

*Guys, I'm on my way back to Ophelia, but don't worry. Boris won't hit for a few more hours, so I'll be okay. I took the car, but I promise I will be back long before it gets dangerous to drive. I'm going to find Georgia because it's not safe on the island, and I have to tell her something very important. I'll be back as soon as I can.*

*I'm sorry. Love you, Sam.*

I left the note on the coffee maker and patted my shorts pocket. Her ring, which I'd placed there yesterday, made a faint impression on my hand. It was still there, and it was going back with me to Ophelia as my good luck charm.

Sunrise wasn't anything like a sunrise this morning. It just got a little bit less dark outside.

The interstate back to Ophelia wasn't busy. No one was headed south. No one but me.

Ole Red was having a rough ride back there, strapped to the back of the car. I watched in the rearview mirror as the wind picked him up, and he was wobbling back and forth, banging against the Bronco. Both of his tires spun in endless circles, but he was secure; I'd tightened the straps myself.

Back in fifth grade, I rode Red across town to declare my love for Jennifer Corrine. Now, here he was with me again as I was about to do the same thing with Georgia. Funny how some things never change.

"Close your eyes," Jennifer had told me at recess. The slides were as tall as the clouds back then.

"I am, I am," I'd said.

"Okay, now imagine you're at the most beautiful place in the world."

"Fine, okay."

At the time, I wasn't thinking about paradise on the beach or a candy shop or even my latest

*Transformers* car. I had been thinking about Georgia. I just hadn't known it at the time. The girl in my head was a nameless, faceless image, but I was certain now it had been her.

That memory had been long gone, lost in the back of my mind until now. It was Georgia who was responsible for bringing it back.

"What do you see?" asked Jennifer.

"I don't see anything yet."

"You have to tell me what you see."

"I can't see anyplace."

"Tell me what you're seeing."

"I just see a person."

"Who is it?"

Jennifer assumed that I was talking about her. I didn't correct her, but then she hugged me, so I let her go on thinking that.

Georgia—a girl I was afraid to touch, who I had already risked my life for once—I loved her. She was a life I had saved.

Heavy sheets of rain blew onto the car when I reached the bridge to Ophelia, and I gripped the wheel with white knuckles to keep the car on course. I exited the bridge and headed toward Main Street, the trees giving me a bit of cover, acting as a barrier to the blustering wind and rain.

The island was deserted. Downed tree branches were strewn across the road, and I maneuvered around them, forcing me to drive through large puddles that were already starting to flood the empty sidewalks.

Evidence of anyone who had stayed behind had been blown away. Joe's Pancakes was locked up tight, ominous and empty, shut down like the rest of the ghost town Ophelia Island had

become. The diner's windows were boarded up, so I was unable to see inside, but still, an image of Georgia roamed through my mind. But there was no time for daydreams now.

I turned on Shell Way and headed straight to Mat's house.

That ugly blue roof came into view. Water streamed off it in heavy rivers.

Mat's car sat parked in the driveway. Doubt made me pause, but the sight of Ole Red in the rearview reminded me why I was here. So I put the Bronco in park and raced through the rain to the front door, but I kept the engine running in case I needed to make a quick escape.

The skin on my knuckles fractured with each loud bang as I pounded on Mat's door, but I didn't care. Light from the TV flashed through the tiny diamond-shaped window on the door, and a can of beer sat in a ring of condensation on a table beside the recliner. In case Mat was in the bathroom, I waited a minute, trying to shield myself from the blowing rain before I knocked again.

Inside, everything was still. Mat had to be here, and, if he wasn't, Georgia should've been. Why wasn't she coming to the door? If they were in bed, wouldn't they at least try to see who was caught outside in the storm? Biting my lip, hoping I wouldn't find them in bed together, I slogged through the mud to the bedroom window to get a look inside. The light was off, and Mat's mattress was just the same as it had been the last time. Nothing more than a sloppy mess of covers. It didn't look as if Mat had even slept here. Just as I started to wonder where he had been the past few nights, I remembered the girl he was cheating on Georgia with.

Where would they go without a car in this weather?

I slipped on my way back to the Bronco and soaked my clothes with mud, but I shook it off and climbed into the driver's seat, throwing a spew of muddy droplets in every direction. The wipers couldn't keep up with the pace at which the rain was falling, so I depended on my

memory to remind me where to turn.

At the end of his driveway, I stopped. Where was I going to go? She was supposed to be with Mat, and now they were both gone without a car. Were they moving on foot somewhere?

The only other place Georgia could have been was the lighthouse. Just the thought of her taking Mat there made jealousy boil under my skin. The lighthouse was *our* place. Her thinking place. At least that's what she had told me. It was not a place where she would have taken Mat.

But I steered the clunky Bronco toward the lighthouse anyway, swerving to avoid the maze of trash cans, shingles, and tree limbs that littered the street. The beach flew past in a blurry, dark-gray streak, and just as I passed by beach entrance seventeen, I caught sight of something moving—a person marching alongside the swirling waves on the raving shore. I slammed on my brakes, but the water on the road caused me to skid, nearly running the Bronco into a tree.

I looked back at the beach. In the dark and the haze of the wind and rain, the figure had almost disappeared.

But I knew that walk. It was tattooed in my memory from the first time I saw her.

I opened my door, catching it just as a gust of wind blew it back toward my face, but I pressed on, forcing my body forward against the wind and pelting rain until I made it to the beach. Yellow caution tape at the entrance had torn, now in tattered pieces, shredded at the ends where it had been tied to close off the beach.

I ran to the water to reach her, sprinting through the hard sand that had been packed down by the showers.

Each drop of rain felt like a dagger, splitting my flesh wide open, my discomfort made worse by the wind lashing at my open wounds.

I called for her from the splintering boardwalk, but her name evaporated in the roaring storm.

No visible line separated the clouds from the ocean. One lay on top of the other, blending into a black blur, spinning together in darkness.

The ocean in the sky, and the sky in the ocean, and here we were, stuck between them.

Her back was to me when I finally got to her.

“Georgia,” I screamed, but she didn’t turn around. “What are you doing out here? Are you crazy?”

I placed both hands on her shoulders and forced her to look at me. Georgia’s ferocious mane of wet curls spun to me against the wind’s will, smacking me right in the face, and another strong gust pushed us against each other. I wrapped one arm around her, determined to help her get off the beach, but she fought against me.

She paused in confusion, brushing my hands away from her.

“Following me again?” Her sharp-edged anger cut me to the bone.

“What’s going on with you? Georgia, you need to get off the island.” I had to shout just so she would hear me, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except getting her off this island, and screaming, I realized, was the only way to communicate with her. To really, truly get her to listen. “Haven’t you seen the news? Take a look around.”

Detached from the weather around us, she became her own storm of emotions. “Everything is fine.” Then she lowered her voice until I could hardly hear her. “I’m staying with Mat.”

“Mat won’t keep you safe.”

“And you will?”

“Yes, I swear I will if you’ll just leave the island with me. Georgia, you’re risking your safety—your life—just being here. Why would you do that for him?”

“Sam, I’ll be fine.” It was a blatant lie, and she knew it. “What are you even doing here?”

You're not supposed to be on the island. I thought you left."

"I did. But I came back. And I couldn't find you at Mat's house where you said you'd be."

"Why'd you come back?" I wasn't sure she was ready to hear my answer.

"You know why. Georgia—"

A wave crashed at our feet, exploding like a cannon, and, as an instinct, I turned her toward shore, shielding her with my body. Water splashed up to our waists, and we both lost our footing, so I grabbed her arm to help steady her in the rumbling surf. Waves bit at our legs, tugging at our bodies, begging us to venture deeper out to sea. The ocean wanted us.

"Come back to the mainland with me, Georgia. This isn't safe."

"You can't take me with you, Sam." She jerked her arm back, pulling it out of my grip. "I'm staying here."

God, I wanted to rip my hair out of my scalp, pick her up, carry her to my car, make her listen. "Mat doesn't deserve you, Georgia. Leave him. Leave him here and come with me."

She looked at me hard but said nothing.

"He lies to you. Georgia, I saw him with someone else. Mat doesn't love you. He couldn't. He cheats on you."

"I cheated on *him*. I was with you, remember?" Her voice kept breaking with obvious pain. Something in the way the words toppled out felt raw and true, like maybe this was the first time she was admitting to herself that she had any kind of feelings for me. That she was relieved to have been with me on that bed instead of Mat.

"He hurts you," I said. "I've seen it. Georgia, I've seen everything. I know what he does to you, and I can't stand by and watch. I know how mad he gets, and I've seen him hit you, and—"

My chest caved. We stood there in the rain, attacked by the storm, defeated by things much

bigger than we were.

Though her face was wet from the hurricane, I could tell her eyes filled with tears.

“Just leave, Sam,” she said. “We’ll talk after the storm. I promise.”

*Promise.*

*Promises break.*

“Talk to me now, Georgia. I need to know. Why did you run out and leave me last night at the lighthouse? Was it guilt for being there with me? Did you even care about me at all? Because that’s why I’m here, Georgia, because I care about you.”

The storm raged on around us, pressing into me.

She spun on her heels. “Just leave, Sam. I can take care of myself.”

“No.” I trailed right behind her. “I’m not leaving again without you. I’m not leaving you the way—”

*The way you left me last night. I wanted to say it but couldn’t.*

I knew the exact reason she had left me. Georgia had run from the lighthouse because she was afraid that I would become one more in the line of people who left her. She left me because her father left her mother, and her mother didn’t care about her, and Mat mistreated her, and everyone in her life was ruthless.

“Just go.” She began to run, so I followed her.

The wind hurled itself into me, but I charged forward after her. I grabbed her by her bruised wrist and spun her around, so close that I knew she could hear me this time. The pale color of her face was gone. She was no longer lifeless, but alive—her eyes, her nose, her lips, all full of color again.

“Listen to me.”

I latched on to her waist, pulling her to me. The wind beat down against my face, tossing Georgia's curls around my neck like a noose. I wanted to kiss her, but it wasn't the time for that yet. Not until I made her understand.

"I came back to make sure you were safe, and I didn't do that for nothing. I'm not letting you get hurt; you've been too hurt for too long, and I'm fixing that. Today. The first time I saw you, you wore your hair down like this, you had on a pink tank top, and I hadn't seen you smile yet, but I knew it was going to be beautiful. Georgia, you take my breath away." I meant it. I meant all of it, and I didn't know why I mentioned those small details, but it felt right.

"And I know how screwed up things must be for you. I know how screwed up Mat's brain is and...please, just come back with me. I can't let you stay on Ophelia. I won't."

Water spilled from our faces, puddling between our chests.

"And I did follow you that day," I continued.

Her facial expression remained hidden behind a layer of ocean and storm and wind, but even through all of that, she was still a flame. If she went away, I would be left with a body covered in burns.

For a moment, I thought she was going to give me everything I wanted. Let me sweep her off her feet. Let me take her home with me. But the moment my words registered with her, she stiffened with shock because I remembered all of that, because I even *knew* some of it.

"To be honest, I did follow you," I admitted again. "I was wondering if you were okay. And I don't know everything about you, Georgia. I've only known you for a few weeks, but I know I love you. I know I'm in love with you."

She held my gaze. I waited for her to try to escape my hold on her just so I could reel her back to me again, but my silence allowed my words to sink in. I wasn't letting her go in this storm.

Georgia was crying now, a soundless cry, and I couldn't tell whether the drops on her cheeks were rain or tears, but I knew she was crying. Crumbling.

"No, you don't," she said.

"Yes, I do."

"You don't even know me."

"Yes—"

"Why do you keep saying that?" She wriggled out of my grip and started to back away.

*I'm not the bad guy*, I wanted to scream after her.

"Why are you so convinced that I don't love you?"

"I love someone else." Though her words penetrated right through my heart, I knew it was an excuse. Georgia didn't love him. She knew that. I knew that.

"So?" I stepped toward her again. "That doesn't mean I can't love you."

"How can you love someone who doesn't love you back, Sam?" The question was more for her than for me.

"You would know; you say you love Mat."

She looked away. Georgia had no idea how to be honest with herself, how to see the truth for what it was, without all the lies tainting it.

Betrayal. Truth. She embraced them as one—one single essence—because the truth felt like a lie to her.

"You don't love him." I shook my head and nudged her face back toward mine. "Georgia, you don't love him."

The wind pushed her against me, but she resisted and kept me at arm's distance this time.

"I just want it to be over," she said. "With him. With everything."

She sounded so small, so taken over. We were both just ships in a tsunami. The chaos of the storm made it difficult to hear her, but I understood her perfectly. She wanted it to be over, and so did I. She could end it if she would only trust me. I wanted to cry for her because she was being torn apart piece by piece, dissolving in the murky water, and I wanted to gather her up in my arms and place the pieces of her back together.

“I love you, Georgia. Why is that so hard for you to believe?”

She bit her bottom lip, and I could see a growing sob building in her lungs.

“I don’t know what love is.” A distinct tear split through the rainwater on her cheek. “I don’t know how to love you.”

“It’s so easy.”

With that, Georgia let me pick up her pieces. I tipped her chin toward mine and cupped her neck in my hands, then her cheeks, and I kissed her. As I tightened my grip on her, she grimaced. I must have rubbed another bruise.

*I’m sorry, I mouthed. I won’t hurt you. I’ll never hurt you.* Then I started saying it out loud, and she stood on her toes and wrapped her arms around my neck, collapsing against my body.

“Take me to the lighthouse,” she said, her face buried in my soaked shirt.

“What about Mat’s?” I thought maybe she would explain where he was and why he wasn’t at home to begin with, but she remained silent.

“I just want to go to the lighthouse tonight.” Her thinking place. I couldn’t say no.

“Why didn’t you go there first?”

She moved her foot in a tiny circle while she thought about how to answer. Her focus shifted to the mark it had left in the wet sand. “I don’t know.”

“Does Mat know about this?”

Her green eyes darted once more to the ocean.

“Is he home? I went there to find you, but no one answered the door. I saw his car parked in the driveway.”

Nestling into the crook of my shoulder, she pressed farther into my drenched shirt. “He’s...” If she said anything more, I wasn’t able to hear.

“Where? What?” I asked again.

“He’s passed out.”

When I’d peeked through his window, Mat wasn’t on his bed or in his chair. “But he wasn’t in his room.”

“He’s on the floor. Let’s go,” she said. “Don’t worry about Mat. He’s fine. If I don’t care, then you shouldn’t.”

The lighthouse was the safest place for us to be during the storm. Georgia had said that this lighthouse had survived many hurricanes already, and the intensity of the wind and rain had picked up, so I didn’t argue about going there instead of insisting that we leave Ophelia in the height of the storm. I thought of my parents and wished that there were some way I could reach them. They must have found my note, and I was sure they were worried sick. There would be some kind of punishment coming my way, but I couldn’t do anything about it at this point. I did exactly what I needed to do, and any punishment—except for losing Georgia—would be worth it.

Georgia propped her elbow against the door and stared out the window for the entire ride, clenching her seatbelt every time we had to swerve. Time warped with our distress, and it took us twice as long as it should have to arrive at the lighthouse thanks to all the storm damage. I hated to think about how much more damage was still to come.

A hundred questions about Mat whirled together in my brain, ready to come out, but the words just floated in a misspelled puddle on my tongue. Boris was the only thing that filled the silence.

I parked the Bronco in front of the porch stairs at the lighthouse. We counted to three and made a run for the window, and I helped Georgia in first, then launched myself through, pulling hard to close it behind us. Rain pounded against the roof, but the storm became muffled through the walls of the living room.

Georgia and I stood there in the lighthouse, breathing. Dripping. She shivered, but there was no way to dry off. The commotion of getting here had settled, and there was a peaceful quiet between us, which made the moment seem almost cozy. In my fantasy, Georgia and I should have had a fire crackling in the fireplace. In our reality, water puddled around our feet, and the darkness pushed us close together.

She made no movement when she said, "I'm going to stay here."

I traced her face with four fingers. "Are you safe here?"

"Yes," she said, taking my elbows in her small hands. "I will be."

"What if Mat wakes up? Won't he come looking for you?"

Despite the present dangers of the weather, Mat still seemed more of a threat than Boris.

"I don't want to leave you," I said. "I'm not leaving you."

"Mat won't come back."

Lightning struck somewhere close, and the whole room lit up in a bleached flash. In the briefest of moments, I could see the exhausted purple rings under her eyes. And I could feel the purple ring in my pocket.

"How do you know he won't?"

“When Mat drinks enough, he’s out for an entire day.” That seemed believable, but her statement was weak, and I didn’t want to question her honesty with me. Georgia was a good liar, but I buried my suspicion and decided to trust her.

“I’ll be safe here,” she said again.

“Let me stay with you.”

“Sam, then your parents will freak out and—”

“And that doesn’t matter. Just let me be with you.”

“Do you trust what I’m telling you, Sam?” she said.

I closed my eyes and nodded.

“Then leave me, and trust that I’ll be okay.”

Waiting for her to expand on how she could ever be okay in this storm, even if she was protected by the strong lighthouse, I knew she’d say as little as possible.

“Is there any way to contact you? I want to be positive you’re okay,” I said.

“Of course I’m going to be okay.” She forced a fake smile. “You don’t need to call. I’ll see you when this blows over.”

*Over.*

“I think you’ll be safe here. I’m just worried about you. I’d like to be able to find you,” I said.

“But you don’t need to find me.”

Her stubbornness channeled my inner Logan, making me want to curse, but I was able to regain control of my words and my emotions.

“Georgia, I’m so sorry for everything—”

“Sam, you didn’t do anything bad.” She paused, then out of nowhere, she thanked me.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “I’ll be back soon. For you.”

We shared a cold, wet hug, but the next booming crash of thunder was my cue to go. Our wet clothes clung to our bodies and stuck together as we tried to pull apart. It reminded me of our first hug on her front porch the night of the sailing accident. When I wanted to kiss her but didn't. With the storm swirling outside, I chose to be brave.

Our lips came together in a frenzy of uncontrolled exhilaration. "I want to stay," I whispered to her.

"Go back to your family," she said, kissing me again. "They would worry. I'll be perfectly safe here until you get back."

*She'll be safe, she'll be safe*, I kept repeating. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you leave Ophelia with your mom and brother?"

Our gaze shattered, and she grew distant again. "I didn't want to shack up with my mom's boyfriend through the storm. Jeffery likes him. He's too young to know any better."

"When I get back," I said, "I'll come. I'll be back tomorrow morning. It's just one night in the hotel, and I'll be back. I'll come back for you."

"I want you to come," she said, admitting it for the first time. "If you can catch me." She grinned, the same crooked smile that did me in from the start.

"I'll follow you." I flashed her a weak smile.

"Bye, Sam. Be safe out there."

*Love while you still can*. I wanted to tell her one more time that I was in love with her, but I didn't want to be a cliché, throwing those words around like a cheap phrase.

Instead, I grabbed her face and kissed her, better than the first time, deeper than we had experienced before. I pulled back just before I got carried away and planted one more kiss on the

tip of her nose.

“Bye, Georgia. I’ll be back soon,” I said, blowing her one final kiss as I climbed through the window.

*I’ll come find you.*