

COME HOME TO ME

CHAPTER 1

There are exactly twenty-three potholes on Maple Street between the "Welcome to Riverbrook" sign and my parents' driveway. I counted them twice on my way into town, wincing each time my Honda Civic's suspension protested with an ominous creak. Some things never change.

"Recalculating," my GPS announced for the fifth time, stubbornly refusing to believe I knew where I was going.

"I grew up here," I told it, turning it off with perhaps more force than necessary. "I think I can find my way home."

Home. The word felt strange in my mouth after ten years away. I'd sworn I'd never come back to Riverbrook—not to stay, anyway. Brief Christmas visits and the occasional weekend didn't count. But here I was, twenty-eight years old with my life packed into cardboard boxes and plastic bins in the back of my car, crawling past familiar landmarks that seemed simultaneously unchanged and unrecognizable.

The FOR SALE sign on the Hendersons' lawn. The repainted storefronts on Main Street. The new stoplight at what used to be a four-way stop. Small changes that somehow made everything feel off-kilter, like a painting hanging just slightly crooked.

I rolled down my window, letting the crisp October air rush in. The scent was unmistakable—fallen leaves, woodsmoke, and that particular sweetness that only seemed to exist in small towns nestled against the mountains. Despite everything, something in my chest loosened.

My phone buzzed on the passenger seat. It was Jen, my best friend since kindergarten and the only person I'd kept in regular contact with since leaving.

You alive? Did you make it?

I pulled into my parents' driveway before typing a quick response.

Just arrived. House looks exactly the same. Send help.

Her reply came instantly: *Dinner tonight. No excuses. The Grill at 7. Everyone's dying to see you.*

I groaned. "Everyone" was the last thing I needed right now. I'd hoped to slip back into town quietly, get settled, and figure out my next move without the entire population of

Riverbrook dissecting my return. Small towns had long memories, and I'd given them plenty to remember—especially when it came to how I left.

Or more specifically, who I left.

My parents burst through the front door before I could even turn off the engine. Mom was already crying, and Dad was pretending he wasn't about to. They looked older than they had at Christmas—Mom's hair more silver than brown now, Dad's shoulders slightly more stooped. The guilt of staying away so long twisted in my stomach.

"Olivia Rose Matthews!" Mom exclaimed, pulling me into a hug that smelled like cinnamon and home. "I can't believe you're really here."

"Hey, Mom," I said, my voice muffled against her shoulder. "It's good to see you."

Dad wrapped his arms around both of us. "Welcome home, Livvy."

Home. There was that word again.

"It's just temporary," I reminded them, the same thing I'd been saying since I'd called three weeks ago to tell them I was coming back. "Just until I figure things out."

They exchanged a look I pretended not to notice.

"Your room's all ready," Mom said, reaching for one of the smaller boxes in my backseat. "I put fresh sheets on the bed and cleared out some closet space."

"You didn't have to do that," I said, though I was grateful. "I don't have that much stuff."

The lie was obvious given the state of my overflowing car, but they were kind enough not to comment.

We carried boxes into my childhood bedroom, which looked both exactly the same and completely different. The walls were still the pale blue I'd chosen when I was sixteen, but Mom had replaced my old bedspread with something more adult, and the posters of bands I'd once loved were gone, leaving faint rectangular outlines on the paint.

"We'll let you get settled," Dad said, squeezing my shoulder. "Dinner's at six if you're up for it. Your mom made your favorite."

"Lasagna?"

Mom smiled. "What else?"

When they left, I sat on the edge of the bed, running my hands over the unfamiliar comforter. The last time I'd slept in this room, I'd been eighteen and heartbroken, counting the hours until I could escape to college on the other side of the country. Now I was back, with a failed engagement, a career on hiatus, and no idea what came next.

I unpacked my laptop first, setting it on the desk where I'd once done high school homework. After connecting to the Wi-Fi (password: "OliviaAndRose1993"—my parents were nothing if not predictable), I opened my email, hoping for some message that would magically solve everything.

Nothing but a reminder about my student loan payment and a promotional email from a yoga studio in Seattle I'd never see again.

From my window, I could see most of Riverbrook spread out below—the winding river that gave the town its name, the church steeple, the high school football field in the distance. And just beyond that, if I leaned at the right angle, the red roof of the Callahan house.

I quickly stepped back from the window.

Nope. Not going there. Not yet.

Instead, I unpacked enough clothes for a few days and spent an embarrassing amount of time deciding what to wear to The Grill. It was just a local restaurant, nothing fancy—the same place we'd all hung out in high school, if it was even still the same after all these years. But I knew that tonight would be my official reintroduction to Riverbrook society, and first impressions mattered, even when they were actually second impressions.

I finally settled on dark jeans, ankle boots, and a soft sweater that my mom had always said brought out the green in my eyes. Casual but put-together. The "I didn't try too hard but still look good" look that actually took considerable effort.

After dinner with my parents (during which they carefully avoided asking any of the big questions, like why my fiancé wasn't with me or what had happened with my job), I drove downtown to The Grill, trying to ignore the butterflies in my stomach.

The restaurant looked almost exactly as I remembered—the same neon sign, the same checkered tablecloths, the same jukebox in the corner that had been playing the same fifty songs since I was a kid. The only difference was the addition of some string lights across the ceiling and a chalkboard wall with specials written in colorful script.

Jen was already there, waving frantically from a corner booth. She looked the same as she had when I'd seen her last Christmas—curly hair pulled into a messy bun, bright smile, eyes that missed nothing.

"You're here!" she squealed, jumping up to hug me. "You're really here!"

"I'm really here," I confirmed, hugging her back.

"Sit, sit," she said, pulling me into the booth. "I ordered you a glass of the house white. Still your favorite?"

"You remember," I said, touched.

"Of course I do. I also remember that you've been avoiding my questions for three weeks, so start talking." She leaned forward, eyes gleaming. "What really happened with Perfect Patrick?"

I winced at the nickname. "He wasn't perfect."

"No kidding. He let you go."

I took a long sip of the wine, which was exactly as mediocre as I remembered. "It was mutual. We wanted different things."

"Uh-huh," Jen said, clearly not buying it. "And your job? You loved that position at the publishing house."

"Also mutual," I said, studying the menu even though I knew exactly what I was going to order. The Grill's bacon cheeseburger had featured in at least a dozen of my homesick dreams over the years. "The company was restructuring. They offered a pretty decent severance package to anyone willing to take it."

"So you just... took it? Without another job lined up? That doesn't sound like the Olivia Matthews I know."

I shrugged, uncomfortable with her scrutiny. "Maybe I'm not the same Olivia anymore."

Jen's expression softened. "Hey," she said, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. "I'm not judging. I'm just worried. You show up after ten years away, clearly running from something—"

"I'm not running," I protested.

"No? Then what would you call it?"

Before I could answer, the bell above the door jingled, and Jen's eyes widened. Something in her expression made me turn around, and the moment I did, everything in the restaurant seemed to fade away.

He was taller than I remembered, or maybe that was just the way he carried himself now—with a quiet confidence that hadn't been there when we were eighteen. His dark hair was shorter, more neatly cut, but he still had that one stubborn lock that fell across his forehead. He was wearing a simple button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing forearms tanned from outdoor work.

Ethan Callahan. My first love. My worst heartbreak. The reason I'd stayed away from Riverbrook for so long.

And he was walking straight toward our table.

"Olivia," he said, his voice deeper than I remembered, those familiar blue eyes studying me with an expression I couldn't read. "I heard you were back."

Of course he had. In Riverbrook, news traveled faster than the internet.

"Ethan," I managed, suddenly acutely aware of how my hair looked, how my voice sounded, how my heart was hammering against my ribs like it was trying to escape. "It's... been a while."

His mouth curved into a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Ten years, two months, and about fifteen days. But who's counting?"

CHAPTER 2

The silence that followed felt like it lasted an eternity, though it was probably only seconds. Jen, bless her, jumped in to save us.

"Ethan! What perfect timing. We were just about to order." She scooted over. "Join us?"

I shot her a look that I hoped conveyed exactly how much I did not want him to join us, but Ethan was already sliding into the booth beside her, across from me.

"Just for a minute," he said. "I'm meeting Tyler and his fiancée." He gestured toward the door where his younger brother was helping a petite blonde woman with her coat.

Tyler spotted us and waved, then headed toward the bar with his fiancée.

"Engaged, huh?" I said, grasping at anything that might make this less awkward. "That's great."

"Yeah, the wedding's in June. The whole town's invited, apparently." Ethan ran a hand through his hair, that familiar gesture making my stomach flip in a way I refused to acknowledge. "So. Seattle, right? That's where you ended up?"

"Yeah," I nodded, taking another sip of wine to buy myself time. "I was working for Weston Press. Editorial assistant, then associate editor."

"Was?" he asked, catching my slip immediately.

"I'm... between positions at the moment."

"Hence the homecoming," he said, nodding as if he'd solved a puzzle.

"It's temporary," I said quickly. "Just until I figure out my next move."

Something flickered in his eyes. "Of course."

Jen glanced between us, then suddenly stood up. "I just spotted Mia. I need to ask her something about the festival committee. Back in a sec."

Before I could protest, she was gone, leaving me alone with Ethan for the first time in a decade.

"Subtle," Ethan commented, watching her practically run to the other side of the restaurant.

"She never was good at excuses," I agreed, then immediately regretted engaging in the banter. This wasn't supposed to be comfortable. This wasn't supposed to be anything at all.

"How are your parents?" I asked, falling back on politeness.

"Good. Dad's talking about retirement, but Mom doesn't believe him. Says he'd go crazy within a week." His eyes softened when he talked about his family. That hadn't changed. "They'd love to see you, by the way."

The thought of facing Mr. and Mrs. Callahan, who had once treated me like a daughter, made my chest tight. "Maybe. How's the business?"

"Callahan Construction is now Callahan Development," he said, a note of pride entering his voice. "We've expanded beyond just building houses. We do commercial projects, renovations, even some property management now."

"Wow. That's impressive." And it was. When we were together, Ethan had been uncertain about joining his father's construction company. He'd had dreams of architecture, of designing buildings, not just building them. "So you're running it now?"

"Co-running. Dad's still involved, but I handle most of the day-to-day." He paused. "And I did go to architecture school. Part-time while working for Dad. Got my degree three years ago."

Something warm unfurled in my chest at the knowledge that he'd pursued his dream after all. "Ethan, that's wonderful. I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks." For the first time, his smile seemed genuine. "What about you? Besides the job situation. Anything else new in your life?"

The question was casual, but I knew what he was really asking. Are you with someone? Are you married? Happy?

"I was engaged," I said, deciding honesty was the simplest approach. "It didn't work out."

His eyebrows rose slightly. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Are you?" The words slipped out before I could stop them.

He didn't answer immediately, those blue eyes studying me with an intensity that made me want to squirm. "I'm sorry you were hurt," he finally said. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Especially you."

The sincerity in his voice made something in my chest crack open. This was why I'd avoided coming home for so long. Not because I was still in love with Ethan Callahan—I wasn't, I couldn't be—but because he had always been able to see through me in a way no one else could.

"Liv," he started, his voice softer now, using the nickname that only he had ever called me.

"Don't," I said quickly. "It's fine. Ancient history, right? We were kids."

His expression shuttered. "Right. Kids."

Jen chose that moment to return, sliding back into the booth with a too-bright smile. "So! Have you two caught up? Isn't it great, both of you back in Riverbrook at the same time?"

"I never left," Ethan pointed out, his voice cooler now.

"Right, but Olivia did, and now she's back, so it's like a reunion!"

I could have strangled her.

"Actually," Ethan said, checking his watch, "I should get back to Tyler and Megan. They're probably wondering where I disappeared to." He stood up, towering over our table. "It was good seeing you, Olivia. Welcome back to Riverbrook."

"Thanks," I managed, relief and something like disappointment warring in my chest as he walked away.

As soon as he was out of earshot, I turned to Jen. "What the hell was that?"

"What?" she asked innocently. "I thought you two should talk. Clear the air."

"There's no air to clear. It's been ten years."

"Uh-huh. And you both acted totally normal and not at all like you're still hung up on each other."

"I am not hung up on Ethan Callahan," I hissed, aware that my volume was rising. I took a breath. "That relationship ended a long time ago. We've both moved on."

"Have you?" Jen asked, tilting her head. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you ran away to Seattle, got engaged to someone who is literally Ethan's opposite in every way, and when that fell apart, you came running back to the one place you swore you'd never return to."

I stared at her, feeling exposed. "That's not... It's more complicated than that."

"Then explain it to me," she said gently. "Because I'm your best friend, and even I don't understand what's going on with you lately."

I sighed, pushing my wine glass away. "Patrick and I weren't right for each other. We both knew it, but we kept trying to make it work because on paper, everything was

perfect. He's a successful attorney, I had a great job in publishing, we had this beautiful apartment with a view of the Sound..." I trailed off, remembering the hollow feeling that had taken up residence in my chest those last few months. "But it wasn't real. We were going through the motions."

"What happened?"

"I came home one day and found him sitting at the kitchen table with the ring box open. He looked at me and said, 'I don't think either of us wants this anymore.' And the worst part was, he was right. I was relieved." I swallowed hard. "We broke up that night. A week later, the publishing house announced the restructuring, and it felt like... I don't know, a sign or something."

"So you decided to come home."

Home. That word again.

"I decided to regroup," I corrected. "Figure out what I actually want instead of what I think I should want. And my parents have the space, so..."

"So you're starting over," Jen said, nodding. "That's brave, Liv."

"Is it? It feels more like running away."

"Maybe it's both." She reached for the menu. "Now, let's order. I'm starving, and they've added sweet potato fries since you left."

I was grateful for the change of subject, but as we ordered and chatted about easier topics—her job at the local bank, mutual friends, town gossip—I couldn't help but be aware of Ethan across the restaurant. He was laughing at something his brother had said, his head thrown back, the sound carrying across the room. I'd forgotten that laugh. How had I forgotten that laugh?

After dinner, Jen hugged me fiercely in the parking lot. "Don't be a stranger," she said. "No hiding out at your parents' house. We're getting coffee this weekend, and I'll fill you in on everything you've missed."

"Deal," I promised, knowing I needed at least one ally in town.

The drive home was short—everything in Riverbrook was short—but it gave me enough time to think about the unexpected twist my first night back had taken. Seeing Ethan had been inevitable, I supposed. Riverbrook wasn't big enough to avoid anyone for long. But I hadn't expected it to happen so soon, or for him to be so... Ethan. Still with

that quiet intensity, that ability to see right through me, that smile that had once been the center of my world.

My parents were already in bed when I got home, a small mercy. I wasn't ready to answer questions about my evening or who I'd seen. Instead, I crept up to my room and curled up on the unfamiliar bedspread, staring at the ceiling I'd stared at countless times as a teenager.

The last time I'd slept in this room, I'd cried myself to sleep, heartbroken and furious, counting the days until I could escape. I'd been so certain then that leaving was the right choice, the only choice. That staying in Riverbrook would mean settling, shrinking, becoming less than I could be.

Now, a decade later, I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

My phone buzzed with a text from an unknown number.

It really was good to see you, Liv. Whatever brought you back, I'm glad it did. —Ethan

I stared at the message for a long time, my finger hovering over the delete button. Then, against my better judgment, I saved the number and typed a response.

It was good to see you too. Congratulations on the architecture degree. You always did have good blueprint handwriting.

It was a silly thing to remember—how neat and precise his handwriting had been when he used to show me his sketches, how he could draw perfectly straight lines without a ruler. But it had been one of the things I'd loved about him, the care he took with everything he created.

His response came quickly: *You remembered that?*

I hesitated, then typed: *I remembered a lot of things.*

The three dots appeared and disappeared several times, as if he was typing and deleting responses. Finally: *Get some rest, Liv. Riverbrook will still be here in the morning.*

I put my phone down, unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed that he hadn't pushed for more conversation. As I drifted off to sleep, I realized that despite everything, despite the awkwardness and the history and the decade of distance, seeing Ethan Callahan had been the first time in months that I'd felt fully awake.

CHAPTER 3

I woke to sunlight streaming through curtains I'd forgotten to close and the smell of coffee wafting up from downstairs. For a disorienting moment, I didn't know where I was—not my apartment in Seattle, but somewhere both familiar and strange.

Home. Right.

I checked my phone out of habit, half-expecting (hoping?) to see another message from Ethan, but there was nothing. Just a reminder about a Zoom interview I'd scheduled for next week with a publishing house in Chicago. A backup plan, in case this "return to Riverbrook" experiment failed spectacularly.

After a quick shower, I headed downstairs to find my mom sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee and the local newspaper.

"Morning, honey," she said, looking up with a smile. "There's fresh coffee in the pot. Dad had to go into the store early—inventory day."

My father owned the only hardware store in Riverbrook, a business he'd taken over from his own father thirty years ago. Another Riverbrook tradition: staying put, taking over family businesses, building lives in the same small radius where you were born.

"Thanks," I said, pouring myself a cup. "Is that the Riverbrook Gazette? I can't believe that's still in print."

"Some things don't change," Mom said with a smile. "Though they do have a website now, if you can believe it. How was dinner with Jen last night?"

I hesitated, wondering if she already knew about my encounter with Ethan. In Riverbrook, it was a safe bet that she did.

"It was good. The Grill hasn't changed much."

"Mmm," she hummed noncommittally, watching me over the rim of her mug. "And did you see anyone else there?"

Definitely knew.

"A few people," I said vaguely. "Tyler Callahan and his fiancée. Ethan."

"Oh?" Her attempt at casual curiosity wasn't fooling anyone. "How is Ethan? I run into Joyce at the grocery store sometimes, but we don't really talk about the kids."

Joyce Callahan had once been my mom's closest friend, their relationship another casualty of whatever had happened between Ethan and me. The thought made me feel a fresh wave of guilt.

"He seemed good," I said, focusing on my coffee. "He's running the family business now. Got his architecture degree."

"That's wonderful," Mom said, and I could hear the genuine pleasure in her voice. She'd always had a soft spot for Ethan. "He's done so much with that company. Your father says they're responsible for most of the new development on the east side of town."

I nodded, remembering what Ethan had said about expanding beyond construction. "He mentioned that."

Mom set down her newspaper, fixing me with the look that had always seen through my evasions. "Olivia, I don't want to pry—"

"Then don't," I said, more sharply than I'd intended.

"But," she continued as if I hadn't spoken, "I hope you know you can talk to me. About anything. Including why you're really here."

I sighed, the fight going out of me. "I told you. The breakup, the job—"

"I know what you told me," she said gently. "But I'm your mother. I know when there's more to the story."

The thing was, there wasn't really more to the story—at least, not in the way she thought. There was no dramatic betrayal, no terrible secret driving me home. Just a slow accumulation of wrong choices and compromises until I'd looked around one day and realized I didn't recognize my own life anymore.

"I'm just... reevaluating," I said finally. "Taking some time to figure out what I actually want."

"And that brought you back to Riverbrook." It wasn't a question.

"It brought me back to you and Dad," I corrected. "The fact that you happen to live in Riverbrook is coincidental."

Mom smiled, seeing through my deflection. "Uh-huh. Well, whatever the reason, we're glad to have you. Take all the time you need to figure things out."

I was saved from having to respond by my phone ringing. It was Jen.

"Hey," I answered, grateful for the interruption.

"Don't hate me," she said without preamble.

I immediately tensed. "What did you do?"

"So you know how the Fall Festival is next weekend?"

The Riverbrook Fall Festival was an annual tradition—a weekend of hayrides, pumpkin carving, apple bobbing, and a harvest dance that had been happening since before I was born. As teenagers, Ethan and I had worked the festival together, volunteering at various booths before sneaking away to make out behind the cider stand.

"What about it?" I asked cautiously.

"Well, I'm on the planning committee this year, and we're short-handed, and I might have volunteered you to help with the decorations."

"Jen!" I exclaimed, drawing a curious look from my mother. "I've been back for less than twenty-four hours!"

"I know, I know, but we're desperate! Half the committee came down with that stomach bug that's going around the elementary school, and we need to get everything set up by next Friday. It's just a few hours of your time, and it'll help you reintegrate into town life."

"Who says I want to reintegrate?"

"Don't you?" she challenged. "Isn't that why you came back? To reconnect with your roots?"

"I came back because my parents have a free guest room and I'm unemployed," I reminded her.

"Semantics. So you'll do it?"

I glanced at my mom, who was pretending not to eavesdrop. "Fine," I sighed. "When and where?"

"Tomorrow at 10 AM, town square. Bring work gloves. You're the best! Love you, bye!"

She hung up before I could ask any more questions, which was probably intentional.

"Volunteering for the festival?" Mom asked, not even pretending she hadn't been listening.

"Apparently."

"That's wonderful! It'll be a great way for you to see everyone."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I muttered.

After breakfast, I decided to take a walk around town, reacquainting myself with the place I'd once known better than anywhere else. Riverbrook in autumn was undeniably beautiful—the streets lined with maples and oaks in brilliant shades of red and gold, the mountains in the distance already showing a dusting of snow on their peaks. The air was crisp and clear, carrying the scent of woodsmoke and fallen leaves.

I followed the familiar path down Main Street, past storefronts that had been there since my childhood, interspersed with a few new additions—a yoga studio, a fancy coffee shop that definitely hadn't existed when I left, a boutique selling artisanal candles and locally made jewelry.

Riverbrook had changed, I realized. Not dramatically, but in small ways that added up to something different than the town I'd left. It had grown, evolved, moved forward—just as I had. Just as Ethan had.

I found myself turning onto River Road, which wound along the water's edge. Without consciously deciding to, I ended up at Callahan Park, a small green space at the bend in the river. The park had been dedicated to Ethan's grandfather, who had donated the land to the town decades ago.

It was also where Ethan had first kissed me, the summer before our junior year of high school.

I sat on a bench overlooking the water, remembering that day with a clarity that surprised me. We'd been friends for years before that—our mothers were close, and we'd grown up together, moving from childhood playmates to teenage friends with an ease that had seemed natural at the time. But that day, something had shifted.

We'd been skipping stones across the river, competing to see who could get the most skips. Ethan had always been better at it, a fact that drove my competitive teenage self

crazy. After a particularly impressive seven-skip throw from him, I'd shoved him playfully, and he'd caught my hand, turning me to face him.

"I have a confession to make," he'd said, suddenly serious.

"What?" I'd asked, my heart inexplicably racing.

"I've been practicing stone-skipping every day for the past two weeks so I could impress you today."

"That's cheating!" I'd exclaimed, laughing.

"No, it's strategy," he'd corrected, still holding my hand. "And dedication."

"Dedication to what?"

"To you," he'd said simply, and then he'd kissed me, right there by the river, with the sun setting behind the mountains and the water rushing past us.

It had been a perfect moment—the kind that, even as it was happening, I knew I would remember forever.

"I thought I might find you here."

I startled at the voice, turning to find the very subject of my memories standing a few feet away, hands in the pockets of his jacket, watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Ethan," I said, my voice embarrassingly breathless. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here," he pointed out, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "The better question is what are you doing here?"

I gestured vaguely at the river. "Just... reacquainting myself with the town."

"And you ended up here," he said, his eyes never leaving my face. "Of all places."

I couldn't deny the significance, so I didn't try. "It's a nice park."

"It is," he agreed, then gestured to the empty space beside me on the bench. "May I?"

I nodded, scooting over slightly though there was plenty of room. He sat down, close enough that I could smell his cologne—something woodsy and clean that was different from what he'd worn as a teenager but suited the man he'd become.

"I hear Jen roped you into festival duty," he said, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

I groaned. "News travels fast."

"It's Riverbrook," he said with a shrug. "And Jen called me right after she called you."

"She called you? Why?"

He turned to look at me, those blue eyes catching the sunlight in a way that made my breath catch. "Because I'm on the committee too. Apparently, we're working together tomorrow."

Of course we were. Of course Jen had orchestrated this entire thing.

"Is that going to be a problem?" he asked when I didn't respond.

"No," I said quickly. "No, it's fine. It's just decorations, right? How hard can it be?"

His laugh was a low rumble that I felt more than heard. "You haven't changed, have you? Still underestimating the complexity of physical labor."

"Hey," I protested, "I've assembled plenty of IKEA furniture in my time. I'm practically a carpenter."

"Right, because putting together a bookshelf is exactly the same as building a festival booth."

"Wait, we're building booths? Jen said decorations!"

"Decorations, booths, lighting installations—it's all part of the setup," Ethan said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you get paired with someone who knows what they're doing."

"Someone other than you, you mean?" The words came out more flirtatiously than I'd intended.

Something flickered in his expression—surprise, maybe, or pleasure. "I'll be supervising the whole operation. Perks of owning the construction company that donates all the materials."

"Ah, so you're the boss now," I said, nodding. "Giving orders instead of taking them."

"Something like that." He paused, studying me. "So you're really back? For good?"

I looked away, focusing on the river. "I don't know about 'for good.' But I'm back for now."

"Because of the breakup?"

The direct question surprised me, though it shouldn't have. Ethan had never been one to dance around a subject.

"Partly," I admitted. "And the job situation. And just... needing a change, I guess."

"From Seattle? The city you always dreamed of living in?"

There was no bitterness in his voice, just genuine curiosity, but the question still stung. Because he was right—I had always talked about Seattle, about escaping to the Pacific Northwest, about building a life in a city where no one knew my history or had expectations based on who I'd been as a child.

"Dreams change," I said softly. "Sometimes what you think you want isn't what you need."

He was quiet for a long moment, both of us watching the river flow past. "I know what you mean," he finally said.

I turned to look at him, surprised by the admission. "You do?"

"Sure." He shrugged, a casual gesture that didn't match the intensity in his eyes. "I wanted to be an architect designing skyscrapers in New York or Chicago. Instead, I'm running a family construction business in the town where I grew up."

"But you got your degree," I pointed out. "You're doing what you love, just in a different context."

"Exactly." He smiled, a genuine smile that reached his eyes. "Sometimes the dream doesn't change, just the setting."

The way he was looking at me made me wonder if we were still talking about careers.

"I should get going," I said, suddenly needing space to think. "I promised my mom I'd help her with some gardening this afternoon."

"Sure," he said easily, standing when I did. "I'll see you tomorrow, then. Ten o'clock, town square."

"I'll be there. With work gloves, apparently."

"And closed-toe shoes," he added. "Safety first."

"Yes, boss," I said with a mock salute that made him laugh.

As I walked away, I could feel his eyes on me, and it took everything I had not to look back. Because the truth was, sitting next to Ethan Callahan on that bench had felt more right than anything had in a very long time, and that terrified me.

I'd come back to Riverbrook to figure out what I wanted, not to fall back into old patterns. Not to revisit a relationship that had ended for good reasons—hadn't it?

The problem was, I couldn't quite remember what those reasons were anymore.

CHAPTER 4

The town square was bustling with activity when I arrived the next morning, exactly at ten o'clock. Volunteers in matching "Riverbrook Fall Festival" t-shirts were unloading trucks, setting up tables, and organizing supplies. In the center of it all stood Ethan, clipboard in hand, giving directions with the easy confidence of someone used to managing large projects.

He spotted me almost immediately, raising a hand in greeting before excusing himself from the group he was talking to and making his way over.

"You made it," he said, sounding pleased. "And you brought gloves."

I held up my hands, showing off the gardening gloves I'd borrowed from my mom. "Safety first, right?"

"Right." He grinned, then turned to survey the square. "So, we've got a few different stations set up. The booth construction is happening over there," he pointed to an area where stacks of lumber and tools were organized, "lighting is along the perimeter, and decorations are being sorted near the gazebo."

"I'm guessing you're not putting me on construction duty?"

"Not unless you've developed carpentry skills in the last decade that I don't know about."

"IKEA furniture," I reminded him, making him laugh.

"Right. Well, as impressive as that is, I thought you might be more comfortable with the decorations team. We need someone with an eye for design to coordinate the autumn displays." He hesitated. "Unless you'd rather do something else?"

The consideration touched me. "No, decorations sound perfect."

"Great. Let me introduce you to the team." He led me toward the gazebo, where several people were unpacking boxes of artificial leaves, pumpkins, and corn stalks. "Everyone, this is Olivia Matthews. She's going to be helping with the displays. Olivia, this is the decorations committee."

I recognized a few faces from high school, though I couldn't remember all their names. A woman about my age with a short pixie cut stepped forward.

"Olivia! It's so good to see you again. It's been forever." She pulled me into a hug before I could respond. "It's Melissa. Melissa Jenkins? We had AP English together senior year."

"Of course," I said, the memory clicking into place. "You wrote that amazing analysis of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' that Mrs. Hoffman made us all read."

Melissa beamed. "You remember that? God, that feels like a lifetime ago. I'm a high school English teacher now, if you can believe it."

"I can absolutely believe it," I said, smiling at how perfectly that career suited the girl who had always had the most thoughtful literary insights.

"Melissa's our creative director for the festival," Ethan explained. "She's got the vision for how everything should look."

"More like I'm the only one who cared enough to make a Pinterest board," Melissa said with a laugh. "But I'm happy to have another set of eyes. Sometimes I think these guys would be fine with just throwing some pumpkins around and calling it a day."

Ethan raised his hands in surrender. "I'm a builder, not a designer. That's why I brought in reinforcements." He checked his watch. "I need to get back to the construction team, but you're in good hands with Melissa. I'll check in later."

As he walked away, Melissa leaned in conspiratorially. "So. You and Ethan, huh?"

"What? No," I said quickly. "There's no 'me and Ethan.' We're just... old friends."

"Uh-huh," she said, her skepticism obvious. "That's why he's been watching the entrance like a hawk for the past half hour, and why his whole face lit up when you arrived."

"It did not," I protested, though a warm flutter started in my stomach at the thought.

"If you say so," Melissa said with a knowing smile. "Come on, let me show you what we're working with."

For the next few hours, I lost myself in the work of sorting decorations, arranging displays, and helping create what Melissa called "Instagrammable moments" throughout the festival grounds. It was satisfying, creative work, and I found myself enjoying the camaraderie of the volunteer team.

Occasionally, I'd glance over to where Ethan was working with the construction crew, directing the assembly of the wooden booths that would house various vendors during the festival. More than once, I caught him looking back at me, and each time, a little jolt of electricity would run through me.

Around noon, Jen arrived with bags of sandwiches and drinks for the volunteers.

"Look at you, all covered in fake autumn leaves," she teased, handing me a sandwich and a bottle of water. "Having fun?"

"Actually, yes," I admitted, surprised to realize it was true. "It feels good to be doing something physical after months of staring at a computer screen."

"I knew you'd enjoy it," she said smugly. "And working with Melissa is great, right? She's so creative."

"She is," I agreed. "Though she has some interesting theories about me and Ethan."

Jen's innocent expression didn't fool me for a second. "Oh? What kind of theories?"

"You know exactly what kind." I took a bite of my sandwich to avoid elaborating.

"Well, can you blame her? The two of you have been stealing glances at each other all morning. The chemistry is palpable."

"There's no chemistry," I insisted. "Just... complicated history."

"Mmm-hmm. And what does your fiancé think about this complicated history?"

"Ex-fiancé," I corrected automatically, then frowned. "Wait, what does Patrick have to do with anything?"

Jen nodded toward something behind me. "Because he's standing right over there."

I whipped around so fast I nearly spilled my water. And there he was—Patrick Sullivan, in his perfectly tailored wool coat and designer shoes, looking as out of place in Riverbrook's town square as a peacock in a chicken coop.

"What the hell?" I whispered, feeling the blood drain from my face.

"You didn't know he was coming?" Jen asked, suddenly concerned.

"No," I said, still staring. "We haven't spoken in weeks."

Patrick hadn't spotted me yet. He was looking around the square with a slightly bewildered expression, like a tourist who'd taken a wrong turn.

"What should I do?" I asked, feeling uncharacteristically panicked.

"Talk to him?" Jen suggested. "Find out why he's here?"

"Right. Talk to him. In the middle of the town square. With everyone watching." Including Ethan, who I could see had also noticed the newcomer and was observing with a frown.

Before I could decide on a course of action, Patrick turned and saw me. His face broke into a relieved smile, and he started walking over.

"Olivia," he called, his voice carrying across the square in a way that made several heads turn. "There you are!"

"Patrick," I said, trying to keep my voice neutral. "What are you doing here?"

He reached us, glancing curiously at Jen before focusing on me. "I came to see you, of course. When you weren't at your parents' house, they said you might be here." He looked around at the festival preparations. "What is all this?"

"The Fall Festival," I explained, feeling strangely defensive. "I'm volunteering."

"I can see that," he said, taking in my casual clothes and gardening gloves with barely concealed surprise. This from the man who'd once asked if my "dressed down" outfit of jeans and a sweater was what I wore to clean the apartment.

"Patrick, this is my friend Jen," I said, remembering my manners. "Jen, this is Patrick."

"The ex-fiancé," Jen said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I've heard so much about you."

Patrick looked momentarily taken aback by her directness, but recovered quickly. "All good things, I hope."

"Mmm," Jen hummed noncommittally.

An awkward silence fell.

"Could we talk?" Patrick finally asked, turning back to me. "Privately?"

I glanced at Jen, who gave a subtle nod of encouragement. "Sure," I said. "Let me just let Melissa know I'm taking a break."

After a quick word with Melissa, who was clearly burning with curiosity, I led Patrick away from the town square toward a small coffee shop on the corner.

"What are you really doing here, Patrick?" I asked once we were seated with our drinks—an almond milk latte for him, black coffee for me.

He fidgeted with his cup, a nervous gesture I'd rarely seen from him. Patrick Sullivan, attorney at law, was always composed, always in control.

"I've been thinking about us," he finally said. "About how things ended."

"We both agreed it was for the best," I reminded him.

"Did we? Or did we just give up without really trying?"

I stared at him, genuinely confused. "Patrick, you were the one who said we weren't right for each other."

"I know, I know," he said, running a hand through his perfectly styled hair. "But I've had time to think, and I realized that maybe I was hasty. We had a good life together, Olivia. A beautiful apartment, promising careers, similar goals—"

"But we weren't happy," I cut in. "At least, I wasn't. Were you?"

He hesitated, and in that hesitation, I found my answer.

"We were comfortable," he finally said. "And I think happiness is overrated. Most people don't find that storybook romance they dream about. They find someone compatible and build a life together."

"Is that what you want? Compatibility over connection?"

"I want a partner who understands the kind of life I'm building," he said. "Someone who shares my values and ambitions." He reached across the table to take my hand. "Someone like you."

A month ago, his words might have swayed me. A month ago, I was still trying to convince myself that what we had was enough, that the hollowness I felt was just pre-wedding jitters or career frustration, not a fundamental mismatch of souls.

But now, sitting across from him in this small-town coffee shop, with the memory of Ethan's laugh still fresh in my mind, I could see the truth with painful clarity.

"Patrick," I said gently, pulling my hand away, "I care about you. I always will. But we want different things, and pretending otherwise won't make either of us happy."

"What do you want, then?" he asked, a hint of frustration entering his voice. "To stay in this... this postcard town? To give up everything you've worked for?"

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "That's why I'm here. To figure it out."

He laughed, a short, disbelieving sound. "You're having a quarter-life crisis, Olivia. It happens. But you don't solve it by running back to your hometown and playing pretend with old high school flames."

I stiffened. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw the way that construction guy was looking at you," Patrick said. "And the way you were looking back. Let me guess—the one who got away?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," I said, though the accuracy of his assessment stung.

"Don't I? It's classic. Successful career hits a bump, engagement ends, so you run home to see if the road not taken might have been better after all." He shook his head. "But that's not real life, Olivia. That's a Hallmark movie."

His words hit uncomfortably close to home. Was that what I was doing? Using Riverbrook—using Ethan—as an escape from my real life and real problems?

"I think you should go," I said, standing up. "You came a long way for nothing."

Patrick looked up at me, his expression softening. "I came because I care about you. Because I think we were good together, and we could be again."

"We weren't good together," I said, the truth of it settling in my chest. "We were good on paper. There's a difference."

He stood, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small velvet box—the engagement ring I'd returned to him the night we broke up.

"Think about it," he said, placing the box on the table. "I'll be at the Riverbrook Inn until tomorrow. If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

Without waiting for a response, he walked out, leaving me staring at the ring box and the half-finished latte he'd abandoned.

I sat back down, suddenly exhausted. What was I doing? What did I want?

The bell above the coffee shop door jingled, and I looked up to see Ethan standing there, his expression a careful neutral that didn't quite hide his concern.

"Jen sent me to check on you," he said, approaching my table slowly, as if giving me time to send him away if I wanted. "She was worried."

"I'm fine," I said automatically, then sighed. "Actually, that's not true. I'm confused."

His eyes fell to the ring box on the table, and something flickered across his face—pain? resignation?—before he schooled his features.

"Your fiancé wants you back," he said. Not a question.

"Ex-fiancé," I corrected. "And yes, apparently he does."

Ethan nodded, hands in his pockets. "And what do you want?"

The echo of Patrick's question made me pause. What did I want?

"I don't know," I admitted. "That's the problem. I thought I knew, and then everything fell apart, and now I'm just... lost."

Ethan was quiet for a moment, then pulled out the chair Patrick had vacated and sat down. "Can I tell you something?"

I nodded.

"When I was in architecture school, one of my professors had us do this exercise. We had to design our dream house—not for a client, not for a grade, but for ourselves. Where would we live if we could live anywhere? What would matter to us? Would we prioritize a view, or privacy, or community? Would we want something modern or traditional? Big or small?"

"What did you design?" I asked, curious despite myself.

A small smile played at his lips. "A cabin by the river. Simple, practical, with big windows to let in the light and a wraparound porch where I could sit and watch the water."

"That sounds beautiful," I said, able to picture it perfectly.

"It was. But that's not the point of the story." He leaned forward, his blue eyes intent on mine. "The point is, when my professor looked at all our designs, he said something I've never forgotten. He said, 'Your house reflects your values. It shows what matters to you, what you're willing to compromise on, and what you're not.'"

I considered this. "And you value simplicity, nature, tranquility."

"Yes," he agreed. "But more importantly, I learned that I value being true to myself over impressing others. My classmates were designing glass mansions and urban penthouses, trying to show off their technical skills. I just designed a place where I would be happy."

"And the moral of this architecture parable is...?" I asked, though I thought I already knew.

"The moral is, when you're building a life, just like when you're building a house, you have to start with a clear understanding of what matters to you. Not what should matter, not what matters to someone else, but what truly matters to you."

I looked down at the ring box, then back at Ethan. "And if I don't know?"

He shrugged. "Then you figure it out. You try things. You make mistakes. You redesign. But you don't move into someone else's dream house just because it looks good from the outside."

The metaphor was getting a bit strained, but I understood what he was saying. And he was right.

"When did you get so wise?" I asked, trying for lightness but hearing the tremor in my own voice.

He smiled, that warm, genuine smile that had always made me feel like everything would be okay. "Around the time I stopped fighting against who I really am and what I really want."

"And what do you want, Ethan?" The question slipped out before I could stop it.

He held my gaze for a long moment, something unspoken passing between us. Then he stood up, breaking the spell.

"Right now, I want to finish building those festival booths before the sun sets," he said. "Are you coming back to help?"

I looked at the ring box one more time, then left it sitting on the table as I stood up. "Lead the way."

As we walked back to the town square, I felt lighter somehow, as if I'd set down a burden I hadn't realized I was carrying. I didn't have all the answers yet, but for the first time in a long time, I felt like I was asking the right questions.

And that was a start.

CHAPTER 5

The rest of the week passed in a blur of festival preparations, job applications, and careful navigation of the small-town social landscape. Patrick had left as promised, texting me only once to say that he understood my decision and wished me well. The finality of it was both sad and relieving—the definitive end of a chapter in my life.

I'd thrown myself into volunteering for the festival, working alongside Melissa and the decorations team to transform the town square into an autumn wonderland. The work was satisfying in a way that my publishing job hadn't been for a long time—immediate, tangible, collaborative.

And if I found excuses to coordinate with the construction team more often than strictly necessary, well, that was just good project management.

Ethan and I had settled into a cautious friendship, our interactions friendly but careful, both of us seemingly aware of the unresolved current running beneath the surface. We didn't talk about the past, about what had gone wrong, about the decade spent apart. Instead, we focused on the present—on festival logistics, on town gossip, on rediscovering the easy conversation that had always been a cornerstone of our relationship.

By Friday morning, the festival grounds were nearly complete. The wooden booths stood in neat rows, decorated with corn stalks, artificial leaves, and twinkling lights. The gazebo had been transformed into a photo spot, with a swing draped in autumn flowers and a backdrop of fall foliage. Around the perimeter, hay bales created seating areas, and strings of Edison bulbs crisscrossed overhead, ready to illuminate the square when evening fell.

"It looks amazing," I told Melissa as we surveyed our work. "I can't believe we pulled this off in a week."

"We make a good team," she agreed. "You should consider joining the committee permanently."

I laughed. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I don't even know how long I'll be in town."

"Right," she said, giving me a knowing look. "Still 'just visiting.'"

Before I could respond, Ethan approached, clipboard in hand. "Final inspection time, ladies. Anything that needs last-minute attention before we open tomorrow morning?"

Melissa and I exchanged glances. "I think we're good on decorations," I said. "Everything's secured and weather-resistant, as requested."

"Perfect." He made a note on his clipboard. "Melissa, can you double-check the vendor assignments? Make sure everyone knows where they're setting up tomorrow?"

"On it," she said, heading toward the information booth where the festival map was displayed.

That left Ethan and me alone, standing amid the festive decorations that would soon be filled with townspeople and visitors.

"It really does look great," he said, looking around with satisfaction. "Better than last year."

"I'll take full credit for that," I joked.

"As you should." He smiled, then hesitated. "Listen, I wanted to ask you something."

My heart did a little flip. "Oh?"

"The festival officially kicks off tomorrow morning, but there's a sort of... pre-festival tradition tonight. A dinner for all the volunteers at The Grill. Nothing fancy, just a thank-you for everyone's hard work."

"Okay," I said, not sure where he was going with this.

He shifted his weight, suddenly looking less like the confident construction boss and more like the slightly awkward boy I remembered. "I was wondering if you'd like to go. With me."

"With you," I repeated. "Like, together?"

"Yeah." He met my eyes directly. "Like a date."

The word hung in the air between us, charged with meaning and memory.

"Ethan," I started, then paused, unsure what to say. We'd been carefully avoiding anything that felt too personal, too close to the wounds of the past. A date was definitely crossing that line.

"It's just dinner," he said quickly. "No pressure. I just thought... it might be nice to talk. Really talk. Outside of all this." He gestured to the festival grounds around us.

I thought about the careful distance we'd been maintaining, the unspoken questions that lingered whenever we were together. Maybe it was time to address them head-on.

"Okay," I said, surprising myself with how right the decision felt. "I'd like that."

His smile was like the sun coming out. "Great. I'll pick you up at seven?"

"I'll be ready."

As he walked away to continue his inspection rounds, I felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension. This wasn't just dinner with an old friend. This was a step toward something—reconciliation, closure, or maybe something new entirely.

When I got home, I found my mom in the kitchen, making what appeared to be enough cookies to feed a small army.

"Festival bake sale," she explained when she saw me eyeing the cooling racks that covered every available surface. "I'm in charge of chocolate chip this year."

"Need help?" I offered, washing my hands at the sink.

"Always." She handed me a mixing bowl. "You can start on the next batch. The recipe is on the counter."

We worked in comfortable silence for a few minutes, me measuring ingredients while she transferred cooled cookies to containers.

"So," she said eventually, "Jen tells me you've been spending a lot of time with Ethan this week."

I should have known. "We're both working on the festival," I said neutrally. "The whole committee has been spending time together."

"Mmm-hmm." She gave me a sidelong glance. "And is the whole committee taking you to dinner tonight?"

I nearly dropped the measuring cup of flour. "How did you—"

"Riverbrook," she reminded me with a smile. "No secrets."

I sighed, resigned to the lack of privacy. "It's just dinner, Mom. To catch up."

"Of course," she said, though her tone suggested she didn't believe me for a second. "You know, your father and I always liked Ethan."

"I know, Mom."

"He's done very well for himself. Built that business up from a small local operation to something really impressive. Did you know they're doing projects all the way in Springfield now?"

"I didn't," I said, genuinely surprised. Springfield was the nearest city, about an hour away—not huge, but significantly larger than Riverbrook.

"Oh yes. The new community center there was a Callahan project. Won some kind of award, I think."

Pride bloomed in my chest, followed by a twinge of something like regret. I'd missed so much of Ethan's life, his accomplishments, his growth into the man he'd become.

"That's wonderful," I said, focusing on mixing the cookie dough.

Mom was quiet for a moment, then said carefully, "You know, whatever happened between you two back then... you were both so young."

I tensed. We didn't talk about this—not when I left for college, not during my brief visits home, not ever.

"Mom—"

"I'm not prying," she said quickly. "I just... I've always wondered if maybe there was a misunderstanding. Something that could have been fixed if you'd both been a little older, a little wiser."

The truth was, I'd wondered the same thing many times over the years. But admitting that felt too vulnerable, even to my mother.

"It was a long time ago," I said instead. "We're different people now."

"Are you?" she asked softly. "Or are you maybe the same people who just took a detour?"

Before I could respond, my phone rang—Jen's ringtone. Grateful for the interruption, I wiped my hands on a towel and answered.

"Emergency fashion consultation needed," Jen announced without preamble. "I'm coming over in twenty minutes with options for your date."

"It's not a—" I began, then sighed. "How many people know about this?"

"Hmm, let's see... me, your mom, Melissa, probably Tyler by now, which means his fiancée knows, so... everyone?"

"Fantastic," I muttered.

"Small town, big news," Jen said cheerfully. "Now, are we thinking casual cute or knockout gorgeous for this reunion date?"

"It's dinner at The Grill, Jen. With the entire festival committee."

"Yes, but it's also the first time you and Ethan have officially gone on a date in ten years. This is historic."

I glanced at my mom, who was pretending not to listen while methodically arranging cookies, a small smile playing at her lips.

"Just bring options," I said, defeated. "I'll see you in twenty."

True to her word, Jen arrived exactly twenty minutes later with what appeared to be half her closet.

"I wasn't sure about sizes, so I brought a range," she explained, laying outfits across my bed. "We're similar enough that something should work."

"Jen, this is way too much," I protested, eyeing a particularly sparkly top with alarm. "It's a casual dinner."

"There's no such thing as too much when it comes to second-chance romance," she declared, holding up a burgundy sweater dress against me. "This could work. Autumnal, figure-flattering, but not trying too hard."

I took the dress, surprised to find that I actually liked it. "This isn't bad."

"Try it on," she urged. "And these boots would go perfectly." She produced a pair of suede ankle boots with a modest heel.

When I emerged from the bathroom wearing the outfit, Jen's expression was all the confirmation I needed.

"Yes," she said decisively. "Absolutely yes. You look incredible."

The dress was more fitted than I usually wore, but the color was flattering against my skin, and the length was perfect with the boots.

"Are you sure it's not too much?" I asked, turning to see the back in the mirror.

"It's exactly right," Jen assured me. "Ethan won't know what hit him."

The thought of Ethan's reaction made my stomach flutter with a mixture of anticipation and nerves. This was silly—we'd known each other our whole lives, had dated for two years in high school, had seen each other at our worst and best. And yet, the prospect of this dinner felt momentous in a way I couldn't quite explain.

"What am I doing, Jen?" I asked softly, sitting on the edge of my bed.

She sat beside me, her expression turning serious. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... all of this. Coming back to Riverbrook, agreeing to this date... am I just running backward because I'm afraid to move forward?"

Jen considered this, taking more time with her answer than I expected. "I don't think so," she finally said. "I think you're giving yourself space to figure out what you really want, without the pressure of trying to be someone you're not."

"And what if what I want is here? In the place I spent a decade trying to escape?"

She smiled. "Then you'd have to admit that sometimes the universe has a sense of humor. And that growing up doesn't always mean leaving everything behind."

I thought about that as I finished getting ready, applying light makeup and styling my hair in loose waves. Maybe Jen was right. Maybe coming back wasn't an admission of failure or a retreat from real life. Maybe it was just another path forward, one that happened to circle back to where I began.

At exactly seven o'clock, the doorbell rang. I heard my father answer it, followed by the low murmur of masculine voices. When I came downstairs, I found Ethan in the foyer, chatting easily with my dad about the festival setup.

He looked up when he heard me on the stairs, and the conversation died mid-sentence. He was wearing dark jeans and a blue button-down shirt that matched his eyes, his hair slightly damp as if he'd just showered. He looked good—really good—and the appreciation in his gaze as he took in my appearance made me glad I'd let Jen talk me into the dress.

"Wow," he said simply. "You look beautiful, Liv."

The nickname, spoken so naturally, sent a warm current through me. "Thanks. You clean up pretty well yourself."

Dad cleared his throat. "Well, you two should get going. Don't want to be late."

"We'll be fine, Mr. Matthews," Ethan assured him. "I won't keep her out too late."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, she's twenty-eight, not eighteen," Mom called from the kitchen. "Have fun, you two!"

Ethan grinned, offering me his arm. "Ready?"

I took it, feeling oddly formal and yet completely at ease. "Ready."

The drive to The Grill was short, filled with easy conversation about the festival and final preparations. Ethan's truck was newer than the one he'd had in high school, but it still smelled the same—like sawdust and that woodsy cologne he wore.

"I should warn you," he said as we pulled into the parking lot, "there's going to be a lot of interest in... this." He gestured between us.

"This?" I echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"You know what I mean. Us, together. It's going to fuel the gossip mill for weeks."

I laughed. "I figured as much when Jen showed up with half her wardrobe and a detailed plan for my makeup."

"So you're okay with it? The attention?"

I considered the question. A week ago, I might have said no. A week ago, I was still trying to keep my distance, to maintain the fiction that I was just passing through, that Riverbrook and its inhabitants—especially Ethan—were temporary fixtures in my life.

But something had shifted. Maybe it was the work on the festival, maybe it was the conversation in the coffee shop, maybe it was just the inevitable gravity of returning to a place that had shaped so much of who I was.

"I think I am," I said, surprising myself with the truth of it. "Are you?"

He smiled, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering against my cheek for a moment. "Liv, I've been hoping for a second chance with you for ten years. A little town gossip is the least of my concerns."

The simple honesty of his statement took my breath away. Before I could respond, he got out of the truck and came around to open my door, offering his hand to help me down.

As we walked into The Grill, I was acutely aware of his hand at the small of my back, a gentle, protective gesture that felt both new and familiar. The restaurant was already crowded with festival volunteers, many of whom turned to look when we entered.

"There they are!" Melissa called, waving us over to a large table in the corner. "We were starting to think you weren't coming."

"Just fashionably late," Ethan said easily, pulling out a chair for me before taking the seat beside me.

Dinner was a lively affair, with conversations flowing freely around the table. I found myself enjoying the sense of community, the inside jokes, the shared excitement about tomorrow's festival. It was different from my life in Seattle, where my social circle had consisted mainly of Patrick's law colleagues and a few work friends.

Throughout the meal, Ethan was attentive but not overbearing, his knee occasionally brushing against mine under the table, his hand sometimes resting on the back of my chair. Small touches that felt significant, intentional.

As coffee and dessert were served, the mayor stopped by our table to thank everyone for their hard work. "The festival looks better than ever," he said, his gaze landing on me. "And it's wonderful to have Olivia Matthews back in town to help. I hope we'll be seeing more of you, young lady."

"Thank you, Mayor Johnson," I said, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks at being singled out. "It's been a pleasure to be involved."

After the mayor moved on, the conversation at our table turned to tomorrow's schedule, with Melissa assigning final tasks and check-in times.

"Ethan, you're on troubleshooting duty," she said. "Anything breaks, leaks, or falls down, you're the first call."

"As usual," he said with a good-natured shrug.

"And Olivia, would you mind helping with the welcome booth in the morning? We're short-handed for the first shift."

"Happy to," I agreed.

As the dinner wound down, people began to leave in twos and threes, until just a few of us remained.

"We should probably head out too," Ethan said, checking his watch. "Early morning tomorrow."

We said our goodbyes and walked back to his truck, the night air crisp and cool after the warmth of the restaurant.

"So," he said as we drove, "official festival business aside, would you like to go somewhere else? Just the two of us?"

The question hung in the air, full of possibility.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

He smiled, that familiar half-smile that had always made my heart skip. "You'll see."

Ten minutes later, we were parked at Lookout Point, a scenic overlook above the town that had been a popular spot for teenagers when we were in high school. From here, the lights of Riverbrook spread out below us like stars, the river a silver ribbon winding through the valley.

"I can't believe this place still exists," I said as we got out of the truck. "I half expected it to be a housing development by now."

"It almost was," Ethan said, retrieving a blanket from behind the seat. "A developer from Springfield wanted to build luxury homes up here a few years ago."

"What happened?"

He spread the blanket on the hood of the truck and helped me up to sit on it. "Callahan Development happened. We bought the land instead."

I turned to him in surprise. "You own Lookout Point?"

"The company does," he corrected. "We donated it to the town as a conservation easement. It can never be developed now."

"Ethan, that's... that's incredible." I was genuinely moved by the gesture, by the commitment to preserving a piece of Riverbrook's character.

He shrugged, climbing up to sit beside me. "It was the right thing to do. Some places shouldn't change."

We sat in comfortable silence for a while, looking out over the town where we'd both grown up, where our histories were intertwined in ways that couldn't be undone.

"Why did you really ask me out tonight, Ethan?" I finally asked, turning to face him.

He considered the question, his expression thoughtful in the moonlight. "Because I've missed you," he said simply. "Not just since you came back, but for ten years. And because I think we left things unfinished."

"Unfinished," I repeated. "That's one way to put it."

"How would you put it?"

I took a deep breath, finally ready to address what we'd been dancing around all week. "I'd say we broke each other's hearts and never really talked about why."

He nodded slowly. "That's fair. So let's talk about it now."

The directness of his approach caught me off guard, though it shouldn't have. Ethan had always been straightforward, preferring to address problems head-on rather than letting them fester.

"Okay," I agreed. "But it's been a long time. I'm not sure I even remember all the details anymore."

"I do," he said quietly. "I remember everything."

The intensity in his voice made me shiver, and he immediately took off his jacket, draping it over my shoulders. The gesture was so automatic, so caring, that it made my throat tight.

"We were supposed to go to college together," I started, pulling his jacket closer around me. "That was always the plan. Apply to the same schools, get an apartment together, build a life."

"Until you got into Berkeley," he said, nodding. "Full scholarship."

"And you got into State," I continued. "With the construction management program you wanted."

"But Berkeley was your dream," he said. "The English program, the Bay Area, the chance to get out of Riverbrook."

I nodded, remembering the excitement I'd felt when the acceptance letter arrived. "I wanted you to come with me. To apply for a transfer, at least try."

"And I couldn't," he said softly. "Dad's first heart attack happened that spring. The business was struggling. Tyler was still in high school. They needed me here."

"I know," I said, because I had known, even then. "But I needed to go. I couldn't stay in Riverbrook, not then."

"So we were at an impasse," Ethan said. "You couldn't stay, and I couldn't leave."

"We could have tried long distance," I pointed out. "Other couples do it."

He was quiet for a moment. "Is that what you wanted? To try?"

The question took me back to that summer after graduation, to tearful arguments and desperate compromises, to the growing realization that our paths were diverging in ways we couldn't control.

"I think I did," I admitted. "But I was also scared. Scared that the distance would change us, that we'd grow apart, that we'd end up resenting each other."

"So you ended it," he said, not accusingly, just stating a fact. "The night before you left for California."

The memory was still painful, even after all these years. The way he'd looked at me when I said we should break up cleanly, make a fresh start. The way he'd argued, then pleaded, then finally accepted it with a quiet dignity that had broken my heart all over again.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," I said softly. "Setting us both free to become who we were meant to be, without being tied to the past."

"And were you?" he asked. "Free?"

I looked out over the town, considering the question. "I don't know. I built a life in Seattle. I had a career, friends, a fiancé. On paper, it was everything I thought I wanted."

"But?"

"But something was always missing," I admitted, finally saying aloud what I'd barely acknowledged to myself. "Some essential connection that I couldn't find, no matter how hard I looked."

He turned to face me fully, his eyes searching mine in the moonlight. "Liv, I need to tell you something. Something I should have told you ten years ago."

My heart raced. "What is it?"

"I was going to transfer to Berkeley," he said. "I'd already started the application process. I was going to surprise you with it at graduation."

I stared at him, stunned. "But... your family, the business—"

"I'd worked it out with Dad. I was going to take classes part-time, come home during breaks to help with the business. It would have taken me longer to graduate, but I was willing to do it." He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of frustration that hadn't changed in a decade. "And then Dad had the heart attack, and everything changed. By the time he was stable, you were already talking about making a clean break."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

"I tried, that last night. But you were so convinced that breaking up was the right thing, so determined to start fresh without looking back. And part of me thought maybe you were right—that holding onto each other would just make it harder for both of us."

I closed my eyes, remembering how final I'd been, how certain that I knew what was best for both of us. I'd been eighteen, headed to my dream school, convinced that the world was waiting for me beyond Riverbrook's borders. And Ethan, loyal to his core, had let me go.

"I'm sorry," I said, opening my eyes to find him watching me with an expression that made my heart ache. "I was young and stupid and scared."

"We both were," he said gently. "I could have fought harder. Could have followed you to California anyway, once Dad was better. But I convinced myself that you were better off without me, that I'd just hold you back."

"You never could have held me back," I said fiercely. "You were the one person who always pushed me forward, who believed I could do anything."

"And I still do," he said, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "Look at you—successful editor, published writer, the same brilliant, determined Olivia I fell in love with when we were sixteen."

The casual mention of love, spoken as if it were an established fact, made my breath catch. "Ethan—"

"I'm not saying this to pressure you," he said quickly. "I know you're figuring things out, deciding what's next. I just... I wanted you to know the truth. About what happened then, and about how I feel now."

"And how do you feel now?" I asked, hardly daring to hope.

He smiled, that warm, genuine smile that had always been my undoing. "I feel like I've been given a second chance that I never expected. And I don't want to waste it."

Slowly, giving me every opportunity to pull away, he leaned in. When his lips met mine, it was like coming home after a long journey—familiar and new all at once, a recognition of everything we'd been and everything we could be.

I wound my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss, feeling the years between us melt away. He tasted the same, felt the same, his hands on my waist as sure and steady as they'd ever been.

When we finally broke apart, both breathless, he rested his forehead against mine. "I've wanted to do that since the moment I saw you in the town square," he admitted.

I laughed softly. "I've wanted you to do that since the moment I saw you at The Grill my first night back."

"We've wasted a lot of time," he said, his thumb tracing my cheekbone.

"We've lived a lot of life," I corrected. "Become people who might fit better now than we did then."

He smiled against my lips. "Always the optimist."

"One of us has to be," I teased, recalling our old dynamic—me always looking forward, him more cautious, more grounded.

We stayed at Lookout Point for another hour, talking and kissing and rediscovering each other under the stars. It was easy, being with Ethan—easier than I remembered, without the insecurities and drama of adolescence clouding things.

As he drove me home, his hand resting on mine between the seats, I felt a sense of possibility that had been missing from my life for too long. I didn't know what the future held—whether I'd stay in Riverbrook or return to the city, whether this rekindled connection with Ethan would last or fade—but for the first time in years, I was excited to find out.

At my parents' door, he kissed me goodnight, a sweet, lingering kiss that promised more to come.

"See you tomorrow?" he asked. "At the festival?"

I nodded, reluctant to let the evening end. "Bright and early. Welcome booth duty."

"I'll bring you coffee," he promised. "The good kind, from that new place on Main."

"It's a date," I said, the word feeling significant and right.

As I watched him drive away, I realized I was smiling—really smiling, the kind that came from deep inside. Whatever happened next, tonight had been a gift. A chance to heal old wounds, to understand what had gone wrong, and maybe, just maybe, to start writing a new chapter together.

I went inside, closing the door softly behind me, my heart fuller than it had been in a very long time.

CHAPTER 6

The morning of the Fall Festival dawned bright and clear, the kind of perfect autumn day that seemed almost too good to be true. I'd barely slept, my mind replaying every moment of the previous evening—Ethan's revelations, the kiss at Lookout Point, the sense of possibility that had been missing from my life for too long.

When I came downstairs, Mom took one look at my face and smiled knowingly.

"Good night?" she asked, setting a cup of coffee in front of me.

"It was nice," I said, trying for casual and failing miserably.

"Mmm-hmm." She busied herself with packing cookies for the bake sale. "Your father and I will be at the festival around noon. He's helping with the parking situation this morning."

"I'll look for you," I promised. "I'm at the welcome booth until one, then I'm free to wander."

"With Ethan?" she asked innocently.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't suppress a smile. "Maybe. We didn't make specific plans."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find each other," she said with confidence. "You always did."

It was true. Throughout high school, no matter how crowded an event was, Ethan and I had always somehow gravitated toward each other, as if pulled by some invisible force. I wondered if that same magnetism would still be at work today.

I arrived at the festival grounds just before nine, when the vendors were still setting up and the volunteers were making final preparations. The town square looked even more beautiful in the morning light, the autumn decorations glowing in the golden sunshine, the strings of lights ready for when evening fell.

The welcome booth was a small wooden structure near the main entrance, decorated with a garland of artificial leaves and a large "WELCOME TO THE RIVERBROOK FALL FESTIVAL" sign. Inside, I found Melissa arranging maps and programs.

"Morning, sunshine," she greeted me. "You look suspiciously well-rested for someone who was out late with Ethan Callahan."

"Good morning to you too," I said, hanging my jacket on a hook. "And I wasn't out that late."

"Details, please," she demanded, handing me a stack of programs to fold. "The entire town is dying to know if Riverbrook's original golden couple is back on."

I felt my cheeks warm. "I wouldn't go that far. We're... exploring possibilities."

"Exploring possibilities," she repeated, raising an eyebrow. "Is that what they call it these days?"

"Melissa!"

She laughed. "I'm just teasing. But seriously, I think it's great. You two always made sense together, even back in high school. And the way he looks at you... well, let's just say some things haven't changed."

Before I could respond, the man himself appeared at the booth, carrying two coffee cups and wearing a smile that made my heart skip.

"Morning, ladies," Ethan said, handing me one of the coffees. "As promised. Vanilla latte, extra shot, no foam."

"You remembered my coffee order?" I asked, genuinely touched. It had been a decade since we'd done something as mundane as getting coffee together.

"Some things stick with you," he said with a shrug, though his eyes held mine with an intensity that suggested he remembered a lot more than just how I took my coffee.

Melissa looked between us, then dramatically cleared her throat. "Well, I suddenly need to be anywhere but here. Olivia, I'll be back before the gates open. Ethan, try not to distract my booth partner too much."

She slipped out, leaving us alone in the small space.

"Hi," Ethan said softly, stepping closer.

"Hi yourself," I replied, taking a sip of the perfectly prepared latte. "Thanks for this."

"You're welcome." He reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, the gesture becoming familiar again. "Sleep well?"

"Not really," I admitted. "Too much on my mind."

"Good things, I hope?"

I smiled. "Very good things."

He glanced around the empty booth, then back at me, his intent clear. I nodded slightly, and he leaned in to kiss me—a quick, sweet kiss that nonetheless left me wanting more.

"I've been thinking," he said, pulling back just enough to look at me. "After the festival tonight, there's a tradition. The volunteers all gather at the gazebo after cleanup for a little celebration. Drinks, music, that kind of thing."

"Let me guess—you want me to be your date?" I teased.

He smiled. "Actually, I was hoping you might want to skip it altogether. Have dinner with me instead. Just the two of us, at my place."

The invitation sent a thrill through me. "Your place?"

"I bought a house a few years ago," he said. "Nothing fancy, but it's mine. I'd like to show it to you."

The significance wasn't lost on me. This wasn't just dinner—it was Ethan inviting me into his life, showing me the home he'd built for himself, literally and figuratively.

"I'd love that," I said sincerely.

His smile widened. "Great. It's a date."

The sound of voices outside signaled that the festival was about to begin. Ethan checked his watch. "I should go. Troubleshooter duties await. But I'll find you later?"

"I'll be here until one," I said. "After that, I'm all yours."

The words came out more suggestively than I'd intended, and a flash of heat in his eyes told me he'd caught the double meaning.

"I'll hold you to that," he said, his voice lower. With one more quick kiss, he was gone, just as Melissa returned with another volunteer.

The morning passed in a blur of welcoming visitors, handing out maps, and directing people to various attractions. The festival was clearly a success—by noon, the town square was packed with families enjoying the pumpkin carving station, the apple cider press, and the various craft booths.

I spotted Ethan occasionally, moving through the crowd with purpose, stopping to fix a wobbly table here or adjust a light strand there. Each time our eyes met across the square, a little jolt of electricity ran through me, a promise of later.

My parents stopped by the welcome booth around twelve-thirty, Mom proudly reporting that the bake sale was nearly sold out.

"The festival looks wonderful, honey," she said, looking around the square. "You and the committee did an amazing job."

"Thanks, Mom. I had fun doing it."

Dad nodded approvingly. "It's good to see you getting involved. Feels like old times."

The comment gave me pause. It did feel like old times in some ways—the familiar rhythms of small-town life, the sense of community, the satisfaction of contributing to something that brought people joy. But it also felt new, as if I was experiencing Riverbrook through fresh eyes, appreciating aspects I'd taken for granted or actively resisted as a teenager.

When my shift at the welcome booth ended, I took some time to explore the festival properly. I tried my hand at apple bobbing (harder than it looked), admired the intricate jack-o'-lanterns at the carving station, and sampled roasted chestnuts from a vendor who swore they were prepared according to a century-old family recipe.

I was examining handmade jewelry at one of the craft booths when I felt a presence behind me, then heard a familiar voice close to my ear.

"The silver ones would look nice with your eyes."

I turned to find Ethan standing there, looking unfairly handsome in a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show his forearms.

"Expert jewelry opinion?" I asked, smiling up at him.

"Just an observation," he said. "I've always liked you in silver."

It was true—the necklace he'd given me for my eighteenth birthday had been silver, a delicate pendant with our initials intertwined. I'd kept it for years after we broke up, tucked away in a jewelry box I rarely opened, until one day in Seattle when I'd finally given it to a charity shop in a fit of "moving on."

I wondered now if that had been a mistake.

"Are you done troubleshooting?" I asked as we moved away from the booth.

"For now. Everything's running pretty smoothly. I thought I'd take a break, see if a certain welcome booth volunteer wanted to grab some lunch."

"I could eat," I agreed. "What's good?"

He grinned. "Mrs. Henderson's fried dough is legendary. And completely terrible for you, but it's a festival tradition."

"Lead the way."

We wandered through the festival together, stopping for fried dough (which was indeed delicious), watching a local band play on the small stage near the gazebo, and generally enjoying each other's company in a way that felt both new and familiar.

It was strange, being with Ethan in public like this, in our hometown where everyone knew our history. I caught people watching us, whispering behind their hands, some smiling approvingly, others looking surprised. But for once, I found I didn't mind the attention. There was something validating about it, as if the town itself was confirming that this reconnection made sense.

As afternoon turned to evening, the festival took on a magical quality. The strings of lights came on, casting a warm glow over the square. A bonfire was lit in a designated area, where children roasted marshmallows for s'mores. The band switched to slower songs, and couples began dancing on the small area in front of the stage.

"Dance with me?" Ethan asked, holding out his hand.

I hesitated only briefly before taking it. "Fair warning—I haven't improved much since senior prom."

He laughed, leading me to the dance floor. "That's okay. I've gotten better enough for both of us."

And he had. The slightly awkward teenage boy who had stepped on my toes more than once at prom had been replaced by a man who moved with confidence, guiding me effortlessly into his arms.

We swayed to the music, his hand warm at the small of my back, mine resting on his shoulder. It felt right, being held by him like this, as if the decade apart had been nothing but a brief intermission.

"You know," he said softly, his lips close to my ear, "I used to imagine running into you somewhere—Seattle maybe, or San Francisco. I had this whole scenario where I'd see you across a coffee shop or a bookstore, and you'd look up and recognize me, and we'd get a second chance."

"And instead, I came back to you," I mused. "Life has a funny way of working out."

"It does," he agreed. "Though I'm still not entirely sure why you came back. Not that I'm complaining."

I considered my answer carefully. "I think I was looking for something I'd lost. Not just you," I added quickly, "but a sense of... belonging, maybe. Connection. In Seattle, I had a life that looked good on paper, but it never quite felt like mine."

He nodded, understanding in his eyes. "And does this feel like yours? Being back here?"

"Parts of it do," I admitted. "More than I expected."

The song ended, but neither of us moved to break apart. Instead, Ethan held me a little closer as the next song began.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think you belong wherever you decide to belong. Riverbrook, Seattle, or somewhere else entirely. You were never defined by this town, Liv. That's what I always admired about you."

His words touched something deep inside me, a recognition that I'd spent so much time running from Riverbrook, from being "just" a small-town girl, that I'd never considered the possibility of choosing it, of making it mine on my own terms.

"Thank you for saying that," I said softly. "It means a lot, especially coming from you."

We danced for another song, then decided to take a break. As we walked toward one of the food vendors for drinks, Ethan's phone rang.

"Sorry, I should check this," he said, glancing at the screen. "It might be festival-related."

I nodded, watching as he stepped away to take the call. His expression grew serious as he listened, his free hand coming up to rub the back of his neck—a gesture I remembered from our youth, one he made when stressed or worried.

When he returned, his disappointment was evident. "I'm really sorry, but there's an issue at the construction site in Springfield. A pipe burst, and they need me to deal with the emergency crew."

"On a Saturday night?" I asked, unable to hide my disappointment.

"The joys of being the boss," he said ruefully. "I have to go, but I'll try to make it back for our dinner. Can I pick you up around nine instead of seven?"

"Of course," I said, understanding even as I wished for a different outcome. "Go do what you need to do."

He looked genuinely torn. "I hate leaving you like this."

"I'm a big girl, Ethan. I can entertain myself at a festival for a few hours." I smiled to show I meant it. "Besides, this gives me a chance to check out the pie-eating contest without you making fun of my competitive streak."

That earned a smile from him. "Your competitive streak is one of my favorite things about you." He kissed me quickly. "I'll text you when I'm on my way back. Nine o'clock, your parents' house?"

"I'll be waiting," I promised.

After he left, I wandered the festival alone, trying not to feel let down by the change in plans. It was reasonable—he had a business to run, responsibilities that couldn't be ignored just because I was back in town.

I found Jen at the ring toss booth, expertly landing rings around bottle necks to win an oversized stuffed bear.

"Show-off," I teased, approaching her. "Save some prizes for the children."

She grinned, accepting the bear from the booth operator. "Years of practice. Where's your handsome contractor? I thought you two were joined at the hip today."

"Work emergency," I explained. "He had to go to Springfield, but he's coming back later."

"Ah, the glamorous life of dating the boss," she said, tucking the bear under her arm. "Get used to it if you're sticking around. Ethan's always been all about the business."

"I'm not sure I'm 'sticking around,'" I reminded her. "Or 'dating' Ethan, officially."

She gave me a skeptical look. "Right. You're just making out with him at a public festival for fun."

"You saw that?" I asked, feeling my cheeks heat.

"Olivia, everyone saw that. It's the most exciting thing to happen at the Fall Festival since Old Man Jenkins fell into the apple-bobbing tub three years ago."

I groaned. "Great."

"Oh, come on. It's sweet. The hometown girl returns and reunites with her high school sweetheart. It's like a movie."

"Life isn't a movie, Jen."

"Sometimes it kind of is," she argued. "And sometimes that's okay."

I couldn't help but smile at her optimism. "Maybe you're right."

"I'm always right. Now, help me win another bear so I can give them as Christmas presents."

I spent the next hour with Jen, trying various carnival games and laughing more than I had in months. As the evening wore on, the crowd thinned slightly, families with young children heading home while teenagers and adults lingered for the nighttime festivities.

Around eight, I checked my phone, hoping for a message from Ethan. There was nothing, which wasn't necessarily concerning—he was probably still dealing with the emergency—but it did make me wonder if our plans might need to be postponed.

I was debating whether to text him when I quite literally bumped into Tyler Callahan, who was carrying two cups of hot cider.

"Whoa, sorry," he said, impressively managing not to spill either drink. "Oh, Olivia! Hey!"

"Tyler," I greeted him warmly. Ethan's younger brother had always been a sweetheart, though I'd known him more as an annoying tag-along when we were teenagers than as a peer. Now, at twenty-five, he was a grown man, handsome in the same way as his brother but with a more open, easy-going demeanor.

"I heard you were back in town," he said, smiling. "It's great to see you. You look amazing."

"Thanks," I said, genuinely pleased to see him. "You too. All grown up and engaged, from what I hear. Congratulations!"

"Thanks," he said, his face lighting up at the mention of his fiancée. "Megan's around here somewhere. Probably at the craft booths—she's obsessed with handmade candles."

I laughed. "I'd love to meet her sometime."

"Definitely. Hey, have you seen Ethan? We were supposed to meet up to go over some things for tomorrow, but I can't find him anywhere."

"He had to go to Springfield," I explained. "Something about a pipe burst at the construction site."

Tyler's brow furrowed. "Springfield? That's weird."

"Why?"

"Because I just talked to Dave, who's the site manager there, and everything's fine. He's actually here at the festival with his kids."

A cold feeling settled in my stomach. "Are you sure? Ethan got a call about an emergency."

"Positive," Tyler said. "We only have the one project in Springfield right now, and Dave would definitely know if there was an issue."

I tried to make sense of this. Had Ethan lied to me? But why would he do that?

"Maybe it was a different site," I suggested, not wanting to jump to conclusions. "Or maybe I misunderstood."

Tyler shrugged. "Maybe. Anyway, if you see him, tell him to call me, okay?"

"Sure," I agreed, my mind racing.

After Tyler left, I pulled out my phone and called Ethan. It went straight to voicemail. I sent a text: *Hey, just checking in. Everything okay with the emergency?*

No response.

I tried to brush off the uneasy feeling, telling myself there must be a reasonable explanation. Maybe it was a different project, or maybe he'd misspoken and meant a different town. But the seed of doubt had been planted, and I couldn't help remembering how easily our relationship had fractured once before, how quickly trust could be broken.

By eight-thirty, with still no word from Ethan, I decided to head home. The festival was winding down anyway, the cleanup crew already starting to dismantle some of the peripheral booths.

As I walked toward the exit, I heard someone call my name. It was Melissa, jogging to catch up with me.

"Leaving already?" she asked. "The volunteer after-party is just getting started at the gazebo."

"I'm not really in the party mood," I admitted. "And Ethan and I had plans for later, so..."

"Ethan?" she looked confused. "I thought he was at the hospital with his dad."

My heart dropped. "What?"

"Yeah, Joyce called me about an hour ago. Mr. Callahan had some kind of episode—not another heart attack, they don't think, but they took him to the ER as a precaution. Ethan's with them."

I felt slightly dizzy, trying to reconcile this new information with what Ethan had told me and what Tyler had said. "But... he told me he had a construction emergency in Springfield."

Melissa's confusion matched my own. "That's weird. Why would he say that?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But I need to find out what's going on."

"Do you want me to drive you to the hospital?" she offered.

I considered it, then shook my head. "No, I think I'll just go home and wait to hear from him. There must be an explanation."

But as I walked home through the darkening streets of Riverbrook, the doubt grew stronger. Why would Ethan lie about where he was going? Was he actually at the hospital, or was that another lie? And if he was with his father, why not just tell me that?

The most painful possibility—that he was having second thoughts about us and had fabricated an excuse to get away—was the one I tried hardest not to consider. But it lingered at the edges of my mind, a shadow I couldn't quite banish.

When I got home, the house was dark. My parents had left a note saying they'd gone to dinner with friends after the festival and would be home late. I was grateful for the solitude, not ready to answer questions about why I was home early or where Ethan was.

I changed into comfortable clothes and tried to distract myself with television, but my mind kept circling back to the conflicting stories and Ethan's silence. By nine-thirty, when he still hadn't called or texted, I decided to be direct.

Are you at the hospital with your dad? Tyler and Melissa seem to have different ideas about where you are tonight. Just want to make sure everything's okay.

I sent the text, then waited, staring at my phone as if I could will a response into existence. Ten minutes passed. Twenty. Nothing.

Around ten, I heard a car in the driveway. My heart leapt, thinking it might be Ethan, but it was just my parents returning from their dinner.

"You're home early," Mom observed, finding me on the couch. "I thought you had plans with Ethan tonight."

"Something came up," I said vaguely. "I'm not sure what, exactly."

She gave me a concerned look but didn't press for details. "Well, it's been a long day. I think I'll head up to bed. Don't stay up too late."

"I won't," I promised, though I knew sleep would be elusive tonight.

After my parents went upstairs, I tried calling Ethan again. Still straight to voicemail. I left a message this time: "Ethan, it's me. I'm worried. Please call me when you get this."

By midnight, with still no word, I finally went to bed, though I knew I wouldn't sleep well. Something was wrong—not just with Ethan's whereabouts, but with the ease and trust I'd thought we were rebuilding.

I lay awake, watching moonlight filter through my curtains, wondering if I'd been naive to think we could simply pick up where we left off, to believe that the connection we once shared could be restored so easily.

The past was never really past, I realized. It lived in the spaces between us, in the habits of mind and heart that had been formed by our first parting. Trust, once broken, was a delicate thing to rebuild. And I wasn't sure if Ethan and I had laid a strong enough foundation yet to withstand this new crack.

Eventually, I drifted into a fitful sleep, my dreams filled with faceless figures telling contradictory stories, with roads that led in circles, and with Ethan always just out of reach, no matter how fast I ran.

CHAPTER 7

I woke to the sound of rain against my window, a gray, drizzly morning that matched my mood perfectly. My phone showed no missed calls or texts from Ethan, deepening the unease I'd felt since the previous night.

Downstairs, I found my dad at the kitchen table with his Sunday paper and coffee. Mom was nowhere in sight.

"Morning," he said, looking up with a smile that faltered when he saw my expression. "Everything okay?"

"Not really," I admitted, pouring myself a cup of coffee. "Have you heard anything about Mr. Callahan being in the hospital?"

Dad looked surprised. "Bill Callahan? No, I haven't. Why?"

"Just... trying to figure something out." I sat across from him, wrapping my hands around the warm mug. "Where's Mom?"

"Church. I'm on bedrest after church this Sunday," he said with a wink. It was an old joke between them—Dad went to services every other week, claiming God had agreed to a part-time arrangement.

We sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the rain tapping steadily against the windows. I was grateful for my father's undemanding presence, his willingness to let me sit with my thoughts without pressing for explanations.

Finally, I asked, "Dad, do you think people can really change? Or do we just keep making the same mistakes in different ways?"

He folded his paper thoughtfully. "That's a pretty heavy question for 8 AM on a Sunday."

"Sorry," I said. "Just thinking out loud."

"No, it's a good question." He took a sip of his coffee. "I think people can change, but it takes work. Consciousness. Most of the time, we fall into patterns without even realizing it."

"Like coming back to your hometown when your life falls apart?" I suggested wryly.

He smiled. "Or like running away when things get complicated."

The gentle observation hit home. He was right—I had a history of running when relationships became difficult or uncertain. I'd run from Riverbrook, from Ethan, and more recently, I'd run from Seattle and Patrick when that relationship had faltered.

"I don't want to keep making the same mistakes," I said softly.

"Then don't," Dad said simply. "When you recognize the pattern, you can choose differently."

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed with a text. My heart leapt, hoping it was Ethan, but it was Jen.

Coffee at Brewed Awakening in 30? Major gossip to discuss.

I texted back a quick agreement, grateful for the distraction. After a quick shower and change, I headed downtown, umbrella in hand against the persistent drizzle.

Brewed Awakening was the new coffee shop on Main Street, a hip establishment with exposed brick walls and artisanal pastries that would have fit perfectly in Seattle. It was busy even on a rainy Sunday morning, locals seeking refuge from the weather and festival visitors grabbing a warm drink before heading home.

Jen was already there, securing a small table by the window and waving enthusiastically when she spotted me.

"I ordered for you," she said as I sat down. "Vanilla latte, right?"

"Perfect, thanks." I unwound my scarf, still damp from the short walk. "So what's this major gossip?"

Jen leaned forward, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "It's about Ethan. And his ex."

My stomach dropped. "His ex?"

"Rebecca Morgan. She's back in town too. Apparently, she came in for the festival weekend to see her parents, and guess who was seen having a very intense conversation with her at The Grill last night?"

I didn't need to guess. The pieces were falling into place—the mysterious emergency, the conflicting stories, the silence.

"Ethan," I said, my voice flat.

Jen nodded, watching my reaction carefully. "Around eight o'clock. Mrs. Patterson was there having dinner with her bridge club, and she said they looked very... cozy."

Mrs. Patterson was Riverbrook's most notorious gossip, known for embellishing details, but the timing aligned too perfectly to be coincidence.

"Did Mrs. Patterson happen to mention if Mr. Callahan was in the hospital last night?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

Jen looked confused. "Mr. Callahan? Not that I know of. Why?"

"Just trying to sort out some conflicting information," I said. Our coffees arrived, providing a momentary distraction. "So who is Rebecca Morgan, exactly? The name sounds familiar, but..."

"She and Ethan dated for about two years," Jen explained. "Started maybe four years ago? She's from here originally, but she was living in Chicago when they met. She came back to help her mom after surgery and ended up staying. They were pretty serious—living together and everything."

This was news to me. In all our conversations since I'd been back, Ethan had never mentioned a serious relationship, let alone someone he'd lived with.

"What happened?" I asked, though I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Jen shrugged. "She got a job offer back in Chicago that was too good to pass up. They tried long distance for a while, but eventually broke up. She moved back to Chicago about a year ago."

The parallels to our own story were not lost on me. Another woman Ethan had loved, another choice between staying and leaving.

"And now she's back," I said, taking a sip of my latte to hide my expression.

"Just visiting, as far as I know," Jen said. "But still. Interesting timing, right?"

"Right," I agreed, my mind racing. Had Ethan lied to me so he could meet his ex-girlfriend? Had he been having second thoughts about us, about moving too quickly into a relationship that might be doomed to the same end?

"Liv," Jen said gently, reaching across the table to touch my hand. "I'm sure there's an explanation. Ethan is crazy about you—anyone with eyes can see that."

"Then why lie?" I asked. "Why not just tell me he needed to talk to her?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But you should ask him."

"I've been trying. He's not answering my calls or texts."

Jen frowned. "That's not like him."

"Isn't it?" I said, more bitterly than I intended. "We've been back in each other's lives for a week, Jen. I have no idea what's 'like him' anymore."

"Fair point," she conceded. "But the Ethan I've known for the past decade isn't the type to ghost someone, especially not someone he cares about."

I wanted to believe her, but doubt had taken root, feeding on old insecurities and the fresh pain of being left in the dark.

"I should just forget about it," I said, attempting to sound nonchalant. "It's not like we're in a relationship. We went on one date. Kissed a few times. No big deal."

"Liv," Jen said, her voice gentle but firm. "It is a big deal. To both of you. Otherwise you wouldn't be this upset, and he wouldn't have been looking at you the way he has been all week."

She was right, and we both knew it. Whatever was happening between Ethan and me was far more significant than a casual fling or a nostalgic reunion.

"What should I do?" I asked, hating how lost I sounded.

"Talk to him," Jen said simply. "Face to face, not over text. Go to his house if you have to. Get the full story before you decide how to feel about it."

"And if he's getting back together with his ex?"

"Then you'll know, and you can move forward accordingly. But don't assume the worst based on Mrs. Patterson's secondhand gossip."

Again, she was right. I was jumping to conclusions, letting my fear of rejection color my interpretation of limited information.

"I'll talk to him," I promised. "As soon as he resurfaces."

"Good." Jen switched to a lighter tone. "Now, let's discuss something more cheerful. Like the fact that Tyler Callahan told me you're being considered for the town's marketing coordinator position."

I nearly choked on my coffee. "I'm what?"

"Oops," Jen said, not looking the least bit sorry for her indiscretion. "Was that supposed to be a secret?"

"Considering I had no idea about it, yes?"

She laughed. "Well, surprise! The town council's been trying to boost tourism and local business, so they created this new position. Part-time at first, but potentially full-time if it goes well. Tyler said Mayor Johnson was really impressed with your work on the festival and your background in publishing, and he's going to reach out to you about applying."

I sat back, processing this unexpected information. A job in Riverbrook had never been part of my plan—I'd been focused on either returning to publishing in a major city or perhaps exploring freelance editing. But a marketing role could actually be a good fit for my skills, and the idea of helping promote the town I'd once been so eager to escape held a certain poetic appeal.

"I don't know," I said slowly. "I hadn't really considered staying permanently."

"It's just an application," Jen pointed out. "No commitment. But it could be a good option while you figure things out. Better than sitting in your parents' house filling out online job forms."

She had a point. And the prospect of a job—even a temporary one—was appealing. My savings wouldn't last forever, and I'd been starting to feel the pressure of unemployment.

"I'll think about it," I promised.

We finished our coffees and parted ways, Jen heading to her parents' house for Sunday dinner, me walking aimlessly through the rainy streets, trying to sort through my tangled thoughts.

Almost without conscious decision, I found myself on Ethan's street. Jen was right—I needed to talk to him directly, to get answers instead of speculating. I knew where he lived, approximately—he'd mentioned buying a house on River Road, and there weren't that many options.

I walked slowly down the street, looking at each house and trying to guess which might be his. Near the end of the road, closest to the river, I spotted a craftsman-style home with a wraparound porch—just like the dream house he'd described designing in architecture school.

This had to be it.

Heart pounding, I walked up the path to the front door. There was a truck in the driveway—not Ethan's, but one with a rental company logo. I hesitated, suddenly uncertain. What if he wasn't alone? What if Rebecca was with him?

Before I could reconsider, I made myself knock. Three firm taps, then silence.

No answer.

I knocked again, louder this time. Still nothing.

I was about to turn away when the door finally opened, revealing a disheveled Ethan. He was unshaven, wearing a rumpled t-shirt and jeans, with dark circles under his eyes suggesting he hadn't slept much. He looked surprised—and not particularly happy—to see me.

"Olivia," he said, his voice rough. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to figure out what happened to you last night," I said, hating the hurt that crept into my tone despite my best efforts. "You disappeared, told different stories to different people, and then stopped answering your phone."

He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of frustration I remembered well. "It's complicated. And not a great time."

"Is your father in the hospital?" I asked directly.

He looked confused. "What? No. Why would you think that?"

"Because that's what Melissa told me. But Tyler thought you were handling a construction emergency in Springfield, which he then said wasn't happening. And Jen heard you were at The Grill with your ex-girlfriend." I crossed my arms, feeling exposed standing on his porch in the rain. "So which is it, Ethan?"

He closed his eyes briefly, as if gathering himself. Then he stepped back from the door. "You should come in."

The interior of the house was as beautiful as I'd imagined—warm wood tones, large windows overlooking the river, a stone fireplace in the living room. Under other circumstances, I would have wanted to explore every inch, to see the home Ethan had created for himself. But right now, all I could focus on was the tension between us and the explanation I was waiting for.

"Sit down," he said, gesturing to the sofa. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?"

"Answers would be nice," I said, remaining standing.

He sighed. "Fair enough." He paced a few steps, then stopped, facing me directly. "Rebecca is here. In Riverbrook. She came to see me at the festival yesterday."

Even though I'd been prepared for this, hearing him confirm it still hurt. "And you couldn't just tell me that?"

"I was going to," he said. "But it was complicated, and I needed time to sort things out before I talked to you."

"Sort what out, exactly?" I asked, dreading the answer.

Before he could respond, a voice called from elsewhere in the house. "Ethan? Who was at the door?"

A moment later, a woman appeared in the living room doorway—tall, elegant, with the kind of effortless beauty that made other women feel instantly inadequate. Rebecca, I presumed.

She stopped short when she saw me, surprise flashing across her face before she composed herself. "Oh, hello."

"Rebecca, this is Olivia Matthews," Ethan said, his voice carefully neutral. "Olivia, Rebecca Morgan."

"The Olivia?" Rebecca asked, her eyebrows rising slightly. "Well. This is unexpected."

The implication that Ethan had talked about me to her, that she knew who I was while I hadn't even known she existed until this morning, made me feel even more off-balance.

"I should go," I said, turning toward the door. This was worse than I'd imagined—not just a conversation with an ex, but Rebecca in Ethan's house, clearly comfortable enough to be staying there.

"Liv, wait," Ethan said, moving to block my path. "It's not what you think."

"Isn't it?" I asked, hating the tremor in my voice. "You lied about where you were going, you spent the night with your ex-girlfriend, and now she's here in your house. What exactly am I misunderstanding?"

"Everything," he said firmly. "If you'll just let me explain."

"I think I'll give you two some privacy," Rebecca said, already backing out of the room. "I'll be upstairs."

After she left, I reluctantly sat on the edge of the sofa, waiting for an explanation that could possibly make this situation okay.

Ethan sat across from me in an armchair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "Rebecca showed up at the festival yesterday afternoon, completely out of the blue. I hadn't seen or spoken to her in months. She said she needed to talk to me about something important, but the festival wasn't the place for that conversation."

"So you lied to me and went to meet her at The Grill," I filled in.

He had the grace to look ashamed. "Yes. I told you about Springfield because I didn't want to upset you or complicate things between us before I understood what was going on."

"And what is going on, Ethan?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like your ex-girlfriend came back and you dropped everything—including me—to be with her."

"It's not like that," he insisted. "Rebecca came back because she's in trouble. She lost her job in Chicago, then her apartment. She had nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to."

"So you're... what? Taking her in out of charity?"

"I'm helping a friend who's going through a hard time," he corrected. "The same way I'd help Tyler, or Melissa, or anyone else I care about."

I wanted to believe him, but the timing was too suspicious, the situation too intimate. "And she's staying here? In your house?"

"In the guest room," he said firmly. "It's temporary, just until she gets back on her feet. A few weeks at most."

"Why didn't you just tell me this yesterday?" I asked, the hurt seeping through despite my efforts to remain calm. "Why make up stories and then ignore my calls and texts?"

He ran a hand through his hair again, looking genuinely regretful. "I handled it badly, I know. I was trying to figure out how to help Rebecca without jeopardizing what's happening between you and me. And then everything got complicated, and I thought it would be better to explain in person rather than over text."

"So you just... what? Decided to ghost me until you figured it out?"

"My phone died," he said. "I forgot my charger at the office, and by the time I realized, it was too late to go back for it. I was going to come see you this morning, explain everything face to face."

It was a plausible explanation, but something still didn't add up. "And the different stories? Your dad in the hospital? The emergency in Springfield?"

He looked confused again. "I never told anyone my dad was in the hospital. As for Springfield, that's what I told you, and maybe Tyler overheard or misunderstood. I don't know where the hospital story came from."

I thought back to what Melissa had said. She'd mentioned Joyce Callahan calling her about Mr. Callahan being in the ER. Had Melissa misunderstood, or had someone deliberately spread misinformation?

"This all seems very convenient," I said, not ready to let go of my suspicion. "Your ex shows up out of the blue, needs a place to stay, and you immediately offer your home, without even talking to me about it."

"Why would I need to talk to you about it?" he asked, a hint of defensiveness entering his tone. "We've been on one date, Olivia. We're not in a relationship where I need to clear my decisions with you."

The words stung, even though they were technically true. We hadn't defined what we were to each other, hadn't made any commitments. But it had felt like more than just one date—it had felt like the beginning of something significant, a continuation of what we'd once had.

"You're right," I said, standing up. "We're not in a relationship. Which means you don't owe me explanations, and I don't need to sit here listening to them."

"Liv, don't," he said, standing as well. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Didn't you?" I challenged. "Because it sounded pretty clear to me."

"I just meant that things between us are still new, still undefined. I'm trying to navigate this situation the best I can."

"By lying? By avoiding me?"

"By taking time to figure out the right thing to do!" he exclaimed, frustration evident in his voice. "I care about you, Olivia. I don't want to mess this up again. But Rebecca is my friend, and she needs help. I can't turn my back on her just because the timing is inconvenient."

I understood his position, logically. If a friend of mine had been in trouble, I would have helped them too, regardless of how it might look to someone else. But emotions rarely followed logic, and the sight of Rebecca in Ethan's house had triggered all my deepest insecurities.

"I should go," I said again, needing space to think. "You clearly have a lot going on right now."

"Don't leave like this," he pleaded, reaching for my hand. "Let's talk this through."

I pulled away. "I think we've said enough for now. You have your priorities, and I have mine."

"And where do I fall on your list of priorities?" he asked, a hint of bitterness entering his voice. "Because from where I'm standing, you've got one foot out the door of Riverbrook, just like before. The first sign of trouble, and you're ready to run."

The accusation hit home, echoing my conversation with my father earlier that morning. Was I running again? Taking the easy way out rather than facing a difficult situation?

"That's not fair," I said, though part of me wondered if it was. "I came here looking for you. I knocked on your door. I'm trying to understand what's happening."

"Are you? Or are you looking for an excuse to put distance between us?"

We stared at each other, the question hanging in the air between us. There was truth in what he said—I had a history of retreating when relationships became complicated or uncertain. But there was also truth in my hurt, in the feeling that Ethan had prioritized his ex-girlfriend over whatever was developing between us.

"I need time to think," I finally said. "And you clearly have your hands full here."

He didn't try to stop me as I walked to the door, though I could feel his eyes on me, could sense the words he wasn't saying.

Outside, the rain had stopped, though the sky remained gray and heavy with clouds. I walked slowly back toward town, replaying the conversation in my mind, trying to sort through my feelings.

Ethan had a right to help his friend. I had a right to be hurt by his dishonesty. We both had valid perspectives, and neither of us was entirely wrong or right.

The question was where we went from here.

As I reached Main Street, my phone buzzed with a text. Not from Ethan, but from an unknown number.

Ms. Matthews, this is Mayor Johnson. I'd like to speak with you about a potential opportunity with the town of Riverbrook. Are you available for coffee tomorrow morning?

The job Jen had mentioned. It was real, and the mayor wanted to talk to me about it.

A week ago, I would have dismissed the idea immediately. A job in Riverbrook? The very place I'd spent a decade trying to escape? But now, after the festival, after reconnecting with the community and rediscovering aspects of small-town life that I'd forgotten I enjoyed, the prospect didn't seem so outlandish.

And yet, the timing gave me pause. If things with Ethan were already complicated, how much more complex would they become if I decided to stay in Riverbrook permanently? Would working and living in the same small town where he was helping his ex-girlfriend "get back on her feet" be setting myself up for heartache?

I texted back a polite acceptance of the mayor's invitation, deciding that hearing more about the position couldn't hurt. It didn't commit me to anything, and having options was always better than having none.

As I walked home, I tried to imagine what my life might look like if I stayed in Riverbrook. Would I find fulfillment in a small-town marketing role after working in publishing in a major city? Would I eventually chafe at the limitations of a place where everyone knew my business and privacy was a luxury?

And most importantly, could Ethan and I find our way back to each other, or were we destined to keep hurting each other, keep misunderstanding and missing connections?

I didn't have answers to any of these questions. But for the first time, I was willing to stay still long enough to find out, rather than running at the first sign of uncertainty.

That, I decided, was progress. Small, perhaps, but real.

When I got home, I sent Ethan a brief text: *I'm still hurt, but I understand you're trying to help a friend. I need some time to think. I hope you understand.*

His reply came quickly: *I do understand. Take all the time you need. But please know that you matter to me, Liv. More than I think you realize.*

It wasn't a solution, but it was a start. A recognition that whatever was between us was worth working through, worth the effort of understanding and being understood.

And for now, that would have to be enough.

CHAPTER 8

The next week passed in a blur of activity. My meeting with Mayor Johnson had gone well—the marketing coordinator position was exactly as Jen had described, a part-time role focused on promoting Riverbrook to tourists and potential new residents. The mayor had been enthusiastic about my publishing background and my "fresh perspective" as someone who had lived both in Riverbrook and in a major city.

I'd submitted a formal application, along with some initial ideas for marketing campaigns that had seemed to impress the town council. The position wouldn't be decided for another two weeks, but I found myself genuinely hoping I'd be selected.

In the meantime, I'd taken on some freelance editing work for a small press in Seattle, which gave me both income and a sense of purpose while I waited to hear about more permanent opportunities.

As for Ethan, we'd kept our distance since our confrontation at his house. We'd exchanged a few texts—brief, polite messages that carefully avoided anything too personal or emotional. I knew from Jen that Rebecca was still staying with him, still "getting back on her feet," whatever that meant.

The space had been good for me, giving me time to think about what I really wanted and whether Ethan fit into that picture. The hurt from his dishonesty had faded somewhat, replaced by a more nuanced understanding of the situation. I still didn't like that he'd lied to me, but I could appreciate his instinct to help a friend in need, even an ex-girlfriend.

The question was whether we could move forward from here, or if the timing was simply wrong for us—again.

I was pondering this question while walking through the park on a crisp autumn afternoon when I quite literally bumped into Rebecca Morgan.

"Oh! I'm sorry," I said automatically, stepping back. Then I recognized her, and an awkward silence fell between us.

"Olivia," she said, recovering first. "I thought I might run into you eventually. Small town and all that."

"Rebecca," I acknowledged, unsure of the proper etiquette for speaking to the woman staying with the man I was... whatever Ethan and I were to each other.

She smiled, seeming genuinely friendly despite the awkwardness. "I was actually hoping to talk to you. Do you have a minute?"

Curiosity overcame my initial instinct to make an excuse and leave. "Sure."

We found a bench overlooking the river, sitting at a comfortable distance from each other. Rebecca was as stylish as I remembered from our brief encounter at Ethan's house, dressed in a chic wool coat and boots that looked like they cost more than my entire outfit.

"I want to apologize for the other day," she began. "My showing up clearly complicated things between you and Ethan."

"It's not your fault," I said automatically. "You couldn't have known."

"Actually, I did know," she admitted. "Ethan told me about you the day I arrived—how you were back in town, how you two were reconnecting. He was... very transparent about his feelings for you."

This surprised me. "He was?"

She nodded. "That's partly why I wanted to talk to you. I think you might have the wrong impression about my relationship with Ethan."

"It's really none of my business," I said, though I was intensely curious about what she might reveal.

"Maybe not officially," she conceded. "But I know what it looked like, finding me at his house that morning. I'd want an explanation if I were in your shoes."

I remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

"Ethan and I were serious once," she said, looking out at the river. "We lived together for almost a year, talked about marriage. But ultimately, we wanted different things. I couldn't see myself staying in Riverbrook forever, and he couldn't imagine leaving."

The parallels to my own history with Ethan were unsettling.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I got a job offer in Chicago—a significant promotion, the kind you don't turn down. We tried long distance for a while, but..." She shrugged. "It's hard, being apart from the person you love, trying to build a life in two different places."

"I know," I said softly, thinking of my own failed long-distance relationships over the years.

"When I lost my job three months ago, Ethan was the first person I called," Rebecca continued. "Not because I wanted to get back together, but because he's still one of my closest friends. He offered to let me stay until I got back on my feet, no strings attached."

"That sounds like Ethan," I acknowledged. It was one of the things I'd always loved about him—his loyalty, his willingness to help others without expecting anything in return.

"It is," she agreed. "He's a good man. One of the best I've ever known." She turned to look at me directly. "Which is why I want to be very clear: There is nothing romantic happening between Ethan and me. There hasn't been for over a year. He's helping me as a friend, nothing more."

The sincerity in her voice was convincing, and I found myself believing her. "Thank you for telling me that. It... helps."

"Good." She smiled. "Because he's crazy about you, you know. Talks about you constantly. 'Olivia thinks this' and 'Liv would love that.' It's actually a little annoying."

I laughed despite myself. "He does not."

"He absolutely does," she insisted. "I've known Ethan for five years, and I've never seen him like this. Not even when we were together."

Her words sent a warm current through me, a cautious hope that perhaps things between Ethan and me weren't as complicated as they seemed.

"I don't know what happened between you two in the past," Rebecca continued. "He doesn't talk much about it, just that you were his first love and things ended badly. But I do know that second chances don't come around often. It would be a shame to waste one because of a misunderstanding."

She stood, adjusting her coat. "Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. I'm heading back to Chicago next week—I've got an interview for a new position. So you won't have to worry about me lingering in the background of your relationship."

"I appreciate your honesty," I said, standing as well. "And good luck with the interview."

"Thanks." She hesitated, then added, "He's at the construction site on Elm Street today, if you were wondering. Supervising the new community center project."

With a knowing smile, she walked away, leaving me with a lot to think about.

I sat back down on the bench, trying to process the conversation. If Rebecca was telling the truth—and I had no reason to doubt her—then my fears about Ethan rekindling a relationship with his ex were unfounded. He was simply being the kind, loyal person he'd always been, helping a friend in need.

The question was whether I was ready to take another step forward with him, to risk my heart again on a relationship that had already broken it once.

My phone buzzed with a text from Jen: *Dinner tonight? The new Thai place on Main is actually decent.*

I texted back: *Can't tonight. I think I need to talk to Ethan.*

Her response was immediate and enthusiastic: *FINALLY! Good luck! Call me after with ALL the details.*

I smiled, appreciating her unwavering support. Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I texted Ethan: *Are you free to talk tonight? I'd like to see you.*

His reply came within minutes: *Yes. My place at 7? I'll cook dinner.*

The offer of a home-cooked meal was appealing—and significant, I thought. Not a public meeting at a neutral location, but an invitation into his space, a gesture of openness.

Sounds perfect. See you then.

For the rest of the afternoon, I alternated between anticipation and anxiety about the upcoming conversation. I wanted to clear the air with Ethan, to move past the misunderstanding about Rebecca, but I was also aware that there were deeper issues to address—questions about the future, about what we each wanted and whether those wants were compatible.

By the time I arrived at Ethan's house that evening, I had rehearsed various versions of what I wanted to say, none of which felt quite right. I settled for honesty, deciding to let the conversation flow naturally rather than trying to script it in advance.

He answered the door immediately when I knocked, as if he'd been waiting nearby. He looked good—freshly showered, wearing a blue button-down shirt that brought out his eyes, his hair still slightly damp.

"Hi," he said, a cautious smile playing at his lips. "Come in."

The house smelled amazing—garlic, herbs, something savory simmering on the stove. "Whatever you're cooking smells delicious," I said, hanging my coat on a hook by the door.

"Thanks. It's my mom's lasagna recipe. I remember you used to love it."

The fact that he remembered such a small detail from our teenage years touched me. "I still do. It's what Mom made my first night back in town."

He led me into the kitchen, where the table was set for two with a bottle of red wine already open and breathing. No sign of Rebecca, I noted with relief.

"She's out with friends tonight," Ethan said, correctly interpreting my glance around the house. "But she did mention she ran into you today."

"She did," I confirmed, accepting the glass of wine he offered. "It was... illuminating."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"She explained your relationship. That you're friends, that you're helping her through a rough patch. That there's nothing romantic between you."

He nodded, leaning against the counter. "All true. Is that why you wanted to talk? Because of Rebecca?"

"Partly," I admitted. "But there's more to it than that."

"I figured." He checked the oven, then turned back to me. "The lasagna needs another fifteen minutes. Want to sit in the living room while we wait?"

I followed him to the comfortable seating area I'd barely noticed during my previous visit, too caught up in my hurt and confusion to appreciate the warmth of his home. Now I could see how perfectly the space reflected Ethan—unpretentious but thoughtfully designed, with comfortable furniture arranged to take advantage of the river view, built-in bookshelves filled with architecture volumes and novels, and family photos displayed alongside what looked like his own sketches of buildings and landscapes.

"I like your house," I said sincerely, settling onto the sofa. "It suits you."

"Thanks." He sat in the armchair across from me, giving me space rather than crowding next to me on the couch. "I designed most of the renovations myself. The original structure was sound, but it needed updating."

"You did a beautiful job." I took a sip of wine, gathering my thoughts. "Ethan, I want to apologize for how I reacted the other day. I jumped to conclusions without giving you a chance to explain."

"And I want to apologize for lying to you about where I was going that night," he countered. "I should have been honest from the start. I just... I was trying to avoid exactly what ended up happening—you feeling hurt or threatened by Rebecca's presence."

"I understand that," I said. "But relationships—whatever this is between us—need to be built on trust. And trust requires honesty, even when it's uncomfortable."

He nodded, acknowledging the point. "You're right. I handled it badly. I was so focused on not losing this second chance with you that I ended up jeopardizing it anyway."

The admission was both flattering and concerning. "Is that how you see me? As something you might lose?"

He considered the question thoughtfully. "I think I'm still carrying the memory of how it felt when you left before. It shaped how I approach relationships—always preparing for the other person to leave, always holding something back to protect myself."

His honesty moved me. "I understand that. I think I've been doing something similar—running before I can be left, keeping one foot out the door so it hurts less if things don't work out."

"And is that what you're doing now?" he asked quietly. "Keeping one foot out the door?"

It was the central question, the one I'd been avoiding since returning to Riverbrook. Was I truly open to staying, to building a life here? Or was I just passing through, taking shelter temporarily before moving on to somewhere else?

"I don't know," I admitted. "I'm trying not to. I've applied for the marketing coordinator position with the town."

His eyes widened in surprise. "You have? That's... that's great, Liv."

"Is it?" I asked, needing to know his true reaction. "Because it would mean staying in Riverbrook. For at least a year, maybe longer."

"Of course it's great," he said, leaning forward. "I want you to stay. I've wanted that since the moment I saw you at The Grill your first night back. But I also want you to stay for the right reasons—because it's what you want, not because of me or anyone else."

His answer was perfect—supportive without being presumptuous, acknowledging his own desires while respecting my autonomy. It was the response of a man who had matured beyond the boy I'd once known, who understood that love couldn't be used as a tether.

"I'm figuring out what I want," I told him honestly. "And Riverbrook is starting to feel like it could be part of that. Not because it's safe or familiar, but because I'm seeing it differently now. Seeing possibilities I couldn't recognize when I was eighteen and desperate to leave."

"Like what?" he asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

"Like the sense of community I felt during the festival. The satisfaction of creating something that brings people joy. The way everyone knows each other's stories, for better or worse." I smiled. "Even the gossip has its charm, in a way. There's something to be said for a place where people care enough to talk about you."

He laughed. "That's one way of looking at it."

"And then there's you," I added softly. "Being around you again—it feels right, Ethan. In a way nothing has in a very long time."

The timer in the kitchen beeped, interrupting what might have been a significant moment. Ethan stood reluctantly. "I should get that. We can continue this conversation over dinner?"

"Absolutely," I agreed, following him to the kitchen.

Dinner was delicious—the lasagna every bit as good as his mother's version—and the conversation flowed easily. We talked about the community center project he was working on, about my freelance editing assignments, about mutual friends and town developments. It felt comfortable, domestic in a way that made me imagine other dinners, other evenings spent like this.

As we cleared the dishes together afterward, working in easy synchronization as if we'd been doing it for years, I found myself thinking about Rebecca's words: second chances don't come around often.

"What are you thinking about?" Ethan asked, noticing my thoughtful expression as he loaded the dishwasher.

"Second chances," I said honestly. "And whether we're getting one, or if we're just reopening old wounds."

He straightened, turning to face me fully. "What do you think?"

"I think... I think I've been afraid of making the same mistakes, of history repeating itself. But maybe that fear is keeping me from seeing that we're different people now. That what happened before doesn't have to determine what happens next."

He stepped closer, his eyes never leaving mine. "And what do you want to happen next, Liv?"

The question hung between us, loaded with possibility. In that moment, looking at Ethan in the warm light of his kitchen, I knew the answer with a clarity that surprised me.

"I want to see where this goes," I said. "I want to stop running from the past and start building a future. And I want you to be part of that future, whatever form it takes."

The smile that spread across his face was like the sun breaking through clouds. "That's what I want too," he said softly, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "No more running. No more holding back."

He leaned in slowly, giving me time to pull away if I wanted to. But pulling away was the last thing on my mind. When his lips met mine, it felt like a promise, a new beginning built on the foundation of our shared history but not bound by it.

This kiss was different from the ones we'd shared at Lookout Point—less urgent, more deliberate, a statement of intent rather than a surrender to long-suppressed desire. His hands cradled my face with a gentleness that made my heart ache, and I wound my arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

When we finally broke apart, both slightly breathless, he rested his forehead against mine. "Stay," he whispered. "Not forever, if you're not ready for that. Just tonight. Stay with me."

The invitation was clear, and my body's response was immediate—a rush of warmth, a quickening of pulse. But my mind counseled caution. As much as I wanted to stay, to lose myself in the physical expression of what we were feeling, I knew we both needed time to ensure this reconnection was built on solid ground.

"I want to," I said honestly. "But I think we should take this slowly. Make sure we're doing it for the right reasons, not just because it feels good in the moment."

He nodded, a flicker of disappointment in his eyes but no pressure, no attempt to change my mind. "You're right. We have time. No need to rush."

The respect in his response only made me more certain that I was falling for him all over again—or perhaps still, as if my heart had simply been waiting for the opportunity to pick up where it had left off.

"But I would like to see you again tomorrow," I added, not wanting him to think I was pulling away. "Maybe you could show me the community center project? I'm curious about your work."

His smile returned, bright and genuine. "I'd love that. It's one of my favorite designs so far."

"It's a date, then," I said, enjoying the way the simple phrase made his eyes light up.

He walked me to the door when I left, kissing me once more before I stepped out into the night. It was a perfect goodnight kiss—sweet but not chaste, a promise of more to come but not a demand for it now.

"Goodnight, Liv," he said softly.

"Goodnight, Ethan."

As I walked home through the quiet streets of Riverbrook, I felt a sense of peace settling over me. For the first time since returning, I wasn't thinking of the town as a temporary refuge or a stepping stone to somewhere else. I was seeing it as a place where I might build a life—not out of defeat or compromise, but out of choice.

And Ethan was part of that choice—not the whole of it, but a significant, central element that made other pieces fall into place.

When I reached my parents' house, I found Mom still up, reading in the living room. She looked up when I came in, a knowing smile playing at her lips.

"Good evening?" she asked.

"Very good," I confirmed, unable to keep the happiness from my voice.

"I'm glad," she said simply. "You deserve it, honey."

As I climbed the stairs to my room, I felt lighter than I had in months, maybe years. The future was still uncertain in many ways—the job with the town wasn't guaranteed, my relationship with Ethan was still new and potentially fragile—but for once, that uncertainty didn't fill me with anxiety.

Instead, I felt something that had been missing from my life for too long: hope. Hope for a future that might be different from what I'd once imagined, but no less fulfilling for that difference.

And that hope, I realized, was worth coming home for.

CHAPTER 9

"And this will be the main gathering space," Ethan explained, gesturing around the partially constructed room where support beams created a skeleton of what would eventually be a community center's central hall. "Floor-to-ceiling windows along that wall to take advantage of the natural light and the view of the park."

I followed his gesture, easily able to imagine the finished space thanks to the detailed renderings he'd shown me earlier. "It's going to be beautiful," I said sincerely. "I love how you've designed it to feel both modern and connected to Riverbrook's history."

His smile was pleased but modest. "That was the goal. A space that looks forward while honoring the past."

The metaphor wasn't lost on me. In many ways, it described what we were trying to build between us—a relationship that acknowledged our history without being constrained by it, that incorporated who we had become during our years apart.

We'd been spending most of our free time together in the two weeks since our dinner at his house. True to my request, we were taking things slowly, focusing on rediscovering each other as the adults we'd become rather than rushing into physical intimacy. There had been plenty of kisses—some sweet, some heated enough to test my resolve about waiting—but we'd stopped short of taking that final step.

It wasn't just about avoiding past mistakes or protecting our hearts. It was about building something real, something that could last beyond the initial rush of reconnection.

"So what do you think?" Ethan asked, watching me examine the construction site. "Can you picture yourself organizing events here? Maybe a holiday market or a spring craft fair?"

The question was casual, but I caught the underlying meaning. Could I see myself staying in Riverbrook long enough to use this space once it was completed months from now?

"I could," I admitted. "It would be perfect for the kind of community engagement the marketing position is supposed to foster."

"Have you heard anything about the job yet?" he asked, taking my hand as we walked through the site.

"Not officially. But Jen says the council is meeting tonight to make the final decision. I should know by tomorrow."

"Nervous?"

I considered the question. "Less than I expected to be. I think I'll be okay either way."

And it was true. While I was genuinely interested in the position and believed I could do it well, my sense of self was no longer tied to whether I stayed in Riverbrook or moved elsewhere. The past few weeks had shown me that I could be happy here, that the town I'd once been so desperate to escape could now be a place I chose freely.

"I have something to show you," Ethan said, leading me toward a back corner of the construction site where temporary offices were set up in trailers. "A surprise."

"Should I be scared?" I teased.

"Definitely," he replied with mock seriousness. "Terrified, even."

Inside his office trailer, blueprints and sketches covered nearly every surface, along with material samples and color swatches. It was organized chaos, the workspace of someone whose mind was constantly generating ideas.

Ethan rifled through a stack of drawings before pulling out a large sheet of paper. "Here it is," he said, unrolling it on his desk. "What do you think?"

I looked at the detailed architectural rendering, immediately recognizing the building it depicted. "Is that... the old Willow Street Library?"

He nodded. "The town's putting it up for sale. It's been empty since they moved the library to the new building on Main last year."

The Willow Street Library had been one of my favorite places as a child—a beautiful Victorian house that had been converted to a public library decades ago. I had spent countless hours curled up in its window seats, devouring books and dreaming of the stories I might one day write.

"It's a shame to see it sitting empty," I said. "It's such a beautiful building."

"I think so too," Ethan agreed. "Which is why I've been working on plans to convert it."

I studied the rendering more closely, noting how he'd preserved the building's historic exterior while reimagining the interior spaces. "Convert it to what?"

"A bookstore," he said, watching my reaction closely. "With a café on the first floor, reading spaces throughout, and potentially a small publishing operation for local authors in what used to be the attic."

My heart quickened as I absorbed what he was showing me. It was, essentially, my dream business—the kind of place I'd occasionally fantasized about opening "someday" when I had more experience in publishing and enough capital to take the risk.

"Ethan, this is... this is amazing," I said, genuinely moved by the thoughtfulness behind the design. "But why? Are you planning to open a bookstore?"

He laughed. "God, no. I can barely find time to read the instruction manuals for new tools, let alone run a literary business." His expression turned more serious. "I designed it for you, Liv."

The simple statement took my breath away. "For me?"

"I remember how you used to talk about owning a bookstore someday. How you wanted to create a space that would bring people together around stories, that would support local writers and artists." He shrugged, suddenly looking slightly embarrassed. "When I heard the building was going up for sale, I started sketching. Just as an exercise at first, but then... I don't know. It felt right."

I was speechless, overwhelmed by the gesture and what it represented. Ethan hadn't just remembered a dream I'd shared as a teenager—he'd taken it seriously enough to envision how it might become reality, to use his professional skills to give it shape and form.

"I'm not suggesting you buy it tomorrow," he added quickly when I remained silent. "It's just... something to consider. Maybe not now, but someday. When you're ready."

"When I'm ready," I repeated softly, running my fingers over the detailed drawing. "Ethan, I don't know what to say. This is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me."

He smiled, relief evident in his expression. "You're not freaked out? I was worried it might seem presumptuous."

"Not freaked out," I assured him, stepping closer to wrap my arms around his waist. "Touched. Amazed. A little overwhelmed."

"Overwhelmed good or overwhelmed bad?"

"Definitely good." I looked up at him, trying to find words for the emotions swirling through me. "You didn't just remember what I wanted. You saw a way to make it possible here, in Riverbrook. You're showing me a future I never imagined could exist in this town."

His hands came up to frame my face, his expression serious. "That's all I want, Liv. Not to tie you here or pressure you to stay, but to show you that you can build the life you want anywhere—even in the place you once couldn't wait to leave."

The sincerity in his voice, the depth of understanding in his eyes, made something shift inside me. This man knew me—not just the surface details or the shared history, but the core of who I was and what I dreamed of. And he wasn't trying to change those dreams to fit his vision; he was showing me how they might coexist with a life in Riverbrook.

I kissed him then, pouring into it all the words I couldn't quite formulate. His arms tightened around me, drawing me closer as the kiss deepened from gratitude to something more urgent.

When we broke apart, both slightly breathless, I said what I'd been feeling for weeks but hadn't yet voiced aloud. "I love you, Ethan. I think part of me never stopped."

His eyes widened, a flash of surprise followed by a joy so pure it was almost painful to witness. "I love you too, Liv. I always have."

The simplicity of the exchange, the truth of it resonating between us, made everything else fall away. In that moment, it didn't matter whether I got the marketing job or stayed in Riverbrook permanently. What mattered was that we had found our way back to each other, that the connection we'd shared as teenagers had matured into something deeper and more resilient.

"Take me home," I said softly. "Your home."

He searched my face, understanding the significance of the request. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I'm sure. No more waiting."

The drive to Ethan's house was charged with anticipation, his hand finding mine across the console, our fingers intertwining in a gesture both innocent and intimate. We didn't speak much, both aware of the threshold we were about to cross.

When we arrived, the house was quiet and empty—Rebecca had left for Chicago three days earlier, having secured a new job there. We moved through the rooms with a sense of purpose, Ethan leading me to his bedroom, a space I hadn't seen before.

Like the rest of the house, it reflected him perfectly—clean lines, rich wood tones, large windows overlooking the river. The bed was substantial but not ostentatious, covered in a deep blue comforter that looked invitingly soft.

"Second thoughts?" he asked, noticing my hesitation in the doorway.

I shook my head. "Just... taking it in. Being here with you. It feels significant."

"It is," he agreed, stepping closer to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear—that familiar gesture that had always been his way of showing affection. "But we can still take it slow. There's no rush."

But I didn't want to take it slow anymore. I wanted to be with him fully, to reconnect in every way possible. I reached for him, pulling him into a kiss that left no doubt about my intentions.

What followed was both familiar and entirely new—the rediscovery of each other's bodies, changed by the decade apart but still instinctively attuned. There was a tenderness in Ethan's touch that hadn't been there when we were teenagers, a confidence that came from maturity and experience.

And there was freedom in surrendering to the love I felt for him, in knowing that this time, our connection wasn't built on the fragile foundation of youth but on the solid ground of who we had become.

Afterward, lying in his arms with the late afternoon sun casting golden light across the bed, I felt a peace I hadn't experienced in years. Not just physical satisfaction, though that was certainly part of it, but a deeper sense of rightness, of being exactly where I was meant to be.

"What are you thinking?" Ethan asked, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my bare shoulder.

"That I'm happy," I said simply. "Happier than I've been in a very long time."

He smiled, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Me too."

We stayed like that for a while, talking softly about everything and nothing—memories from our past, stories from the years we'd been apart, dreams for the future. It was easy, this reconnection, as if our souls recognized each other even as our minds were still catching up.

Eventually, hunger drove us from bed. We cooked dinner together in his kitchen, moving around each other with a comfortable familiarity that belied the newness of our relationship. It felt domestic in the best possible way, a glimpse of what our everyday life might look like if we continued on this path.

After dinner, as we sat on his porch swing watching the sun set over the river, my phone buzzed with a text from Jen: *Council meeting just ended. Call me ASAP!!!*

My heart raced. "It's Jen," I told Ethan. "About the job."

He squeezed my hand. "Call her."

With slightly trembling fingers, I dialed Jen's number. She answered on the first ring.

"You got it!" she exclaimed without preamble. "The vote was unanimous! The mayor's going to call you tomorrow with the official offer, but I couldn't wait to tell you!"

Relief and excitement flooded through me. "Are you serious? They really chose me?"

"Of course they did! Your marketing proposal was brilliant, and everyone agrees we need someone with your perspective and experience. Plus, you're a local girl made good, coming back to help the town grow. It's a perfect narrative."

I laughed at her enthusiasm. "Thank you for letting me know. And for putting the idea in my head in the first place."

"Just doing my civic duty," she said cheerfully. "We'll celebrate this weekend, okay? Dinner at my place Saturday night. Bring your hot contractor boyfriend."

"I will," I promised, smiling at Ethan, who was watching me with curious anticipation. "Talk to you tomorrow."

After hanging up, I turned to him with a grin. "I got the job."

His face lit up, and he pulled me into a hug. "Congratulations! I knew you would."

"Did you now?" I teased, settling back against him on the swing.

"Absolutely. The town would be crazy not to hire you."

I laughed, then grew more thoughtful. "It means I'm staying in Riverbrook. At least for the year-long contract."

"How do you feel about that?" he asked, his tone carefully neutral despite the hope I could see in his eyes.

"Good," I said, surprising myself with how true it was. "Really good, actually. It feels like the right next step."

"I'm glad," he said simply, pressing a kiss to my temple. "And selfishly, I'm thrilled to have you here longer."

We sat in comfortable silence for a while, the swing moving gently, the river flowing steadily beyond the yard. The peacefulness of the moment, the rightness of being here with Ethan, crystallized something that had been forming in my mind for weeks.

"I think I'm done running," I said softly. "From Riverbrook, from the past, from the possibility of getting hurt again. I want to stay still for a while. See what grows when I stop moving long enough to put down roots."

Ethan's arms tightened around me. "I like the sound of that."

"Me too," I agreed. "And who knows? Maybe someday that bookstore could be more than just a beautiful drawing."

"Maybe," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "Someday."

We stayed on the porch until the stars came out, talking about possibilities and plans, about the future we might build together in this town that had shaped us both. Nothing was certain—we were still rediscovering each other, still finding our way forward—but for the first time in my adult life, uncertainty didn't feel like something to fear.

It felt like an adventure waiting to unfold, one I was finally ready to embrace.

And as I leaned against Ethan, his heartbeat steady and reassuring beneath my ear, I realized that sometimes the journey to find yourself leads you right back where you started—not because you've failed to escape, but because you've finally recognized the difference between running away and coming home.

CHAPTER 10

Six months after accepting the marketing coordinator position, I stood in the town square, surveying the preparations for Riverbrook's first annual Spring Arts Festival. Booths for local artists were being set up in a pattern I'd designed to maximize foot traffic. A temporary stage for musical performances occupied one corner, while the gazebo had been transformed into a poetry reading space, complete with comfortable seating and atmospheric lighting.

It was the culmination of months of planning—my first major project as the town's marketing coordinator—and I couldn't help feeling a surge of pride as it all came together. The festival wasn't just about attracting tourists, though that was certainly part of it. It was about celebrating Riverbrook's creative community, about showing both visitors and residents alike that small towns could be vibrant cultural spaces.

"It looks amazing," Jen said, appearing beside me with two cups of coffee. She handed me one. "You've done an incredible job."

"Thanks," I said, accepting the coffee gratefully. "But it's been a team effort. The whole committee has been fantastic."

"True, but it was your vision," she pointed out. "No one would have thought to combine a traditional art show with interactive workshops and performances. That's all you."

I smiled, acknowledging the compliment. The past six months had been challenging but deeply satisfying as I found my footing in the new role. I'd been surprised by how quickly ideas had come to me once I started thinking about Riverbrook not as the place I'd left behind but as a community with untapped potential.

"Have you seen Ethan this morning?" Jen asked. "I need to ask him about the lighting for tonight's concert."

"He's at the library," I told her. "Finalizing some details before the closing next week."

Her eyes lit up. "I still can't believe you're actually buying the Willow Street Library. It's like something out of a movie—the hometown girl returns and opens her dream bookstore in the building where she fell in love with reading."

I laughed at her romanticized version of events, though she wasn't entirely wrong. When the town had officially put the old library building up for sale two months ago, Ethan had encouraged me to consider making an offer. With my savings, a small business loan, and some investment from my parents (who were thrilled at the prospect of me staying in Riverbrook permanently), I'd been able to make it happen.

The plans Ethan had drawn up months earlier were now being implemented, with Callahan Development handling the renovations at a discounted rate. By summer, if everything went according to schedule, Riverbrook would have its first independent bookstore in over a decade.

"It's still surreal," I admitted. "Some mornings I wake up and can't believe this is my life now."

"In a good way, I hope," Jen said, watching me closely.

"In the best way," I assured her. And it was true. The life I was building in Riverbrook wasn't what I'd imagined for myself when I left for college, or even what I'd thought I wanted when I returned ten months ago. It was something better—a life chosen deliberately rather than accepted by default.

"Speaking of surreal life changes," Jen said with a mischievous smile, "how are things with you and Ethan? Any... developments I should know about?"

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," she said innocently. "Just curious about my best friend's happiness."

"Uh-huh," I said, not believing her for a second. "Well, things are good. Really good. We're talking about me moving in with him once the bookstore renovations are done."

This wasn't news—Ethan and I had been discussing cohabitation for weeks—but I wondered why Jen was asking now.

"That's wonderful," she said, sounding genuinely pleased. "You two are perfect together. Everyone says so."

"Everyone, huh?" I teased. "The Riverbrook gossip mill is still running at full capacity, I see."

"Always," she agreed cheerfully. "Though lately you and Ethan have been displaced as the main topic by Tyler and Megan's wedding preparations."

Tyler and Megan's June wedding was indeed the talk of the town, with elaborate plans that seemed to grow more extravagant by the week. I was happy for them, though privately amused by the contrast between Tyler's over-the-top celebration and Ethan's more subdued nature.

"Thank goodness for that," I said. "It was getting a little weird having our relationship be public entertainment."

"Welcome to small-town life," Jen said with a laugh. "You knew what you were signing up for."

I had, and surprisingly, I'd made peace with it. The lack of privacy was occasionally frustrating, but it was outweighed by the sense of belonging, the knowledge that people cared—even if that caring sometimes took the form of nosy questions and exaggerated rumors.

"I should get back to work," I said, finishing my coffee. "The artists start arriving in an hour, and I want to make sure everything's ready."

"Go be brilliant," Jen encouraged. "I'll handle the volunteer check-in."

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of activity—directing vendors to their assigned spots, solving last-minute logistical problems, coordinating with the food trucks that would provide refreshments throughout the weekend. It was exactly the kind of work I enjoyed—creative, collaborative, and concrete.

Around noon, I felt a familiar presence behind me before a pair of strong arms wrapped around my waist.

"The place looks great," Ethan said, his voice close to my ear. "You've outdone yourself."

I turned in his embrace to face him, smiling up at the man who had become the center of my world over the past ten months. "How was the library?"

"Good. The contractor had a few questions about the café space, but we sorted it out." He kissed me briefly. "Everything's on track for the renovations to start Monday."

"I still can't believe it's really happening," I said, echoing what I'd told Jen earlier. "My own bookstore. In Riverbrook, of all places."

"Believe it," he said, his blue eyes warm with pride. "You're going to be amazing. This town doesn't know what's about to hit it."

His unwavering support had been crucial as I navigated the transition from marketing coordinator to small business owner. Unlike Patrick, who had viewed my career ambitions as secondary to his own, Ethan had encouraged every step of my journey, offering advice when asked but never trying to steer my decisions.

"I hope so," I said. "It's a big risk."

"The best things usually are," he said simply. "Are we still on for dinner tonight? After the festival closes?"

"Definitely. I've been looking forward to it all week."

Between my work on the festival and his oversight of multiple construction projects, including the bookstore renovations, we'd barely had time for a proper date in weeks. Tonight was meant to be a celebration of the festival's opening and a rare evening just for us.

"Me too," he said, his smile suggesting he had something specific in mind. "I made reservations at Riverside Inn for eight."

My eyebrows rose in surprise. Riverside Inn was the nicest restaurant in the area, a historic establishment about twenty minutes outside of Riverbrook that was typically reserved for special occasions.

"Fancy," I commented. "What's the occasion?"

"Do I need an occasion to take my girlfriend somewhere nice?" he asked, a bit too innocently.

My suspicions, already raised by Jen's earlier questioning, grew stronger. "I suppose not. But you're being mysterious, and that's not like you."

"Am I?" he asked, still maintaining that innocent expression. "I hadn't noticed."

Before I could press further, we were interrupted by one of the volunteers needing help with a booth setup. Ethan squeezed my hand. "I'll pick you up at seven-thirty? At your parents'?"

I nodded, still eyeing him suspiciously. "I'll be ready."

He kissed me once more, then headed off to check on the stage construction, whistling as he went. Definitely up to something, I thought.

The rest of the day was too busy for me to dwell on what Ethan might be planning. The festival opened at two, and within an hour, the town square was filled with visitors admiring artwork, participating in workshops, and enjoying the spring sunshine. By all measures, it was an immediate success—exactly the boost for local businesses and artists that I'd hoped for.

Around six, with everything running smoothly and the evening team of volunteers in place, I slipped away to get ready for dinner. At my parents' house, I found Mom in the kitchen, arranging flowers in a vase.

"These came for you," she said, gesturing to the stunning bouquet of lilies and roses. "From Ethan. There's a card."

I plucked the small envelope from among the blooms and opened it to find a simple message in Ethan's distinctive handwriting: "To new beginnings. I love you, E."

"Well, that's cryptic," I murmured, though my heart was racing. Was tonight the night? Was Ethan planning to propose?

The thought was both thrilling and terrifying. We'd discussed marriage in abstract terms—both agreeing that it was something we wanted eventually—but hadn't talked specific timelines. Part of me had been waiting for him to bring it up more concretely, while another part had been content to enjoy our relationship as it was, no pressure for formal commitment.

"Everything okay, honey?" Mom asked, noticing my expression.

"Fine," I said quickly. "I just need to get ready for dinner."

Upstairs, I spent an embarrassing amount of time choosing an outfit, finally settling on a green silk dress that Ethan had once said brought out my eyes. I styled my hair in loose waves, applied makeup with more care than usual, and was just fastening a silver necklace when I heard the doorbell.

From my window, I could see Ethan's truck in the driveway. He'd cleaned it, I noticed—another sign that tonight was special.

Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves, I headed downstairs. Ethan was in the living room with my father, the two of them discussing the Riverbrook high school baseball team's chances in the upcoming state tournament.

He looked up when I entered, and the conversation died mid-sentence. His expression as he took in my appearance made all the extra effort worth it.

"Wow," he said simply. "You look beautiful, Liv."

"Thank you," I said, feeling a blush warm my cheeks. "You clean up pretty well yourself."

He did indeed. He was wearing a suit—a rarity for Ethan, who usually opted for business casual at most—and had clearly put effort into his appearance. His hair was neatly styled, and I caught the scent of the cologne I'd given him for Christmas when he stepped forward to kiss my cheek.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

I nodded, suddenly too nervous to speak. This was definitely more than just dinner.

"Have a wonderful evening," Mom called as we headed out. "No rush to get back!"

If Ethan found her comment odd, he didn't show it. He simply helped me into the truck, his hand lingering at the small of my back in a way that sent a pleasant shiver up my spine.

The drive to Riverside Inn was filled with comfortable conversation about the festival, the bookstore renovations, and Tyler's upcoming wedding. If Ethan was nervous about whatever he had planned, he hid it well. I, on the other hand, found myself growing

increasingly anxious, alternating between excitement and a strange fear that I couldn't quite name.

Riverside Inn lived up to its reputation—elegant without being stuffy, with a dining room that offered beautiful views of the water through large windows. We were seated at a secluded table near one of these windows, a bottle of champagne already chilling in a bucket beside it.

"Champagne?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "Now I know you're up to something."

Ethan smiled, looking slightly nervous for the first time that evening. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to someone who knows you as well as I do," I assured him, reaching across the table to take his hand. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

He squeezed my hand, then gestured to the waiter to pour the champagne. Once our glasses were filled and we were alone again, he raised his in a toast.

"To you," he said, his eyes never leaving mine. "And the incredible woman you've become. I am in awe of you every day, Liv—your strength, your creativity, your courage to rebuild your life on your own terms."

The sincerity in his voice made my throat tight with emotion. "Ethan—"

"Let me finish," he said gently. "I've been practicing this."

I nodded, taking a sip of champagne to hide the tears threatening to form.

"When you came back to Riverbrook last year, I thought I was being given a second chance at something I'd lost. A do-over for the relationship that ended too soon." He smiled, a bit ruefully. "But I've realized it's not about second chances or do-overs. It's about finding each other again as the people we are now, not the teenagers we were then."

"I feel the same way," I managed, my voice slightly unsteady.

"I know," he said, his smile widening. "That's one of the many reasons I love you. We've always understood each other, even when we were too young to know what to do with that understanding."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small velvet box, confirming my suspicions about tonight's purpose. But instead of getting down on one knee as I'd half expected, he simply placed the box on the table between us.

"This isn't a proposal," he said, seeing my surprise. "Not yet."

"It's not?" I asked, confused now.

He shook his head. "I want to marry you, Olivia. I think you know that. But I also know that you're just finding your footing here—with the bookstore, with your place in Riverbrook. I don't want to rush you or make you feel pressured into a commitment before you're ready."

I was touched by his consideration, by how well he understood my need for independence even as we built a life together.

"So what is this?" I asked, gesturing to the box.

"Open it," he encouraged.

Inside was not an engagement ring, as I'd expected, but a key on a simple silver chain.

"A key?" I asked, lifting it from the box.

"To my house," he explained. "Or rather, to our house, if you want it to be. I'm asking you to move in with me, officially. Not someday after the bookstore is done, but now. Tonight."

The offer took me by surprise. We'd discussed cohabitation in general terms, but I'd assumed it would happen gradually, perhaps after the bookstore was up and running.

"You want me to move in now?" I asked, wanting to be sure I understood.

He nodded. "I want to wake up next to you every morning, Liv. I want to build a home with you, not just talk about it as something we'll do eventually." He hesitated. "But if you're not ready, I understand. There's no rush."

I looked at the key in my palm, then back at the man across from me—the man who had been my first love, who had found his way back to me across time and distance, who understood me better than anyone ever had.

"I'm ready," I said, closing my fingers around the key. "More than ready."

His smile was radiant. "Yeah?"

"Yes," I confirmed, leaning across the table to kiss him briefly. "But what about your parents? They've been so wonderful about letting me stay with them."

"They already know," he admitted. "I talked to them last week. Your mom cried, but I think they were happy tears."

That explained her knowing smile and cryptic comment as we left. "So everyone knew about this but me?"

He laughed. "Pretty much. Small town, remember?"

"How could I forget?" I said wryly, but I was smiling too. "When were you thinking I should move my things?"

"I may have already enlisted Tyler and some of the construction crew to help tomorrow," he said, looking slightly sheepish. "Too presumptuous?"

"Completely," I agreed. "But also perfect."

We spent the rest of dinner discussing practical details—which of my things to move first, what space I'd need in his home office for bookstore planning, whether his closet was big enough for my clothes (it wasn't, but he promised to build additional storage).

It was, perhaps, not the most romantic of conversations, but it felt right. This wasn't a fairy tale ending but a real beginning—the start of a shared life with all its mundane details and everyday challenges.

Later, as we stood on the deck outside the restaurant, looking out at the moonlight reflecting on the river, Ethan wrapped his arms around me from behind, his chin resting on my shoulder.

"Happy?" he asked softly.

"Very," I assured him, leaning back against his solid warmth. "Though I have to admit, part of me thought you might be proposing tonight."

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest against my back. "Would you have said yes if I had?"

I considered the question seriously. "I think I would have. But I appreciate that you understand I need time to establish myself here first—not as Ethan Callahan's girlfriend or the Matthews' daughter, but as my own person with my own place in the community."

"You've already done that," he said. "The festival today was proof of that. But I get what you mean, and I'm happy to wait until the timing feels right for both of us."

I turned in his arms to face him. "I do want to marry you, Ethan. Someday."

"Someday," he agreed, bending to kiss me. "We have all the time in the world."

And we did, I realized. That was the beauty of what we'd found together—not a desperate, clutching love afraid of time passing, but a steady, patient love that trusted in the future we were building.

As we drove back to Riverbrook—to the house that would now be ours, not just his—I thought about the journey that had brought me here. The scared, ambitious eighteen-year-old who had fled this town in search of something bigger. The disillusioned twenty-eight-year-old who had returned, thinking she was retreating when she was actually advancing in a different direction.

And now, the woman I had become—someone who had learned that homes aren't places you escape from or run to, but spaces you create with intention and love.

Riverbrook was still a small town with all the limitations that entailed. But it was also a community where I was putting down roots, where I was building a business and a relationship and a life that felt authentically mine.

And tomorrow, I would move my belongings into Ethan's house—our house—taking another step on this unexpected but wonderful path.

"What are you thinking about?" Ethan asked, glancing over as we crossed the town line back into Riverbrook.

"Coming home," I said simply. "And how sometimes, it's not a place you return to but a feeling you find when you're exactly where you're supposed to be."

He reached for my hand, entwining our fingers across the console. No words were necessary; the gesture said everything.

We were home—not just in Riverbrook, but in each other. And that, I realized, had been the destination all along.

CHAPTER 11

"No, the poetry section should be by the window," I told the carpenter, gesturing to the alcove where morning light streamed in through stained glass. "That's where I always used to sit when this was the library."

The man nodded, making a note on his clipboard. "Got it. And the children's corner?"

"Opposite side, near the café but not too close to the espresso machine," I decided. "I want it accessible but not in the direct path of caffeine-seeking adults."

It was three weeks before the grand opening of Willow Street Books, and the renovations were in their final stages. The bones of the bookstore were in place—shelving units being installed, the café counter taking shape, the vintage hardwood floors refinished to a warm glow. But a thousand details remained to be settled, from lighting fixtures to the exact placement of reading nooks.

I'd been spending every spare moment at the building, overseeing the transformation of the space from dilapidated library to vibrant bookstore. It was exhausting but exhilarating work, watching my vision take physical form.

"The delivery truck is here with the first book shipment," called Melissa, who had eagerly accepted my offer to become the store's assistant manager. "Where do you want them to put the boxes?"

"In the back room for now," I directed. "We'll start shelving next week, once all the units are secure."

As Melissa went to direct the delivery, I took a moment to simply stand in what would be the main sales floor, trying to envision the finished space. In my mind's eye, I could see customers browsing the shelves, groups gathered for readings, children sprawled on the colorful rug in their dedicated corner. It wasn't just a store I was creating, but a community space—a place where stories would be shared and connections made.

My phone buzzed with a text from Ethan: *Meeting running late. Start dinner without me? Should be home by 7.*

I texted back: *No problem. Take your time. Busy at the store anyway.*

Our new domestic routine was still taking shape after two months of living together. Some days we were like ships passing in the night, both busy with our respective projects. Other days we managed to coordinate our schedules, cooking dinner together or taking walks along the river in the evening.

It was different from my life with Patrick in Seattle, where we'd maintained separate spheres despite sharing an apartment. With Ethan, there was a genuine intertwining of our lives—a sense that we were building something together, even when we were engaged in independent pursuits.

"Olivia?" called a voice from the front door. "You in here?"

I looked up to see Joyce Callahan, Ethan's mother, standing in the entrance with what appeared to be a picnic basket.

"Joyce!" I greeted her warmly. "This is a nice surprise. Come in, mind the tools."

She navigated carefully through the construction debris, smiling as she took in the space. "It's really coming along. I can already see what a beautiful store it's going to be."

"I hope so," I said, accepting the basket she handed me. "What's this?"

"Just some sandwiches and cookies," she said casually. "Ethan mentioned you've been working through lunch most days. Thought you and your crew might appreciate some home cooking."

The thoughtfulness of the gesture touched me. "That's so kind of you. Thank you."

Joyce had been wonderfully welcoming since Ethan and I had reunited, never once mentioning the decade I'd spent away or the broken heart I'd left her son with. Instead, she'd embraced me as if I'd never left, including me in family dinners and treating me like the daughter she'd never had.

"It's nothing," she demurred. "Just an excuse to see how things are progressing. Ethan's been talking this place up so much, I had to come see for myself."

I smiled, knowing how proud Ethan was of the renovation work his company was doing on the bookstore. "Well, you're welcome anytime. Would you like a tour? It's still rough, but you can get the general idea."

"I'd love that," she said enthusiastically.

As I showed her around, pointing out where different sections would be and explaining the concept behind the café, I found myself appreciating her genuine interest and insightful questions. Joyce had been a teacher before retiring, and her love of literature was evident in the way she responded to my plans for author events and reading groups.

"You know," she said as we ended up back near the entrance, "I used to bring Ethan here when he was little. He wasn't much of a reader at first—too much energy, always wanted to be outside building things—but there was a volunteer who ran a storytelling

hour on Saturdays. She did all the voices, used puppets sometimes. Ethan never missed it."

The image of a small Ethan, enraptured by stories in this very building, made me smile. "I didn't know that."

"Oh yes. And when he was a teenager, he had another reason to spend time here," she added with a knowing look. "A certain pretty girl who always sat in the window alcove, lost in a book."

I felt a blush warm my cheeks. "I had no idea he noticed me back then. Before we started dating, I mean."

Joyce laughed. "Noticed you? Honey, he was besotted. Used to check out books he had no interest in just to have an excuse to be here when you were."

This was news to me. Ethan and I had been friends for years before we started dating, part of the same social circle due to our mothers' friendship. I'd always assumed our romantic relationship had developed naturally from that foundation, not from any secret pining on his part.

"He never told me that," I said, touched by the revelation.

"He was a shy boy," Joyce said fondly. "Took him forever to work up the courage to actually talk to you. And then when you became friends, he was so afraid of ruining that by admitting his feelings."

Another parallel to our current situation—Ethan's careful approach to our reconnection, his patience in rebuilding trust before pushing for more.

"He hasn't changed as much as I thought," I mused aloud.

Joyce smiled. "In the ways that matter, no. He's still that thoughtful, determined boy—just with more confidence and experience now." She squeezed my arm affectionately. "I'm so glad you found your way back to each other. I always hoped you would."

"Even after I broke his heart?" I asked, the question slipping out before I could stop it.

She considered this, her expression serious. "Young hearts are resilient. And sometimes, people need to take different paths before they can truly appreciate where they belong." She gestured around at the bookstore. "Look at you—you left to pursue

your dreams, and now you're bringing one of those dreams back to Riverbrook. That wouldn't have happened if you'd stayed."

Her perspective was generous and wise, free of the resentment I might have expected from a mother whose son had been hurt.

"Thank you for that," I said sincerely. "And for welcoming me back so warmly."

"You're family, dear," she said simply. "You always were."

The declaration brought unexpected tears to my eyes. Family. It was what I'd been seeking, perhaps, in all my wanderings—not just biological connection, but that sense of belonging, of being known and accepted.

After Joyce left, promising to bring more food for the workers later in the week, I distributed the sandwiches to the grateful construction crew and settled in my makeshift office to work on inventory orders. But my mind kept returning to her words and the story she'd shared about young Ethan visiting the library because of me.

It made me see our history in a new light—not just as high school sweethearts who'd found each other again, but as two people whose lives had been intertwined in ways I hadn't even been aware of. There was something profound about the circularity of it all, about returning to create something new in a space that had been significant to both of us in different ways.

By the time I locked up the store that evening, I was exhausted but filled with a deep sense of purpose. This project wasn't just about opening a business; it was about creating a legacy, about contributing something meaningful to the town that had shaped me.

I drove home—still a thrill to think of Ethan's house as "home"—looking forward to a quiet evening together. Living with him had been surprisingly easy, our habits and preferences complementing rather than conflicting. He was neater than I was, but tolerant of my occasional clutter. I was more of a morning person, while he came alive in the evenings. We'd quickly developed rhythms and routines that accommodated both our styles.

When I arrived, the house was dark except for a light in the kitchen. I found Ethan at the stove, stirring something that smelled delicious.

"Hey," he said, looking up with a smile that still made my heart skip. "I thought I'd be the late one."

"Lost track of time at the store," I explained, dropping my bag and crossing to kiss him hello. "What are you making? It smells amazing."

"Just pasta with that pesto you like," he said, turning back to the stove. "Nothing fancy. How's the renovation going?"

"Good. We got the first book shipment today, and the shelving units are almost done." I leaned against the counter, watching him cook. "Your mom stopped by with lunch."

"She mentioned she might do that," he said. "Did she interrogate you about your intentions with her son?"

I laughed. "Actually, she told me some interesting stories about you as a kid. Particularly about your library visits."

He glanced at me, a hint of color rising in his cheeks. "Did she now?"

"Mmm-hmm," I hummed, enjoying his discomfort. "Something about a certain boy checking out books he didn't want just to see a certain girl?"

"I'm going to kill her," he muttered, but he was smiling. "It wasn't that obvious."

"Apparently it was," I teased, wrapping my arms around him from behind. "I think it's sweet. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

He shrugged, still focused on the pasta. "It seemed silly, after all this time. And a little pathetic, maybe."

"Not pathetic," I corrected. "Romantic. And very on-brand for you."

"On-brand?" he echoed, turning to face me with raised eyebrows.

"You know what I mean. The thoughtful gestures, the long game, the patience." I kissed him lightly. "It's very Ethan Callahan."

He smiled, relaxing. "I suppose it is. Though for the record, I did eventually read some of those books. Turned out Jane Austen wasn't half bad."

The image of teenage Ethan reading "Pride and Prejudice" to impress me made me laugh out loud. "Now that I would have paid to see."

"Well, I had to understand what had you so captivated," he said, turning off the stove. "Why books were more interesting than, say, the extremely eligible young man pretending to study at the next table."

"If only I'd known," I mused. "We could have started dating much earlier."

"Maybe," he said thoughtfully, serving the pasta into bowls. "Or maybe the timing was exactly as it should have been. We might not have been ready for each other before then."

It was a surprisingly philosophical observation, and it made me think again about Joyce's words regarding different paths and finding our way back.

"Do you ever wonder what would have happened if I hadn't left?" I asked as we sat at the kitchen table. "If we'd tried to make it work when I went to Berkeley?"

Ethan considered the question, twirling pasta around his fork. "Sometimes," he admitted. "But I don't think we would have lasted. Not because we didn't love each other enough, but because we both had too much growing to do. You needed to leave Riverbrook, to discover who you were beyond this town. And I needed to find my purpose here, to make peace with staying."

"And now?" I asked softly.

"Now we've done that growing," he said, reaching across the table to take my hand. "We know who we are and what we want. We're choosing each other from a place of wholeness, not need or fear of being alone."

His insight struck me as profoundly true. The love we shared now was different from our teenage passion—deeper, more grounded, built on a foundation of self-knowledge that neither of us had possessed at eighteen.

"When did you get so wise?" I asked, echoing a question I'd asked him months ago when we first reconnected.

He smiled. "I have my moments. Usually when I'm trying to impress a pretty girl."

After dinner, we settled on the porch swing with glasses of wine, watching the river flow past in the gathering dusk. It had become our favorite evening ritual, this quiet time together before bed.

"I was thinking," Ethan said after a comfortable silence, "about the apartment above the bookstore."

The building included a small apartment on the second floor, which I'd been considering as rental income to help offset the mortgage. "What about it?"

"What if we converted it into an office for you? A writing space."

I turned to look at him, surprised by the suggestion. "Writing space?"

"For that novel you've been talking about since you were sixteen," he said, as if it were obvious. "The one about the girl who finds a door to another world in her grandmother's attic."

I was stunned that he remembered. I hadn't written fiction seriously since college, when the demands of my publishing career had channeled my creative energies in different directions. But the story he mentioned had indeed been a dream project of mine for years—one I'd occasionally mentioned to him when we were teenagers, lying on the hood of his truck and talking about our futures.

"You remember that?" I asked, touched beyond measure.

"Of course I do," he said simply. "You used to light up when you talked about it. Said you'd write it 'someday' when you had time and space."

"And you think that someday is now?"

He shrugged. "Why not? You're establishing the bookstore, putting down roots here. Maybe it's time to revisit that dream too."

The suggestion resonated with something that had been stirring in me since returning to Riverbrook—a creative energy that had been dormant during my years in Seattle, when I'd been so focused on climbing the career ladder and fitting into Patrick's world.

"I haven't written fiction in years," I said, though the idea was already taking hold in my imagination.

"So? It's like riding a bike," he said confidently. "And you'd have the perfect inspiration right below you—a bookstore full of stories and interesting people."

He was right, I realized. The bookstore would be an ideal environment to nurture a writing practice—surrounded by books, connected to a community of readers, with a dedicated space just steps away from the bustle but removed enough for concentration.

"You're serious about this," I said, studying his face.

"Completely," he confirmed. "The apartment would make a perfect writer's retreat. We could design it however you want—built-in bookshelves, a desk overlooking the street, comfortable reading chair by the window."

The vision he painted was seductive—a space that was entirely mine, dedicated to a creative pursuit I'd set aside but never truly abandoned.

"What about the rental income?" I asked practically. "That was part of the business plan."

"The bookstore will do fine without it," he said with confidence. "Your marketing background, the café component, the events you're planning—it's a solid business model. And if you need a buffer, I'm happy to invest."

"I couldn't ask you to do that," I protested.

"You're not asking. I'm offering," he corrected. "As a business partner, if that makes you more comfortable. I believe in what you're creating, Liv. And I believe in your writing, even if you haven't done it in a while."

His faith in me—in both my business acumen and my creative potential—was overwhelming. It was so different from what I'd experienced with Patrick, who had viewed my publishing career as a nice hobby until we had children, at which point he'd assumed I'd stay home.

"Let me think about it," I said, though I was already imagining what the space could be, how it might feel to have hours dedicated to writing again.

"Of course," he agreed easily. "No pressure. It was just an idea."

But ideas, once planted, have a way of taking root and growing. As we sat in comfortable silence, watching the stars emerge above the river, I found myself mentally designing the writing space, planning a schedule that would allow me to balance the bookstore's demands with creative time.

"Thank you," I said softly, leaning against his shoulder.

"For what?"

"For seeing possibilities I don't always see for myself. For remembering dreams I'd almost forgotten."

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "That's what partners do. Remind each other of who we are and what we want when we get too busy to remember ourselves."

Partners. The word felt right—equal, supportive, mutual. We were building individual dreams while creating a shared life, neither sacrificing for the other but both strengthening what we built together.

Later that night, lying beside Ethan in the darkness of our bedroom, I found myself thinking about the many forms of coming home—to a place, to a person, to oneself. My return to Riverbrook had been all three, a journey that had appeared to be moving backward but was actually taking me forward in ways I couldn't have imagined.

"You awake?" Ethan whispered, his hand finding mine under the covers.

"Mmm," I confirmed. "Just thinking."

"About?"

"The writing studio," I admitted. "I think I want to do it."

I felt rather than saw his smile in the darkness. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. But I'll pay for the renovation myself. No business partnership."

"If that's what you want," he agreed. "Though my offer stands."

"I know. And I appreciate it. But this needs to be something I do on my own."

He understood without further explanation, one of the countless ways he showed his respect for my independence. "Whatever you decide, I'm behind you."

"I know that too," I said, squeezing his hand. "It's one of the many reasons I love you."

He pulled me closer, his body warm and solid against mine. "Get some sleep. You've got a bookstore to build tomorrow."

A bookstore to build. A novel to write. A life to create with the man beside me. As I drifted toward sleep, I felt a profound sense of rightness—as if all the disparate threads of my life were finally weaving together into a pattern that made sense.

Coming home to Riverbrook had been the beginning, not the end. And the story we were writing together was still in its early chapters, with the best parts yet to come.

CHAPTER 12

"Speech! Speech!" chanted the crowd gathered in the newly opened Willow Street Books, glasses of champagne raised in celebration.

I looked around at the packed room—friends, family, townspeople, and visitors who had come for the grand opening—and felt a momentary flutter of stage fright. Public speaking had never been my forte, despite my comfort with written words.

Ethan, sensing my hesitation, squeezed my hand encouragingly. "You've got this," he murmured. "Just tell them what this place means to you."

Taking a deep breath, I stepped onto the small platform we'd set up for author readings, facing the expectant faces of what seemed like half of Riverbrook.

"First of all, thank you all for coming today," I began, my voice steadier than I felt. "Seeing this space filled with people and books is a dream come true—quite literally, since I've been dreaming about opening a bookstore since I was twelve years old and discovered that books could be more than just entertainment. They could be lifelines, windows to other worlds, and sometimes, the only friends you need."

A murmur of appreciation rippled through the crowd. I spotted my parents near the front, Mom dabbing at her eyes while Dad beamed with pride. The Callahans were there too, Joyce giving me a thumbs up when our eyes met.

"Many of you know that this building was once the town library, where I spent countless hours as a child and teenager. It feels fitting that it's now beginning a new chapter as a bookstore—a place where stories will continue to be discovered and shared."

I paused, gathering my thoughts. "When I left Riverbrook after high school, I was certain my future lay elsewhere. I wanted bigger cities, broader horizons, experiences beyond what I thought a small town could offer. And I found those things, built a life I was proud of. But something was always missing."

My eyes found Ethan's in the crowd, his steady gaze giving me strength to continue.

"I didn't expect to find what I was missing when I came back here last year. I certainly didn't plan to stay, to build a business, to rediscover connections I thought were long behind me." This earned a knowing chuckle from the audience, many of whom had followed the rekindling of my relationship with Ethan with avid interest. Small towns and their gossip—some things never changed.

"But Riverbrook surprised me," I continued. "It wasn't the place I'd left behind. Or maybe I wasn't the same person who left. Either way, I found something here that I hadn't found anywhere else—a sense of belonging, of community, of being part of something larger than myself."

I gestured around at the beautifully renovated space, with its gleaming bookshelves, comfortable reading nooks, and café corner already doing brisk business. "This store is my way of contributing to that community, of creating a space where stories and ideas can flourish. Where children can fall in love with reading, where writers can find inspiration, where neighbors can connect over shared interests."

The words were flowing more easily now, my initial nervousness replaced by genuine emotion. "I couldn't have done this alone. There are so many people to thank—my parents, who believed in this dream enough to invest in it; the incredible construction team from Callahan Development, who turned my vague ideas into this beautiful space; Melissa, who agreed to manage the café with no prior experience but boundless enthusiasm."

I smiled at Melissa, who raised her glass in acknowledgment from behind the counter.

"And most of all, I want to thank Ethan Callahan," I said, my voice softening as I found him again in the crowd. "Not just for the practical support in designing and renovating this space, but for showing me that coming home doesn't mean giving up on your dreams. Sometimes, it means finding new ones—or rediscovering what was waiting for you all along."

The look that passed between us was private despite the public setting, a silent acknowledgment of all we'd built together in the year since I'd returned.

"So please, enjoy the store, browse the shelves, try the excellent coffee, and most importantly, find a book that speaks to you. Because that's what this place is really about—connecting people with stories that might change their lives, just as books have changed mine." I raised my glass. "To Willow Street Books, and to all of you who made it possible."

"To Willow Street Books!" echoed the crowd, followed by enthusiastic applause.

As I stepped down from the platform, people surged forward with congratulations and well-wishes. The next hour passed in a blur of conversations, introductions to visitors from neighboring towns, and the deeply satisfying sight of customers actually purchasing books from my store.

It wasn't until the crowd began to thin in the late afternoon that I had a moment to catch my breath. I found a quiet corner near the poetry section—my favorite spot in the store,

with its window seat overlooking the street—and took a moment to simply absorb what we had accomplished.

The bookstore was everything I'd envisioned and more. The renovation had preserved the building's historic charm while creating a space that felt both cozy and contemporary. Ethan's design touches were evident throughout—the custom bookshelves that maximized space without feeling crowded, the reading nooks tucked into unexpected corners, the café bar made from reclaimed wood from the original library circulation desk.

Upstairs, my writing studio was taking shape as well, though it wasn't yet complete. I'd decided to take Ethan's suggestion, converting the apartment into a creative space where I could work on the novel I'd begun drafting in stolen moments between bookstore preparations. The project was still in its early stages, but it felt good to be writing fiction again, to be reclaiming that part of myself that had been dormant for too long.

"There you are," said Ethan, appearing with two cups of coffee from the café. He handed me one and settled beside me on the window seat. "Hiding from your adoring public?"

I smiled, accepting the coffee gratefully. "Just taking a moment to let it all sink in. It doesn't quite feel real yet."

"It's real," he assured me, looking around at the store still bustling with customers. "And it's a hit. Melissa says the café's already made back half its daily operating costs, and it's only four o'clock."

"That's encouraging," I said, genuinely pleased by the news. The business plan I'd developed was conservative, anticipating a slow build in customers rather than an immediate success. If the opening day was any indication, we might reach profitability faster than I'd projected.

"Your speech was beautiful," Ethan said, his eyes warm as they met mine. "You meant what you said? About finding what you were missing?"

"Every word," I confirmed, reaching for his hand. "Returning to Riverbrook was the best decision I never planned to make."

He laughed softly at that. "Sometimes the unplanned decisions are the most important ones."

"Speaking of decisions," I said, remembering something I'd been meaning to tell him, "I got a call from a publisher in New York yesterday. They want to meet with me about a book idea."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "Your novel?"

"No, not that—it's nowhere near ready. This would be a non-fiction project, a book about small-town revitalization through arts and culture. Based on what we've done here with the festival program and now the bookstore."

"Liv, that's fantastic," he said, genuine excitement in his voice. "When's the meeting?"

"Next week. They want me to come to New York to discuss it in person." I watched his face carefully, unsure how he would feel about me traveling to the city for a potential project. We'd been focusing so much on building our life in Riverbrook, I wasn't sure how a publishing opportunity that might require travel would fit into the picture.

But his smile never faltered. "You should absolutely go. This is a great opportunity."

"You're not worried about me being tempted by the big city again?" I asked, only half joking.

He shook his head, his confidence touching me deeply. "Not even a little bit. Riverbrook is your home now—our home. That doesn't mean you can't pursue opportunities elsewhere sometimes."

His understanding, his complete lack of insecurity about my commitment to our shared life, reaffirmed what I already knew: this relationship was built on a foundation of trust and respect that my younger self couldn't have appreciated.

"I love you," I said simply, because there were no other words that adequately expressed what I was feeling in that moment.

"I love you too," he replied, leaning in to kiss me briefly. "And I'm incredibly proud of you. The store, the book possibility, all of it."

"We make a good team," I said, glancing around at what we'd built together—him with his architectural vision, me with my literary one, both of us supporting the other's dreams.

"The best," he agreed. "Oh, I almost forgot. I have something for you. An opening day gift."

From his jacket pocket, he produced a small, wrapped package. "It's not much," he said as I took it. "Just something I thought belonged here."

I unwrapped it carefully to find a leather-bound edition of "Pride and Prejudice"—not a new copy, but a vintage one with gilded edges and a slightly worn spine.

"Open it," he encouraged.

Inside the front cover was an old library card with familiar stamps—dates from twenty years ago, when this had been the town library. And there, on the card, was my own childish signature, indicating I had checked this very book out multiple times.

"How did you find this?" I asked, genuinely amazed.

"When they closed the old library, a lot of the books were sold off or donated. I've been keeping an eye out for this one for years, ever since I knew it was your favorite. Found it at a used bookstore in Springfield last month."

The thoughtfulness of the gift moved me deeply. It wasn't just a book, but a tangible connection to my past, to the girl I had been and the woman I had become.

"It's perfect," I said, tracing the familiar cover. "The first addition to the store's permanent collection. Not for sale at any price."

He smiled, pleased that I understood the significance. "I thought it could stay here in your reading nook. A reminder of why you started all this in the first place."

I placed the book carefully on the window seat beside me, making a mental note to find a special display spot for it later. "Thank you. Not just for the book, but for... everything. For supporting this crazy venture, for believing in me even when I wasn't sure I believed in myself."

"That's what love is," he said simply. "Seeing the best in each other, even when we can't see it ourselves."

A customer approached then, asking for a recommendation, and I reluctantly left my quiet corner to help her find the perfect book. The rest of the opening day passed in a pleasant whirlwind of sales, conversations, and the deeply satisfying sight of people enjoying the space we'd created.

By the time we closed at seven, I was exhausted but exhilarated. The day had exceeded all my expectations—not just in terms of sales, though those had been

stronger than projected, but in the way the community had embraced the store as a new gathering place.

Melissa stayed to help me close up, counting the register and storing leftover pastries from the café while I straightened shelves and made notes about which sections needed restocking.

"So," she said as we finished, "official verdict on day one?"

"Better than I could have hoped," I told her honestly. "You were amazing with the café. I don't know how you kept up with all those orders."

She grinned. "Coffee is my superpower. Seriously, though, this place is special, Olivia. You've created something Riverbrook has needed for a long time."

"We created it," I corrected. "I couldn't have done this without you and everyone else who pitched in."

"Team effort," she agreed. "But it was your vision. Don't sell yourself short."

After she left, I did a final walk-through of the store, turning off lights and making sure everything was ready for our second day of business tomorrow. In the quiet, with the evening light filtering through the stained glass windows, I felt a profound sense of accomplishment and belonging.

This space was mine, created according to my vision but with the support of the community I had once been so eager to escape. The irony wasn't lost on me—that I had traveled so far only to find my purpose back where I started.

But it wasn't really where I'd started, I realized. Riverbrook had changed in the decade I'd been gone, becoming more diverse, more open to new ideas, more connected to the wider world. And I had changed too, bringing back perspectives and experiences that allowed me to see my hometown with fresh eyes.

When I finally locked up and headed home—to the house I now shared with Ethan, where he was waiting with takeout from our favorite restaurant and a bottle of champagne to continue the celebration—I felt a sense of completion that had eluded me in Seattle despite all my professional achievements there.

It wasn't that my life was perfect or that all my questions had been answered. The future still held uncertainties—how the bookstore would fare beyond its successful opening, what might come of the publishing opportunity in New York, when Ethan and I might take the next step in our relationship.

But for perhaps the first time in my adult life, I wasn't anxious about those uncertainties. I was simply living in the present, appreciating what we had built and looking forward to what might come next.

As Ethan and I toasted the successful opening with champagne on our porch swing, the river flowing steadily beyond our yard, I thought about the journey that had brought me here—not just the physical return to Riverbrook, but the emotional path from the restless teenager eager to escape to the woman who had chosen to make this place her home.

"Penny for your thoughts," Ethan said, noticing my contemplative mood.

"I was just thinking about circles," I said. "How life sometimes brings you back to where you started, but as a different person."

He nodded, understanding immediately. "The hero's journey. You have to leave home to find what you're looking for, but often what you're really seeking is a deeper connection to where you began."

"Exactly," I agreed, touched as always by his intuitive grasp of what I meant. "Though I wouldn't call myself a hero."

"I would," he said simply. "It takes courage to leave what's familiar. And even more courage to come back and see it with new eyes."

As we sat together in the gathering dusk, I felt a sense of peace that had been missing from my life for longer than I cared to admit. Not the temporary calm of a problem solved or a goal achieved, but a deeper tranquility that came from knowing I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Coming home to Riverbrook had been a journey of rediscovery—of the town, of Ethan, and most importantly, of myself. It wasn't an ending but a beginning, a fresh chapter in a story that was still unfolding.

And for the first time in years, I couldn't wait to see what happened next.

CHAPTER 13

The New York skyline glittered through the window of the publishing house conference room, a view I'd once found exhilarating but now regarded with a certain detachment. It was beautiful, yes, but it no longer represented the pinnacle of success in my mind.

"So we're thinking a spring publication date," said Catherine, the editor who had reached out about my book proposal. "That gives you about eight months to complete the manuscript. Does that timeline work for you?"

I nodded, still somewhat stunned that this was actually happening. "That should be fine. The bookstore is up and running smoothly now, and I've blocked out writing time in my schedule."

"Excellent." She smiled, sliding a contract across the table. "We're very excited about this project, Olivia. 'Small Town Renaissance: Revitalizing Communities Through Arts and Culture' fills a real gap in the market. And your personal experience gives it authenticity that similar books lack."

The contract represented everything I'd once dreamed of—a book deal with a respected New York publisher, the chance to share my ideas with a national audience, validation of my expertise and writing ability. Yet I found myself hesitating before picking up the pen.

"Is there a problem?" Catherine asked, noticing my hesitation.

"No, not at all," I assured her. "It's just... a big moment. My first book contract."

"Hopefully not your last," she said warmly. "We see a lot of potential in you as an author."

I signed then, my signature looking surprisingly steady despite the emotions swirling within me. This wasn't just a professional milestone; it was the integration of my two worlds—the ambitious career woman I'd been in Seattle and the community-focused entrepreneur I'd become in Riverbrook.

After the meeting concluded, I had a few hours before my flight home. On impulse, I texted my former colleague from Weston Press, suggesting coffee if she was free. Thirty minutes later, we were seated at a bustling café near Bryant Park.

"You look great," Aisha said, studying me over her latte. "There's something different about you. More... settled, maybe?"

I smiled, touched by her observation. "I feel settled. In a good way, not in a 'I've given up on my dreams' way."

"I never thought you'd end up back in your hometown," she admitted. "You were always so determined to build a life in the city."

"I surprised myself," I acknowledged. "But it turns out Riverbrook had more to offer than I realized when I was eighteen and desperate to leave."

"Like a second chance with your high school boyfriend?" she teased, referencing what I'd shared about Ethan during our catch-up.

"Among other things," I laughed. "But yes, Ethan is a big part of why staying feels right."

"It sounds like you've built something special there," she said, a hint of wistfulness in her voice. "The bookstore, the community arts program, the relationship. Like you've found your place."

Her words echoed what I'd been feeling but hadn't fully articulated. I had found my place—not just geographically, but in terms of purpose and belonging.

"What about you?" I asked. "Still enjoying Weston?"

Her expression clouded slightly. "It's... challenging. Another round of layoffs last month. The industry is changing so fast, and not all publishers are adapting well."

I nodded, understanding her concerns. The publishing world I'd left had been in flux, with traditional houses struggling to remain relevant in the digital age.

"Have you ever thought about doing something different?" I asked. "Using your skills in a new context?"

She laughed ruefully. "All the time. But what? I've been in publishing my entire career. It's all I know."

"That's what I thought too," I pointed out. "But it turns out the skills we develop in publishing—curation, marketing, community building—are valuable in other contexts. Like, say, running an independent bookstore."

"Are you offering me a job, Olivia Matthews?" she asked, only half joking.

I hadn't been, but the idea took root as soon as she said it. Aisha was brilliant—a skilled editor with excellent taste and a talent for event planning. And Willow Street Books was doing well enough that I'd been considering hiring additional help, especially with the book contract now requiring more of my time.

"Maybe I am," I said slowly. "Not immediately, but... would you consider relocating to a small town if the right opportunity came along? We're growing faster than expected, and I could use someone with your expertise."

She looked surprised, then thoughtful. "A few years ago, I would have laughed at the suggestion. But lately... I don't know. The city feels different. More exhausting than exciting."

"Think about it," I encouraged. "Visit sometime, see if you could imagine yourself there. No pressure, just an idea to consider."

By the time we parted ways, Aisha had promised to come to Riverbrook for a weekend in the fall, and I had a flight to catch. As the plane lifted off, carrying me back to my chosen home, I reflected on how much had changed in a year.

The woman who had arrived in Riverbrook feeling defeated and directionless now had a thriving business, a book contract, and a relationship that nourished rather than depleted her. The town I'd once seen as a limitation had become the foundation for possibilities I couldn't have imagined elsewhere.

When I landed, Ethan was waiting at the small regional airport, leaning against his truck with that half-smile that still made my heart skip. He straightened when he saw me, opening his arms for a hug that felt like coming home in the truest sense.

"Welcome back," he said, pressing a kiss to my temple. "How was New York?"

"Productive," I said as we walked to the truck. "I signed the contract."

"That's fantastic, Liv!" His genuine enthusiasm for my success was one of the countless reasons I loved him. "We should celebrate."

"I'd like that," I agreed. "But something low-key. It's been a long couple of days."

As we drove through the familiar streets of Riverbrook, I filled him in on the publishing details and my impromptu job offer to Aisha. Rather than being surprised, he seemed pleased by the idea.

"She'd be a great addition to the store," he said. "And having someone you trust running things day-to-day would give you more flexibility for writing and other projects."

"If she decides to come," I cautioned. "It's a big change, moving from New York to Riverbrook."

"Some people make that transition quite successfully," he pointed out with a smile, glancing at me.

"True," I acknowledged. "But it's not for everyone."

When we arrived home, I was surprised to find the porch decorated with string lights and the table set for dinner. A bottle of champagne was chilling in an ice bucket, and the tantalizing aroma of Ethan's famous lasagna wafted from the kitchen.

"I thought you might be hungry after your flight," he explained, seeing my surprise. "And I wanted to make your first night back special."

The thoughtfulness of the gesture touched me deeply. It was so typical of Ethan—not grand romantic gestures, but meaningful, personalized ones that showed how well he knew me and what mattered to me.

"This is perfect," I said sincerely. "Thank you."

Dinner was relaxed and intimate, both of us sharing stories from the days we'd been apart. Ethan updated me on the bookstore, which Melissa had been managing in my absence, and his progress on a new development project on the edge of town.

"Oh, and Tyler called," he mentioned as we finished our meal. "The wedding invitations are finally ready. He's bringing ours over tomorrow."

I smiled, thinking of Ethan's younger brother and his elaborate wedding plans. "Just in time. The wedding's only, what, six weeks away?"

"Five," Ethan corrected. "And Megan's in full panic mode, apparently. Something about the floral arrangements not matching the exact shade of blush pink she wanted for the bridesmaids' dresses."

I laughed, imagining the scene. "Poor Tyler. Though he did sign up for this."

"He did," Ethan agreed. "And he's actually enjoying it, I think. The planning, the traditions, all of it." He hesitated, then added, "It's made me think about what kind of wedding we might want. Eventually."

The casual mention of our potential future wedding sent a warm current through me. We'd discussed marriage in general terms but hadn't made any concrete plans or formal commitments.

"Oh?" I said, trying to sound equally casual. "And what have you been thinking?"

He shrugged, a slight flush coloring his cheeks. "Nothing specific. Just that I'd want something that feels like us. Something meaningful but not extravagant. Maybe outdoors, by the river."

The fact that he'd given it any thought at all was significant, and I found myself imagining the scenario he described—a simple ceremony near the water that had been a constant presence in our relationship, surrounded by the people who mattered most to us.

"That sounds perfect," I said softly. "I've never been one for big, elaborate events anyway."

"Me neither," he agreed, looking relieved that I shared his vision. "Though I'd want to do it right. Give you the day you deserve."

The conversation was veering into territory that felt both exciting and slightly premature. We'd been back together for less than a year, living together for only a few months. Yet in many ways, it felt like we'd been building toward this future our entire lives, the decade apart merely a detour on a path that was always meant to reconnect.

"Well, whenever it happens," I said carefully, "I think we're on the same page about what matters."

He smiled, reaching across the table to take my hand. "We usually are. It's one of the things I love most about us."

After dinner, we moved to the porch swing with glasses of champagne, watching the fireflies begin their evening dance over the river. It was a perfect summer night—warm but not humid, the air scented with honeysuckle from the vines that climbed the porch railings.

"I have something for you," Ethan said after a comfortable silence. "A welcome home gift."

From his pocket, he produced a small velvet box. My heart stuttered at the sight of it, though something told me this wasn't the proposal we'd just been obliquely discussing.

"What's this?" I asked, taking the box from him.

"Open it and see."

Inside was a key—not the house key he'd given me months ago when asking me to move in, but something older and more ornate.

"It's the original key to the Willow Street Library," he explained. "From when it was first built in 1892. I found it in the town archives when I was researching the building's history for the renovation permits."

I lifted the key carefully, admiring its intricate design. "It's beautiful."

"I had it framed for the store," he continued. "To hang behind the main counter. But I wanted to give it to you first, to hold for a while. It seemed right that you should be the one to place it there, since you're giving the building its new purpose."

The symbolism of the gesture moved me—this physical connection between the building's past and its future, between what it had been to me as a child and what it was becoming under my stewardship.

"I love it," I said sincerely. "And I love you for finding it, for understanding why it matters."

He smiled, drawing me closer on the swing. "I know how much that building means to you. How it shaped you."

"It did," I agreed. "But so did you. So does this—what we're building together."

He was quiet for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "You know, when you first came back to Riverbrook, I was afraid to hope for this. For us. I thought maybe we'd get closure, or become friends again, but I didn't dare believe we could find our way back to each other so completely."

"I didn't either," I admitted. "I was so focused on what I thought I wanted—a career in publishing, a life in a big city—that I couldn't see other possibilities. Other paths to happiness."

"And now?" he asked softly. "Are you happy with the path you've chosen?"

I considered the question, though I already knew the answer. The past year had been challenging in many ways—establishing the bookstore, navigating our rekindled relationship, finding my place in the community I'd once left behind. But it had also been the most fulfilling period of my adult life, rich with purpose and connection in a way my existence in Seattle never had been.

"I am," I said with certainty. "Happier than I've ever been. This life we're creating—it feels right in a way nothing else ever has."

His smile was radiant in the soft porch light. "That's all I've ever wanted for you, Liv. Even when we were apart, even when I thought I'd never see you again—I just wanted you to find where you belonged, where you could be truly happy."

"And you?" I asked, needing to hear his affirmation too. "Is this what you want? This life, this town, this relationship?"

"It's everything I want," he said simply. "You're everything I want."

The certainty in his voice, the depth of love in his eyes, filled me with a profound sense of peace. We had found our way back to each other across time and distance, through growth and change and separate journeys that had ultimately led to this shared destination.

As we sat together in the gathering dusk, the river flowing steadily beyond our yard, I thought about the many forms love can take throughout a lifetime. The passionate, all-consuming love of youth. The steady, enduring love of maturity. The love that breaks and heals and transforms, becoming stronger at the mended places.

What Ethan and I had now was all of these—the rekindled spark of our teenage connection, the deeper understanding that came with adult perspective, the resilience born from having lost and found each other again.

"I was thinking," I said after a while, "about what you said earlier. About a wedding by the river."

He turned to look at me, a question in his eyes.

"I like that idea," I continued. "A lot. And I don't think we need to wait until some arbitrary point in the future to make it happen."

His expression shifted from questioning to hopeful. "What are you saying, Liv?"

"I'm saying that when you're ready to ask, I'm ready to say yes." I smiled, squeezing his hand. "I'm not going anywhere. This is where I want to be, with you. For the rest of our lives."

It wasn't quite a proposal—from either of us—but it was a promise, a commitment to the future we both wanted. And for now, that was enough.

Ethan pulled me closer, his kiss conveying everything words couldn't fully express—gratitude, joy, certainty, love. When we finally broke apart, both slightly breathless, he rested his forehead against mine.

"I love you, Olivia Matthews," he said softly. "I always have, and I always will."

"I love you too," I replied, the simple words containing a lifetime of meaning. "Welcome home."

And in that moment, with the river flowing steadily beyond our porch and the future stretching bright before us, I knew with absolute certainty that I had finally found where I belonged—not in a place, but in a person, in a love that had survived separation and change and the passage of time.

I had come home to Riverbrook, yes. But more importantly, I had come home to myself, to the life I was meant to live and the love I was meant to find—not once, but twice, in a second chance more precious for having almost been lost.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

The river sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight, its surface dappled with gold as the sun began its descent toward the horizon. On its banks, beneath an arch woven with wildflowers and trailing ribbons, Ethan waited for me, handsome in a simple gray suit, his smile visible even from a distance.

My father squeezed my arm gently as we paused at the edge of the gathering. "Ready, Livvy?"

I nodded, too full of emotion for words. The small crowd of friends and family turned to watch as the string quartet began playing—not the traditional wedding march, but a gentle melody Ethan and I had chosen together, one that spoke of journeys and homecomings.

As we moved slowly down the aisle—really just a path mowed through the wildflowers that grew along the riverbank—I took in the scene we had created: simple white chairs arranged in a semicircle facing the water, lanterns waiting to be lit as evening fell, tables set beneath twinkling lights strung between the trees.

It was exactly as we'd envisioned when planning our wedding—intimate, meaningful, connected to the natural beauty of the place that had brought us together, torn us apart, and ultimately reunited us.

In the front row, my mother dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, while beside her, Joyce Callahan beamed with maternal pride. Tyler stood near Ethan as his best man, looking considerably more relaxed than he had at his own wedding three months earlier.

Jen waited at the front as my maid of honor, her smile wide and her eyes suspiciously bright.

But it was Ethan who held my gaze as I approached—Ethan, whose eyes never left mine, whose love was written so clearly on his face that it took my breath away.

When we reached him, my father placed my hand in Ethan's with a gesture both traditional and deeply symbolic. The circle complete, a family reconnected.

"Hi," Ethan whispered as he took my hands in his.

"Hi yourself," I whispered back, overwhelmed by the rightness of this moment, this choice, this life we were formally joining.

The ceremony itself was brief but meaningful—vows we had written ourselves, promises made with full awareness of their weight and significance. We spoke of second chances and chosen paths, of growth and return, of a love that had matured like wine, becoming richer and more complex with time.

"I promise to be your partner in all things," Ethan said, his voice steady despite the emotion shining in his eyes. "To support your dreams as fiercely as my own. To remember that love is not possession but freedom—the freedom to be fully ourselves while building something beautiful together."

"I promise to be your harbor and your horizon," I replied, the words I'd carefully crafted flowing naturally now. "Your safe place to return to and your encouragement to explore. To never again mistake running away for moving forward, or independence for isolation."

When we exchanged rings—simple bands of white gold, unadorned but for the date engraved inside—it felt less like a new beginning than a confirmation of what we had already built together: a partnership based on mutual respect, shared purpose, and a love that had withstood both time and distance.

"By the power vested in me," said Mayor Johnson, who had been delighted to officiate, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. Ethan, you may kiss your bride."

The kiss was sweet and brief, mindful of our audience, but filled with promise for later, when we would be alone. As we turned to face our guests, now officially introduced as Mr. and Mrs. Callahan, the applause that erupted seemed to echo the joy I felt bubbling up inside me.

The reception that followed was exactly as we'd wanted—relaxed and intimate, with excellent food, plenty of wine, and conversation that flowed as steadily as the river beside us. As daylight faded, the lanterns and string lights created a magical atmosphere, transforming the riverbank into an enchanted setting.

After dinner came dancing, beginning with our first dance as a married couple. Ethan led me onto the small wooden platform we'd constructed for the occasion, pulling me close as the music began—a song that had been playing the first time he kissed me, all those years ago at Callahan Park.

"Happy?" he murmured against my hair as we swayed together.

"Completely," I assured him, leaning back to meet his gaze. "You?"

His smile was answer enough, but he said it anyway: "More than I ever thought possible."

As the evening progressed, I found moments to connect with the people who had been part of our journey—my parents, whose support had never wavered; the Callahans, who had welcomed me back into their family with open arms; Jen and Melissa, who had become not just friends but essential parts of my Riverbrook life.

Even Aisha was there, having accepted my job offer six months earlier and now thriving as the event coordinator for Willow Street Books. She had brought her fiancé, a local teacher she'd met shortly after moving to town, proof that Riverbrook's magic wasn't limited to those who had grown up there.

"The store's in good hands," she assured me when I thanked her for taking charge during our two-week honeymoon. "Though your regulars miss you. Mrs. Henderson asks about you every day when she comes in for her coffee and mystery novel."

"Tell her I'll be back with souvenirs from Italy," I promised. "And plenty of stories."

As the celebration continued around us, Ethan and I slipped away for a moment of quiet, walking hand in hand along the river's edge. The moon was rising, casting a silver path across the water, and in the distance, the lights of Riverbrook twinkled like earthbound stars.

"Do you remember," Ethan asked, "the night you came back to town? When we ran into each other at The Grill?"

I nodded, smiling at the memory. "You said it had been ten years, two months, and fifteen days. But who's counting?"

"I was," he admitted. "Every day you were gone, I was counting. Not because I was dwelling in the past, but because a part of me never stopped believing we'd find our way back to each other."

His certainty moved me deeply. "Even when I was engaged to someone else? Living across the country?"

"Even then," he confirmed. "It wasn't rational, and I wasn't sitting around pining. I dated, I built my career, I created a life I was proud of. But somewhere deep down, I knew that if you ever came home, we'd have a second chance."

I leaned into him, grateful beyond words for his faith, for the steadiness that had always been his greatest strength. "Thank you for waiting. For believing in us even when I didn't."

"Thank you for coming back," he countered. "For being brave enough to try again."

We stood together in comfortable silence, watching the river flow past—the same river that had witnessed our first kiss as teenagers, our reunion as adults, and now our marriage. Its constancy was a reminder that some things endure, unchanging at their core despite the passage of time.

"We should get back," I said eventually, aware that our guests would be wondering where we'd disappeared to. "Before they send out a search party."

Ethan nodded, but before we turned back, he pulled me close for one more kiss—deeper than the one we'd shared during the ceremony, a private affirmation of all we meant to each other.

"I love you, Mrs. Callahan," he murmured against my lips.

"I love you too, Mr. Callahan," I replied, still getting used to the new name that represented not a loss of identity but an expansion of it.

As we walked back toward the lights and laughter of our wedding celebration, I felt a profound sense of completion—not as an ending, but as a foundation for all that was yet to come. The bookstore was thriving, my book was due for publication in the spring, and now Ethan and I were officially beginning our life together as husband and wife.

It wasn't the future I had imagined for myself when I left Riverbrook at eighteen, determined to find meaning and purpose far from its familiar streets. But it was infinitely richer, more authentic, and more fulfilling than anything I could have planned.

Sometimes the longest journeys lead you right back where you started—not because you've failed to escape, but because you've finally learned to see, with clarity and gratitude, what was there all along.

I had come home to Riverbrook. I had come home to Ethan. But most importantly, I had come home to myself—to the woman I was always meant to become, in the place I was always meant to be.

And that, I realized as Ethan and I rejoined our loved ones under the twinkling lights, was the greatest journey of all.

THE END