

A BRADFORD SISTERS ROMANCE

# Falling for You



BECKY WADE



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2018 by Rebecca C. Wade

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-7642-1937-5 (trade paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-3197-1 (cloth)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017963578

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Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC

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18 19 20 21 22 23 24      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my editor, Raela Schoenherr

You're easy to talk to, sincere, and enthusiastic. You have fabulous hair and admirable taste in fancy shoes. You're unfailingly gracious. You're wonderfully smart. And I'm very fortunate, because you've lent your wisdom to the editing of every one of my novels. I'm so grateful to have you in my corner.

Thank you!

## CHAPTER

# One

I discovered a secret.”

Corbin Stewart looked sharply at twelve-year-old Charlotte Dixon. “What kind of a secret?”

“A family secret.”

“A big secret or a little secret?”

“I think it’s kind of big,” she whispered. Her pale skin looked paler than usual against her long dark hair.

When Charlotte had appeared at his side just now, Corbin had been tugging on a resistance band with his injured right arm. Now he let the band drop and straddled the weight-lifting bench so that he faced her.

Charlotte was his cousin Mark’s daughter, which technically made Charlotte his first cousin once removed. However, he both thought of Charlotte as his niece and called her his niece. Since Corbin was an only child and had only two first cousins—Mark and one who lived in Michigan with no kids—Charlotte was the closest thing to a niece he was ever going to get.

He lifted an eyebrow teasingly. “So? Spill the secret.”

“I’ve decided not to tell you.”

“Spill your secret, Charlotte. I’m stuck here doing rehab. I’ve

got nothing better to do than listen to the yammerings of a middle schooler.”

“Yammer? I don’t yammer.”

“Trust me. You yammer. Now tell me your secret.”

Charlotte put on her drill sergeant face. “Get back to work with that resistance band, Uncle Corbin. Then we’ll talk.”

“Spill it.”

“Resistance band,” she insisted.

Charlotte wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon when she grew up and had made it her personal mission in life to “help” him rehabilitate his shoulder. For four months now she’d been meeting him for his physical therapy sessions at the Wallace Rehabilitation Center after she got out of school in the afternoons.

He picked up the resistance band and went back to work, watching her out of the corners of his eyes. “Spill it.”

“Straighten your spine. That’s better.”

Back in early June, Corbin had left Dallas and traveled to Seattle so that Dr. Wallace could perform Corbin’s complex shoulder replacement surgery. It was the second surgery he’d had on the shoulder since his final game with the Mustangs last January. In the third quarter of that game, a defensive end had sacked him, crushing his shoulder against the helmet of a fallen player in the process.

Of the thousands of plays Corbin had run in his lifetime, none had impacted him as much as that one. The play had lasted only six seconds. Those six seconds had broken his humerus in five places, ended his football career, sent him on an emotional bender for six weeks, and doomed him to months of pain and one wicked scar.

After Corbin’s second surgery, Dr. Wallace hadn’t needed to pressure Corbin into rehabilitating his shoulder at the doctor’s state-of-the-art facility in Shore Pine, Washington. Mark and his family lived in Shore Pine. Plus, Corbin needed a break from the intense media attention he endured in Dallas.

During June, July, August, and most of September, he’d undergone physical therapy. Neuromuscular massage. Electromagnetic pulse therapy. Cryotherapy.

Charlotte had talked the whole time. She'd corrected his form. She'd told him about her love of Korean pop music and whales and science. She'd told him why her two younger brothers frustrated her and why her mom and dad didn't get her anymore. But this was the first time Charlotte had ever mentioned anything about a family secret.

Corbin was no stranger to family secrets. He'd carried a heavy one when he was her age. He didn't want that for sheltered, odd, sweet, sarcastic, smart Charlotte.

"I've been thinking about this for three days," Charlotte said, "and there's only one person I want to talk to about the secret."

Corbin's jaw hardened because he was afraid he could guess who she was referring to, and it wasn't either of her parents. "If you won't tell me, you should talk to your mom and dad about the secret."

She shook her head. "They're the ones who've been lying to me about the secret all my life. All my life! I can't trust them."

"On your feet," the physical therapist called. "Spider walk."

Corbin and Charlotte, both very familiar with all the shoulder exercises by this point, moved to an empty spot against the gym's wall. Corbin slowly spider-walked the fingers of his right hand up the wall until he'd extended his arm as far overhead as he could stand. Then he began again.

"Up until last night, I was planning to tell you the secret. But then I realized that I can't trust you, either."

He gave her a look of mock outrage. "Why can't you trust me? I'm the one who told you to keep an open mind about EXO's Sehun back when you liked Chen better. Later, you agreed with me. I was right about Sehun." It was all Charlotte's fault that he knew the members of at least three Korean girl bands and three boy bands by name. He'd been trying to wash the information from his memory, but it was sticking like graffiti.

"I can't trust you because you never told me that Willow Bradford was your girlfriend."

Shoot.

Charlotte glared at him suspiciously.

Corbin and Willow had a complicated history that had been sweet—very sweet—before it had turned bitter. Problem was, it had turned so bitter in the end that he had to grit his teeth and look away every time Charlotte started talking about Willow, which was often.

Willow had grown up in Shore Pine’s nearby sister city of Merryweather. Charlotte was in awe of the woman who’d been raised practically in her backyard, then gone on to achieve worldwide success as a model. Charlotte believed her idol to be an angel sent from heaven to wear fashionable clothes, kiss babies, and perform miracles.

“I’ve talked to you about Willow so many times,” Charlotte said. “So many.”

He remained silent.

“Like, I’ve probably talked about her at least once every therapy session.”

He said nothing.

“And you never said that you were her boyfriend.” A scowl lined her forehead.

He sighed and let his arm fall to his side. “I didn’t say anything to you about her because I knew you’d pump me for information.”

“Well . . . *yeah*. I would have.”

“My relationship with Willow didn’t end well.” Whenever he thought about Willow, a mixture of hurt, guilt, frustration, and desire cut through him. “So if you’d pumped me for information, I’d have had a hard time not saying anything bad about her to you. I was doing you a favor by keeping silent and letting you believe she’s a saint. Actually, now that I think about it, I’m pretty impressed by my silence. I’m a hero.”

“I was trying to find information on Google last night about how I could, you know, meet Willow. To tell her my secret. I had a mint in my mouth and when I saw a picture of *you* with *her*, I was so shocked I spit it out. It was disgusting.”

“The fact that I dated her or that you spit out the mint?”

“The fact that I spit out the mint. There’s nothing disgusting about Willow Bradford. She’s perfect.”

He slitted one eye and growled softly. “See. Now that you know I know her, I can’t let that slide. She’s not perfect. She’s human.”

“Straight arm dumbbell lift,” the physical therapist called.

Corbin gripped a weight in his right hand and slowly lifted his arm straight out in front.

“How long did you two, you know, date each other?” Charlotte asked.

“For seven months.”

“How long ago?”

“Four years ago.”

“Why’d you break up?”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Did you love her?”

Yes. “I don’t want to go there, either.”

“Could you help me meet Willow?” Charlotte asked.

“No.”

“Keep that arm straight, Uncle Corbin.”

It infuriated him how difficult some of these simple exercises still were for him.

“My mom said she heard that Willow is running her mom’s inn or hotel or whatever in Merryweather for a few months,” Charlotte said. “Did you know that she’s in Washington?”

“Yes,” he said reluctantly. “I knew.”

Her eyes rounded. “Have you *seen Willow Bradford* since you’ve been living in Shore Pine?”

“A few times.” He remembered exactly how she’d looked the moment they’d come face to face with each other almost three months ago. Her long, graceful limbs had tensed. Her pale skin had flushed. Her blond hair had been slightly windblown, which made her look like she’d just been kissed by someone who knew how to kiss. The calendar had said July that night, but her green eyes had sparkled with winter anger.

“I saw her at a birthday party,” he told Charlotte. “A birthday party I would never have gone to, by the way, if I’d known she was going to be there.”



“You *could* help me meet Willow,” Charlotte stated. “I know you could.” She tested a brave-but-pained expression on him. “I haven’t been sleeping much because of this secret. I can’t talk to my parents about it, and I can’t talk to you.”

He knew he was in trouble. He’d been a beast on the gridiron, but he was a marshmallow where Charlotte was concerned. “How about you talk to a school counselor?”

“No.”

“The youth pastor at church?”

“No. I know in my heart that Willow Bradford can help me. She’s really sweet and she loves kids because she volunteers for Benevolence Worldwide.”

“Just because she’s an ambassador for a charity doesn’t mean she loves kids.”

“Of course it does. Also, she and one of her sisters and her dad were interviewed on TV, and they talked about how they handled the family tragedy they went through when Willow’s stepmom was killed. My secret is about a family tragedy, too.”

Concern pulled his mouth into a frown. “It is?”

“Yes. So see? Willow and I have family tragedies in common.”

He sighed.

“I know she’ll help me. I think that *God Himself* wants her to help me.” She spoke with the kind of drama that belonged only to twelve-year-old girls.

Corbin recognized that she was working him over, but that didn’t make him immune.

“Will you please, please, please help me meet her?” Charlotte asked.

Shoot.

• • •

*Text message from Corbin to Willow fifteen days before their breakup:*

Corbin

I miss you. It feels like forever since you left.

Willow

I just left Dallas yesterday.

Corbin

Exactly. Until I met you, I didn't know a day could feel like forever.

Willow

A day really can feel like forever, can't it? I miss you, too.

Corbin

Come back and see me this weekend.

Willow

I'd love to, but the people at Harper's Bazaar who hired me to do this shoot in Morocco might not be thrilled if I left. Come see me this weekend in Morocco.

Corbin

I might.

Willow

Except that you're playing the Eagles this weekend.

Corbin

Oh, right. Bummer.

Willow

As if you'd ever actually skip a game. You're crazy about football.

Corbin

I'm crazier about you.

Willow

Well, if you decide to stand up the Eagles this weekend, let me know. I'll make sure to have a cup of Morocco's famous mint tea waiting for you.

Corbin

I don't want tea. I just want you.