

First Chapter
Enduring Everything
By M. Sembera

Sophia's Wedding Day

Standing in front of my open jewelry box, I sighed. I had intended to give Sophia pieces here and there but as it turned out she never liked wearing jewelry, except for the tiny diamond earrings her dad gave to her for her sixteenth birthday. I only wore the studded emerald earrings Mrs. Thomas gave me and my grandmother's bracelet.

Hearing Sophia flop down on my bed, I turned and said, "Oh, quit pouting. Your dad will be happy to see you wearing them."

With a heavy sigh, she fussed, "Ugh, I hate wearing jewelry it feels like things are crawling on me."

Making a face at her, I assured, "You are a strange girl."

With a little giggle she hopped off my bed and stood next to me, "Ok mama, whatcha got?"

Pulling out the diamond necklace and earrings Hert gave me when we got married, I replied, "These."

"Oh my gosh, they're huge!" she blurted, practically yanking the earrings out of my hand.

"Do you want the ring that goes with it?" I asked, pulling my engagement ring out.

Nodding, she reached in my jewelry box, asking, "What's this?" Before I could stop her, she grabbed the little white box that I thought was hidden.

Stopping for a moment, I stared at her, shocked that she had it in her hands. The necklace Jackson gave me. It was a long beaded chain with a pendant that had a

wren perched on top of a Celtic heart. I used to take it out and look at it every night but it had been years since I had even touched the box.

Shaking it, Sophia asked, "What's in here? Is it a secret?"

Rolling my eyes, I snapped, "Oh my goodness Sophia, don't be so dramatic. It's just an old necklace."

"Can I open it?" she asked, arching her eyebrow and giving me a mischievous grin.

Rolling my eyes at her again, I shrugged her off pretending it was no big deal. Smiling wide, she sat back down on my bed, appearing incredibly pleased with herself. When Sophia opened it, she looked confused.

Looking up at me, she said, "I've seen this before."

"Where?" I blurted before she clarified, "The heart."

Blushing a little, she explained, "Ailin has one, a tattoo. His brothers took him to get it after we got engaged."

Pursing my lips at her, I said, "They still do that?"

The men in Jackson family, on his mother's side, tattooed a Celtic heart on the left side of their chest when they became engaged.

Smiling, she shared, "Sarah said they're all a little different, Ailin's has my name in his."

Thinking I should just change the subject, I assured, "Ok, I really don't want to think about him having his shirt off with you."

Carefully inspecting my necklace, she mumbled, "I told you we are waiting."

Holding my hand out, I said, "Ok now, give it back, we have a lot to do."

Placing it back in the box, she started to hand it back then jumped to her feet.

With a loud gasp, she shouted, "You're the bird!"

Trying to pretend she was just being crazy, I said, "What? Don't be silly."

Pulling the box away from me, she said, "Penny is gonna just die! It's a Wren! You're Uncle Jacks' Ren! I can't believe we never figured that out."

"Where did you hear that from?" I snapped, snatching the box from her and setting it back in my jewelry box.

"Penny and I spent like, years trying to figure out who Uncle Jacks' tattoo was for. We never saw it and Oran used to just call it his bird, but we knew he had

one," she informed before saying, "Uncle Jacks never got married and neither did you."

"I was married to your dad," I reminded.

Frustrated that I wouldn't acknowledge what was already very clear, Sophia pursued, "Mama."

With a heavy sigh, I shared, "Ok but it's not what you're thinking. We were never engaged and we only dated for a few weeks in high school. He is your godfather Sophia. The Thomas' are the closest thing to family we have. It's not only about love, it's also about loyalty and friendship."

Appearing disappointed, she revealed, "When I was little, I used to wish Uncle Jacks was my dad."

Sitting down next to her, I placed my arm around her shoulders, saying, "Your dad loves you."

Resting her head on my shoulder, she said, "I know. It's just that..." Stopping her, before I started to cry, I said, "Keep in mind, if that was the case you would be marrying your cousin, and that would be really gross."

Sophia laughed and hugged me before darting off to her room.



I finally got Sophia in the wedding dress that Mrs. Thomas made for her. Not that there was a problem with it, for some reason Sophia liked to wait until the last minute to do everything. It was antique white satin, strapless and flowed down from the waist to the floor. Mrs. Thomas was sweet and told everyone that we made it however, aside from the one time I handed her some thread, I mostly sat and watched. Once Sophia was ready, I went to my room to get dressed. Standing in front of the mirror looking at my dress, I thought it was funny that I wore the same light pink color the day I married Bert. Feeling even though I was much older now, I looked better than I did that day because I wasn't six months pregnant. Walking into the kitchen, I found Sophia leaning over the counter eating a piece of pear cake.

Horrorified, I fussed, "What are you doing?"

With a mouth full of cake, she said, "I'm hungry."

Shaking my head at her, I sighed, saying, "Please don't get anything on your dress. And put your shoes on, we need to go. You're going to be late for your own wedding."

Nodding at me, Sophia finished stuffing her face just as the driver arrived.

Hert insisted on using drivers for his daughter's wedding. It was by far more elegant but I still wasn't happy about it. Jackson's cousin Brennen had quite a bit of property so we were having an outdoor wedding. It wasn't easy but Ailin's mom Sarah did agree to leave The Bar open long enough for us to hold the reception there. Ailin's dad Gus owned The Bar. He passed away suddenly about six months ago and none of the kids were taking it over. Both Gus and The Bar held a special place in all our hearts. On the way, I watched Sophia sitting across from me, looking like she didn't have a care in the world.

"Are you nervous?" I asked, remembering how I felt on my wedding day.

Giving me a strange look, she asked, "Why would I be?"

Shrugging, I answered, "Oh I don't know because you're getting married."

Looking at me, like I was silly, she assured, "He's my heart, mama."

Nodding at her, I smiled.

We arrived in just enough time for me to be seated next to Jackson's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, in the front row. Trying not to cry, I avoided looking back at Hert and Sophia waiting to make their way down the aisle. Glancing at Ailin, anxiously awaiting Sophia, there was still a hint of freckles across his nose, most of them had faded as he grew up but his dark auburn hair and green eyes had stayed just the same. Jackson escorted Penny, Sophia's best friend and Ailin's sister, down the aisle. Ailin's brothers, Auggie, Braden and William, followed arm in arm with Sophia's other bridesmaids. When I glanced at Jackson, patting Ailin on the back, he smiled wide and winked at me. Jackson had not changed much through the years in either attitude or looks. He had the same stocky build, same blond hair and his smile radiated cheerfulness. Smiling back, I thought, 'How, after all these years, does that smile make me just as happy as the first time he flashed it at me!'

Sophia was a vision coming down the aisle with her soft brown curls covered her shoulders. Her brown eyes shimmering bright as she made her way to her soon to be husband. Once Bert gave her away, he sat next to me. When Sophia and Ailin smiled at each other, I was done for. In fact I didn't stop crying until after they were married and everyone was congratulating them. The only thing that didn't make me feel like I was being a complete and total baby was that Mrs. Thomas and Sarah were bawling too.

Sophia and Ailin were not attending the reception at The Bar. Giving an excuse of getting on the road before dark. Their honeymoon, would consist of staying in various hotels as they took a road trip cross country. I was sure that wasn't the real reason but I understood and it made me feel like they had waited just like Sophia claimed.

Bert and I were the last to tell them goodbye and wish them well. We stood silent next to each other watching them drive away.

With a heavy sigh I looked up at Bert, saying, "Well that's it she's officially grown and married."

Looking down at me, he asked, "Would you like to ride with me to the airport?"

"Umm, I'm going to the reception," I replied.

Nodding, he replied, "I thought we could talk, I won't be coming down next year, now that Sophia's married."

Realizing it could be years before I ever saw him again, I decided to ride with him.

Heading to the airport, Bert said, "You did a good job with her."

Giving him a light smile, I said, "Thank you for being her father."

It was strange being in such a small space with him. When he looked at me, his blue eyes had the same intensity as they always had. The scars on his face from his car accident had faded and were barely noticeable, his hair was still black but strands of silver were starting to take over. Over the years, I had avoided all opportunities to spend one on one time with him. Although I had known him my entire

life, that one year of marriage to him, not only changed all of our lives but showed me I was on the wrong path.

We remained silent until he asked me, "So, you're Jackson's secretary now?"

"Yep, Mr. Thomas retired last month and I don't wear pajamas to work if that's what you are asking," I said in response to his disapproving look.

With a slight laugh, he asked, "Would you like to come back with me?"

Confused, I asked, "Come back where?"

Looking directly into my eyes, he shared, "You are still so beautiful, Sophia is grown, I want you. I want you to come to Spain with me."

Shaking my head, I was stunned.

"Hert, I can't just leave," I replied.

Slyly smiling, he said, "Yes you can. We can pick up where we left off."

Scowling at him, I questioned, "Do you even remember where we left off?"

Frustrated, he snapped, "I remember what it was like when we were together."

I remembered what it was like too.

"I'm sorry Hert, I just can't. Everything that makes my life good is here," I assured.

Nodding, he didn't say another word to me except goodbye.



The driver took me to The Bar. Feeling melancholy the whole way, I actually did consider Hert's offer. No matter how much time had passed, I was still hurt over the way he deceived me for the sake of The Office. He also agreed to be Sophia's father and I had fallen in love with him. Much like our plan for him to be her father, Hert's proposal and declaration of love was just for show. There were times I missed him and times I still felt angry over his deception but like his mother, Ms. Herterand, told me, 'Some people aren't meant for each other'. Shaking off my emotions, I stepped out of the car and headed into The Bar.

The second I walked in, I saw Jackson waving his hand in the air. When I threw mine up, to ask what he wanted, all he did was smile. Shaking my head, I rolled my

eyes walking over to Emerson. Standing there with a pleasant smile on his face, his soft brown eyes held no resentment or regret from his past, only kindness.

Bumping him a little, I said, "Hey there."

Smiling, he hugged me before saying, "Hey Ren, where were you?"

"Oh, I rode with Bert to the airport," I replied.

With a soft smile, he asked, "Are you alright?"

"Yes Em, I'm fine," I laughed before asking, "Where's Amila?"

"Trying to round up play dates for the kids, we have twelve now," he laughed.

Laughing back, I questioned, "Play dates or kids?"

Shaking his head at me, Em said, "I think we will stick with seven."

"Did I ever tell you how proud I am of you?" I asked.

Emerson was once my best friend. He came into my life when I was sixteen and in desperate need of care and compassion. Through the years Em had come into his own. He started a foundation for abandoned and unwanted children when adoption was the only way that he and his wife could become parents. Thriving in their positions, Emerson and Amila, Em being a wealthy philanthropist and Amila a wife and mother both with high social standing, were two people I could always count on, although now, I was closer to Amila

Placing his arm around my shoulders, he shared, "You know we added a new section to the foundation."

Nodding I really wished he hadn't brought that up.

Giving a compassionate smile, he imparted, "Amila thinks it would be good if you were a speaker there. Or maybe come to the house and talk to Charlotte. We love her but she is so lost Ren."

"I know, she already asked," I said, trying to get the title of *Abused and Mistreated Children* out of my mind.

With a sweet smile, Emerson shared, "It is good for kids to hear that life will not always be that way, that they can be happy," before adding, "And I think it might be good for you too."

"I told her I would think about it Em," I replied with a 'now drop it' tone. When he hugged me again, it felt protective.

The new division of the foundation was prompted by the newest edition to their household, Charlotte. I really thought they were kind of crazy for adopting a fifteen year old but Amila said the moment Emerson saw her he couldn't leave her there. I knew they were trying to help. It wasn't the first time. Em and Amila were concerned with what was going to happen when Sophia moved out. There was a tremendous amount of research that went into that specific area of the foundation. As far as they were concerned, I had compartmentalized my whole life to cope with my childhood. It's possible they were right, but today I didn't want to think about it.



As it got later and later, everyone that attended the reception left a beer on the bar 'for Gus' before they headed out, until Jackson and I were the only ones left in The Bar.

Staring at the bar that was lined with bottles, I said, "I'm glad Sarah let us close The Bar down for the last time."

"I miss Gus," he shared.

Tearful, I nodded, saying, "Yea me too."

Nudging me a little, he asked, "Hey, where did you go after the wedding?"

"Next ask me to ride with him to the airport," I said, wiping my eyes.

Appearing concerned, he asked, "How was that?"

Shrugging, I answered, "Alright."

"He asked you to go, didn't he?" Jackson questioned.

Nodding, I said, "Yea," before he asked, "Well?"

Giving him a look, I asked, "Well what?"

"Are you going?" he questioned.

Shaking my head, I replied, "Why would I? Everything is here," before blurting, "I almost forgot!" and walking back behind the bar.

I picked a bottle up from behind the bar and opened it. Taking a sip, I fought back tears before setting my bottle on the bar. Jackson gave a, 'I'm sad too' smile before we headed to the back. Flipping lights off along the way, Jackson

stopped when we reached The Dog House. The little room at the back of The Bar that Gus stayed in when he got in trouble with Sarah, for being himself. It was also where Jackson took me on our first date. Reaching up, Jacks grabbed the little plaque I gave Gus for his birthday and handed it to me. Hugging it tight as we left, when Jackson locked the door, we closed down The Bar for the last time.

Thankfully, Jackson drove his car because I completely forgot I had no way to get home. It was a long quiet drive to my house. I imagine we were both feeling sad about Gus and The Bar.

When Jackson pulled in my driveway, I offered, "Wanna come in? I have cake."

Laughing at me, he said, "Sure."

We made it inside and I immediately walked to the kitchen.

Pulling a plate out of the cabinet, I laughed, "I had to hide a piece from Sophia. We can share it."

When I placed the plate on the counter, Jackson stepped right in front of me, informing, "Ren, I'm not here because of the cake."

Suddenly nervous, my stomach was in knots as I said, "But it's pear cake."

Shaking his head at me with a wide smile, Jackson laughed, "Alright we can share it."

Smiling back, I turned to get another plate.

I turned back around and saw Jackson walking to the couch with the piece of cake in his hand.

"Oh no you don't!" I yelled, quickly following him.

Flopping down on my couch, he flashed a smile, saying, "I remember how you share."

Rolling my eyes at him, I fussed, "Ok now I'm not sharing, give me my cake."

Placing the cake on my coffee table he put his hands up, saying, "I don't want to get injured."

Making a face at him, I said, "And why would you just lay it on the coffee table? I don't even want it now."

"Come sit down with me then," he said, still laughing at me.

Sitting down beside him on the couch, I tucked my legs under my dress and asked, "You don't want it now?"

With a light smile, Jackson, shared, "Sophia told me she saw the necklace I gave you."

"Is that why you're here?" I questioned, not really wanting to know the answer.

Shaking his head at me, he replied, "No," before pulling a ring out of his jacket, saying, "This is."

Speechless, I looked at the little gold Claddagh ring that had a Wren etched into the heart.

"It's a promise ring," he said.

Hardly able to speak, I asked, "What are you promising?"

Leaning closer, he replied, "I already made the promise," right before he kissed me.

When my marriage to Felt was at its end Jackson promised that one day he would put a ring on my finger, make love to me every night and kiss me every morning. Then he swore to wait until I was ready to be with someone again. He gave me time to raise my daughter and get a handle on my life. With the revival of that promise, all my nervousness disappeared and I kissed him back.

Slowly pulling away, he offered, "I can get down on one knee if you want."

Looking down at the ring he was still holding between us, I slid my finger into it and whispered, "Just keep your promise."

"Every day for the rest of my life," he whispered back before I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him.

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