with a heaping side of awkward. It was better when Chels was there too, but she quit the minute she met her required hours. Scooping poop isn't her thing.

Chelsea sighs. "Is that what it is with Deke? The fact that your mother would crack in half if anything happened between you two?"

"Doubtful. Mom was less crazy before my brother left, and I still had this...problem. Maybe I was dropped on my head as a small child."

She grins. "That would explain some things."

I laugh, but I'm thinking about Deacon being in the office. I can still see his fingers sliding forward on my desk. My whole body coiled up tight. Was it obvious? Did he notice?

"Hey, you haven't said anything to him, have you?" I ask. "Anything about me, I mean."

She wrinkles her nose. "No chance. I love my brother, but he doesn't deserve you. Aside from impromptu hookups with complete strangers—"

"Thanks for that."

"All I'm saying is Deke doesn't do relationships. Not really. Anything emotional and he just can't. Not since Mom."

"I know."

He can't do them, and Chelsea always wants one. Funny what the same grief can do to two different people.

She smacks my arm lightly. “Omigod, did I tell you? He wrecked my freaking car! I mean, it’s not that bad, and I know it’s a piece of crap, but it hasn’t even been a week since his last ticket.”

“I saw the bruise. He got a ticket at the wreck?”

“No, for speeding. Eighty-seven in a sixty-five. They might take his license.”

We turn onto Queen Street, finally catching some shade. I bump her shoulder lightly. “A brother with no license is better than a brother wrapping your car around a tree.”

“Or one who hits the highway one night because he can’t take it anymore.” Chelsea catches herself fast, grabbing my shoulder. “Oh God, I didn’t—I wasn’t thinking about—”

She wasn’t thinking about Landon. *My* brother. The former prince of Beaufort who left for Duke with a golden cardiologist future only to crash and burn nine months into his freshman year. Good-bye, college. Hello, shattered parents.

“It’s okay,” I finally say, though it’s not. Talk to my parents for two seconds if you want to see how not-okay Landon’s “I need time to find myself” disappearing act is. They need to get over it, but it’s not like they have much chance with him never being here.

“I can’t believe I said that,” Chelsea says, misreading my quiet for anger. “I’m so worried about Deke, I’m being stupid. I’m sorry.”

I shrug. “You’re just scared for your brother.”

“Yeah,” Chelsea says, slowing by the shelter. “I’m scared I’m going to lose him too.”

Before her mom died, before Landon, maybe I would have told her that would never happen, but I know better now. Sometimes

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we do lose people. As bad as I want to reassure her, I know enough to keep my mouth shut and let her be afraid.

“You gotta get in there,” she says. “Give my brother hell for that ticket.”

“Call me tonight when you’re done?”

Her slim brows pull together. “Done with what?”

“Oil change? Joel’s picking you up at the repair shop at seven thirty.”

“Oh crap, that’s right.”

“Chelsea, you have *got* to get more organized.”

“What for? I have you for that.” She sticks out her tongue and waves.

Deacon wasn’t scheduled for this afternoon, but Chelsea was right about him being here. I spot his motorcycle in the back lot. Figures. He’s always good for an extra shift when he’s fighting with his dad. Or when a dit-dotter from the Midwest gets too clingy.

I step inside and straighten the volunteer time sheets before I write myself in. Deacon’s the only volunteer I know who kept working after graduation, but it’s no shock. He and I have always been animal people. When we were in preschool, we constantly set up a veterinarian station on the picnic table in my backyard. We never had Band-Aids at my house, because they were all on Chelsea’s stuffed animals, especially the turtles. They’ve always been my favorite.

I pass through a tiled hallway with rows of cat cages and the smell of fresh litter heavy in the air. There’s an “Adopted” sticker on Chester’s empty cage. I smile and take his old heart-shaped name tag before I head into the prep room. Deke’s not here either, which means he’s in the dog zone.

I find him with Rocky, a ninety-pound Rottie mix missing half an ear. He's a special-needs adoption, a deaf senior with that *scary-dog* look that keeps families walking. We keep him in the back on busy days, because too many squealing four-year-olds wear him out. Deacon's sitting on the floor, rubbing Rocky's shoulders—they get a little stiff sometimes and the massage seems to help. Rocky noses at the pockets of his faded jeans.

“Nothing left in my pockets, Rock,” he says, switching to scratch his ears.

Nothing left, but I'm sure that dog's had a few smuggled shrimp from the boat today. Deacon always brings him something. And I always go soft at the edges when I see it.

“Twice in one day. Lucky me,” Deacon says. He's got an uncanny knack for sensing people behind him. Made water balloon fights a real pain over the years.

“Did you hear the bad news?” he asks. “Dr. Atwood had to rescue a stray today.”

“How is that bad?”

“Well, you didn't get to do it yourself.” He turns to smirk at me, and my insides do annoying fluttery things. “You're one rescue away from a spandex outfit and a catchy name.”

“Yeah, well, Chelsea thinks we're both going to get bitten and catch rabies.”

“Her paranoia is dependable. Remember when you went up that tree for the cat?”

My breath stutters at the memory. “How could I forget?”

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Deacon chuckles. “Chels was screeching like a banshee. She kept punching my arm, telling me to call the fire department.”

He didn’t though. He scolded her instead, telling her I was perfectly capable of climbing that tree. And then—the part I remember best—his hands touched my waist when I hopped down and stumbled. It was the briefest touch, just a graze to steady me on my feet, but I was a fourteen-year-old with a crush, and that half second is burned into my memory like a tattoo.

“You still going to climb trees and save mongrels when you’re a fat cat lawyer like Joel?”

I sigh. “You’re really not going to let this go, are you?”

“I just never thought the law thing would stick. You’ve always been an animal lover. You were going to save sea turtles, remember? You’d walk around with that damn lunchbox full of gauze and tape, looking for injured crabs. What did you call that thing again?”

“The coastal critter kit.” I grit my teeth, trying to bite back my irritation. “There are practically zero jobs in marine biology. It’s not sensible.”

“You could be a vet. There’s money in that.”

“There are already plenty of vets in Beaufort,” I say. It’s true, but it’s not the real reason. But how do I explain that it’s not about money? My mom’s family is a sea of medical practices and law firms. It’s a legacy thing, and since the disappointing child slot in my family is full, it’s my job to fill the role.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to rile you up.” Deacon’s voice is low and tender.

He doesn’t mean to do a lot of things to me, but he does them all the same. I reach for paper towels and a subject change.

“I’m surprised you’re here,” I say. “Don’t you have an issue on one of the boats?”

“I have an issue with my Dad riding the guys’ asses like a jockey.” Venom is injected in every word. “Figured I’d rather check on my favorite boy than deal with him anymore today.” He leads Rocky back to his cage and latches the door with a reluctant sigh.

“He needs you, you know,” I say. “You’re talented with the mechanical stuff.”

“According to Dad, my *talent* is looking pretty for girls who might buy tickets.”

True, but he’s being a mule. I should say something about the ticket and the constant fighting. About the way he’s trashing his future a little harder every year. I chicken out and wipe down an empty cage that I already disinfected two days ago.

“You’ve got that look, Emmie.” Out of nowhere, he’s right behind my shoulder. His arm brushes mine. “You’re biting your tongue, aren’t you?”

I laugh softly. “So hard that blood’s about to shoot out of my ears.”

I turn to look at him. The air hums like power lines between us.

“Go on and say it,” he says.

“Say what? What *can* I say?”

“Something,” he says, voice softer, eyes cast down. “Hell, *anything*. You’ve known me forever, haven’t you?”

Our sleeves are touching. People don’t stand this close...I don’t think. I don’t know what this is. I’ve got a handful of cards, but I’m not sure what game we’re playing.

I swallow hard. “I’ve known you long enough to remember

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when you weren't so angry. When Chelsea and I didn't sit around worried sick about what crazy thing you'll do next."

He arches a brow. "Maybe you two need to get lives."

"Maybe you need to be a little more careful with *your* life."

His face twists into a scowl. "Like you, right, Emmie? Crossing every *T* and dotting every *I*."

My cheeks go hot. I don't know how this became a fight, but his face is red and my jaw is so tight, my teeth hurt.

He runs a hand over his hair and steps forward. Like he's going to reach for me. Touch me maybe. "Emmie, I'm sor—"

The door bangs open, sending all of the dogs into a barking frenzy. Deacon springs back in time for me to see cargo shorts, battered sneakers, and a stack of dog food bags coming through the door.

Seth French. Incoming senior like me. Half-assed sprinter on the track team and my not-quite-but-almost boyfriend last winter.

He drops the bags, and Deacon slinks away, palming his keys off a storage cabinet. The unspoken things hanging in this room make it hard to breathe, but Seth doesn't notice. He just adjusts his baseball hat over his dirty-blond hair and winks at me.

"Well, if I'd known you were going to be here, I'd have come earlier." His gaze shifts to Deacon. "Hey, man."

Deacon barely glances at him. "Hey."

Ah, our little awkward triangle of doom. I'm crazy about Deacon, Seth's crazy about me, and Deacon's just crazy.

Fantastic.

"So, Sunday night," Seth starts, flashing me his smile. It's not

a bad smile. Charmed me once upon a time, as Mom constantly reminds me. “Let’s go get burgers.”

“Burgers?”

“Yeah, burgers. Maybe some fries. If we’re feeling really wild, we could even commit to coffee at the Cru afterward. We used to do that. It wasn’t so bad.”

I grin. Seth brings that out in people. He’s easy. Goofy. The kind of guy any girl should fall for. My mother fell for an easy, goofy guy. I flinch.

*And that worked out oh so well in the end, didn’t it?*

“Have I convinced you?” Seth asks.

I like Seth. I don’t want to not be friends because I don’t see happily ever after every time he looks at me. Maybe dinner would be a good way to clear the air. Set things straight.

“Help me clean out the darn cages and we’ll talk about it,” I say. I’m about to clarify that this is not a date, but then I see Deacon waiting at the door.

He’s checking his phone, but I know him. He doesn’t care about his phone. He’s watching this, and I don’t like it. Maybe he thinks he has the right to know my business too, but he doesn’t. I don’t butt into his exploits on the boats, and he doesn’t have an all-access pass to my universe either.

I shoot him a glare, and he heads out, the door clanging shut behind him.

“So I’ll take it this Sunday won’t be a date,” Seth says with a meaningful look at the door Deacon just exited.

I’ve got to give him credit. He’s not as oblivious as I figured.

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I snatch another paper towel from a roll and fold it in half. Scrub at a perfectly clean spot on the counter. “I’m not dating Deacon, Seth.”

“No, but you’ve got that weird *something* vibe going on. It’s fine. I got the message when you cooled off last winter.”

I quirk a brow at him. “Then why do you keep asking me out all the time?”

“I don’t know. I like seeing you flustered? It’s a small town?” I make a sound somewhere between bewildered and outraged, and Seth laughs. “I do like you, Emmie. Friends is fine. Really.”

I soften. “Are you sure? If we go Sunday, it won’t give you the wrong idea?”

“It’s all good, I promise.”

“Then Sunday it is.”

Even after all day playing with dogs and mindlessly scrubbing cages, I’m still mad at Deacon on the walk home. The heat isn’t helping. The sun is low in the sky, but the wind feels too heavy and moist. It’s like walking through soup. I’m ready for air-conditioning. And a gallon of iced tea. My phone rings in my pocket, and I pull it out, grateful to see Chelsea’s name.

Maybe she can explain why her brother is being a complete tool.

I bring the phone to my ear and say hello. I can tell by the way she takes a breath—ragged and shaky—that something isn’t right.