

RESCUING OLIVIA

by Julie Compton

Every life is allocated one hundred seconds of true genius. They might be enough, if we could just be sure which ones they were.

James Richardson, poet

FLORIDA

Chapter One

Anders stepped off the elevator into the lobby of the ICU, and the sounds of everyday life evaporated. He still heard voices, but they were more hushed than the ones in the main lobby downstairs, and he suspected most of them up here on the fourth floor belonged to doctors or nurses. Otherwise, the halls were silent. His eyes scanned the area, and he tried to determine where he was supposed to go and how he was supposed to get there. The hallways appeared to form a large H, with the elevators in the middle. He saw only two sets of doors, one on each side of the elevator banks, each leading to one leg of the H. The doors nearest to him had an identifying plaque at shoulder height – it merely stated "ICU." He stepped to the opposite side of the hall and read "ICU-Neuro" next to the other set. He pulled both handles, but they were locked.

A sense of helplessness overcame him. He was a grown man – almost thirty years old – and yet he couldn't figure out something as simple as how to visit his girlfriend in the intensive care unit of a hospital. He felt as if he was on a scavenger hunt to find something very, very important, yet no one had given him any clues to get started. It occurred to him then that perhaps

the hospital prohibited visitors in the ICU. But no, no, that wasn't right either. The kind lady in the pink clothing at the reception desk downstairs would have mentioned that when he asked her which floor Olivia was on. Too bad she hadn't mentioned how he should get behind these doors once he got up here.

He heard more voices, a man's voice above softer female ones, so he followed the sound down the east hall. He came to a glass-enclosed room in the middle of the floor, though curtains had been drawn to block his view inside. He leaned in the open doorway, anxious to ask someone the secret code for penetrating the ICU, but when he saw who was there, he stopped.

He'd never met Lawrence Mayfield in person, but there was no mistaking that this was Olivia's father sitting on the couch against the opposite wall. The Romanesque nose and the dark waves of hair gave him away. On Olivia the features were regal, but on Lawrence Mayfield they were warrior-like, and to Anders, chilling.

Her mother was there, too, or someone Anders assumed was her mother. Though she'd chosen the most comfortable-looking chair in the room – a leather lounger with plenty of cushioning – she sat erect with both feet planted firmly on the floor. A hospital blanket draped her shoulders but underneath it, her clothes screamed money.

And then there was the final person, a tall, slim black woman who sat in a folding chair just to the right of Olivia's mother. The two of them held hands.

All three faces looked in his direction and, to his surprise, two of those faces – the two belonging to Olivia's parents – hardened. It might have been a mouth closing a bit tighter on one, a cheek lifting ever so slightly into a grimace on the other, or simply a straightening of shoulders, but Anders sensed it, however imperceptible. It became immediately clear to him that they knew

exactly who he was, too. The large raw scrape on his right arm, flesh exposed, provided only the first of many clues.

He nodded, his eyes on Olivia's father. "Sir." He managed the word by habit of manners, and as if its mere utterance set in motion a sequence of events, he finally moved to shake the man's hand.

"You must be Andy." The flat tone of the comment told Anders that this man would not be extending his arm in greeting, and he stopped mid-step from advancing farther into the room. A sudden anger began to build as he processed the name Olivia's father had used. Only his friend Lenny referred to him as Andy. Olivia had *never* used it, so he was certain her father used the nickname in some strange attempt to be the alpha dog.

"No, sir, I'm Anders. Anders Erickson." He almost added, "It's a pleasure to meet you," but he caught the instinctive impulse in time.

A slight smirk crossed the man's face. "Excuse me. *Anders*."

Anders waited in anticipation of further introductions, however cold, but it became apparent that none would be made. The Mayfields stared at him with accusing eyes. The black woman, though, gazed at him behind a veil of anguish and fear. Anders recognized it because it mirrored his own.

"Is there something you need?" her father asked, though Anders was sure the question was not intended as an offer to help.

He slowly turned his gaze back to the patriarch of the family. "I've just come from talking to the" – he almost said "cops", but then thought better of it – "police. I was hoping to see Olivia."

"Well, that's a lovely thought, but only family members are allowed to visit."

Without thinking, he asked, "Is she family?" and pointed at the woman next to Olivia's mother. Now *he* sounded hostile, and he regretted asking the question.

A derisive laugh erupted from her father's throat. "Not that it's any of your business, but Makena has known Olivia since she was born and might possibly know her better than even her mother and me."

Her mother and I, Anders thought.

Before he could respond, her father added, "Olivia never told you about Makena?"

Anders chewed on the inside of his cheek without realizing it. He knew the point of the man's question, and he refused to give him the satisfaction of an answer, but her father had nevertheless succeeded in sowing the seed of doubt in his mind. Olivia hadn't ever mentioned Makena, and all Anders could think now was, *why not?* What else hadn't she told him?

He turned and left the room to find a nurse. At the other end of the long hall, he found a U-shaped nurse's station but no nurses, and was about to return to the lobby downstairs for help when he saw one of the doors to the ICU open.

"Excuse me!" he called.

A nurse in light blue scrubs turned at his voice and put one finger to her lips to signal "quiet."

"Could you hold that door, please?" He tried to shout and whisper the words simultaneously as he jogged in her direction, but it was impossible. It didn't matter; the door closed silently and the nurse made no moves to stop it.

She waited until he stood, a bit breathless, in front of her. "Sir, I'm sorry, you're on the

intensive care floor. You must keep your voice down."

Even though she meant to scold, her voice had a soothing, sympathetic tone. She looked so young, like she could have been his kid sister. Her chin-length blonde hair was stick-straight, and her pale skin was clear and dewy. Skinny arms stuck out from the short sleeves of her top; her delicate hands held a chart against her chest. He required an angel and she was his only possibility.

"I need to see Olivia Mayfield," he said. "They told me downstairs she was in ICU."

The nurse nodded to the doors behind her. "She's in Neuro."

"Can you take me to see her?"

Her eyes darted in the direction of the waiting room, as if she was trying to remember whether she'd seen him in there with the rest of them. "Are you family?"

Anders shifted on his feet. "I guess that depends what 'family' means. She's my . . . we're . . ." He fumbled for the correct term. "Lover" sounded inappropriate, but boyfriend and girlfriend sounded too juvenile, and neither came close to describing what they meant to each other. Anders determined in that instant to propose to Olivia when he saw her. Why had he waited?

"Are you a boyfriend?" She smiled slightly. She'd seen others struggle with the same explanation. Even though he knew she hadn't intended to, she'd made him sound like he was one of many.

"Yes, we live together." So that she didn't mistake them for mere roommates, he added quickly, "We love each other." He didn't care anymore how immature he sounded.

"I understand, sir. I really do."

He believed her. When she looked down at the floor and shook her head, he knew what her next words were going to be.

"It's just that hospital rules prevent non-family members from visiting patients in the ICU. Otherwise, we'd have so many people traipsing through and our patients would never get better. I'm sure you can understand." The pained look on her face told him that she really didn't enjoy relaying this news. He knew another, less compassionate nurse might have. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Are there ever any exceptions?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes, if the family gives permission, and the doctor okays it." She must have seen the flash of hope in his eyes. "But . . ."

She breathed deep and he waited.

". . . the family has made it quite clear that no one outside her immediate family is to be allowed in."

Anders could feel his legs weakening underneath him and he wondered what in God's name these people had against him. They didn't even know him, yet he was an enemy.

"I'll talk to them. I'll see if I can convince them, okay?"

She nodded sadly, and he suspected she'd already spent enough time with Olivia's father to know what he was up against. She started in the direction of the nurse's station.

"Nurse?"

"You can call me Carrie."

"Thank you, Carrie. Can you at least tell me how's she doing?" He braced himself for a litany of privacy rules.

She paused, as if trying to decide which of them to break for his benefit. "Look, sir—"

"You can call me Anders."

Just her eyes smiled this time, and she came close to him again and touched his shoulder. They were friends now.

"Anders. I shouldn't be telling you anything, and I'm not sure whether this will make you feel better or worse, but she's in a coma." He gasped. "What I mean is, she won't know whether you're there or not."

He looked to the ceiling to stall the tears welling up in his eyes. "That's it? You're going to give me that information and not tell me more?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off and began pacing the floor. "I can't believe this is happening. I've gotta wake up soon because there's no fucking way this is actually happening."

"Sir." She grabbed his arm with surprising authority. "I'm sorry. I've already told you enough to get myself fired. But you can't assume the worst, okay? Many people recover full mental and physical function when they emerge from a coma." She paused and waited until he nodded, a signal to her that he'd regained control, however tenuous. "I just didn't want you to leave here thinking she was lying there wondering where you were, why you hadn't come."

Or worse, Anders thought. Asking and being told a lie in response.

He knew she offered the information to be kind, and he didn't want to direct his anger at her. "Okay, okay. I'm going to speak to them, though, her family. Okay?"

Carrie nodded. "There's a bell—" she motioned to a small button to the right of the door "—just press it if you don't see me around."

She turned to go, and he called to her one more time. "Carrie?" She looked back over her

shoulder. "Just . . . well, thank you."

She gave him a quiet smile, but it didn't look hopeful.

When Anders returned to the waiting room, her father was alone, talking into a Bluetooth hooked over his right ear. He glanced up at Anders, but his expression remained the same; the presence of the man his comatose daughter lived with affected him no differently than if he'd been looking at a picture on the wall. To Anders's ears, the phone call consisted of all business. He caught no mention of Olivia. *All my father's business meetings were important*, Olivia had told Anders the first time she'd brought up her father. *More important than his daughter's life?* he wondered now.

Digging his hands into his jeans pockets, he fingered the necklace he'd found on the ground before the ambulances had arrived at the scene. He spoke only after he saw the man touch the device at his ear, signaling the end of the call.

"Sir, the nurse said she could allow me in to see Olivia if her family gave permission."

"Well, Andy—Anders—I don't think that will be happening." He reached into the briefcase at his feet, pulled out an eyeglass case, and took his time retrieving the glasses and placing them on his nose. He then pulled out a stack of papers and began to leaf through them. Anders watched in disbelief. He didn't want to believe Olivia shared blood with this man. But her father's behavior was all too familiar, and it eroded his already shaky determination.

He stood straighter, reminding himself that this was Olivia's dad, not his own.

"Mr. Mayfield?"

Her father looked up over the top of the reading glasses as if he was surprised to see Anders still in the room.

"Did I do something to offend you, sir? Is there a reason you don't want me to see her?"

The man leaned back into his chair and sighed.

"Olivia's mother and I think that you have done quite enough for her, Andy. I'm sure the two of you have had a hell of a time together—God knows I cringe to think of the details—but it's time for her to come home and be with family. If she's lucky, that is."

For a moment Anders stood speechless, staring at him and trying to process the meaning of what he'd just said. What he'd just accused him of. If Anders had been a different sort of man, more like Lenny, he would have considered taking a swing at the guy. But if he'd been more like Lenny, he would never have been standing there discussing Olivia with her father. Olivia would have never been in his life.

"Are you saying you think I *caused* the accident? That it was my fault?"

Her father had turned his attention back to his damn papers, and he answered this time without even looking up. "You were driving the motorcycle, weren't you?" He spoke the word "motorcycle" with obvious contempt.

Anders snorted in disgust. "Someone tried to run us off the road!"

"So you say. But it's interesting how there were no witnesses, isn't it?" He flipped a page. "Not to mention no helmets. How dare you be so cavalier with my daughter's life." Finally his eyes showed emotion, though it was only cold hate. "Now, if you'll let me get back to my work."

Anders face burned, and he felt the blood pumping fast through the veins in his neck.

"Sir, I'm begging you." Though he tried to control it, he could hear the encroaching desperation in his voice. "Can you please just let me see her? When she comes to, she'll tell you the same thing." He realized he'd just let slip that the nurse had told him something confidential.

But if her father realized it, he didn't show it. He didn't show anything, for that matter. Anders could have been speaking to a deaf man. "I would never hurt her. I just need to see her. I'm *begging* you," he repeated. "*Please.*" His voice cracked with the last word.

Approaching footsteps echoed on the polished hospital tiles in the hall, but Anders heard nothing but the sound of silence coming from the statue in front of him. He turned to escape and almost knocked down Olivia's mother, who stood in the doorway in front of the other woman. "Excuse me, ma'am," he muttered, and as he darted past them, his eyes caught Makena's. Perhaps he'd imagined it, but he could have sworn he heard a voice, deep and grainy but distinctly feminine, telling him not to give up. Never give up.

Not that he'd planned to, anyway.

The day before had started pretty much like many of the others they'd spent together. Anders woke before Olivia. The early rise wasn't new to him; even as a kid he'd woken at the break of day. He'd go fishing before school, or just hang out in the tree fort behind his house while he waited for his dad's car to pull out of the drive. Now, if he had to work, it gave him a chance to sit on the deck with her first, drink coffee and watch for dolphins in the morning surf. If he didn't have to work, well, that was even better.

He hadn't set an alarm. The light of dawn crept through the window and tapped him on the shoulder to announce the arrival of the new day. His eyes opened, and the gentle sound of the surf reassured him that nothing had changed overnight. He rolled over and inhaled the salty air mixed with the sweet smell of her sweat. He longed to touch her, but he didn't. She'd had another nightmare a few hours earlier and needed her sleep. Though she claimed she never remembered

them, she always seemed a bit off the next day; an unexpected touch by him would startle her, or she'd tense at overhearing a stranger speak to his female companion in the wrong tone.

So instead he watched her sleep. He watched the flutter of her eyelids as she dreamed, he watched the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. Every once in a while, a white tern landed on the sill of the open window and watched with him. He felt they shared a secret, he and the bird.

He knew she wasn't pretty by conventional standards, yet to him she was beautiful. Her dark hair fell against the pillow in long, kinky coils, its color reminiscent of the black coffee she drank each morning. Her eyelashes were long, too—they were one of the few features she liked about herself—and they protected sleepy olive-green eyes. ("They're hazel, Anders," she'd say, laughing. "Simply hazel.") Freckles dotted the bridge of her nose and then cascaded down to her cheeks. A Cupid's bow framed her lips.

But he liked her neck the best, the way the long lines of it stretched lazily from collarbone to jaw when her head tilted to the side, away from him. A delicate silver chain with a small charm in the shape of a crane rested in the hollow. She never removed the necklace, not when she showered, not when she slept, and he'd come to think of it as just another part of her for him to marvel at. It was all he could do not to lean over and kiss that neck, ravish it until she awoke in delight and joined him in the lovemaking that had become almost a morning ritual for them. But he waited. The waiting made it all the better.

"Anders." Her voice was hoarse. The lips formed a slight smile.

"Olivia."

They each said it as if to confirm the existence of the other. A pinch just to be sure.

"Good morning."

"And that it is." He returned her smile.

She turned toward the window. "Hmm, I can smell the ocean today."

The tern was gone. All that remained inside the window frame's perimeter was one cotton-ball cloud against a periwinkle-blue sky.

She reached for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him close. "Let's go for a ride today. A long ride." She gave him a peck on the lips. "Take me somewhere I've never been."

He retreated to the hospital cafeteria on the main floor. He told himself he'd figure out some way to get in, that leaving would be the equivalent of conceding defeat. Anyway, it'd be easier to get updates on her condition if he stayed close.

He bought a cup of coffee and dropped the change in the handmade Styrofoam tip cup next to the cash register. The cashier didn't acknowledge it. He took a seat at a table in the far corner, near a picture window facing the parking lot. The dinner hour was just beginning, and the cafeteria buzzed with the chatter of hospital personnel as they pushed their way through the cafeteria line and jockeyed for the cleanest tables. The groupings reminded Anders of his high school days, when the jocks and the cheerleaders dared not sit with the intellectuals or the potheads. Here, he could pick out the doctors by their white lab coats over dress shirts and ties, in the case of the men—or skirts or pantsuits, in the case of the women. The nurses dressed in scrubs, mostly solid colored but sometimes floral for the women.

The doctors and nurses stood in stark contrast to the family and friends of patients, whose

hollow eyes and weary efforts to smile at strangers gave them away. They were like the walking dead, and Anders wondered how in the short span of twenty-four hours he'd managed to become one of them.

Take me somewhere I've never been.

The irony of Olivia's request was that it seemed to Anders she'd been everywhere, and he'd never left Florida.

This wasn't entirely true; he'd visited his sister and her family in Chicago several times in an attempt to heal old wounds, and he'd taken a road trip to Southern California with a biker buddy a few years back, thinking that he'd fall in love with it and decide to stay, but he found that it had the same plastic façade that threatened to suffocate his home state.

But otherwise, Anders's life had been lived in Florida. He'd been born there, raised there, and according to his father (who'd left long ago for New York), was wasting his life there. But Anders didn't see it that way. He liked his Florida, the part that existed away from the tourists and the snowbirds, the part beyond the sweltering cities and the burgeoning suburbs. Until he'd met Olivia and moved into her beach house, he'd lived not far from Port Orange, just south of Daytona, in a rented mobile home set on the edge of a mangrove near Rose Bay. He was about fifteen minutes from the Atlantic Ocean in one direction, twenty-five minutes from his job at the Bentley Palms Golf Resort & Spa, closer to Orlando, in the other.

That he'd moved into a mobile home horrified his parents. His mother's concern stemmed mainly from the threat of hurricanes and tornadoes, but his father simply felt that living in a mobile home was akin to living in a hole. 'You're not trailer trash,' he'd said to Anders on more

than one occasion, back before Anders had stopped speaking to him completely, "so don't act like it." In his father's opinion, his living arrangements were unacceptable for someone of Anders's "smarts and upbringing" – as he called it.

Anders was well aware of his own "smarts." At his father's insistence, he'd been IQ-tested in the third grade to see if he was gifted; he'd scored 154. His teachers had requested testing again in ninth grade because despite the previous high score, his grades never substantiated his supposed intelligence. The second time he'd scored 162.

Not wanting to hurt his mom, he finally applied himself for the remainder of high school and ended up graduating near the top of his class. And though he'd dutifully filled out college applications, he ultimately declined the acceptances and scholarship offers that followed, and his mom accepted his decision graciously. Though she tried to explain the benefits of a college degree, she also knew her "good job" arguments fell on deaf ears. She understood he had no interest in the material possessions that drove many individuals to spend their lives chasing a buck. A large house and a fast car just didn't seem like sufficient payoff to him. She argued that a degree could make it easier for him to pursue the outdoor life he loved, but he remained unconvinced. The idea of travel romanced him, but he figured he could do this without the fancy hotels and overpriced restaurants. He'd never eaten fresher fish than those he'd caught himself; he'd never found a more relaxing bed than a sleeping bag under the stars.

Olivia, on the other hand, had traveled the world. Anders didn't know the full extent of it—she didn't talk much about it and she brushed off as annoying the teasing comments from Lenny and others about her being cosmopolitan—but he knew the story of her birth, how she'd arrived in the world surrounded by African women and mosquito nets, and that told him enough

to know that she'd experienced things he probably couldn't even imagine.

He jumped at the touch of someone's fingers on his forearm.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't realize you were sleeping."

He looked up to see the nurse from upstairs standing over him. Carrie. She'd told him her name was Carrie.

"No, it's okay. I didn't realize it either." But clearly he had dozed; blackness stared back at him now from the other side of the window. He wondered how much time had passed. He scooted to sit straighter on the hard plastic chair and managed to give her weak smile.

"I thought you'd left," she said. "But I'm glad you're here."

He didn't respond. He didn't want to read too much into what she'd just said.

"Tell me your name again."

"It's Anders."

She nodded, a smile growing on her face. "Yes, I thought so. You don't forget a name like that."

"Why do you ask?"

"Listen, I came down for my dinner and happened to spot you over here in the corner, so give me a few minutes to eat, but then come back upstairs, okay? But don't take too long. They've gone to dinner, too, but I don't know how much time we have."

He knew without asking that "they" were Olivia's family. He scanned the cafeteria but then realized she meant they'd left the hospital. He could feel his pulse increasing as the nap-induced fog began to clear and her meaning began to sink in.

He started to ask another question; he didn't think he could last the ten minutes it would take to finish her meal, but she just shook her head.

"Not now. We'll talk upstairs. I have something to show you."

He chose one of the sacred escapes of his youth, a small, secluded spring on private but vacant land at the edge of the Ocala National Forest. He didn't divulge where they were going or what the spot meant to him; he told her only to bring a swimsuit, a towel and some dry clothes for later. They took off on the bike just after nine.

She fell in love with the place at first sight, just as he'd hoped. She told him it reminded her of Africa and pretended to pout when he laughed at the comparison. "Well, we do have panthers out here, I guess," he said.

"I meant the remoteness, the sense that you're a long way from anything or anyone. I like that."

They left the bike at the trailhead and hiked the short distance to the pool. After swimming naked in the icy water, they dried their bodies on a large rock in the hot sun and, afterward, made love in the shade of the scrub oaks and water tupelos.

"How many other women have you brought here to your little piece of paradise?"

He grinned but didn't answer.

"Ah, quite a few, I gather."

"No."

"How many then?"

He reached up and pushed her hair away from her face. "Why do you ask a question like

that? You're not the jealous type."

"No," she agreed. She wore a small, almost bashful, smile. "Not usually."

He thought about how to answer. He'd been at this swimming hole many times over the years, with groups of friends of both persuasions, but he'd only ever brought one other woman here in the same way he'd brought Olivia. Yet even that he now dismissed as irrelevant, knowing his actions had been motivated more by lust than a need to share a slice of his life.

"Just one." He ran a finger down her cheek and over her damp lips. "But I didn't tell her I loved her."

He sat in the now empty waiting room surrounded by the evidence left behind by her family. A paper cup with a few dregs of cold coffee in the bottom and lipstick prints on the rim; the morning's newspaper scattered on the small table in front of the sofa; a hospital issue pillow and blanket discarded on the chair in the corner.

The door to the room had been propped open, and Carrie peeked her head in, summoning him to follow her. He hadn't felt anything that remotely approached joy since before the accident, but if it was possible to feel joy at the prospect of visiting a comatose person in the intensive care unit of a hospital, then that's what he felt. His muscles tensed with eagerness.

Carrie gripped the handle to the entrance to the ICU, and just as she lifted her badge to swipe it across the access panel, she turned to Anders.

"Each patient has an assigned nurse. When I'm on duty, I'm it for Olivia." He nodded and moved forward. "Slow down," she said, not unkindly. "This is important for you to know before we go in there." He nodded again, trying to check his impatience. "The nurse covering for me

knows the general rule about families, of course, but because she's just my relief, she doesn't really pay attention to who's been in and out. Nor could I necessarily identify those who are allowed in for the other patients. It's up to each of us to enforce the rule for our particular patient.

"I'm telling you this because it's important that you just follow my lead when we get in there. Act like you belong, not like I'm sneaking you in, because although I'm in charge of my patient, that doesn't mean there might not be another nurse who'd like to get me in trouble if she could. Got it?"

"I understand."

"And it's going to have to be quick, Anders. If her family returns and we get caught, I'd be out of job. No questions asked."

She swiped her badge and pulled the heavy door open. "Follow me."

"Carrie? Why are you doing this for me?"

She smiled and winked. "That's what I'm about to show you."

On the other side of the doors, the silence of the hospital corridor was replaced by nurses quietly discussing their plans for the weekend, various beeps and buzzers, and the horrifying, artificial breathing sound of a ventilator. Anders recognized the last sound from sitting at his grandmother's side in her dying days, and it still haunted him. He trailed Carrie wordlessly around the curve of the half-moon nurse's station, where she let her relief nurse know she was back on duty with a simple nod. The other nurse eyed Anders, but he did as instructed and merely nodded a greeting, too. Carrie entered the last room, but Anders stopped in the doorway at the sight of Olivia in the hospital bed behind the wall of glass.

Like an uninvited guest, the images of the crash barged in. He saw the Mercedes coming up fast on them in the curve, the slide of the motorcycle's rear tire, the sudden gripping of the pavement again and then, her body being tossed and tumbled as the bike high-sided, flipping over and over. The sounds of her short scream, and then the rev of the Mercedes' engine as it sped west, leaving a frightening silence in its wake. The interminable wait for the ambulances afterward, as he hovered over her lifeless body on the side of the road and begged an invisible someone to make her okay. And though some part of him knew he'd really witnessed only snippets of the actual accident—he'd been flung, too—his imagination had no problem filling in the parts he hadn't seen.

He closed his eyes for a moment and gave a silent prayer of thanks that the ventilator noise hadn't come from this room.

"Come on in." Carrie already faced a laptop computer placed on top of a rolling supply cart, her fingers flying across the keyboard as her eyes darted to the mass of machinery standing guard at Olivia's bedside. Anders moved forward only a few steps, but stopped again when he saw the catheter protruding from the far right side of her head.

Carrie waved him closer. "Come on. You can touch her. You won't hurt her." She faced Olivia now, pulling the sheet back to check wires, tubes, connections. Any concerns he had earlier about Carrie's youth were extinguished by her apparent competence. This was her territory and she knew it intimately.

She gently lifted Olivia's left arm and tucked the sheet under it so he could have access to her hand. He reached for it, and the moment he felt her warmth, he finally gave up a few of the tears he'd been holding in.

He glanced at Carrie. "I'm sorry." The words came out in a voice he didn't even recognize. He tried to wipe his face on his shoulder, because now that he held Olivia's hand between both of his, he wasn't letting go.

Carrie stopped her busy activities and stepped back; he could feel her watching him. "Don't apologize."

He leaned forward, one hand still holding Olivia's, and with the other he caressed her cheek as his lips covered her forehead, her nose, her lips, with lightweight kisses. "I'm here, baby," he whispered. "I'm here." Her skin felt dry, her slightly parted lips parched. He couldn't stop looking at the spot where the catheter entered her head. A patch of hair had been shaved off to accommodate the tube and the bandages.

"That's where she hit her head," Carrie explained. "She was bleeding under the skull and they had to relieve the pressure on her brain."

He stared at Carrie and waited for more information.

She sighed. "How much do you want to know?"

"As much as you can tell me."

"The brain swells and accumulates extra fluid when it's injured. It increases in size, thus increasing the pressure. To prevent damage, the neurosurgeon drills a hole through the skull to relieve the pressure. It's called a craniotomy."

He took a deep breath.

"It sounds worse than it is. She came through it beautifully. It's really now just a wait-and-see type thing."

"Can she hear me? Does she know I'm here?"

Carrie met his questions with silence, and he glanced back at her to be sure she heard. With a tilt of the head, she stared at Olivia thoughtfully. "The doctors say probably not, and maybe they're right. But you know what? I think it can only help to talk to her."

She came closer. "Here, I'll show you what made me change my mind." She used a foot pedal to adjust the bed so that Olivia sat more upright. "I can't believe I didn't notice it earlier, but she's got quite a head of hair, and this is pretty small." She gently leaned Olivia forward, motioning for Anders to cradle her, and then she brushed her curls to the side, parting the hair down the back of her head. "It's fairly new. The hair's still growing back."

From Anders's angle, a small, black tattoo presented itself upside down and threatened to blend in with the shorter curls of the same color, but he knew what the tiny, scripted letters spelled as soon as he set eyes on them.

"It's my name."

Carrie laughed at his statement of the obvious. "Yeah, it is." She suddenly realized he'd never seen it. "You mean, you didn't even know it was there?"

"No." So they'd each had their little secret, their little surprise they were going to spring on the other when the moment was right.

He pulled her closer and carefully cradled her head against his chest. He inhaled, but her hair's familiar sweet scent had been replaced with an antiseptic smell he associated with the bandage on her head. He closed his eyes and tried to memorize the feel of her limp body in his arms, because he knew this might be the only time he'd be allowed such unfettered access to her unless she came around—until she came around—and insisted upon it.

He kept thinking of how it felt when they were on the bike, heading back from the

springs to the beach house, how the insides of her thighs pressed up against him and her arms wrapped tight around his waist. She usually rested her chin on his left shoulder so she could see the road ahead of them, but he'd noticed on this trip she kept lifting her head and looking behind them, something she only did when he was about to make a turn. And then her voice in his ear, just minutes before the crash. "I think someone is following us." The funny thing is, if they'd had their helmets on, he probably would have never heard her. And yet, if they'd had the helmets on . . . He kept thinking what he should have done differently, what he *could* have done differently, when they'd reached the bike and realized their helmets were missing. He wasn't even sure why they hadn't carried them down to the spring; he hardly ever left them with the bike like they did that day, but the last place he thought he'd have to worry about theft was in the middle of the Florida forest. He'd been angry when he realized they'd been stolen, but not for a minute was he concerned for their safety. He'd ridden for years without incident, and out there on the rural roads, he knew they'd have little traffic.

"I was going to ask her to marry me." He lifted his head and met Carrie's eyes.

Carrie smiled at that information but he wasn't done. The confession spilled out. "I mean, the day of the accident. I was going to ask her when we were at the springs, but something startled us, we heard a noise in the woods. It was probably just an animal but for some reason she was so freaked out by it, and after that, she couldn't relax. So I decided to do it later, maybe that night at home." He turned away and placed his cheek against Olivia's hair. "But if I'd just done it, if I'd asked her, she would have forgotten the noise and we would have stayed longer . . ."

Carrie couldn't have known the events leading up to the accident, where they'd been and what they'd been doing, unless, perhaps, she'd seen a police report, but nevertheless she

understood the import of his words. "Oh, you can't possibly start thinking like that—"

"But it's true. If I'd asked her, we wouldn't have left when we did."

"Anders." Carrie's sigh weighted the room with sadness. "Do you know how many people I hear say things like that? Please don't start second-guessing yourself. Just focus on her getting better. That's what matters now, okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah, yeah. I know." He kissed Olivia's head, as if sealing a silent promise. "I was such a fool."

"No, you're no fool." She started to say more, but instead she just closed her mouth and shook her head.

"What is it?"

"I just—well, I just knew the minute I saw the tattoo who her family was."