



Robin Huber

TRUE
NORTH

a love story

His love will lead her home...

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[*A Love Like Yours*](#) (Book 1 in *Love Story Duet*)

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For Kevin

Chapter 1

Liv

I lie in my bed, clinging to a heavy blanket of sleep, but the morning sun casts its soft glow against my cheek, calling me to get up and face the man in my kitchen who asked me to be his wife last night. To whom, I politely said yes.

A loud bang forces my eyes open. The crescendo of pots and pans clattering across my kitchen floor is an ironic accompaniment to the mess I've gotten myself into.

I groan quietly and pull my duvet over my head, but even then, I can't escape the morning light pouring mercilessly through my bedroom window, or the glaring fact that I have no intention of marrying Travis Beauclair.

Considering that I failed miserably in my attempt to end our casual dating relationship last night, it should be fascinating to see how breaking off our budding engagement goes.

I throw the duvet off and press my fingers to my tight chest, mindlessly rubbing the spot that's been quietly aching since I was twenty-two, but it doesn't help.

It never helps.

I smell coffee, the only thing that will help me feel better about breaking Travis's heart, and...*bacon*. Bacon will give me strength.

I stare at a crack in my ceiling, listening to Travis for a few more minutes, until I hear the quiet thuds of his bare feet crossing my old—but charmingly historic—apartment. One could argue that old and charming aren't synonymous, but I try to look on the bright side of things. It's a necessary coping mechanism in my life.

Travis carefully nudges my bedroom door open with a tray of food, wearing a pair of joggers, a six-pack, and a smile. As charming and handsome as he is, I've been looking for the bright side of our relationship for a while now—but the inevitable truth is, I don't love him.

He tries to blow one of his messy, dark locks out of his blue eyes. "Hello, fiancée." He smiles wide, and my heart takes a diving leap into my stomach. I can't look at his scruffy just-woke-up-and-made-you-breakfast-in-bed face.

I'm a terrible person.

I should have ended things with him months ago. Now I've gone and agreed to marry the man.

What was I thinking?

I wasn't thinking. I was so caught up in my plan to break up with him last night, I was completely caught off guard when he dropped to one knee in the middle of my favorite restaurant. The word *yes* just fell right out of my mouth, even though every single part of me was screaming *no*.

I blame shock and peer-pressure for my automatic answer. All the in-the-know waiters and other diners were staring at us, waiting for me to accept his very *public* proposal. I didn't want to disappoint them. But the second I said yes, I heard a familiar voice fill my head, echoing my own ambivalent thoughts. *Liv, what are you doing?*

I pulled in a hushed breath when I heard my twin brother's voice, and blinked back the unexpected tears that rushed to my eyes. I hadn't heard Brandon's voice in so long, and although it was disapproving, I was wrapped in warmth. I closed my eyes for just a moment, just long enough to see his face preserved forever at twenty-one, before someone else filled my mind. Someone I've tried to forget for seven long years. Someone I'm now certain will never leave my heart no matter how much time passes. Gabriel North.

Assuming my tears were for his proposal, Travis pulled me into his arms and slid the engagement ring onto my finger. I was too busy clinging to the sound of my brother's voice and trying to hold onto Gabe's beautiful face in my mind to stop him. It wasn't until the people around us started clapping and congratulating us on our engagement that I finally came to my senses and surveyed the damage.

In just a few foggy minutes I managed to acquire a sparkly new diamond ring and a beaming fiancé.

"Coffee?" Travis asks with a smile, and I nod my head tentatively.

"Yes, please."

He carefully sets the tray of food down on my nightstand and hands me a cup he already made. I take it from him, sipping it eagerly, but it does little to comfort me. It's too strong, too sweet, and in need of cream. Lots of cream. But I drink it anyway, hoping it will take the edge off my champagne-induced headache—a consequence of accidentally agreeing to marry him last night.

I swallow down the bitter coffee and place the mug on my nightstand next to the sparkly diamond ring that's resting dreamily in a ray of sunlight, reflecting a million tiny white sparkles on my wall.

Travis immediately picks it up and slides it back onto my finger, and a jolt of guilt shoots across my chest and wraps tightly around my heart.

I rub the spot mindlessly. "Travis—"

"Move to Dallas with me," he interrupts, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing inside me.

"What?" I ask, shocked. As if getting married wasn't enough, he wants me to move to a new city? A new state?

I've spent seven years trying to make a life here in Raleigh, but most days I still feel like a misshapen puzzle piece that will never fit in. I tried to root myself with work, with friends...even with *him*. But all of that has only ever provided temporary relief from the longing I feel to be somewhere else—the place that still echoes deep in my bones. The place where, I know in my heart, I'm supposed to be. The thought of starting over again somewhere else is disconcerting, to say the least.

"I know we're not married yet, but I don't want to go without you." Excitement flashes in his eyes.

"Travis"—I shake my head and spin the ring on my finger—"I can't move to Dallas with you."

"Why? You knew Raleigh was only temporary for me. Graduate from Duke, pass the bar, then go home to Dallas and join my parents' law firm. I might be a few years late, but that was always the plan." He laughs softly. "Guess I just needed to sow some wild oats first." He puts his hand on my thigh and grins. "But now that I've gotten that out of my system..."

"That was always *your* plan, Travis. Not mine."

He pushes his lips together and flashes his piercing blue eyes at me. "Liv, you can get another job in Dallas if that's what you're worried about. I know it's a big city, but my family has connections. I'm sure they'll pull some strings for you."

I feel my face screw up. "Thanks, but I don't want another job." Not in Dallas, anyway.

His face is a mix of disappointment and confusion. "Okay...for now, I guess. But once we're married..." He shrugs his shoulders and says firmly, "The firm is in Dallas, Liv. My family is in Dallas."

"I know...but I won't be."

“What do you mean, you won’t be?” He sounds nervously perplexed.

I decide to rip the band aid off. “I mean I can’t marry you, Travis.”

He studies me for several seconds, blinking occasionally, and then he stands up and runs his hand through his dark hair. “But last night...you said yes.”

“I know I did. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? For what? For changing your mind?”

“I haven’t changed my mind, Travis.”

He folds his arms over his bare chest. “Then why the hell did you say yes?” Why would you do that?”

“I was just...overwhelmed. It all happened so quickly and everyone was watching us.” I drop my chin and say honestly, “I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“How’s that working out?” he snaps.

I close my eyes and whisper, “I’m sorry.”

After a few silent seconds, he sits back down on the bed and reaches for my hand. “You’re just scared,” he says softly. “It’s a big deal to get married. I know that. We’re young and we still have our whole lives ahead of us.”

“I’ll be thirty next year,” I say quietly, wondering where the hell the last seven years of my life went, and feeling agitated with myself for letting them slip by so carelessly.

I’ll be thirty.

I should want to get married. I should want a big city job, certainly one that’s less stifling than the one I have here—editing marketing materials for restaurant chains isn’t exactly my dream. But I *don’t*, I don’t want any of it. I don’t want it in Dallas and I don’t want it *here*.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Olivia. I can give you a good life in Dallas. I *want* to give you a good life. Will you just let me do that? Please?”

I give him a tight smile and nod over the emotion that’s suddenly strangling me. “I know you can...but it’s not the life I want.”

“Why?” he groans, and it pierces my heart.

I look up at him with watery eyes and admit, “I don’t love you, Travis.” I feel both relieved and stricken at once, finally saying those words out loud—words I planned on saying last night, before he got down on one knee. The anxiety that clung to them in my head before we got to the restaurant is only exacerbated by the look on his face now.

After a few shocked seconds, the corners of his mouth turn down and he nods his head slowly. “I guess that’s a pretty good reason.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He lets go of my hand, stands up, and gazes at the massive green-leafed sugar maple outside my second-story window.

I’m going to miss that tree.

“Travis, I have to go home.” The ache in my bones turns into a quiet buzzing that makes my heart thump anxiously.

“Home?” He turns around and gives me a curious look. “To Georgia?”

“Yeah.” I nod softly.

St. Simons Island is the second greatest love of my life—the place I called home for twenty-two years. The place that still beckons my soul like a lighthouse signaling a ship adrift at sea. I haven’t been back since I left for my final year of college at North Carolina State seven years ago—a year later than originally planned. But after what happened the summer before, the last thing on my mind was hurrying back here to finish school.

I had planned to return to St. Simons after I graduated, but when the time came, I couldn’t do it. As difficult as it has been to stay away, the fear of facing who I left behind was easier to deal with—or *not* deal with—from four hundred miles away.

“Why?” Travis asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I inhale a deep breath and hug my knees to my chest. “I miss the ocean.”

“The ocean?”

More specifically, the tiny section of the Atlantic that surrounds the Island. I miss the way it rushes up on the sandy shores and fills the sounds and rivers that snake through salty marshes. I miss the smell of it, I miss the sound of it, I miss the feel of it on my sun-soaked skin in the summer.

“Yeah,” I say softly, “I miss the ocean.”

He sits down on the edge of the bed and folds his hands in his lap. “So, I guess that’s it then,” he says, uncharacteristically throwing in the towel. “I’ll go my way and you’ll go yours, and we won’t get married.”

I nod softly. “I guess so.”

He gauges me for a few seconds, and then shakes his head and lets out a bemused breath. “Really?” He stands up and starts pacing around the room with a determined look on his face.

After a few unnerving seconds, he stops suddenly and gives me an accusatory look. “This is about that guy you used to date, isn’t it? The one who was in the accident with you and your brother.”

“What?” I whisper, because a sudden flash of heat is coursing through me, burning up all my oxygen. “You don’t know anything about him, or my brother.”

“Well, maybe if you opened up to me once in a while, I might. What I do know is that he got some sort of brain damage in the accident and now you’re getting all nostalgic about him because I want to give you a life that he’ll *never* be able to give you. Damn, Liv! When are you going to let him go?”

“Stop it,” I say through clenched teeth. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“For Christ’s sake, he killed your brother.”

I bolt up from the bed and slap him hard across the face, making my palm scream. “I said stop!” I yank the ring off my finger and shove it in his hand. “I think you should go.”

He holds his red cheek, looking dumbfounded. “Liv, you’re being irrational.”

I glare at him, hoping to convey the thoughts I’m holding back, which I’d likely regret saying later.

He looks down at the ring in his hand and then at me with disappointment in his eyes. “You’re really doing this?”

I nod at him, unable to find words to express the flood of emotions surging through me.

“Liv, please—”

I close my eyes and warm tears spill down my cheeks. “It’s over, Travis.” I exhale a shaky breath that’s laced with relief, sorrow, guilt, and fear, because I know now, the only way I can move on with my life is by going home and facing my past.

Chapter 2

Liv, Eight Years Ago, August 15th

“Momma? Where are my jeans?” I call down the stairs, hanging the top half of my body over the banister.

“Which ones?”

“You know, the ones that are faded and ripped a little at the knees?”

She holds up the pair I was looking for. “These?”

“Yes!”

“Still warm from the dryer,” she says, tossing them up to me.

I catch them midair and wink at her. “Best mom ever.”

“Love you too,” she laughs.

One of the best things about being home for summer break is that my mom offers to do my laundry. And I’m more than happy to let her. Beats waiting around the laundromat in the windowless basement of my dorm.

“You’re still not ready?” my twin brother, Brandon, says, combing his sandy blond hair in the hall mirror. “Gabe’s on his way. He’ll be here any minute.”

“I know his whereabouts, Brandon. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, well, he was my best friend first,” he calls down the hall as I make my way to my room.

I turn around and make pouty lips at him. “Aw, I remember those days. Sorry they had to end, but he’d rather make out with me now.”

He makes a gagging sound as I disappear behind my bedroom door and it makes me laugh. *Poor Brandon*. He’s been putting up with me and Gabe since the tenth grade. But he has no one to blame but himself. He’s the one who said it was okay for his best friend to start dating his sister. I think he might have underestimated Gabe’s affection for me.

I tuck my white tank top into my snug fitting jeans, step into a pair of sandals, and inspect my sun-kissed face in the mirror. By sun-kissed, I mean I forgot to reapply sunscreen while watching Gabe surf for several hours this morning. And by watching Gabe surf, I mean I was gazing at him unabashedly and daydreaming about our future. One more year until we graduate from North Carolina State and then the world is ours. *According to Gabe*. I giggle with wonder and excitement at the thought.

I still remember the thrill I felt when we both got accepted, and the subsequent relief that followed, knowing that we could stay together in college. Gabe never doubted that we could maintain a long-distance relationship if we had to, but I'm slightly more practical than he is. I brush on some powder to help camouflage my pink cheeks and add some mascara to highlight my green eyes. Just a dab of my favorite tinted lip gloss—I smack my lips together and make a soft popping sound—and I'm almost ready to go.

"You ready?" Brandon calls from the other side of the door? "I'm heading downstairs."

"Yep, I'll be down in two minutes," I call back. *Or five.*

I run my fingers through my long brown hair to separate the loose waves I curled into it. It's usually the color of milk chocolate, but the sun has really lightened it up this summer.

Okay. Ready to go. I grab my phone and look at the delicate gold ring on my right hand—a small compass is engraved on the surface around a little diamond. It was a gift for my eighteenth birthday from Gabe. *My true north.* I spin it around on my finger and smile, thinking of the sweet words he wrote in the letter that went with it.

My phone buzzes on my dresser and I see a text message from Brandon.

Brandon: *Gabe's here*

I knew he was here. I could hear his Camaro coming up the street.

Me: *I'm coming*

I grab my bag and bounce down the stairs, eager to see his handsome face, which never burns, no matter how much time he spends in the sun. His skin just soaks up the rays and turns a warm shade of bronze.

Brandon opens the front door before Gabe has a chance to knock and waves him into the foyer. I stop at the bottom step and watch them talk for a minute, fighting the gravitational pull of Gabe's golden brown eyes. They're like warm honey and melted chocolate, framed by dark lashes. He runs his hand through his caramel brown hair, pushing it off his forehead, and laughs at something Brandon said. It must have been good, because his cheeks flush beneath his tan skin. He glances over at me and his cupid's bow lips turn up at the corners, stretching into a full blown, heart-stopping smile.

"Hey, sunshine."

"Hey."

He begins to walk over to me, but my mother reaches him first and pulls him into a hug. “Hey there, handsome.”

“Hey, Ms. Dalton. You look nice tonight. Duke taking you out?”

“Sweet boy”—she pats his cheek—“flattery will get you everywhere.”

There’s no hiding my mother’s affection for Gabe, not that she’s ever tried. She’s had a soft spot for him since we were in preschool, which is about how long he’s been friends with Brandon.

I step up behind him and wind my arms around his lean stomach. “Hi.”

He turns around and wraps his arms around me. “Hi.”

I smile and stand on my tiptoes to plant a soft kiss on his lips—one that’s appropriate for my parents’ house. But Brandon just can’t help himself.

“Get a room,” he teases, and I flush pink.

I hear my dad choke on whatever he’s drinking in the kitchen, and then he makes a beeline to the foyer where we’re all gathered. He wraps his wide arm around Gabe’s neck and says, “You take care of my little girl tonight.”

I roll my eyes. “You know I’m an adult, right, Daddy?”

“Of course, Duke,” Gabe says confidently, “you know I always do.”

My dad nods and gives Brandon a firm look. “You too. Keep an eye on your sister.”

“What is this, nineteen-fifty? I’m twenty-one, I can take care of myself,” I exclaim, but nobody seems to be paying any attention to me.

“Yes, sir,” Brandon answers, cutting his amused eyes at me.

“Oh, Duke, give it a rest.” My mom pulls him away. “Have fun at the dive-in. Be safe, okay?”

“Don’t worry, Momma. Nobody wants to get in the ocean at night with *Jaws* playing on a giant projector over the water.” Brandon laughs and kisses her cheek.

“Well, be careful around the bonfire then,” she says as we head out the front door.

“Yes, ma’am,” Brandon answers, closing the door behind us, but she pulls it open and calls down the sidewalk.

“Drive safe.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And wear your seatbelts.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t drink and drive.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Or do drugs.”

“Oh my God, Mom.” I spin around and look at her. “We get it.”

She smiles and winks. “Love you.”

“Love you too. You’re crazy.”

“Bye,” she sings, and closes the door.

Brandon climbs into the back of Gabe’s Camaro—a graduation present from his parents before we left for college, and a reward for making the grades in high school to earn a full scholarship. It’s white with shiny black racing stripes along the top, just like he always wanted. I inherited my dad’s old Jetta and Brandon got an even older pickup truck that used to belong to our neighbor. Grades didn’t equate to wheels in our house, especially not when both of us were heading off to college at the same time. Gabe is an only child and his parents liked to dote on him growing up—not entirely because he was part of the IVF baby boom of the nineties, although his mom often refers to him as her *miracle baby*. Actually, she would say *bébé miracle*. Jacqueline North was born and raised in France. She moved here when she was a teenager, but she speaks fluent French and still has an accent. She taught Gabe to speak French too, but he usually reserves it for arguments with her, or to whisper sweet nothings in my ear.

I know the basics.

Je t’aime is *I love you*.

Mon amour is *my love*.

Petite amie is *girlfriend*.

I’ve completely fallen in love with the language, so last year I chose to minor in French. Hopefully by the time I graduate, I’ll be able to hold a conversation in the North household. Or at least keep up with Gabe’s dad. Danny North is Georgia born and bred, but he knows enough French to weigh in when he wants to.

Gabe closes the passenger door behind Brandon before I can get in.

“What are you doing?”

He spins me around and takes my face in his warm hands. “I just wanted to tell you that you look really beautiful tonight.” He smiles and dips his head to kiss me, softly at first, and then deeply, pressing me against the car until I feel every line of his body against mine.

They say that the French are one of the most romantic nationalities and I’m pretty sure the genetic trait didn’t skip Gabe. It isn’t uncommon for him

to use words like *beautiful* when he speaks to me or to kiss me like it's the last time.

He drops his hands away, leaving my lips tingling as he whispers in my ear, "Je t'aime."

I inhale shallow breaths and bite my smiling lip. "I love you too."

A loud smack against the inside of the back window reminds me that we're not alone and a warm rush of blood fills my cheeks. Gabe laughs like it's the best joke in the world to be kissing his best friend's sister. He opens the door and I casually slide into the passenger seat.

"Seriously, Liv, was that really necessary? I mean, it's bad enough that I had to see, but Mom and Dad could have been watching. Are you trying to make Dad's head explode?"

I turn around and smirk at him. "Oh, I'm sorry, does it make you uncomfortable to see your sister making out with your best friend?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, it does."

I laugh and reach for Gabe's shoulder when he slides into the driver's seat. Brandon starts in on him as soon as he shuts his door. "Dude, I'm happy you two are together, but she's still my little sister."

"Brandon, you were born two minutes before me."

"Yeah, and that makes me older. Leave me with some shred of brotherly naiveté, please."

Gabe glances at him in the rearview mirror. "You and those big words."

"Hey, don't hate because I got into Georgetown," Brandon says smugly.

I glance at Gabe and smirk. "That was three years ago, B. And tell us again, Mr. Valedictorian, why you chose to go to one of the top party schools in the country instead." I turn around and wait for his answer.

"Hey, I may be smart, but even us geniuses like to have a good time. Life's all about balance, sis. Besides, you know I don't do cold weather. And FSU is a perfectly respectable university."

"It didn't have anything to do with Audrey Miller going there, did it?"

"I mean, it doesn't hurt to see that fine—I mean *familiar*—face around campus," he says, grinning.

"And there it is." I laugh and shake my head.

Gabe smiles and rubs my knee. "Well, it may not be Georgetown, but I think NC State is working out just fine for us."

I smile softly. "Yeah, I'd say so."

“I still can’t believe that you actually went *away* for college,” Brandon teases. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

I turn around and say happily, “Ain’t nobody like a homebody.”

Gabe laughs and his eyes crinkle. “You better believe it, B. We go back to Raleigh in a few weeks. You won’t see us again until Thanksgiving.”

Brandon rubs his chin and says, “It’s weird, isn’t it? We come home and it’s like no time has passed, nothing has really changed between us. But then we go back to our separate lives and that’s kind of normal now too.”

“Yeah. It’s weird,” I say softly over the hesitation that accompanies the thought of leaving again. I don’t mind Raleigh, exactly, but even after three years of going to school there, it doesn’t feel like home. Not the way the Island does. This is where our history is. Where our families are. Where we grew up. It’s where Gabe and I fell in love. And where we’ve spent every summer, like this one, playing on the beach, fishing in the surf, and combing the sand for shark teeth.

At low tide, the shore stretches for hundreds of yards and it’s always a contest to see who can collect the most shark teeth. We also convinced our dad to let us take his boat out on our own a few times this summer, so we got to explore some of the smaller barrier islands, like Little St. Simons and Jekyll Island. I’ve made a hobby of taking pictures of the wildlife that live in the flooded wetlands that surround them, and the century-old live oaks that drip with Spanish moss and tangle with the wild palm trees that line their shores.

It’s never easy to leave, but at least I have my pictures. And Gabe. He feels like home no matter where we are.

I squeeze his hand and he smiles at me as he pulls into the gravel parking lot by the beach. The engine purrs as he looks for a spot in the crowded lot. When he eventually finds one and parks, I hurry to unbuckle and get my door open before he can circle the car, but he beats me to it, greeting me with a satisfied smile as he pulls the door open.

“It’s the twenty-first century, Gabe. I can open my own door.”

“I know.” He winks.

* * *

I sit between Gabe’s legs, feeling him breathe in and out against my back as we watch *Jaws* from our blanket on the sand. He kisses my hair

occasionally and nuzzles my neck as Chief Brody and Hooper set out on a boat to kill the giant man-eating shark.

“Is this the one where they electrocute it?” I ask.

“No that’s the second one. They blow it up in this one.”

“So, how does it come back in the second one?”

“That’s a different shark.”

“Oh. So there’s a whole bunch of these super realistic animatronic sharks swimming around.”

He laughs and nods toward Brandon, who’s cozied up with Audrey Miller a few blankets away. “Looks like he’s pretty comfortable.”

I smile and nod. “He’s liked her for years, but it took him until college to admit it.”

“Not exactly.”

I look up at him with curious eyes. “What?”

“He told me that he had a huge crush on her in high school, but he asked me not to tell you.”

“What? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!” I huff. Then I purse my lips over a small smile and say, “You’re a good friend.”

“Well, I just told you, so...maybe not.”

I laugh. “I guess it’s not surprising. She’s exactly his type.” Tall and lean with ample curves and long, wavy brown hair. I’d kill to have curves like Audrey. My B-cups and one-hundred-and-twenty pound frame don’t exactly put me in the curvaceous category. “Do you have a type?” I ask, looking up at him.

“Yeah.” He laughs.

“Go on,” I say curiously. *Please don’t say tall and blond.*

He reaches up and tucks my hair behind my ear. “You,” he says softly, making my heart sprint.

I kiss him with smiling lips, then I turn back around and my eyes drift to Brandon and Audrey again. She’s pretty, with her blue eyes and full lips, but she doesn’t seem to know it. She’s also very kind, a necessary prerequisite for dating my brother.

I’m really rooting for you, Audrey.

Brandon might be a genius, but his common sense is lacking sometimes. It makes me feel a lot better knowing someone like Audrey is looking out for him in college.

I'm not aware that I'm staring at them, until something obstructs my view.

Jeremy Black.

He stops at our blanket and squats down in the sand in front of me. "Hey, Livy." He smooths his black hair back. "Haven't seen you all summer. You look good."

Gabe leans forward and wraps his fingers around my arms possessively, which I would normally mind, but Jeremy's sole purpose in life is to remind Gabe that he kissed me in the sixth grade. "Jeremy," Gabe says sharply, and that's all he has to say before Jeremy is back on his feet. Gabe is a lot bigger than he is.

"Hi, Gabe," Stacey McGillis coos, batting her thickly mascaraed lashes at him.

Jeremy's eyes drop to Stacey's pushed up boobs.

"Hi, Stacey," I say, pulling her attention away from Gabe. "You look really...nice tonight."

She gives me a condescending smile and a flat, "Thanks."

I guess I wasn't convincing.

"You and Jeremy should go grab a spot to watch the movie. It looks like there's still some space way over there," I say, pointing across the crowd of people.

She narrows her eyes at me. "See you later, Gabe." She flutters her fingers at him as Jeremy pulls her away.

"God, those two are made for each other," I say, rolling my eyes.

"I fucking hate when he calls you Livy," Gabe grumbles.

"The feeling's mutual. Nobody's called me Livy since the third grade." I pull him close, wrap my arms around his neck, and plant a slow, firm kiss on his lips.

"Mmmm," he murmurs against my lips, "what was that for?"

"I just love you. And I thought you needed a gentle reminder."

"Remind me again."

I kiss him again and then I stand up and tug him off the blanket onto the soft sand. "Walk with me? I need a break from the crowd."

"Okay."

"Maybe we can find a more private spot on the beach. Grab the blanket."

Gabe gives me a familiar look when he realizes that I'm not merely interested in a walk, and it makes me laugh. He quickly gathers up the blanket and tells Brandon that we're going to look for a better spot, but Brandon is too wrapped up in Audrey to care.

"Yeah, yeah, be safe," he says lazily as we walk away.

I take Gabe's hand and let him lead me down the beach away from everyone. "Did my brother just tell us to have safe sex?"

"I think so."

"That is wrong on so many levels."

Gabe laughs. "Doesn't he know I haven't deflowered you yet?"

"Oh my God, if you could never say deflower, like ever again, that'd be great."

He laughs freely and it echoes down the beach.

We walk a long way before we settle on a quiet spot between two sand dunes, far enough down the beach that we can't hear the chatter from the crowd or see the giant movie screen over the water. Gabe spreads the blanket out on the sand and we sit together like before, my back to his chest, his arms over my shoulders, his chin to my cheek, gazing out at the dark ocean.

A nearly full moon is hanging low over the horizon, casting its pale light on the beach and reflecting off the waves that roll in several yards away. They crash on the shore, one after the other, making a rhythmic hushing sound.

It's a warm night, but the cool air coming off the ocean raises goosebumps on my arms. Gabe rubs them when I shiver. I rest my head back against his chest, feeling him breathe in and out against me. I could sit like this forever, listening to the hush of the ocean and the quiet pull of his slow breaths in the dark.

"I'm going to miss this."

"You always do. Maybe this year we can check out some of the beaches in North Carolina. Raleigh isn't that far from the coast. We can take road trips on the weekends."

"Yeah. But they won't be like this. They won't be *home*."

"My sweet, sentimental girl." He hugs me tight. "This year is going to fly by, you'll see. Before you know it we'll be graduating, and then we can come home, at least for a while, until we get jobs like real adults." He laughs low and soft in my ear.

“You promise?”

“I promise. This time next year, we’ll be sitting right here in this very spot.”

I smile softly. “You know, you can’t break your word. It’s all a man’s got,” I say, reciting a line from a movie, though I can’t recall which one.

“I would never break a promise to you, Liv.” His tone is suddenly serious and I wonder if we’re still talking about coming home after we graduate.

I turn around between his knees and his eyes grip mine.

“If you want to live here after we graduate, we will. Okay? I’ll commute if I have to.”

“Gabe—”

“If you want me to build you a house right here with my own two hands, I’ll do it,” he says, and a quiet rush of air leaves my lungs. He wraps his hand behind my neck and rubs his thumb over my cheek. “If you want me to love you every day for the rest of our lives, I will.”

“Gabriel,” I whisper, curling my fingers around his wrist.

He presses his mouth to mine and kisses me slow and deep, love pouring out of him and into me. His fingers push into my hair and I snake my arms around his back, pulling him close.

I break the kiss and whisper into his ear, “Gabe, I want you.”

He pulls his mouth back to mine and mumbles against my lips, “I know, I want you too.”

“No, Gabe”—I push his shoulders back and look into his dark eyes—“I want *all* of you. I don’t want to wait anymore.” I swallow hard, feeling my heart thumping in my throat.

Gabe’s face fills with intensity. “Are you sure? What about—”

“My virtue?” I smile softly and say certainly, “I *am* going to marry you, Gabriel North, but not today. And I don’t want our first time to be in a dorm room. I want it to be here, on our beach. I’m ready.”

The muscles in his clenched jaw tighten and he swallows hard, making his Adam’s apple bounce up and down. “Liv”— he brings his mouth back to mine—“I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” I whisper.

“We’ll go slow, okay?”

“Okay.”

His eyes fill with gentle concern. “You’ll tell me if I hurt you?”

“Yes.”

He kisses me softly, but urgently, raising my arms above my head. I hold them there while he lifts my tank top and slides it over my arms, exposing my white lace bra. He leans down and kisses the tops of my breasts softly. Those he’s seen a time or two, but I appreciate the special attention he gives them. He lays me back on the blanket and kneels beside me to unbutton my jeans. I lift my bottom so that he can maneuver them over my hips. He tugs them down past my knees and struggles a little to get them off my ankles.

“Fresh out of the dryer.” I smile. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for wearing tight jeans, baby,” he says, and I giggle. He gazes down at what’s left of my clothing—my bra and matching panties. He reaches over his head and pulls his shirt off, and he’s all long lean muscles and golden skin, tanned from the summer sun. He crawls over me, still wearing his jeans, and positions his elbows beside my shoulders, leaning up to hold his weight off me. He drops his head and rubs his nose against mine. “Are you sure you’re ready to do this?”

“I’ve never been so sure about anything.”

He smiles and kisses me hard, pushing his tongue into my mouth, and mine tangles with his. We mastered kissing long ago. Slow, deep kisses fill me with hot, flowing honey that slowly travels down to my core. I press my hips up against his instinctively, needing to feel his hardness between my legs to relieve the ache there. Gabe takes my cue and slides his hand between us, slowly inching his way down my stomach until his long fingers are inside my panties, gliding between my legs. He pushes his finger inside me and I moan into his mouth, rocking my hips against his hand. He makes a deep, throaty groan and kisses me harder, pushing into me deeper, and then he rubs the slickness up over the sensitive spot between my legs, circling it again and again. I stop kissing him and drop my head against the blanket, arching my back as I quietly cry, “Gabe.”

He drops his mouth to my neck and trails warm kisses up to my jaw and back down, until I cry out with pleasure and my body shatters into a million pieces beneath him. He brings his mouth back to mine and kisses me slow as my body trembles beneath him.

“Gabe,” I pant, “I’m ready. I want you...now.”

He gives me a small, satisfied smile. “Slow, remember?”

I nod my head reluctantly and try to slow down. As ready as my body is, I know this isn't something I want to rush.

He hooks his fingers inside my panties and slides them down my legs, leaving warm, breathy kisses in his wake that do all sorts of delicious things to my insides. I try to lie still and savor the feeling of his lips dragging across my skin. He reaches for my bra and I lean up to give him access to the clasp in the back. He quickly unhooks it—something else he mastered a while ago—and slides it down my arms. I lie back on the blanket, completely naked, gazing up at him, and I feel so safe and at ease lying in the light of the moon beneath him. He leans over me and kisses my breasts, and I let out a soft moan. He kisses my mouth and rubs his hand across my stomach. “You’re so beautiful.”

I beam up at him, thinking the same thing about him. “Tell me again.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Say it in French.”

“Tu es la plus belle chose que j’ai jamais vu,” he whispers. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I pull his mouth back to mine and kiss him hard.

He unbuttons his jeans and shrugs out of them, but not before grabbing a condom out of his pocket that I’m pretty sure is a few years old now. I’ve been on birth control for a while to help with my periods, so I don’t worry about its reliability.

He sheds his boxer-briefs and I feel him spring free against my stomach. This is all new and the feeling of him against me makes my muscles clench low and deep in my tummy.

I’m ready. I’m *so* ready.

He tears the condom open with his teeth and reaches down to put it on. When he pulls his hands to my face again, I can see the question in his eyes.

“Yes,” I say, giving him the answer he’s asking for. “I’m ready. I want you.”

He nods softly and his eyes, dark in the light of the moon, gaze into mine as he takes himself in his hand and rubs softly over my entrance. Then he gently pushes into me.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

I groan softly at the strange feeling, hoping he didn’t hear, but he stops moving, so I know that he did. “It’s okay, you didn’t hurt me.”

“Liv, we don’t have to.”

“I want to. Just go slow, okay?”

He presses his lips together and nods, and continues pushing into me ever so slightly, but I suddenly feel tense and rigid.

Why? I’m ready. My body is definitely ready, or it was two minutes ago. I love him more than anything in the world. *I’m ready.* I close my eyes and take slow deep breaths, and try to relax.

Breathe in.

And out.

In. And out.

My muscles begin to relax and my body melts into the blanket under Gabe’s weight. I grip his arms, feeling his muscles flex as he holds himself over me. He’s being so careful.

Relax, Liv. Just relax, I remind myself.

The look on Gabe’s face is one of pure ecstasy and awe. It’s too much. I pull his mouth to mine and kiss his full lips. He loses focus and pushes into me the rest of the way, sending a sharp pinch of pain through me that makes me squeak.

“I’m sorry,” he says, looking apologetic.

The pain quickly dissipates and I focus on his handsome face, on the weight of his body pressing down on me, on the warmth of his wide thighs against mine, on the way that we’re connected. I smile up at him. “I’m okay. Keep going.”

He slowly pulls back and I focus on the strange feeling of him moving inside me. He feels *huge*. I wonder if this is what it feels like for everyone. Just when I begin to feel empty again—a welcome relief—he pushes back into me, filling me up and stretching me further. I make a soft moan that matches his and I realize that it’s because it felt *good*. He moves out of me again and then back in. *Ohh*.

“Are you okay?” he asks, barely audible.

“Yes.”

His eyes close and he breathes heavily against my mouth. “You feel so amazing...I.... Oh my God...Liv.... You feel...incredible.”

I drop my head back against the blanket and pull him down against me, relishing the feeling of his weight on top of me as his tongue caresses mine in sync with this slow movements. I run my fingers down his back and grab

his bottom, pulling him against me to let him know that he can go a little faster now, and he does.

Ohh. Ohhh. Okay, I get it. This is what all the fuss is about. I pull my knees up and hold onto him as he takes me to a new place of pleasure that I've never experienced before. I feel the fire building deep in my tummy and crawling up my thighs...slowly...slowly...until my entire body is bursting beneath him. "Gabriel," I cry, wrapping my legs around him tightly.

He lets out a husky groan and kisses me passionately, and I shudder beneath him while he thrusts into me two more times, making a deep guttural groan and grinding his hips against me, before he stills.

I lie beneath him, dizzy with satisfaction, both physically and emotionally. Gabe just made love to me for the first time and it was *amazing*. I didn't think it was possible to love him more, but I do. I smile, feeling giddy, but I need to take a breath and Gabe is lying on my chest. "Gabe, you're crushing me."

He raises up on one elbow. "Sorry." He has a giant smile on his face, the one that shows off his straight white teeth and makes my heart skip around in my chest. "That was amazing."

I reach up and rub my thumb over his flushed cheek. "It was pretty incredible."

"Did it hurt?" he asks with apologetic eyes.

"Just a little at first, but as soon as I relaxed it felt good, and then it felt great, and then it felt amazing." I smile and run my fingers through his hair. "I love you so much."

He plants a soft kiss on my forehead. "I love you more."

We get dressed, but we opt to skip the rest of the movie. We lie together instead, our fingers interlaced, my head on his chest and his arms wrapped around me, staring up at the starry sky, talking and making plans for the future. After about an hour, we get up and make our way back. The movie should be over soon and Brandon will likely be looking for us.

* * *

The credits are rolling when we walk up to the thinning crowd. Those who are left are packing up their coolers and dragging them across the sand back

to their cars. Brandon is standing in front of Audrey with a smile on his face. He doesn't look like he's in a hurry to leave.

She gives him a quick hug. "Bye, Brandon. I had fun tonight." She glances up at me with a shy smile, then she gives me a hug and whispers, "Hope it's not weird for you that I'm talking to Brandon."

"Of course not. Keep an eye on him for me this year, okay?"

She laughs softly and nods. "You got it."

"See you at Thanksgiving?"

"Yep, I'll be home."

"I guess I'll see you then," I say with a knowing smile.

"Hope so." Audrey laughs. "Bye." She waves over her shoulder as she goes, leaving Brandon with a big smile on his face.

"I take it you finally asked her out," I say to him as soon as Audrey is out of ear shot.

"Indeed, I did." He bows proudly.

"Did you do anything else?" Gabe winks, and I smack his arm. "What?" He laughs. "She's cute."

"She's gorgeous," Brandon says with a love-struck smile on his face. "But no, I think there'll be plenty of time for that. Besides, she's a nice girl. I don't want to rush it."

"Well, duh! It's about time you asked her out. She's had a crush on you since forever."

"Yeah, well, good things come to those who wait," he says, cracking his knuckles out in front of him.

I roll my eyes and shake my head. "Come on, Romeo, let's go."

Gabe walks next to Brandon and squeezes his shoulder in a guy-like congratulatory way as we make our way to the car.

We all pile in and Gabe takes my hand as the engine purrs to life. He pulls onto the two lane road that runs parallel to the beach. It hasn't changed much since I was little. Knotted mangroves and palmetto bushes line either side of it, giving way to beach access in between the sand dunes every couple of miles. The moon is shrouded behind a blanket of clouds now, so I can't actually see the trees through the dark, except for right at the edge of the road where the headlights are glowing against the ground.

"Hey, text Mom," I say to Brandon. "Let her know we're on our way."

"It's only ten."

"I know, but you know how she worries. Just send her a quick text to let her know. My phone is dead."

"All right, all right." He pulls his phone out, but drops it when Gabe stops at a red light. "Ah, shit."

"You're such a klutz," I tease.

"Easy on the brakes, man." He leans forward and reaches under Gabe's seat, stretching and groaning and cussing as he searches for it. "Dammit," he grumbles, unbuckling so that he can find it.

Another car pulls up alongside us and it startles me because that lane is meant for oncoming traffic. "Oh, God, it's Jeremy." I recognize his ridiculous souped-up Honda. It looks like he just drove it off the set of *The Fast and the Furious*.

He rolls his window down, so Gabe lowers his. "What do you want, Jeremy?"

He grins and nods in my direction. "Liv knows what I want."

"Ew," I say as Gabe slams the car into park. He reaches for his door handle, but I grab his arm. "Gabe, don't. He's an idiot. Just ignore him."

He hesitates, but then shuts his door.

Jeremy grins with satisfaction. "Hey, why don't we see what that car of yours is made of?"

I roll my eyes.

"Come on pretty boy, one quick race. You win, I'll leave Liv alone. I swear."

Gabe grips the steering wheel and revs the engine, and Jeremy bounces in his seat.

"All right, let's do this!" Jeremy shouts.

"You're not actually considering racing him, are you?"

Gabe ignores me and revs the engine again.

"Gabe, come on, you're better than this."

"Kick his sorry ass, Gabe! You got this," Brandon says excitedly. "His piece of shit car couldn't keep up with my dad's old Jetta."

"Hey!" I protest.

"Sorry, Liv, but it's true."

Gabe joins Brandon in a laugh at my car's expense.

"Fine, have it your way. Do your little boy race and show Jeremy who's got the bigger"—Gabe raises an eyebrow at me—"engine." I narrow my eyes at him.

“It’s a straight stretch of road, Liv, and there aren’t any cars coming. I just need a few hundred feet to shut him up.” He looks at Jeremy and establishes the finish line. “Next beach access sign.”

I wave my hand at him and look out my window.

When the light turns green, Gabe floors it and my head slams back against the seat. I grab the door handle. *Holy shit, this car is really fast.* Gabe doesn’t normally drive like this. The lines in the middle of the road are flying by and the trees that I could barely see before are now just a dark blur. There aren’t any cars coming, so I feel somewhat okay about not having a head-on collision, but *no, no I do not feel okay!*

“Gabe, that’s enough.”

“Almost there.” His arms are locked straight out in front of him and his hands are gripped firmly around the steering wheel. He has a wild look of male domination in his eyes.

“Hell yeah,” Brandon shouts from the back seat when Gabe reaches the finish line before Jeremy. “You smoked his ass!”

“Gabe, slow down!”

Brandon shouts again, leaning forward to grab Gabe’s shoulders. I look back and see Jeremy’s car slowing behind us. He turns around and heads in the other direction.

Thank God.

Gabe and Brandon are celebrating, but I’m just relieved that it’s over. I turn back around in my seat and my heart rate begins to slow to a normal pace again. But it quickly jumps back up when I see a deer leaping out into the road ahead of us. “Gabe! Watch out!”

* * *

I hear glass cracking and metal twisting. I see blurs of light and trees and dirt and—*Ow!* Pain is stabbing me all over my body. I’m being flung around like a rag doll. Terrified, but unable to see or catch my breath long enough to scream out, I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for it to end. When it finally does, an eerie silence settles around me.

I reach for my chest, struggling to breathe. My seatbelt is crushing me and my head is throbbing. I look up and down, feeling disoriented. I’m hanging upside down by my seatbelt. I can’t see much, just the haze of the headlights shining against a tangled mess of trees that I could reach out and

touch. The windshield is gone and a long, leafy branch is in the car. I squeeze my eyes shut again, feeling confused, but after a few seconds my head clears and I remember the race...and the deer.

“Gabe?” I croak.

The silence I hear in return sends a sickening rush of heat through me.

“Brandon?”

I blink my eyes a few times, but everything is blurry. “Gabe?” I rasp again, my voice trembling and barely audible. I turn my head and the skin on my neck rubs painfully against my constricting seatbelt. I see Gabe hanging by his waist from his seatbelt. The top half of his body is laying limply against the roof of the car, which is now the floor. “Gabe!” I cry, but my voice is just a resounding echo in my head. It’s like I’m screaming under water. “Gabe!” I scream again, ignoring the pressure in my head, but he doesn’t answer.

I can see blood pooled around him in the glow of the headlights. His face and arms are covered in cuts and his white T-shirt is splotted with red. I cry silently, trying to reach him, but I can’t. “Gabe!” I yell, desperately trying to find my voice. “Gabe!” I scream again, a little louder now. But he doesn’t move.

Oh, God.

A spike of adrenaline courses through me and I work frantically to get my seatbelt unbuckled, but it’s locked in place, holding me prisoner. I stretch my left arm out as far as I can, ignoring the burning pain that comes with it, until the tips of my fingers reach him. I grip his shirt and desperately tug at the material. “Gabe! Gabriel! Wake up!” I say insistently, hearing my voice a little clearer now. “Wake up!” I repeat, trying not to cry as I beg him to come to. I call his name again and again, yanking on his shirt with all my strength, but he just lies there, still and unmoving.

My hand falls back to me and I begin to cry. “Gabe, please...please wake up. Please.” I cry harder and the only sound I hear is the echoing of my own sobs.

“Brandon,” I call over my shoulder to the back seat. I can’t turn my head far enough to see him. “Brandon, Gabe needs help.”

He doesn’t answer me.

“Brandon?” I stretch my arm out again, ignoring the pain from the seatbelt. I reach for the rearview mirror and tilt it so that I can see the

backseat. I search from one side of the mirror to the other, but I don't see him. "Brandon?"

The realization that he isn't in the car and the memory of him taking off his seatbelt to find his phone settles over me like a ton of bricks, suffocating me. I think of him lying on the side of the road, hurt and scared. *I have to look for him. I have to find him!* I claw at my seatbelt, but it's a vice grip, holding me to the seat. I'm completely helpless.

The overwhelming frustration of not being able to help the two men I love most in the world quickly consumes me and I begin to scream.

I scream and scream and scream, until I can't scream anymore.

"Oh my God, oh my God," someone says from outside of the car.

"Help," I rasp. "Help us."

"Oh my God, Liv."

Jeremy.

He crouches beside Gabe's broken window and peers inside the car. "Oh, fuck. Oh, God."

"Jeremy, help us."

He stands up, I assume to come to my side of the car, but then I hear him throwing up. I cry, feeling as sick as he does. When it's silent again, I call for him. "Jeremy."

He reappears by my broken window and reaches inside the car for my hand. "It's okay, Liv. I'll get you out."

I cry hard, feeling comforted by the warmth of his hand. "Jeremy, Gabe needs help and you have to find Brandon. Call 911."

He ignores me, determined to unbuckle my seatbelt, but it won't budge. "Fuck!"

"Call 911, Jeremy. Just call 911."

He pulls out his phone and dials 911 with shaking fingers. "Yes, there's been an accident..."

After several excruciating long minutes, I hear the faint sounds of sirens in the distance, and a tiny bubble of hope rises inside me. *It's okay. They're going to be okay. Everything's going to be okay*, I repeat over and over in my head.

Jeremy lets go of my hand and jumps to his feet, screaming for the ambulance. "Over here!"

I reach for Gabe again. My fingertips barely brush his arm, but I can feel how cold he is. "Please don't leave me, Gabe. Please. I need you." I

hear car doors opening and closing, and the shuffling of feet outside.

“I’ve got two in the car!”

“Please help him. He’s hurt,” I say, squinting into the light that’s shining on my face. “And my brother. He was in the car too.”

“Okay, just calm down. You’re going to be okay,” the officer says, squatting down beside Gabe’s broken window. He’s shining a flashlight into the car and I can see how pale Gabe is in the light. “What’s your name?”

“Liv. Her name is Liv,” Jeremy answers.

“Okay, Liv. We’re going to get you out of there. But I need you to hold on for a few more minutes, all right?”

“No,” I squeak. “Get Gabe out first. Please. He’s cold. And my brother, you have to find him. Please,” I cry.

The officer stands up and walks around to my broken window. He squats down and shines the light on me again. “Liv, we’re going to help your friend too, but we need to get you out first.”

“No, I’m fine. Just please, get him out first.”

Several EMTs surround Gabe’s window and shine their lights on him. He looks...he doesn’t look...I swallow hard. “Is he alive?”

“You said his name is Gabe?” the officer asks.

“Yes.”

“Gabe,” one of the EMTs calls loudly, “can you hear me?” He lifts one of Gabe’s eyelids and flashes a light in his eye, but Gabe doesn’t respond.

“What’s your brother’s name, Liv?” the officer asks.

“Brandon. Please find him.”

“I’ve got a pulse,” the EMT says, touching Gabe’s neck, and I break down into relieved sobs.

I’ve been upside down for too long and I have to work hard for each strangled breath. My arms begin to tingle from the lack of oxygen and suddenly my vision fades to black.

Chapter 3

Liv

By four o'clock in the afternoon, the bright sunlight that filled my apartment this morning has been replaced by the gray shadows of a thunderstorm. I force myself up off the bed, where I collapsed after rigorously cleaning my entire apartment. I started in the kitchen, scrubbing the pots and pans that Travis left, still upset long after he was gone. By the time I swept, mopped, dusted, vacuumed, and shined everything in my apartment, I felt a little better.

I walk into the bathroom and lean over the sink to look at my disheveled reflection in the mirror. My long hair is pulled up into a ratty bun on the top of my head and my eyes are bloodshot. I didn't wash my makeup off last night before bed, and mascara now stains my cheeks. I've been crying all day.

Clean. Cry. Repeat.

I splash some water on my face, but it doesn't help. I need to take a shower. When the thunder fades, I turn the shower on, assuming it took the lightning with it, and step under the streaming hot water. I wash away the sweat and tears and mascara, but another wave of sadness hits me and more tears flow while I finish my routine.

The accident fractured my life into two distinct parts. It's the hinge upon which everything swings. On one side is a girl who was wide eyed and excited about her future, and on the other side is a woman who can't stop crying in the shower.

I miss that girl.

When I'm through, I dry off and put on my pink and gray flannel pajamas that I usually reserve for sick days. Then I grab a box of tissues and climb into my tightly made bed. I pick up my phone and call my mom.

"Hey, sweetie!" she answers exuberantly. "I was just thinking about you."

I smile softly. "You were? How come?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about our next visit. It's been a while since we've seen you."

"Well, you may get to see me sooner than you thought."

“Sooner than Thanksgiving?” She pauses. “Liv, honey, it’s only June. Daddy can’t take any time off sooner than that. He’s working on a new line and it’s really starting to take off.”

My dad is the head of purchasing for a furniture manufacturer and, after years of working in foreign markets, he’s recently taken an interest in buying and selling locally made items. The thought of my very southern father speaking Mandarin makes me giggle. *Usually*. Right now, I can barely muster a small smile.

“He won’t need to take any time off work. I’m...coming home.” *For the first time in seven years*. My throat tightens at the thought.

I clear my throat and wait for my mother to say something.

“Oh, um...”

“It’s time, Momma. I’m ready.”

“What about your job? I thought you were in line for a promotion soon.”

“I’ll find something else. I’m sure there are plenty of editing jobs closer to home,” I say, trying to convince myself.

“Okay. Well, are you okay? Did something happen?”

“No. I mean, not really.” I sigh. “Well, sort of, I guess. But that’s not why I want to come home. It’s just...well, maybe it is, but—”

“For heaven’s sake, Liv, will you just tell me what happened?”

“Nothing happened. Travis proposed last night and—”

“What?” I hear the smile in her voice, but before I can mitigate it, she lays the phone down and calls for my father. “Duke! Duke! Liv got engaged. She’s engaged.” She picks up the phone again.

“Momma! Stop,” I say, trying to reign her in. “I said Travis proposed. I didn’t say I was engaged.”

“Oh.” She whispers something to my father and tries unsuccessfully to hide the disappointment in her voice when she returns. “So, you said no?”

“I said no. I don’t love Travis, you know that.”

“Well, I guess I just thought, I *hoped*, that something changed.”

“No, nothing’s changed. Being with Travis has only reminded me of what *real* love feels like.” I pause and there’s more silence. “Momma?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“How...is he?” My heart pounds heavily in my chest. I rarely ask her about Gabe and she rarely volunteers information about him, even though I

know she sees him regularly. She and my dad are still very close to his parents.

“He’s...okay,” she says carefully. “Gabe’s doing okay now. He’s working with Daddy, actually.”

“What? He is?” There’s a hopefulness in my voice that I can’t hide. *He must be doing so much better now.*

My mother hears it too. “Liv, honey, Gabe...isn’t the same. He’s different now. He’s not the person you remember. And I don’t think he’s ever going to be.”

My heart sinks to the deepest part of me and new tears rush to my eyes. “I know.” My Gabriel is gone.

“He *is* doing a lot better, and we couldn’t be happier about it, but—”

I hold the phone away from my ear and cry quietly into my pillow for a few seconds.

“Liv, maybe it’s not a good idea for you to come back here.” Her voice is laced with worry. “Let me come to you and we’ll work everything out.”

“No, I’m fine.” I wipe my face with a fresh tissue. “I promise, I can handle it.” I have to. I can’t keep hiding out in Raleigh anymore. “I *need* to come home.”

“Okay.” She’s quiet again. “I can’t believe that you’re really coming back.” I hear a small smile in her voice now. “It’s been so long.”

“I know. Me neither,” I say nervously.

“Don’t worry about a thing. Daddy and I will take care of anything you need.”

“Momma, I’m not a little girl anymore. You don’t have to take care of me. I’ll figure everything out when I get there.”

“Okay. You know, Liv, we’re so proud of you. You’ve come so far, since—”

“I know.” I think she and my dad are just happy that I finished college in one piece.

“Are you sure you don’t want me and Daddy to come get you? It’s a long drive by yourself. We could come up next weekend.”

“No. I want to drive myself. I think it will give me time to think about things, clear my head.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll get your room ready.”

“Mom, really, it’s fine. Don’t go out of your way.”

“Your dad has been using it to store all of his fishing gear. It needs a good once-over.”

“Well, as long as there aren’t any fish hooks in my bed.” I laugh softly.

“Oh, Liv, your dad is going to be so happy. He’s missed having you here so much these last few years. So have I.”

“I know. I’ve missed it too.”

“Make sure to get your car serviced before you leave, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And if you need anything at all, just let us know.”

“I will.”

“I love you, honey. I can’t wait to see you.”

“I love you too.”

* * *

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me,” my best friend, Trisha, says, hugging my neck tightly. *Strangling me*, actually. “I’m going to miss you so damn much.”

“I’m going to miss you too,” I choke out, peeling her arms off me. “But I have to do this, Trish. I can’t keep forcing a life here that I’m never going to fit into, or I’ll lose what’s left of me.”

She bobs her head and sweeps one of her auburn curls off her face. “I just feel like you’re going to forget about me.”

“Trish, you’ve been my best friend since our senior year in college. You’re literally the only thing that makes me doubt my decision to leave. You’ve been the best part of my life for the last seven years. How could I forget about you?”

She shrugs. “But I’ve only been a part of your life here in Raleigh. How do I fit into your old life in Georgia?”

“I’m not going back to my *old* life.” My heart throbs a little, because I can’t go back to my old life, no matter how badly I wish I could. “And we’ll still talk all the time. I mean, let’s be real, you’re kind of a talker,” I tease. “It’s not in your nature to go more than twenty-four hours without communicating.”

She laughs and extends her finger. “Pinky promise? You won’t forget about me?”

I smile and wrap my pinky around hers and give it a shake. “Pinky promise. *You* don’t forget about *me*. Now that you’re a big-time interior designer.”

“I won’t. I promise. Unless of course I land that job with the hockey player. Then all bets are off.” I laugh and she hugs me again. “I’m kidding. I have every intention of coming to visit you as soon as you get settled in St. Simons.”

“You better.”

“As long as it doesn’t conflict with my hockey player appointments.”

“Trisha!”

“Kidding.” She releases me and squeezes my hand. “Take care of yourself, Liv.”

I nod over the anxious feeling in my stomach. “I will.” I get in my car and put my seatbelt on.

“Call me when you get there,” she says through the open window.

“I will.”

“Or when you’re half way there.”

“Okay.”

“Or even just a quarter of the way.”

“All right,” I laugh, “got it.”

“Or in like, five minutes...if you feel like talking. Or crying. Or just breathing quietly into the phone.”

“If I resort to breathing quietly into the phone, promise that you’ll stop being friends with me.”

“No way, not going to happen. I’m here for you, even if things get weird.”

I laugh freely now, feeling a little lighter. “Okay, Freak, I’m leaving now.”

“Byyyye,” she says with a twang, and pulls her dark sunglasses down off her head to cover her watery eyes. She steps back as I pull away from the curb.

I try not to look back as I drive away, but my traitorous eyes steal a glimpse of her in the rearview mirror. She steps out into the street and begins waving her hands back and forth wildly, and I come to an abrupt stop. *Did I forget something?*

She bends over laughing and waves me on to go.

“Freak!” I shake my head and narrow my teary eyes at her. *I’m really going to miss you.*

* * *

The sun is shining and my stomach is full as I make the final leg of my trip home. I hold my phone to my ear for the two seconds it takes Trisha to pick up.

“Hey!”

“Guess where I just ate,” I say to her.

“Um...can you narrow it down to a city for me?”

“Savannah.”

She pulls in an audible breath. “The café where we had brunch last summer?”

I smile, thinking of the weekend she and I spent in Savannah, shopping and eating our way through the historic town. “I did.”

“Did you get the shrimp and grits?”

“Of course. And I devoured it while gazing out at the Intracoastal Waterway.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m so jealous.”

“It definitely wasn’t the same without you.”

“Did you get the fried green tomatoes?”

“I was stuffed, but I got some for my dad. They’re his favorite.”

“Okay, well now that my mouth is watering, I’m going to go grab some lunch. Call me when you get there!”

“I will.”

I end the call, turn my radio up, and roll down my windows. The farther away I get from Raleigh, the better I seem to feel. I catch a smile on my face in the rearview mirror and stretch my hand out of my window to feel the warm summer air rushing against my palm. It swirls through my fingers. I raise my hand and lower it again, surfing through the waves of wind.

I breathe in the familiar smell of brackish water as I cross the first bridge over the salt marsh that stretches between the Georgia coast and St. Simons Island, and my eyes scan everything, eager to see the view that was just a memory until now.

The water snakes around the gold and green grass, and sparkles under the sun. There are a couple of small sailboats docked near the shore,

rocking gently in the calm water, and two white egrets perched on a tangled branch that's sticking up out of the water. My heart swells. If I could hug this view I would.

Driving across the Island is somewhat surreal. Everything seems different, though nothing has really changed. I'm guessing it's probably me who is different.

It doesn't take me more than fifteen minutes to get to my parents' neighborhood. As I drive along the familiar streets, I survey the houses. Ms. Baker's house is just as beautiful as it always was. The traditional southern style ranch, with its wide front porch and big white columns, has always been my favorite house in the neighborhood. Black rocking chairs, hanging green ferns, and an American flag add to its timeless charm. My parents' house is a traditional two story with a wraparound porch and a covered walkway that leads to the detached garage.

I see my mom and dad waiting for me on the front steps when I pull up the bricked driveway and I wave at them out of my window.

"There's my girl!" my dad says, hurrying over to open my car door.

"Hey, Daddy!"

"I can't believe my baby girl is finally home." He opens my door and pulls me out of my car and into his arms.

"I'm practically an old maid now."

"You'll always be my baby girl," he says, squeezing me tight.

"Hi, Momma," I mumble over his shoulder.

She squeezes in and my dad wraps his arm around her too. "Both my girls back under one roof."

It's hard not to smile at his excitement, but when he releases me, I see a familiar sadness in his eyes. He quickly masks it and grabs a few of my bags from the car, and then we head inside.

When I walk through the front door, I breathe in the familiar scent of the house and it comforts me and saddens me at the same time. How can one bad year overshadow twenty-one good ones? It doesn't seem fair. I sigh quietly and try not to think about those difficult months as I follow my mom to the kitchen.

"Made your favorite," she says, pointing to the cake stand that held all of our birthday cakes growing up. "Coconut cake."

"Oh, wow, that looks amazing." I squeeze her hand and smile softly. "Let's have a piece," I say, knowing how happy it makes her to feed us.

“Don’t you want to get unpacked first?”

“Nope.” I shake my head and lean over the counter to look at it.

She smiles and lifts the glass lid off the beautiful, fluffy white cake.

My dad opens his fried green tomatoes and gobbles them up before she even makes the first cut. “Oh, man. Thank you, baby,” he says to me, throwing the box away.

I give him a one-armed hug around his wide waist. “You’re welcome.”

The three of us sit around the kitchen table, trying to enjoy the delicious cake that my mother made, but not even my father can hide how much it hurts to be back together without Brandon. I place my hand over his and he smiles softly over his sadness. “You don’t have to be strong for me, Daddy.”

He lowers his head and then looks at me with weary eyes. “We’ll always miss him, won’t we?”

I get up and wrap my arms around his neck. “Yes.”

I feel my mom’s hand on mine. “Come on, honey. Brandon wouldn’t want us to be sad today. Today is a day to celebrate. You’re finally home!”

I look up at her smiling face, awed by her strength, and pull myself away from my father. I hug her on my way to the kitchen sink and then I rinse my plate off. “I’m going to head upstairs and start unpacking.”

“Want some help?” she asks.

“No. I won’t be too long. You got all of the fish hooks out of my bed, right?” I smile softly.

“Ha...Ha,” my dad says, getting up from the table, and my mom and I both grin. “I’ll go get the rest of your things from the car, baby.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” I smile and head over to the stairs, pausing to look at the framed pictures on the wall as I climb them. I stare at Brandon in his black tuxedo. Even all dressed up for his senior picture, he looked like a surfer, with his sandy blond hair combed to the side and the sun-kissed freckles on his tan face.

He was so young. He still had so much life in front of him. He’ll never graduate from college. He’ll never get married or have kids. He’ll never be an uncle to my kids, if I ever have any.

You’re thirty, jobless, and living with your parents, my conscience reminds me. *Don’t count on it.*

“Almost thirty,” I grumble quietly. And I won’t be staying here long. Only until I find a place to rent.

When my heavy feet reach the top step, I see a small framed picture sitting on the hall table that stops me in my tracks. Gabe and Brandon are sitting on the tailgate of a truck after one of their hunting trips. I pick it up and hold it out in front of me. They must be twelve or thirteen. I touch their young faces and think, *Why couldn't it have stayed like that?*

I take the picture with me, passing Brandon's room on the way to mine. My mom converted it into a guest room years ago. She said it was too difficult to see his room set up like he'd be coming back one day. It makes me sad to see all of his things gone, but I understand why she put them away. I walk into my room, which, much like the rest of the house, is exactly the same as it was when I left. It's like I've gone back in time, as if the last seven years never even happened.

I fall onto the bed, eager to feel the comfort of my old mattress, and the white wooden headboard smacks the wall, just like it did all my life. It's still just as comfy as I remember. I sit up and look around my room. The only thing different now is that all the pictures I left taped to the dresser mirror are gone. They were mostly of me and Gabe, so I know why my mother took them down.

I wonder where she put them.

Part of me hopes that she threw them away, but another part of me prays that she didn't. I stand up and walk around the room, looking at my old knickknacks and the empty frames that once held pictures of me and Gabe. The only picture she left in the room is a framed five-by-seven of me and Brandon. I pick it up and touch the glass. He's holding me on his back at the beach. My arms are wrapped around his neck and my legs are hanging down on either side of him. We're both pink-cheeked from the sun, making goofy faces. We must have been about fifteen.

I miss you so much, B.

Being back in this house makes me feel closer to him, but it also magnifies the fact that I'm missing my other half. I inhale an uneven breath and put the frame down next to the picture of Brandon and Gabe that I relocated to my room. I need to unpack and find my running shoes so I can go work off the cake, and the sorrow I keep pushing down.

After hanging up all my clothes, I stand on my tiptoes and push a stack of blankets aside on the top shelf of my closet, and a small wooden box comes tumbling down, missing my head by mere inches. It lands on the

hardwood floor, cracking open and sending pictures scattering across the room. I kneel down to pick them up.

I guess I know where all my pictures went. I stare at each one for a few seconds before stacking them in my hands. When I see Gabe's smiling face...when I see him kissing me and hugging me, I get an odd feeling in my stomach, not unlike the feeling I get when I look at pictures of Brandon. I see a person who I loved, who loved me, who's gone.

Except that he's not gone. *He's still here.* I don't know what's worse.

I put the pictures back in the box before the grief takes over, but then I see the ring Gabe gave me for my eighteenth birthday and I find the letter that went with it. I rub my thumb over the little compass that's engraved in the gold and unfold the faded piece of notebook paper.

Liv,

Tomorrow you will turn eighteen. You will legally be allowed to vote! You can buy cigarettes (but please don't). And you can even join the military (but please don't). You will officially be an adult!

None of that really matters to me, though. I will love you the same tomorrow as I do today. And I love you the same today as I did when I was sixteen. I've been privileged to watch you grow into the beautiful woman you've become and I thank my lucky stars every day that you chose me.

The coming years will be a challenge, no doubt. But as long as we're together, I know we can navigate whatever comes our way.

I promise to be your compass when you start to feel lost. I'll be your beacon home when the world gets too big. No matter what path life chooses for us, I will always be your true North.

~ Gabe

Whether or not I want to cry no longer matters. The tears leak onto my cheeks. I pick up the delicate gold ring and rub my finger over the little compass again.

I slide it on my right ring finger where it used to belong and, for just a moment, just a split second, I allow myself to pretend I'm still his.

My mom knocks on my bedroom door. "Honey, I found a pair of your shoes." She walks in and sees me crumpled on the floor over the note and the box and the pictures. "Oh, Liv." She kneels beside me and wraps her arm around my shoulders. "I'm so sorry. I forgot that was up there."

"It's okay."

“I just couldn’t bring myself to get rid of it, so I stuck it up on top of the closet. I don’t know why. I didn’t mean for it to upset you.”

“I would have been upset if you had gotten rid of it.” I wipe my face, and she nods with understanding. “You found my running shoes,” I say, eyeing the shoebox in her hands.

She smiles and stands up. “Might not be a bad idea to lace them up. I hear that running has magical healing powers.” She winks and reaches for my hands. She knows that I use running in place of clinical therapy.

“I think you might be right.”

She pulls me to my feet. “Go for a run, honey. You’ll feel better.”

* * *

I stand in my parents’ driveway, looking out at the familiar view from the house. The yard is lush and green and perfectly manicured. My father has been on a quest to have the best yard in the neighborhood for as long as I can remember. I pull my heel up to my butt and stretch my quad, then I alternate to the other side. My muscles are tight. I need this run. I bend over and grab my ankles and stretch my hamstrings. *Ow*. I really need this run.

I stand up, shake my legs, and push my ear buds in. I turn my music up and start down the driveway toward the street. I begin with a slow jog. I’m sore at first, but after a few minutes, the ache in my muscles goes away and I’m able to keep a steady pace. I breathe in and out, letting the fresh air fill my lungs and clear my head. All I have to do is focus on my feet hitting the pavement. Everything else just falls away.

Left foot.

Right foot.

Breathe.

Left foot.

Right foot.

Breathe.

I run for a long time. I’m not really sure how far I’ve actually gone, but I must have covered a few miles because I can see the cemetery just up ahead. I stop running, turn around, and head back to the house.

Chapter 4

Gabe, Eight Years Ago, August 18th

“He should be waking up soon.”

“How long will it take?” my mother asks the man, whose voice I don’t recognize.

“Not long. But remember, this is going to be extremely confusing for him. We won’t know the extent of his injury right away.”

“But you said—”

The man interrupts my father. “We think his brain injury is moderate, from what we can tell. The surgery went well and the swelling in his brain is coming down. Those are all good things. He’ll most likely regain normal functions over time, but the cognitive and behavioral impairments he might experience could last from a few weeks to a few months. Some might even be permanent. You need to be prepared.”

My mother squeezes my hand and whispers, “Tu êtes fort, Gabriel. You’re so strong.” Her southern-French accent is something that’s uniquely specific to her, and comforting to me. “You have to fight this,” she says firmly. “Fight for me and Daddy. Fight for Liv. She needs you now.”

Liv. Where is she? I try to ask, but my tongue won’t move. My mouth won’t open. I can’t move anything. It’s like a lead blanket has been shrink-wrapped over my entire body. I try to swallow, but my throat burns. And my head is throbbing.

Liv. I want Liv.

I concentrate hard on my mouth opening and after a long minute, it finally does. I force my tongue to the roof of my mouth and make a *lul* sound.

My mother squeezes my hand again. “Gabriel?”

“Liv,” I croak, and it feels like a thousand knives scraping my throat at once. I open my heavy eyelids, closing and opening them a few times, until I can tolerate the light. My mom is sitting in a chair beside the bed I’m lying in and my dad is hovering over her shoulder. They look terrible, like they haven’t slept in days.

“Mo-momma,” I mumble, feeling the knives again.

“Yes, bébé. I’m here. Daddy’s here too.” Tears run down her cheeks, but she wipes them away quickly.

A man in a white doctor's coat is standing beside them. "Gabriel, I'm Dr. Franklin. Is it okay if I call you Gabriel?"

"Gabe," I rasp.

The man smiles at my mother and father. "Okay, Gabe. Can you tell me who this is?" he asks, pointing to my father.

"Dad."

"And this?" He points to my mother.

"Mom."

He smiles again. "Very good. Do you know where you are, Gabe?"

I look around the room and see flowers and balloons that say *Get Well Soon*. There are monitors to the left and right of me and I'm hooked up to an IV bag that's hanging from a silver stand beside the bed.

"Hospital."

"That's right. Do you know why you're in the hospital, Gabe?"

I gaze at him, trying to remember what happened to me and why I'm in so much pain.

When I don't answer, he drags a chair over to the bed and sits beside me. "You were in a very bad car accident, Gabe. You suffered a pretty serious brain injury and you have a broken leg."

Car accident?

I swallow down the knives again. "My...throat...hurts."

"You were in an induced coma for a few days. You were intubated. I know it hurts. That will go away."

"Coma?"

"It was important to keep you sedated while the swelling in your brain went down."

"We've been here the whole time, Gabriel," my mother says, squeezing my hand.

My father winds his arm around her and puts his hand on top of hers. "You're okay, son, you're going to be okay," he says, and tears fill the rims of his tired eyes.

I try to lift my hand under theirs, but it's heavy. "Liv."

"Do you remember anything about the accident, Gabe?" the doctor asks.

I close my eyes and try to think around the throbbing pain in my head, but it's difficult to see past the dark patches that are clouding my thoughts.

"My...car?"

"Yes, the crash happened in your car."

I give my parents a worried look, but they just shake their heads and say, "It's okay."

"Do you remember what happened?" the doctor pushes.

I close my eyes again and try hard to see around the splotches of black. When I finally do, I see the road...and the deer.

"Deer."

"That's right, there was a deer."

"Liv said you swerved so that you wouldn't hit it," my mom says. "It was just an accident, Gabriel. Just a terrible accident." She begins to cry.

Liv? She was there? Liv was in the accident? I close my eyes and try to remember. "Liv?" My voice comes out a little stronger now.

"She was in the accident with you, Gabe. Do you remember that?" the doctor asks.

My heart thumps painfully against my ribs. I squeeze my eyes shut and try harder to see past the dark patches in my head. The memories start to come back to me in turns, each one passing in and out of view before my mind can bring them into focus.

We were at the beach. It was night time.

I see Liv smiling up at me.

Are you sure you're ready to do this?

I've never been so sure about anything.

Oh, yes. I remember.

I hear the theme music from *Jaws*. I see Jeremy Black.

Gabe, that's enough. Liv's voice echoes through my aching head and it hits me like a cement wall, crushing me with the weight of a thousand cinderblocks.

Oh my God.

"Liv. Where's...Liv?" I try to shout, but it comes out all slurred and slow like I'm drunk.

My mom cries harder and my heart slams against my aching ribs. I feel like I'm going to be sick.

"Where...is...she?"

"Liv is okay," the doctor says. "She's recovering on another floor."

My heart slows, but warm tears rush to my eyes and leak onto my face, stinging my cheeks. I swallow against the knives in my throat. "How...bad?"

“She has a broken arm and a pretty deep cut on her cheek. She needed stitches and surgery to repair her arm, but she’s recovering well. She’ll be released today.”

I’m relieved that she’s not hurt worse, but it’s fleeting. The fact that she’s hurt at all is like being punched in the gut. A hundred thoughts race through my sluggish mind. *Is she in pain? Is she scared? Is she mad?* She told me not to race Jeremy. Why did I do it? *I’m such a fucking idiot.* Why didn’t I listen to her? Maggie and Duke must be so upset. And Brandon...he’s going to *kill* me.

Wait. “Brandon.”

Was he in the car too?

My mom lifts her tear-streaked face and wipes it with a tissue. She glances at the doctor and he stands up. Her eyes are filled with heartbreak when they return to mine. “Petit bébé”—she holds the balled-up tissue to her mouth—“Brandon”—she slowly shakes her head from side to side—“he didn’t make it.” She bursts into sobs and falls over me.

What? He didn’t *make it*? Brandon is... I can’t finish the thought because my chest feels like it’s collapsing on my lungs and the edges of my vision blur. Tears flood my eyes. “No”—I shake my throbbing head back and forth—“no.”

“I’m so sorry, Gabriel,” my mother cries.

I look at my father, disbelieving. “No. It’s not true.”

He looks at me with tear-filled eyes. “I’m so sorry, son. I’m so sorry. You know that”—he can barely get it out—“he was like my own boy.” He leans over me and cries hard.

Brandon’s...*gone*? He’s really *gone*? *No...No!* I choke out a painful moan and more tears burn down my cheeks.

My chest begins to heave uncontrollably, painfully, until I can’t breathe anymore. I gasp and try to inhale, but my lungs feel like they’re closing. I can’t breathe. I beat my hand against the rail on the side of the bed.

“Gabriel?” My mom lets go of me. “Gabe? He can’t breathe!” she shouts. “He can’t breathe!”

“Okay, it’s okay,” the doctor says calmly, stepping beside her. He picks up a syringe and pushes it into my IV. “You’re all right, Gabe. Just give this a few seconds to work.”

I feel my body relax almost instantly.

“I want you to take another breath now. Slow and steady.”

My lungs open and I suck in as much air as I can, ignoring the accompanying pain in my ribs.

“There you go. Slow and steady.”

I feel more and more relaxed by the second.

“This is a lot for him to take in at once. He’s got a long road ahead of him. The next few days will be the hardest.” The doctor’s voice seems to be drifting further and further away. “He’s probably going to be in and out for a while.”

* * *

I splash down into a breaking wave, holding a football under my arm.

“Show off,” Brandon calls from the shore.

I stand up and make my way through the surf, tossing the ball back to him. He catches it and starts running toward me. I plant my feet, set to tackle him, and when he gets within two feet of me, I lunge toward him and take him down hard.

“Take it easy,” he says, shoving my shoulder into the wet sand. “You’re not supposed to tackle your QB.”

I laugh and sit up. “I really miss protecting your sorry ass on the field. Four years of high school football wasn’t enough.”

He leans back on his hands and stares out at the horizon. “No, it sure wasn’t. I miss playing with you too. We had some good times back then, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, we did.”

The beach is empty and the sun is starting to sink in the afternoon sky. I drop my head back and soak in the day’s last rays of heat. “Things are going to be a lot different after we all graduate next year, huh?”

He nods his head, but keeps his eyes on the horizon. “You have to take care of my sister, okay?”

“You know I will.”

“It’s different now. She needs you. And you need her.”

I look at him, but he stares out at the ocean.

“Brandon—”

“Just remember that you can always talk to me. I’ll always be here for you, brother.”

Chapter 5

Liv

I sit at the kitchen table across from my mother, watching her sip her coffee and read the newspaper in her nightgown. Her messy hair is pulled up, her face is makeup free, and she's wearing reading glasses in lieu of contacts. I haven't seen my mother like this in years, but I find it incredibly comforting. It reminds me of Saturday mornings growing up, especially with the hum of the lawn mower outside.

The only thing that's missing is Brandon.

When I saw the cemetery yesterday, it caught me off guard. I wasn't ready to go see him yet. But today, I'm ready. *I think.*

"I'm going to go see Brandon today," I say tentatively to my mom, who sits up over her plate of scrambled eggs and gives me a small smile.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want some company?"

"No. I want to go alone, if that's okay." I sip my coffee, hoping she doesn't mind.

"Yeah, honey, that's okay." She lowers her eyes to her newspaper again. "I think it's a good idea."

I finish my oatmeal, take my bowl to the sink, and head upstairs to get dressed. I take a quick shower and pick out my outfit—a sundress and sandals for what will certainly be a warm day. I curl loose waves into my hair, which the humidity will likely knock out, and let them fall down my back anyway. I take a little extra time with my makeup, which I carefully inspect in the mirror.

He can't see you.

I roll my eyes and grab my purse.

* * *

I walk through the cemetery, holding a bouquet of blue hydrangeas—Brandon's favorite. Once, when he was little, he picked all the blue hydrangeas in our yard because he said blue was his favorite color. My

mom got so upset because there was nothing left but stems. I smile, remembering his little voice.

I walk under the giant oak trees, noticing the way the sunlight illuminates the Spanish moss that hangs from their wide, weepy branches, casting shadows on the sprawling green lawn that's covered in headstones. Some of them lay flat and others stand tall. In between the graves, the manicured grass is sprinkled with flowering crepe myrtles and magnolia trees that are in full bloom. I close my eyes and breathe in the smell of my childhood. Just like the salty marsh, the delicious lemony scent of the magnolia blossoms warms my heart. The sunshine on my shoulders is another welcome comfort.

It's been years since the last time I made this walk, but I follow the familiar path to Brandon's grave. When I see his headstone, my heart falters, pushing aside the nostalgic thoughts of my childhood. I take a deep breath as I get closer and try to swallow down the guilt that's suddenly choking me.

I shouldn't have stayed away so long.

I drop my bag on the cement bench by his grave and kneel down in front of his marble headstone, tracing my finger over the words engraved in it.

*In Loving Memory
Brandon Thomas Dalton
March 28, 1991 – August 15, 2012
If tears could build a stairway, and memories
a lane, we'd walk right up to heaven and
bring you home again.*

"I'm so sorry, Brandon. I'm so sorry," I cry over and over, pressing my palm to the cool marble. I'm racked with guilt, not just because I haven't visited his grave in so long, but because I've barely even spoken to him the last few years.

I let the tears flow out of me until the heaviness in my heart begins to lighten. I've cried more in the last two weeks than I have in the last two years, but each time I have a breakdown like this, I feel a little bit better.

With a final ragged breath, I place the flowers on top of his headstone and turn toward the bench to get a tissue from my bag, but I'm startled when I look up and see a man standing behind me.

I blink up at the tall stranger, who's staring at me with golden brown eyes. His wavy brown hair is falling slightly over his forehead and his square jaw is clenched tight. His cupid's bow lips are pushed into a small pout and his broad chest and shoulders are bouncing up and down under his white T-shirt. I'm intensely aware that I'm breathing just as hard. My heart feels like it's in my throat, racing like a wild stallion. I watch his full lips part, but he doesn't say anything. After a long, silent second, he drops his head, turns around, and begins to walk away. And I'm flooded by an emotion I haven't felt before—a mix of elation and grief. It washes over me like a tsunami, bringing a fresh wave of tears with it.

"Gabe," I call, and he pauses. "Please...don't go."

His shoulders rise and fall a few times, and then he turns around and slowly walks toward me again. My thoughts stammer around my head as I take him in. My Gabriel, but bigger. Much bigger. The muscles in his arms and shoulders are thick and well defined. And his face...it's the face I know, but more sculpted, more masculine. *Beautiful*.

He stands in front of me and all I can do is stare up at him in disbelief. I forgot how tall six-four is. He towers over me. "Gabe," I say his name again, still shocked.

"Liv," he says my name curiously, but it's like a thousand symphonies playing in my head. "What are you doing here?" His voice is deeper than I remember, and he has a strong southern drawl. *Was it always that strong?*

"Um"—I shake my head and glance at Brandon's headstone—"I'm visiting my brother. I...needed to see him."

"I mean, what are you doing in St. Simons?" He looks confused.

"Oh. I, um...your mother didn't tell you? I'm back. I moved back. Yesterday, actually. I'm staying with my parents. I don't know for how long, but—" I force myself to stop rambling. "I thought my mom would have told yours..."

He stares at me silently and my eyes follow his long, tan arms to a six-pack of beer that he's holding in his hand. I didn't notice it before, probably because my eyes were too busy taking in the view of his face. I eye the bottles curiously.

"For Brandon," he explains. "I come here sometimes." He shrugs his wide shoulders. "I like to have a beer with him and...talk," he says tentatively.

"Really? You do that?" I fight back more tears and force a small smile.

He nods and shoves his other hand in his pocket. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were—I should go.”

“You don’t have to,” I say impulsively. “You can stay, if you want.” As soon as I say it, apprehension replaces my initial shock.

“Um. Okay,” he says with equal reluctance.

My bewildered heart is doing laps inside my chest. It’s exalting and exhausting at once. I think I might be feeling every emotion, and maybe some that haven’t been defined yet. I eye the beer in his hand again, hoping alcohol might numb whatever unnamed feeling this is. “Mind if I join you?” I don’t mean to intrude on his alone time with Brandon, but I was here first. This is technically *my* alone time with Brandon.

He shakes his head and hands me a bottle. I take it and sit down on the bench, and I watch him twist the cap off another bottle and place it in front of Brandon’s headstone. I choke a little on the lump in my throat, but swallow it down. He sits beside me and opens a beer for himself with the comfort and ease of a grown man who probably drinks beer regularly—not only at parties, like when we were in college.

A man. *So strange*. He’s twenty-nine now. I didn’t expect him to look like he did the last time I saw him—it’s been seven years—but I can’t stop staring at him. His thighs are wide in his jeans and even his hands look bigger wrapped around his beer bottle.

“Want me to open that for you?” he asks in his deep voice, pointing to my beer.

“Thanks.” I hand it to him and he twists the top off with ease.

We take turns sipping our beers, neither of us speaking, until the silence is too much for me to take. I have so many questions, but I don’t know how to ask any of them. They’re too intimate to ask a stranger, someone I don’t even know anymore.

But he’s not a stranger.

I peek up at him. He’s *Gabe*. The boy I fell in love with when I was sixteen. The boy I *thought* I was going to spend my entire life with. The boy I nearly lost and spent the better part of a year taking care of and nursing back to health. The boy who broke every promise he ever made to me.

I take a few deep breaths to steady myself and then I turn to face him. His eyes meet mine and his lips part like he wants to say something. But, like before, he doesn’t. He just stares at me, making my stomach twist with angst that reminds me of the months I spent after the accident trying to coax

him out of the depression he fell into. He was consumed with sadness and guilt over losing Brandon, but the shame he endured was more debilitating than his injuries. News stories that covered the accident made him out to be some sort of monster, disregarding his spotless record and high academic achievements. They only saw the mistake he made, and they didn't allow for redemption.

Although most people in our small community offered words of sympathy and reassurance, Gabe was trapped beneath the weight of the occasional dirty look or unforgiving comment. Just as the media had done, Gabe allowed his mistake to erase everything good in his life. Including me.

As the sadness, guilt, and shame turned to embarrassment and anger, it was hard to find the line between depression and TBIPD. Traumatic Brain Injury Personality Disorder.

It was a risk we were all aware of, but as time passed, it became evident that Gabe's personality had been affected. It didn't matter how many times I told him that I loved him, that everything would be okay, that he *would* get better over time, he didn't believe me. He didn't *want* to believe me. He gave up on the hopes and dreams we shared, he gave up on college, and he gave up on me.

His injury affected more than his personality, though. It impacted his motor skills and his cognitive thinking. It was disheartening, to say the least, to see someone who'd aced all his college math courses struggle to solve a simple equation. But over time, it slowly began to come back to him. I was sure he'd be able to return to Raleigh and finish college, that *we'd* be able to finish college together...eventually. But he made it clear that he didn't see a future with me anymore.

I've spent seven years quietly agonizing over what happened between us back then, wondering how he could stop loving me so suddenly, how he could cut me out of his life so abruptly, wondering what I did, or what I could have done differently. And now, after all this time, there's a chance I might actually find out.

Part of me is terrified to ask Gabe anything. I don't know how he'll react and I don't want him to leave. The fact that I feel this way, after everything that happened, scares me even more. But I can't sit here with all these unanswered questions festering and eating away at me. I used to know everything about him and now I know nothing. It's overwhelmingly

frustrating. I don't know if *my* Gabriel is in there or not, but that's who I'm going to talk to, because he's the only Gabe I know.

"You've changed since the last time I saw you," I say, smiling softly over my nerves. "You look different."

He gives me a tentative smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "You look different too."

I look down at my lap. I've gained ten pounds since college, but I like being a little curvier.

He sips his beer and says, "You look good, Liv."

I press my lips together and try to ignore the butterflies that flock to my stomach. "So do you." I look at the place in his hair where he had surgery. "You can barely see the scar now."

"Hence the longer hair," he says, looking up toward his forehead.

"I like it. It's different, but good." I smile softly and look down at my lap again.

After a few uncomfortable seconds, we both say, "So—"

"Sorry, go ahead," Gabe prompts.

"Oh, um, I was just going to say that I heard you're working with my dad now."

"Uh-huh." He sips his beer.

"Uh-huh," I repeat, looking up at him curiously. "What exactly are you doing for him?"

"I'm helping with a new furniture line."

"That's great, Gabe."

"It's not really what I thought I'd be doing. But as far as being a physical therapist goes...well, let's just say that if I never see another PT for the rest of my life, that'd be just fine." He laughs grimly and I let out a strangled sigh. He underwent so much physical therapy after the accident. Just thinking about it dredges up a lot of stressful memories.

"What about you? I heard you got your English Lit degree. You putting it to good use?"

"Trying." I keep my answer short. The last thing I want to do is talk about how I went back to Raleigh and finished college without him.

"I'm glad. You always were a bookworm."

I smile over the ache in my heart. He knows me better than anyone and has an index file of my history at his fingertips. I glance up at him and see a glimpse of the boy I used to love in his eyes, and the shards of my broken

heart scrape painfully inside my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I chew the corner of my mouth and say impassively, “I don’t work on books.” Like the rest of my adult life, my career hasn’t gone as planned.

“Oh.” His eyes move off to the distance, but I can see the disappointment in them, and it fills me with sadness. The accident changed the trajectory of our lives, but Gabe changed the trajectory of mine even further. Did he really expect me to go on with the plans we made together...by myself? *Did he really think I could?* The thought fills me with frustration and hurt. Especially now.

I always imagined what this day would be like. I imagined what Gabe would look like, what I would say to him. I assumed he would be fragile—like he was after the accident. I thought I might actually feel sorry for him. But he’s not fragile. He’s strong, so much stronger than I ever could have imagined. And I don’t feel sorry for him. I feel *angry*.

“Well, it’s not too late,” he says, oblivious to the storm brewing inside me.

Yes, it is. It’s seven years too late.

I pick at the label on my beer bottle, trying to still the emotions that are sloshing around inside me. But I can’t. I realize now that I’ve been perpetually stuck for seven years, not because I was in Raleigh, or because I didn’t love my job—or Travis for that matter—but because I never got the closure I needed to move on.

I loved Gabe unconditionally. There’s nothing he could have done that would have changed that. And if I’m being honest with myself, there still isn’t. I’ll always love him for who he was before the accident. And I’ll always forgive who he became after it, because it’s not his fault.

As much as I want closure, as much as I *need* closure so I can finally move on with my life, I’m not ready yet. Maybe I’ve been fooling myself all these years, clinging to a glimmer of hope that something could change, that somehow things could go back to the way they were, but I’m not ready to sacrifice that hope for the sake of forgiveness.

“I’m sorry”—I shake my head and hold in a breath that promises to bring a flood of tears with it—“I thought I could do this, but I have to go.” I grab my bag and stand up. I suddenly have the urge to get as far away from him as possible. “It was good to see you,” I squeak out, leaving him sitting alone with a confused look on his face.

I don't look up until I fall into my car and shut the door. Asking Gabe to stay was a knee-jerk reaction, an automatic reflex triggered by seven years of separation. I was just so happy to see him again. I was overwhelmed. But I wasn't thinking about the consequences.

I drop my head to my steering wheel.

That was not what I imagined at all.

Chapter 6

Gabe

I sit alone on the bench by Brandon's grave, frozen by the painful truth that Liv couldn't stand to sit next to me for another second. It's what I feared, what I expected, but it still hurts *so damn much*.

I'd do anything to go back and change our last day together. If she only knew that. If she knew how much it hurt me to say the things I said to her. But it was the only way to get her to go—so she could start living her life and stop wasting it taking care of me. The accident took away my future, but I'd be damned if it was going to take hers too. It hurt like hell to tell her I didn't love her anymore, but it was deserved pain. At least, I thought so at the time.

I was so messed up back then. Guess I probably always will be, to some extent. But it got pretty ugly those first few months after the accident. I struggled with Brandon's death. We all did. But the physical and mental challenges I faced during my recovery didn't help my state of mind. Aside from the fact that my head looked disfigured and my leg was in a cast up to my hip, I struggled with my motor skills. I couldn't button a shirt or tie my shoes, I couldn't hold a pencil. Frustration doesn't even begin to describe how that felt. Later, when the cast came off my leg, I still bumped into everything. There were so many bruises on my body, it looked like I had some sort of blood disorder. That went on for months.

I spent so much time in physical therapy that year, I didn't have time to think about much else. But I eventually regained my motor skills and I learned how to walk in a straight line again, thanks to the physical therapists who stuck with me, no matter how much of a pain in the ass I was. And then I had plenty of time to think about how badly I messed up my life...and Liv's.

In the beginning, my parents kept the news stories hidden from me, along with my phone, seeing as how I could barely hold it, so I didn't see all the social media posts and commentary that labeled me a murderer. But it was only a matter of time before I saw what people were saying. Once it got out that I had been racing, people from near and far said I deserved what I got and that my head injury was karma getting back at me. Some said I deserved to lose my future. Even those in my own community, who

knew it was an accident, looked at me differently. It's been nearly eight years and I still remember the fear, shame, and guilt of seeing my picture embedded in the news stories. Brandon and Liv's pictures made it into a few of them too, and I couldn't look at them without feeling nauseous.

Liv was by my side, broken arm and all, stitches stretched across her cheek for weeks, while I recovered in the hospital. My only comfort was that she was there, usually curled up in a chair she'd pushed up against my bed. We held hands and cried together over Brandon, and I would hold her as best I could when she climbed up into the bed next to me and sobbed on my chest. The nurses tried to separate us a few times, but they eventually gave in when our parents intervened. I think they all knew the only way we were going to get through losing Brandon was together.

By the time I was released to go home, the stitches were gone from Liv's cheek, but a bright pink line still remained where they'd been. *God*, it tore me up to look at her and see the constant reminder of what I did...to her, to Brandon...to everyone. She would tell me that it was nothing and that it gave her character, but one time she asked me if I still thought she was pretty because I didn't look at her the same way anymore. And she was right, I didn't. But not because I thought she was anything less than beautiful—the kind of beautiful that only comes around once in your lifetime. But because of who I saw reflected in her eyes—the monster everyone said I was. Someone who was capable of scarring her beautiful face and taking her only brother away from her.

It became harder and harder to be around Liv. I was frail, weak, and angry. And she was hopeful and positive. She was so sure that everything was going to be okay, that I was going to get better, and things would eventually go back to the way they had been. But how could they? How could I? I grew resentful and frustrated with her. The more she talked about our future, the one we'd planned before the accident, the more certain I became that I'd never be able to give it to her.

I tried to tell her this, to make her understand. But every scenario I presented, she rectified with some impractical solution.

Liv, I may never be able to tie my shoes again.

Then I'll tie them for you.

I can't finish college if I can't solve one damn math problem.

Then you'll start your own business. I'll help you.

I might not ever be able to drive again.

Then I'll be your chauffeur.

What if I can't, you know, perform anymore?

Then I'll become a nun.

I laugh softly to myself. That problem certainly didn't last long. The only thing that got either one of us through the second half of that year was physical intimacy. I was weak, but I always found the strength to be with Liv. In six months, we made up for the five years we'd waited to be together, but it wasn't enough to save us. We still grew apart.

All she ever wanted to do was help me, but being around Liv was a constant reminder that, not only did she lose her brother because of me, she was sacrificing her entire future. And I couldn't live with that. She was so consumed with taking care of me that she couldn't see her life passing her by. But I could. So, after several more unsuccessful attempts to try to convince her to go, I finally told her that I didn't love her anymore.

They were the hardest words I've ever said. The biggest lie I've ever told. But convincing her it was true meant she could have the life she always wanted. The life she deserved. It wasn't long before she left for Raleigh, like I hoped she would. But not a day has passed that I haven't thought of her...that I haven't missed her.

I wanted to go see her so many times, and I almost did once. I came so close. But as fate would have it, that was also the day that I had my first seizure. I saw it as a sign to leave Liv alone and not interfere with her life. And I never gave in to those feelings again.

Still, I've thought about her too many times to count over the last seven years. I thought about her finishing college, I thought about her making new friends, I thought about her starting her career after graduation. I even thought about her getting married and having kids one day. Those were all the things I wanted for her. All the things *she* wanted.

I don't know why she asked me to stay today, and I don't know why I did. Guilt? Fear? Need? All of the above? For a minute, I forgot everything that happened—the accident, the year that followed. I just saw Liv. *My Liv.*

My heart didn't stop pounding the entire time she was here. It's still pounding away in my ears, and my stomach is twisted into knots. Making small talk with Liv might have been one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. When we were together, it was like being with my best friend. There wasn't anything we couldn't say to each other. There wasn't anything we *didn't* say to each other. Until the end.

Liv was always so strong, maybe even more so after the accident. I was sure she'd be okay because she was so willful and tenacious and brave. She could have done anything she wanted to do. But the person sitting beside me today was fragile and nervous and...sad. Not the Liv I remember. I thought that maybe she'd be different for a little while after we broke up, but not this many years later.

I run my hands through my hair and my fingers follow the scar along the side of my head.

I did that to her. I made her that way.

I stand up and drop my hand on Brandon's headstone. "I'm sorry I couldn't take care of her, brother. But she's better off without me."

Chapter 7

Liv

I lace up my running shoes and sneak out of my parents' house before sunrise. I woke up at three A.M. and couldn't go back to sleep. Seeing Gabe at the cemetery yesterday really shook me. He's changed so much more than I expected, reiterating the fact that life continued after I left, and that he got better, at least physically, without me.

Just like he wanted.

I get in my car and head to the beach. It tends to have its own healing properties.

When I pull into the parking lot, it's empty besides an old Ford F-150 that's rusted around the bottom. It looks like it used to be white. I'm guessing it belongs to a surfer. I recognize the salt corrosion. They're usually the only ones out here this early.

It's 6:30 and the sun is just starting to glow orange in the sky beyond the sand dunes. When I step out of my car I pause and breathe in the salty sea air. I close my eyes and listen to the rushing sound of the waves crashing in the distance. I brought my ear buds, but I don't think I'm going to use them. I want the ocean to be my soundtrack this morning. I toss them back in my car and lock the door.

I jog across the parking lot, feeling like I'm bouncing across the pavement in my running shoes, until I reach the sandy path that leads to the beach. I know that once I'm past the soft sand between the dunes it will be much easier to run, but it's *giving...me...a workout*. When I make it to the wide open beach, I'm happy to see that the tide is out and there's plenty of packed sand to run on.

The sun is just above the horizon now, throwing its golden reflection on the surface of the ocean all the way up to the shoreline. The sky is amber against the dark blue line of the horizon, but the rest of the sky is electric blue, speckled with small, puffy gray clouds that glow white around the edges.

I inhale deep, cathartic breaths as I run, letting the ocean air resonate through me, healing me as I go. I feel better with every step. I think about my life in Raleigh—the years I spent just *surviving*, not moving forward. I may not know exactly what's next, but I know that *this* is part of the plan.

I laugh with my next labored breath, feeling giddy at the thought. *My plan*, I think again, letting the idea straighten my spine and square my shoulders. I lift my chin and smile. Travis proposing might have been the best thing that could have happened to me. Who knows how much more time I would have wasted in Raleigh if he didn't get down on one knee.

This, I think, looking out at the endless horizon, *is where I belong*. This is my peace, through the turmoil and the heartache and the painful memories. This place—this beautiful, oak-covered, sun-drenched island—is exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I jog a little further until my elated thoughts shift. I'm going to run into Gabe again, it's inevitable. In fact, I'll *have* to see him, if I'm ever going to get any closure. And I have a feeling it's not going to be any easier than it was yesterday. But—I look around at my sanctuary—it seems like a fair tradeoff.

I run for another mile or two before I see anyone else on the beach. A couple of surfers are making their way into the water and there's another jogger in the distance running toward me.

I have to get a job, I think, making a mental checklist entitled "My Plan." Scratch that, I want a career. I want to do something I love that won't chip away at my soul. I want to edit *books*. I want to stay up late working on manuscripts until my eyes are bleary and the words run together. I quickly tally the number of publishing houses on the Island and come up with...zero. In fact, I'm fairly certain the nearest one is in Atlanta.

I'll freelance. I can do it from anywhere. But I'll need to build a website for that. And a portfolio. I wipe the first beads of sweat from my forehead and take another quick tally, this time of my finances. I have enough in savings to get started, but I'm going to need that to live off of. Rent doesn't come cheap on the Island, and apartment buildings are slim pickings, so I'll probably have to look for a townhouse or a condo. I'd love to rent a beach house, but they're far too expensive and honestly, much too big. They're meant to accommodate vacationing families.

I suppose I'll have to get a job to pay for my career, at least for a little while. I frown at the thought and keep running.

The sun is rising faster now, inching its way into the sky. The clouds have cleared and it's starting to get warm. Sweat is trickling down my back now. I'm tempted to run right into the water, but that would make for a very soggy ride home. At least the breeze is constant, cooling me a little.

The jogger down the beach is getting closer and I can now make out a man and a dog. The dog keeps running into the water and then back up onto the beach beside him. I can't make out the details of the man's face, but he's wearing a white sleeveless shirt and gray shorts. I can tell that he's muscular and he looks pretty tan. He must spend a lot of time out here.

I glance at the horizon and then back at the man, then out at the horizon and back at the man. I watch his dog run into the water again. I think it might be a golden retriever. I try not to stare as we approach each other, but I look up right before we pass and I stop running. "Gabe?" I spin around and run after him.

"Hey," he says, keeping his pace, which is much faster than mine. I have to double my strides to keep up with him.

"Hi," I huff. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I wasn't expecting to see you either. Since when do you run?"

"I don't know. Since college." I glance up at him. His hair is wet from the sweat beading on his face and neck, and there's more sweat trickling down the middle of his back, soaking through his shirt, which is clinging to the muscles in his back—about all I can see from my position a few inches behind him. I dig my feet into the sand and run faster to keep up with him.

He glances down at me and whistles for his dog that's swimming through the surf several yards away.

"You got a dog?"

"Yeah." He keeps his answer short and his eyes out in front of him.

"What's his name?"

"Her name is Roxy."

"Oh. That's a great name," I pant.

"It is, but I didn't name her."

I can't tell if he's being short with me on purpose or if he's just trying to stay focused on his run, but it's an unsettling reminder of the change in his personality from his injury. The old Gabe would have never greeted me with anything less than a beaming smile.

"She's a service dog. They named her before I got her," he explains.

A service dog?

"I have seizures," he says, answering my unspoken question.

If I had any saliva left in my mouth, I'd try to swallow. My mom told me he had a seizure a few years ago, but I didn't know that he's had more. I

run in silence, falling slightly behind him again. “I didn’t know,” I say with a winded breath.

“It’s not a big deal. I take medicine that helps.”

I try unsuccessfully to swallow the lump in my throat. “Gabe, can you slow down?” He ignores me and keeps his pace, so I dig my feet into the sand harder and ignore the burning in my calves. “Hey, I didn’t mean to take off like that yesterday.”

He slows down a little, like he wants to listen now.

“It was just...a lot,” I pant. “It was the first time I’ve been to Brandon’s grave in years and”—I gasp for air—“I wasn’t ready for much else.” I look up at him hoping to convey that I wasn’t ready for *him*.

“I know.” He glances down at me. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry—”

“I wasn’t ready either. My mom should have told me you were back.”

Would he have avoided me if she had? I try to ignore the sting of rejection I’ll probably always feel around him and say, “Well, maybe neither of us were ready, but now here we are.” I huff, trying to ignore the burning in my lungs.

He doesn’t respond, so we run in silence for a few seconds.

“Gabe, can we just talk about it?” I finally ask, feeling strengthened by the endorphins pumping through my veins. “Can we just get it all out? Because this isn’t the last time we’re going to bump into each other,” I struggle to say. “It’s a small island.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“There’s everything to talk about!”

“No, Liv, there isn’t. Just leave it alone.”

“Leave it alone? Seriously?” I slow to a stop and drop my hands to my knees, gasping for air as the burning in my calves radiates up my legs. *I need closure, dammit.*

Gabe keeps running.

“You know, everyone thinks you’ve changed because of your injury,” I shout down the beach. “But the only change I see is that you’ve turned into a jerk!” I yell, feeling overwhelmed with frustration and anger.

He turns around and jogs back toward me, slowing to a stop a few feet in front of me. He puts his hands on his hips and his chest rises and falls as he catches his breath. “Yeah, well, I’ve been called a lot worse than that. But you’ve probably forgotten,” he says, making new cuts in my heart. He

knows I did everything I could to protect him from the awful things people said about him after the accident.

My eyes prick with tears, but I blink them back. “I hate you,” I say through clenched teeth, fighting a wave of emotion that’s ready to pour out of me.

“Yeah”—he closes his eyes and opens them again—“that’s what I thought.” He turns around and starts running down the beach again.

“Gabe,” I shout, but he doesn’t stop this time. “I didn’t mean it,” I whisper to myself as he disappears down the beach.

* * *

“Liv, honey, you’re still asleep?” my mom asks, opening the curtains that cover my bedroom window, but I pull the sheet over my face to block the midday sunlight that pours in.

When I got home from my run, I showered and climbed back into bed, but I haven’t been able to sleep.

“You missed breakfast and if you don’t get up soon, you’re going to miss lunch too,” she says, sitting on the bed beside me.

“I don’t care,” I mumble.

She pulls the sheet off my face. “Liv, what’s the matter?”

I blink my puffy eyes a few times until they adjust to the light and I see my mom hovered over me with a concerned look on her face.

“I saw Gabe.”

“Oh.” She nods her head thoughtfully.

“Twice, actually.”

“When?”

“Yesterday at the cemetery. And again this morning.”

“This morning?”

“I got up early and went for a run on the beach. You and Daddy were still asleep.”

“Ah.” She nods and moves the hair out of my face. “Well...it was only a matter of time.”

“I know. I just thought I’d have a few days to adjust first.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Yes. But it was...it wasn’t good. It was weird.”

“Well, honey, that’s probably normal. You have different lives now.”

I don't need a reminder.

"Why didn't you tell me he has seizures?" I ask.

"I told you he did."

"You told me he had *a* seizure. Once. Years ago."

She shakes her head and sighs. "Oh, I don't know. We just didn't want you worrying about him."

"I'll always worry about him." But if I had known he was having seizures regularly, it probably would have made things much harder for me.

"Yeah." She knows.

"Well, did you also forget to mention that he's huge now?"

She shrugs. "I guess it's not that noticeable when you see someone all the time."

I nod and pick at my thumbnail. "I called him a jerk...and I told him that I hate him."

"Oh, honey, why?"

"I don't know, because he was being a jerk." My eyes fill with tears. "I didn't mean it."

"Of course you didn't."

"I was just so frustrated." I sit up and wipe my eyes. "He wouldn't talk to me about what happened. He told me to leave it alone. And I get it, it's not easy to talk about. But I *need* to talk about it, or it's going to eat me alive." I shake my head, blinking back more tears. "You were right, Momma, he's not the same. He was never the same after the accident."

"Oh, Liv." She pulls me into a hug.

"I was afraid to talk to him at first, at the cemetery. I wasn't expecting to see him there and the thought of rehashing our last days together made me want to run and hide. But I feel like that's all I've done since the moment he told me he didn't love me anymore." I sit back and wipe my eyes. "I just ran from the truth, I guess. But I'm done running and I am *not* going to hide anymore. I want a fresh start *here* and I don't think I'm going to get that until I get some closure with him."

"Liv... Gabe"—she presses her lips together—"he's been through a lot."

"I know. I was there."

"I'm not just talking about his recovery. Though, Lord knows he's had some mountains to climb. I'm talking about the emotional and mental damage he's endured. The kind physical therapy couldn't fix. I know he looks better, but the last few years haven't been easy on him. His whole

world changed. And I know yours did too. So did mine. But he took the brunt of it, baby. I just don't think he'll ever be the same Gabe we knew before the accident."

I exhale a quiet breath and another tear rolls down my cheek.

"I'm not telling you this to make you sad. Just make sure he knows that you don't hate him. That's not something either of you should be carrying around. Not after everything you've both been through."

I nod in silent agreement.

"He lives in the apartment over that old garage on his parents' property," she adds, patting my leg. "I think Jackie had a hard time letting him go," she muses. "And Lord knows Danny needs him nearby. Since his heart attack, he just can't do the heavy lifting to keep that place up anymore. And Gabe uses the garage for his work."

"His work?"

She raises her eyebrows over a small smile. "Maybe you should go over there and see it sometime."

"Maybe," I say uncertainly.

"Why don't you get up and get dressed. I'll make us some lunch."

"Okay." I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand up. "Ow." My calves are on fire.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, my legs are just sore from running this morning."

"Did you push yourself too hard?"

"Maybe a little."

Maybe I pushed Gabe too hard. Just because I'm ready to talk about what happened, doesn't mean he is.

"I thought we could do a little shopping this afternoon and maybe go to Sophie's Place to get our nails done, if you're up to it." She smiles. "A pedicure might be nice."

I smile and nod. "That would actually be great."

* * *

The drive to Gabe's parents' house two days later is a familiar one. I've probably made it a hundred times, but I'm seeing everything with new eyes now. I notice everything and appreciate it all in a way that I couldn't before—the worn fences, the flags on the wooden telephone poles, the yellow

ribbons tied around the trunks of the weepy old oak trees that hang over the road, the purple and yellow flowers that grow wild alongside them.

When I see the gate to the Norths' property, my skin pricks with anxiety. I'm not really sure if I'm ready to see Gabe again so soon, but my mother was right. He needs to know that I don't hate him.

I'm definitely not ready to see his parents. The last time I saw his mother, Jackie, I was crying on her front porch, begging her to let me see Gabe. After he ended things, I left on my own accord, overcome with hurt and shock. But when he wouldn't answer my calls or respond to any of my texts, the separation anxiety quickly consumed me. I just wanted to see him, to talk to him, to try to change his mind somehow, convince him that he still loved me. But I couldn't even convince Jackie to let me inside. She sent me away. Twice. I shake my head and sigh. All I did was embarrass myself.

I pull onto the property and hear the familiar sound of the gravel crunching under my tires as I drive through the open gate. The modest ranch style house sits on several acres of land covered in century-old oaks and giant magnolia trees with blossoms as big as my hand. There's an old barn in the back and they used to have a chicken coop beyond that.

I make my way down the long, sandy road, watching the little house disappear from view as I follow it to the two-story garage on the opposite side of the property. I park my car next to an old white Ford F-150—the same one I saw in the parking lot at the beach. It must be Gabe's. *He drives a truck.* I shake my head at the foreign thought and climb out of my car.

When I reach the stairs to the apartment, I hear a loud banging noise coming from the garage...and music. Both of the giant doors are raised up, so I go inside.

Wow. The garage is filled with furniture. *Beautiful* furniture. Giant wooden farmhouse tables, tall chestnut-colored armoires, driftwood coffee tables and benches that are stacked high.

I weave through the rows of furniture, touching each piece that I pass, taking in the scent of fresh lumber and sawdust. The craftsmanship is amazing. I make my way to the back of the garage and find Gabe hammering a nail into a very large piece of wood. I clear my throat and call his name, "Gabe."

He reaches for a nearby speaker and turns the music down. "Hey," he says, looking surprised to see me.

“Hi.” I chew my bottom lip nervously, second-guessing my decision to come see him. But it’s too late to turn around. “I’m sorry to stop by without calling. I didn’t have your number so…” It’s a lame excuse. He knows I could have gotten his number if I really wanted it. Deep down, I hoped that by stopping over unannounced, he might not be here. “I just, um, I wanted to come by and tell you that I’m sorry,” I say, getting it out quickly. “I didn’t mean what I said. I don’t hate you.”

He pulls off his leather work gloves and tosses them on a nearby workbench. He leans back against it and crosses his muscular arms over his broad chest, pulling his shirt tight. “Well, you should,” he says, gazing at me with his honey brown eyes, mesmerizing me every time he blinks.

“Well, I don’t.”

He stands up straight and walks over to me. “Why?” he asks, closing the space between us and towering over me.

“What do you mean?” I ask warily.

“Why?” he asks again, and I can see the pain in his eyes now. “Why don’t you hate me?”

I shake my head incredulously. “Do you want me to?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it would be so much easier if you did.”

I attempt to swallow down the hurt that’s lodged in the middle of my throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know that I was making things so difficult for you.”

“Why did you come back here, Liv?”

My stomach clenches tight as I try to hold in a pained breath. “Would you rather I stayed away?”

He stares at me blankly, but doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to.

“Wow,” I whisper as the tears fill my eyes.

“Look, I know I fucked everything up, all right? You being here only reminds me of that.”

I swallow hard and square my shoulders as the hurt turns to anger. “Yeah, well...this is my home too, and I’m not going anywhere, so you’re just going to have to get over it.”

He lets out an ironic laugh and shakes his head. “Get over it?” He turns around and walks over to his workbench again, but I follow right behind him.

“Gabe.”

He ignores me.

“Gabe!”

He picks up his gloves, but I grab them out of his hand.

“Dammit, Gabe, look at me!” I reach for his arm, but when he turns around, I see a familiar look in his eyes that tugs hard at old strings still tied to my heart—reminding me of when I used to tell him that everything would be okay, that I still loved him, that he wasn’t the failure he thought he was. But, like then, he can’t see me through his own demons, even after all this time. *God*, what I wouldn’t give for him to look at me the way he did before the accident, just once more. Still, as his empty eyes gaze into mine, I’m reminded of who he was before, and I put my hand on his flushed cheek. “It’s okay, Gabe.”

I watch the storm inside him settle, feeling like it moved from him to me, because an electric current is suddenly buzzing through me, making my palm tingle where it’s pressed to his warm cheek. He closes his eyes and I wonder if he feels it too, but when he opens them again, I see the dark clouds return.

He wraps his long fingers around my wrist, pulls my hand away, and says, “Please go.”

* * *

I lie on my parents’ couch, listening to the storm outside, mindlessly flipping through the channels on the TV, which keep getting stuck each time the satellite goes out.

“Liv, dinner,” my mother calls from the kitchen. When I don’t answer, she walks into the living room and repeats, “Liv...dinner.”

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry,” I say, keeping my eyes on the pixelated TV screen.

“Honey, you haven’t eaten all day.”

“Yes, I have.”

“Barely. Now come on, come have dinner with me and Daddy. Please?”

She’s right, I haven’t eaten much in the last twenty-four hours, not since before Gabe asked me to leave. It was far too reminiscent of when we broke up, and it hurt almost as much as it did back then. Before the accident, Gabe would have never ignored me or asked me to leave when things got heated.

We could always talk through anything. I listened to him and he listened to me, and we always met somewhere in the middle, even if we agreed to disagree. But after his injury, he lost the ability to effectively argue. If I didn't entertain his self-deprecation, or agree that I was better off without him, as he often tried to convince me, he simply shut down. There was no talking to him. There was no convincing him. We were on different pages, separated by our own truths, and drifting farther and farther apart. I had hoped time would have helped, but the truth is, his brain injury altered who he is. Time isn't the problem.

The thought is almost unbearable.

"I really believed he would get better."

She pulls me up into a hug. "Oh, honey."

"Do you think he ever will? Eventually?" I ask, still clinging to a tiny morsel of hope.

She releases me and says carefully, "I think Gabe *is* better." She looks at me and explains, "As far as what Jackie has told me, the doctors say he's made a full recovery, aside from the seizures. But that's typical after a brain injury. This is who Gabe is now. Who he'll always be."

She gives me a small, compassionate smile, but it does little to ease the pain in my heart.

"I know it hurts, honey, but maybe now you can finally move on. You said what you needed to say. He knows you don't hate him. Let that give you peace and maybe some closure."

"I'm trying." I don't think Gabe will ever talk to me about what happened. And I don't think it matters anymore. There's no rational explanation he could give me that would make me understand how he could stop loving me so suddenly. It wasn't in his control any more than it was in mine. It was all out of our hands...the accident, Brandon, his injury. There's no explanation for any of it. So, I'm just going to have to get over it on my own.

Get over it and move on. I close my eyes and let go of the hope I've been holding onto. I owe myself that much.

Chapter 8

Gabe

I pull into the Daltons' driveway, wheels splashing through puddles, my windshield wipers struggling to keep up with the pounding rain. I put my truck in park and sit for a few minutes, waiting for the rain to lighten up, for my heart to stop hammering inside my chest.

She's better off without you, I remind myself. But she still deserves an explanation for how I acted yesterday. I wasn't lying when I said it would be easier if she hated me. It would be. If she did, I could go on with my life without worrying that I'm screwing up hers any more than I already have. But the truth is, the thought of Liv hating me tears me to shreds inside.

She was the only person who saw past my mistake after the accident. It's something you can see in people's eyes—even my own mother couldn't hide the sadness behind hers. But when Liv looked at me, I only saw love. Even when I hated myself, she never did. It used to drive me crazy, because I really wanted her to hate me sometimes. I wanted her to scream at me for what I did. To tell me that I ruined everything. But it didn't matter how hard I pushed her, she would just put her hand on my cheek, like she did yesterday, and tell me everything was okay.

When she did that yesterday, I wanted to pull her into my arms and cry like a baby. It had been so long since I felt her touch. And I know she meant what she said, that it would be okay, that *we* could be okay, if I'd allow it. But I can't. As much as I want her—and I do still want her, I probably always will—I'm not the same person she remembers. The man she loved is gone. And I don't think she'd like the one I've become.

I inhale a deep breath, reach for the door handle, and run through the relentless rain, through the soggy grass, and up the slippery steps to the front porch. I wipe my face and ring the doorbell, trying to control my breathing.

"Gabe," Duke says, surprised, when he opens the front door.

"Hi, Duke." Before I can explain why I'm standing on his front porch, soaking wet, Maggie peers over his shoulder.

"Gabe," she says with equal surprise, but comprehension quickly settles on her face. "Now's not a good time," she says quietly, and I know Liv must be inside.

“It’s okay,” Liv says moments later, squeezing between her parents. She closes the door behind her, giving us privacy, and eyes my wet clothes. “Gabe, you’re drenched.”

She’s wearing sweats and an old T-shirt, her hair is pulled up, and she’s fresh-faced, blinking up at me. *God*, she hasn’t changed a bit. I stare at her for several quiet seconds as I’m swept back in time, reminded of how things used to be between us. Then I see the iridescent line that stretches across her cheek in the dim light of the porch and my chest rises and falls with labored breaths.

“Gabe, are you okay?” she asks, taking a step toward me, but she hesitates and falls back on her heels.

“I was really messed up after the accident,” I say urgently, unable to contain my thoughts any longer. “I still am.” I run my hands through my wet hair, tracing the scar over my ear. “I’m sorry, I don’t want it to be like this. But I can’t change what happened. I can’t take it back. And I can’t make it go away. I’ve tried. I swear to God, I’ve tried. But I don’t know how to fix it. I can’t fix it,” I admit, wishing like hell I could.

Liv’s eyes fill with tears, but she doesn’t say anything.

“I was good, Liv. I was *good* before—”

“I know,” she says, taking a step toward me again. This time she reaches for my arm, touching it gently with her small hand. “I know you were.”

“I did everything I was supposed to do, you know? Made good grades, played sports, got a full ride to college. I even waited for…” I look away from her sympathetic eyes, full of compassion I don’t deserve. “For a while, I had it all. A best friend who was like a brother and a girlfriend who—” I pause when I see the way she’s looking at me now, desperate for every word, every admission I came here to make. And full of forgiveness, still, after all these years. “Who was a best friend,” I say honestly, wanting her to know. “Who was everything.”

Her green eyes shimmer behind her tears and my heart hammers inside my chest as fast and hard as the rain pounding on the sidewalk. I want to pull her into my arms and tell *her* that everything will be okay, but I don’t know if it will be. I don’t know how it could be.

I clear my throat and continue, “But I took it all for granted. And just like that, it was all gone.”

She reaches for me again, but hesitates, like before. “I’m messed up too. I think I probably always will be.” She presses her lips together into an unapologetic smile and shrugs. “But not just because of the accident. Because of everything that happened after it,” she says flatly, piercing my heart.

She’s messed up because of *me*. I already knew that she was, I could see that at the cemetery. But hearing her say it, hearing her admit that I’m the culprit of her pain, and *probably always will be*, nearly tears me in two.

I gaze at her through a sea of sadness I usually camouflage with silence. But I can’t be silent around her. I can’t pretend to be the person everyone thinks I’ve become, the person I often believe I’ve become, with her. She deserves more than that. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

The pained look on her face tells me I did, I hurt her deeply. And I meant to. As much as it killed me, as much as I didn’t *want* to hurt her, I meant to. But I don’t know how to make her understand that even though every bone in my body was telling me not to, I did it for her.

“You’ll never know how sorry I am,” I say, leaving it at that. I drop my head and shove my hands into my pockets. “I guess that’s what I really came here to say. That I’m sorry. For all of it...for the accident, for Brandon, and most of all, for hurting you.”

She blinks back the tears that fill her eyes, but she doesn’t respond.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me, especially not for Brandon, but I just wanted you to know. I am sorry.” Having said what I needed to say, I duck my head, step off the porch, and jog through the rain toward my truck.

“It’s okay,” Liv calls urgently, and I pause.

I turn around and watch her jog down the steps on bare feet, and run through the grass, ignoring the pelting rain. She collides into me, wraps her arms around me, and presses her cheek to my chest. “I forgive you,” she says with a breath of relief, like she’s been holding it in all this time, and I feel a small weight slip off my shoulders, startling me, because I’d forgotten it was there. I’ve been carrying it so long.

I close my eyes and wrap my arms around her shoulders.

“I forgive you,” she says again, and I fight a tear that leaks onto my cheek and mixes with the rain on my face.

I tighten my arms around her and hold her until I feel the warmth of her skin against mine through our wet clothes. And for the first time in seven years, I feel relief.

“There’s no easy fix, Gabe, for any of it. But maybe...maybe we can just be messed up together.” My heart races, defiantly thrilled at the unlikely prospect, but it calms down when she adds, “As friends.”

Friends. I hadn’t considered this.

Could I be friends with Liv? My mind runs in circles around the idea, and I grasp at the possibility. We were friends long before we were together. And *damn* I miss her. She clings to me beneath a crack of lightning that lights up the sky, and I say into her wet hair, “Maybe.”

Chapter 9

Liv

“Ow!” I shake my hand and wipe off the hot oil that splattered it. I hold my finger to my mouth and continue dropping pieces of floured chicken into the popping skillet with a pair of tongs.

“Liv, baby, what are you doing?” my dad asks, looking surprised to see me standing over the stove, frying chicken in the middle of the day.

“I’m making lunch.” I keep my eyes on the skillet. “For Gabe.”

“Oh,” he says gently. “Well, all right.” He pours himself a cup of water. “You and Gabe spending some time together now?”

“No, not really.” I shrug. “I just thought it would be a nice gesture.”

He nods and sips his water. “Well, I think that’s a real nice thing to do.”

“I’m still not sure how this is going to help you move on with your life,” my mom says, joining us in the kitchen. “On from Gabe,” she adds with a knowing glance.

She was happy when I told her that Gabe and I made amends last night, but she had hoped we’d leave it at that. Sometimes I think she just *needs* something to worry about.

“I’m convinced there is no moving on from Gabe, Momma, not if I’m going to stay here. There’s just finding a new normal.”

“So, *are* you going to stay?” my dad asks, with hopeful eyes.

My mom gives me a subtle grin, and I nod happily in his direction. “Yeah. Momma and I found the perfect little condo this morning and it’s just a few blocks from the beach. But,” I add with a sigh, “it’s being renovated, so I won’t be able to move in for at least another month or two.”

“That’s great news. You can stay here as long as you need. Shoot, stay here for good. You don’t *have* to move out.”

“Daddy, I’m almost thirty. I need my own place.”

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and kisses my cheek. “You’ll always be welcome here.”

“I know.” I return his warm smile. “Now, all I need to do is find a job to support my new career and I’ll be on my way.” I laugh.

My mom reaches for the tongs in my hand and prompts, “Show him your website.” She minds the chicken for me, so I lead my father over to the kitchen table and take a seat in front of my laptop.

He peers over my shoulder as I show him the various menus and pages I created to showcase my freelance editing skills.

“You did all this?”

“Yeah.”

“You might need to come work for Southern Coastal. Our website could use a new look.”

“It’s really not that hard, once you get the hang of it. Besides, you have a whole marketing team that can do this.”

“It looks great, baby. I bet you’ll start lining up clients in no time.”

“It still needs a lot of work, but thanks. I hope so.”

“Have you given anymore thought to what you want to do in the meantime?” my mom asks.

“Not yet. I think I’m going to use the next few weeks as an overdue vacation, but I’ll start looking soon.”

“Some downtime would probably be good for you,” she agrees, “before you start your next adventure.” She smiles encouragingly.

I close my laptop and return to the stove, where I watch my mother flip the chicken over with ease, barely making a ripple in the hot oil.

“So, have you made any plans for this vacation?” she asks.

“No. I just want to take some time to...reconnect, I guess.”

“With?” She gives me a knowing look.

“Everything,” I answer honestly. “The Island, the beach, you.” I smile at her.

She smiles back, then pushes her lips together and adds, “Gabe?”

“Yes, Gabe too.”

She hands me the tongs and, after a quick assessment of the chicken, I begin pulling the crispy pieces from the pan and placing them on a paper towel.

“I know he’s not the same. And I know things will never go back to the way they were—I don’t expect them to. But I’ll always care about Gabe. And right now, I think we could both use a friend.”

“Gabe could certainly use one,” my dad says, and it makes my heart ache when I think of the way people treated him after the accident, either like he was to blame for what happened or like he was a fragile piece of glass. He became so introverted, he basically cut his remaining friends out of his life, and by the sound of it, he hasn’t made any new ones.

My mom makes herself a cup of tea. “I just don’t want to see you getting hurt again, that’s all.”

“I won’t,” I assure her. “Things are different now, I realize that. But I think we *could* be friends again. And”—I look into her worried eyes, imploring for her support—“I’d really like that.”

“Friends,” she says cautiously, wrapping her long fingers around her warm cup of tea.

I shrug one shoulder and nod. “Friends.”

* * *

When I get to Gabe’s apartment, I park my car next to his truck and grab the picnic basket off the seat, which I filled with fried chicken, biscuits, and chocolate chip cookies. I carry it into his garage where I hear him working, glancing down at my outfit—a tank top, linen shorts, and sandals. The warm, humid day also necessitated a ponytail.

I find Gabe in the back of the garage bent over a giant piece of unfinished wood, rubbing it down with a block of sand paper. He’s wearing a pair of worn-out jeans, work boots, and nothing else, besides a golden tan. The muscles in his shoulders and back flex each time he runs the sand paper over the wood, and I stare shamelessly for several long seconds before I finally call his name, “Gabe.”

He glances over his shoulder and turns his music down. “Hey,” he says, wiping his forehead. He pulls his gloves off and tosses them on his workbench.

“I brought you lunch,” I say, holding up the picnic basket. “I hope that’s okay. I just thought that maybe...”

“Lunch sounds good.” The corners of his mouth turn up into a soft smile that touches his eyes just a little and I have to remind myself to breathe, especially when I take in the view of his chest and—*sweet baby Jesus*—his abs. I’ve never seen an eight pack before, but there it is, right in front of me, rippling away in all of its tanned, sweaty glory.

I force my eyes up to his face again. “O-Okay.”

He reaches for his shirt and pulls it on over his head, and I take the opportunity to appreciate his new muscles once more before they’re hidden from view. “Gabe, you’re kind of ripped,” I blurt out, unable to contain my astonishment.

He drops his head bashfully.

“Seriously,” I laugh softly, “what have you been doing?”

He rubs his hand over the back of his neck and shrugs. “I don’t know, I just got so skinny after the accident. I felt weak all the time and didn’t have any energy. You remember?”

I press my lips together and nod over the difficult memory.

“I didn’t want to look or feel like that ever again. So, I decided to do something about it.”

I nod with understanding and hold up the picnic basket. “I made chocolate chip cookies. And fried chicken, some biscuits, and iced tea.”

He gifts me with a smile that warms me like an old, familiar blanket.

“I thought we could both use some comfort food.” I smile softly, but then I wonder if he even eats the high caloric food we grew up on anymore. By the looks of him, maybe he doesn’t. “Is that okay? I mean, do you still like that?”

He gazes at me just long enough for my heart to slow down to a leisurely pace. “Contrary to popular belief, I haven’t changed that much, Liv.”

I press my lips together over a tight smile as my heart stirs and stammers in my chest.

“We can eat around back, if you want.”

“Okay.”

“Come on, I know a good spot.” The glint in his eyes tells me exactly which spot. Behind the barn, under the old oak tree that he carved our initials in. We used to sneak off there to fool around when we were kids. We also used to sit there and talk for hours.

I nod, unable to find my voice, and follow him out of the garage.

“Gabe”—I pause as he weaves through the stacks of furniture—“did you make all this?”

He stops and looks around. “Yeah.”

I wrap my hand around the post of an ornately carved headboard. “This is incredible.”

He watches me trace the intricate grooves in the wood with my fingers.

“How did you learn to do this?”

“I’ve had a lot of time on my hands.”

“Yeah”—I raise my eyebrows—“I guess so.”

“I don’t know...it started out as something to keep my mind off everything. My therapist thought it would be a good idea,” he admits. “But over the years I grew to love it.” He rubs his hand over the headboard thoughtfully.

“Really, it’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.” He gazes at me long enough to make my skin flush and I feel the dewy sheen on my face. I tell myself it’s the Georgia heat and proceed to follow him outside.

“I think I’ve got a blanket in my truck.” He lets out a short, sharp whistle and Roxy comes running across the sprawling property to greet us. I didn’t pay that much attention to her at the beach, because I was busy trying not to die. She circles Gabe’s legs, happily panting and wagging her tail. He rubs her head and squats down to let her lick his face. “Rox, this is Liv.”

I reach for her nose and she licks my hand. “Hi, Roxy,” I say, rubbing her auburn head and silky ears. “So, how does it work?”

Gabe looks at me curiously.

“How does she help if you have a seizure?”

“Oh, um, she can usually tell if I’m going to have one a few minutes before it happens and she lets me know.”

“That’s pretty amazing.” *God*, that makes me feel so much better. I was worried about him around all those power tools in the garage.

He opens the passenger door to his truck and Roxy jumps in. “Not this time,” he says to her. “Get in the back.”

She jumps down and runs around to the tailgate. She waits for Gabe to lower it and when he does, she jumps up into the back.

“She’s really good.”

“The best,” he says, rubbing her head.

I climb up into the truck, put the picnic basket on the bench seat beside me, and reach for the seatbelt, even though I doubt we’ll top ten miles per hour. It’s a deep-seated habit that became even more ingrained in me after the accident. Gabe gets in and slides open the little window in the back for Roxy. She props her nose on the edge of the window and watches him put the key in the ignition.

“Sit down, girl,” he says to her, and she immediately does.

I reach for the door to roll my window down and see the old manual crank. “Gabe, how old is this truck?” I ask, laughing, turning the crank around and around until the window is lowered all the way down.

“Ninety-one.”

“Geez, it’s as old as us.”

“All right now, don’t hate on my truck,” he says, looking over the hood as he navigates off the gravel road that runs through the Norths’ land onto a worn place in the sparse grass where tires have made a path to the back of the property.

I watch him, remembering how nervous he was to get behind the wheel for the first time after the accident. Now, he seems as comfortable as ever. I smile softly. “I’m not hating. It’s actually kind of cool. Very retro.”

“Okay, we’re not *that* old.”

I laugh softly. “Maybe you’ve lost track, but we’ll be thirty next year.... *Thirty!* How the hell did that happen?” I murmur.

“You don’t look a day over twenty-two,” he says, glancing over at me, and my heart flutters wildly.

I try to will the blush from my cheeks and say coolly, “I’d say the same, but you definitely don’t look like you did when you were twenty-two.”

“Thank God,” he says lightly, and I allow myself to laugh about it.

“You look great, Gabe. You look healthy,” I say sincerely. “I’m so glad.”

He nods softly. “Me too.”

He pulls around to the back of the barn and I feel like I’m seventeen again. Nothing has changed. It looks exactly the same. Weathered wooden planks cover the outside and the tin roof shines under the midday sun. The tall golden grass in the pasture beyond the barn waves gently in the wind and the giant oak tree that we carved our initials in covers the beaten ground with shadows.

Gabe puts the truck in park and Roxy dances around in a circle in the back, waiting for him to let the tailgate down. But she grows impatient and jumps down over the side of the truck before he gets to her.

I unbuckle, grab the picnic basket, and ungracefully stumble out of the truck. But Gabe catches my elbow before I fall. “Thanks,” I say, glancing up at him, but his eyes stay fixed on my arm. He turns it over and inspects the scar on my elbow, tracing it with his long fingers, and the warmth of his skin travels up my arm all the way to my heart, making it ache and rejoice at once.

“It’s fine now,” I manage, answering the question in his eyes. It used to bother me a lot after the accident. I stretch my arm out, bending it and

moving it around in an exaggerated circle. "See, fine." I drop my head, but he catches my chin and turns my face to the side. "Gabe." I try to move his hand away, but he finds the almost non-existent scar on my cheek in the sunlight and runs his thumb over it, sending a soft jolt of electricity to my bones that turns them all to jelly.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"You can barely see it now," I breathe.

He pulls his eyebrows together and pushes his full lips into a small pout, reminding me that what he's feeling isn't desire. The bright pink line that once stretched across my cheek used to torture him after the accident. But it's almost invisible now.

Roxy takes off running across the grassy pasture.

"Doesn't she need to stay close to you?" I ask, finding my voice again.

He shakes his head. "She can sense it from half a mile away. She has before."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She won't go too far, though. She just likes running through the tall grass."

"Do you take her everywhere?"

"Usually. Man's best friend. Man's only friend," he says, shaking his head.

"Gabe, that's not true."

He shrugs, like it doesn't bother him. "Well, most days I'm content just working in my garage by myself. Roxy's a good companion."

"I didn't see her with you that day at the cemetery."

"Oh. No, I don't usually take her there." He creases his eyebrows and explains, "She gets kind of confused when I get upset."

My heart squeezes. "O-Oh."

I look up at the giant twisted branches of the oak tree that curve all the way to the ground. They're covered in Spanish moss and shiny green leaves. "God, I love this tree."

"You always did," Gabe says, spreading the blanket out under it.

"I forgot how beautiful it is." I press my hand to its wide trunk and let it drag behind me as I circle it, until I find our weathered initials carved deep into the grooves of the bark...and the compass Gabe carved above them. I touch the simple cross that's flanked only with an *N* on top.

What's the compass for?

In case you ever get lost.

You're missing south, west and east.

It points north, so you'll always find your way back to me.

My true north.

"Liv," Gabe says, pulling me from the memory. "You want to sit down?"

"Yeah."

We sit on the blanket beneath the sweeping branches and I set out our lunch. I hand Gabe a small tumbler of iced tea and watch his Adam's apple bounce up and down as he empties the cup with just a few gulps.

"Thirsty?"

He wipes his mouth and exhales. "Yeah."

Over the next ten minutes, I watch, astonished, as he cleans off a breast, a thigh, and both legs of the chicken I prepared, followed by two biscuits.

"Gabe, I don't think I've ever seen anyone eat that much so quickly. Doesn't your mother feed you?"

"That might have been the best meal I've had in months," he groans, placing his hand flat against his stomach. "My mother's not much of a cook, if you don't remember. And besides, I don't usually eat at my parents' house. There's a kitchen in my apartment."

"Right, of course. I didn't mean—"

"I'm a terrible cook." He smirks and shakes his head. "I don't normally sit down to homemade fried chicken and biscuits."

"Oh." I laugh softly.

"It was really good. Thank you for making it for me."

"You're welcome."

He glances at the picnic basket behind me. "Now, didn't you say something about cookies?"

"Chocolate chip," I say, reaching for the canister that I stacked them in. I hand it to him and he grabs a few off the top, eating each cookie in two bites, moaning quietly over each mouthful.

When he finally seems to be full, he lies back on the blanket, laces his fingers over his chest, and looks up at the tree.

I stretch my legs out beside him and lean back on my hands. "Have you ever thought about selling your furniture?"

"The furniture in my garage?"

“Yeah. People would pay a lot of money for that kind of craftsmanship. Believe me. My girlfriend, Trisha, is an interior designer and her clients spend boatloads on custom-made furniture. And now that you have an in with my dad’s company...”

He turns his head and looks at me. “You mean the furniture I’m making for Southern Coastal?”

My dad’s company.

“Wait. What? That’s what you’ve been helping my dad with? He’s using *your* furniture in the new line he’s working on?”

The corners of his mouth turn up slightly and he exhales an amused breath through his nostrils. “I *am* the new line he’s been working on.”

“What?” I squeal, clasping my hand over my mouth. “Oh my God, Gabe. You have your *own* line?”

He laughs quietly at my excitement and nods, and I have to fight back tears when I think of how far he’s come.

“That’s really amazing.”

He looks up at the tree again. “I needed to earn a living somehow. No degree, remember?”

I sigh, because I know better than anyone how important school was to him before the accident. “No school could teach you how to do that, Gabe. That’s God-given talent.” I stare at him with complete and utter awe, but he doesn’t look at me. “Gabriel,” I say, demanding his attention. When he turns his head, I smile at him. “I’m really proud of you.”

He doesn’t smile, but I can see the pride in his eyes. “You know, no one really calls me Gabriel anymore. Except my mother.”

“Well, you’ll always be Gabriel to me. My Gabriel,” I say quietly, stripped of my defenses by the surge of joy flooding my brain. When it recedes, I avert my eyes from the pools of caramel gazing up at me, before I fall in and drown.

I lie back on the blanket and stare at the wide branches of the oak tree. I can see the blue sky beyond its dark green leaves and when the wind blows, the giant limbs sway and creak. “So, besides making remarkable pieces of furniture, what else have you been up to?” I ask carefully.

“Well, for the past few years, that’s pretty much all I’ve been doing.” He looks at me and asks, just as gently, “What about you? How was Raleigh?”

A wave of apprehension falls over me and I give a half-hearted smile. “Raleigh was...okay.”

“Must have been a little more than okay. You stayed there a while,” he says, and I wonder how much he really knows. I assumed his mother kept him abreast of my life in Raleigh, but now I wonder if she was protecting him from it, like my mother had been protecting me from his life.

Did he *need* protecting from it?

“Um, that’s not why I stayed,” I answer, still distracted by my own question.

He nods thoughtfully and the corners of his mouth turn down. “Well, did you like your job?”

I sigh quietly, thinking about a fair answer. It wasn’t a bad job. In fact, I beat out several qualified candidates for it. I was lucky to have it. The problem was likely me, not the job. “I liked it at first. But I didn’t love it.”

He stares at me for a few seconds, waiting for me to go on. “You want to tell me what you did?” He gives a small smirk that makes me laugh.

“I reviewed and edited marketing materials for restaurant chains. It wasn’t exactly my literary dream come true.” I shrug. “I guess life doesn’t always care about what we want, does it?”

He shakes his head subtly, then says softly, “Sounds like a good job, Liv.”

“It was. But I guess I wanted more than a job. I *want* more than a job. I want to do something I love. Like edit actual books.” I shrug and widen my eyes playfully. “Put my degree to good use and whatnot.”

He smiles openly and it makes my heart beat wildly. “I hope you do.”

We’re both quiet for a few seconds, gazing up at the giant tree branches above us, listening to them creak as they sway in the warm breeze. I close my eyes and listen to the quiet, low buzzing of the cicadas in the distance.

I love that sound.

“What was it like?” Gabe asks, and I open my eyes.

“What was what like?”

“Your last year at NC State. Finishing college. Graduating.” His voice is a mix of curiosity and pride, for me, and disappointment for him.

I’m quiet as my brain conjures up a flurry of painful memories that I’ve worked really hard to forget. “Um...”

“I’m sorry”—he shakes his head and looks up at the tree again—“that was a stupid question.”

“It’s okay,” I say quietly. “It was...*hard*.”

He looks at me again with knowing eyes, and I try to give a reassuring smile, but he just nods and says, "I guess it probably was."

I look up at the patches of blue sky through the wide tree branches again. "I tried to make the best of it, after a while."

"You deserved to go back and graduate, Liv."

I drop my head to the side and say to him, "So did you."

He gives me a disheartened look and says softly, "Not so sure about that."

I stare at him for a few seconds, unsure what to say.

"Vehicular manslaughter comes with a heavy dose of karma."

"It was *not* vehicular manslaughter. And is that really what you think? That what happened to you was *karma* getting back at you?"

"The accident was my fault, Liv. I should have never agreed to that stupid race."

"No, you shouldn't have. But that doesn't make what happened your fault."

He looks up at the tree pensively.

I sit up and pull him up with me, which is like tugging on a boulder. "Hey. It was an accident, which by definition is something that happens *unintentionally*."

"It still doesn't change the fact that if I didn't race Jeremy, Brandon would still be here."

"No, if Brandon was wearing his seatbelt, he'd still be here." I shake my head and give him an impossible look.

"I was going seventy miles an hour on a thirty-five-mile-an-hour road."

"And a deer jumped out of the woods."

"Which I wouldn't have swerved to miss if I was going the speed limit."

"You don't know that."

"Liv, stop denying the truth. It's okay. I've made peace with it. I mean, it took me a long time, but I've come to terms with it."

"But it's not the truth. Brandon didn't have his seatbelt on, which is the most basic rule of riding in a car. That's the truth. And he took it off because of *me*. That's the truth."

"What?" He shakes his head. "No."

"He was egging you on to race Jeremy. That's the truth." I grab his arm and look into his eyes, hoping to make him see. "You loved Brandon and

you would have walked through fire to protect him...and me. *That's* the truth."

He lowers his chin and looks away from me.

"I'm sorry, but I know that somewhere deep down you believe that. The accident *wasn't* your fault. Or Brandon's fault. Or my fault. It was just an accident. A terrible accident."

I can't see his face, but I hear his breath catch.

"Gabe," I say softly, placing my hand against his wide back. "It's okay."

He reaches over his shoulder and squeezes my hand—and my heart.

I press my cheek to his back and wrap my other hand around his arm. Disarmed by his vulnerability, I close my eyes and whisper, "I miss you, Gabe. I still miss you...so much."

He turns around and his eyes are liquid gold and molten chocolate pouring into me. "You don't have to miss me anymore."

I'm suddenly swept back in time, back before everything got so screwed up, when it was all so simple and pure, when he was my whole world and I was his.

I'm pulled back to the present when Roxy comes barreling toward us, barking loud and fast. She pummels into Gabe and starts licking his hands frantically.

"Liv, go!"

"What? No."

"Go now! Please," he pleads.

"Gabe, I don't understand—"

He falls over and starts shaking violently.

Oh, God.

His knees draw up to his chest and his hands form white-knuckled fists. I throw myself over him. "Gabe!" I scream, terrified. Roxy is licking his stone face and whimpering. "Help! Somebody help us!"

After a few agonizing seconds, the earthquake beneath me ceases and Gabe gasps for air. His muscles relax and his hands splay limply on the blanket. He sucks in another lungful of air.

"Gabe?" I scan him from head to toe. "What do I do? Tell me what to do."

He groans, but doesn't answer.

"Please be okay," I whisper quietly.

“I’m okay,” he mumbles, but he doesn’t open his eyes. Roxy lies down next to him with her nose against his cheek. He reaches for her head and rubs it weakly. “Good girl, Rox, good girl,” he pants.

My whole body is trembling and my heart feels like it’s going to beat through my chest. That was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever witnessed. Or at least, a close second. Gabe lies on the blanket unmoving and exhausted as I sit next to him helplessly.

“Gabe, what can I do?” I ask again.

“I’m okay. I just need a minute to catch my breath.” He rolls over and sprawls out on his back, and Roxy licks his face.

I sit silently while he recovers, hugging my knees to my chest, but I can’t stop the tears that fill my eyes. I drop my head and cry quietly. It doesn’t take Gabe long to notice. He sits up slowly and wraps his heavy arm around me. Roxy is still right by his side. “Liv, I’m fine, really.”

“I didn’t know what to do.”

“I told you to go. I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

“Go?” I shoot him a horrified look. “And leave you alone while that happened?”

“That’s why I have Roxy. She won’t let anything happen to me.”

“You really think I would leave you like that?” I work hard to contain the emotion churning inside me. I’m not the same girl he pushed away seven years ago. I sit up straight and say firmly, “I’m not going to leave you when you need me, so please don’t ask me to.”

He lets out a defeated sigh. “I know it looks bad when I’m having a seizure, but it doesn’t hurt. I don’t even feel it. I barely remember it when it’s over.”

“Really?”

“It just feels like I’ve run a marathon afterward.” He laughs softly. “They usually only last a few seconds.”

“Roxy was licking your hands. Is that how she tells you it’s going to happen?”

He wraps his arm around her neck and kisses the top of her head. “Yeah, that’s her method. Not all alert dogs do that. They each have their own brand of medicine. But that’s hers.”

“Roxy,” I call her over, patting my hands on my lap. “Come here.” She circles us and sits in front of me. I hold her silky ears in my hands and lift her face to mine. “You are such a good girl. You did such a good job.” She

wags her long tail and licks my face. “Oh, thank you. You did so good. Yes, you did. You’re so smart. You love Gabe, don’t you?” She licks my face again. “Yeah...” *I am in love with this dog*. Watching her protect Gabe like that was incredible.

Gabe falls back on the blanket again. He looks exhausted. I lie down next to him and he lifts his arm, inviting me into the nook between his arm and his chest. I love the nook. I miss the nook. I just experienced a traumatic situation and *need* to be nooked. I scoot up next to him and lay my head on his chest, and he wraps his arm around me, comforting me just like he did on my parents’ front lawn during the storm yesterday. I press my cheek to his shirt and inhale a deep breath. *My Gabriel*. *Gain* laundry detergent and *Old Spice* shower gel. I couldn’t smell it when he held me in the rain, but it lingers on his soft, dry shirt now. I take another deep breath of his familiar scent. I smell sawdust too. That’s new.

“Did you just smell me?”

“Nope.”

“Did you get a good whiff of sweat? A little sawdust?”

“I like the smell of sawdust,” I say, and he laughs softly.

“I’m sorry that was scary for you.”

I nod against his chest, feeling the remnants of adrenaline slowly dissipate. “I’m sorry it happens to you.”

After a while, we pack up our picnic and head back to the garage.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” I ask him for the fifteenth time.

“I’m fine, Liv, really. I just need a good night’s sleep tonight. I’ll be good as new tomorrow. And I probably won’t have another seizure for a while. I usually only have one every couple of months.”

“Okay. Well”—I pull out my phone—“why don’t you give me your number and I’ll text you mine? And then you can call me if you need anything.”

He recites his number and I send him a text that says *Liv*.

“My phone’s inside,” he says, gesturing to the garage, and I smile at the way his southern drawl makes “inside” sound more like *in-sad*.

“Okay.” I stand on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck to give him a quick hug goodbye. But when he pulls me against him, I disappear beneath the weight of his arms and the world falls away. There’s no pain. No sadness. Only relief. The relief I prayed for night after night in Raleigh. The relief I searched for in Travis, but never found.

“I’ll see you later,” he says against my hair, and I have to tear myself away from him.

“All right. Bye.” I hear the southern drawl in my own voice, brought out by his, and it makes me smile as I get into my car and drive away.

Chapter 10

Liv

I check the time on my phone. *10:18pm*. I send Trisha a text, hoping she's still awake.

Me: *Call me if you're up*

Trisha: *I'm up. Calling now :)*

My phone buzzes in my hand. "Hey," I answer.

"Hey, stranger!"

"I know. I'm sorry I haven't been able to talk the last couple of days. I've just been busy...unpacking and getting settled in at my parents' house."

"Honey, I watched you unpack your entire apartment in one day. So what's really going on down there?"

"You know, I really don't like you sometimes."

"Yes, you do. You love me. So spill it. What's been going on? Is everything okay?"

I sigh. "I do love you. And I miss you."

"I miss you too. I don't like being Livless in Raleigh. Hey, that would make a great country song, wouldn't it? *Livless...in Raleigh...*," she sings with a heavy twang, and then laughs at herself.

"You could always move down here."

"Raleigh is my St. Simons, remember? It's home. All my family is here."

"I know."

"So what's it like being back?" she asks cautiously.

"It's kind of strange and wonderful and sad and surreal all at the same time."

She's quiet for a second. "You saw him, didn't you?" When I don't answer, her voice ticks up an octave. "Really? You saw him?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Yes."

"Okay, can you please stop being so cryptic? I can't see you and I don't know if you're smiling or crying."

"Sorry. I'm fine, Trish. Really, I am. I mean, there has definitely been some crying. But I'm okay. I think everything's going to be okay."

“Okay,” she says hesitantly. “Well, I’m just glad you’re okay. But do you think maybe you can start at the beginning and fill me in?”

“Sure.” I explain everything that’s happened the last few days and she listens intently until I’m through.

“So let me see if I’ve got this right. The love of your young life showed up sporting a new set of washboard abs that make you want to lick him and a serious medical condition that makes you want to rock him, and his best friend is a dog that makes *Lassie* look dumb.”

“Something like that.”

“Well, I didn’t see that coming.”

“Me neither.”

She laughs. “Look, I’m just happy that you didn’t drive your car off a bridge when you got there. I was really worried about you. You were so upset after the whole Travis thing. I didn’t know what to expect. It dredged up a part of you I haven’t seen in a long time.”

“I know. And it hasn’t been easy dealing with everything again, but pretending like my life here didn’t exist was harder.”

“Speaking of pretending that things don’t exist...you know you’re going to have to speak to Travis at some point, right?”

“We broke up, Trish. There’s nothing left to say.”

“Well, maybe it was that easy for you, but I saw Travis at the gym the other day and he was pretty torn up about it. The man wanted to marry you, Liv. Don’t you think you owe him some sort of closure?”

“I told him that it’s over. What else can I do?”

“I know. I’m just saying, he may not have been the love of your life, but you meant something to him. And even if you won’t admit it, he meant *something* to you too. Whatever that something was deserves a conversation.”

I’m quiet.

“You’re a good person, Liv. And Travis is too. He just wasn’t the *right* person. You need to finish things with him the right way. Don’t just run away again.”

“Ouch.”

“I’m sorry, but sometimes you need me to point out your negligent, self-destructive tendencies. It’s for your own good.”

I sigh dramatically. “Well, I was going to ask you to come visit me, but now I’ve changed my mind.”

“Oh, well I was already planning on taking next Friday off to come see you, but...”

“Really?”

“Yeah, well, I was starting to have Liv withdrawals.” She laughs softly.

“Ah, I can’t wait for Trish in real life. Phone Trish is kind of a downer.” She laughs again.

“You’ll stay here, right? My parents have plenty of room and I know they would love to see you. They keep asking about you. I think they miss you tagging along on our little family outings during their visits to Raleigh.”

She laughs. “Of course, as long as they don’t mind.”

“They would probably mind if you *don’t* stay here.”

“Okay, I’ll see you next Friday then.”

“One week! I can’t wait.”

“Try not to get into too much trouble between now and then.”

“I’ll do my best, but I can’t make any promises.”

“All right, I’ll call you later. “Nighty-night.”

“Goodnight.” I end the call and lie in my bed, holding my phone to my chest, staring at my ceiling fan.

Sometimes you need me to point out your negligent, self-destructive tendencies.

I reluctantly text Travis.

Me: *I just wanted you to know that I’m staying with my mom and dad in St. Simons*

Me: *I hope you’re doing okay*

After a few minutes of silence, I put my phone down and try to go to sleep. But just when I start to drift off, it buzzes on my nightstand, startling me, and I see the little green text bubble light up my screen in the dark. My heart does a quick boomerang around the room when I see who the text is from.

Gabe: *Hey I hope it’s not too late*

Me: *Nope I’m up. Everything ok?*

Me: *How do you feel?*

Gabe: *I feel a lot better. Just wanted to say thanks for today*

Gabe: *It was really good to talk*

Me: *Yes. It was*

Gabe: *Thanks again for lunch*

Me: *Glad you enjoyed it*

Gabe: *Maybe we can do it again sometime*

Me: *I'd like that :)*

Gabe: *I'm glad you're back*

I hold my phone to my chest, feeling my heart settle comfortably into a little nest of Gabe.

Me: *Me too*

Gabe: *Do you want to go to the beach with me tomorrow?*

I smile and quickly reply.

Me: *Yes*

Gabe: *Safe to assume you haven't taken up surfing?*

Me: *Assume away*

Gabe: *I won't bring my board*

Me: *It's fine bring it. I'll just watch*

Gabe: *Pick you up at eight?*

Me: *Sounds good*

Gabe: *Ok see you in the morning. Goodnight*

Me: *Goodnight*

I bite my smiling lip and hold my phone to my chest. Startling me, it begins to vibrate beneath my hand. I turn it over to see who's calling and reluctantly answer it when I see the name "Travis" light up the screen. "Hey."

"Hi," Travis says sullenly.

"How are you?"

He huffs quietly. "How do you think I am?"

"Travis...I'm sorry." I don't really know what else to say.

"I want to come see you. I want to talk in person."

"Travis, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Please."

"No."

"Because of him?" he asks, unsettling me.

"What? No."

"Then why?"

"Because...there's nothing left to talk about."

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's over. I'm happy here. I'm ready to move on with my life. You should move on too."

He doesn't say anything.

"It's late, Travis. I have to go."

"Liv."

I sigh quietly. "I'm going to go, okay?"

"Okay," he finally says.

"Take care, Travis."

"Yeah, you too."

* * *

I yawn and sip my warm coffee as I gaze through the kitchen window, waiting for Gabe to arrive. It's early, but the sun is already shining in the blue sky and the birds are singing outside.

The house seems so much quieter than it used to. Brandon was always the first one up in the morning. He'd usually be in the kitchen ready to greet the rest of us when we came down for breakfast. It's never been the same without him.

I yawn again. After spending the evening reassuring my mother that Gabe and I spending time together is a good thing, I spent most of the night tossing and turning, trying to reassure myself that Gabe and I spending time together is a good thing. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw his handsome face. I've fallen asleep to visions of Gabe countless times over the years, even with Travis's arms wrapped around me, but the pictures in my head had faded over time. Now, when I close my eyes, I see him in ultra HD and it's hard to look away. For hours I traced over the details of his face in my mind, followed the lines of his tall, muscular body, listened to his sultry voice speaking to me in that soft southern accent I never seemed to notice before.

It's no wonder why I feel so tired. I yawn again.

I see Gabe's truck pull up in front of the house and I quickly finish the last of my coffee, feeling the caffeine take effect—or maybe it's the butterflies that have suddenly filled my stomach. Either way, I'm awake now.

I hurry out to greet him, not giving him a chance to come inside. I'm just getting used to being around Gabe again. I don't need the added pressure of the Spanish Inquisition known as my mother. I smile when he steps out of his pickup wearing flip-flops, board shorts, and a faded, frayed

baseball cap that looks as old as his truck. He shuts his door and leans against it as I hurry down the driveway with my beach bag slung over my shoulder. As I close the space between us, he gives me a big, gorgeous smile that shows off his straight white teeth and lights up his whole face. *Ohh*. My heart aches and swells at the same time. This is no ordinary smile. I know this smile well. This is *my* smile. The one that he always used to greet me with when we were younger. The one I haven't seen since I was twenty-two.

"Hey, sunshine," he says in that sweet southern voice, and my heart takes a diving leap into my stomach. How can he make me feel so good and so sad at the same time? How can I be such a masochist that I don't even care which emotion he's conjuring up, as long as he's the one doing it?

I stand in front of him and peer up at his eyes in the shadow of his raggedy old baseball cap, that I now recognize from high school. The logo is from an old surf shop we used to go to, but it's been closed for years.

"It's been a while since you called me that."

"It's been a while since I did a lot of things," he says, gazing down at me, and my heart glugs heavily in my chest. "I was kind of hoping I might get the chance to make up for that."

I smile softly over the involuntary feelings of hopefulness I feel stirring deep down inside me. Hope is dangerous where Gabe is concerned. Hope makes me believe that we can be *more* than friends. That maybe he could love me again. That we could be together again. My mother's voice echoes in my ears, warning me against the danger. *I just don't want to see you getting hurt again*. But, the masochist I've become, I eagerly reply, "I'd like that."

He gazes at me for another long second with his lips pressed together like there are more words behind them, and my heart races with anticipation.

Roxy barks once, startling me. I didn't even notice her sitting at my feet. I swallow hard, still staring up at Gabe. "Let's go, Rox," he says, but he doesn't move. He just stares at me and I stare back, and somewhere in between us is a silent conversation filled with all the things we never said and all the things we've ever said.

The air grows thick and it's too much for my brain and lungs to manage—both abandon their posts. Unable to think or breathe, I'm slowly consumed by the hope I'm battling. I don't have the will to fight it anymore.

I *want* to believe that we can be together again. I *want* to believe that he could love me again. I *want* to believe that the current I feel buzzing between us right now is real. I *want* him to wrap his arms around me and press his mouth to mine. I *want* the words he's holding back to be *I love you*. I *want* to be his again. Even if it's only for this one fleeting moment. Even if it shatters me.

I want it.

Roxy barks again and Gabe looks down at her.

The moment is gone.

He smiles shyly, takes my bag, and opens the car door for me. He fumbles when he lowers the tailgate for Roxy and I wonder if he was affected by our silent exchange as much as I was.

I climb up into the cab of the truck on wobbly legs and Roxy sticks her nose through the open rear window. "Hey, Roxy." I rub the top of her head, and she licks my hand.

Gabe climbs in and I can still feel the electricity coming off him when he closes the door. He glances over at me. "All set?"

No, I'm not all set. I'm not set at all, actually. I'm quite the opposite of set. What *was* that? *What did you want to say?* I may never know, but whatever it was is now sitting between us like a giant elephant. I try to ignore it. "Yeah," I answer coolly, feeling more confused than ever.

I thought I could be Gabe's friend. I thought that's what I wanted, what I needed. But now I'm not so sure. Maybe my mom is right. Maybe it's not a good idea to be spending so much time with him. It can only lead to more heartache in the end. I'm just setting myself up for it.

Gabe notices me glancing at the house watching for signs of my mother, whose cautionary words are now bouncing around my head like a pinball. "Forget something?"

I shake my head. "No. I just don't feel like dealing with my mom right now."

"Ah." He nods and scans the yard like a P.I., then he leans in close and says very seriously, "It's all clear."

I laugh, but the air is still thick between us, clouding my head. I can't force a smile.

His face grows serious again. "Are you two fighting or something?"

"No. It's just..." I shake my head, unsure how to explain that it's *him*. "It's—"

“Me.”

I look up at him, and his knowing eyes examine me. “My parents love you, Gabe,” I say truthfully. “My mom is just—”

“Concerned.” The corners of his mouth turn down. He rests his wrists on top of the steering wheel and stares at the house.

“Should she be?” I ask carefully.

He shrugs. “She just wants what’s best for you, Liv.”

I nod my head thoughtfully. “Well, lucky for her, I’m a grown woman and can decide for myself what that is.”

The corners of his mouth turn up like he’s fighting a smile and it instantly lightens the mood. He laughs once and puts the truck in gear. “Yes, you most definitely are,” he says, peering over his shoulder as he backs out of the driveway. “I won’t argue with that.”

“Well, as long as you know.”

I watch Gabe drive along the familiar road that leads to the beach, stealing glances at him out of the corner of my eye. The windows are down and the warm summer air that’s swirling around the cab of the truck has removed any trace of our silent conversation.

The muscles in his arms flex as he shifts gears and plays with the nobs on the radio until he finds the right station. “How do you feel?” I ask, thinking of yesterday when every muscle in his body was rigid and tense and trembling beneath me. It knots my stomach just to think about. I don’t know if spending time with Gabe is a good idea or not, but I feel innately protective over him and not being there for him is a far scarier thought.

“I feel good. Really good, actually. I slept...well.” He gives me a sideways glance that spikes my curiosity. I glance over my shoulder at Roxy, thankful he has her. Her ears are flopping around wildly and she’s biting at the wind.

“So, did you tell your doctor?” I ask, trying to keep the conversation on practical matters, assuming he sees a neurologist to monitor his condition.

“That I got a good night’s sleep? No, but I can fill him in at my next appointment.”

“You know what I mean.”

He laughs quietly. “Yes, Mom, I called him this morning and told him about the seizure.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be your mom. I just don’t know what the protocol is.”

He gives me a small, sincere smile. “I know. I always call after I have one. They like to keep track of how often they occur, how long they last, things like that. They’ve been pushing me to have another surgery, but—”

“Surgery? What for?”

“They want to remove the scar tissue on my brain from the first surgery. They think that’s what’s causing the seizures.”

“Oh. Would that stop them from happening?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, are you considering it?”

“No,” he says surely.

“Why? I mean, if there’s a chance it could stop your seizures—”

“It’s brain surgery, Liv. I don’t know if I want to go through that again. Plus, all the same risks are there. I could have motor skill problems, which would mean more PT. It could affect my personality. I could have memory loss.”

I nod over memories of him struggling to tie his shoes, and getting so angry when he couldn’t. “I understand.”

“I was lucky after the accident.”

Lucky? I give him a dubious look.

“I didn’t lose a single memory.” He flashes his eyes at me and I think about all the precious moments we’ve shared. “That’s not something I want to chance twice.”

I swallow hard and try to ignore the gutting feeling of our past being erased. “Of course.”

He holds my gaze and I’m pretty sure that he’s thinking the same thing. “Shit!” He slams on the brakes and I lurch forward in the seat.

I look up and see the glowing red taillights of the SUV in front of us and my skin pricks with concern.

“You all right?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“You all right, Rox?” he calls through the back window, and she barks once.

“Gabe, are you sure it’s okay for you to be driving?” Is it *safe* for him to be driving? It’s probably a question I should have asked before I climbed up into the truck with him, but my brain was on sabbatical back at my parents’ house.

“Yeah. I told you, I’m fine.” He glances over at me. “I mean, I’m not technically supposed to, but I have Roxy and I always stay close to home. I’m just not used to having a distraction in the front seat with me.” He narrows his eyes, trying to make light of it.

I chew my lip and bob my head.

“I wouldn’t drive with you if it wasn’t safe, Liv. But if it makes you feel better, you can drive.”

I sigh and shake my head. “Can’t drive stick, remember?”

“Oh, I remember,” he says, smirking.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Well then, why don’t you teach me how?”

“Because I’d like to keep my transmission in one piece.” He glances over at me and I purse my lips.

Brandon tried to teach me how to drive his truck once. It was a stick shift like this one and it wasn’t a pleasant experience for anyone involved.

“Come on, let’s get some breakfast,” he says, winding the wheel and turning into Salty Lou’s parking lot, where we’ve eaten a hundred times before. They have the best chicken and waffles.

The diner is an old, white wood-paneled tin-roof house with a wraparound porch and wide windows that are painted with the weekly specials. It hasn’t changed a bit and by the looks of it, neither has the food. The gravel lot is already full of cars and the porch is filled with people waiting to be seated.

We climb out of the truck and Roxy prances around in circles in the back. “Rox, you wait here. Lie down,” Gabe says, patting a blanket in the bed of the truck, and she does as she’s told.

“You can’t take her inside? I thought that alert dogs are allowed.”

“People don’t really like to see a dog in a restaurant.”

“But she’s an alert dog. Screw those people.”

He drops his head so that he can look in my eyes. “Please don’t worry. I won’t have another seizure this soon.”

I furrow my brow. *What if he’s wrong?*

“If anything happens, just catch me, okay?”

“What! You have to weigh like two-hundred pounds!”

He laughs softly through his nose and wraps his arm around my neck. “Two-hundred.”

I’m momentarily distracted by that fact. Two hundred and twenty pounds of lean muscle. “Okay, you think it’s funny, but the thing is, I *would*

try to catch you and you'd probably crush me!"

He shakes his head. "Come on, She-Ra."

He leads me inside the diner and we file through the line of people waiting for a table.

"Hi, Gabe," a pretty young waitress says to him. "There's room at the bar if you don't want to wait." She winks and spins around, and bounces off to the kitchen.

Did she just *wink* at him? She can't be more than eighteen.

Gabe looks down at me and asks, "Bar okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Are you a regular here or something?" *Please say yes. Please don't say you actually know the prom queen.*

"Yeah, I guess I eat here a lot. No kitchen skills, remember?"

"Oh, right." I climb up onto a barstool.

"Liv Dalton?" I look up and see Audrey Miller standing behind the bar wearing a Salty Lou's T-shirt. She looks the same, with big blue eyes and full lips, but her face isn't as full and her wavy brown hair is cut short to her shoulders.

"Audrey"—I smile—"what are you doing here? I thought you were in Florida."

"I moved back last year to help my parents restore the inn. They had a lot of damage after the last hurricane."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

"It's a work in progress, but since I'm pretty sure I'll never find a way to apply my Liberal Arts degree, I've decided to learn a new trade. Inn keeping!" She laughs and so do I. "My parents need someone to take over eventually, so it's a win-win for everyone. Except that they drive me crazy, which is why I've taken to waiting tables in my spare time."

I forgot how much I liked Audrey. I think the last time I saw her was at Brandon's funeral. I only vaguely remember her being there, but then again, I only vaguely remember being there myself. I was on heavy pain killers for my arm, which I used to numb the pain in my heart.

"So, how have you been?" she asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Oh, I, um, I've been..." *A total mess.* "I've been good."

"Well, when did you get back in town?" Her curious eyes move from me to Gabe and then back to me.

"I've been back for about a week now. I'm staying with my parents, so I might need to start waiting tables too."

She laughs. "You planning on staying a while?"

"Yeah, I am, actually."

"Well, Lou's hiring. I could definitely recommend you."

"Oh, okay." I hadn't really planned on getting a job just yet. But I hate to pass up the opportunity. Who knows when or if another one will arise so easily? And alongside a friend no less. "You know what? That would be great, Audrey. If you could put a good word in for me, I'd really appreciate it."

Audrey's face lights up. "Okay, I will!"

"Thanks. That's really nice of you."

"Anything for a Dalton." She gives me a little smile and it makes my heart involuntarily ache for my brother.

Audrey really liked Brandon. I may never know how much, but I'm guessing it was more than a crush. I've never given much thought to the fact that he spent the last hours of his life with her until now, but I have to make myself stop thinking about it or I'll end up wrapped around her like a koala, crying on her shoulder. "It's really great to see you," I say softly.

"You too, Liv." She smiles over the sadness in her eyes. "Nice to see you too, Gabe," she says tentatively, giving him a small smile, before walking away.

He raises his eyebrows. "Nice to see me?"

"What? What is it?"

He frowns and shakes his head. "I come in here every week and she's never said as much as hello to me."

"Huh. That's weird."

"Not weird. I told you how people around here see me. She's not a fan."

I crease my eyebrows. Certainly that's not the case with Audrey. Maybe she just didn't know what to say. I'm sure the accident affected her in ways we're not aware of. I look up at Gabe and smile. "Well, I'm a fan. A big one. Now, feed this groupie before she starves to death!"

He fights a smile. "Chicken and waffles coming up. And an egg white omelet for me."

"An egg white omelet?"

"I ate about two-thousand calories for lunch alone yesterday. If I'm not careful I'll get soft around the middle with you around."

I raise an eyebrow. "Good point. Don't want to lose those washboard abs," I say, staring at my menu, but I see him shake his head and smile out

of my peripheral vision. I like seeing Gabe smile. Brooding Gabe isn't the Gabe I know. My Gabe is happy. Or at least, he was. We both were.

Now, his smiles are like little gifts that he only hands out on special occasions.

We enjoy our breakfast and chat over several cups of coffee before the check comes, by which time I'm officially a Salty Lou's employee. Lou came out and hired me personally. He said he's known my father for years and would be thrilled to have me on his staff.

I start tomorrow.

With my Salty Lou's T-shirt in hand, we exit the diner and head toward Gabe's truck. "Have you ever waited a table in your life, Liv?" Gabe asks.

"No"—I narrow my eyes at him—"but I'm a quick learner. And I need a job. It's just temporary until I get my website up and running. And find some books to edit. And writers who are willing to pay me." I scrunch my nose and shrug.

"Well, I guess I can't complain. You'll definitely improve the scenery in there."

I frown, thinking of the young, flirty server who greeted him when we walked in. Surely he noticed her. And what about Audrey? She's very pretty and still sporting her curves. "What about the prom queen?" I ask, like a jealous girlfriend.

"Prom queen?"

"The waitress who was more than happy to *seat* you when we walked in."

He gauges me and, after a beat, laughs. "You're kidding, right?"

I give him an incredulous look.

"Okay, first of all, I think she's a teenager. And second"—he stops and looks down at me—"she doesn't hold a candle to you."

My heart screeches to a halt and I look away, because I know that if I look at him, he'll see right through me. He'll know that I'm at his mercy, that I'm ripe for injury, and he'll pull back. I don't think he'll risk hurting me again. And I won't risk losing his friendship.

Chapter 11

Liv

"All right, now ease off the clutch," Gabe says, just as the engine chugs and stalls. He laughs. "Not that quick."

"Sorry," I say for the tenth time. Thankfully, we're on an empty backroad that leads to the beach.

"Stop apologizing. You've got this. You just have to keep trying until you get the hang of it," he says with a sincere and determined look on his face.

"You're really sweet, but I was just kidding before. You don't have to teach me how to drive your truck."

"No, you should learn. What if something happened and you needed to drive it?"

As troubling as the thought is, he's right. I nod my head. "All right."

"Press the clutch to the floor and start the engine again."

I jiggle the shifter around in neutral and do as I'm told, then I put the truck in first gear, like before.

"Now, slowly this time, ease off the clutch and give it a little gas."

I follow his instructions, lifting my left foot off the clutch and pressing down on the gas pedal with my right foot, using equal pressure until the truck is traveling at about ten miles per hour. I look over at Gabe with a satisfied smile on my face.

"See, you did it," he says encouragingly. "Now do it again," he instructs as the speedometer nears twenty. "Push in the clutch and put it in second, just like you did with first."

I focus and successfully put it in second gear.

"You got it."

"Stop sign," I say, panicked.

"Okay, just stop like normal. You don't have to downshift. Just put it in neutral when you start to slow down."

"Okay," I say, concentrating, but I stall just shy of the stop sign. "Dammit." I smack the steering wheel and Gabe laughs. "I'm sorry," I say, looking over at him. I'm really not trying to ruin his truck. I'm not sure how much life it has left.

“You’re doing fine. You just have to get the hang of it, that’s all.” He reaches over and tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear. “Brandon would be really proud.”

“Brandon would be laughing at me.”

“Maybe”—he laughs—“but I’m proud. You’re doing real good, ba—” He stops himself and shakes his head. “Sorry. Old habit.”

My heart physically hurts, not because he was going to call me *baby*, but because he didn’t, and now he’s apologizing for it. I force a half-hearted smile and say, “Old habits are hard to break.”

“Yes, they are.” He shakes his head and lets out an ironic laugh. “I’ll work on it. Now, how about you get us to the beach before the sun goes down?”

“Okay,” I say softly.

He drops his head to the side and looks at me. “You good?” he asks.

“Mm-hmm,” I lie, feigning a smile. I put the truck in neutral and start the engine again.

Forty-five minutes later, we arrive at the beach, a trip that should have only taken about ten minutes. Hopefully that’s my last lesson for a while. I park the truck on the side of the road against a sawgrass-covered sand dune. I can’t see the ocean yet, but I can hear the waves crashing against the shore and I can smell the salty sea air when I get out.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, letting it fill my lungs and head with the smells and sounds of my childhood and, just like last time I was here, it satisfies a place deep in my soul. For a split second I let myself go back to the last summer we were all together and I can see Gabe and Brandon running around on the beach, throwing the football to each other.

I exhale and open my eyes.

Gabe is staring at me from across the hood of the truck. “You really missed it, didn’t you?”

I nod my head and hide behind my sunglasses.

He lowers the tailgate for Roxy and she jumps down and circles his legs. “Come here,” he says, kneeling down beside her. He hooks a leash onto her collar and she gives a little crying bark, like she’s trying to talk to him. “I’ll take it off when we get to the water,” he says to her, and she barks again. He grabs his surfboard and tucks it under his arm. “Ready?”

“Yeah. Can I take Roxy?”

“Sure.” He hands me her leash, but as soon as I take it from him, she lurches me forward. “No, Roxy,” he shouts, and she stops. “Tell her to heel,” he says to me.

“Heel, Roxy.” I tug on her leash and she falls back beside me. “Good girl.”

“She’ll drag you down the beach if you’re not careful. She loves the water.”

“A girl after my own heart,” I say, reaching down to pet her soft head. Her silky fur is already hot from the sun.

Once we’re past the dunes and safe from the sandspurs that cover them, I kick off my flip-flops and run through the soft sand, letting Roxy pull me down the beach, just like Gabe said she would. When I find a good spot, I stop and tug on her leash. “Roxy, stop.” I grab a blanket out of my bag and spread it out on the sand. “How’s this?” I ask Gabe, who’s trotting toward me.

“Perfect,” he says, peering out at the surf. He’s much more interested in the water. “Waves look good today.” He leans down and takes Roxy’s leash off and, before he can say anything to her, she’s halfway to the water.

I laugh, watching her splash into the surf. “How’s the water?”

“Like bathwater this time of year. Just how you like it.”

I smile wide and start shrugging out of my shorts and tank top. I reach behind my neck and tighten the knot that’s holding my bikini top up. *The girls are secure*. I look up and see Gabe staring at me. “What?” It’s not like he hasn’t seen me in my bathing suit a hundred times before. I double check my top—everything’s covered.

“You still have that?” he asks, and I realize he’s looking at the gold compass ring he gave me, which is hanging on a delicate chain around my neck, resting on my chest.

My heart races and my cheeks flush with uncertainty. Maybe I should have taken it off. Maybe I shouldn’t have put it on in the first place. Maybe I should just explain that I like wearing it because it reminds me of better times. “Mm-hmm,” I say simply.

He looks out at the horizon and says, “I’m glad you kept it.”

I smile softly and swallow down my unnecessary concern.

He pulls his hat off and tosses it on the blanket.

I reach down and pick it up, dismayed. “Gabe, exactly how old is this —” His shirt lands at my feet and my eyes dart up to his torso. *Sweet*

mother of all that is holy. I swallow hard and finish my thought, “Hat.”

He takes it from me. “I like this hat. It’s been through a lot with me.” He tosses it back on the blanket.

“I guess so.” I laugh and grab my sunscreen out of my bag. I spray it all over my body, rubbing it into my arms and legs. “Can you get my back for me?” I ask, handing Gabe the bottle.

“Sure.” He takes it from me and eyes the label. “SPF 60.”

I’ve already turned around, but I hear him laugh quietly.

“What? Not all of us tan as easily as you do. And besides, we should *both* be wearing good SPF now that we’re getting older.”

He runs his hand down the length of my hair, twisting it and placing it over my shoulder. He slides his fingers across my neck a few times to catch the loose strands and it sends a rush of warmth through me.

“Yeah, well, I guess it’s better than the tanning oil we used to use,” he says, spraying my back.

“What was that stuff, SPF 4 or something?” I shake my head, wondering how we didn’t fry out here.

“SPF 15, actually.” He rubs my shoulders, massaging the sunscreen into my skin, and I close my eyes at the feeling of his strong, familiar hands.

“Tell me you don’t still use that stuff,” I say, trying not to sound too breathy, but it’s a struggle.

He keeps working the sunscreen into my back, rubbing down to my bikini bottoms and back up. “The smell of it reminds me of you.”

I turn around when he’s through and look up at him. “Gabe”—I smile softly—“you shouldn’t use that stuff. It’s bad for you.”

He shrugs and hands me back my sunscreen. “Well, maybe I’ll switch to this now.” He turns around. “Want to get me?”

“Sure...if I can reach you.”

He pushes his feet apart in the sand so I can reach the top of his shoulders. I rub the tight skin that covers the muscles in his back and he lets out a soft groan that makes me smile. I rub him down to his board shorts that sit low on his hips, barely hiding the tan line just above his crack, and work my way back up to his shoulders, stretching up on my tiptoes to reach his neck. I drop down off my toes and swipe his lower back a few more times. “Okay, you’re good.”

“Thanks,” he says, taking the sunscreen from me again and spraying his arms and stomach.

When he's done, I hand him a small tube of sunscreen I use on my face. "Don't forget your face."

"SPF 70?" he says, eyeing it.

"Unless you want wrinkles," I say, putting my hands on my hips.

"Is that your secret?" he asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

"My secret? Gabe, everybody uses sunscreen nowadays."

"Not everybody looks like you."

"Thanks." I push my lips together over a smile and laugh quietly. *I'm a glutton for punishment.* "You ready to get in the water?"

He grins and leaves his surfboard in the sand next to our blanket. "Let's go."

We walk down to the water and the waves splash against my legs. Gabe was right, it's like bathwater. I wiggle my toes against the gritty ocean floor and smile.

Gabe takes my hand and pulls me through the shallow water, until we're trudging through the breaking waves, and I laugh when I feel the familiar spray of the ocean on my face. When we're about waist deep, I let go of his hand and sink below the surface.

I listen to the echoing of the waves churning above me—the only sound I hear—and feel them rolling over me, rushing past my face and tugging on my hair, washing away the uncertainty and sorrow of the last seven years. I stay under for as long as I can hold my breath, until Gabe grabs my hand and pulls me up.

"Are you trying to drown yourself?"

I plant my feet on the ocean floor and wipe the water from my face. "I've missed this so damn much," I say, closing my eyes. When I open them again, I throw my arms around Gabe's neck, and my inhibition to the wind. I hug him tightly and say honestly, "I feel like I'm finally where I'm supposed to be, like I'm home."

"You are," he says softly against my wet hair, and a wave of emotion hits me hard, as big and powerful as the waves rushing past us. He brings his hand to my face and wipes my cheek. "Hey," he says in the sweetest, concerned tone, his southern drawl tugging hard on my heart.

I smile. "I'm just really happy. It's stupid, I know."

"No"—he shakes his head—"it's not stupid. I'm sorry that it's been so hard for you."

Roxy barks, surprising me. She swims up behind me, panting and, I'd almost swear, smiling. She looks so happy, soaking wet, dog paddling in circles around us. Gabe reaches over and pats her wet back, and I can't help but notice *him* standing before me, soaking wet, with his dark hair slicked back. Little droplets of water fall from his sculpted nose down to his broad chest. I try not to look at the eight pack, but *darn it*, it's amazing, flexing every time a wave rushes up against him. The water rushes up...and then it falls back down, leaving a tanned, glistening wet torso in my view. Up...and back down. Up...and back down.

"Isn't this too deep for her?" I ask, trying to distract myself. I'm also a little worried about Roxy getting tired.

She barks and circles us again.

"No. She wants to swim out to the sandbar."

"She can swim that far?"

"Yeah, she does it all the time."

"Do you still swim out there?" I remember him and Brandon racing to see who could get to the sandbar first. It always seemed too far to me. It still does.

"All the time." He grins and I watch his eyes fill with excitement. "Want to go?"

No. "How deep is it?"

"I don't know. Eight, maybe ten feet this time of day. But once you get out there, it's about knee deep."

"What about sharks?"

"Liv, when was the last shark attack here?"

I shrug my shoulders. I can't recall ever hearing about one.

"You're not going to get eaten by a shark. Come on, I'll race you." He grins and dives under the surface of the ocean, and starts swimming away from me. He's two feet away...three feet...four. Roxy is already several feet in front of him.

"Wait!" I screech, not wanting to be alone in the water. I start swimming after them, thinking only of reaching Gabe. I'm not willing to put my feet down to see if I can still touch, but I'm sure that I can't. I just concentrate on putting one arm in front of the other.

My feet kick frantically behind me. I've almost caught up to him, but *geez*, he's fast. I gasp and keep swimming, until I smack into something hard.

I scream.

“It’s okay, Liv, put your feet down.”

I gasp and open my eyes as Gabe pulls me up out of the water. I stand up and shove his stomach with both hands. “You scared the shit out of me!” I hold my hand over my heart while I catch my breath.

“Well, if I didn’t stop you, you’d be swimming to Europe right now.” He laughs, and so do I.

I look around. We’re standing knee deep on a sandbar about a hundred yards out from the shore. *Wow.*

“Pretty cool, huh?”

“It’s so quiet out here.” I look at the endless horizon. “It’s beautiful.”

He smiles. “Yeah. And sometimes,” he says, peering through the water around our feet, “if you look around”—he wades in small circles—“you’ll find one of these.” He reaches beneath the surface and pulls out a sand dollar.

“No way!” I squeal.

Roxy trots over to us and puts her nose on the little brown disc.

Gabe smiles and hands it to me. “If you leave it out in the sun, it’ll dry out. Then you can bleach it white.”

“No, it’s alive. I don’t want to kill it.”

“I think Brandon and I used to use these things as frisbees when we were kids.” He smirks.

“I remember. I used to run around the beach after you two, rescuing all of them and throwing them back into the water.”

He smiles and sits down in the shallow water. “God, I miss him.”

I sit next to him and pull my knees to my chest. “I know. I miss him too.” I rest my chin on my folded arms. “I definitely think he would be proud that I finally got the nerve to swim out here.” I squint my eyes at Gabe. “Not that you gave me much choice.”

“You didn’t have to follow me.”

I would follow him anywhere. Even if it does go against my better judgment.

He gives me a look that tells me he knows.

“He was always proud of you, you know. Maybe it was a twin thing, I don’t know. But the sun rose and set with you. That was something we always had in common.”

I flick the water with my fingers and splash Gabe's face. "Cut it out." I refuse to waste this beautiful day feeling sad.

"I wish I could."

"That's it." I drop my knees beneath me in the water and lean up so that I can place my hands firmly on his sun-warmed shoulders. I look in his eyes and say, "Gabriel North, you are killing my buzz."

"Your buzz?"

"Yes! I just swam to the sandbar for the first time in my life and I'm totally stoked! So, stop being a buzz-kill." I shove his shoulders and fall back on my heels, but he catches my wrists, surprising me when he pulls me into his arms.

He dips me below the surface and pulls me back up. "If you want to play, I'll play," he growls, and the tone of his voice sends unexpected excitement coursing through me. Maybe it's the endorphins from swimming out here, the seclusion of the sandbar, or the simple peace of the open ocean, but I haven't seen Gabe this unbridled in a long time, not since before the accident.

I ecstatically squeal and try to get away from him, but every time I make it a few feet, he pulls me back into his arms and dips me again.

"Gabriel, stop it!" I squeal, but my laughing only entices him more. Roxy jumps up and splashes down in the water beside us, barking and biting at Gabe's shorts. "Get him, Rox," I shout.

"No, Roxy!" He laughs. "Stop it!"

I finally get my feet under me and run away from him, splashing through the water. He watches me for a few seconds and then he leaps to his feet and runs toward me.

"No!" I try to sprint through the water, but it's nearly impossible. I don't get very far before his arms are wrapped around my waist and he's pulling me completely up out of the water. He throws me over his shoulder like a caveman and walks around the sandbar proudly.

"Put me down, you Neanderthal!"

He laughs and struts along the sandbar with me slung over his shoulder. Roxy is no help. She's swimming a few yards away. I beat my fists against his back, but he squeezes my thighs tighter and holds my legs firmly against his chest.

"Gabe! Seriously! I mean it! Put me down this instant!"

He laughs.

“I’ll pants you!” I hook my thumbs inside the waistband of his shorts. “I’m not kidding!”

He ignores me.

“Ugh. You are so frustrating!” I decide to just shut up and go limp. Maybe if he thinks I’m dead, he’ll put me down.

After a few long seconds of silence, he finally does, and I push him away. I narrow my eyes and shake my head at him. “You think you’re so cute, don’t you, with your new muscles?”

He grins and gives me a cocky look, reminiscent of—I can hardly allow myself to think it—the *old* Gabe. And although I’m fighting it as hard as I can, I smile too. “I really hate you, you know.”

“No, you don’t. Told me so yourself.”

“No...I don’t. But, no more caveman, okay? I’m not a fan of caveman.”

“All right. No more caveman. I promise.”

After playing on the sandbar and collecting sand dollars for the next half hour, the water rises a few inches above my knees.

“The tide’s coming in,” Gabe says. “We should probably head back.” He whistles for Roxy and she comes swimming over to us.

Shit. I have to swim across the abyss again.

“You ready?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No. Not unless you really do want to become shark bait.”

“Shhh! Don’t even say that!”

He laughs and takes my hand. “Come on, shark bait, you can do it.”

God, can’t he just carry me on his back? He probably could. *For you, Brandon. I’m doing this for you. And you better think I’m a freaking badass!*

“After you,” I say coolly.

Gabe dives in and I follow behind him, just like before, with Roxy in the lead.

My arms burn and my feet kick frantically behind me until they find the ocean floor again. I stand up and sway back and forth in the waves that churn around my shoulders. I kick off the ocean floor and swim a little further until the waves are at my waist, and then I march through the water on my feet.

Ow! Something stung me. I look down, but only see the grayish-blue water surrounding me. It stings me again. “Ow!” I shriek loudly. “Gabe!

Something's stinging me!" I run my hands over my legs, where the pain is coming from.

Gabe is by my side in an instant. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Something stung me. I need to get out of the water." I hold onto his arms and grimace from the pain that's now radiating up my thighs.

He scoops me out of the water and carries me to the beach. He lays me down in the sand and Roxy comes running over to us. She licks my face and starts whimpering.

"It's okay, Roxy. I'm okay."

"Good girl, Rox. She's okay. Sit down." Gabe scans my body. "What was it? A jellyfish?"

"I think so. I didn't see it, but it feels like a jellyfish sting. It's burning."

"Where?" He scans my body again.

My legs are pressed together where it stung me—right between my thighs. This *cannot* be happening. "Gabe, can you just go get a lifeguard or something?"

"There aren't any lifeguards. Just show me where it stung you. I have a first-aid kit in my truck."

I groan, in part from the pain of the sting, but also because I know that I have to show him where it stung me. *I'm sure you think this is pretty funny, don't you, Brandon?*

"It stung the insides of my thighs," I cry.

"Oh. Okay," he says sweetly. If he wants to laugh, he's doing a good job of hiding it. "Well, can I see?"

I give him an incredulous look.

"Liv," he says seriously, "it's not anything I haven't seen before."

I'm not sure if that makes me feel any better, but I know that I need him to look at it. It feels like my skin is on fire. I pull my knees apart and watch Gabe's eyes fix on my inner thighs. As soon as I see his reaction, all sexual inferences vanish.

"Oooo, Liv, it really got you good."

I look down and see my thighs streaked with small red welts that go all the way up to my bikini bottoms. If I wasn't sure before, I am now. I've been stung by a jellyfish. It's a hazard of playing in the ocean that I've fallen victim to before. I know the marks and pain will dissipate soon enough. But *damn* it hurts.

“I’m going to go get something for it, okay?”

I bob my head. “Okay, hurry.”

“Roxy, stay with Liv.”

She nudges me with her nose and rests her face against my arm.

“Good girl, Roxy.”

Gabe returns thirty seconds later with some Benadryl and a tube of hydrocortisone that I pray will extinguish the fire between my legs.

“Okay,” he says, twisting the cap off and squeezing a little onto his finger. “This should help.” He dabs it onto the red streaks, slowly working the medicine all over my thighs.

Meanwhile I chug the Benadryl straight from the bottle.

By the time he’s finished, the pain has already started to subside.

“You’re my hero,” I say, closing my eyes.

“Come on.” He pulls me up by my arm. “Let’s get you home.”

“No. You didn’t even go surfing yet. I’m fine, I’ll just hang out here on the beach.”

“Liv, you can barely walk.” He scoops me up into his arms again and carries me across the sand to our blanket. But he doesn’t put me down. He grabs my towel and carries me to his truck, where he deposits me on the seat. “I’ll go get your stuff.” He hands me the keys so that I can start the engine. “Roxy, stay with Liv.”

I start the engine and turn on the air, but before Gabe returns, I fall asleep against the window.

I wake up to him scooping me into his arms again and pulling me out of the truck. “Are we home?” I mumble.

“Yeah, we’re home,” he says quietly.

I nuzzle his chest. I’m too tired to open my eyes. Maybe from the jellyfish venom or maybe the medicine—I don’t know which, and I don’t care. I just want to sleep. I feel myself rocking back and forth in his arms, like maybe he’s climbing stairs. *Is he taking me to my bedroom? Where are my parents?* The rocking soothes me back to sleep before I can find out.

* * *

I open my eyes and look around an unfamiliar room.

I sit up, startled.

“Hey,” Gabe says, sitting on the bed beside me. Roxy nuzzles my hand. “I hope you don’t mind, I brought you back to my place. You’ve been asleep for a while.”

“From the venom?” I ask, shaking my head.

Gabe smiles softly. “No, I don’t think so. I think it was a combination of the large dose of Benadryl you ingested and exhaustion from your two-hundred-meter swim.”

“I was already tired,” I say, rubbing my eyes. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

He looks at me pensively, but doesn’t ask why. “You hungry?” he asks. “I was thinking about ordering a pizza. We could just be lazy and watch a movie while you recuperate.”

I smile and nod.

“Just not *Steel Magnolias*,” he says seriously, and I laugh, recalling how often I used to watch it growing up. It’s a rite of passage for Southern women, especially those in small towns like ours, where to this day ladies still consider their bi-weekly trips to the beauty shop a social event. Particularly the older women, who spend as much time getting their hair done as they do playing bridge.

“Okay.”

I look down and see that I’m still wearing my bathing suit, I’m wrapped in my beach towel, and my hair is a salty, matted mess. “Do you think I could take a shower?”

Gabe looks like he’s already taken one. His hair is clean and dry and he’s dressed in fresh shorts and a T-shirt.

“Yeah, sure. Bathroom’s over there.” He points across the open apartment.

I’ve only been up here once before, when Gabe’s parents were having a big backyard Fourth of July party. We snuck up here to make out. It was filled with boxes and bins and a lot of dust at the time. I look around the space now and see a clean, tidy apartment that isn’t much smaller than the one I was renting in Raleigh. The king-size bed is situated next to a dark chest of drawers, an oversized leather chair, and a matching leather couch that’s pushed up against the end of the bed. A large TV is mounted on the wall across from it.

There’s a small kitchen on the opposite side of the apartment with stainless steel appliances and white cabinets that make a U-shape around a

table for two. It's spotless, like the rest of the space.

The old wood paneling on the walls has been painted white and the windows are covered with wooden shutters that complement the hardwood floor. It's a masculine space, but still light and airy.

I notice the pictures that cover the walls—framed black-and-white prints of the beach. And—I look closer—Little St. Simons Island. I recognize the images of the marsh and weepy oaks. I smile and point to the pictures. “Little St. Simons?”

Gabe nods.

“I'd recognize those pictures anywhere.”

“You should. They're yours.”

“Mine? I took those?”

“Yeah, you saved a bunch of them on my computer.”

“You kept them?”

He nods again. “Yeah...that's okay, right?”

“Yeah. Of course.” I can't believe he has my pictures hanging all over his apartment. Pictures that I took when everything was still good, when Brandon was still here, when we were still *us*. I ignore the swan dive that my heart takes into my stomach. “You've really made this into a beautiful space, Gabe.”

“I guess it's an improvement since the last time you were up here, huh.” The corners of his mouth turn up and I know he's thinking about our marathon make-out session that Fourth of July.

“Definitely not as dusty.”

He shakes his head and grins.

“I'm going to go take a shower now, okay?”

“Okay.” He hands me my beach bag, which contains the clothes I was wearing over my bathing suit, but no bra or panties—I wasn't planning on going anywhere after the beach. I *really* don't want to put my damp bathing suit back on. I'll just have to go commando. The shirt I was wearing is dark and loose-fitting, so it should be okay. I make my way to the bathroom and take a quick shower, inventorying Gabe's hygiene products. Just as I suspected, *Old Spice* shower gel. And some fancy shampoo and conditioner that I don't recognize. Explains his shiny new locks.

I reach for a bar of white *Dove* soap—the only option that won't leave me smelling like a man—and wash the salt from my body. The red welts that streaked my thighs before are almost completely gone now, but I'm still

careful when I wash over them. I wash and condition my salty hair until it falls in silky strands down my back.

When I'm done, I dry off and throw on my shorts and top.

I leave the bathroom and find Gabe talking to Roxy on the landing of the stairs outside. "Lay down," he tells her.

"She can't come inside?"

"She needs a bath. She's all sandy."

"She was just in the bed next to me."

"You were sandy too."

I look at the bed and see that he changed the sheets while I was in the shower. "Sorry."

"It was a small sacrifice." He shakes his head, unbothered by the chore. "Pizza's on its way and the movies are in there." He points to a cabinet beneath the TV. "Or we can stream one, if you want something newer."

I sit on the floor in front of the cabinet and start thumbing through his DVDs.

Guy movie.

Guy movie.

Guy movie.

"Geez, Gabe. Obsessed with Jason Bourne much?"

"Jason Bourne is the man," he says, sitting down next to me. He pulls out another DVD. "What about this one?"

Avatar.

"Yes, I love that one. I haven't seen it in forever." It was one of the many we kept in rotation during his recovery. We watched countless hours of movies that year.

He sets the movie up and we get comfortable on the couch while we wait for the pizza to arrive. I wrap myself up in his old afghan, poking my fingers through the holes and pulling it up to my chin. His apartment is *freezing*. He's always been so hot natured.

"Cold?" he asks with an amused look on his face.

"I'm freezing. What do you have the air set on?"

"A comfortable seventy-two." He laughs and pulls me over to him, and I can feel the heat coming off his body through the holey blanket.

"Better?"

"Yes."

We watch the movie and eat pizza, and enjoy the comfort of each other's company for the rest of the afternoon, until Roxy starts to whine and bark outside.

I sit up nervously.

"It's okay," Gabe reassures me. "She just wants inside."

I nod my head. "Sorry."

"I need to bathe her," he says apologetically, seeming reluctant to interrupt our afternoon of laziness.

"Okay, I'll help you."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Don't make her stay outside."

"All right, come on," he says, pulling me to my feet. "I bathe her outside in the summer."

I follow him outside and Roxy, who is waiting on the landing, darts down the stairs ahead of us. She must know the routine. She wags her tail and makes circles in the sparse grass at the bottom of the wooden stairs. Gabe walks over to the garage and grabs some dog shampoo while Roxy prances around his feet.

"Are you going to get a bath, Rox?" I ask her, and she nudges my hand with her head.

"Come on, Rox," Gabe says, pulling a hose out into the grass with a spray nozzle attached to the end of it. He positions her front and back legs apart and tells her to stay still while he sprays her down. He squeezes a little shampoo on her back and starts to lather her up from nose to tail.

When he's finished, I pick up the hose and spray her down. As soon as the soap is rinsed off her she starts to shake her head, and Gabe yells, "Roxy! No!" But it's too late. She shakes her whole body and soaks us both before taking off like a rocket across the yard.

So much for being clean and dry.

I look at Gabe and start laughing, unable to resist the temptation of the nozzle in my hand. I raise it and point it at his chest.

"You wouldn't dare," he says.

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

"Liv," he warns, "don't you do it!"

Too late! I soak his shirt and shorts.

He lunges toward me and I drop the hose.

“Ahh!” I scream, and run several feet away from him before I feel the spray on my back. I scream again and try to twist and turn my body away from the water, but he’s relentless, soaking my clothes and my hair, which had finally just dried.

“Gabe! Stop!” I shriek, and start to run again, but he drops the hose and runs after me. I head for the stairs to the apartment, but I feel him gaining on me, and before I make it to the bottom step, his hands are wrapped around my waist and I’m spinning around and falling backward onto the grass beneath him.

“Gabe!” I cry, laughing. “Get off me!”

He pins my arms above my head and gazes down at me with a look of determination on his face. His chest is rising and falling in hurried breaths against mine.

“Gabe,” I say softly. “Get off me.” I struggle against his hold, feeling his chest against mine through my wet clothes. “Gabe,” I say tentatively, but he doesn’t move. His body covers me, warming the cool water between us until I can feel his heated skin against mine. I savor the feeling of him on top of me—the weight of his body pinning me down, the warmth of his breath as it rushes out of him and mixes with mine.

He gazes at me and the fire that flashes in his eye sears through my veins.

A car door shuts in the distance, echoing across the property and breaking through the fog that consumed me. His parents, most likely, but far enough away that we’re still alone.

Gabe pushes himself off me and gets to his feet.

I sit up and look down at my wet shirt that’s now clinging to me, and I’m reminded that I’m not wearing a bra. I casually cover my chest with my arm and stand up. “I, uh...I might need to borrow a dry shirt.”

“Yeah. A shirt. Um.” He clears his throat and shakes his head. “Yes, you can borrow a shirt.”

“Thanks.”

We head inside and he gives me a shirt to change into.

“I should probably get going. My mom wanted to make dinner for me and my dad tonight, so...” I smile softly.

“I’ll take you home.”

I grab my bag and follow him to his truck.

Things got entirely too carried away with the hose. I would have kissed him. If Gabe had kissed me, I would have kissed him back without hesitation. I would have poured every ounce of my body, heart, and soul back into him. And I think it would have meant something completely different to him.

I can't let that happen again. I can't risk losing him. Today was one of the best days I've had in years, aside from the jellyfish sting. But even that was tolerable because Gabe was there with me. He and Brandon were the two halves that made me whole, and I was reminded of that today. Gabe makes me feel like *me*. The *me* I've been trying to find since I left for Raleigh. I'd rather have him in my life as a friend than not have him in my life at all.

"Gabe?" My voice breaks the silence that has accompanied us on the ride back to my parents' house.

He looks over at me and I can tell I've pulled him out of a deep thought. His face is smooth and unreadable, a disappointing divergence from the playfulness I finally saw in him today, after all this time. I'm not sure which is more unsettling. That his mood shifted so quickly, or that I expected anything different.

"I start work at the diner tomorrow and I know you have to work too, so I guess we won't see each other for a little while." I don't know what my point is. I just can't take the silence anymore.

He nods his head. "Yeah, I guess so."

I feel sharply disappointed.

"Maybe you could come by the diner," I say, smiling over the anxious feeling brewing in my stomach.

He pulls his eyebrows together, creating the little crease above the bridge of his nose that appears whenever he's upset about something. "Maybe."

I inhale a quiet breath and blow it out slowly. "I had fun today."

The corners of his mouth turn up only slightly. "Yeah. Me too."

I return a weak smile and look out of my window.

We ride in silence until we get to my parents' house, where I give him a quick hug, collect my bag off the seat, and head inside.

Chapter 12

Liv

I finish my first shift at Lou's with an old saying in mind. I wanted a career and I got a job. But it's a job that pays. I made great tips today and it was actually kind of fun. It helped that Audrey was working the same shift. She showed me around and introduced me to everyone. The other employees were very welcoming.

I kept my eyes peeled for Gabe, hoping he might show up for lunch. I would be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed when he didn't. I would also be lying if I didn't admit that I checked my phone every hour on the hour, hoping to see a missed call or text from him.

No calls.

No texts.

I'm trying not to take it personally, but I'm jonesin' for a Gabe fix. I realize how screwed up that is, but he's in my chemistry, in my DNA. I need him. I need his friendship. I need to feel that bond that was cemented into my soul so long ago. There's a Gabe-shaped hole in my heart that only he can fill. It's the same one that burned inside my chest the entire time I was in Raleigh. The one that I patched up with duct tape and ignored when I was with Travis, that ripped wide open the second he proposed.

"Liv," Audrey calls across the parking lot as I make my way to my car. She jogs over to me. "Hey, wait up," she says when she reaches me, and we walk across the gravel lot together. "So, what did you think about your first day? Ready to throw in the apron?" She smirks.

"No, it was...fun, actually." I shake my head, still surprised that I enjoyed it as much as I did.

"Okay, I was going to ask you to hang out, but your idea of fun and mine might be a *tad* different," she says, pinching her fingers together, making me laugh.

"I guess it was just nice to have something to occupy my mind for a few hours. Something other than—"

"Gabe?"

I exhale a surprised breath that comes out as an awkward laugh. "I was going to say my current situation, but I guess if you want to narrow it down to just one thing..." I say hesitantly.

“What *is* your current situation?” she asks, just as boldly as before. But when I don’t immediately answer, she squeezes her eyes shut and says, “Sorry. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s none of my business.” She puts her hands on her hips and squints at me through the afternoon sun. “I just really hope you stay. It’s nice to have a friend here again.”

I laugh and admit, “I really hope I do too. I want to. Things are just complicated right now, that’s all.”

“Want to talk about it?”

I smile softly and sigh. “I don’t even know where to start, Audrey. It’s been complicated for a while.” I give her a telling look and she nods with understanding.

“Want to start with Brandon?” she asks carefully.

I fight the tight feeling in my chest and shake my head. “Not yet.”

She bobs her head. “Okay. Well, why did you leave Raleigh? You didn’t like it?”

“That is a much longer story than this walk.”

“All right, well we’ll save that one for drinks.”

“I’d really like that.”

“Okay”—she spins around and leans against the back of her car—“that just leaves Gabe.”

I laugh softly, trying to think of what to say, but as I do my smile wanes. “He takes beer to the cemetery and drinks it with Brandon. Did you know that?”

Compassion washes over her face. “No.”

“Yeah.” I chew my bottom lip. “And he thinks everyone blames him for what happened.”

“Do you?” she asks with genuine curiosity.

“No. Never.”

“Sorry. I just never really knew what happened between you two. There was talk, but I kept to myself after the accident.”

I shrug and smile over the hurt it still brings me. “I don’t really know. One day you love someone...one day you don’t.”

“Him or you?”

I press my lips together and admit, “Him.”

“I’m sorry, Liv.”

“Well, we’re friends now, so it worked out...I guess.”

“Do you still love *him*?”

“Oh, I, um...” I smile apprehensively. “It’s complicated.”

“Right.” She gives me a small, sympathetic smile.

Talking to Audrey is surprisingly comfortable. Maybe because she knew me and Gabe before the accident. Maybe because she knew Brandon. Maybe because she was a part of that fateful night. We share a piece of each other’s history.

“Well, you can see how that might cause a slight predicament for me.”

“You know, I’ve seen Gabe in the diner. He doesn’t talk much, he doesn’t smile, he doesn’t laugh like he used to. I’ve heard what people say, that it’s a side effect from his head injury. You know how people talk.” She shakes her head reproachfully.

“Yeah. I know.”

“I’m a little embarrassed to say it, but I actually avoided talking to him, because I was never sure what to say, or how he would react. But then he came in with you and he was different. I watched him with you. He talked and smiled and laughed with you. I don’t care what anyone says, he was the Gabe I remember. The boy with the gorgeous smile and a twinkle in his eye for Olivia Dalton. His eyes were glued to you the whole time.”

I can’t help the way my heart is swimming inside my chest, but I know better than to get my hopes up. Gabe and I share a deep history. We grew up together. We lost a brother together. We’ll always be bound by that. And he will always love me in some way, I’m sure. The same way he loved Brandon.

But I do find deep satisfaction in knowing that I’m helping bring Gabe out of the state he’s been in for so long—the one I tried like hell to get him out of after the accident. The one everyone chalks up to his injury. Even if we’re never anything more than friends, I’ll be so damn happy to finally see that through.

“I think I just need a little time to navigate this new chapter of my life. My head has been kind of a mess since I left Raleigh.”

“Speaking of Raleigh,” she says curiously, “how about we go grab that drink now and you can tell me about it? I know a little inn not too far from here that does a great cocktail hour right about now.” She glances at her wrist, though she’s not wearing a watch, and gives me a slanted grin.

I smile over a quiet laugh. “Oh, okay, why not?”

“Que sera,” she says, throwing her hand into the air, “follow me.”

Audrey gets in her car and I follow her to her parents' inn, which is hidden at the end of a long driveway that winds beneath a canopy of moss-covered live oaks. When I pull into the circular drive behind her, I'm captivated by the beauty of the white colonial-style home that sprawls across the property and stands three stories high against a backdrop of golden marshes. "Wow," I whisper as I unbuckle.

I've always known about the White Magnolia Inn. Everyone on the Island does. It's a historic landmark that's been in Audrey's family for generations. But I haven't seen it since I was little, and I don't remember it being so *grand*.

"Audrey," I say, getting out of my car, "I forgot how beautiful this place is."

"Thanks. We've done a lot of work on it. There's still some to do, but we're getting there."

I follow her up the sprawling staircase to the second-story porch that spans the length of the house. It's adorned with black rocking chairs, cushioned hanging swings, and slow-spinning fans that give off a subtle breeze. Large potted palms flank the large windows to the left and right of the screened double doors, and two robust ferns sit atop antique-looking pedestals on either side of them.

Audrey pulls one of the doors open and I follow her inside.

"Hi, Ms. Landry," she says to an older woman who's carrying a slice of what looks like key lime pie on a delicate china plate. She's wearing a perfectly pressed, mint green dress that falls to her knees, a French manicure, and a short salt-and-pepper hairdo that's undoubtedly held in place by a can of Aqua Net.

"Hey, darlin'," the woman says warmly, "I was just taking this to your momma. It's her second slice, but don't tell her I told you." She laughs and so does Audrey.

"Your secret's safe with me. And really, can you blame her? You make the best key lime pie on the Island."

"Well, be sure to get a slice then, before it's all gone."

"I will."

Ms. Landry grins and looks at me. "Are you girls going to join us for bridge this afternoon?"

"Ms. Landry, you remember Liv Dalton, don't you?"

Ms. Landry inhales a shallow breath and says softly, “Olivia Dalton. Oh, yes. You’re Maggie and Duke’s daughter, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the well-trained southern child inside me answers, “I am.”

She smiles, but I see the pity in her eyes when she looks at me, as if Brandon only just died. “I haven’t seen you in years, not since...well, it’s been a long time.”

“Yes,” I say, remembering her vaguely from Brandon’s funeral now. Of course, the whole town was there, filling the pews of our small, historic Episcopal church.

“It was such a beautiful service.”

“Yes, ma’am”—I smile politely over the unexpected feelings she stirs up inside me—“it was.”

“Well...you are just as pretty as a picture.” She smiles again and it crinkles her brown eyes this time. “Just like Maggie. Oh, how she used to drive the boys wild, including my son.” She laughs softly. “Jackson lives in Spartanburg now with his wife, and his kids are all grown up, but boy did he have a soft spot for your momma when he was a young man.”

“Really?” I say curiously, having never heard of Jackson Landry before.

“It wasn’t long after she married your father that Jackson joined the Navy. He wanted to see the world, or so he said.” She winks and it spikes my curiosity, but my questions will have to wait. “Come in and say hello to everyone,” she says, waving us toward the glass doors to our left.

“Maybe for just a minute,” Audrey says, giving me an apologetic look.

I follow her and Ms. Landry into a room full of women who are chattering around white-linen-covered tables that are adorned with china plates and coffee cups, delicate-looking desserts, and small bouquets of fresh flowers.

The women lower their cards and look up at us.

“Look who came to say hello,” Ms. Landry says, placing the piece of pie in front of Audrey’s mother.

She glances up at Audrey as her fork glides into the pie. “You want to play, Audrey?”

“No, I just wanted to come say hi. You remember Liv, don’t you, Momma?”

She looks at me and I see the same fleeting sadness in her eyes that I saw in Ms. Landry’s. “Olivia”—she puts her fork down, gets up from the

table, and pulls me into a soft hug—“how are you?” She tightens her arms around me. “I haven’t seen you in years.”

“I’m good, thank you. It’s so good to see you.”

She releases me and smiles, but I can still see the sympathy in her eyes when she asks, “How’s your family?”

“They’re doing fine.”

We’re all fine, I want to say, but I know that our personal tragedy affected our entire community. It’s not something people just forget about.

“Sit down and play awhile,” an elderly woman says, bringing her floral-painted coffee cup to her mouth. I can’t help but notice the bottle of Baileys Irish Cream parked right in front of her when she lowers the cup and carefully places it on the matching saucer.

“Not today, Grandma,” Audrey says. “Liv just moved back to town and we have a lot of catching up to do. Maybe next time.”

“It’s a shame what happened to your brother,” her grandma says to me. “He was a sweet boy.”

“Grandma,” Audrey reproaches. “I’m sure Liv doesn’t want to talk about that right now.”

“It’s fine,” I say, smiling over conflicting feelings of surprise and relief. It’s kind of nice to hear it straight out like that. “He was. I miss him very much.”

“And the North boy. How’s he doing?”

I try to ignore the way all the eyes in the room have carefully drifted away from me, as if that could disguise their attentive ears. “He’s doing well,” I say, cautiously awaiting further questioning about Gabe.

Another elderly woman sitting next to Audrey’s grandma looks up at me and says, “Same thing happened to my uncle Finn when I was a youngster. Fell off the back of an old flatbed pickup truck that was hauling lumber. Knocked his head so hard, he never was right again.”

“Aunt Mary Joe,” Audrey says, shaking her head, and I feel her tense beside me.

“Was a looker too, just like the North boy. He never got married either. He died in his twenties. Complications.” She sighs and reaches for the Baileys. “Such a shame.”

I swallow hard and say, “Gabe’s okay. Really. He’s doing much better.”

“He is,” Audrey reaffirms. “I saw him just the other day and he was full of smiles.” She gives me a knowing glance, but I see the doubtful looks on

the faces around the room. “Well, um, Liv and I have a lot of catching up to do, so...”

“Go on,” her mother says, giving a small, hurried smile. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Okay. Bye, everyone.” She pulls me out of the room, quickly shutting the door behind us, and I follow her through the house until we’re standing on the black-and-white parquet floor that spans the kitchen. “I am so sorry.” She spins around and puts her hands on her cheeks. “I forgot they were playing bridge here today. I would have warned you.”

I laugh softly. “It’s fine.”

“Really?”

I bob my head and exhale a quiet breath. “Does everyone think Gabe is permanently...ruined or something?”

“No.” She scrunches her nose and shrugs. “I don’t know. But who cares? It doesn’t matter what people think. Especially not the bridge club of Glynn County.”

“No. But it matters what Gabe thinks. He told me people still look at him differently, and I shrugged it off. I was sure things would be different now, after all this time. But, he’s right.” My weighted heart sinks inside my chest.

How can they not see everything he’s overcome?

“Audrey?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m ready for that drink.”

* * *

Audrey and I sit in white wicker chairs on the veranda of the White Magnolia, overlooking the oak-covered lawn and surrounding marshes that glisten under the late afternoon sun. We watch guests come and go from the inn to the long wooden dock that stretches out over the marsh. Some pose for pictures in front of the breathtaking coastal backdrop, while others just gaze out at it and sip their drinks.

I tell Audrey about Raleigh, and Travis, and why I decided to come back to St. Simons.

She listens carefully until I’m through. “Travis sounds like a nice enough guy, but maybe not the right guy.”

I nod my head in agreement. “I heard Brandon’s voice. When Travis proposed.” I let out a soft, incredulous laugh. “I guess he didn’t approve.”

“He cared so much about you, Liv. That was always so obvious.”

I tip my glass up and sip my minty drink, which burns a little when I swallow it down. “Can I ask you something, Audrey?”

“Of course.”

“You really liked my brother, didn’t you?”

Her expression changes behind the rim of her etched crystal glass, but she smiles as she lowers it. “Yeah. I really did. I thought...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It’s probably silly, but I thought maybe he was going to be someone special for me. Someone I could be with long term.”

“That’s not silly.” I can barely finish speaking because images of the life they could have had together begin flashing through my mind, engulfing my heart with grief for what could have been. “I wish that could have happened.”

“Me too.”

I reach over and squeeze her hand. “Well, are you dating anyone now?”

She laughs softly and shakes her head. “I haven’t had the greatest luck with men, so I decided to take a break from dating when I moved here.”

“Nobody’s measured up to Brandon?” I smile.

“Not yet. But, I do have a blind date this weekend,” she says, sounding cautiously optimistic.

“You do? With who?”

“John something. I can’t remember his last name. My cousin Sarah set us up.” She rolls her eyes and sips her drink. “I swear, she thinks if I’m not married by the time I’m thirty I’m going to shrivel up into an old maid or something.”

I laugh. “Sarah? Didn’t she get married when she was twenty-two?”

“Right out of college. She married the perfect husband, had two perfect children, and they have two perfect golden doodles, all living together happily in their perfect house.” She cuts her eyes at me. “Or that’s what she’d have you believe.” She shakes her head and sighs.

We sit quietly for a long moment.

“Hey, Liv?”

“Yeah?”

“Next time you hear Brandon’s voice, ask him to send me a good one, okay? He set the bar pretty high.”

* * *

I’ve worked the lunch shift all week and still no signs of Gabe. It’s Friday afternoon now, and I haven’t talked to him since last weekend when we went to the beach. I’m starting to experience cold, clammy Gabe withdrawals. But I’m excited to see Trisha, who should be arriving sometime this evening.

Shelby, formerly known as the prom queen, waves me over to the hostess station and says, as bubbly as ever, “Hey, Liv.”

“Hey.”

“So...how was your first week?” The corners of her pouty mouth turn up and her dimples dive deep into her smooth, round cheeks.

I can’t help but smile back at her as I answer, “It was good.” But I’m slightly suspicious when I notice another young waitress, whose name escapes me, standing awfully close to her, poorly hiding her interest in our conversation.

“So, you know Gabe, right?”

I fight an uncomfortable, slightly amused, smile. “Yes.”

“You’re, like, friends with him, right?”

The other waitress’s attention is fully centered on me now.

“Yes,” I say carefully.

“Are you...more than friends?”

I have to stifle a laugh, which gets caught in my throat and comes out as a quiet cough. “Shelby, how old are you?”

“I’ll be nineteen next week.”

I nod and say gently, “You realize Gabe is almost thirty, right?”

A seductive smile spreads across her face. “And?”

“And”—I shake my head with concern—“he’s too old for you.”

She glances at her friend and they share a knowing look that I find troubling at best. “Well, how old are you?” she asks me.

“Twenty-nine.”

“Oh.” Her face falls and her thoughts appear to shift.

I can’t tell if she’s surprised or disappointed that I’m the same age as Gabe. By the look on her face, I’ve given her a lot to ponder.

“Well, was that it?” I force a polite smile and glance over my shoulder. “I’ve got tables waiting on me.”

“What...happened to him?” she asks quietly. “I hear people talk sometimes when he comes in, but I’ve never asked.”

“Oh. Um.” I close my eyes and try to shake off the thought of people gossiping about him. I exhale a quiet breath and explain, “He was, um...we were...in an accident when we were younger. A really bad accident.”

Her eyes get big, and I realize she’s too young to remember it, or to comprehend the magnitude of it. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know,” she says sincerely.

“It’s okay. I know.”

“Were you hurt?” her friend asks.

“Yes. And we lost my brother.”

Shelby pulls in a slow breath and lowers her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Liv. I had no idea.”

“It’s okay. I know you didn’t.”

“I shouldn’t have...what I said before—I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot.” I smile softly and slant my eyes at her. “But Gabe’s still too old for you.”

She laughs quietly and says, “He’s *so* cute, though.”

“I know.” I widen my eyes and spin around to tend to my tables. *Believe me, I know.*

I spend the next half hour serving up plates of biscuits and gravy, eggs benedict, shrimp and grits, and, of course, chicken and waffles, to the accompanying sounds of Lou’s all-time favorite singer, Patsy Cline. She’s currently crooning the lyrics of *I Fall to Pieces*, which I now know by heart.

I move around the diner singing quietly to myself, “I fall to pieces...each time I see you again. I fall to pieces...how can I be just your friend?”

Finally, I pull my phone out of my apron pocket and send Gabe a text, hoping to evoke a of response from him.

Me: My friend Trisha from Raleigh is coming in town for the weekend and I want to show her around. Thinking about Charlie’s tonight. You should come!

A few minutes later, my phone whistles in my pocket and I nearly throw it at a customer's head trying to pull it out.

Gabe: *I'll meet you there. What time?*

No explanation for his radio silence, but he replied, and he wants to come. I quickly type a reply and hit send.

Me: 8:30. *See you there :)*

He's busy, I remind myself. Busy handcrafting beautiful pieces of furniture in his garage...shirtless, most likely. Maybe a little sweaty.

I'm as bad as the prom queen.

I bury thoughts of Gabe and return to my work. His text was just enough to give me the fix I needed to hold me over until tonight.

"Liv Dalton," a wonderfully familiar voice says from behind me.

"Trisha!" I turn around and see her standing in the middle of the Friday lunch crowd wearing white skinny jeans, rattan wedges, and a flowy printed silk shirt. Her wavy auburn hair is pulled back into a ponytail and her tortoise-shell sunglasses are pushed up on top of her head.

"What are you doing here so soon? I thought you weren't going to be here until later today."

"I was so excited to see you, I couldn't sleep. So I left early."

I leap toward her and throw my arms around her neck. "I'm so glad you're here!"

She hugs me tightly. "I went to your house and your mom said you were here, so I thought I would come see for myself." She drops her eyes over my outfit—a pair of khaki shorts, a blue Salty Lou's T-shirt, and my running shoes, which were beginning to feel neglected. I haven't gone running since my sprint with Gabe on the beach. But I think I've probably burned the same amount of calories waiting tables.

"Olivia Dalton waiting tables." She shakes her head. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" I crease my eyebrows. "It's actually kind of fun. Besides, I needed the extra money."

"Sweetie, you have a degree in English Literature and you speak fluent French. You should be sitting in a posh high-rise office, not slinging hash in a diner." She leans in and sniffs me. "You smell like bacon."

"It's not just a diner. Lou's is a staple in my pre-Trisha life. And I happen to know that you like bacon."

"I prefer eating it, not wearing it like perfume."

“Well then, sit down and I’ll get you some.”

She smiles and pulls her sunglasses off her head and tosses them in her oversized purse. “I am kind of hungry.” She climbs up on a barstool. “I’ll have a house salad—dressing on the side—and a Diet Coke,” she says without looking at a menu.

“No you won’t. You’ll have the chicken and waffles and a sweet tea. No arguments,” I say, before she can disagree. “It will change your life. Trust me.” I spin around and put in the order.

“So, do we have plans for tonight?” she asks, leaning over the counter.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, we’re going to a fun bar. And,” I mumble the next words, “Gabe’s coming.”

“Who’s coming?”

“Gabe. He’s going to meet us there.”

She gives me wide eyes and says rather loudly, “Holy shit, Liv!”

“What?”

“What do you mean, *what*?” she says quieter this time. “The infamous Gabe North, who I only know as the mystery boy who broke your heart before I met you? This is a big deal. A big freaking deal. I’m not sure I’m ready to meet him.”

“Okay, first of all, he’s not a boy.” I smile automatically. “He’s quite the opposite, actually. And you have to meet him eventually, so it might as well be tonight.”

She lets out a reluctant sigh.

“I need you to meet him, Trish. I need you to see that he’s not some monster who ruined me all those years ago.”

“Have you forgotten that I watched you cry yourself to sleep for months over him, that I used to hold your hair back when you got so worked up you made yourself sick?”

I nod over the difficult memory. “That was Brandon too, you know.”

“I know. But Brandon didn’t choose to hurt you. Gabe did.”

“You’re right.”

“Liv, he’s not just some old boyfriend you can be friends with now. He’s in there deep,” she says, pointing to my heart. “I saw what he did to you. I just don’t want to see you like that ever again.”

“You won’t. I won’t let that happen. I’m not the same person I was back then. And neither is he.”

She gives me a skeptical look.

“He’s a good person, Trish. And yes, I *can* be friends with him,” I say, still trying to convince myself. “I *am* friends with him,” I add for good measure. “We’ve been hanging out a little bit and it’s been...nice.”

“Nice?”

“Yes.”

She sighs dramatically. “Fine, I’ll meet him. But I’m warning you, I may have to consume several alcoholic beverages to get through the night.”

“Why do you think I ordered you the chicken and waffles?”

Chapter 13

Gabe

Olivia Dalton came storming back into my life like a lightning bolt and she has completely and utterly wrecked me. This has been one of the worst weeks I've had in years. And I have no one to blame but myself.

I can't relax. I can't concentrate. I can't sleep. I can barely work. I don't know *how* to be friends with Liv. It was all I could do not to kiss her after Roxy's bath. I came so close. But I knew that if I kissed her, it wouldn't be enough. I wouldn't be able to stop until I had all of her.

It's like a light has been turned back on inside me and I don't know how to turn it off. It started as a small pinpoint of light that I could just barely see in the distance, glowing and drawing me to it like a moth to a flame. And now, I can't turn away from it. For the first time since the accident, I see a glimpse of who I was before, who I want to be again...for her.

But I'm no better for her now than I was seven years ago.

My seizures are getting worse, but I plan to keep that to myself. Not even my mother knows. She worries enough as it is.

I don't know how to be friends with Liv, but I'm going to have to figure it out, because that's what she deserves. A friend. A *best* friend, like she's always been to me. It's the least I can do after everything I've put her through. And selfishly, I'll take her any way I can get her, even if that's all we ever are. Even if it means watching her life unfold here on the Island right in front of me.

She'll meet someone eventually, get married, probably have some babies. *Damn*, it's going to hurt like hell, but I guess that's what I deserve.

I kept my distance this week so I could try to get my head straight, but when Liv said she was going to Charlie's, I knew I had to go. I realize Liv's probably been to plenty of bars on her own, and doesn't need my protecting, but I'll be damned if she's going to meet the man of her dreams in a bar filled with drunk, slobbering guys. So, that's where I'm headed now.

Charlie's is actually a pretty cool place. They remix country songs with hip-hop riffs. But without a good buzz, it doesn't hold the same appeal. Excessive drinking doesn't mix well with seizures.

I park my truck in the crowded parking lot and head inside.

The music is blaring through the wood-paneled room and people are yelling over it to talk to each other. I walk past a dozen half-dressed girls who whisper to each other when I pass them.

“Careful, they might attack,” an angel’s voice whispers in my ear. I turn around and see Liv’s beautiful face smiling up at me.

“You better take my hand then,” I say, taking her small hand in mine, unable to resist the urge to touch her, “just for good measure.”

She smiles and pulls me behind her. “Come on, I want you to meet my best friend, Trisha, from Raleigh.”

Best friend? I’m not sure I thought this through. I’ll never know what all Liv went through after we broke up, but God only knows what she’s told Trisha about me.

“Gabe, this is Trisha.” She introduces me to a pretty redhead sitting at a high-top table. Her friend’s wide eyes are fixed on me.

I suck up my insecurities and reach out to shake her hand. “Hi, Trisha. It’s nice to meet you,” I say confidently, keeping my tone light.

She shakes my hand. “Hi, Gabe. It’s...nice to meet you too,” she says, giving me a tentative smile.

“So, what are you girls drinking tonight?”

“Beer for me,” Liv answers, tapping her nails on the half-empty Michelob Ultra bottle in front of her.

“You want a glass?”

“Tastes better straight from the bottle.” She picks it up and takes a swig.

“I see you still like that watered-down stuff.”

“Some things never change,” she says, giving me a wink that hits me square in the chest.

Trisha empties her glass and places it on the table. “Cranberry and vodka for me, please. Thanks.”

“All right. I’ll be back.”

I make my way over to the bar and wait patiently for the bartender’s attention. I glance back at Liv and see her and Trisha engaged in a lively conversation. They’re whispering back and forth and laughing. Liv glances up at me and smiles. She looks relaxed and happy. I can’t help but smile, watching her from across the bar.

“Sorry,” I say when I bump into the girl standing next to me.

She looks up at me and smirks. “You should be more careful with those big shoulders.”

“Oh. Um.” I’m not sure how to respond. “Sorry?” I offer, and turn my attention to the bartender, who’s looking at me expectantly. “A Mich Ultra, your IPA on tap, and a cranberry and vodka. Thanks.”

I pay for the drinks, tip the bartender, and return to the high-top table, where Trisha and I engage in polite, guarded conversation for the next several minutes, until Liv tells her about my furniture line. Then it’s all industry insights and twenty questions as she brainstorms ways to work it into some new designs at her interior design firm. I entertain the idea to get in Trisha’s good graces, but I can barely keep up with the demands at Southern Coastal right now.

“I have to use the ladies room,” she says to Liv. “Want to come with me?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Okay, I’ll be back.”

Trisha disappears into the crowd and I’m grateful for a few minutes alone with Liv.

“So, how was your week?” she asks. “And don’t say busy.” She knows I’ve been avoiding her.

“Yeah, sorry I was MIA.”

She smiles one of her shy smiles. “I thought maybe you got sick of me already.”

I lean in close and say honestly, “I could never get sick of you.”

“Good”—she smiles again—“because I miss Roxy.”

I stifle a laugh. “She misses you too. She’s been pining for you all week.” I gaze at her, hoping against my better judgement to convey the truth. *I’ve been pining for you all week.*

“I know the feeling.”

We stare at each other for several long seconds, until the loud music and noisy people around us fade to white noise in the background. All I see is her, *my* Liv, sitting across from me, staring at me with those beautiful green eyes. I watch her mouth part as she draws in a breath and I fight the urge to lean across the table and press my lips to hers—lips I’ve kissed a thousand times, lips that have touched every single part of my body.

“Oh my God, I love this song!” Trisha shouts, dropping her purse on the table. “Come dance with me!” She pulls Liv off her barstool and drags her to a spot on the floor where several high-top tables have been pushed aside and a small crowd of people are dancing.

I stand up and lean against the table, keeping my eyes on Liv. She looks amazing in her jeans, filling them out in all the right places, and her legs go on for miles in her high heels. She won't escape the eyes of a single guy in here. I watch her as she sways back and forth to the music, her long brown hair teasing the curve of her back when she moves. She twirls under Trisha's hands and laughs, and her smile lights up the whole room.

I feel a long, skinny arm slide around my waist. "Long time no see, Gabey-baby," Stacey McGillis says, smiling up at me.

I glance down at her briefly and then peel her arm off me. "Stacey," I say, keeping my eyes on Liv.

"Well, can I get a hug?"

I ignore her.

"Is that Liv Dalton? When did *she* get back in town?"

I continue to ignore her and watch Liv.

Stacey huffs. "Are you still not over her?"

"She's not the kind of girl you get over."

Stacey crosses her arms over her large, fake breasts. "Well, I guess that makes me chopped liver."

I glance down at her blankly, affirming her assumption.

She huffs again. "You can be a real asshole, Gabe. I don't know why I ever wasted my time with you." She spins around and stalks toward the bar.

Stacey McGillis falls into the category of sad, lonely mistakes I made after Liv left. I let her into my bed a few years ago and she's been trying to get back with me ever since. Asshole or not, maybe now she'll realize she was just a mistake I made on a lonely night.

Two guys are standing in front of Liv now, blocking my view. They're bouncing around like a couple of idiots. I think they're trying to dance. I kind of feel bad for the one guy. He couldn't keep up with the beat of the music to save his life. I inch a little closer so that I can see Liv again. She and Trisha seem completely oblivious to the two doofuses intruding on their dance space. One of the guys leans in and says something in Liv's ear, and it bothers me more than it should. She smiles and shakes her head, and he walks away. Another guy moves in and I watch this one try the same thing. Liv politely waves him off too. Another one tries and is deterred. I watch four different men approach Liv, and whether it's warranted or not, it's really starting to piss me off.

"I got dibs on the brunette," someone slurs in my ear. I look over at the idiot standing beside me wearing a trucker hat and a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off.

"What did you say?"

"The brunette. What I wouldn't give to see her on her knees...right here," he says, holding his hands out in front of his hips.

My heart thunders in my chest as my fist flies through the air and slams into his jaw, sending him to the floor.

Suddenly, everyone is yelling and people are moving in around me.

"Gabe?" Liv shoves her way through the growing crowd and sees the guy lying on the floor, holding his jaw. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"You're out." A bouncer grabs my shirt and starts shoving me toward the exit.

"Gabe?" Liv hurries behind him. "Wait!"

"It's fine, Liv. Go back and have fun."

"What? No!"

The bouncer shoves me outside. "Don't come back tonight."

Liv steps around him and grabs my shirt. "What happened? Did you hit that guy?"

"It's not a big deal. Just please, go back inside and enjoy the rest of the night with Trisha."

She looks hurt and confused.

"I'm sorry. It was stupid." I shrug. "I'll see you later, okay?"

She nods, but her eyes are filled with disappointment.

Dammit. How do I explain that I knocked the guy out defending her honor, when the truth is, it isn't mine to defend?

I drop my head and walk away.

I don't look back until I get to my truck, and by then she's gone back inside. "Idiot!" I shout, punching the door. I reach for the handle with my throbbing hand and climb inside.

I sit in my truck for a long time, staring at my phone. I want to call Liv and explain what happened, but I text her the number of a cab company instead.

Me: Stay and have fun with Trisha. Here's the number for a cab later. Still no Uber on the island. Please don't drive home.

Chapter 14

Liv

I wake up much too early, considering the hour I went to bed. My mouth is dry and I'm thirsty. I wanted to go home after Gabe got kicked out of Charlie's last night, but Trisha, who had already consumed several cocktails, wasn't ready for the night to end. So I half-heartedly danced with her and the other drunk fools until she was finally ready to leave around midnight.

I grab my phone off the nightstand.

6am

It's early, but I have to see Gabe. I don't know what happened last night, but I can't spend another week waiting to find out. I'll have to take Trisha's car, though. Mine is still sitting in the parking lot at Charlie's.

I get up and take a quick shower, brush my teeth, and throw on a sundress and sandals. I leave a bottle of water and two Tylenol on the nightstand next to Trisha, who will likely be sleeping until the late hours of the morning.

I grab her keys and sneak out of the house.

On my way to Gabe's, I finish a bottle of water and swallow down some Tylenol for good measure, but I actually feel pretty good. All I need now is a cup of coffee.

It's not quite 7:00 when I pull onto the Norths' property, which is blanketed by a cloudy veil of fog that's masking the views of the green trees in the distance. This is the third time I've driven past Gabe's parents' house unnoticed, but I doubt anyone is even up yet. I'll have to see them eventually, but for now, I'm happy to avoid any uncomfortable run-ins. Especially with Jackie, seeing as how well our last encounter went.

I pull up to the garage and park next to Gabe's truck. It's quiet on the property, besides the occasional call of a robin beckoning the morning. I'm sure Gabe is still asleep, but I can't wait for him to wake up. I need to talk to him now.

I tip-toe up the dewy stairs to his apartment. I'm halfway up when he opens the door and steps out onto the landing.

I guess he heard me pull up.

I pause and drink him in. He's shirtless and barefoot, wearing a pair of gray drawstring joggers that are tied low on his waist, showing off the V below his sculpted eight pack. His hair is tousled around his scruffy face and his eyes are still heavy from sleep. He's too much to look at this early in the morning, but I can't avert my eyes. They follow the lines of his torso up to his beautiful face.

"Hey," he says, low and husky.

"Hi."

"Are you okay?"

I nod. "I know it's early. Sorry."

He holds the door open for me to come up and I climb the rest of the steps. I rub Roxy's head when she greets me at the door. "Hi, Rox." She circles my legs and follows me in.

"Coffee?"

"Yeah. Coffee would be great."

I sit down at the table in his small kitchen and watch him make a pot of coffee. He gets a couple of mugs down and stands over the pot, watching it intently as it brews. He must need a cup as badly as I do. That or he's distracting himself with it on purpose to avoid talking to me about last night. Something tells me it's the latter.

When the coffee is done brewing, he fills the mugs and stirs in some sugar and half-and-half. He hands me a cup and sits down across from me.

I wrap my hands around the warm mug and slowly sip the creamy, lightly sweetened coffee, recalling how Travis never made my coffee right. "This is perfect," I muse quietly.

"I remembered that you like a lot of cream and just a little sugar."

"You remembered that?"

"Yeah, well, you sent me on enough coffee runs during finals." He laughs quietly and sips his cup. "You used to get all hyped up on caffeine so you could stay up late studying."

"Yeah." I laugh and put the cup down on the table. I give him a small, guarded smile. "I'm sorry that I woke you."

"I needed to get up. I have some work I have to finish today, so..."

"Gabe, are you going to talk to me about last night?"

He pulls his eyebrows together, making the little line appear over the bridge of his nose. "No," he says stubbornly.

"Why?"

“Because it was stupid. I was just being an idiot. I’m sorry that I ruined the night.”

“You didn’t ruin anything. But I think I deserve an explanation. I mean, one minute we were having a good time and the next you were knocking some guy out and getting kicked out of the bar?”

He stares at his cup of coffee.

“If you’re having a hard time controlling your temper—”

His eyes flash up to me. “You think I have anger issues?”

I shake my head uncertainly. “Then just tell me you had a good reason.”

He drops his hands into his lap and sighs. “I can’t do this.”

“You can’t do what?”

“This,” he says with a defeated look on his face.

“You can’t talk to me?”

His empty eyes gaze at me and I begin to wonder if *this* is the Gabe my mom warned me about. His mood shifted quicker than I could blink last weekend, he withdrew into silence all week, then he lost his temper last night, and now he’s going to shut me out again. My heart shrinks inside my chest and hot tears burn behind my eyes, but I hold them back. The anticipation of the withdrawal I’m undoubtedly going to experience fills me with fear, which I immediately convert into anger.

“Why the hell did you even come last night? If you don’t want to be around me, Gabe, then don’t. I wasn’t trying to push you to be my friend, I just thought maybe you could use one. I guess I was wrong.”

He takes a deep breath and stands up. “I don’t want to be your friend.” He grabs the back of his chair. “Don’t you get it?”

Ouch. I feel myself shrinking in my chair as the anger turns to hurt.

He runs his hands through his hair and then drops them on the table. He looks into my eyes and says clearly, “I *can’t* be your friend.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. *Do not cry. Do not cry.* “I understand.” I stand up and look for my bag so I can run to the car and let it out. *Where the hell is my bag?* I find it under the table and search for my keys with shaking fingers.

“No, you don’t understand.”

I’m suddenly overcome with seven years of pent-up emotions that I no longer have the will to contain. Every question that’s burned inside me since I left for Raleigh comes screaming to the surface.

“Why did you push me away?” I cry, needing to know now more than ever why he stopped loving me. The tears sting my eyes, but I blink them back. “Just tell me. Tell me what I did, Gabe. So I can move on.”

His eyes move away from me. “You didn’t do anything.”

“Then why did you stop loving me? Was it really because of your injury? Did it change the way you felt about me *that* much?”

“No,” he says firmly, confusing me.

“You’re right, I don’t understand. Injury or not, you knew how devastated I was after losing Brandon, but you pushed me away anyway. And I wasn’t equipped, Gabe. I wasn’t ready to do that without you. I don’t understand how you could do that to me. How could you do that to me?” I cry, the tears running freely down my cheeks now. “I lost part of myself when Brandon died, but without you, I had nothing, I was nothing. Just an empty shell. I’m *still* just a shell of who I was before.”

“Liv—”

“All I wanted to do was help you. I would have sacrificed *everything* for you.”

“I know.”

“I loved you so much. And I’m terrified that I’ll never be able to love anyone like that ever again.”

He gazes at me for a long silent second.

“I have to go,” I say quietly, turning toward the door, but he catches my elbow and spins me around.

“I never stopped loving you,” he says, just louder than a whisper.

I gaze up at him, wondering if I heard him right, and feeling dizzy from the emotions sloshing around inside me.

“You want to know why I hit that guy last night?” he asks, speaking a little louder. “It was because he was bragging about how he was going to hook up with you. Do you know what that was like for me?”

“Gabe,” I say, barely loud enough to hear my own voice, because my brain is still struggling to make sense of his admission.

“I can’t be your friend, Liv. I want to, I swear to God I want to. I tried...but I can’t.” He reaches for my face and wipes a tear from my cheek I wasn’t even aware was there. It feels as if my whole face has gone numb. “But not because of the reason you think. I can’t be your friend...because I’m still in love with you. And I know how incredibly selfish that is, but—”

“What?” I blink up at him, wondering if I heard him right.

“I love you,” he says, groaning, as though the words are torture.

I stand frozen, looking up at him, and I see relief and pain reflected in his eyes, mirroring my own emotions.

“I never stopped,” he says clearly, and my blood stills in my veins.

A thousand thoughts flood my mind, tugging me in different directions. “But you said—”

“I know what I said. I lied, okay?”

“You...you lied? Why would you do that?”

“Because I didn’t *want* you to sacrifice everything for me. I wanted you to finish college and start your life. And I knew the only way I could get you to do that was by telling you that I didn’t love you anymore.”

“How could you do that?” I ask, feeling my heart break all over again, like it was just yesterday. “How could you lie to me?” I pull my hand to my mouth, thinking of the pain I endured for months and months. For *years*. I cry quiet tears. “You broke my heart.”

“I know I did.” He pulls my hand away from my face and I see the heartbreak in his eyes too. “I just wanted more for you, baby.” He holds my face between his hands and says huskily, “I still do. You deserve so much better.”

“Better,” I say softly, “than what?”

“Me.” His eyes water and I see the guilt and sacrifice behind them. And all traces of betrayal vanish.

I reach up and smooth the little line over his nose with my thumb. “Gabe, there isn’t *anything* better than you.”

“Liv—”

“Shhh...” I put my hand on his flushed cheek. “It’s okay.”

Suddenly, a new emotion washes over his face that seems to be a conflicting mix of joy, pain, and sheer, raw passion, because his mouth is on mine within seconds and he’s pulling me into his arms.

Ohh. The feeling of Gabe’s lips on mine again is surreal. I’ve kissed him a thousand times before, but those kisses have lived as faded memories in my head for the last seven years. And none that I recall were quite like this. This kiss holds seven years of heartbreak and loneliness and longing and desire. It’s everything that we were, everything that we lost, and everything that we could be again, all wrapped up into one desperate kiss.

He holds my face as his eager lips navigate mine, pulling and tugging them until my heart is hammering inside my chest. His tongue caresses

mine and I moan when I taste him. He's warmly familiar and deliciously new all at once. I moan again and he drops his hands to my waist. He picks me up and I wrap my legs around him, kissing him frantically and kicking off my sandals as he carries me to his bed. By the time we reach it, my dress is off and Gabe's sweatpants are pushed down on his hips. He drops me onto the giant mattress and kisses me urgently—on my mouth, on my throat, on the parts of my breasts that aren't covered by my bra.

Roxy is standing beside the bed with her head propped up on the mattress, watching us with curious eyes.

"Go, Rox," Gabe says to her, pointing to the kitchen, but she doesn't move. He pushes himself off me, scoops her up—a hilarious sight with her long legs and shaggy tail sticking up in the air—and carries her to the kitchen. "Stay," he tells her, repeating the command until she lies down.

He hurries back to the bed with a determined look on his face and I lean up to greet his eager lips when he climbs on top of me again. He kisses me slow and deep this time, and his tongue moves effortlessly over mine. He sucks my lips and gently pulls them between his teeth, making them tingle and making me feel frenzied with desire. I don't know which part of him to touch first. I want to feel all of him. I want to explore his new body and rediscover the familiar parts I already know. My hands are everywhere at once—his hair, his neck, his back, his arms, his shoulders.

His new muscles flex under my touch and I want to kiss each and every one of them. He's like a living, breathing David, with muscles carved from stone, except that he's soft and warm and gentle. He kisses my neck and collarbone, and nuzzles my breasts.

I arch my back, giving him access to my bra, which he quickly unclasps and pulls down my arms. He gazes at my naked breasts and they swell under his lustful stare. He kisses each one softly, massaging them with his strong, gentle hands. He moves his mouth to my neck while his hands search the rest of my body. He seems equally torn as to which parts of me to touch.

I squirm beneath him, moaning and rocking my hips up against him. I want him *so badly*. "Gabe," I beg.

He kisses my mouth and slips his hand inside my panties. When his fingers slide over the slickness between my legs, he moans and falls back onto his knees. He scrambles out of his sweatpants and his erection springs free.

The sight of him naked, with his etched muscles framing his maleness, is glorious. Even *it* looks bigger, if that's possible. I don't have long to ponder it. He leans down and kisses my thighs and stomach feverishly, hooking his thumbs inside my panties, before ripping them off. *Literally*. If it wasn't the hottest thing that's ever happened to me, I would tell him those were my favorite pair.

He crawls over me, kissing me everywhere he can, and reaches for the drawer on his nightstand. He pulls out a condom and tears it open.

"Gabe, I'm on the pill."

He pauses.

"I'm on the pill, you don't have to."

He looks conflicted.

"I want to feel you," I say, pulling his mouth back to mine.

He hesitates, then tosses the condom on the floor. "I've always been safe," he mutters as he kisses me again. He raises up slightly and pushes my legs apart with his knees. His warm honey-and-chocolate eyes are gazing down at me and his messy hair is hanging over his forehead. I reach up and run my fingers through it, watching his full lips part as he rubs himself over my entrance. I can barely breathe, waiting for him to sink into me. My back arches with anticipation and I lick my lips, watching his.

He pushes into me and I cry out with relief and joy and ecstasy. I've wanted this for so long. I've longed for him, pined for him, for so many years, and now I have him in this perfect, euphoric moment.

I savor the feeling of him buried deep inside me, stretching me, filling me, sending electricity to the tips of my fingers and the ends of my toes. He pulls back and I gasp with need and anticipation, wanting to feel him inside me. He pushes into me again, making an audible *mmph*, and I cry out again as a tear falls from my closed eye. "Gabe," I whisper, gripping his shoulders. He begins to move in and out of me, kissing me slow and deep, holding my face in his hand, and I feel him wipe the tear with his thumb. He nudges my cheek with his and whispers, "I love you, Liv. Je t'ai toujours aimée." *I've always loved you.*

This is the first time Gabe has spoken French to me in seven years. I close my eyes and soak in his beautiful words, which I understand perfectly. They wrap around my heart, filling the hole as if it was never there at all.

"Je t'aime aussi. Tu es tout pour moi, Gabriel. Mon coeur ne bat que pour toi."

Gabe pauses and stares at me with a look of surprise and wonderment, and my heart swells, because I know that he understood every word I just spoke to him. *I love you too. You are my everything, Gabriel. My heart beats only for you.*

He smiles and kisses me hard, and whispers in my ear, “Je ai été tellement perdu sans toi.” He doesn’t translate, because he knows I understand him now. *I’ve been so lost without you.*

I wrap my arms and legs around him, wanting to be as close as I possibly can to him. He runs his hand down my thigh, holding it against him as he sinks into me deeper. *Ahh.* I moan loudly.

He moves a little faster now. *Oh, God.* “Gabe,” I pant. He sits up and falls back on his heels, pulling me into his lap with one smooth motion, never breaking our connection. He holds me close and lifts me up and down on him, until I take over, moving at my own pace, taking as little or as much of him as I want. I wrap my hands behind his neck and take as much as I can get.

He lowers his head to my breasts and gives them the utmost attention, kissing and squeezing them gently in his hands. The fire starts to build deep inside me, spiking each time his lips touch my skin. It sears through my veins and burns across my thighs as I fall against him harder, taking him deeper.

Ohh, yesss. “Gabe,” I cry as I tighten around him and a million little explosions ignite throughout my body.

He leans forward, laying me back on the pillows, and holds my hands, pressing them into the mattress as he thrusts into me hard...again and again...sending tremors through my body until I explode again, moaning and calling his name as the embers settle. He makes a deep, guttural, groaning sound and buries himself inside me as he finds his release. Then he collapses on top of me.

A few seconds later, he leans up on his elbow before I have to tell him that he’s crushing me. He kisses my swollen lips and flashes an exhausted, satiated smile. He pulls out of me slowly, giving me one last morsel of pleasure, and I let out a soft, contented sigh.

“That was amazing,” I breathe.

“You’re amazing,” he pants, pulling me onto his chest, and I listen to his heartbeat slow to a steady pace. “After everything that happened, you still went back and minored in French,” he says, bewildered.

“It made me feel close to you.”

He smiles and rolls on top of me again, and kisses me softly. He lowers his head to my neck and trails light kisses across my collarbone and breasts that tickle me. He leans up on his elbow again and rubs his hand over my breast, giving it a soft squeeze. “You’re curvier”—he smiles softly —“softer.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ve filled out a little.”

“I like it.” His finger gently traces the delicate chain that’s draped across my chest, until he gets to the small gold ring that’s attached to it. He picks it up and rubs his thumb over the engraved compass. “You found your way back to me.”

I smile and say softly, “My true north.”

He unclasps the chain and the ring falls softly onto my breast. He picks it up and slides it onto my finger, where it once belonged. Where it *still* belongs. And my heart swells.

“Always wear it,” he says softly, “so you’ll always find your way back to me.”

“Okay.”

He presses his lips to mine and kisses me firmly. Then he runs his teeth across his bottom lip and lowers his head to my breasts again, tickling me with light kisses.

I laugh and squirm beneath him. “Gabe!”

Roxy’s watching us from the kitchen, whining.

“She probably thought I was killing you.” Gabe laughs.

“Ah, Roxy. It’s okay.” I sit up and pat the bed. “Come here, girl.”

She comes running toward us and leaps onto the bed, excitedly wagging her long, shaggy tail and licking us all over. “Ahh!” I squeal.

“No, Roxy! Down!” Gabe points to the floor, trying to cover himself with the sheet.

She does as she’s told and sits at the foot of the bed, resting her head on the mattress.

I lean forward, stretching across the bed to pat her head. “You’re a good girl, Roxy.”

Gabe lets out a sexy moan and I realize that my bare bottom is up in the air. He reaches for my hips, pulling me back to him, and whispers in my ear, “I want you...again.”

* * *

I wake from a satiated, sex-induced coma to the sound of Roxy whining. She's sitting by the door, nudging it with her paw.

"You need to go out, Rox?"

She prances around in a circle.

I get up to let her out and then climb back into Gabe's bed. I gaze at him sleeping beside me. His muscles are relaxed and his scruffy face is smushed against the pillow. He looks younger when he's sleeping, like the Gabe I fell in love with all those years ago. I stare at his broad chest, watching it rise and fall in peaceful sleep. It's hard not to be in awe of the man he's become since then. So strong and capable. And he definitely knows his way around the bedroom. I sigh, smiling down at him, but then I wonder who he's had so much practice with and my face falls.

I've always been safe, I remember him saying, though it quickly evaporated into the haze of desire. The condoms in his drawer weren't for me, so who were they for? My mind runs rampant with possibilities. Stacey McGillis had her arm around him at the bar last night. I didn't have a chance to ask him about it.

I pull in a worried breath. We just had unprotected sex.

He did not sleep with Stacey McGillis, my conscious reassures me.

"What's the matter?" Gabe asks, opening his eyes. He sits up slowly and studies my worried face. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Liv, I know when you have something on your mind."

I chew the corner of my mouth. "Just please don't be offended when I ask you this."

"Okay," he says cautiously.

I press my lips together and look down at my hands, folded in my lap. "I know I don't have any right to ask you this. And you don't have to answer."

"Liv, it's okay. Just ask."

I bob my head and spit it out. "Who were the condoms for?" I look up at him hesitantly. "I mean, I don't expect that you've been celibate all these years. In fact, I'd say you've had quite a bit of practice." I raise a suggestive eyebrow. "I was just wondering if maybe there was someone more recently. Maybe someone like"—I let out a soft laugh and shake my head, because saying it sounds so ridiculous—"Stacey McGillis?"

He looks at me very seriously and says, “You saw that last night, huh?”

Oh. I exhale a stunned breath, because the tone of his voice and look on his face answers my question. “Yeah,” I finally say, trying to find my heart, “I saw.”

He pulls his eyebrows together, making the little crease appear over the bridge of his nose. “Liv”—he sits up and shakes his head—“Stacey is...she was...”

I stare at him with big puppy eyes, waiting for the blow.

“Yes,” he finally says, and my heart sinks further inside me. “One time, years ago. It was a mistake. One I’ve regretted ever since.”

I nod, acknowledging his shocking admission, but I can’t bring myself to say anything.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I say quietly over the unreasonable hurt I feel, “you don’t have to apologize.”

I was with Travis. I don’t have the right to have an opinion about any of Gabe’s sexual endeavors. But the masochist I am, I ask, “Were there many others?”

He shrugs. “A few. But none of them meant anything to me.” He reaches for my face. “None of them were you.” He rubs his thumb across my cheek and I smile softly over the unwarranted ache in my heart. “If I thought there was a chance that we would be together again, I would have waited for you. I swear I would have.”

I wrap my arms around him and kiss his neck. “I didn’t expect you to.”

“The condoms weren’t for anyone recent.”

“It’s okay, Gabe, you don’t have to explain.”

“And I’ve never had unprotected sex, until today...with you”—he smiles softly—“just so you know.”

That’s reassuring. I nod thoughtfully and tell him, “Me neither,” to be sure he knows. But now I just want to change the subject.

“Can I ask you something now?”

“Mm-hmm,” I mumble against his neck.

He unwraps my arms and pulls me into his lap. “Why are you on the pill?”

Tell him about Travis.

“I’ve been on the pill since I was fifteen. It helps with my periods.”

“So, there isn’t anyone you want to tell me about?”

Tell him.

“Like, Travis?”

My heart jumps up into my throat. *How the hell does he know about Travis? And why the hell am I so afraid to talk about him?*

Maybe because I can’t write Travis off as a one night stand. Or maybe because not that long ago Travis asked me to marry him.

“Travis Beauclair,” I finally say. “How do you know about him?”

“Word travels fast in a small town.” He takes my left hand and holds it in his. “Rumor is he wanted to marry you.” He laces his fingers with mine and implores me for the truth.

I shrug and nod my head ever so slightly. “Yeah. Something like that.”

“I take it you didn’t feel the same way about him?”

“No,” I say certainly. “How could I? I’ve only ever felt that way about you.”

He smiles softly and pulls me close until my lips land on his. “Thanks for straightening that out for me.”

“Anytime.”

“For the record, I overheard your momma telling mine about him.”

Great.

“I have to say, I really don’t like the guy.” He laughs, and so do I.

“That’s reasonable.” I kiss him softly and notice the time on the alarm clock next to his bed.

11:30am.

“Gabe, I have to go. Trisha’s probably awake by now, wondering where I am.”

“Okay.”

“Shoot,” I say as thoughts of last night remind me that I still need to go get my car.

“What is it?”

“My car. It’s at Charlie’s. I drove Trisha’s over here.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

“You will?”

“Yeah. I’ll bring it over later today. It’ll give me an excuse to steal you away for a bit. You see, I’ll need someone to take me back to my truck afterward.” He grins.

“Ah. Well, I’m sure I can manage to sneak away, just for a little while.” I laugh. “You know what? Why don’t you bring it over tonight and have

dinner with us? My mom's cooking because Trisha's here. You should come."

"I don't know. You sure Maggie will be okay with that?"

"She'll have to be." I reach for his hand. "Come to dinner. It'll be like old times. And even if it's not, that's okay. I want you there."

He nods and agrees over the hesitation in his eyes. "Okay."

I smile and lean in to kiss him. "Good," I say against his lips, and he responds by kissing me back. I reluctantly pull myself away from him and search for my clothes. "You know," I say, holding up what's left of my panties, "these were my favorite pair."

Gabe smiles. "I liked them too."

"Then why did you rip them in half?" I ask, laughing.

"Because they were in the way." He crawls across the bed until his hands are on my hips. He pulls me close and drops his mouth to my stomach, dotting it with soft kisses. "I couldn't wait another second. I had to have you." He holds my hands and kisses the insides of my wrists. "It was the quickest way to get to you." He looks up at me with a small smile, one of many he's gifted me with this morning.

"I wish I didn't have to go."

"Then don't. Stay here with me...forever," he says, teasing, I think. But then I see a flash of panic in his eyes.

I bite my lip, just hard enough to suppress the worry I suddenly feel. When it subsides, I softly assure him, "I'm with you now, Gabe." It feels almost dreamlike to be saying that. "I'll be back," I promise. "Wild horses couldn't keep me away from you now."

He laces his fingers with mine, but I see him struggling with *something*. Before I get the nerve to ask him what's wrong, he looks up at me and says resolutely, "I wouldn't let them. I'll never let you go again, Liv. No matter how selfish it is."

I blink back joyful tears and bend down to kiss his full lips. "Good. Because I don't think I could survive living without you again. Not now."

"Me neither," he says gruffly.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand.

"I have to go."

He nods and untangles his long fingers from mine. "Are you sure Trisha won't mind me coming tonight? She may want you all to herself."

“Oh, I think Trisha will be very happy to see you again.” I smirk. “I thought I was going to have to scrape her jaw off the floor when I introduced you last night.”

He shakes his head. “I thought maybe she wasn’t real thrilled to meet me. After everything I put you through.” He shrugs.

“Well, that might have been part of it. But only because she didn’t know you yet. I think all that changed last night, not entirely because of your charming demeanor and devastating good looks.” I wink. “It’s not every day we women see men of your caliber.”

“Well, lucky for you, you can see me any time you want,” he says unpretentiously.

“Seriously, Gabe. I don’t think you know how gorgeous you are. You’re kind of beautiful.”

He stands up and holds my face in his hands. “Je ne peux pas imaginer quelque chose de plus exquis que tu.” *I can’t imagine anything more exquisite than you.*

Chapter 15

Liv

Trisha scolds me when I walk into my parents' house just before noon.
"It's about time!"

"I'm so sorry," I say quietly. "I thought I would be back before you woke up."

"I'm messing with you. It's fine. But why are we whispering?"

I take her hand and drag her into the kitchen.

"Where are we going?"

"Shhh."

"Where were you? Did you go see Gabe?"

"Yes." I turn around and face her, unable to hide the giant smile on my face.

"Did something happen?"

I nod my head.

"Oh my God!" she screeches.

"Trisha, quiet!"

"Liv, your parents aren't here," she says at normal volume.

"Oh. Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"I don't know, I was kind of intrigued by your stealthiness."

I spin around and fall into a chair at the kitchen table with a smile still plastered on my face.

Trisha sits across from me. "Liv, you're killing me. Will you please let me into your world right now? What happened?" she screeches again.

I bite my smiling lip. "I don't even know where to begin."

"Okay, well, I'm dying to know, but first back up and tell me what happened last night. Why did your mystery boy disappear at the bar?"

"Oh, that was nothing. A guy made a crass comment about me, so Gabe punched him."

She raises her eyebrows. "Hot and chivalrous."

"I guess he was having a hard time staying in the friend zone with me, but he didn't think I would understand, so he bolted."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes"—I bob my head—"I do. Because I feel the same way. We still love each other, Trish." My heart soars and I slump in the chair, still

smiling, still reeling, still feeling satiated and enveloped in all things Gabe. But I sit up when I see the look on Trisha's face.

"You still love him? After everything that happened?"

I inhale a slow breath and square my shoulders. "Yes. I know that's probably hard to understand, but—"

"It's not. I could see it after five minutes of being around you two."

"Oh. Really?"

She widens her eyes. "Oh, come on! It's like you two were orbiting each other."

I exhale a quiet breath. "That's exactly how it used to feel when we were younger. Like I was a satellite and Gabe was the earth."

"I've never seen you like that before." She shakes her head. "Especially not with Travis." She stares across the table at me. "I kind of get it now. Gabe was your world."

"Yeah," I say softly. "When I was young, my mom used to tell me that you know you really love someone when they give you roots *and* wings." I smile and shrug. "Gabe does that. Even now, after all this time, after everything we've been through. After everything *I've* been through." I sit up straight and say happily, "He makes me feel excited about my life again, about my future. Like I can do anything I want to. Or be whoever I want to." I shake my head, bewildered. "It's as if this weight was tied around me that's finally gone. I didn't even know it was there, but now that it's not, I feel so...free."

She nods, trying to understand, but I can tell this is a lot for her. "Well, okay," she says, smiling softly. "I'm just happy to see you so blissed out."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Cautiously optimistic."

"I have to be, for your sake."

"I know. And I love you for it. But I honestly don't remember the last time I felt this happy. And it feels so damn good."

She gives me a sincere smile and says, "You know, you still haven't told me exactly what you're so happy about." She widens her eyes playfully. "What happened this morning?" She leans forward and asks very seriously, "Did you sleep with him?"

"Yes," I say, smiling involuntarily, and her eyes widen to the size of saucers.

"Olivia!" She sits back in her chair. "Okay, tell me everything. How was it?"

I laugh. "Well, the first time was amazing. And the second time was also amazing. And the third time was pretty amazing too."

She gasps dramatically. "You did not do it three times!"

"Yeah...we did." I pull my hands to my mouth to cover my smile.

She slopes her shoulders and huffs. "I really don't like you right now."

I drop my hands and laugh at her.

"He's like, ridiculously gorgeous. Pictures don't do him justice. I can't believe you were shagging him all morning while I was sitting here nursing my hangover."

"Well, I didn't just run over there and jump his bones, you know. I wanted to find out what happened last night. But when he told me he couldn't be friends with me because he still loves me, and that he lied to me seven years ago because he thought I deserved better...I told him there's nothing better than him...and then one thing led to another."

"Wow," she says. "All that before lunch. And here all I've done today is paint my toenails and watch *Duck Dynasty* reruns with your dad."

I laugh. "*Duck Dynasty*?"

"Oh, yeah, Duke's a big *Duck Dynasty* fan. Didn't you know?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it past him. Did you see the giant buck head hanging in his office?"

"Oh, yes, I've had the pleasure of meeting Randy."

We both burst out in laughter until tears reach the corners of our eyes. "My dad is so weird. Why would he name him Randy?"

"I don't know, but being in your house and hanging out with your parents all morning has explained *a lot* about you!"

I laugh harder. "It's a wonder you've stayed friends with me all these years. I have serious home-life issues."

Trisha sighs and wipes her eyes. "Seriously, your parents are really awesome, Liv."

"Yeah, they are. I love 'em. They do crack me up, though."

"Hey, if your parents make you laugh and not cry, that's a win in my book."

"One for the parents." I high-five her.

"Speaking of your parents, when are you going to tell them about Gabe?"

"I actually invited him to dinner tonight. I hope that's okay."

“Hmm...I don’t know. I’ll be forced to sit across the table and look at his gorgeous face all night. That might be a deal breaker for me.”

“I didn’t think you would mind.”

“He doesn’t have a brother, does he?”

My mind drifts to Brandon. “No. No brother.”

“Darn.” She snaps her fingers.

“Hey, you can have Travis.” I give her a big, animated grin.

“Um, thanks, but I’ll pass. Trophy wife isn’t on my vision board.”

“Uhh!” I huff. “And you wanted me to make up with him?”

“Oh, honey, I never would have let you marry him. I just wanted you to talk to him and get closure, for your sake.”

“Well, that’s good to know.”

“So, have you talked to him yet?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. But I don’t know if it helped.”

“Why? What did he say?”

“That he wanted to come here and talk to me in person.”

“Seriously? What did you say?”

“I told him no, because there’s nothing left to talk about.”

“Well, did you tell Gabe about him?”

“Yeah, he knows.”

“Does Travis know about Gabe?”

“He knows *of* him. But no, he doesn’t know that we’ve gotten back together. It only just happened.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“I wasn’t planning to. It’s not really any of his business.”

“And you’re not the slightest bit concerned that Travis will come here anyway and interrupt your little honeymoon?”

“Well, I wasn’t...until *now*. You think he would?”

She taps her fingernails on the table. “We’re talking about Travis here. He’s nothing if not determined.”

“Well, that can’t happen. Gabe knows about him, but I don’t need Travis coming here and making a scene. Forget determined. Travis is the most competitive person I’ve ever met. Maybe tied with the most stubborn.”

“Hence his reluctance to let you go.”

“Trisha, if he comes here, it could be a disaster.”

“Well then, let’s make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“How?”

“First, you need to call him. Tell him that you’ve moved on with Gabe. And...I’ll be your backup. I still see him at the gym sometimes, so next time I do, I’ll mention how well you’re doing, how happy you are with Gabe, etcetera. Not sure how much reinforcement it will take, but I think we can get the message across.”

I bob my head. “All right. That’s a good idea.”

She reaches across the table for my phone and holds it up in front of me. “Go on, then.”

* * *

“Liv, honey, can you grab the cream, the wine, and the parmesan cheese from the fridge?” my mom asks. “Use the cheese grater and make little parmesan shavings for me, okay?”

“Shaved parm. Got it.” I grab the ingredients for my mom’s famous bowtie chicken alfredo pasta and follow her instructions.

“What can I do, Maggie?” Trisha asks.

“How about setting the table? We’re going to eat in the dining room.”

Trisha’s eyes light up. “You’ve got it. One tablescape coming up.”

My mom pulls four plates down from the cabinet and stacks them in Trisha’s hands.

“One more,” I say, glancing up from my task. “Gabe is coming over to have dinner with us.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea, Liv? I thought you were taking this new friendship slow.”

My throat feels dry when I consider telling her that we’re no longer *just friends*, but I decide to focus on her questioning of my judgement instead.

“I wouldn’t have invited him if I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“Well, I wish you would have talked to me about it first.”

Trisha gives me a knowing glance and discreetly leaves the kitchen.

“Well, I wish you would stop acting like I’m some kind of fragile flower when it comes to him.”

Her silence raises the temperature in the room a few degrees.

“Want to say what’s on your mind?” I ask, keeping my eyes on my task.

“You want to know what’s on my mind? What’s been on my mind since the second I heard you were in an accident, since the moment I found out

Brandon was gone, since you left for Raleigh seven years ago, and every minute of every day since you came home?"

I look up at her troubled face, but I know better than to answer.

"There's only so much a person can take before they're broken beyond the point of repair, Liv. We already lost Brandon. And then we lost Gabe. Maybe not physically, not the same way we lost Brandon, but we lost him all the same. I can't lose you too."

"You're not going to lose me, Momma. And you haven't lost Gabe. He's still there."

"Not the old Gabe. He changed after the accident. And he's never been the same."

"Maybe you're just not looking hard enough."

"Liv, honey, sooner or later you're going to realize the boy you remember isn't there anymore."

"*That's* your problem. You're so busy looking for who he used to be, you can't see who he's become. I don't want the boy I remember. I want the man he is now. The incredible, broken man he is now. And he wants me too, cracks and all."

She stares at me as this new information resonates. "I see." She turns around and busies herself at the sink.

"Momma, I was going to tell you, but I didn't want you to worry. I just thought—"

"You thought?" She turns around and looks at me again. "Liv, you haven't been home long enough to give rational thought to any of this."

"Hey"—I reach for her hand and look into her worried eyes—"I know what I'm doing, okay? I know what's at stake and I don't take it lightly. Neither does Gabe." I give her a soft, reassuring smile. "He's been through hell and back, Momma, but he *is* back. *My* Gabriel is still there. He was just waiting for me."

She closes her eyes and, after a long, deep breath, she squeezes my hand. "I hope you're right."

"I am."

She gives me a small, tentative smile and lets go of my hand.

"So, does that mean you're okay with Gabe joining us tonight?"

"If you think it's a good idea to have Gabe over for dinner, then I suppose I do too."

"Really?"

“I miss him too, you know.” She pulls me into a hug and, after a few seconds, I feel long, skinny arms wrap around us.

“I love you guys,” Trisha says.

“We love you too, Trisha,” my mom says, detangling herself from us. “Now. Where did that bottle of wine go? I need a glass. Or three.”

“Me too,” I say, grabbing the bottle.

Trisha, still looking a little hungover, scrunches up her nose and holds her hand up. “I’m all set, thanks.”

“Something sure smells good in here,” my dad says, joining us in the kitchen. He walks over to the stove and picks up a piece of seared chicken that’s popping in the pan. He drops it into his mouth. “Mmm. You got a good scald on that chicken, baby,” he says to my mom over his mouthful, and she grins.

“Stop eating it or we won’t have enough for everybody.”

“Who’s everybody?”

“Gabe’s coming over to have dinner with us,” she says casually.

“Oh. Well, that’s *good*,” he says cheerfully. “That’s real good,” he repeats, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me into a hug.

I smile at him.

“You know, Gabe stopped by the office a couple of days ago,” he says, piquing my curiosity.

“He did?” I can’t help but wonder what else he was up to all week.

“I needed him to sign some papers. He seemed different, lighter than I’ve seen him in a long time. I think he might have even smiled.”

“Daddy.” I roll my eyes.

The doorbell rings and my heart jumps up into my throat.

“Well, go let the boy in,” my dad says to me, and I see a small smile on my mother’s face out of the corner of my eye.

I fight hard against a smile as I hurry to the front door. When I open it, I’m swept back to when I was sixteen, when Gabe stood on this very doorstep waiting to take me out on our first date. Except, instead of the teenage boy who stood before me then, I’m staring at a very tall, thickly muscled, scruffy-faced *man*. And instead of holding flowers, he’s holding a bottle of wine.

“Hi,” I say, exerting all my self-control to not jump up and kiss his full, cupid’s bow lips.

“Hey,” he says in a husky voice that oozes all things male. He grins and I know exactly what he’s thinking, because I’m thinking the same thing.

“Hi, Gabe,” my mother calls from somewhere behind me, and my indecent thoughts are quickly zipped up and tucked away for later.

“Hi, Maggie,” he says over my shoulder.

“Well, are you going to let him in, Liv?” she asks, stepping beside me.

“Sorry. Yes, come in.” I smile at him and step to the side.

“I hope you brought your appetite, Gabe. I’ve been cooking up a storm,” my mother says, reaching up and wrapping her arms around his neck.

He leans down to hug her. “It smells great, Maggie. I’m starving.”

My dad crosses the living room, extending his hand as he closes the space between him and Gabe. “Gabe,” he says, shaking his hand with a warm smile.

“Hi, Duke,” Gabe says, gripping my dad’s hand firmly.

“How ya doin’, son?”

“Can’t complain,” he says, masking a smile I can see in his eyes.

“Sure glad you could join us tonight. It’s been a while since we all shared a meal under the same roof.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve missed Maggie’s cooking, that’s for sure.”

“Oooh, what’d you bring me?” my mom asks, eyeing the bottle of wine in his hand.

“Momma told me this is your favorite.” He holds up the bottle and looks at the label.

“And that is why your mother has been my friend for twenty-five years.” She smiles up at him. “Thank you, sweetie,” she says, taking it from him.

“The infamous Gabe North. Long time no see,” Trisha says, joining us in the living room.

“Hey, Trisha. Good to see you again.”

“Thanks for relinquishing your hostage this morning. I was starting to feel neglected.” She smirks.

Trisha! I step on her foot.

“Ow!” she squeals.

Gabe looks at me and I look at my parents and they look at him.

“Is that where you were?” my mother asks, raising her eyebrows at me.

“So, who’s hungry?” I ask, clapping my hands together. I take Gabe’s hand and pull him into the dining room, and Trisha trails behind us, followed by my mother and father.

We sit around the table and eat and drink, until our stomachs are full and the wine has run dry. My mom prepared a ridiculous amount of pasta, salad, and buttery garlic bread, which is almost completely gone now.

The conversation has been light and even funny at times. My dad recited all his old jokes, most of which begin with two unlikely characters walking into a bar. And he and Gabe regaled us with stories from their recent hunting and fishing trips with Gabe’s father, Danny. I love hearing about the time they’ve spent together in the woods since Brandon died, something Brandon always said was good for the soul. I think it’s their way of staying connected to him.

Trisha recounted embarrassing stories from Raleigh, like when I tripped down the stairs at the Museum of Natural Sciences, and I told them about the time I made her laugh so hard she peed in her pants in the middle of Pullen Park.

“Momma, that was so good. Thank you for making dinner for us.”

“My pleasure, honey. I’m just happy to have a full house to feed again.” She smiles and reaches across the table for Gabe’s empty plate.

He stands up and takes it from her. “Let me, Maggie.”

“Yeah, Momma, we’ll clean up. You go relax.”

“Oh, well, all right, if you insist.” She smiles.

“We insist. Go.”

We send my mother and father out of the room and go clean up the mess in the kitchen. When we’re through, I tell Trisha that I need to drive Gabe back to his truck.

“It shouldn’t take long. Charlie’s is only a few miles from here.”

“No need to hurry. I’m heading off to bed anyway. I want to get an early start tomorrow, so I can get back in time for my date with the hockey player.” She presses her lips together over an excited smile.

“What? What date?” I ask, with eager curiosity.

She laughs and shrugs. “I wanted to tell you before, but you’ve had a lot going on.”

“Trisha Marie, I cannot believe you waited until now to tell me this!”

“I was waiting for the right time.” She laughs again. “He asked me out at our last appointment, and I said yes. So, he’s cooking me dinner at his

place tomorrow.”

“That’s great, Trish.”

“I really like him. He’s funny and sweet. I think you’ll like him too.”

“I’m sure I will.” I pull her into a hug. “I’m so happy for you. And I’m so glad you came.”

She gives me a quick peck on the cheek and says, “Me too. This has been...well, eye opening, for one.” She laughs. “And so much fun. I love seeing you like this. I’m going to miss you when I leave in the morning, but this is where you belong.”

“Trisha.”

“I mean it. And don’t worry about Travis. Now that he knows you’re with Gabe, I think you can finally put him behind you. And I’ll be on the lookout for him at the gym, just to drive it home.” She winks.

“Thanks.” I really hope she’s right. Travis was just as stubborn on the phone today as he was the last time I spoke to him. But, it felt good to be honest with him about Gabe.

“Is that it?” Gabe asks, returning from trash duty.

“Yeah, I think so. I was just telling Trish that I need to take you to get your truck now. You ready?”

“Yeah. Sorry, Trisha. I swear I won’t hold her hostage this time.” He smirks.

She waves him off. “Don’t worry about me. I’m off to bed. I can already feel myself slipping into a food coma.” She gives him a quick hug. “It was really great to get to know you, Gabe.”

“You too, Trisha.” He glances at me and then gives her a sincere look. “And, I just wanted to say thanks...for being there for Liv, when I wasn’t.”

I swallow down the unexpected lump in my throat.

“Oh, yeah, of course,” she says, shaking her head, like she’s shaking off a bad memory. She shrugs and smiles at me. “Our girl turned out okay.”

“She sure did,” Gabe says.

“Okay. Well, now that we’ve confirmed my mental wellbeing, can we please go?”

They both laugh.

“Bye,” Trisha says, waving her hand at us as I lead Gabe out of the kitchen and into the living room where my parents are sitting on the couch, laughing loudly. The wine has definitely gotten to them.

“Gabe, you leavin’?” my dad asks, getting up from his spot on the couch.

“Yes, sir. I have a big order to fill for work and my boss is pretty demanding.” He laughs and so does my dad. “I’ve got to get an early start tomorrow.”

“On a Sunday?”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t get as much done today as I had planned, so...” He glances at me and I fight hard against a smile.

“That’s my boy,” my dad says, oblivious to the reason why he didn’t get much done today. He wraps his arm around Gabe’s shoulders and gives him a firm squeeze. “That kind of work ethic can’t be taught,” he says loudly to me and my mom, pointing at Gabe. He lowers his voice. “You just keep making those beautiful pieces, son, and you’ll go far.” He looks at me and my mom again. “People are going to pay good money to have a Gabriel North piece in their home,” he says loudly, “just wait and see.”

Gabe and I both laugh at my tipsy father. “Okay, Daddy,” I say, peeling him off Gabe. “We’ve got to go.”

My dad smiles wide. “This has been a good night. A real good night.”

I smile and push Gabe toward the door.

“Thank you for dinner, Maggie,” he says, spinning around, but I keep my hands on his stomach, shoving him backward.

“My pleasure, Gabe. Come back soon. You know you’re always welcome,” she says with a warm smile.

We step onto the front porch, close the door behind us, and share a passionate kiss. I smile up at Gabe, glad to be alone with him, and a little giddy because the night went so well.

When I pull up beside Gabe’s truck in the gravel lot in front of Charlie’s, I ask, “Do you really have to work tomorrow?”

He scrunches his nose and nods. “I was supposed to finish a table today. I’ll have to finish it tomorrow.”

I push my lips into a pout.

“But I have to eat. Maybe you could bring me lunch again?”

“Okay.”

“Something healthy this time, though. I can’t keep eating like a Dalton. You people have some seriously good genes. I don’t know how Duke’s not three hundred pounds by now.”

“All right, something healthy, got it. And for the record, I run a lot.”

He drops his chin and I know he's thinking about our little jog on the beach.

"You know, you really gave me a workout that morning."

He shakes his head and says, "I'm sorry. My head wasn't in a good place. I was a jerk that day."

"Well, I guess I forgive you."

"Maybe we can try it again sometime?"

I smile. "I do love running on the beach at sunrise."

"I'll just walk fast to keep your pace," he says, teasing me.

I shove his shoulder, and he laughs.

"Come here." He reaches for my hand and pulls me close to him. "Thank you for asking me to come tonight." He gives me a gentle smile.

"Thank you for coming."

He cups my face in his hand and I melt into his warm kiss. I moan softly into his mouth as his tongue caresses mine, but the chatter of bar patrons making their way through the parking lot reminds me we're not alone.

I fall back into my seat.

"Are you sure you don't want to come back to my place for a little while?"

"Of course I want to. But you and I both know I won't make it home in time to see Trisha off if I do that."

He nods reluctantly. "All right."

"I'll come over tomorrow around noon."

"Okay." He smiles, and kisses me again.

* * *

I pull into the driveway at my parents' house and see my mom sitting on the front porch steps sipping a cup of coffee, holding a tissue in her hand. I get out of my car and go to her.

"Momma, what's wrong?" I ask when I see that she's been crying.

She shakes her head and smiles. "Nothing's wrong."

"Then why are you crying?" I ask, sitting down next to her. "Did you and Daddy get into a fight or something?"

"No, Daddy and I are fine."

"Well, what's going on? Why are you crying?"

"You were right. I just can't believe that I didn't see it before."

“See what?”

“We thought it was the accident. All this time. We thought that the injury caused the change in his personality, in his behavior.” She holds the tissue to her nose. “But we were wrong. It was you. He changed because he lost you.” She looks at me with watery eyes. “He was like the old Gabe tonight. He was so happy. And so were you.”

I smile and nod. “I am happy. For the first time in a long time, I’m really happy.”

She dabs the tissue under her eyes. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited to hear you say that.” She puts her arm around me and hugs me tightly. She sits up straight and wipes her face. “I know it’s been a hard road for both of you, but maybe this is where it was supposed to lead you.”

I reach for her hand. “I think so.”

She puts her other hand on top of mine.

“I still love him...after all these years. I love him so much it’s hard to breathe sometimes.”

“And he loves you.”

I nod my head and tell her, “He lied, Momma.”

She gives me a disconcerted look.

“Before I left,” I explain. “When he told me that he didn’t love me anymore. He lied. He just wanted me to finish college and start my life. He thought I was wasting it here. He thought I deserved more...something better”—I shake my head—“something better than him.”

She brings the tissue to her nose again and sips her coffee, but she doesn’t say anything. She just stares straight ahead. And suddenly, my world shifts.

“You knew,” I say skeptically. She doesn’t look at me and I huff a disbelieving breath. “You did, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I knew,” she says softly. “He was heartbroken after you left. He couldn’t hide that from Jackie. She told me everything.”

“Oh my God,” I say shocked. “How could you not tell me? How could you let me believe he didn’t love me anymore?”

“Liv—”

“I was heartbroken,” I cry, blinking back tears. “And you knew it. You watched me cry myself to sleep for weeks before I left for Raleigh. You listened to me cry on the phone for months afterward. How could you do that?” I ask, getting up from the steps.

“Liv, you don’t understand. Sit down.”

“I don’t want to sit down.”

She puts her cup of coffee down and stands up. “Liv...Gabe lied to you because he loved you. Because even though he was getting better, he didn’t know if he’d ever make a full recovery. And he couldn’t watch you waste another minute of your life waiting on him.”

“That was *my* choice to make.”

“You were spending every second of your time over there. It was all you could think about. How to get Gabe better. How to fix him.”

“So, I cared too much? That’s why you lied?”

“You didn’t care about anything else! That’s why. You didn’t do *anything* for yourself. You didn’t go out with your friends. You didn’t spend time with me and Daddy. You didn’t read or watch TV anymore. You were losing yourself and Gabe could see it. We all could.”

“You should have told me.”

“If I had, you would have come home. And I’m sorry, but as a parent, I couldn’t let that happen. It was my responsibility to make sure you took your chance at life, got on your own two feet.”

“Yeah, well, look where it brought me”—I cross my arms—“right back here to Gabe.”

She shakes her head and sighs. “You can’t see it right now, Liv, but you’ve grown so much since you’ve been gone. When you left, you *were* heartbroken. I know that. It broke my heart too. But since then, you’ve become a strong, independent woman. The one I always knew you could be. The one that Gabe wanted you to be. Who knows what would have happened if you stayed...the resentment you both might have felt.” She wraps her hand around mine and I let her. “I love you so much, Liv. Please don’t be angry at me. I just wanted what was best for you.”

I look at the ground, my anger dissipating a little, and say softly, “I guess that’s something you and Gabe have in common.”

She squeezes my hand and nods. “Because we both love you.”

“Yeah.” I sit back down on the steps, and my mother sits beside me, but I still feel unsettled. I understand her reasoning for not telling me the truth, but it’s like I was left in the dark for seven years.

What else hasn’t she told me?

After a few silent seconds, I ask, “Who’s Jackson Landry?”

She gives me a strange look as she brings her coffee cup to her mouth. She takes a sip and asks, "How do you know about him?"

"It's a small town."

She exhales a deep breath and looks up at the stars. "Jack was a friend of mine a very long time ago."

"Was he ever more than a friend?"

She lets out a soft, curious laugh. "For a short time, before I met your father."

"Well, what happened?"

"Oh, honey, it was so long ago. Why the sudden interest in my old boyfriends?"

"Well, I recently discovered that my mother is a vault of secrets, so pardon my interest in the truth."

"Liv, stop being dramatic. Just because I haven't told you every uninteresting detail of my love life before I married your father doesn't make me a vault of secrets."

"I happen to find Jackson Landry very interesting."

"Why?"

"Because he joined the Navy when you and Daddy got married, and I don't think it was so he could see the world."

She sighs. "Jack loved me. And, I thought I loved him too, for a time. Until I met your father."

"When Daddy moved here from Macon?"

"Yes. He was seventeen and so handsome. And charming. I loved that man within five minutes of talking to him."

"So what happened? Did you break up with Jack?"

"Yes. And I broke his heart. He wanted to get married. But I wanted to go to college. And I wanted to go wherever your father was going."

I smile, thinking of their alma mater and all the pictures of them together at the University of Georgia. "Go Dawgs."

She laughs softly. "Go Dawgs."

"So, I guess the rest is history, then?"

"It really is. I hate that I hurt Jack, but he wasn't right for me. Duke was. And so are you. And so was Brandon. I found my family, and that's always given me peace."

"Thanks for telling me that."

“Honey, I’m so sorry that I hurt you, but know now that I’ll always tell you anything you ever want to know. No more secrets.” She holds her pinky out and I wrap mine around it.

“No more secrets.”

“I love you. And I’m so happy that you’ve found happiness again. I didn’t expect it to be with Gabe, but what a blessing to have you both back.”

I lean against her arm, lay my head on her shoulder, and say, “We can finally be a family again.”

She inhales a shallow breath and whispers, “My cup runneth over.”

Chapter 16

Liv

I finish my morning shift at the diner and head home to get showered—the only way to get rid of the bacon smell clinging to my hair, which Trisha so dutifully pointed out during her short visit. She’s only been gone a few hours, but I miss her already. Luckily, I’ve got a pretty good distraction waiting for me to bring him lunch.

I didn’t have time to make him anything, so I picked up some turkey wraps on the way over.

When I pull onto the Norths’ property, I drive past the little brick house, ignoring the telltale signs that someone is home. The windows are open and there are gardening tools laying on the sidewalk, but I don’t see anyone. I’m still not ready to see his parents. *When will I be?* I’m beginning to wonder. I know I won’t be able to avoid them much longer.

I park next to Gabe’s truck, which is loaded with lumber, and find him in the garage working on the early makings of what looks like a large armoire. I call his name, but he doesn’t hear me over the music and the intermittent buzzing of the table saw.

Roxy runs over to me and circles my legs. “Hi, Roxy.” I rub her floppy ears. The music stops and I look up.

Gabe smiles at me and runs his hands through his hair, showing off his toned torso. “Hey.”

“Hey.” I laugh quietly. Will I ever get used to my *new* Gabe? I make my way over to him and rest my hand on his bare stomach, dewy from working in the Georgia heat. “I brought you lunch. A whole-wheat turkey wrap and fruit. Healthy...like you asked.” I stand on my tip-toes so I can kiss him.

“Very,” he mumbles against my lips.

I press my lips together, tasting the salt on them.

“Sorry, I’m sweaty.”

“Don’t be.” I smile and kiss him again, and he moans softly.

I drop back down onto my heels. “Hungry?”

“You have no idea,” he says suggestively.

“Good.” I hop up on the table behind me and begin pulling our lunch out of the deli bag. “Let’s eat.”

He narrows his eyes at me.

“Seriously, I’m really hungry.”

He laughs and sits on the table across from me. He reaches for a wrap and says, “You know, you’re supposed to sit at the table, not on top of it.”

I rub my hand over the smooth tabletop. “I thought I’d test out your craftsmanship.”

“Don’t worry,” he says confidently, “I make ‘em sturdy.” His deep voice is laced with insinuation.

“Good to know,” I say over my mouthful as I chew. I smile and touch the long, wide planks of knotted wood that are matched seamlessly together. The stain around the edges is dark, but it fades to a lighter color in the middle, like the bottom half has been buried beneath the earth for twenty years.

“This is really incredible. I can’t believe you made this.”

He smiles and takes a bite of his wrap. “Thanks, it took me forever to get the stain right. I’m doing this new *unearthed* collection.”

“That’s exactly what I thought. It looks like it was pulled right out of the ground.”

He rubs his hand over the edge of the table, eyeing his work thoughtfully. “That’s what I was going for.”

“I really love it.”

We sit across from each other on top of the table, eating our lunch and glancing up at each other every few seconds. Gabe pops a few grapes into his mouth and I do the same. I hold one to my lips, letting them close around it to make an O-shape, before sucking it into my mouth. Gabe’s eyes and nostrils flare, so I decide to have a little more fun. I lick my fingers, keeping my eyes on him the whole time.

Seconds later, he’s kissing me and pushing me down on the table.

“Gabe!” I laugh and squirm beneath him.

Roxy starts to dance around the table and bark.

“Lay down, Rox,” Gabe says to her, pointing across the garage, and she does as she’s told. He kisses my neck and holds my hands over my head against the table so I can’t move, not that I would if I could. He drops his head to my stomach and works my shirt up over my breasts, growling against them when he sees that I’m not wearing a bra. “Je te veux.” *I want you*. My back bows beneath him and his mouth moves down to my thighs. He pushes my skirt up and says, “Jesus, Liv,” when he sees that I’m not wearing any panties either.

“Didn’t want to risk it,” I say, panting down at him.

His mouth immediately covers me and his tongue moves over the most sensitive spot between my legs. I groan and rock my hips up reflexively. I drop my head back against the table and press my fingertips to the smooth surface of the wood, thinking of how he created this beautiful, one of a kind masterpiece as a fire scorches through me. He pushes me further and further until I’m on the brink of what I know is going to be an earth-shattering orgasm. I gasp and let out a soft moan that goes on... and on... and on. “Gabe,” I cry when I can’t take it anymore.

He looks up at me with parted, glistening lips. His eyes are like warm honey and his cheeks are flushed with desire.

“I want you,” I say, needing to feel him inside me. He wipes his mouth and crawls over me, and I lean up and kiss his chest. It’s salty, a sign of the effort he put into the new masterpiece he was working on today. I kiss him again, tasting the salt on his neck.

He unbuttons his jeans and settles over me, leaving my shirt pushed up over my breasts and my skirt gathered around my waist. He positions himself between my legs and sinks into me with his jeans still hanging off his hips, and we make love on top of the beautiful table, hidden behind all of his other works of art.

* * *

“You cannot sell this to my dad,” I say, hopping down off the table that now holds two of my orgasms in its grain.

Gabe presses his lips together and looks down at the table, conflicted. I’m sure that it would make him a lot of money. He knocks his knuckles against the wood. “Yeah, well, I’m not sure I could let this one go now.” He smiles. “It’s turning out to be my favorite piece.”

I smile and wind my hands in his hair. “Mine too.”

He looks around at the scattered pieces of wood and piles of sawdust on the floor. “I just need a few hours to finish up in here. Will you come over later?”

“Yes.” I nod my head once and reach for his hand.

“I love you, sunshine.”

I exhale a shallow breath. “Is this real? Are we really...together again?”

He takes my face in his hands and looks into my eyes, into my soul, and says, “Yeah, baby, we’re really together again.”

I’m at once wrapped in warmth and shrouded in fear. It seems too easy. I don’t want to think about how or when the other shoe will drop, but the last time I was this happy, that’s exactly what happened.

I let Gabe get back to work and head home, thinking about this. Obsessing about it, actually. By the time I get home, I’m racked with anxiety. I sit in my car in my parents’ driveway with my head against the steering wheel. I should get out and go inside, but I’m paralyzed with fear that something is going to happen, that somehow, I’m going to lose Gabe again.

I’m startled by a knock on my car window. “Liv, what are you doing in there?” my dad asks.

I sit up. “Um, nothing. I was just getting out,” I say through the glass.

He points to the passenger door and walks around the car. I unlock it and he gets in.

“Liv, honey, what’s going on? You and Gabe okay?” he asks, getting straight to the point. When I don’t answer, he gives me a concerned look. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened. Everything is...perfect.”

My dad sits silently waiting for me to elaborate.

“It’s too easy! Something’s going to happen. I know it. The last time I was this happy, my entire world crumbled down around me. And all I can do now is sit around and wait for it to happen again.”

He nods thoughtfully, trying to think of the right thing to say. “Liv, honey, I know why you feel this way, but you’re allowed to be happy. You deserve it. God wants you to be happy.”

“God?” I laugh cynically and roll my eyes.

My father shakes his head and says, “No ma’am. We raised you better than that. You aren’t gonna play the Blame God card. If me and your momma could get right with Him, then so can you.”

“Get right with Him? Daddy, what kind of God would take Brandon away from us and then rip me and Gabe apart?”

“The same one who brought you back together,” he says firmly. “You and Gabe have been given a second chance. A chance to make things right. Don’t waste it worrying about all the things that could go wrong, but probably never will.”

I sigh. "I know. You're right."

"Can I get that in writing?" He squeezes my hand and smiles.

I laugh softly and return his smile. "Thanks, Daddy. And, for the record, I don't blame God. I guess I just felt like He wasn't doing me any favors."

"Well, this seems like a pretty big one."

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat and blink back tears of gratitude. "Yeah, I guess it does."

Chapter 17

Liv

I snuggle up against Gabe's warm body under the cool sheets in his freezing apartment and listen to the peaceful sounds of him sleeping. The blades of the ceiling fan circle above us, making a gentle swooshing sound, and the crickets and frogs are making soft music outside that reminds me of summertime when I was a child. Roxy makes an occasional low gruff in her sleep—a sound I'm quickly getting used to.

Knowing that Roxy is wired to protect Gabe, even when she's asleep, is reassuring. As much as I try not to worry about him, I do. It's only a matter of time before he has another seizure. Knowing that it will inevitably happen again soon is torment. Roxy is the only thing that gives me any peace about it.

I've been doing a little research and the only thing I've learned I can do to help him when he's having a seizure is *nothing*. More specifically, I should remove any sharp objects, loosen any tight clothes, and help reassure him after it's over. So, aside from the obvious, there isn't anything I can do to help him. I think that's what scares me the most. All I can do is watch it happen.

Part of me wishes he would have the surgery, but I've been researching that too, and he's right. There are a lot of risks involved. Risks I've been struggling with. What if his motor skills *are* affected? How much physical therapy would he have to go through? What if he couldn't make furniture anymore? What would that do to him? He loves making furniture and he's just gotten his line off the ground. Or what if his memory *is* affected? Could it be permanent? Could he forget everything we've been through to get here? My chest feels tight just thinking about it and I can tell that my face has screwed up.

I inhale a slow, quiet breath and let the unnecessary worry go. Gabe isn't interested in the surgery and for now, neither am I.

I close my eyes and try to fall asleep.

Gabe has been passed out for the last half hour. And when Gabe sleeps, he's out. Probably because he's exhausted from all the hours of manual labor he puts into making furniture. It's no wonder his body looks the way it does. We've gotten in plenty of quality time in that old garage of his,

though. And in the back of his truck. And under the old oak tree behind the barn. And inside the barn once when we got caught in a storm.

We've only been back together for a week, but we might be making up for lost time.

I smile and roll over, pressing my back to Gabe's stomach, and he flops his arm over my shoulders, drawing me near in his sleep.

Sleep is something I battled for years following the accident. I didn't have a good night's sleep for months afterward. I would lie awake for hours, afraid of the recurring nightmare that lurked behind my closed eyes, waiting to destroy me night after night. I would have intense flashbacks of the accident, always with me trapped inside the car dangling by my seatbelt, staring at a lifeless Gabe and screaming for my missing brother. It's been years since I've had that dream, but it still haunts me.

I open my restless eyes and watch Gabe's chest rise and fall with slow breaths. It makes me happy to see him sleeping so hard, lost in what must be a peaceful dream. His face looks relaxed and tranquil. I snuggle into his nook and breathe in his scent. I love being so close to him during the quiet, vulnerable hours of the night. It makes me feel calm to know that he's safe, and it makes me feel safe to be wrapped in his arms.

My mom isn't thrilled about me sleeping over here, but I've informed her that ship sailed long ago. And that Gabe and I are adults who don't actually need permission to spend the night together. Still, I can't help but wonder if Gabe's parents have noticed. I'm sure they've seen my car parked next to his truck in the early hours of the morning. I'm also pretty sure that Gabe has already filled them in on our reunion.

I close my eyes and push away every new thought that bounces into my head. Each one moves in like a blob in a lava lamp, slowly ricocheting from one side of my mind to the other, changing shape like an amoeba. I gently push each one out of view, until I finally drift off to sleep.

* * *

Something is crushing my chest. I struggle to breathe. I want to move my arm, but I can't. It hurts. Hot tears burn my eyes, blurring the dark that surrounds me. I try to cry out, but there's no sound. I struggle under the weight of a thousand bricks, but I can't move. A bright light replaces the dark, but it's blinding.

Liv, a gravelly voice calls my name.

I try to turn toward it, but I can't.

Liv, the strangled voice calls again, and I know that it's Gabe.

Gabriel, I cry silently from under my lead blanket. The light softens and I see something...someone coming into view. *Gabe*? He's hanging upside down and his arms are splayed limply by his head. His face is turned away from me, but there's blood pooled around him. He needs my help. I struggle and try to scream, but I'm trapped by the deafening weight of an ocean, unable to move or make a sound. He turns his blood-stained face toward me and his eyes, stained crimson, pierce mine.

Help. Me. Liv, he gurgles.

"Gabe!" I scream.

"Liv...Liv."

I wake to Gabe shaking me, and I gasp.

"Liv, look at me."

"Gabe." I grasp for him in the dark.

"I'm here, I'm right here." He pulls me against his chest and I feel his warm skin beneath my cheek.

I cry softly against his shoulder.

"It's okay. It was just a dream. You're okay."

"But you weren't. You weren't okay. I was inches from you, just inches, while you were bleeding to death, and all I could do was pray that you weren't dead," I cry, remembering.

"I know."

"I was so scared. I just wanted you to open your eyes and tell me that you were okay, that everything was okay, but—"

"Shhh...I know." He runs his hand over my hair, soothing me. "I know."

He holds me in his arms for a long, silent minute.

"How often do you have them?"

"Not often. Not anymore."

"I'm so sorry," he whispers into my hair.

"I was thinking about the accident before I fell asleep. I'm sure that's what triggered it."

"I wish I could take the nightmares away, make you forget what happened. I would do anything to erase those memories for you."

I turn my face up to his, seeing him more clearly in the gray moonlight that's filling his apartment. I cup his scruffy cheek in my hand and pull his

mouth down to mine. "I know a way," I whisper, "at least for tonight."

* * *

I wake to the familiar buzzing sound of a table saw. It starts and stops every few seconds.

Gabe is working.

I smile and sit up, feeling refreshed. After Gabe made love to me in the middle of the night, I slept like a rock.

Note to self: make love to Gabe to remedy bad dreams.

I have to work the lunch shift at the diner, but Gabe is taking me on a date later this evening. Our first proper date in almost eight years. He made dinner reservations at a nice restaurant and we're going to see a movie afterward.

Something about dinner and a movie with Gabe fills me with a sense of normalcy that I missed when I was with Travis. He took me on a ton of dates, but they were always so much work. Being with Travis in general was work. I now know that it was because I was forcing myself to be a different person for him. It's no wonder why I feel so rested. Life with Travis was exhausting. I shake my head and try not to be so hard on myself. I know who I am with Gabe and that's what matters.

I get up and take a shower, throw on my work clothes, and trot down the stairs to find him.

Roxy meets me at the bottom step.

"Hi, Roxy." I rub her soft head.

The buzzing has stopped and I hear voices when I round the corner of the garage. I recognize the southern drawl of the deep voice mixing with Gabe's. It's Danny, Gabe's father. I hesitate when they look up at me, but only for a moment. It's too late to turn around.

Danny smiles and his eyes crinkle around the edges. "Hey, darlin'."

I smile shyly and make my way toward him and Gabe. "Hi, Mr. North." *Geez*, I sound like I'm sixteen again.

He pulls me in for a big bear hug and I practically disappear beneath his wide arms. "Call me, Danny, sweetheart. I think you've graduated to that." He holds me back by my shoulders and shakes his head, taking me in from head to toe. "Gosh, you're all grown up. How did that happen?" I see the sadness in his eyes that he's trying to mask. It's the same sadness I

sometimes see hiding behind my father's eyes when he looks at me. He sees Brandon.

I smile over the tight feeling in my chest. "It's been a while, I guess."

"It sure has." His face is soft and sincere. "It's so good to see ya again, darlin'."

"It's good to see you too, Danny," I say, looking into his smiling, golden brown eyes—the ones he shares with Gabe. I forgot how kind and warm Danny is. It really is great to see him. It's not weird at all, even though I just skipped down from Gabe's apartment after spending the night with him. But I guess that's probably not news to Danny.

"You tell your momma and daddy we're going to have a big family dinner soon, okay?"

I bob my head and smile. "Yes, sir. I will."

He slaps Gabe on the back, giving his shoulder a firm squeeze, and they share a knowing glance. Gabe smiles and I don't have to wonder what they were talking about before I came down.

Danny leaves and I hop up onto our table. No wayward intentions here; it's just become my favorite and *only* place to sit in the garage. I purse my lips at Gabe and wait for him to say something. He steps toward me and I grab his shirt to pull him close.

"Was that so bad?" he asks.

I shake my head and say through pursed lips, "No."

"You have been avoiding my parents."

"Gabe—"

"It's okay, I understand. It's hard after all this time, especially with the way things ended."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry." He hugs me. "They're happy that you're back. Just give them a chance, okay?"

I nod my head against his chest. "Okay. I will."

"You going to work?"

"Mm-hmm. Gotta make that bacon." I look up at him and smile. "Pun intended."

He laughs and kisses my forehead. "I'll see you later."

"I can't wait."

I look back at the garage in my rearview mirror as I slowly drive across the Norths' property. I could have stayed and watched Gabe work all day,

but I have to get to the diner.

“Shit!” I slam on the brakes.

Jacqueline North is standing two feet in front of my car.

Holy crap. I grab my heart. I nearly hit her. She looks as stunned as I feel.

I put my car in park and open the door. “I am so sorry!” I say, getting out quickly. “I didn’t see you.”

She shakes her head. “It’s okay.” She gazes at me for a long second and her eyes mist over. “You’re all grown up.”

Have I really changed that much? She looks exactly the same. Thin, pretty, petite features, shoulder-length brown hair that’s swept off her delicate face, and a cupid’s bow mouth that matches Gabe’s. She’s several years older than my mother, but she doesn’t appear to have aged since her forties.

“I was hoping to invite you in,” she says with a lingering French accent that clings to her vowels.

“Oh, um.” I look down.

“Please, Olivia. Please,” she says again.

I glance over my shoulder when I hear the table saw echoing across the property.

Just give them a chance.

I inhale a quiet breath and nod. “Okay.”

Her eyes light up and she steps aside so I can pull my car up in front of the house. I get out and follow her inside.

Wow, nothing seems to have changed. Ornately carved wooden furniture, richly colored fabrics, and delicate little trinkets and baubles contrast the rustic antler chandelier that’s hanging over the dining room table and the giant buck head that’s mounted over the white brick fireplace. It’s a style that’s specific to the Norths’ home, and specific to the memories of my teenage life with Gabe.

“Would you like a café?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The French are serious about their coffee. What we call espresso, the French call a regular cup of Joe—strong black coffee that’s highly concentrated and served in a teeny tiny cup that makes you want to stick your pinky out.

I follow Jackie into the kitchen and take a seat at her table. She joins me with two of the little cups in her hands. She hands one of them to me and sits down.

“Thank you,” I say, taking a sip. It’s strong. But delicious. I inhale a deep breath, feeling my lungs open from the jolt of caffeine.

“So, Liv, how do you like being back in St. Simons?”

Small talk. *Okay.*

“It’s been great. Thank you.” *Because I’ve been with your son. The one you wouldn’t let me see when I was heartbroken and crying on your doorstep seven years ago.*

She sets her cup down and sighs. “Liv, after you and Gabe...” She looks down and shakes her head. When she looks up at me again, her eyes are filled with regret. “I’m sorry, Olivia. For what I did. Or didn’t do.”

“Oh. Um.” I smile a soft, uncomfortable smile. “It’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

“No, it’s not. I watched you cry and beg for my son, and I turned you away. He convinced me it was the right thing to do for you, but still, it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, and I’ve never forgiven myself for it. But I’m asking you to forgive me now. Please.”

I nod my head and say quietly, “I forgive you.”

She smiles and touches my cheek. “Oh, petit bébé, I prayed for you to return to us. I prayed for you to return to my son. He was never the same after you left.”

“Jackie, what was different about him? After I left, I mean.”

She furrows her perfectly shaped eyebrows and says, “I think, sometimes, even though our body heals after a trauma, our spirit doesn’t. Gabriel eventually got better physically, but emotionally he was never whole. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” I say quietly over a wave of emotion that takes me by surprise. I know exactly what she means, because without him, I wasn’t whole either.

“The light was gone from his eyes,” she continues. “He didn’t laugh anymore. He didn’t smile.” She wraps her long fingers around mine. “It broke my heart to see him like that. But then you came back”—she looks at me with awe in her eyes—“and he came back too.” She lets go of my hand and pulls me against her thin frame, hugging me tightly. “My Gabriel is so happy...for the first time in so long. And I know you are too.”

I smile automatically. “I am.”

She releases me and adds, "I've watched you with him and I can see it."

A rush of heat flashes across my skin. The Norths' land is so large, it's easy to feel secluded, but it is possible that Gabe and I got caught up in the moment once or twice during one of our afternoon outings on the property the last few days. I try to push the panic aside. The rational part of my brain assures me that is not what she means. But my face flushes pink anyway.

Jackie must notice, because she smiles and says, "It's okay, bébé. I was young and in love once too." She laughs and sips her coffee.

Oh, dear Lord. My face flames hotter. I grab my teeny tiny French coffee cup, wishing it were a supersized American mug to hide behind.

"Oh, who am I kidding," she says, gliding gracefully over my embarrassment. "I'm still in love with that stubborn man. I may not be in my twenties anymore, but I still love him just as much as I did then. Gabe is just like him, you know. Stubborn as an ox. And he listens about as well as Danny too. Those North men can be infuriating sometimes, always hell-bent on making things ten times harder than they need to be."

Well, isn't that the truth.

"But they sure make up for it with their hearts."

I smile softly and nod. "Jackie, can I ask you something else?"

"Anything, bébé."

"Should I be worried about the seizures?"

Her face grows serious, but she smiles to hide her concern. And my heart sinks to my stomach, because I know the answer is yes by the look in her eyes. "He told you about the seizures."

"Oh. Um." *Huh?* I shake my head and explain, "I was there. For the last one. Just a couple of weeks ago."

Her eyes widen with worry that she tries to mask.

"He didn't tell you?"

She presses her lips together and shakes her head. "No, he didn't tell me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. I just thought—"

"They're happening more often. He hides it from me because he knows I worry."

"What do you mean, more often? He said they're usually a few months apart."

She shakes her head. "They used to be. But he's getting them more frequently now. He had one just a few weeks before you returned."

My mouth suddenly feels dry.

“The only reason I even know about it is because I was with him when it happened. Who knows if there have been more.”

I swallow hard. “Um. Okay.” My heart is racing, but my mind immediately goes into fix-it mode. “So, the only way to stop them is to have the surgery, right? He should have the surgery.”

“He thinks it’s too risky. Remember what I said about him being stubborn?” She rubs her forehead.

“Can’t you and Danny just make him?” I realize how desperate I sound.

“He’s a grown man, Liv. He barely listened to me when he was still under my roof. What makes you think he’ll listen to me now?”

“There must be something you can do.”

She shakes her head. “Not me. You.” She smiles softly and points her finger at me. “It’s your turn to take care of Gabriel now. You love him. Talk to him. He’ll listen to you.”

I’m most certainly going to ask him about the seizures, but I’ll have to tread lightly.

“Okay. I’ll talk to him.”

I glance up at the clock on the wall. *Crap*. I have ten minutes to get to work. “Jackie, I’m so sorry, but I have to go to work.”

“Okay, you better run then.”

“It was really good talking to you. Thank you for the coffee.”

She gives me a quick hug and kisses my cheek. “Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

I smile. “I won’t. I promise.”

Chapter 18

Liv

It's one of the busiest shifts I've worked at the diner. I'm thirty orders in and I still have an hour to go. I've definitely gained a solid appreciation for the physicality of waiting tables. I'm exhausted...and sweating. But I'm making good tips.

"Liv, I need you behind the bar," Lou shouts. "Audrey can take your tables."

The breakfast bar bumps right up to the kitchen. That means more heat...and more sweating. I'm already looking forward to taking a shower when I get home.

"Sorry, Liv," Audrey says with apologetic eyes. No one likes to work the bar because it's the front line for all the hot plates. If you work the bar, you have to pass the plates to the servers.

"It's okay." I smile and wipe my forehead. I slide behind the bar and tend to everyone seated at it. Their drinks are filled, their ketchup is plentiful, and they all have napkins and silverware.

"Order up," one of the cooks calls.

I spin around and grab the two awaiting plates, practically dropping one on the counter because it's so hot. "Ow!"

"Careful," a vaguely familiar female voice says from behind me. "You wouldn't want to hurt yourself."

I turn around and see Stacey McGillis seated at the bar across from me. She crosses her skinny arms and leans over the counter on her elbows, pushing her giant boobs together.

Well, somebody got a boob job. Gabe has seen those ridiculous things? My mind involuntarily conjures up images of the two of them together, and my stomach twists into a sickening knot.

"What do you want, Stacey?" I ask, unable to hide my contempt for her.

"Well, hello to you too."

"Do you want something to eat?" I ask in a monotone voice.

"A Diet Coke would be great," she says, smiling like the conniving snake she is.

I fill up a cup and place it in front of her.

"Can I have a straw?"

I grab a straw out of my apron pocket and hand it to her.

She tears the paper with her long, painted finger nails and drops the straw into her cup.

“Anything else?”

“You know, I thought things could be different between us now,” she says, twirling her straw around in her cup. “Since we have someone, I mean, something in common.” She pushes her thickly glossed lips together and smirks, and my heart pounds inside my chest.

“Order up.”

I ignore the call from the kitchen.

“Miss?” A diner calls from down the bar.

I ignore him too.

Stacey leans over the bar again so that she’s just inches from my face. “I don’t blame you for coming back for more. He tasted so...damn...good,” she whispers slowly.

My chest rises and falls with labored breaths and my ears feel like they’ve filled with water. My brain struggles to process what she just said to me through the waves of fiery heat that are consuming me.

“Liv. Order up!”

“Miss? Can I get a refill?”

The room starts to spin and I have to hold onto the counter so that it doesn’t swallow me whole. In the center of the vortex is Stacey McGillis. I’ve never inflicted physical harm on anyone in my life, but I want to kill Stacey, right here in the middle of the diner.

Seeing as how I’m surrounded by witnesses, I choose a less violent approach. I lean across the counter, causing her to fall back in her seat, and say quietly, “I feel sorry for you, Stacey. You got a taste of a real man and now you’ll spend the rest of your life craving what’s mine.” I press my lips together and smile sweetly at her.

She glares at me, and when I don’t back down, she spins on her stool and leaves. I keep my eyes on her back as she marches out of the diner.

When she’s good and gone, I sneak away from the bar and find the nearest exit. I stumble outside and take a deep breath of the warm summer air, but it’s too thick to calm me down. I’m not one for confrontation, but I couldn’t let Stacey think there was any chance for a reunion with Gabe.

After a few more deep breaths, I head for my car. I need an air-conditioned minute alone to get my thoughts back in order. I stare at the

gravel as I stomp across the parking lot, still sick, still shocked, still fuming, until I'm stopped by a wall of...polished brown leather shoes, rolled khakis, and a fitted navy blue sports coat that's casually open over a white button-down.

Travis?

"Liv." He puts his hand on my arm.

"Travis?" I look up at him through the blinding midday sun, and he smiles down at me. "What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, shocked.

"Hi to you too."

"Sorry, but you shouldn't have come here. You have to go."

His face falls. "What? No. I just got here. I'm not leaving."

"Travis, I told you that it's over. I'm with Gabe now. What else do you want from me?" I know I'm being harsh, but he's as stubborn—and quite possibly as dense—as a damn ox. And I'm still reeling from my altercation with Stacey. He's not catching me at my best.

"Liv, please, just hear me out." He pauses for a moment, then says, "I forgive you, okay?"

"You forgive me? For what?"

"For this other guy," he says, exasperated.

I have to suppress a shocked laugh. "Travis, I broke up with you. And *then* I moved on. In that order."

He puts his hands on my shoulders and says, "I know."

"Good."

"But I haven't moved on. And I'm willing to forgive you and give us another chance."

"I don't want another chance!" I close my eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm sorry that this has been so hard on you, Travis, but it's over between us. There's nothing left for me to say." I glance over my shoulder at the diner. "I have to get back to work now." I no longer have the mental capacity to worry about what happened with Stacey. I have a much bigger problem out here in the parking lot.

Travis drops his hands and shakes his head. "So you're a waitress now?"

"Yes."

He nods, but I can see the disapproval in his eyes.

"I have to get back to my customers, okay? Bye, Travis." I turn around to walk away, but he grabs my arm.

“Liv, please.”

“No,” I say exasperated, “I don’t love you, Travis. I’m sorry.”

He pulls his dark eyebrows together over his piercing blue eyes. “Well maybe you will, in time.”

I give him a disbelieving look. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“Then how does it work? Explain it to me. Please. Because I don’t understand how you would rather serve food to a bunch of country bumpkins than have a real life in Dallas with me.”

“A real life?”

“I can give you everything you need. I can take care of you.”

“No. You can’t.”

“Liv.”

“I’m sorry, I have to go.” I begin to walk away, but he grabs my arm again.

“Liv, wait.”

“Let go of my arm.”

“Don’t do this. You’re making a mistake.”

I try to twist my arm out of his grip, which only tightens. “Let go of me.”

His face is a mix of frustration and determination.

“Travis, you’re hurting me.”

I hear the scuffling of heavy feet on the gravel.

“Get off her!” Gabe shouts, knocking Travis backward into a parked car.

“Gabe!”

“Are you okay?” he asks, standing between me and Travis.

“I’m fine,” I say, stepping around him. “Travis, are you okay?”

“Travis?” Gabe says, and my chest tightens.

“Is this him?” Travis asks, eyeing Gabe, from his sawdust-covered work boots up to his old, tattered baseball cap.

“Travis, please, just go.”

“This is why you want to stay here and act like a servant to a bunch of rednecks? For him?”

“Travis, you need to get in your car. Now.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“I think it’s time for you to go,” Gabe says, standing two inches from his face.

“I’ll go when I’m good and goddamn ready.”

Oh, here we go.

Gabe closes the last inch of space between them and says, “I said leave. Now.”

“I’ll leave when my fiancée gets in the car and comes with me.”

My heart screeches to a stop.

“Fiancée?” Gabe says, like he’s been hit in the chest. He steps away from Travis and looks at me.

“No.” I shake my head, but I see the doubt in Gabe’s eyes. “I’m not his fiancée,” I say urgently. “I’m not your fiancée,” I say to Travis.

“You were.” He looks at Gabe and says, “She was mine for the last two years.”

Gabe’s chest rises and falls like he’s priming for an explosion.

“That’s right. Just ask her.” Travis pats his chest and says, “I’m the one who took care of her in Raleigh. I gave her everything she wanted. And I made her scream until she forgot about you.”

“Travis!” I shout, swallowing down the sick feeling in my stomach.

Gabe’s fist flies through the air and hits Travis square in the jaw. I duck out of the way as the two of them begin to scuffle back and forth, ignoring my screams for them to stop. Travis charges Gabe, wrapping his arms around his waist, and pushes him back several feet across the gravel. He gets a swing in and pops Gabe across the cheek.

“Stop it!” I shout, reaching for Travis’s arm, but I end up getting an elbow to the face that knocks me on my ass.

Gabe’s eyes flare, and his already red face flames even hotter.

“Gabe, I’m fine,” I say from beneath my hand, which is pressed to the aching spot on my cheek, worried that he might kill Travis. He assesses me for a moment, then grabs Travis’s collar and punches him hard across the face, before shoving him down onto the ground.

I stand up and wipe off my shorts and the backs of my bare legs, which are dotted with tiny pieces of gravel. Several people are standing next to their cars now, watching the whole ordeal, including Audrey, who must have come outside to find me.

“Liv, what’s going on?”

I can’t answer her. I just shake my head.

Gabe wipes the blood from the corner of his mouth with a heavy hand and looks at me. His face is a mix of anger, disappointment, exhaustion, and

pain, all wrapped up into one devastating look. “Did he hurt you?” he asks me calmly.

I touch my face. *Ow*. Yes. My cheek feels like it’s on fire. “No, I’m okay.”

He holds my stare, chewing the inside of his lip, conflicted and contemplating, but he doesn’t take a single step toward me.

“Gabe, please. We weren’t engaged. Not for very long, anyway. Just let me explain.” But he doesn’t give me the chance. Travis was quite convincing. Gabe gets in his truck and drives away, dragging my heart behind him.

“Liv,” Audrey says, placing her hand on my back, “are you okay?”

I clutch the hole that has ripped wide open in the middle of my chest, tearing through the scar tissue I thought had sealed it. “No.”

“Liv?” I look up and see Travis staring at me like the cat that ate the canary. He has a bloody nose and the early makings of a black eye. He runs his hands through his dark hair and laces his fingers together behind his head. “Jesus, Liv.” He drops his hands and reaches for me. “You know I didn’t mean to. I would never hurt you.”

“Don’t touch me.” I glare at him. “You couldn’t begin to understand how much you’ve hurt me.”

“Liv, that wasn’t me, okay? I’m sorry.”

I close my eyes and say, “Just go.”

“Liv...please.”

“Goodbye, Travis,” I say for the last time. I look at Audrey. “I can’t go back inside.”

“I’ll tell Lou you got sick. Don’t worry about it. Do you want me to drive you home? I can tell him that you need me to.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Okay. Well, call me later. You know I’m here for you if you need me.”

I force a small smile. “Thanks, Audrey.” I catch a glimpse of Travis’s taillights when he tears out of the parking lot in his BMW and I watch his taillights fade from view, praying that I never see him again.

I fall into my car, thankful that I put my keys and phone in my apron pocket, and drop my head to my steering wheel.

I have to talk to Gabe. I leave the diner and head straight to his apartment, ignoring the speed limit as I go.

I pull onto the Norths' property just a few minutes later, relieved to find Gabe's truck in the back by the garage. I park beside it and listen for the usual sounds that he's working, but I don't hear anything coming from the garage. Instead, I hear a loud cracking noise coming from somewhere nearby. It sounds like wood splitting apart.

I follow the sound behind the garage and find Gabe swinging an axe at an old, gnarled tree trunk. I dodge a rogue piece of wood that comes flying at me. I don't know if he sees me or not, but he doesn't look up.

Roxy runs over to me and circles my feet, and I pat her numbly.

"Gabe."

He keeps swinging the axe.

"Gabe."

He swings it again.

"Gabe!"

He slams the axe down hard, leaving it wedged in the wood, and looks up at me.

"Gabe, please."

"You should have told me."

"Told you what? You knew we were together."

"You should have told me it was serious. You brushed it off when I mentioned hearing that Travis wanted to marry you. You made it sound casual."

"It was casual. I don't understand why you're so upset."

"Because I can't believe you were engaged to that asshole!" he shouts. "I know you were messed up after we... after I... I know it's my fault, okay, but did you really lose yourself that much that you would turn to a guy like him?"

I stare at him, mouth agape, shocked by his accusation. He doesn't know the half of why I was with Travis. And, as angry as I am with Travis, I feel suddenly defensive of him.

Gabe picks up the axe and starts swinging it again. "How could you agree to marry that jerk?"

I try to control my wild heartbeat long enough to explain. "We were not engaged. Yes, he proposed. I told you he wanted to get married, and technically I did say yes, but—"

He slams the axe down again, startling me with the loud crack, and I wonder who he's truly angry with. Me, Travis, or *himself*. He leaves the axe

wedged in the wood and looks up at the tall pine trees towering over us. “I feel like I don’t even know you right now.” He pulls his hat off and runs his hand through his hair. “Maybe he does.”

“*You* know me. Travis never did.”

“You expect me to believe that? You were together for two years.”

“I know, but I never gave myself to Travis.”

“Oh, it sounds like you gave yourself to him plenty. So much for protecting your virtue.”

I screw up my face and huff. “Seriously? Is that what this is about? You’re mad because I slept with him?” My chest tightens as I recall the rejection and loneliness I felt after we broke up. “I didn’t have physical touch for *five* years. Five years,” I cry. “I was desperate just to be held again. And no, I didn’t love Travis, but he was nice to me, and he made me feel safe and wanted.”

“Do you know what it’s like to have another man tell me he made you scream?” I know that cut him deep. And I hate Travis for saying it. But I do know what it’s like.

“Kind of like when Stacey McGillis told me that you tasted good? At least Travis wasn’t some trashy one-night stand.” I shake my head, which is completely clouded with anger now. “I cannot believe you had sex with her! God only knows how many people she’s screwed.” I cross my arms and glare at him. “The thought of you touching her makes me sick.”

“Stacey McGillis?” He shakes his head, and I raise my eyebrows at him affirmatively. “That’s not the same thing, Liv. It didn’t mean anything.”

“Oh, it meant something to her, believe me.”

He looks frustrated. “It was one time.”

“With her. Who knows how many others there were.”

“At least I didn’t agree to marry any of them.”

“I was confused,” I yell.

Disappointment chases away his anger. “That guy, Liv? Really?” He shakes his head. “The girl I knew wouldn’t have even talked to a guy like that.”

“Yeah, well, the girl you knew wouldn’t have had the opportunity to talk to a guy like that if you hadn’t thrown her away in the first place.” I regret saying it as soon as it leaves my mouth.

“Is that what you think I did? Threw you away?”

“No.” I close my eyes. “I’m sorry, Gabe.”

He exhales a quiet breath and drops his head. "I think maybe we should take a break. Things have been moving kind of fast."

"A break?" I close the space between us and grab his shirt. "This is just a fight, Gabe. A stupid fight. It doesn't change anything. Okay? It doesn't matter what happened while we were apart. It doesn't change anything," I repeat. But when he doesn't look at me, the hole in my chest starts to burn around the edges. "Is this how it's going to be?" I cry, and frustrated tears leak onto my cheeks. "You're just going to push me away whenever things get hard?"

His face twists up and I know I've hit a nerve.

"We both made mistakes without each other, but we can get past it. I know we can."

He just stands there, looking past me.

I swallow the lump in my throat and lift my shaking fingers from his shirt, because I don't know what else to say. If he can't get over the fact that we've lived different lives, then maybe there's nothing left to say.

"I should go," I whisper, taking a few wobbly steps backward, until I'm confident my legs can carry me to my car.

I don't see the trees I know are around me or the pine needles under my feet I smell baking in the hot sun. All I hear is the sound of my panicked breaths swirling up through my throat, and all I can see are the blurry tears that have filled my eyes.

When I reach my car, I fall into the driver's seat and succumb to the pain that's racing toward me like a tsunami. I hold onto the steering wheel and cry quietly against my hands. After a few seconds, I inhale a shaky breath and lift my trembling fingers to the ignition. I start the car, wipe my eyes, and begin to drive away.

I glance up at the rearview mirror when I hear Roxy barking. She's chasing my car, making me cry even harder. She stops and runs back to Gabe, who is standing at the bottom of the stairs to his apartment. I try to keep my eyes on the gravel drive in front of me, but Roxy is barking wildly.

I glance up again and see Gabe collapse on the ground.

"Oh my God." I slam on the brakes and open my door, and run from the car with my keys in my hand. I run faster than I ever have in my life, until I'm sliding onto the ground beside him.

He's trembling uncontrollably.

"Oh, God."

All of the research in the world couldn't prepare me for this. It's just as terrifying as it was the last time. I lean over him, not touching him, and wait for the seizure to end. But it seems to go on forever—definitely longer than the last time.

Roxy whines and circles us, nudging me with her nose. "I know. It's okay, Rox," I say to her, trying to convince myself. "Come on, Gabe. Come on." I try to will him out of it, but his fists are clenched tight and his knuckles are white under the fresh bruises from hitting Travis. "Come on, baby."

His body finally relaxes and his arms and legs fall limply against the ground. He lies in the fetal position with his head curled to his chest. After a few seconds, he opens his unfocused eyes and I grab his hand. "It's okay, Gabe, you're okay."

He looks confused.

"You had a seizure, but it's over."

Roxy sticks her nose in his face and licks him. He can barely lift his hand to her head, but he tries. "Good girl," he mumbles, "good girl."

God, this one really did a number on him.

"Gabe, what can I do?"

After a long, silent minute, he rolls onto his stomach and tries to push himself up off the ground, but he's weak. I duck under his arm and wrap myself around him so I can help him stand. "Let me help you. Please."

He gives me a powerful look—one of vulnerability and trust—and I know that he wants me to help him, that he needs me to. Without faltering, I muster up every ounce of strength inside me to get him up the stairs.

He weighs nearly a hundred pounds more than me. Every step is a challenge, each one representing a different struggle we'll have to face, like we did today. But I know that we can do it. Whatever life throws at us, we can make it, as long as we're together.

I won't leave again, no matter how hard he pushes me.

When we get to the top of the stairs, I help him to his bed. He closes his eyes and falls asleep quickly. I lie down beside him and hold his hand, crying silent tears, until I fall asleep too.

Chapter 19

Liv

I wake to Gabe's brown eyes, soft in the light of the afternoon. He's lying beside me in the same position that he fell asleep in.

"Hi," I whisper.

"I'm sorry," he says, reaching for my face.

I put my hand over his. "It's okay."

"It's not okay. Not this time. I *am* to blame for losing you before, and I nearly lost you again today."

"You didn't lose me. I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere."

"I was an idiot."

"Yeah." I smile lightly. "But I don't blame you for getting upset about Travis. I'm sorry for what he said. But I swear, Gabriel, I never loved him. He was just someone who filled the void you left. I never should have let it go on for as long as I did. I was going to break up with him the night he proposed."

"Can't imagine why." He smirks.

"As soon as he put the ring on my finger, I thought of you. I couldn't wear it. Not when the only ring I have ever wanted to wear is yours. I told him that I couldn't marry him the next day."

"Is that why you left Raleigh?"

I nod my head. "Yes."

"Well, I guess I should thank the guy then."

"He's obviously having a hard time letting go, but I didn't mean for you to get involved. I'm really sorry." I kiss his bruised knuckles.

"It's understandable. You're not an easy girl to let go." He laces his fingers with mine and I scoot closer to him. "And you don't need to apologize for being with him, or anyone else, when I'm the one who pushed you away in the first place."

"Gabe—"

"I was in agony without you, Liv. The loneliness, the longing just to feel something...*someone*. I wish I could have been there to make you feel safe and wanted. But I'm glad someone did. You deserved to feel loved, even if you didn't love him back." He rubs his thumb over my cheek and catches a stray tear. "I'm sorry about what Stacey said to you."

I shake my head and kiss the inside of his palm. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care about her or what happened while we were apart. The only thing that matters now is us. Me and you and *our* future together.”

“Me and you.”

“No matter what.”

He smiles and I watch the weight of the day leave him.

I scratch his scruffy cheek. He didn’t shave today. From the looks of it, it’s probably been a few days. “You’re starting to look like a lumberjack. I guess it goes with the whole axe and tree thing.”

He laughs. “I guess I need to shave, huh?”

“It would probably be best. There are parts of my body that might object to you taking sandpaper to them.”

He laughs and raises an eyebrow. “Well, in that case.” He sits up, but he still looks wiped.

“Why don’t you let me do it?”

“Shave for me?”

“Yeah. I can do it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Trust me, okay?”

“I trust you, Liv.”

I smile softly over the weight of his words and lug his heavy body off the bed. “Come on.”

I lead him into the kitchen and he sits down at the table while I go collect his shaving essentials from the bathroom—a razor, shaving cream, a hand towel, and some moisturizer. I return to the kitchen and place the items on the table next to him.

He watches me fill a cup with warm water at the kitchen sink. “I love you,” he says.

I smile at him over my shoulder. “I love you too.”

I place the cup on the table beside the other items and pull my chair around so I can face him. I sit down and fill my palm with a little white mountain of shaving cream and gently rub it onto his face and neck. “Hold still,” I say, dipping the razor into the warm water.

He relaxes his face and watches me bring the razor to his cheek.

I pull it down toward his jaw, revealing a strip of smooth skin. “See. Nothing to it,” I say softly, rinsing the razor in the water. I begin to drag it across his cheek again, but I pause when Gabe brings his hand to my wrist.

His warm eyes gaze into mine. "Thank you," he says, and I know that he's not just thanking me for the shave.

"There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, Gabe."

"I know."

I lean forward and place a soft kiss on his lips, and he smiles when I sit up.

"Come here," he says, wiping shaving cream off my chin, and we both laugh.

"No laughing," I say, putting on my serious face as I carefully navigate the razor over his chin, under his jaw, and down his neck.

When I'm done, I wipe his face with the towel and rub a little of the moisturizer onto his smooth skin. "All done." I lean forward and kiss his cheek, rubbing it with my own.

He pulls me into his lap and nuzzles my neck. "What smells like bacon?"

"Oh, that would be me. I guess I need a shower."

He laughs and stands up, pulling me up with him. "I need a shower too."

"How about a bath?" I ask, afraid that he might not have the energy to stand under the hot water for too long. "I'm tired and I would love to sink into a warm bath with you."

"Okay." The look in his eyes tells me he's on to me, but I'm glad he's letting me take care of him.

We make our way to the bathroom and I fill the tub with water. It's late in the afternoon now, but there is still enough daylight coming through the small window over the tub to fill the room with soft light. I push Gabe's shirt up over his chest and he tugs it off over his head. "Gabe." I exhale a shocked breath when I see a dark blue bruise on the side of his ribcage. I follow it up his back to his shoulder. Travis didn't do *that*.

He examines himself in the mirror. "Huh," he says casually, "I must have hit the steps when I fell."

"Oh my God." My eyes widen with disbelief. "You might have broken a rib or something. You need to see a doctor."

He twists his torso and stretches his arms from side to side. "Nothing's broken. I'm fine."

I nod reluctantly. "Okay, as long as you're sure."

"I'm sure. It's just a bruise."

I swallow that down like a cannonball and proceed to take my clothes off under Gabe's watchful eyes. I don't anticipate anything more than a warm bath wrapped in his arms. He's too exhausted from the seizure and I'm not convinced he doesn't have a broken rib. Still, his lust-filled eyes follow me as I step into the tub.

"Come on." I hold my hand out for him and wait while he shrugs out of his jeans. Then he takes my hand and we settle down into the warm water together. The tub isn't very big, but we manage to fit. I lean back against Gabe's chest, careful not to push on his ribs, and rest my hands on his sturdy thighs. "This is nice."

He rubs my shoulders and then cups some of the water in his hands and pours it over my breasts, rubbing his palms over them. "Mmm...very nice."

I make a noise that's a mix between a laugh and a moan. I can't deny that it feels good, but now's not the time. He doesn't need to exert any more energy than necessary. "I talked to your mom this morning," I say, trying to divert his attention away from sex.

"You did?"

"Yeah. When I was leaving. I stopped by the house and had a cup of coffee with her." I don't bother to mention that I nearly ran her over.

"That's great. What did you talk about?"

I tilt my chin up and look at him.

"Me. Of course."

I smile softly. "It was a good talk."

"Well, I know she must be happy about it."

"Yeah. She seemed happy. She was a little concerned when I told her about the seizure you had a couple of weeks ago." I pause and wait for him to respond. When he doesn't, I explain, "I didn't know that you didn't tell her."

"It's okay. I don't always tell her, because I know she worries."

"That's exactly what she said. She also told me you had another one just a few weeks before that."

"Did she now?"

"She's just concerned. So am I. If you're starting to have them more often, then maybe—"

"They don't hurt me."

"The one today did."

"It's just a bruise. It's nothing."

“What if you had hit your head?”

“That’s why I have Roxy.”

“I heard her barking. Did she lick your hands to warn you?”

“Yeah, she did.”

“And you still fell? Why didn’t you sit down?”

He drops his chin to my shoulder. “Because I was watching the love of my life drive away with my heart.”

“Gabe.” I feel horrible. If I had stayed just another minute longer, I would have been there when he had the seizure and maybe he wouldn’t have hurt himself. “I shouldn’t have left.”

“I pushed you to go.”

“Next time, I’ll push harder.”

He breathes against my neck and says, “Good. Don’t ever leave me. No matter how stubborn I am or how hard I push. Promise you’ll always stay.”

“Wild horses, remember?”

He kisses my jaw, just below my ear.

“Gabe, I want you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“Talk to your doctor about the surgery.”

He stops kissing me.

“I can’t lose you, not now. I know you weren’t badly hurt today, but you *were* hurt. I can’t imagine if something worse happened. If there’s even a chance that—”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Liv, before we got back together, I convinced myself I could be friends with you because I knew deep down, I couldn’t live without you.”

I tilt my chin up and smile. “I felt the same way.”

He smiles softly, but then his face grows serious. “It wasn’t long before I realized friendship wouldn’t be enough, but I knew my seizures were getting worse,” he admits. “They *are* getting worse. And I don’t know what it means.” His voice is laced with worry and regret. “I didn’t want to burden you with it, but when you asked me why I stopped loving you, I...I couldn’t lie. I had to tell you the truth. I’m sorry.”

I close my eyes and choke out, “You’re sorry?” I turn around, sloshing water over the side of the tub, and put my hands on his cheeks. “Gabe, you could never be a burden to me.”

“I’ll consider the surgery, Liv. For you. For *us*.”

I wrap my arms around his neck. “Thank you,” I mumble against his ear.

He wraps his arms around my back and asks, “Will you go with me to my next appointment?”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have your parents there?”

“You’re the one I want by my side if I decide to go through with the surgery.”

“Okay.”

He smiles and puts his hand under my chin. “Hey, wasn’t I supposed to take you on a date tonight?”

“We can do it another night.”

He shakes his head. “No. I’m taking you out tonight.”

“Gabe, you need to rest.”

“I did rest. I feel better. I’m already shaved and everything.”

I know he won’t give in, so I do. “Okay.” At least he’ll be sitting through dinner and a movie.

“We still need to get you cleaned up, though,” he says, grabbing my body wash—one of the many girly products that have taken up residence in his bathroom.

“Sorry about the mess in here. I’ll put all my stuff away when we get out,” I say, glancing at the counter that’s covered with my makeup and skincare products.

“No. Don’t.”

I look at him curiously.

“Move in with me.”

I smile and laugh. “I think I already have.”

He laughs softly. “I mean officially. I want you to bring all your things here. I don’t want you running back to your parents’ house every other day to grab more clothes. I want you here...to take care of me,” he says, affirming the big fat *yes* dancing around my head. “And I want to take care of you. I know this place is small, but I want to share it with you. I want it to be our home, for now.”

I smile so big it hurts. “I want that too. But what about my condo?”

“Well, if you still want to move into it when the time comes, I’ll understand. And if you don’t, well, I’ll understand that too.” He smiles and

kisses me, and before I know it I'm melting into his arms and forgetting all about my little condo, and my resolve to abstain from him today.

* * *

I step out of the bathroom after putting the finishing touches on my makeup, including some extra concealer to cover the bruise on my cheekbone, courtesy of Travis. It's just starting to show and I don't want Gabe to see it. He might forego our date to drive to Raleigh and pummel Travis some more. It isn't too bad. It's more of a pink mark than a bruise. You can't even see it with the concealer.

Since this is our first official date in years, I pulled out all the stops. My hair is falling down my back in loose waves. And I'm wearing a black miniskirt, a flowy ivory silk tank top, and black high heels that wrap around my ankles.

"Wow," Gabe says, getting up from the couch, "you look amazing."

"Thank you. So do you," I say, taking him in from head to toe. He's wearing a black suit with tobacco brown dress shoes, and a white shirt that's unbuttoned at the collar, showing off his tan skin. And his hair is darkened by whatever product he put in it, complementing his dark lashes that frame his eyes.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

He takes my hand and leads me down the stairs outside.

When we get to his truck, he opens the passenger door for me, but he shuts it before I can get in. I turn around and he puts his hand against the door. "I'm sorry I have to take you out in this old truck. I'm going to get a new car soon."

It doesn't take me long to realize that he noticed Travis's car today. "Gabe, I love this truck. I don't want you to get a new car."

He pulls his eyebrows together and lowers his chin. "I can take care of you. I know I don't show it off the way some people do, but I make a good living. I can give you nice things."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I know your life in Raleigh was different...fancier than it is here. I just want you to know that I can give you that too."

I put my hand on his chest. “Gabe. Stop. I know that you can provide for me. But I don’t need you to. I don’t want the life I had in Raleigh. I just want you.” I drop my hand and pat the truck behind me. “And this old truck, because it’s part of you.”

He smiles softly and nods. I’m not sure if I’ve convinced him that he doesn’t need to compete with Travis—I think it’s hardwired in a man’s brain to size up and exceed his competition—but Gabe won that race long before Travis even entered it.

He opens the door and I slide in quickly before the humidity knocks the waves out of my hair.

Gabe gets in and starts the engine.

I smile and take his hand as we pull out onto the road that leads to town. The sun is glowing orange beyond the tall pines, illuminating the lacy moss that’s hanging from the oak trees. It looks like gold dripping from the branches—a parting gift from the sun as it sinks toward the horizon, leaving behind a cloudless indigo sky and the promise of a fun evening with Gabe.

Chapter 20

Liv

Trisha has been texting me all morning, but I was too busy moving out of my parents' house to check my phone until now.

Trisha: *I cannot believe he showed up there.*

Trisha: *What are you doing? Call me!*

Trisha: *Helloooo*

I call her while Gabe is grabbing the last of my boxes out of the back of his truck.

"Oh my God. I cannot believe Travis came there anyway," she says as soon as she answers.

"I know. Me neither. But at least we tried."

"I really thought my reinforcement at the gym would have deterred him. I feel terrible."

"It's not your fault. I should have known he would come here anyway, out of spite if nothing else."

"I can't believe your boyfriends got into a fight over you. I've waited my whole life for something like that to happen to me."

I laugh over a frown. "It was sort of awful, for the record."

"Well, at least it's over with now, and you can move on with your life. And in with Gabe. Yay!"

"Yes." I laugh and watch Gabe carry in two boxes stacked on top of each other. I smile at him. "Trisha, I love you, but I have to go. I'm being a total slacker. Gabe is carrying all my crap up the stairs by himself."

He looks at me and mouths, *yeah, slacker.*

"Wait! What's your new address? I want to send you a housewarming present."

I smile and give her Gabe's, I mean *our*, address.

I still don't know if I'm going to stay once my condo is move-in ready. Maybe I could convince Gabe to move there with me. But I'm growing more and more fond of this place, especially the beautiful tree-covered property it sits on.

Gabe squats down and takes Roxy's floppy ears in his hands.

And I'm especially fond of its tenants.

"I'll call you later, Trish, okay?"

“Okay. Tell Gabe I said hi, and that I’m really sorry about Travis.”

“Not your fault, but I will.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you. Bye”

I hang up and look at Gabe. “Trisha says hi.”

“Did you thank her for sending your ex-boyfriend down here to fight me?”

“Ha. Ha. She feels really bad about it, not that she should. But she told me to tell you she was sorry.”

He leans against the boxes on the table. “She’s forgiven.”

“Well, that’s very big of you,” I say, making my way over to him. I kiss him softly. “Thank you for bringing the last of the boxes up.”

“You’re welcome, slacker.”

I purse my lips at him. “What did your parents say about me moving in?”

“The same thing yours did. They want me to make an honest woman out of you.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him again. “I guess you better not let them down then.”

He shakes his head and kisses me. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Are you ready for your appointment? We need to get going.”

“Yep.”

* * *

I hold Gabe’s hand and attempt to stay calm while we sit in the waiting room at the neurologist’s office. I’m a bundle of nerves, but Gabe seems cool as a cucumber. I guess this must be normal to him by now. He’s been seeing Dr. Franklin for the last eight years. I haven’t been here since I was twenty-one when I came to some of his early appointments.

Dr. Franklin performed Gabe’s surgery after the accident and Gabe still sees him regularly to monitor his seizures. But today’s appointment is to discuss the surgery that could possibly eliminate the seizures altogether.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

“Gabriel,” a nurse calls across the waiting room.

He stands up and pulls on my hand. “Come on.”

“Are you sure I’m allowed to go back with you?”

“Yes, come on.”

I follow him back to the small examination room.

“Dr. Franklin will be right in,” the nurse says, before closing the door.

I stare at the posters on the wall that depict the human brain. One shows it in three-dimensional slices. Gabe points to it. “That’s where my scar is. The temporal lobe. That’s where they’ll have to go in.”

“Gabe, just know that whatever you decide, I support you, okay? You don’t have to go through with the surgery if you don’t want to.”

“I know.”

There’s a knock on the door. “Hello, Gabe,” the doctor says as he enters the room.

Gabe reaches out and shakes his hand. “Hi, Dr. Franklin.”

“Good to see you, son. And who is this?” he asks, turning to me.

Gabe smiles and says, “Dr. Franklin, this is Liv.”

I see realization flash across his face. “Liv. Yes.” He shakes my hand with both of his. “It’s good to see you again. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it has. It’s good to see you too.”

He turns to Gabe, clipboard in hand, and takes a seat on the rolling exam stool.

Gabe and I sit down in the chairs across from him.

“So, Gabe, I understand you want to talk about the surgery I’ve been pushing you to have for the last six months. Why the sudden change of heart?”

Gabe looks at me and then back at Dr. Franklin. “It just feels like the right time.”

“I see.” He glances at me and smiles. “Well, I’ve given you all the risks, told you what’s involved. It’s really up to you to make the decision. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a perfect candidate for the surgery. I think we have a very good chance that the seizures could cease completely.”

Gabe pulls his eyebrows together and the little line appears over the bridge of his nose. “Yes, I understand. But would you mind going over it all again?” He glances at me. He wants me to hear it firsthand.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Franklin says, picking up his cue. “As you know, there’s a scar on the temporal lobe of your brain that’s causing your seizures. It looks like a little spider web about the size of a golf ball. It’s residual scarring from the blunt force to that part of your brain during the accident. We removed most of the damaged tissue, but there was a lot of

swelling, and well, we were just trying to keep you alive.” He smiles briefly, but the thought knots my stomach. “Aside from the scar, your brain has completely recovered. So, if we go back in now, I can make a clean cut and remove the scarred tissue.”

“But won’t that just leave a new scar?” I ask.

“It will. But a clean scar almost never causes seizures.”

“Oh.”

“The surgery has a seventy percent success rate.”

Seventy percent? That’s it? I assumed it was higher. “What about the other thirty percent?”

“Those patients still have great improvement, much fewer seizures that are more easily controlled with medication.”

“But you’re already taking medication, right?” I ask Gabe. I’m suddenly filled with questions I can’t contain.

He nods and Dr. Franklin answers for him. “We’ve tried several different medications on Gabe, but they’ve become less and less effective. Even if he does still have the occasional seizure, the medication would be able to do its job and greatly minimize the frequency.”

“Okay.”

“There’s no way to predict which percentile Gabe will fall into, but a temporal lobectomy is the only way to ensure decreased seizure activity.”

“Guess it’s a no-brainer then,” Gabe says, laughing at his pun.

Dr. Franklin smiles. “So, let’s talk risks. Because this is brain surgery and I would be remiss not to paint the full picture.”

I chew the inside of my lip. This is what it all boils down to.

“Complications can arise. Usually one out of every fifty patients incurs some kind of adverse side effect from the surgery. That might be depression, change in personality, partial loss of vision, speech problems, memory loss...”

My face screws up as I listen.

“Death.”

“Death?” *He could die from this?*

“I’m not going to die, Liv.”

“You can die from a tonsillectomy,” Dr. Franklin says to me. “Surgery is surgery. But Gabe is right. And I’d put money on him pulling through with flying colors. I wouldn’t suggest the surgery if I didn’t already believe that. Gabe is a good candidate. This surgery *will* change his life. It will give him

back a normal life. Yes, there are risks involved, and I want you to be aware of them,” he says, looking at Gabe. “But in this case, the risks don’t outweigh the benefits.”

Gabe looks at me and nods. “So, what’s next then? How do we get started?”

He’s going to do it.

He’s going to do it.

I’m suddenly filled with fear.

Depression, change in personality, partial loss of vision, speech problems, memory loss, death.

I’m not sure how death is categorized as a side effect. The risks swim through my head like a frenzy of sharks.

“Well, first you’ll meet Dr. Connelly, a fellow neurologist who will perform the surgery with me. Then we’ll start the evaluation process. You’ll need an EEG, CT scan, MRI, PET scans...”

It all starts to run together.

“It’s all routine.”

“I’ve had most of them before,” Gabe reminds me.

“It’s our way of making sure Gabe’s brain is healthy and up for the challenge of the surgery. It’s a *good* thing,” Dr. Franklin assures me.

I bob my head. It’s all so overwhelming. “Okay. So then, when would he have the surgery?”

“I’ll have to get with scheduling, but as long as we can get through the evaluation process fairly quickly, I’d say in a month or so.”

A month. *Okay.* If he had said next week, my heart might have exploded. A month should be enough time to wrap my head around it.

“How long will I be out?” Gabe asks.

“It’s not a quick recovery, I won’t lie. You’ll need to be monitored in intensive care for the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours for infection, bleeding, stroke...”

He could have a stroke?

“All highly unlikely, but we’ll monitor you just in case. Then you’ll remain in the hospital for about a week. After that, you can go home, but you’ll have limited activity for several weeks.”

The crease has reappeared over the bridge of Gabe’s nose.

“You’ll need someone at home to help you.”

“I’ll be there. I’ll help him.” I look at Gabe. “I’ll take care of you.”

Gabe takes my hand and nods. “Okay. Where do I sign up?”

Chapter 21

Gabe

I gather up the papers that my lawyer sent me to review before the surgery—a living will and power of attorney. Ultimately, Liv will be able to make the final decisions about my condition if I can't. She just doesn't know it yet. And neither do my parents. So before I head to his office to drop these off, I need to swing by the house to see them.

"Hello," I call as I walk through the door. I smell something cooking and know that my dad is in the kitchen.

"In here," he calls.

I walk in and find him standing in front of the stove, working over a pan of sizzling hot andouille sausage links. "Just in time," he says when he sees me. "Biscuits are in the oven. Don't tell your momma, they're store bought, and still a heck of a lot better than hers."

He winks and we both laugh. My mom has a lot of great qualities, but cooking isn't one of them. My dad learned how to cook when he married her so they wouldn't starve to death.

"Secret's safe," I say, grabbing a piece of the smoky sausage out of the pan.

"Hey now." He nudges me back a few inches with his elbow and it quickly turns into a game of block and tackle. I would be the one being blocked and he would be the one being tackled.

My mom walks in as we hit the floor. "Gabe! Get off your father!"

"He started it." I smile wide at my dad, a man of considerable size, who is now pinned beneath me.

"You stole my sausage," he groans.

"I was hungry. Besides, I thought you're not supposed to be eating greasy food anymore."

"He's not."

"That girl not feedin' you?" my dad says, ignoring my mother. "Don't marry a girl who won't feed ya, now."

"Hey!" my mom interjects.

I let him up. "You don't worry about me, old man. Liv can cook."

"It's like I'm not even here," my mom says, throwing her hands in the air.

“Aw, Momma, you know we love you.” I pull her into a tight hug. “You make a mean cup of coffee.”

My dad grins. “Now how about you get your cute little French butt over there and make us some,” he says, winking at her.

The corners of her mouth turn up as she sashays over to her espresso machine. “At least I know I’m good for something.”

“Aw, baby, you’re good for a lot more than that.” They share a suggestive look.

“Okay, can you two knock it off? I was planning on eating breakfast with you, but I’m starting to lose my appetite.”

“You’re staying for breakfast?” my mother sings.

“I was going to, but...” I scrunch my face up and shake my head.

My dad laughs. “Oh, Gabe, it’s good to keep the romance alive in a marriage after all these years. You’ll understand that one day when you’ve been married as long as we have.”

I pull my hat off and run my hand through my hair. “Speaking of that...”

My mom gasps. “You’re going to ask her to marry you, aren’t you?” Her eyes widen with excitement.

“Well, I, um—”

“Gabriel North, you marry that girl,” she orders, before I can finish. My mom knows that I finally decided to go through with the surgery for Liv, something she’s been asking me to do for a while now. She thinks Liv will take care of me the way that she can’t anymore. She isn’t wrong.

I laugh. “Calm down, Momma, that’s the plan.”

She gasps again. “Oh, Gabriel!” She hugs me.

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” my dad says, slapping me on the back. “When are you gonna pop the question?”

“I don’t know yet. I just know I want to marry her.”

“Of course you do, bébé, of course you do,” my mother says, placing her small hands on my face. “Elle est l'autre moitié qui vous rend entier.” *She is the other half that makes you whole.*

I nod my head. “I know, Momma, I know.”

“You talked to Duke about this yet?” my dad asks.

“No, but I will. Just keep it to yourselves for now, okay?” I place my hands firmly on my mother’s shoulders and repeat, “To *yourself*.”

“Oh, Gabe, really. I know how to keep a secret.”

I give her a slanted look.

“All right, I promise. Not a word.” She presses her lips together.

“Do you think you’ll do it before the surgery?” my dad asks.

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

Neither of them say anything and it makes me uneasy.

“What, you don’t think I’m going to pull through?” I laugh, but I would be lying if I said the thought hadn’t crossed my mind. Hence the legal documents on the passenger seat of my truck.

“Of course we don’t think that!” my mom says.

“Okay, well that’s reassuring.” I laugh again. “I’ll let you know when I decide.”

“Well, you better decide soon. Your surgery is in four days,” my mom points out, as if I didn’t know. I’ve spent the last four weeks being poked and prodded and scanned to get ready for it. And now it’s less than a week away, hurling toward me like a giant wrecking ball.

I’ve told them all that I’m ready for it. I’ve told Liv I’m ready a dozen times. But the truth is, I’m not ready. I’m terrified. I don’t know if I’ll be the same after. No one can know that, not even Dr. Franklin. And it’s eating me up inside to think I could wake up from surgery and not even know who Liv is. Or that I might not be able to tell her how much I love her. Or that I might not be able to see her beautiful face. Maybe none of those things will happen, but even if everything goes smoothly, how long will it be before I can hold her again? Before I can kiss her again? Before I can make love to her again?

I’m scared as hell to go through with it, but I *am* going to go through with it. I’m going to have the surgery because it’s the only chance I have to give Liv a normal life—one with kids that I can actually help take care of. There’s no way I could be left alone with a baby the way I am now. I can just imagine it. I’m holding the baby and I have a seizure and drop it, or God forbid, crush it under the weight of my body. But Liv wants kids one day and so do I. That’s the future we always planned together. The future I thought I lost seven years ago. But Liv’s given it back to me, and now the surgery will give it back to her. *That* is why I’m going to go through with it.

“As soon as I decide, you’ll be the first to know,” I say to my overly-concerned mother.

“Well, either way it’s just so wonderful!” She takes my face between her hands again and kisses my cheek.

“I was also trying to tell you, before you got so excited, that seeing as how I want to marry her and all, I’m appointing Liv as my medical power of attorney. So if anything does happen, she will be the one to make the final decisions.”

My mom’s face falls.

“Momma, if we were married already, she would be the one to do it, so...”

“No, Gabe, I’m not upset. I just don’t even want to think about that. You shouldn’t either.”

“She’s right,” my dad says. “You take care of the legalities, because it’s the responsible thing to do, but don’t you think for one second that any of that’s gonna come into play. You’re strong, son. Hell, you’re a hell of a lot stronger than me. And you’ve been through a lot worse than this. This is gonna be a walk in the park.”

I smile at my dad’s reassuring words. “I’m gonna kick this surgery’s ass.”

“Hell yeah you are!” My dad swings his arm around my neck and we both laugh. “Now, sit down and eat.”

Chapter 22

Liv

My eyes open to the soft sunlight that fills our little apartment through the covered windows. It's early, but the songbirds that live in the trees on the property have been up for a while, chirping and singing in harmony.

I stare at the ceiling and watch the tiny dust motes floating gently through the air above me. Roxy circles the bed and lays her head on the mattress by my hand. She whines softly. She needs to go outside. "Okay," I say, rubbing her soft head. I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed, but my body feels heavy. I don't want to get up. I gaze at the alarm clock, which needlessly reminds me that today is August 15th, the anniversary of Brandon's death.

How can one day hold so much weight? It's just another date on the calendar...for most people. For me, it marks the beginning of the end of my innocence, in more ways than one. I gave myself to Gabe that night, ready to embark on the journey to adulthood. But I wasn't prepared for the cruel heartbreak that life had in store for us. I learned how to survive, but the unsuspecting girl with hopes and dreams of a picture-perfect life was lost forever.

Roxy nudges my hand.

"Okay, Rox, come on," I say, dragging my feet to the door. I let her out and open the shutters that cover the windows. The cloudless pink sky hints to a warm summer day to come. How can it be so beautiful out when I feel so sad? It feels out of balance.

I think of the rest of the world going about their day, unaware of my personal tragedy, and it makes me resent each and every one of them. I secretly hate the entire world for not feeling sad today. It doesn't seem fair. It's completely irrational and I know that there are probably tons of people who have their own reason for hating this day, or some other day on the calendar, but right now I feel like I'm the only one who feels like this.

I climb back into bed.

Not the *only* one.

I watch Gabe sleeping and touch his scruffy cheek.

Please keep him safe during his surgery tomorrow, I pray silently.

Gabe opens his eyes and gazes at me. "Hi."

“Hi.” I hear the sadness in my voice and it makes me feel worse. I wonder if I will always feel like this on the anniversary of Brandon’s death. I don’t want to feel sad about it anymore, but I can’t help it, I just do.

Gabe reaches for my hand and holds it in both of his. I feel comforted by him, but sharing this day with him makes it more real. The wave pool of sadness that’s sloshing around inside me makes its way up to my eyes. Gabe wipes a tear from my cheek and pulls me into his arms. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to. I know he’s thinking about Brandon too. He holds me and I cry quietly in his arms for a long time, until we both fall back asleep.

I wake to Roxy barking outside. Gabe gets up and lets her in, and by the looks of it, it’s the middle of the day now. I glance at the alarm clock.

11:30am.

Gabe climbs back into bed and pulls me into his arms again. I think he needs me today just as much as I need him.

“I love you, Gabe.”

“I love you too.”

“I hate this day.”

“I know, me too.”

“I still miss him...so much.”

“I do too, Liv.” His voice cracks.

I look up at him and my heart aches in a whole new way. I no longer focus on the pain I feel. Gabe lost a brother that day too and it kills me to see how much he’s hurting right now. I put my hand on his cheek. “I don’t want to feel this way anymore.” I pull his face to mine and kiss his soft lips. “Make me forget. Let’s both forget.”

He closes his eyes and kisses me firmly, and covers my body with his. He drops his head to my chest and inhales a deep breath, like I’m some sort of drug that will numb his pain. He wraps his hand behind my neck and pulls me up onto my knees so that we’re kneeling in the middle of the bed. He holds my face and gazes at me with piercing eyes. His jaw is clenched tight with emotion and his cheeks are flushed under the scruff that covers them.

He’s heartbreakingly beautiful.

The muscles in his jaw tighten as he closes his eyes and kisses me again. His tongue moves over mine, soothing my grieving heart, and tears

fall from the corners of my eyes when he speaks against my lips. “Je ne sais pas ce que je ferais sans toi.” *I don’t know what I would do without you.*

I wrap my arms around his back and pull him close to me. He pulls my shirt up and I lift my arms so that he can slip it off. He tosses it on the floor and I see Roxy go lay down in the kitchen. He lowers his head to my chest, breathing me in again as he lays me back against the pillows. He gazes down at me and I gaze up at him—this beautiful man I’ve loved since I was sixteen—and I say another silent prayer to keep him safe during the surgery tomorrow. “I love you, Gabriel.”

A new emotion flashes across his face, and I know that it’s not grief, it’s fear. He’s thinking about the surgery too. Neither of us say it, but somewhere deep down inside us lives the tiniest shred of possibility that this could be our last day together. I push the tainted thought out of my mind. “Everything is going to be okay,” I whisper.

The little line appears over the bridge of his nose as if on cue. I reach up and smooth it with my thumb. “It’s going to be okay,” I repeat.

He crawls over me, leaving hot, wet kisses in his wake that make my eyes close a little. Then he hooks his fingers in my panties and slowly slides them down my legs. He slips them past my feet, holds them to his nose, and inhales a deep breath.

“Are you smelling my panties?” I laugh.

“I never want to forget how you smell.”

I make a funny face, but I understand what he’s doing. He thinks he could forget after the surgery.

“You smell amazing,” he assures me. He drops his mouth to my ankle and kisses me slowly all the way up to my hip, stopping to breathe me in again. He kisses between my legs softly, just once, just long enough to make me moan and arch my back beneath him.

He drags his nose and lips across my stomach, alternating between deep breaths and soft kisses all the way up to my breasts, which get the added attention of his hands. I lie with my eyes closed, feeling his mouth on me, feeling him breathe me in, feeling his strong hands on my body.

He moves to my neck and trails kisses up to my ear. “I love you, Liv,” he whispers, and I can hear the fear in his voice now. He looks at me with desperation in his eyes, the little line permanently affixed over the bridge of his nose now. “No matter what happens tomorrow, always know that.”

I swallow hard and nod my head. “I know, Gabriel. I know you love me.”

“Promise me you’ll never forget. Promise me that you’ll always remember how much I love you right now, how much I have always loved you.”

“Gabe—”

“Just promise me, okay? Please,” he pleads.

“Okay. I promise.”

He nods his head and I watch the fear leave his eyes. But it lands right in the middle of my chest and I have to stifle the low buzz of panic that’s now coursing through me. I say another quick prayer. *Please, God, please let him be okay tomorrow.*

He kisses me passionately and I kiss him back, like it’s the last time I’m ever going to kiss him. I try to memorize the way his tongue feels against mine, the way he tastes, the way his full lips fit perfectly over mine. I wrap my hands behind his neck, taking note of the way his warm skin feels under my palms and the way his wavy hair falls slightly over my fingers. The left side of his head will be shaved for the surgery tomorrow, so I take a moment to appreciate his dark brown locks. I run my fingers through it, gripping it in my hands, and he moans, low and deep. “Je te veux.” *I want you.*

I nod, panting beneath him as he shrugs out of his sweatpants and kneels on the bed beside me. I want to trace every line of his body with my eyes, but he moves too quickly.

“Wait,” I say, and he pauses. “Don’t move.” I take in his exquisite male form, from his broad shoulders down to his strong thighs. I trace every line of the muscles in his chest and torso, lingering on his eight pack and the well-defined V that sits just below it.

He looks confused and a little concerned.

I smile up at him. “You’re just so beautiful.”

His cupid’s bow lips stretch into a wide smile over his straight white teeth and my heart skips a beat, fluttering inside my chest. He crawls over me and kisses me again, pushing my legs apart with his knees. He reaches between us and I feel his fingers glide between my legs. He moans into my mouth and I moan back to tell him that I’m ready, I’m *so* ready.

“Souviens combien Je t’aime...toujours.” *Remember how much I love you...always.*

“Toujours.” *Always.*

He sinks into me, filling me, satisfying me, and I don’t know which part of him to focus on first. I want to memorize every part of him this way. Every sensation that he sends through my body with his. The way that his strong arms cradle my shoulders when he holds himself above me. The way they feel flexing under my hands when I grip them. The weight of his body pressing against my hips. I close my eyes and savor the feeling of him moving in and out of me.

He paces his thrusts to a steady rhythm and laces his fingers with mine, pressing my hands into the pillows by my head while he makes slow, sweet love to me, alternating kisses on my lips with deep breaths against my neck.

I could make love to Gabe like this for hours, if our bodies would allow, which mine won’t. I can’t stop the orgasm I feel building.

“Not yet,” Gabe whispers, reading my body, which he knows as well as his own. He leans up and kneels beside me. Then he smiles and flips me over.

“Gabe,” I laugh into the pillow, which my face is now smushed into, and battle my hair out of my eyes.

He leans over my back, putting his mouth next to my ear, and says, “I want you every way I can have you today.”

I smile over my shoulder. “I’m all yours.”

He laughs and I feel the weight of the day leaving us.

Chapter 23

Liv

I glance over at Gabe in my passenger seat. He has to check in for surgery at 6am and the hospital is an hour away. Suffice it to say, it's early. It's still dark actually, but I can see the faint orange glow of the sun on the edge of the horizon with the promise of a new day—one that will mark the beginning of a seizure-free life for Gabe.

Nervous excitement floods me.

Gabe's parents are following us to the hospital and my mom and dad are going to meet us there. It's going to be a long day for all of us. The surgery itself should only take a few hours, but the pre-op and post-op procedures will take just as long. Once they take Gabe back, we won't see him again until the afternoon.

I've been trying to prepare myself for when I see him after the surgery. His head will be partially shaved and bandaged, but he won't have the bruising and swelling like last time. Most of that was incurred during the accident. I expect he'll be groggy and he'll probably have a massive headache. I just want to be there to comfort him as much as possible.

I made him a get-well bag that he doesn't know about. It's loaded with his favorite candy—Peanut Butter M&M's, Jolly Ranchers, and Skittles—his favorite movies—*Ocean's Eleven*, *The Dark Knight*, *Creed II*, *The Hangover* trilogy—a *Men's Health* magazine, a photo book of all our old pictures, and lastly, a framed picture of Roxy. He's going to have a lot of down time to fill over the next week. I figure that should get him through the first couple of days.

I reach over and rest my hand on the back of his neck, and run my fingers through his hair. "How do you feel?"

"Hungry"—he glances over at me—"and under-caffeinated."

"Poor baby." He wasn't allowed to eat or drink anything after midnight. He's running on empty this morning. "Sorry," I say, turning my head toward my window to sip my travel mug of coffee.

He narrows his eyes at me.

"Well, one of us has to stay alert. You're about to take a three-hour nap."

“I’m already looking forward to my first real meal. I probably won’t even get any of the hospital food until tomorrow.”

I rub the back of his head. “What do you want for your first meal? I’ll make it.”

He gives me a sideways glance and grins. “Pasta. With homemade marinara sauce. And chocolate cake.”

“Is that all?”

“That should do.” He winks at me.

“Okay.”

We pull into the parking garage at the hospital and the soft glow of the rising sun that accompanied the last ten minutes of our drive is replaced by bright florescent lights and signs that say *In-Patient Check-In*.

I’m suddenly filled with anxiety and just want to get the day over with.

Jackie and Danny greet us when we get out of the car and we all make our way inside the hospital together. My stomach is in knots, but I do my best to hide it.

“Dad, don’t forget to check on Roxy later, okay?” Gabe says to Danny.

“I won’t. I’ll head back to the house as soon as you’re out of surgery.”

“Let her get out and run for a while. She’s not used to being inside all day.”

“I will. Don’t worry about Roxy. I’ll take care of her.”

“I’ll go see her too,” I say. “Later, maybe tonight.”

Leaving her this morning was hard for Gabe. She knew something big was happening today. She was whining before we even got out of bed and then she wouldn’t leave Gabe’s side.

We go to the check-in counter and although it’s not even 6am yet, the hospital is alive with bright lights and moving bodies dressed in blue scrubs. Some of them are passing through swinging doors, some are waiting by the elevators, others are climbing the stairs. The one behind the counter looks up and greets us with a big smile. Her red hair is pulled back into a tight bun and her blue eyes match the color of her scrubs. The name on her badge says *Rachael*.

“Checking in?” she asks, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

Rachael is much too chipper for 6am.

Gabe lowers his head and speaks at a volume that’s appropriate for this hour of the morning. “Yes. Gabriel North. I have surgery scheduled with Dr. Franklin this morning.”

I count to five before she breaks eye contact with him and looks down at her computer. “Um. Okay...let’s see.” She glances up at him again and then drops her eyes back to her screen and smiles. “Gabriel North. Temporal Lobectomy with Dr. Franklin and Dr. Connelly at 8am.” Her smile fades. She glances up at him again with a perplexed look on her face, as if she’s wondering why the strapping man standing before her is checking in for brain surgery. I can almost hear her working out his backstory in her head. I’m not sure what she’s coming up with, but it must be a real tear-jerker, because a gloomy cloud has just settled over her sunny demeanor. “You’re right on time,” she says softly, and hands him a clipboard with several pieces of paper attached to it.

I’d like to tell her that it’s not that serious, but it *is* serious. What he’s been through is serious. What he’s still fighting through is serious. Whatever dramatic story she has come up with in her head couldn’t possibly compare to what he’s been through in real life. What we’ve both been through.

Gabe doesn’t seem to notice. Nor did he notice when she was drooling over him five minutes ago. He never notices the way women respond to him. I, on the other hand, can’t escape it. I’ve seen women trip over their own feet staring at him when he passed by them. One woman slid off her barstool the night we went to Charlie’s. He was walking in and she nearly broke her neck watching him make his way through the crowd.

Oh, wait, that was me.

I laugh quietly to myself at my joke. I need to laugh today.

Another female nurse walks by and her eyes land on Gabe when she passes us. I watch her to see how long she’ll stare at him. She doesn’t see the man standing in front of her until she bumps into him. She looks embarrassed when she apologizes to him.

“Oh, um, nurse?” Gabe says to Rachael, handing the clipboard back to her. She looks disappointed that he didn’t notice her name. “I already have all of the legal paperwork completed.” He pulls a manila envelope out of the bag he brought for his stay.

“Oh.” She takes it from him and thumbs through the documents, mumbling the titles of each one. I’m only half listening, but I hear her say *medical power of attorney* and my heart involuntarily sinks to my stomach. The only reason for a medical power of attorney is to allow someone else to

make decisions about his condition if he can't. If he were unconscious, or worse.

I force the thought from my mind. I know the hospital requires the document, but knowing why it exists still pangs me. I don't envy Jackie and Danny. I wouldn't be able to make those decisions for someone I love, especially not Gabe.

"Okay, you're all set," Rachael says. "Michael here will take you up to your room." She gestures to a very tall, very thin man who has appeared with a wheelchair.

Michael looks like he needs a hamburger and a hug.

"Oh, no that's not necessary. I can walk," Gabe says politely.

"It's policy. You have to go in the wheelchair," she says apologetically.

Gabe huffs and closes his eyes, and I stifle a giggle. This guy won't be able to push Gabe two feet in that wheelchair.

Danny steps beside Gabe. "Mind if I take him up? I'm his father." He gives Rachael a big sunny grin and pats Gabe firmly on the back. "He takes after his old man," he says, referring to Gabe's size.

She glances between the two of them, her eyes lingering on Gabe a beat too long, and says, "Yes, I, um, see the resemblance." She smiles. "I suppose that would be okay."

Gabe gives Danny an approving look, and sits down in the wheelchair.

"Okay, follow me," Michael says, and Danny steers Gabe toward the elevators.

I walk beside him and give him a little wink.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

"Stubborn as an ox," Jackie whispers in my ear as we walk.

I laugh quietly and nod.

When we get to Gabe's room, I'm surprised that it's so big. There's enough room for everyone to sit down comfortably. "Is this where Gabe will be after the surgery?" I ask a nurse who is checking a device beside the bed.

"Not necessarily this room, but once we move him out of intensive care, yes, it will be a room similar to this." She smiles at me, and I smile at Gabe.

"It's a nice room."

"It's a hospital room. There's nothing nice about it," he says, reminding me how much time he spent in the hospital after the accident.

I shrug. “At least there’s room for me. I can sleep on the sofa.” Opposed to last time when I slept in a chair pushed up next to his bed for weeks.

He smiles and nods. “Good point. I guess that does make it a pretty good room.” He bends down and presses his lips to my forehead.

“Okay, Gabe, you’ll need to change into this gown. Ties go in the back.”

He takes the gown from the nurse and eyes it warily.

“Dr. Franklin and Dr. Connelly are both already here, so we may be able to get an early start. I’ll be back to get your IV started in just a few minutes, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

My heart takes another diving leap into my stomach. I’ve lost count of how many times that’s happened today. Each time it does, I remind myself that people have surgery every single day.

He’s going to be fine.

The nurse turns to Jackie and Danny and says, “Mom and Dad, want to wait outside?”

Jackie answers, “Okay, we’ll be right outside in the hall.” She squeezes Gabe’s hand when she passes him on the way out. I know today can’t be easy for Jackie and Danny either. As much as we all want him to have this surgery, as much as we know that it’s going to change his life for the better, it’s distressing to know that he’s about to be put to sleep and have part of his skull removed. I push that thought aside too. *No more negative thoughts*, I tell myself, but I know it won’t be long before another one is creeping back into my head.

It’s going to be a long day.

I decide to hold all my thoughts and inevitable worry until I’m in the waiting room. Right now, I need to be in the moment with Gabe, until the last possible second when they wheel him away.

The nurse looks at me and says, “Wife?”

“No.” Gabe answers before I can respond. “She’s my—my girlfriend,” he says, hesitating over his answer. He looks frustrated. Which is now confirmed by the crease over the bridge of his nose.

I smile up at him reassuringly, wondering what is suddenly bothering him.

She nods her head approvingly. “Okay, go ahead and get changed. I’ll be back.”

Gabe ignores her as she leaves the room. His eyes haven't left mine since the word *girlfriend* stuttered out of his mouth.

"You okay?" I ask him.

"No, I'm not okay."

Oh, no. He changed his mind. He doesn't want to go through with the surgery. *Oh, God,* I feel relieved.

No, I feel disappointed.

I feel relieved.

I feel...*conflicted*. I want him to have the surgery, but I also want to take his hand and run as far away from this place as possible.

No. He *has* to do this. He's done everything to prepare for it. He's the perfect candidate. It's going to be a piece of cake. Okay, it's going to suck. But it's one sucky day that will give him back the rest of his life. All right, one sucky week, maybe a month. But he has to do this.

"Gabe—"

"Marry me, Liv."

"What?"

"Right now." His words come out in a desperate rush and my heart takes off in a wild sprint. He grabs my hands and holds them between us, pulling me close to him. His soft honey brown eyes consume me. "Marry me," he says again, the urgency gone from his voice now, and tears fill my eyes. He is the *only* one I have ever wanted to hear utter those words.

I wrap my fingers around his hand and sit down on the bed, pulling him down next to me. I hold his hand in my lap and look into his pleading eyes. "I love you, Gabriel, so much. And yes," I say, smiling, "I *will* marry you."

His eyes fill with tears that match mine.

"But not here, not like this."

"Liv, what if something goes wrong?" The desperation returns to his voice. "What if I can't remember anything when I wake up? What if I *don't* wake up?"

An unexpected calm settles over me. "You *are* going to wake up...and you *are* going to remember...and we *will* get married." I smile and hold my hand to his face, and gaze into his worried eyes. "Gabe, I've dreamt about our wedding since I was a little girl. I still do. I want to wear a beautiful white dress for you and say our vows under our oak tree behind the barn."

He lowers his chin and smiles softly. "Is that what you want? You want to get married under that old oak tree?"

I smile wide and nod my head. "Yes. More than anything."

He holds my face in his hands and drops his forehead to mine. "Okay." He laughs softly and presses his mouth to mine.

When the nurse returns, we're both laughing and sniffing. "Sorry to interrupt," she says, politely. When she sees that Gabe is still fully dressed, she puts a fist on her hip and shakes her finger at him. "Didn't I tell you to get changed, young man? And you're the girlfriend," she says to me, "you're supposed to be able to get his clothes off." She grins.

Gabe leans in and whispers, "Fiancée," just loud enough for me to hear, and I beam up at him. Hearing him call me his fiancée makes my heart quadruple in size.

"I'll get changed right now," Gabe says to her.

"Okay, I'll give you a few more minutes."

"What was your name?" I ask, before she leaves the room.

"Nina," she says, rounding the corner.

"Thank you, Nina. I'll be sure to take his clothes off now."

"Very funny," she calls back, closing the door behind her.

"I like Nina."

"Ready to see me all gowned up?" Gabe asks, pulling his shirt off over his head. "It is one sexy getup."

"If the nurses catch wind of what's under that gown, you'll be the most popular patient in the hospital."

He throws his boxer-briefs at me.

"Thank you. I'll hang onto these for safe keeping."

"Tie me up?" he asks, turning around so that his back is to me.

"Thought you'd never ask," I tease, reaching for the loose ties.

He shakes his head and laughs.

Before I get to the lower tie, I pull the gown apart and peek at his bare bottom. I linger a second too long.

"Are you done looking at my ass now?"

I laugh and cover him up. "Yep." I spin him around and wrap my arms around his waist. "That is one mighty fine ass."

He grins. "I think you're actually turned on by this?"

"So what if I am?"

Nina walks back into the room.

"Nina, where can I get a few of these gowns to take home?" Gabe smirks.

I smack his stomach softly. “Cut it out,” I say with wide eyes, and he laughs.

“You can keep that one. Now get your handsome butt in the bed so I can start your IV.”

“What did I tell you? You’re the talk of the hospital.” I wink at him.

He rolls his eyes and sits down on the bed, then scoots back against the pillows. My heart takes another little dip into the pool of angst that has filled my stomach this morning. I can’t help but recall the first time I saw Gabe lying in his hospital bed after the accident. He was almost unrecognizable.

“All right, Gabe, I’m going to start your IV now,” Nina says, preparing the syringe. She carefully inserts the needle into his skin and although he doesn’t flinch, the crease appears over his nose, and I know it hurts.

I rub his other arm, which is stretched out to hold my hand. “Je suis désolé, bébé.” *I’m sorry, baby.* I speak in French because I know that Gabe wouldn’t want Nina to hear me fussing over him.

“Il ne fait pas de mal.” *It doesn’t hurt.*

Nina glances up, then politely returns to her task.

“Je souhaite que je pourrais avoir la chirurgie pour tu.” *I wish I could have the surgery for you.*

“Je ne voudrais pas vous laisser.” *I wouldn’t let you.* “Mon cœur ne pouvait pas prendre ce.” *My heart couldn’t take that.*

I widen my eyes at him. “Ce qui vous fait penser mine peut?” *What makes you think mine can?*

He inhales a deep breath and squeezes my hand, but he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to. His tortured eyes say it all. He lifts my hand to his mouth and softly kisses my knuckles.

“All right, you’re all set,” Nina says, giving Gabe his arm back, and with that, our private conversation comes to an end.

“Is it okay if we come back in now?” Jackie calls from the doorway.

“Yes, you can come in,” Nina says. “I’m just going to go let Dr. Franklin know that Gabe is ready now.”

My heart plummets to my feet. *He’s ready? Now?* But I’m not ready. *I’m not ready!* I’m just about to say this when Jackie and Danny walk back into the room, but I’m silenced by the look on Jackie’s face. She’s scared for Gabe.

And now I’m terrified.

She sits on the bed beside Gabe, wraps her arms around his neck, and speaks quietly to him in French. I stand up to give them privacy, but Gabe tightens his grip on my hand and pulls me close to him again.

"I'll see you after," Gabe says to her.

She kisses his cheek and reaches for Danny's hand. Danny takes it, and then leans in and kisses Gabe firmly on the forehead. "I love you, son." His voice is huskier than normal. "We'll see you real soon."

"I love you too, Dad."

Danny wraps his arm around Jackie's shoulders. "Liv, we'll be in the waiting room."

"Mm-hmm." It's all I can muster. I'm afraid that if I speak, the dam will break.

Danny guides Jackie out of the room and Gabe and I are alone again. There's so much I want to say before they take him back, but there isn't enough time to get it all out. Gabe pulls me down onto the bed beside him and wraps his arms around me.

"I love you," I whisper. Of all the thoughts flooding my head right now, that's all I can say.

He reaches for my face and kisses me softly. Then he takes my hand and asks, "Do you have a pen?"

"A pen?" I barely get out.

He nods.

"Um, hold on." I get up and look in my purse. I find one and return to the bed with it, along with a yellow sticky note.

He crumples the small square of paper and tosses it aside.

I look up at him confused, but he turns my hand over and opens my palm. And then he begins to write on it. I watch curiously as he drags the pen across my skin, the moment consuming me as I read what he's writing.

*I will love you
the same tomorrow
as I do today.*

He holds my hand and blows softly on my skin to dry the ink as I read the words that he wrote to me on my eighteenth birthday. "Gabriel."

"Hello, Gabe! How are we doing this morning?" Dr. Franklin asks enthusiastically as he enters the room.

I stand up beside the bed and try to pull myself together, but a stray tear runs down my cheek. I'm careful not to wipe it with the hand that Gabe

wrote on.

Dr. Franklin must notice, because his demeanor quickly softens. “Liv, Gabe is in great hands today.”

“I know,” I say, forcing a small smile.

“It’s time to take you back,” he says to Gabe, and several new nurses file into the room.

Why are there so many? Did Nina spread the word about the hot neuro patient in room 408?

Gabe reaches for my hand once more, ignoring the nurses who are checking his IV and preparing his bed to be mobilized.

“Excuse me,” one of them says to me.

I move out of the way, breaking contact with Gabe, but his eyes stay on mine, so I ignore the next nurse who bumps into me. “It’s time,” one of them says.

I kiss Gabe’s forehead and force myself to step away from the bed, but he holds my hand and pulls me with him as they wheel him out of the room.

I follow beside his bed until one of the nurses tells me I can’t go any further, and I force my feet to stop moving. I feel Gabe’s fingers slip out of mine as they move him away from me and my heart aches to the point of physical pain as I watch him go.

“Liv,” he calls, and I run to his bedside again, ignoring the nurses who are telling me—more firmly now—that I can’t go any further. He pulls my face to his and kisses me, and I feel the bed stop moving for a moment. He holds my face above his and smiles a big beautiful smile that makes me forget everything else, and for the first time today, I feel like everything is going to be okay. I squeeze his hand, but his fingers slip from mine too soon as they continue pushing him down the hallway.

“Walk with me,” Nina says, showing up just in the nick of time, because when I watch them take Gabe through the double doors at the end of the hallway the panic sets back in.

The rational part of my brain tells me that everything will be fine, that he will be fine, that I will be fine. But the irrational part of my brain tells me I might never see *my* Gabe again. The rational part of my brain also tells me that this is how everyone feels when their loved one is undergoing major surgery, especially major *brain* surgery, and that I’m not a crazy person for feeling this way.

As Nina guides me down the hallway toward the waiting room, she takes one of my hands and holds it between both of hers. “I haven’t seen that kind of love in a long time,” she says, catching me by surprise, and forcing the dam to break wide open. My feet stop moving and I drop my head and cry—quite literally—on her shoulder as she pulls me in for a hug.

“They’ll take care of him, right? He’ll be okay?” I ask, looking at her for affirmation.

“He’s going to be fine, darlin’.” She pats the back of my hand and starts to walk again. “I know you don’t remember, but I was one of the nurses who took care of you after the accident.”

She was?

“When Dr. Franklin told me who you were today, I remembered you immediately.” She squeezes my hand. “I took care of both of you.”

My heart swells knowing that she was there for us after the accident, and I feel an instant connection to her.

“It was a bad time, I know, but seeing the two of you today...” She smiles softly. “Well, it makes all the bad days seem a little more worth it. Makes me grateful for what I get to do.” She smiles again. “I get to see miracles happen. And what you and Gabe have isn’t anything short of a miracle. Gabe is lucky to be alive. But I’m guessing you already know that. The doctors and nurses taking care of him today know it too. So don’t think for a single second that we won’t do absolutely everything possible to make sure he pulls through this surgery with flying colors.”

I smile and wipe my tears. “Thank you, Nina.”

“Je t’en prie,” she says, giving me a wink.

“What?” Nina just said *you’re welcome* in French.

She gives me a shy smile and admits, “I spent a few summers in France with my favorite aunt when I was a girl.”

“Serves us right. We shouldn’t assume we’re the only two people in a room who speak French.”

“Don’t worry, I would have stopped you if you started talking dirty.” She laughs and elbows me playfully.

By the time we make it to the waiting room, we’re both laughing, and I feel *okay*. I’m ready to start counting down the hours and minutes until I can see Gabe again.

Chapter 24

Liv

Four hours have passed since they took Gabe back for surgery. Since I felt the warmth of his hand, since I heard his deep voice call my name, since I kissed his cupid's bow lips. And every second that passes now, feels like an eternity.

I keep looking at the door, waiting for Dr. Franklin, or somebody, *anybody*, to come in and tell us that the surgery is over and that it went well.

Four hours.

I check the time on my phone for the hundredth time.

Four hours and five minutes.

They probably spent the first hour prepping him, and it will most likely be another hour of post-op once the three hour surgery is over, so I'm trying not to let the worry get to me just yet.

I send Trisha a text to let her know we're still waiting. I've been keeping her in the loop all day. Audrey too.

Audrey was so sweet to bring us lunch from the diner, and then she sat with me for an hour until she had to go back. She left me with a stack of magazines to help keep me occupied, but I've already thumbed through them all.

I glance across the waiting room at my mom and dad. My mom smiles reassuringly and my dad gives me a thumbs up. They arrived shortly after Gabe was taken back. They look tired. So do Jackie and Danny. I'm guessing that means I probably do too. How can four hours of doing absolutely nothing be so exhausting?

Maybe it's the four hours of angst, anxiety, and fear we've been masking behind forced smiles and light conversation that has exhausted us all.

I sigh and close my eyes, and pray—something I've done a hundred times today.

Please let Gabe be okay. Let Dr. Franklin be standing behind that door, ready to tell us that Gabe is fine.

To my utter shock, Dr. Franklin pushes through the door.

I jump to my feet and so does everyone else, but none of us say anything.

“The surgery went great,” Dr. Franklin says with a satisfied smile.

My breath rushes out with a huge sigh of relief. *Thank God.*

I don’t know if I’m doing it on purpose or not, but I’ve managed to tune out everyone else in the room besides Dr. Franklin. I think someone is hugging me, but all I can do is focus on him and ask, “Really? He’s really okay?”

He crosses his arms over his chest and gives me a confident smile. “He’s great, Liv. He’s not awake yet, but his vitals look good, his brain activity is good. Everything looks good.”

“Thank you,” I say with more gratitude than I have ever felt before.

I turn to Jackie and Danny and my mom and my dad, taking turns hugging each of them. When we’ve finished rejoicing in Gabe’s successful surgery, I ask, “When can we see him? How long until he wakes up?”

“Not long. Maybe another hour.”

My heart flutters and I smile with nervous excitement. I can’t wait to see him. In fact, it’s taking everything in me not to burst through the door and run down the hall to find him. But I know that when he wakes up, we’ll have another obstacle to overcome.

“Do you think he’ll be the same? Will he remember?” I ask, knowing good and well that Dr. Franklin can’t possibly know. But I have to ask. I have to try to prepare myself somehow.

“There’s no reason to believe Gabe will have any negative side effects from the surgery. We were able to make a nice clean cut to remove the scar tissue. We won’t know for sure until he wakes up, but I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

“Okay. Will someone come and get us as soon as he’s awake?”

“Of course. Just sit tight for a little longer, okay?”

* * *

Six hours have passed since they took Gabe back. Almost two have passed since Dr. Franklin came to tell us he was out of surgery.

“Something’s wrong,” I say, pacing around the room.

“Now, come on, Liv, don’t start doing that,” my dad says, watching me.

“Gabe should be awake by now. Why haven’t they come back to get us yet?”

“Calm down, bébé,” Jackie says, touching my arm.

“No, I’m not going to calm down. I’m going to find out what’s going on.”

I go to the nurse’s station for the third time in the last hour, asking for information. Begging. “Please. Just tell me if something’s wrong.”

“I’m sure nothing is wrong,” the nurse says calmly, “but I’ll page Dr. Franklin again. Someone should be out to get you soon, if you’ll just return to the waiting area.”

I close my eyes and spin around, and reluctantly walk back to the waiting room. When I get there, I see Dr. Franklin standing by the door on the opposite side of the room where he stood before, flanked by my mom and dad, and Jackie and Danny. I close my eyes with a sigh of relief, but when I open them again, I notice that their faces aren’t right. Jackie’s hand is covering her mouth and she has tears in her eyes. Danny’s hand is on her shoulder and his face is pulled tight. He has the same little crease over his nose that Gabe gets whenever he’s upset.

I gaze at them.

The expressions on my parents’ faces are almost a mirror reflection of Jackie’s and Danny’s. They’re upset.

Dr. Franklin looks at me. “Liv,” he says, but I don’t move. I don’t think I can. “Liv,” he says again, but I just stare at him.

The next thing I know, someone is shaking my shoulders and calling my name. “Liv.”

My eyes flash up to my dad. “No”—I shake my head and pull my arms away from my dad—“No!”

Dr. Franklin puts his hand on my shoulder. “Liv—”

“You said he would be fine! You said everything went perfectly.” Tears fall down my cheeks.

“It did,” he says calmly, “the surgery went seamlessly and Gabe’s vitals are still good.”

“What?” I say, bewildered. “Then why—”

“He hasn’t woken up yet and we don’t know why.”

“He...he hasn’t woken up?”

Dr. Franklin shakes his head, and I see Jackie crying in my peripheral vision.

“But he’s okay?” I ask hopefully.

“It’s not that simple. Gabe should have woken up by now.”

“Well, maybe it’s just taking longer than normal, maybe he’s just—”

“He should have woken up by now,” Dr. Franklin repeats, and the gravity of his tone nearly takes me to my knees.

The tears well in my eyes again. “Then why hasn’t he?”

“We don’t know. We’ve gone over everything again and again. Nothing could have gone any better with the surgery. He sailed through it with flying colors.”

“I don’t understand.” I close my eyes and try to see past the frustration and fear clouding my head.

“We think that he might have had a stroke.”

My stomach flips and twists into a sickening knot.

“That could explain why he hasn’t woken up. We’ll need to run some more tests to be sure, but...”

I’m on my knees.

On the ground.

Wrapped in my mother’s arms, crying against her shoulder.

* * *

Twelve hours have passed since they took Gabe back for surgery. Twelve hours have passed since I felt the warmth of his hand. Twelve hours have passed since I heard his deep voice call my name. And every second that passes now is agony. Not knowing why he won’t wake up, not knowing if he *will* wake up.

“You can come in now,” a nurse says, stepping out into the hallway of the ICU. We’ve been lined up outside Gabe’s room, waiting to go in for the last ten minutes.

“Go ahead, bébé,” Jackie says, giving my hand a squeeze. “We’ll give you a minute with him first.”

I close my eyes and try to mentally prepare myself to see him. I have no idea what he’s going to look like. And I have no idea what my reaction will be to seeing him unconscious.

I inhale a tentative breath and follow the nurse into the room.

My Gabriel. Lying in the bed, sleeping peacefully beneath the blanket draped over him.

He’s perfect.

His head is bandaged and I can see where it’s been shaved, but his face isn’t swollen and there’s no bruising that I can see.

“There’s no breathing tube,” I say to the nurse. “I thought he would be on a ventilator.”

“No, he’s breathing just fine on his own,” she says.

I sit on the bed beside him and lean over him.

“Careful of the monitors,” the nurse says.

“Okay.” There are several wires attached to him and his IV is still connected.

I stare at his beautiful face, lost in sleep. “Gabriel, it’s time to wake up. Wake up, baby.” I take his hand that doesn’t have tubes or wires attached to it and hold it in both of mine, savoring every ounce of warmth I can draw from it. I hold it to my cheek and cry. “Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.” But he doesn’t move.

I kiss his mouth and whisper in his ear, “Come back to me, Gabriel, come back to me.” I sit up and wipe my eyes, and notice that the ink on my left hand is smeared.

No! How could I be so careless? I’ve wiped away so many tears, his words are almost gone.

I grab my phone and hold my hand up in front of the screen, and take a picture of the smudged words Gabe wrote. I squeeze my fist closed around them and lie across his chest. It’s warm beneath my cheek and slowly rises and falls with each quiet breath.

I close my eyes and listen to his steady heartbeat. “Wake up, Gabriel,” I whisper, “please.”

I hear the shuffling of footsteps entering the room, but I don’t move. If I lie here like this, with his warm skin under my cheek and his heartbeat against my ear, I can pretend that he’s here.

* * *

“She hasn’t moved,” my mother says.

“The skin to skin contact is good for him,” Dr. Franklin says to her. “Any stimuli that might bring him back to consciousness is good.”

I can still feel Gabe under me. I must have fallen asleep on him. I don’t open my eyes, but I can tell they’re swollen. They burn behind my closed eyelids and Gabe’s chest is damp under my cheek from where I was crying.

“How long should we let her stay like that?”

“She’s had a long day. You all have. Let her sleep. You should get some rest too.”

My right arm is asleep, so I’m guessing I’ve been lying like this for a while. It must be late.

“When will we get the test results from the CAT scan?” Jackie asks.

“I actually expected them back by now. Let me go check on it and I’ll be back in a few minutes. But then I want you all to get some rest.”

“Come on, Maggie,” my dad says, “let’s go home and get some sleep.”

“I can’t leave her here like this.”

“Momma, it’s okay,” I mumble against Gabe’s chest.

She’s at my side instantly.

I lift my head and realize they all are. My mom, my dad, Jackie, and Danny. They’re all hovered over me, hovered over Gabe.

“Liv, honey—”

“You can leave. I’m okay.” It’s a lie. I’m not okay. How could I be okay? *How will I ever be okay?* I sit up and shake my sleeping arm, and it pops and zaps all the way down to my fingertips. I look at Gabe. He still looks the same. *My Gabriel. My sleeping Gabriel.*

“Liv, come home with us. You’ll feel so much better tomorrow if you sleep in a real bed.” The look in her eyes tells me she knows I’m not going to leave Gabe.

“I won’t feel better until he wakes up. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’ll stay with her,” Jackie says. “If that’s okay with you, Liv. We can take turns staying up with him.” She smiles a gentle, sad smile. “You can sleep on the couch and I’ll take the chair. Then we can switch.”

I nod. Jackie understands. She knows I won’t leave him. She knows I *can’t* leave him. She can’t leave him either.

“Okay.”

“Danny, you have to go check on Roxy.”

Roxy! *Oh my God*, poor Roxy. I completely forgot about her. *How could I forget about her?* She’s probably so confused, wondering why no one’s come home yet. *What if Gabe doesn’t wake up? What if he never comes home to her?*

I shake off the thought. That is *not* going to happen. *It’s not going to happen.*

I wipe fresh tears that leak onto my cheek. “Please, Danny, you have to stay with her tonight.”

Danny nods his head reluctantly. I know that he doesn't want to leave Gabe, but the look on my face is enough to get him to go. "All right," he says. "I'll go. But I'll be back first thing in the morning. Call me if anything changes."

"What time is it?" I ask anyone who will answer.

"2:45...am," my dad says. "It's late, baby. I'll see if the nurse can bring you a pillow."

"My stuff is in the car. I didn't want to bring it up until Gabe was out of surgery." My heart throbs, but I keep talking over it. "Would you mind bringing it up with you in the morning?"

"Of course, baby. We'll get it for you."

"We'll bring you both breakfast in the morning," my mom says.

Jackie wraps her hand around my mom's. "I don't know what we would do without you and Duke."

"Call us if anything changes. Anything at all."

"I will."

Dr. Franklin walks back into the room just as the three of them are about to leave. He has a puzzled look on his face. "Gabe hasn't had a stroke," he says, shaking his head.

Oh, thank God.

"We'll continue to run more tests, but nothing abnormal showed on the CAT scan."

A strange mix of relief and worry surges through me, adding to my exhaustion.

He shakes his head and rubs his hand over the white-and-gray stubble that now covers his cheeks and chin. He's been up all day too. "We're not going to get any answers tonight, so I want you all to get some rest now."

We all nod with silent understanding.

Dr. Franklin leaves the room and my parents and Danny follow.

Jackie dims the lights and gestures to the couch. "Go on, bébé. Get some sleep. I'll stay up with him. I'll wake you if anything happens."

I press my lips to the back of his hand, giving it a firm squeeze, then I lay it gently on his stomach and stand for the first time in hours. My head spins and Jackie catches my arm as I stumble.

"Careful."

I inhale a deep breath and blink until the white spots leave my vision, then I force my heavy legs to carry me to the small couch across the room. I

lie down and close my eyes and after a few seconds, or minutes, or maybe hours, I fall asleep.

Chapter 25

Liv

Three days have passed since they took Gabe back for surgery.

Three days since I've heard his voice, since I looked into his familiar eyes.

"Wake up, baby...please, wake up," I whisper in his ear. I sit up and look at him, unmoving and still. I reach for his face and rub my thumb over his scruffy cheek. "I know you're in there. Just open your eyes. Open your eyes, Gabe." I stare at him, feeling helpless. I stare at the wall above his bed, feeling helpless. I look around the empty room, feeling helpless.

I *am* completely helpless.

My parents left for the night and Danny convinced Jackie to go home and sleep in her own bed. I couldn't be convinced. I won't leave this room until Gabe wakes up. And even then, I won't leave this hospital until he does. I have my clothes, my pillow, my toiletries. There's a bathroom with a shower and a couch for me to sleep on, when I'm not lying in the bed beside him. There's absolutely nothing that I need that isn't in this room.

Except for Roxy. I miss her.

The doctors still don't know why Gabe hasn't woken up. One theory is that he *did* suffer a stroke, but they can't see it on the CAT scan. Another theory is that this is just his body's way of healing from the surgery.

I'm going with the latter.

"I have a surprise for you," I say to him, reaching into his get-well bag. One of the nurses told me that coma patients can sometimes still hear what's going on around them. I don't know if that's true or not, but I pull the photo book out and lay it across his chest. I know he can't see the pictures, but maybe if he hears me talking about them, he'll open his eyes.

I flip to the first page and point to a picture of me, him, and Brandon from when we were ten. Brandon's arm is in a cast. "You remember this, Gabe? When you tackled Brandon in the backyard playing football and broke his arm?" I smile and shake my head. "Brandon was so mad because he couldn't play pee-wee football that fall." I drag my hand to the opposite page and point to one of just me and Gabe around the same age. It's one of my favorites. Gabe had probably just done something ridiculous, like use Cheetos to make a walrus face—one of his many childhood talents—

because he's smiling smugly at me and I'm laughing with my eyes closed tight and my head thrown back.

"I thought you were the funniest boy I'd ever met," I say softly. "I was so jealous that Brandon got to spend so much time with you."

I flip a few pages and point to a picture from when we were sixteen. All three of us made this one. "This was spring formal. This was the night you asked me to be your girlfriend. Remember?" Gabe and Brandon are both wearing black suits and I'm wearing a blue dress, standing between them on my parents' sidewalk. "God, I was so in love with you. At sixteen, before you ever kissed me or even held my hand, I already loved you." I lean over and kiss his forehead. "Where are you?" I whisper.

"It's good to keep talking to him," Nina says from the doorway.

I look up and give a half-hearted smile.

Dr. Franklin follows her in. "How ya doin', Liv?"

I shrug. "Okay."

"Liv, we need to talk to you about something." His tone is serious and I immediately tense upon hearing it. I'm so raw right now, the slightest shift in the atmosphere of the room feels like sandpaper rubbing against my skin.

"What is it?"

"We need to talk about a plan. For Gabe."

My glazed eyes stay locked on him, but his words aren't computing.

"We still have very high hopes that Gabe could wake up soon. On his own. But—"

"He *is* going to wake up soon."

He nods subtly. "Liv, you need to be prepared."

"It's only been three days. He was in a coma for three days after the accident—"

"An induced coma. He was in a medically induced coma after the accident. We woke him up after three days."

I know this. I mean, I know what he's saying, but...

"This is different. There's no way to know when or if he'll wake up...or what he'll be like when he does."

"No." I screw up my face and shake my head. "No! What are you saying?"

"It's okay," Nina says.

"No, it's not okay." I spring to my feet and stand in front of Dr. Franklin. "You said he would be fine. You told him he was the perfect

candidate. You told *me*! You said this surgery would be a piece of cake. You said he would be FINE!" I yell, surprising myself.

I glance down at Gabe, hoping that maybe it jolted him awake. It didn't.

"I'm so sorry, Liv. I did tell you those things. I told *him* those things. Because I believed them." He pulls his hand to his forehead. "Look, I'm not saying we should give up hope. We shouldn't. *You* shouldn't. His vitals are still good. He's still breathing on his own. Hell, his brain activity is still good." I can see the frustration on his face. "There's no reason that he shouldn't be awake right now!"

Nina stands in front of me and places her hands on my shoulders. "We just want you to start thinking about the next steps for Gabe. We need to have a plan in place if he doesn't—if this becomes long term."

I know what they're asking me. I close my eyes and drop my chin. "Why are you asking me? We need to talk to Jackie and Danny."

"It's your decision. Not theirs," Dr. Franklin says, his voice even now.

My eyes flash up to his and without any further explanation, I understand. "He made *me* his medical power of attorney?"

"Yes."

"No," I whisper. "Change it. Pick someone else. I can't do it. I can't decide for him. I won't!"

"You have to, sweetheart. It can't be changed." Nina takes my hand and pulls me over to the couch. "He chose you because he trusts you with his life. Do you know what a privilege that is?"

Tears rush to my eyes and fall down my cheeks.

"You don't have to make any decisions today. But when you do, *if* you do, remember that it's because he trusted you to." She pats the back of my hand.

"He's going to wake up, Nina."

She nods her head and smiles softly. "There's not a doubt in my mind, darlin'."

* * *

My eyes slowly open to the soft gray light that fills Gabe's hospital room. It must be morning. I turn my head and see Jackie sitting in the chair beside Gabe's bed. Her head is laying on his arm, her hand is wrapped around his, and she's singing to him in French.

“What time is it?” I ask her.

“Early. 6:30. I couldn’t sleep. I left without waking Danny. Last night was the first time I’ve heard him snore in five days. He was sleeping hard.”

Five days.

I turn my hand over and uncurl my fingers to look at the words that are almost completely erased from my skin now. I close my fingers over what’s left of the ink and grab my phone. I pull up the picture that I took a few days ago.

*I will love you
the same tomorrow
as I do today.*

“Would you like me to get you a café?” Jackie asks, standing up.

“Yes. Thank you.”

She leaves the room and once again, I’m alone. I haven’t been alone with Gabe a lot. His parents or mine are usually with me, there’s the constant interruptions from the doctors and nurses, Audrey has visited a few times, and Trisha FaceTimes me at least once a day. But when I am alone with him, I’m *alone*.

I don’t know how much longer I can take the silence. I want him to wake up and speak so badly, I feel like I could scream. I throw the blanket off me and walk across the cold floor on my bare feet until I’m beside him. I lean over him, placing my hands on either side of his shoulders, and shout, “Wake *up*, Gabe! Wake *up*! For the love of God, wake *UP*! I can’t take this anymore. I can’t take it—” I trail off as a full body sob rakes through me, leaving through my eyes in waves of tears. “Please.” I cry, dropping my face to his, scratching my cheek on the thick stubble that covers his face now.

I sit up and stare at him. “How could you do this to me? How could you do this?” I’m so angry I don’t know what to do.

“Please, Brandon, send him back. Send him back to me. I can’t live without him. I’ll die too. I can’t live in a world without both of you. I can’t.”

I stand up and start pacing around his bed. My emotions shift between grief and anger like the opposite ends of a see-saw.

I lean over him again and shake his shoulders. “You’re here. I know you’re still here. Open your eyes, Gabriel! Do you hear me? OPEN YOUR EYES!”

Chapter 26

Gabe

I stare at Liv, asleep on the couch in my hospital room.

So beautiful.

I had my doubts going into surgery, but I remember everything. Every moment we've shared. Everything we've been through. The good and the bad. All of it.

She opens her eyes and sits up.

"Hey, sleepy head," I say to her, but she stares past me like she didn't hear me. "Hey, sunshine." I smile at her, but she doesn't look at me. She just stares across the room.

She looks sad.

"Liv, what's the matter?" I ask, moving closer to her. "I'm okay. I made it through the surgery."

She throws the blanket off her, walks over to the bed, and sits with her back to me.

I hold my hands out. "Liv, I'm right here."

"Wake *up*, Gabe!" she shouts. "Wake *up*! For the love of God, wake *UP*! I can't take this anymore. I can't take it—"

She starts to cry.

"Liv?"

"Please," she begs.

"It's okay, Liv, I'm right here. I'm okay."

She sits up and I see a man lying in the bed who...looks like *me*.

"How could you do this to me? How could you do this?"

I reach for her, but a bright flash of light blinds me.

"Gabe."

"Gabe," the familiar voice calls again.

The light softens and I see someone moving toward me. "Gabe." His voice is closer now. Clearer. He closes the space between us and wraps his arms around my shoulders, slapping me on the back with one hand. "Brother, I've missed you."

"Brandon?" I wrap my arms around him and squeeze him hard. "I've missed you too, so damn much." I let go of him and step back so I can see his face.

It's really him. He's really here, standing right in front of me. He looks exactly the same.

A million thoughts race through my mind at once—a million things I want to say to him. I pick the most important. "I'm so sorry about the accident. I'm so sorry for what happened to you, Brandon. I would give anything to take it back."

He smiles and shakes his head. "That wasn't in your hands, Gabe. None of this is."

"Liv..." I want to tell him every wonderful thing about his twin sister, but I don't know where to begin.

"I know." He puts his hand on my shoulder and says, "She needs you, Gabe. You have to go to her now. It's time."

"Wait."

"It's time."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be here. I'm always here, brother."

Another flash of light blinds me.

Someone is shaking me and shouting, "Open your eyes, Gabriel! Do you hear me?"

Ohhhh...my head.

"OPEN YOUR EYES!"

Liv?

"S-stop. Y-yelling."

She gasps and stops shaking me. "Oh my God. Gabriel? Gabriel!"

I open my heavy eyelids, but the light forces them shut again.

"Gabriel!" She holds my face in her hands. "Open your eyes, Gabe. Open them again. Look at me."

I open them again, blinking until they adjust to the light, and I see Liv hovering over me like an angel.

"Hi," I croak.

She laughs but her eyes are filled with tears. "Hi." She drops her mouth to mine and kisses my lips, my cheeks, my forehead, and my lips again. "Oh my God." She leaps from the bed and runs to the door. "He's awake! Gabe's awake!" she screams down the hall. She runs back to the bed and sits beside me. "I knew you would wake up. I knew you would come back to me." She smiles through the tears that are running down her face.

I lift my hand to her cheek, ignoring the ache from the IV attached to it, and whisper, "Don't cry, sunshine."

She wraps her hand around my wrist. "You remember?"

"Everything."

She leans down and kisses me again. "I love you."

"I love you too. As much today as I did yesterday."

She puts her forehead on mine and nods.

"Maybe more."

A flock of nurses and doctors fill the room. "Gabe," Dr. Franklin says, pulling a chair beside my bed. "Can you hear me?"

Liv sits up and wipes her eyes. "He can hear you."

"Yes," I answer hoarsely.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Dr. Franklin."

He smiles and nods. "You look pretty cozy, but can you tell me whose hand that is you're holding?"

I look up at Liv and say, "My fiancée."

Nina smiles over Liv's shoulder and says, "Congratulations."

Chapter 27

Liv

Three months ago, Gabe asked me to marry him in his hospital room before his surgery. The next day, I wished I had. Today, I finally will.

Gabe was released from the hospital a few days after he woke up from the coma with a clean bill of health. After extensive testing, the doctors ultimately surmised that the coma was simply Gabe's body's way of letting his brain heal after the surgery.

He had no memory loss, no changes in his personality, no damage to his motor skills. The only thing that Gabe lost was the threat of his next seizure. He hasn't had one since before the surgery and Dr. Franklin assures us he will most likely never have one again.

Looks like Roxy is out of a job. *Thank God.* She will never be out of our hearts, though. She's a part of our family and today she will be a part of our wedding. She's Gabe's best man.

Once Gabe was back on his feet, he proposed again with the most beautiful diamond ring I've ever seen. The antique round-cut diamond is surrounded by sixteen French-cut princess diamonds that cascade down the sides of the hand-engraved white gold band. Gabe had it custom made, but it looks like it belonged to eighteenth-century French royalty. I look down at my one-of-a-kind engagement ring, resting on my finger where it will stay forever.

It's hard to believe how much has changed this year. It wasn't that long ago, but I can hardly remember what my life was like in Raleigh. The pain I endured after I lost Gabe was washed away by the tide that brought him back to me. But I'll never forget the struggle, and I wouldn't want to. I don't think I would be able to appreciate the calm if it weren't for surviving the storm.

I'm going to marry Gabriel North today. I laugh quietly to myself and butterflies fill my stomach.

"What's so funny?" Trisha asks over the diamond-encrusted bobby pin that's hanging from her lips. She's in charge of my hair.

"I just can't believe I'm actually going to marry Gabe today."

"Well, believe it, sister," she says, placing the last pin in my hair, "because you're ready to walk down the aisle."

“Not yet.” Audrey holds up my wedding dress—a simple, sleeveless, V-back gown made of ivory tulle and Alençon lace, accented with ivory ribbon that ties in the back and falls down the length of the delicate train.

Alençon lace is made in France, and authentic Alençon lace is extremely hard to find, so naturally it was the first and *last* dress I tried on.

Audrey and Trisha help me get into it.

I stare at myself in the mirror for a few long seconds, thinking of everything that brought me to this day.

“You okay?” Trisha asks.

I nod over a wave of emotion as I stare at my reflection. Trisha did a beautiful job on my hair. It’s hanging in long waves down my back, but the front pieces are swept off my face with the jeweled bobby pins. It’s casual, but elegant.

She also did my makeup, which I better not ruin with tears. It compliments my hair perfectly. Both look soft and natural. Perfect for marrying Gabe outside under our old oak tree.

“You did a beautiful job,” I say, turning around to hug her. “Thank you. I really don’t know what I would do without you.”

“You’re welcome.” Her voice shakes a little and my eyes prick with tears.

“Knock it off,” Audrey says, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

I pull her in for a group hug. “I love you both.”

“Okay, stop it,” Trisha says, standing up straight. She holds me back by my shoulders and grabs a tissue. “I cannot recreate perfection!”

I laugh and try to compose myself.

“And your hair and makeup would be hard to redo too.”

“Trisha.”

“Kidding.”

I laugh again. “Seriously. Thanks for being a part of today. It really means so much to me.”

“Liv, I’ve seen you on some of your worst days”—she smiles and holds my hand—“but today I get to see you on one of your happiest. There’s nowhere else I would rather be.”

“I love you, Trisha.”

“I love you too.” She hugs me and grabs another tissue.

“Okay, we seriously have to get it together now,” Audrey says. “It’s almost time!” She widens her eyes and lets out a little squeal.

My eyes widen to match hers and I inhale a deep breath. “Okay. I’m ready.”

I hear my mother and Jackie talking as they climb the steps to my and Gabe’s apartment, where I’m getting ready. I broke the lease on my condo before I ever stepped foot in it. Once Gabe decided to go through with the surgery, and I knew how much he’d need me after, I didn’t want to be anywhere but here in our home.

“Liv?”

“Almost ready, Momma.”

I stand in front of the dark wood-framed floor mirror beside our bed, staring at my lace-clad reflection. I turn from side to side, admiring my gown, feeling the soft tulle under my hands. I love this dress. *I hope Gabe likes it.*

I hear quiet gasps when my mother and Jackie walk inside.

“Oh, Liv,” my mom cries, crossing the apartment to stand beside me. She holds her hands to her face. “You are absolutely breathtaking.” She wipes a stray tear.

“Thanks, Momma.”

“I mean it. I’ve never seen a more beautiful bride.” She cries a few more tears.

“Momma, stop crying.” I smile and hold her hand.

“Just wait until your daddy sees you. Wait until *Gabe* sees you.”

“Do you think he’ll like it?” I ask Jackie, who is smiling at me adoringly.

“Gabe would marry you in sweatpants, bébé.” She laughs and reaches for my hand.

I smile and nod. “That’s probably true.”

“But what a gift to give him *this* vision to hold in his heart for the rest of his life.” She pulls me into a hug and whispers, “Tu es son ange”. *You’re his angel.*

My eyes well up.

“No!” Trisha yells, making us jump. “No more crying!”

I blink back the tears. “I’m not crying.”

“Yes, you *are* and there’s no time to redo your makeup now.” She runs toward me with a q-tip, which seems to have appeared out of thin air. I wonder if she has them stashed in her bra for exactly this reason. Knowing

Trisha, she probably does. She dabs my eyes, careful not to smudge her masterpiece.

“Baby, it’s time,” my dad says from the doorway.

I turn around and face him. “I’m ready.”

His eyes mist over, but not for long.

“Do. Not. Cry,” Trisha says, pointing her finger at him. “If you cry, she cries. And she cannot cry!”

He shakes his head and clears his throat until his emotions are contained. Then he smiles and holds his arm out for me. “Well, don’t make the boy wait.”

I smile and take his arm.

“Hold on! Your flowers,” Audrey says, handing me my bouquet of creamy white magnolias and baby blue hydrangeas.

I take them from her, imagining Brandon walking her down the aisle and taking his place next to Gabe in a matching suit, looking handsome and probably bigger than he was at twenty-one. I try not to let myself think about how much I miss him right now, but I see my mother wipe her eyes again, and my heart aches involuntarily.

I’m here, little sister.

Brandon. *I love you, Brandon.*

My heart is wrapped in warmth and I imagine him walking beside me as my dad leads me down the stairs. He helps me into the vintage blue Ford pickup truck that seemed only fitting for our outdoor wedding by the barn. I also thought it paid homage to Gabe’s pickup. It’s an F-150 like his, but about forty years older.

The ride to the back of the property seems to take forever, but I’m not really sure how fast this old truck can go. I see the barn and my heart practically leaps out of my chest, knowing Gabe is standing on the other side of it, waiting for me—along with thirty of our closest friends and family members.

I have to remind myself to breathe.

My dad helps me down out of the truck and Trisha, Audrey, my mom, and Jackie appear from the car behind us to help fluff my dress and smooth my train. They each give me a quick hug and then make their way around the barn to take their places for the ceremony.

I’m suddenly filled with nerves. Maybe it’s the buildup of not seeing Gabe all day, or maybe it’s the small crowd that’s gathered to witness this

very intimate moment between us. I'm not sure which, but my hands begin to shake.

"Dad."

"I've got you, baby," he says, placing his hand over mine.

I hear the soft strum of the acoustic guitar that's accompanying the ceremony and I try to steady my heartbeat to its soothing melody.

Breathe. *Just breathe.*

I close my eyes and open them again to a beautiful fall day. I hadn't really noticed before, but it's absolutely gorgeous today. The sky is strikingly blue—there isn't a single cloud in it—and the sun is shining through the trees, illuminating the hanging moss, and throwing slanted shadows on the leaf-covered ground. It doesn't usually get cold in this part of Georgia until after Thanksgiving, but today the air is crisp and cool.

I take another deep breath of the clean fall air, letting it resonate through me, and it erases what's left of my nerves. The music changes and I know that it's our turn now. My dad looks down at me and says, "I think that's our cue."

I smile and nod, and tighten my arm around his as he leads me around the side of the barn, careful not to step on my dress, until we're standing before the century-old oak tree that Gabe carved our initials in when we were seventeen. Tears fill my eyes when I take in the view. White paper lanterns and delicate crystals hang from the twisted moss covered branches above two sections of white wooden folding chairs and the faces of our closest friends and family.

Everyone stands and I can feel their eyes on me, but the only face I see is Gabriel's. He's standing at the end of the aisle, smiling his breathtaking smile, pulling me toward him with his warm golden brown eyes.

I blink back my tears and take him in from head to toe. He's wearing a fitted pale-gray vest, matching suit pants, an ivory shirt with a navy blue tie, and tobacco brown leather shoes. His face is shaved smooth and his hair is arched over his forehead in a little wave. He cut it after the surgery, since they had to shave half his head, and he hasn't grown it back out yet. It's just long enough to cover the new c-shaped scar above his ear.

He looks like he just stepped off a page of a magazine. I want to run to him and take his handsome face in my hands, but I manage to contain myself and stay by my father's side as we slowly walk toward him.

Roxy is sitting at Gabe's feet, patiently waiting for me. I smile at her when I see the ivory ribbon tied around her neck. She barks once and everyone laughs, including me. Gabe reaches down and touches her head, and she shakes her floppy ears back and forth.

When we reach the end of the aisle, Trisha takes my bouquet. She and Audrey look beautiful in their champagne-colored chiffon dresses. My dad lifts my hand from his arm and carefully places it in Gabe's. And everything else disappears.

All I see is him.

All I feel is him.

His long fingers move over my hands and wrap around them. His palms pulse against my skin and his breath falls softly on my forehead as he leans in and whispers, just loud enough for me to hear, "*Qui valait l'attente.*" *That was worth the wait.*

What was left of the breath in my lungs rushes out on a wave of emotion and it takes all my control not to pull his face to mine and kiss him before the ceremony even begins.

"You're so beautiful," he says, wiping a tear from my cheek.

The minister begins to speak to our guests, but I stay locked inside my Gabe bubble, half listening, until it's time to say our vows.

I pay close attention to the minister and repeat the traditional words that will marry us.

"I, Olivia Charlotte Dalton, take you, Gabriel Chr stien North, to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part. This is my solemn vow." I smile and slide Gabe's simple white gold wedding band onto his finger.

Gabe takes his turn repeating after the minister. "I, Gabriel Chr stien North, take you, Olivia Charlotte Dalton, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part. This is my solemn vow." He slides my wedding band onto my finger, and I beam up at him.

"Liv, I believe you have something you want to share," the minister says to me.

I nod and gesture to Trisha who hands me a familiar folded-up piece of paper. I open it with shaking hands and look at Gabe. "Gabe, you wrote me

a letter on my eighteenth birthday...”

He nods and smiles softly.

“I wanted to share it today...if that’s okay with you.”

He nods again.

I try to swallow down the emotion that’s choking me so I can read it. ““Liv””—my voice wobbles a little—““tomorrow you will turn eighteen.”” Gabe wipes a stray tear from my cheek and I smile at him. I take the moment to steady myself so I can continue. ““You will legally be allowed to vote...You can buy cigarettes, but please don’t.””

Soft laughter comes from the small crowd.

““And you can even join the military, but please don’t.””

More laughter.

““You will officially be an adult...None of that really matters to me, though...I will love you the same tomorrow as I do today.”” I glance up at him and he smiles at the words that are now hanging in a frame above our bed. ““And I love you the same today as I did when I was sixteen...I’ve been privileged to watch you grow into the beautiful woman you’ve become, and I thank my lucky stars every day that you chose me.””

The laughs have turned into quiet sniffles now.

I drop my hands and look into Gabe’s eyes, and recite the rest of the letter from memory. ““The coming years will be a challenge, no doubt. But as long as we’re together, I know we can navigate whatever comes our way. I promise to be your compass when you start to feel lost. I’ll be your beacon home when the world gets too big. No matter what path life chooses for us, I will always be your true north.””

Gabe brings his hands to my face.

“You were my compass, Gabe. You were my beacon home. You *are* and always have been my true north. And I promise, for as long as I live, I will be yours.”

Epilogue

Gabe, Three years later

I'm balancing a cake in my left hand and balloons in my right when I walk through the front door and find Liv standing on our dining room table, hanging streamers from the light fixture above it. "Liv! What are you doing up there?"

She steps off the table just in time for me to drop the cake, let go of the balloons, and catch her very pregnant body in my arms.

"Liv, are you okay?" I examine her stomach.

"I'm fine," she says, laughing, "but Brandon's cake isn't."

I look down and see our toddler son eating his third birthday cake off the floor. Brandon looks up at us with big green eyes and waves his little icing-covered hand at me. "Hi, Daddy!"

Roxy slides across the hardwood floor and starts licking the icing off Brandon's face.

"Roxy. No!"

She sits up straight and gives me big innocent brown eyes. Brandon giggles and pats her back.

I put Liv down and pick him up. "Buddy, you're not supposed to eat that yet."

He smiles and shoves his little fingers into my mouth.

"Oh, it's good," I mumble, licking the icing off my lips.

"I think I can salvage it," Liv says, bending over to pick up the cake.

"I'll get it," I say, putting Brandon down. "Come on, buddy, let's help Momma take your cake to the kitchen, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy."

I ruffle his sandy blond curls and follow Liv into the kitchen with the cake.

We bought this house a few years ago, because we fell in love with the property, and we've been renovating it ever since. It's just a mile from my parents' place and the property is about the same size, complete with a barn I use as my workshop when I'm not at the warehouse where my furniture line is manufactured now.

Gone are the days of making furniture in my parents' garage. But I'm happy to see my business growing and becoming one of the top furniture

manufacturers in the Southeast. I'm also happy to be able to provide for my family doing something I love.

Liv is also providing for our family as a freelance book editor—her *dream job*, as she puts it. It helps that we're both able to work from home. We put in a double home office, complete with two desks and a play area for Brandon. And I have a full staff that keeps production running smoothly at the warehouse.

The final renovations on the house were completed last week, after we decided to add another room for the new baby, and today we're having everyone over for Brandon's birthday. It's probably the last time we'll be able to get together before the baby's born. Liv is due in three days. Brandon was born a week late, after twenty excruciating hours of induced labor, but the doctor assures us Liv is right on schedule this time.

Liv's parents should be here soon and mine just pulled up. Trisha is here too. Liv's due date lined up perfectly with her husband's hockey schedule, which has him in Canada right now, so she's staying with us until after the baby's born. Audrey and her husband, John, will be here too. Brandon is pretty smitten with their little girl, Mallory, who just turned two.

"Grandma!" Brandon shouts, running over to my mother when she walks in.

"Ah, petit bébé," my mom says, pulling him into her arms. "Joyeux anniversaire!" *Happy birthday!*

"Merci," he says, thanking her in French. Brandon speaks French as fluently as he speaks English.

"Where's my big birthday boy?" my dad asks, walking into the kitchen.

"I'm right here, Grandpa!" Brandon says, running over to him.

My dad scoops him up and puts him on his shoulders.

"Liv, honey, you gonna make it through the party?" he asks, looking at her stomach.

She laughs and pats her belly. "Oh, I think he's got a few days left."

"He? What makes you think it's a boy?" my mom asks, placing her hands on Liv's stomach. Much to everyone's anticipation, we chose to wait until the baby is born to find out the gender.

"I don't know." She smiles at me and it takes my breath away. "I just feel like Brandon's supposed to have a brother," she says, reaching for my hand.

"Me too," I say quietly.

“Take me outside, Grandpa!” Brandon says, patting the top of my dad’s head.

“All right.”

“Come on, Grandma!” Brandon bounces on my dad’s shoulders.

My mom laughs and follows them outside.

When we’re alone, I pull Liv into my arms and kiss her. “Je t’aime tant.” *I love you so much.*

“Pas autant que je t’aime.” *Not as much as I love you.* She reaches for my hair and runs her fingers over the c-shaped scar above my ear, and I’m overwhelmed as I think of everything we went through to finally get to this place in our life together.

I hold her face in my hands and look into her green eyes—the ones she shares with our son. “You are *my* compass, Liv, *my* beacon home. You are, and always were, my true north.”

Her eyes mist a little. “Gabe.”

I kiss her again and thank God for this beautiful girl who came into my life when I was just a boy. For letting me know and love her brother like he was my own. For guiding us through everything we went through to get where we are today. For my son and for the new life He’s blessed us with. For bringing me out of the coma and for being seizure free for the last three years.

There was a time in my life when I didn’t think I deserved the happiness I know today. I blamed myself for the accident. And for losing Brandon. But I know now that it wasn’t in my hands.

None of this is.

And one day, I’ll get to see my brother again.

Until then, I will love Liv and our babies, and cherish this precious life we’ve built together.

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About the Author

Robin has been dreaming up book boyfriends since before she ever had one. A career, a husband, and three kids later, she's still hopelessly addicted to love stories that make her swoon. Robin is an extroverted introvert with an unhealthy dependency on her horoscope and a knack for plotting emotionally charged romance novels on her way to work, where she spends her days as a hospital director. She loves the ocean, thunderstorms, coffee, wine, and Tim Riggins. She hates turtlenecks, chunky jewelry, kitchen gadgets, and high heels, though she begrudgingly wears them often. She also has an aversion to extreme cold, which is why after a four-year stint in the Northeast, she returned home to Florida where she's living happily ever after.

For more about Robin and her books visit:

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