

*'Sometimes the storm comes not to destroy you, but to water what you planted.'*

Coming out of the reception hall a few minutes later was like stepping into another world. The overcast sky had turned dark and angry looking as huge clouds were quickly sweeping in off of the ocean water. Gabe was there by the door, waiting to lock up behind her. As the wind whipped across the parking lot, her hair flew in all directions and made her change her mind about the black and white shots in and around the churchyard.

"Hope you don't have far to go?" He asked, his deep voice raised a notch. Piper tried to gauge how far she'd walked that morning and if there was shelter from the rain on the way back to the hotel. Getting caught in the rain with her equipment wasn't an option. As her only lifeline to landing a new job, she guarded it at all costs. Cursing inwardly that she didn't drive the car over, Gabe seemed to read her thoughts.

"I'm glad to give you a lift." He said with a dip of his head. Piper turned to look up at him. His eyes were a light blue, so inviting. She thought of Roy's brown eyes and how quickly she'd fallen for him. She couldn't help but wonder who else might be a part of Gabe's life.

"I shouldn't." Piper had to raise her voice a bit over the growing wind. She stepped back with a tense smile, trying to remember what stores were between there and the hotel. The last thing she needed to do was to give this guy the wrong impression, cute as he was. He raised an eyebrow but nodded, respectful of her.

They had just made it down the steps when the heavens above opened as if the winds had gathered the entire ocean above them. With a shriek, Piper gasped and turned to head back for the safety of the doorway, only to see no overhang to shield them. Gabe lightly touched her and pointed to his truck. She took off in a dead run with him right behind. The huge drops were unnaturally icy, even in the middle of a humid summer day.

"Hey, jump in!" He shouted, pulling the door open. Ushering her into the back seat next to her bag, he climbed in the front as heavy winds began whipping sheets of rain at the truck. Piper slammed the door behind her, trying to catch her breath at the sudden cloudburst. Turning around in the driver's seat, Gabe gave a nervous laugh as Piper caught her breath from the surprise of the moment. Thunder cracked overhead, making her jump.

Pushing her wet hair back, she realized she must look like a half-drowned rat. Almost able to read her thoughts, he said,

"Reach back and open my gym bag - there's towels in there." He pointed at a huge duffel on the floor behind her seat. Unzipping the bag revealed his workout

clothes and fresh towels, among other things. Handing the top one to him, she took in the feel of the soft nylon shorts next to the second towel. As she wiped her arms, she couldn't mistake the fresh smell of his soap. The rain howled down around them, the pounding of the wind angrily rocking the truck. Piper hoped the action outside covered her awkward feeling of being in a total stranger's car and going through his gym bag only minutes after meeting him.

The view out the window turned to a gray smear and neither could see across the street. The dog whimpered behind Piper as it lay down to wait. She gave a silent thanks to God for not being caught in the storm; otherwise, her equipment would surely have been ruined. More thunder boomed ominously all around them.

"You ok?" Gabe asked to break the silence.

"Yep. Thanks for taking the time to track me down." Piper fingered the towel in her lap, thinking of the towels she'd just gotten at her bridal shower. She'd never see Roy after an early morning shower with a towel around his waist. Never run in the rain with him like this. She felt stupid even entertaining the daydream now. Everything was tainted with images of Maddie taking her place. Trying to look through the window, the storm magnified how alone she felt.

Gabe tossed his towel back onto the seat next to her, interrupting her momentary fugue.

"Not a problem." He said, turning and watching her nervously begin to fold the damp towel in her lap. "Would you rather sit up here?"

Piper shook her head because she couldn't get the words out. She didn't trust simple words not to unlock others. The last thing she needed to do was unload on this perfect stranger about how her life was in shambles. It was bad enough to let herself get worked up over a simple kind gesture as offering her shelter from the rain. She wiped at the condensation on the window.

"So, how far do you have to go?" He asked quietly.

"The Marriott at Main." She told him.

~\*~

It was hard to even see her let alone hear her in the seat behind him as the rain pounded the truck relentlessly. Gabe just fit comfortably facing front, being six foot seven, so he had to cock his leg awkwardly across the center console to twist around and ask about giving her a lift. She was looking a little lost with his towel in her lap as if she really wanted to get away from him and the dog. Hector seemed to put her on edge by the way her body language read.

Thinking that perhaps she was a bit claustrophobic of suddenly being closed in with the rain surrounding them, he hit the ignition and turned on the air. In another

minute, the windows cleared and things seemed to be letting up enough for him to see the road. Without peppering her further, he gave the storm another minute and then hit the lights and left the parking lot.

Most everybody was safely off the road, riding out the storm in various tourist attractions that peppered the downtown area. Gabe took his time, knowing Hector would enjoy the spontaneous detour.

As he checked her in the rearview mirror, he was surprised at how she looked so small. Leaning her head back onto the seat, she reminded him of a little girl being bussed off to summer camp or something. But in spite of that, he found himself staring.

Pulling into the rather full parking lot, Gabe pulled right up to the front door so she could have the immense awning to keep her dry, he got out to open her door. Everything was wet and he could feel the wind soaking his back, but it didn't matter. She had the mystery bag on her shoulder and hopped out with a relieved smile.

"Thanks so much!" She said as she got out, an appreciative smile greeting him as she walked to the door. An attendant was already waiting as he stood there, watching the rain from the safety of the lobby. Gabe nodded and smiled.

"Sure thing!" He managed as a gust of wind pushed him from behind. Then she was gone and that was that.

Pulling away from the hotel, Gabe drove slowly back to Happy Paws. He knew his sister would have her hands full with some of their current borders as Toby always howled horribly when there was a storm. That always got the other dogs going. She'd be waiting to see him and Hector. But he couldn't get Piper out of his mind.