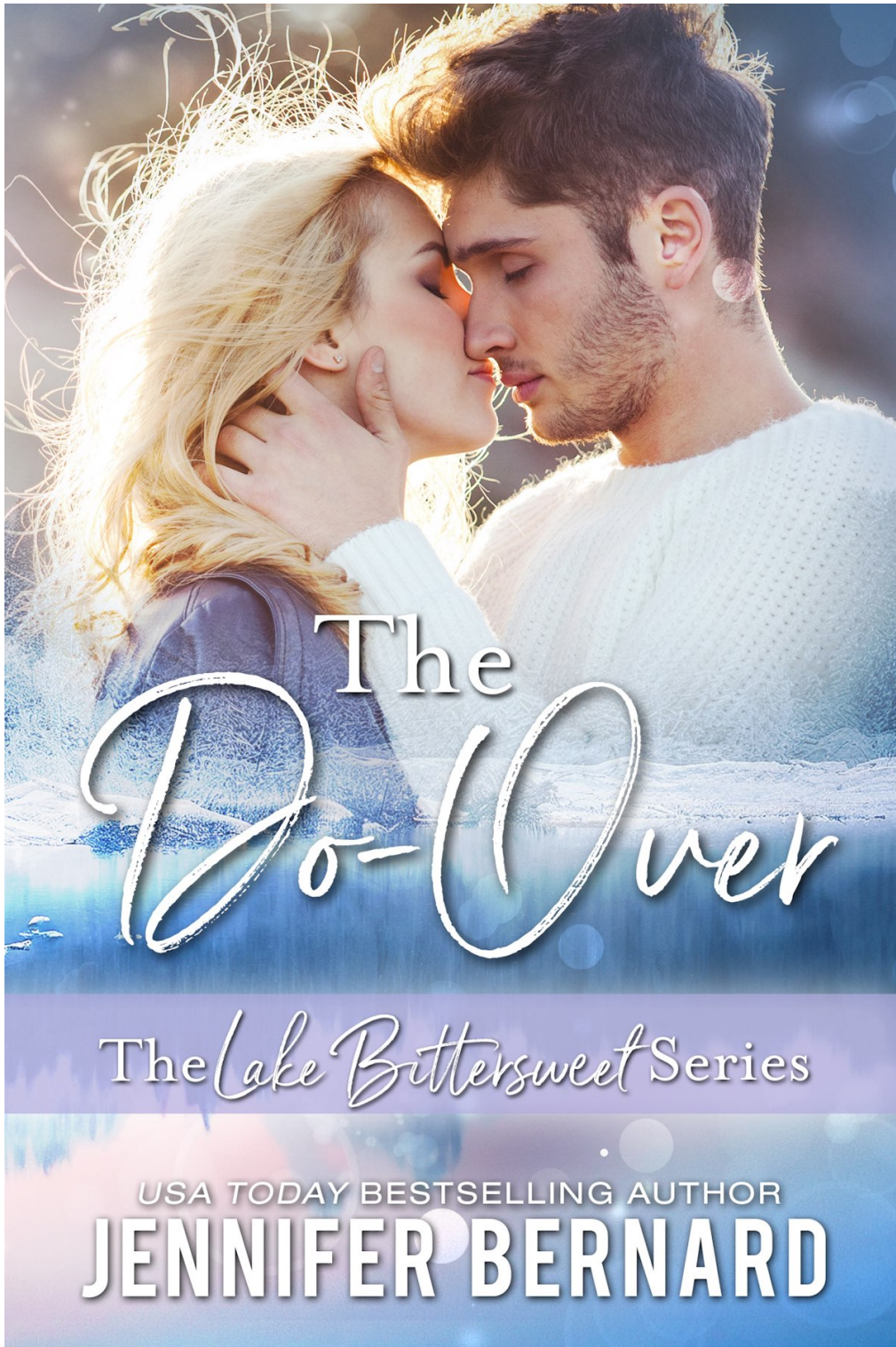


The
Do-Over

The Lake Bittersweet Series

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER BERNARD



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Also by Jennifer Bernard

one

For Billy Cooper, Thanksgiving in Lake Bittersweet was always ... well, bittersweet. The baseball season was over, with long months ahead of getting out of shape, then getting back into shape. Then there was the worry about what the front office might do with his contract in the off-season. Months of downtime gave him plenty of time to stress over that. And then to worry about what stress-coping mechanisms he might fall into.

That was the “bitter” part. But then there was the “sweet” part—being reunited with his family. But even that part was bittersweet. Ever since he and Jenna had ended their marriage, Thanksgiving always had two phases. During phase one, it was just him and his two older brothers and his nephew—basically four men finding new and ridiculous ways to mess up a turkey. Phase two was when Jenna brought their boys over, and he got to spend some time with Zack and Bean over pumpkin pie.

This year it was pumpkin, apple, caramel pecan, chocolate something-or-other and several other pies he couldn't identify. The pies were lined up on a buffet-length dessert table Thomas and Carly had borrowed from the Blue Drake. The Cooper family had gone all out this year because it wasn't just the

brothers anymore. A goddamn explosion of romance had changed everything.

Too bad his own romance had crashed and burned three years ago.

Under the table, he surreptitiously checked his phone and thumbed open his text messages.

From Jenna: *They're playing tag with the Hannigan kids rn. I'm going to let them burn off some energy so they'll have room for pie.*

Sounds good. Thanks

He always liked to add some gratitude into their exchanges. Jenna was the best. Hands down. She could have made things so difficult after their split, but she never had. She did everything she could to make sure he got as much time as possible with the boys. The least he could do was show her how much he appreciated that.

Was it normal for your respect for a spouse to grow after a divorce? Maybe not, but that was what had happened with him and Jenna. They got along so much better as an ex-couple. Jenna claimed it was thanks to her genius-level “rules for a happy divorce.” Personally, he thought it was because they weren’t kids anymore, as they had been when they got married.

“Billy.”

His head jerked up. Thomas was trying to catch his attention. His oldest brother—former fire chief, surrogate father, and now a town alderman—jerked his head to his right, where his son Danny slouched. “Danny has something to say before we say grace.”

“Sure. Right on. What’s on your mind, Danny-boy?”

He smiled at his nephew. Danny was a senior at some fancy private school back east. Hard to believe, because Billy still remembered carrying him in a sling on walks along the lake, which was the only thing that made him stop crying. He and Galen had tried their best to help Thomas take care of his newborn, and thank God they hadn't screwed him up too much. He was a good kid.

Everyone around the table turned their attention to Danny, blond and lanky and serious. Next to him sat his new stepmother, Carly, who held her and Thomas' baby in her lap. She was the first woman to join the family. The most recent was Brenda McMurray, Galen's new love. They sat cuddled together across the table, surrounded by a nearly visible halo of happiness.

Billy had never imagined his crusty older brother turning into such a mush-ball of lovey-dovey vibes. He'd always known his brother had a huge heart, but women didn't always see that. The auburn-haired teacher saw all the good things about Galen, and for that, Billy already considered Brenda family.

Danny himself had brought a girl home with him. She was a fellow student who'd come all the way from Egypt to attend Exeter Academy, and didn't have the time to fly home for such a short break.

"We're listening, Danny." Carly bounced the black-haired little Teddy on her lap. Just like any Cooper worth the name, he refused to go to sleep and miss all the fun. Billy's boys were the same way.

"I was explaining Thanksgiving to Layla, and she said it probably doesn't feel like a great holiday to the Indian tribes

around here. So I, uh, just wanted to bring that up, not to be a party pooper.”

“You’re not being a party pooper.” Brenda sat up straighter, her sea-green eyes alight with the prospect of a teaching moment. “It’s an excellent point. Thanks, Layla.” She nodded to the girl, who broke into a tremendously relieved smile. “Wasn’t Redbull saying something about that the other day, Galen?”

Galen nodded. Redbull was his business partner, and a member of a local Ojibwe tribe, as well as a lover of energy drinks, hence his nickname. “He says maybe along with the pie, we should admit that our ancestors sometimes acted like dicks and that in between bites of turkey, we should consider living up to our treaties.”

“Fair enough.” Thomas raised his glass of wine. “Danny, would you like to do the honors?”

“Sure.” Danny put his hands together in a prayer position. “On this Thanksgiving,” he intoned, “let’s be grateful that we always have the opportunity not to be dicks.”

Billy sputtered out the sip of wine he’d just taken. He snatched up a napkin and coughed into it. “Well put, Danny,” he managed when he’d gotten control of himself. “Couldn’t have said it better myself. To not being dicks!” He lifted his glass again.

They all clicked glasses, all seven of them, while little Teddy squirmed on Carly’s lap. Luckily he was only seven months old, but then again, he could probably expect plenty of salty language to come his way in the future. The Cooper brothers were not known to hold back, since they’d basically been raised by wolves, or rather, themselves.

Brenda laughed until her face turned pink. “Thanksgiving toasts sure are different here in Minnesota. My mother would probably faint if this happened at her dinner table.”

Billy wondered what Jenna would have thought of that toast, if she and the boys had been here. For sure, she would have agreed with the thought, if not the language. Jenna was one of the kindest people in the world. Too kind, maybe. She’d probably even been too nice to him after the breakup.

“To Brenda’s mother,” Billy said, tipping his glass toward her. “May she learn to love the Cooper brothers. Or at least one of them.” He grinned at Galen. “If you need to send in a ringer to charm her, I’m on standby.”

“No need.” Galen scratched at his beard, which was still growing in after his dramatic temporary shave. “She’s already welcomed me to the family. There was even a handshake.”

“That’s a lot for my mom,” Brenda explained. “We’re hoping for a hug by the time my grandmother gets married. You’re all invited, by the way. It’s in mid-December at the Blue Drake. Thanks for that, Carly.” She directed a smile at Carly, who was in the midst of feeding Teddy a softened piece of dinner roll.

“Hey, it’s our pleasure. The place is turning into northern Minnesota’s most popular wedding venue. Seems like a good tribute to my father and his four ex-wives. But I’m sure your grandmother’s marriage will last,” she added quickly.

Brenda laughed and shrugged. “It’ll last as long as Granny wants it to. In all her seventy-plus years, she never wanted to get married before, so I consider that to be a good sign.”

“Your grandmother is a rock star,” said Carly. Her deep green eyes flashed with amusement. “She doesn’t care what

anyone thinks.”

“Accurate,” Brenda agreed. “For better or worse. She said she’s putting an escape clause into the wedding vows.”

Billy’s heart gave a twist. When he and Jenna had gotten married, neither one had ever imagined they’d need an escape clause. He’d been all in, a hundred percent, the way a young person with no clue about the world could be. Then he’d gotten signed by the Twins, and he’d spent more time away from Jenna than with her, and then...

Thomas checked his watch and glanced at Carly. “Should I bring in the turkey?”

At her nod, he pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. Thomas was the tallest of the three brothers, although Billy was the most athletic, with the quickness and speed it took to play shortstop. Galen might be the most fit, however, since he spent his days hiking wilderness trails and canoeing down rivers.

“Want a hand?” Billy offered, already getting to his feet. Thomas beckoned for him to join, and they made their way into the big farmhouse kitchen where Thomas had spent many years making meals for Danny.

Thomas pulled the magnificent golden-brown turkey from the oven and set the roasting pan on the counter.

“Nice.” Billy sniffed the mouthwatering aroma rising from the bird’s juices. “Looks like your best one yet.”

“Remember the first time we tried to cook a turkey?”

“Yeah, when we forgot it was in the oven and went fishing? Locked ourselves out of the house? I had to climb to the second story to break into my bedroom and save the turkey.”

“It had transcended turkey-ness at that point.”

“Turkey-flavored charcoal for Thanksgiving.”

“Those were the days.”

They grinned at each other. Thomas’ smile had a sardonic edge, but Billy felt a genuine sense of nostalgia. Where was that coming from? It had been hovering around him ever since he got back to town. As if Lake Bittersweet was trying to tell him something.

“Want to take it in? I’ll grab the carving knives.” Thomas rummaged through a utensil drawer.

Billy put on two oven mitts shaped like loons. They’d come from a souvenir shop by way of a yard sale. In the old days, the Cooper brothers had done most of their shopping at garage sales and thrift stores. He and Jenna had done the same, since they’d been completely broke when they got married, with a baby coming. When he’d signed his first minor league contract, at the age of twenty-three, he’d taken Jenna to the nicest boutique in Braddock and told her to go wild.

She’d picked out one dress—a sexy red number, since she’d always wanted the perfect red dress—and refused to get anything else.

“We have to be smart. We can’t just spend it all at once. We have to save it for Zack and school and a million other things.”

They’d argued, but not fiercely, because he was on cloud nine since he was finally going to play professional baseball. “One nice dinner and we’ll call it good.”

She’d been right, of course, about the money. At dinner she’d worn the red dress, and they’d been all over each other that night. He hadn’t signed his first major league contract for

another four years. It was a damn good thing she'd made him save his money.

“Is Jenna coming for pie?”

Billy startled. Thomas had a sixth sense when it came to knowing when something was on Billy's mind. It probably came from all those years when he was Billy's only parental figure.

“Yeah, with the boys. They should be here soon.”

Thomas waited, clearly lingering over his knife drawer search to give Billy time to spit out what was on his mind.

Billy let out a sigh. “I don't know, man. I told you I might get traded. But there's more. A team in Japan wants me to play for them. I'd have to pay a penalty for leaving the Twins early, but they'd give me a massive fricking contract. It's so big that I can't just say no. I mean, Japan. It's so far. But it's just a two-year contract, and at the end, I could walk away with a shit-ton of money. The boys would have everything they need forever.”

“Except you,” said Thomas softly.

“Yeah. The only reason I see them as much as I do right now is that I play for the Twins. Any other team, it'd be impossible. The Japanese season is just as long as ours is. I'd have to live overseas from February to October.”

“Damn.” Thomas withdrew two sheathed knives from the drawer. “What are you thinking?”

One thing Billy loved about his oldest brother was that he didn't offer advice unless asked for it. Even then, he rarely weighed in.

“I don't fucking know.” Billy rubbed the back of his neck.

“Have you talked it over with Jenna?”

“Not yet. I will.”

He knew he should talk to her, had been telling himself that. But things were really good with Jenna right now, and this bombshell possibility might mess up everything. He sighed again. “There’s another problem.”

“Something quick or something that’ll make this turkey go cold?”

“It’s complicated,” Billy admitted. “The Japanese team wants me, but they want to make sure they aren’t getting the old Billy.”

“Ohh, the old Billy. The one who used to close down every club in Minneapolis. What did they call you? Billy Club?”

“To be fair, Minneapolis has some great clubs. It’s the Prince effect.”

Thomas gestured toward the door, and Billy picked up the roasting pan. “Aren’t we supposed to put this on a platter or something? What are we, barbarians?”

“At heart, yes. But you have a point.”

Thomas grabbed a large oval platter from a cabinet and placed it next to the roasting pan. They gazed down at the turkey. “I guess it’s too late for it to get itself on the platter,” said Thomas.

Billy assessed the glistening bird. “I have a spectacularly low dropped ball percentage. Also, I washed my hands right before we sat down.”

“Then go for it.”

Billy picked up the bird and plopped it onto the platter in one smooth motion.

“And Cooper shows off that touch that has baseball aficionados swooning,” said Thomas in his best radio announcer voice. “Doesn’t miss a beat as he puts that bird right where he wants it. Quick, too. With Cooper, it’s all about speed and precision.”

Billy flipped him the bird—so to speak. “Shut the fuck up. I’ve got more than speed going for me. I’ve got stamina too.”

“Tell it to the ladies. Not the ones out there,” Thomas said quickly, shooting a glance toward the dining room, where laughter and chatter rose and fell. “They’re taken. But there’s got to be a zillion women out there in those clubs who want to hear about your stamina.”

For some reason, Thomas’ teasing gave Billy a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hadn’t been to a club in two years. That was also approximately when he’d stopped drinking. Some of his earliest memories were of bringing his mother a beer from the fridge. When he’d stopped drinking, going cold turkey, so to speak, he’d missed her, not the buzz. Which had caused him to think long and hard about his screwed-up childhood.

“You know I’m not that guy anymore.”

But Carly was calling to them from the dining room, reminding them to bring the gravy along with the turkey, and Thomas’ attention was no longer on Billy and his problems.

How many people really got it that he wasn’t that guy anymore? The Japanese scouts weren’t sure. Some fans still called him Billy Club. And Jenna...

The doorbell rang.

“That’s probably Jenna,” Billy said.

“I’ll take the turkey. You get the door. Make sure Jenna knows we’d love to have her stay.”

As Thomas whisked the turkey-laden platter toward the dining room, Billy headed the other way, through the arched opening that led to the entryway and the front door. His gut tightened the way it always did when he knew he was going to see Jenna. So many emotions always flooded through him, or at least tried to. Luckily, he was an expert at constructing a dam to keep them back.

“Hey, Jenna,” he said with all the casual ease that he’d cultivated for the last three years. He’d perfected a certain way of looking at her, sort of blurring his gaze so he didn’t pick up too many details. It was easier that way, because he still found her attractive. She wore her blond hair in a low ponytail, but it was so fine that half of it was falling out. That happened a lot, because she was always rushing around. Her lake-gray eyes almost always held a smile, but right now she looked tired. Still beautiful, though.

“Happy Thanksgiving.” He peered past her. “Where are the boys?”

“They both conked out in the car. You weren’t answering your texts.”

He checked his phone and saw that he’d accidentally hit the mute button. “Sorry.”

“No worries. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that we’re here. Sort of. I mean, we’re in the driveway.”

He hesitated. It didn’t seem right to leave the three of them sitting in her car while Thanksgiving turkey was served. “We’re just about to eat. Want to come in? They’ll be okay for a few.”

“No, I don’t want to leave them. I have the heat on.”

She wore a navy blue pea coat that he knew she reserved for special occasions, but it wasn’t the warmest one she owned. The temperature had dropped to about twenty degrees. Was she warm enough? Was that a shiver? Where was her hat? She’d probably left it in the car. Jenna disliked hats because they wreaked havoc on her fine hair.

“Have you eaten?”

“Oh yes. Gorged is a better word. Thank God for stretchy waistbands.”

He didn’t want to picture her waistband. He wished she wouldn’t mention things of a physical nature like that. But she had no idea that it affected him. He never let on that it did.

“Let me get a plate of food and I’ll come sit with you until they wake up.”

She cocked her head, considering. Scanning him with that moonlight gaze. “That’s not necessary. I can hang out by myself. I don’t want to break my Wordle streak.”

“Well, would you mind? It just doesn’t feel right, being Thanksgiving and all.”

After more thought, she nodded. “They probably won’t sleep too long, anyway. You know Bean. He’ll be up and ready for more trouble in no time. He’s really excited to see Danny and Teddy. They both are.”

The Cooper cousins. Billy loved it. No one could say he didn’t provide his boys with high-quality cousins. “I’ll be right out.”

“Okay. No rush.”

“What are you talking about? Wordle takes you about ten seconds.”

“My average is actually five seconds,” she corrected. “If only Wordle was a sport.”

“You’d be a superstar.”

“Yup, you could retire and I could support the family.”

He gave her a smile that came right from the bottom of his heart. Of all the things he appreciated about their post-divorce life, he loved the fact that she still called them a “family” the most.

two

She was a fool. Jenny knew better than to sit in a cozy dark car with her ex-husband, with their kids napping in the backseat. It was a complete violation of one of Jenna's Rules for a Happy Divorce, which weren't copyrighted but should be.

Do not allow yourself to feel attraction to your ex.

That was very hard to do when you were putting yourself in the exact same situation that had gotten them married in the first place. Teenagers in dark cars with raging hormones and lack of experience with protection, yup, she remembered that feeling all too well.

But she and Billy hadn't had much chance to talk since the season had ended, so she resigned herself to some alone-time with her ex. She should be used to this after three years. But maybe she'd never really get used to it.

He was Billy Cooper, after all. She watched him emerge from Thomas' farmhouse, his tall form backlit by the warm light from the kitchen, and sighed. Things would be so much freaking easier if she'd married someone less sexually potent. Every long and easy stride screamed both confidence and fun. Just the same as it ever was.

Block it out. Don't let him get under your skin. You got this. You have to.

But he's so damn sexy in his dress-for-dinner clothes. Those black pants hugging his thighs. That sweater clinging to his muscles like a coat of paint.

She could handle everyday Billy without blinking an eye. But Thanksgiving Billy was a whole different story.

She scrambled for Plan B. Another helpful technique was to remember all the things about their relationship that didn't work, but she didn't like to fall back on that one because it left her feeling peevish and grumpy. But a girl had to do what a girl had to do.

When he opened the car door, she whispered, fairly sharply, "Don't spill anything, I just cleaned the car."

"Really?"

With eyebrows raised, he glanced at the floorboards and kicked away the muffin wrapper she'd tossed there this morning. It had joined the junk mail she'd picked up from her father's post office box and still hadn't thrown away.

"Last year some time?" He asked the question mildly, as if testing her mood.

"I think it was June," she admitted.

"I'll take care of it for you. You should have told me." He settled his plate on his lap and dug into the steaming plate of turkey and stuffing. Her mouth watered. Even though she'd eaten at the Hannigans' house, they were vegetarian and had served lentil loaf as the main dish. Nothing against lentils—she made a damn good soup that the boys loved—but you couldn't stuff a lentil loaf.

She inhaled the warm aroma, smelling mushrooms, sage, turkey juices. “You don’t have to clean my car.” The fact that she really, really wanted some of that stuffing gave an extra edge to her voice.

“I know. It’s just an offer. You can put it on the list now that I’m back.”

That was one of their post-divorce traditions. When the season ended, he came back to town and dealt with logistical shit like car repairs, house repairs, bike repairs, and any other tasks she could come up with.

“The list is already very long,” she warned him.

“Good. Keeps me out of trouble.”

She wished he hadn’t said that, because it reminded her of all the trouble he’d gotten into since she’d known him. He’d been such a wild and reckless kid when they’d gotten together. “Billy Club, staying out of trouble? I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“Believe it, baby. I didn’t go to a single club this season. The guys nearly staged an intervention.”

Whatever. Clubs were just a handy way to blow off steam. Women had a way of finding Billy no matter where he was.

Not that he’d cheated on her—she was almost completely sure he hadn’t—but worrying about it had just about driven her mad. The contrast between her daily life of diaper changing and toddler-wrangling and his life of adoring fans and workouts had been impossible to reconcile. Add in some shady rumors and the fact that they were so damn young...and her lifelong struggle with anxiety...

She shook off her thoughts. Life was so much calmer in the divorced phase of their relationship. And she had to hand it

to him—Billy made a rock-solid and reliable ex-husband.

“Really? I’m surprised the clubs of the Twin Cities didn’t go out of business,” she said lightly, knowing he wouldn’t take offense. They’d always had fun teasing each other.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you? I can hear it in your voice.”

“I told you, I already ate at the Hannigans’.” Still, she couldn’t keep from eyeing his plate of food. Hopefully he wouldn’t notice.

“What’d they serve, kale salad?”

“No, don’t be silly. They went all out and made a lentil loaf. I think it was supposed to be in the shape of a turkey? But it was more of a brownish-greenish-grayish blob.”

They both laughed. In the old days, they’d been close to the Hannigans and choked down many a meal with them before gorging on cheeseburgers when they got home.

“Here.” He filled a fork with a mix of turkey and stuffing and offered it to her. “Gotta love the Hannigans, but you should treat yourself on Thanksgiving.”

She stared at the fork, weighing the implications. Eating off each other’s plates was a couple thing to do. Allowing herself to be fed by Billy, even more so. But sweet mama, did it look good. And there wasn’t anything specific against it in the “rules.”

She compromised and took the fork from him so she could feed herself. It tasted so good that she moaned in appreciation, closing her eyes, the better to savor the delicious bite. “Oh my God,” she murmured.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that he’d fixed his gaze on the front door of the house, as if he was deliberately

trying not to watch her eat.

Or maybe he was wishing he was back inside with his family. Yeah, that made more sense, since their days of lusting after every little thing about each other were over.

“You can go back inside,” she told Billy. “I’m fine out here. You could leave the plate,” she added, snagging another bite of stuffing.

“I’m good here.” His easy tone, that deep voice, sent a prickle along her skin. “I actually need to talk to you about some things.”

“Important things?”

“Yes.”

Her thoughts scattered in a thousand different directions. Had he met someone? Was he getting married? Did he want to change the amount of child support he sent? Was it about the kids? Maybe he wanted Zack to join Little League, which might be okay, except Zack was obsessed with hockey. But it was natural for a baseball player to want his son to love the game too.

“I already talked to Zack about it, and he really wants to stick to hockey, and soccer in the summer.”

“What?” He squinted at her. The light from the house molded his cheekbones and strong jaw, like a black-and-white ad for something rich and male—a high-tech watch or a luxury aftershave. “I know. He told me. I don’t care, I just want him to have fun.”

“Baseball’s all right too,” said a sleepy voice from the backseat. “It’s just kind of boring sometimes.”

Billy put a hand to his chest. “Ouch.”

“Not when *you’re* playing,” Zack added as he pulled himself into the space between the driver and passenger seats. “The boring parts are when the pitcher’s just standing there trying to make up his mind about what to do next.”

“Pitchers have to be strategic. You’ll appreciate it when you’re older.” Billy patted Zack’s head in a deliberately patronizing way. Billy and Zack already had a teasing vibe between them, a typical Cooper thing. Bean was different. Bean took everything to heart and felt things very passionately. They were all careful not to tease him too much. It was a youngest child thing.

Jenna was the youngest herself, but she and Annika had a completely different kind of relationship. Annika was a kind of mama-bear older sister, very protective. After the divorce, Annika had moved in with them so she could help take care of the boys.

Zack made a face at his father, then tried to climb into the front seat. “Is that food?”

“Are you telling me you’re actually hungry?” Jenna shook her head. “You ate an entire herd of lentils.”

Billy chuckled at her joke. One of the best things about their divorce was that they were still able to laugh together. They’d never lost their shared sense of humor even while everything else was falling apart.

“I’m hungry again,” Zack declared. “Can I have that roll?”

Billy handed over the buttered roll, which disappeared down Zack’s throat in about two bites.

“Not so fast,” she warned. “You might choke.”

He launched into a story about a kid at school who’d nearly choked on a peanut, but a teacher had done the

Heimlich on him and saved his life. And another kid had tracked down the peanut after it shot across the room and made a shadowbox with it. “The Zombie Peanut’s Revenge,” she’d called it.

“She made up this whole story about how the peanut was actually a murderer who was cursed to take the form of a peanut, but he still wants to kill people.”

“Good Lord.” Billy nearly choked on his own, non-peanut food. “Is that girl okay? Do we need to talk to her parents?”

“She’s so cool.” Zack’s heartfelt tone made Jenna wonder about terrifying things like pre-teen crushes. “Can I have that drumstick?”

“Okay, that’s it.” Billy whisked the plate out of Zack’s reach. “How about you and I go into the house and join the rest of the family? There’s an entire turkey in there.”

“But only two drumsticks.”

“Fine.” He handed Zack the drumstick. “You can have it. But let’s go, we don’t want to get your mom’s car greasy.”

“I’ll stay with Bean,” Jenna told them as Zack jumped out of the car. “We’ll be in as soon as he wakes up.”

“Look forward to it.”

Billy’s intimate, slightly lowered voice made her head jerk up. What did he mean by that? Anything? Nothing? She remembered that he had something important to talk about.

“Should we just talk later about...that other thing?”

“What other thing?” Zack demanded. He never missed a beat, that kid. “Are we moving?”

“Moving? Of course we’re not moving. Why would you think that?”

“Because of Japan.”

“Japan?”

Her gaze flew to meet Billy’s. His guilty expression said it all.

“Hold on one fluffer-nutter minute.” She’d concocted that phrase a while back to take the place of the one that always wanted to slip out of her mouth. “What’s going on here?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. But can we do it later?”

His low voice made her realize she’d been speaking at top volume. A sleepy voice confirmed that. “Mommy? Why are you yelling?”

“I’m not yelling, sweetie, but if I were yelling, I’d have a very good reason. I’m sorry I woke you up. Do you want to sleep some more?”

“Are we at Danny’s house?”

To the boys, the older generation was mostly icing on the cake. The real star was their cousin Danny.

“We are. Should we go in and have some pie?”

“Do they have turkey?” he asked hopefully.

She sighed. It was a good thing she wasn’t trying to raise her family vegetarian. “They do. Stuffing too.”

“And mashed potatoes, green beans, cranberry sauce, yams, buttered rolls, and about twenty pies.” Billy opened the passenger door with his free hand. “Come on out, bud. Let’s get some food into you.”

From outside her SUV, he caught her eye and mouthed something, either an apology or a promise to talk more in a bit.

Japan. *Japan.*

The word ping-ponged through her brain all the way into Thomas and Carly's house. Beautiful country, she had no doubt. Sushi bars, sake, anime, all that got a big thumbs up from her. She also knew about Shohei Ohtani and his spectacular play. She even knew a few words of Japanese taught to her by the wife of one of the Japanese players Billy was friends with.

But Jesus. Was Billy really considering moving there? What about the boys? They got plenty of chances to see him during the summer, when either she or Annika took them to Minneapolis, or when he had a couple of days off. None of that would be possible if he was in Japan.

And if he thought for one second that she was going to uproot the boys from their entire support system—her sister, their uncles, their friends, even her eccentric and impossible father—he could forget about it. They'd decided early on to raise the boys in Lake Bittersweet instead of whatever city he played in. That applied to cities on other continents too.

With her stomach in knots, she greeted the Cooper family, exchanging hugs with those she knew well—all the men, basically—and friendly words with Carly and Brenda, as well as Danny's friend from school. Her mood lightened as she took in the sheer joy on Galen's face as he held hands with Brenda.

Galen deserved every bit of happiness. He'd been there for her without question during the divorce and afterwards. He'd babysat more times than she could count, he'd taught both

boys how to fish and paddle a canoe—basically anything that happened in the summertime. Billy handled the winter fun.

Brenda looked just as happy, which was great considering she'd been the subject of a flash-in-the-pan scandal just a few days ago. Hopefully all that drama was over with.

Thomas sent Danny to find chairs for the three newcomers, and a few moments later they were all crowded around the table and her boys were stuffing their faces for the second time that day.

She accepted a plate as well, along with a glass of wine.

Which was when she noticed that Billy was drinking sparkling apple cider. That was interesting. His drinking had always been something that got him into trouble, and she knew it went way back. His mother had been trying to turn him into her ten-year-old drinking buddy when Thomas had convinced her to let all the brothers move to Lake Bittersweet.

She remembered what he'd said about staying out of trouble and not going to a single club this season. When he'd quit drinking, she'd hoped and prayed he could stick to it, but she hadn't known if he would. The bright lights of baseball fame could be so seductive. The fact that he was still sober... well, she was impressed.

Carly tapped her fork against her glass. "We have reached the best part of the evening."

"Pie?" Zack said hopefully, making everyone laugh.

"Absolutely. And along with the pie, we're going to go around the table and each say one thing we're grateful for this year. I'll give you a few moments to gather your thoughts." She passed Teddy over to his big brother Danny, who grinned down at the black-haired bundle of energy. Galen and Brenda

jumped up to help her clear the table. When Jenna tried to join them, Carly insisted she finish her plate of food. “You just got here. Relax for a minute. Enjoy that wine. It comes from Gault’s private collection.”

Hmm, a rock star’s private wine stock. Hard to say no to that. Jenna had partied at the Blue Drake a few times back in the old pre-kid days. She’d known Gault by sight, as had everyone in Lake Bittersweet. Purple stovepipe hats weren’t normal rural Minnesota garb. She’d cried when Gault had died last year. *End of an era*, she’d thought, expecting some outsider to take over the Blue Drake and turn it into condos or something. Instead, Carly had revived it back to its glory days, except even better.

Maybe there was a lesson in there.

Once the pie plates had been distributed and seven mouthwatering pies arranged down the middle of the table, Billy said, “Okay, Carly, since you’re the hostess, you’re up first.”

“Trust Billy to find a baseball reference for everything,” Jenna teased as the rest of the table laughed. Billy flashed her two fingers, meaning that he’d earned two points for that baseball reference. Inside joke; they’d been keeping a running tally for the entire length of their relationship.

“Personally, I think Carly should *kick things off*,” she declared.

“Football? That’s just cruel.”

“No crying in baseball.” She wiggled two fingers at him. Billy tilted his head, acknowledging her two points.

Carly ignored them both. “Fine, I’m happy to go first. It goes without saying that I’m grateful for all of you, and to be

part of the Cooper family. But I'd also like to say that I'm grateful that Teddy slept through the night last night. First time ever."

The whole table cheered and applauded. Danny went next, with a gracious comment about being grateful to Layla for not wanting to contribute to her carbon footprint by flying back to Egypt for the break. "Good for the environment and for us!" he ended with a flourish.

Smiling, she returned the sentiment with a short speech about feeling very welcome in Minnesota, and grateful to the thrift store that had plenty of used winter gear she could buy.

And then it was Billy's turn. "First, I gotta say I'm grateful to Lancelot."

"That's his glove," Danny whispered to Layla, who looked very confused. "Baseball. I'll explain later."

"Lancelot saved my ass more times this season than I can count."

"To Lancelot!" Thomas raised a glass to Billy's glove.

Rolling her eyes, Jenna raised her glass and joined in. Typical Billy, putting his baseball glove at the center of his life.

"But I also want to say I'm grateful to Jenna for being..." He shrugged, as if he couldn't find quite the right words.

"Best ex-wife ever?" she asked tartly. That was another of their running jokes. Maybe they'd been a terrible married couple, but they were a kick-ass divorced one.

"No. One of the best all-around *people* ever. Right, boys?"

Bean cheered, while Zack pretended to gag. Billy met her eyes as he lifted his glass of cider. His were filled with

mischievous and warmth, and it was impossible for her to block it out. A thrill snuck through her, zinging from her heart to her toes.

Trouble.

And then she remembered. *Japan*. Was he trying to win her over so she'd consent to this Japan idea? She wasn't sure what she thought about it yet—she didn't know the details—but flattering her wasn't going to work.

Except that her pulse was still fluttering. *Darn it all, Billy. No curveballs, please.*

Two points for her—silently, to herself, which wasn't nearly as much fun.

three

Billy knew Jenna was unhappy with him, and he couldn't blame her. He had no idea how Zack knew about the Japan offer; maybe he'd overheard something during a call with his agent, Pete? He should have talked it over with Jenna before the kids got wind of it. Communication was at the top of her wishlist of rules.

Now she was digging into her blueberry pie with extra fierceness. When she was pissed, she tended to attack her food as if it was the guilty party.

When Bean fell asleep with his head pillowed on Billy's lap, he caught her eye. "Ready?" he murmured.

"Locked and loaded," she answered cheerfully. No one else would be able to tell, but he knew she was righteously angry.

They said their goodbyes. After collecting the kids' coats and hats and mittens, Jenna shepherded Zack out the door while Billy carried the groggy Bean in his arms. One of Bean's superpowers was sleeping. Once he was out, he was nearly impossible to wake up. So different from Zack, who'd fought against sleep with every fiber of his being and had kept them up for hours every night.

The two boys were so different, Billy found it fascinating. They changed all the time, too. He'd come back after a long road trip and discover they no longer liked Legos and were all about Razor scooters. How much would they change if he was gone for months at a time instead of weeks?

At Jenna's house, he breathed a sigh of relief that Annika was working the overnight shift at the clinic. Annika had moved in after the split, and while Billy was grateful for her help, he knew she was still wary of him. Jenna was very close to her big sister; she trusted her. So far he'd stayed on good terms with Annika, but he knew she was paying close attention. Unfortunately, charm didn't work on her. His only tool was good behavior.

Zack hugged him goodnight and took himself off to bed.

"Brush your teeth," Jenna called after him.

"I know, Mom! Geez."

Her lips twitched, but she clamped down on her smile, as if reminding herself that she was upset. Sometimes Jenna had a hard time holding onto her anger. That could be good and bad; usually her anger was justified and deserved to be heard.

"I'll put Bean to bed," he offered, since he was still holding the warm bundle of his youngest son.

"Okay. But don't leave after that. We need to talk."

"Of course not." He wanted to be irritated at the suggestion that he'd try to avoid the conversation, but he knew where it came from. In his younger days, he hadn't taken things like disagreements seriously. He'd blown off plenty of confrontations, mostly because he'd known he was in the wrong and hadn't wanted to admit it.

Upstairs, he took an extra moment to tuck Bean into bed. The boy's cheeks were flushed from the night's excitement and too much pie. At least he hadn't broken anything; Bean was absurdly accident-prone. Recently, Jenna had taken him to an eye doctor, but his vision was perfect. Apparently, his only problem was a need to keep up with his older brother.

Billy dropped one last kiss on the top of his head and headed downstairs to face the music.

Jenna had changed into comfy lowrider sweatpants with a stripe down the side, and a baggy sweater. She also wore her fuzzy fleece slippers. The combination was clearly not meant to be sexy, but still led him to imagine cuddling on the couch with her. She held two cups of hot chocolate, one of which she offered to him.

He made a show of sniffing it before taking a sip.

She raised an eyebrow. "You know one of my Rules for Divorce is don't poison your ex unless absolutely necessary."

Her rules cracked him up because they seemed to morph according to circumstances. "Yes, but you don't always follow rules. Do I have to remind you about the time we snuck into ___"

"Nope." She cut him off with a rueful smile. He could have ended that sentence with a number of forbidden locations, starting with a summer estate rumored to be haunted and including the VIP room at the Blue Drake. "I'm not always the good girl people think, am I?"

"Definitely not." He tried to keep the insinuation out of his voice, but it was impossible. He knew Jenna's fiery side better than anyone. He hurried onwards. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to

you about Japan right away. I don't know how Zack heard about it, but I'm sorry about that too."

Her gaze flicked away from him, then she set her mug down, sank into the armchair and folded her legs under her. "So what's the deal? Are you moving to Japan?"

The way she said it, he knew she'd spent the evening steeling herself for that possibility.

He set his mug down too, then crouched next to her. "Jenna, I would never move anywhere without you signing off on it. You know I wouldn't."

She chewed on the inside of her mouth, a stress habit he was familiar with. "Go sit on the couch."

"Sure." He hesitated, then did as she asked. He'd just have to get his point across without using their mutual physical awareness to do so. "There's a team in Japan that has expressed interest in me. That's as far as it goes, but Pete thinks I should seriously consider it. It would be a huge jump from my current contract, and you know the new manager at the Twins doesn't like me. He's been putting Pedro in the lineup almost as much as me. Pete doubts they'd be willing to match what the Chunichi Dragons would offer. He thinks they'll use Pedro as a way to lowball me."

"The Chunichi Dragons..." Jenna tilted her head. "If you take that offer just because the team has a cool name, I'll break all the damn divorce rules."

He had to laugh at that. "The name is pretty awesome, but I'm more about the money. We'd have a lot more to work with." On top of child support payments, he put most of the money he made in a fund for the boys. He'd only started making decent money a few years ago. Before then, they'd

both scrambled for funds. At the beginning, Jenna had made more as a botanical illustrator than he had as a minor league baseball player.

“How long is the contract?”

“Two years, probably. I’d come back here in the offseason, same as now.”

“But the boys wouldn’t see you as much during the season.” She shook her head unhappily.

“I’d fly them to Japan whenever they want. You too,” he added. “You could all come. Summer in Japan. Pretty freaking cool.”

“Yeah, maybe. But they have so much going on here in the summer. They look forward to it all year long. Fishing, canoeing, swimming, soccer...”

He wanted to tell her they had all those things in Japan, but he actually didn’t know. Surely they must fish there. But canoeing? Or the Minnesota state sport, mosquito-slapping?

“Cultural exposure,” he said. “It’s good to experience life in other countries. Broadens your horizons.”

“Bean is six. He doesn’t need his horizons broadened yet.” Her wry tone echoed what he believed, too. Bean might not even remember living in Japan if he was only six at the time. Billy’s own memories from that age were fuzzy and mostly involved playing with squirt guns and worrying about his mother.

He slouched back on the couch and linked his hands behind his head. “Yeah, I should forget about it. Tampa Bay is also an option, or I can take my chances with the Twins. Honestly, I’m not sure the Dragons would work out anyway.”

Her gaze flew up to meet his over the rim of her mug. It had an anatomically correct picture of a frog on it, inspired by one of her first jobs, illustrating an *Encyclopedia of Tree Frogs*. That gig had left Jenna with a lasting love for frogs. It was the oddest thing, but endearing too. She even recognized the different croaks from their local frog species.

Just one of Jenna's many quirks. From her blond, perky exterior, people never guessed how secretly weird she was.

"Why not?" she asked with a frown. "Because of the kids?"

"No, not that. I mean, that would be my reason. But the Dragons might not pull the trigger anyway. They're concerned about my..." Ugh, he had to say it. "Reputation."

"What?" Jenna sat up so quickly she nearly sloshed hot chocolate onto her sweater. "How dare they?"

"How *dare* they?" He blinked at her, taken aback by her fierceness. Jenna always defended her loved ones with warrior-like passion, but he'd left that inner circle three years ago. "They have every right to decide who they want to bring on."

"I know that, but you're Billy Cooper! You have the quickest reaction time in the American League."

"*And* I've been known to party."

"But it never affected your game. You still had the highest percentage of successful throws to third base with another runner on first in an opposing team's stadium last season."

He squinted at her. "That's a real stat?"

"It's an obscure one," she admitted. "But it's true."

He made a show of writing a note on his phone. “Gotta remember to tell Pete that one. Maybe he can get a bump up on the contract that I’m going to turn down.”

Jenna settled back in the armchair and picked up her mug. Behind her, a bay window looked out into the backyard, where in daylight could be seen a trampoline, a badminton net, and a jungle gym that Jenna had rescued from the dump. No wonder all the neighborhood kids congregated at their house.

Her house.

He didn’t live here and never had. He’d bought it for them after the divorce. When he was in Lake Bittersweet, he rented a guesthouse on the eastern side of the lake, where all the big summer homes were located. The owners allowed him to use the home gym of the main house for all his off-season workout needs.

“So you’ve decided against it,” Jenna said in a neutral tone that gave him no clue as to her opinion.

“I haven’t decided anything. I’m considering. Discussing. Running it by you. I’m serious, Jenna. I won’t make any move that you’re not down with.”

She nodded and turned the mug around in her hands. Her gray eyes hazed over as she lost herself in thought. Jenna had remarkable eyes. They were a light gray that picked up other colors from whatever she was wearing, or her environment in general. But no matter the color, they were always luminous, like sunlight shining through the early-morning fog that hovered over Lake Bittersweet.

“I can see why you’re considering it,” she finally said. “That new manager obviously isn’t your biggest fan. You’re probably worried about what effect that’s going to have on

your status with the Twins. You're a baseball player, you want to play."

"Yeah."

It wasn't just that, though. Yeah, he loved playing baseball. Loved exercising his talent to its fullest. But he also wanted to leave a mark on the world, give his boys something to be proud of. Lord knew he'd failed them in other ways. He hadn't been able to keep things together at home, and while it took two people to get divorced, most of the fault lay with him.

"And then there's the financial aspect. No one knows how long a sports career will last. It makes sense to make as much as you can while you're healthy."

That was true too. That was one reason he spent so much energy in the off-season maintaining his fitness and muscle tone, to give himself the best chance of preventing an injury. Shortstop was a tough position. You didn't want to bulk up too much because you might lose quickness. But strong muscles combined with flexibility were the surest way to keep a player's joints intact.

"What are you saying?" he asked her cautiously.

She waited a long time before answering, then lifted her eyes to meet his. "I think I'm in favor."

For some reason, he experienced a pang of...something when she said that. Loss? Hurt? So she was really fine with him moving half a world away? "It's not that simple. I can't just say yes. I have to prove I'm not a reputational risk anymore."

"How would you do that?"

"Well...I, uh..." He cleared his throat. He hadn't thought things would get this far, so he hadn't prepared for this

moment. "I'd need you."

four

Jenna stared in confusion at the long-legged, magnificent man sitting on her couch. Side note—it was okay to objectify your ex-husband, right? Hadn't she earned that privilege? “Clarify, please.”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Pete wants to set me up with a reporter to follow me around. Show the wholesome family man side of the notorious Billy Cooper.” He shot her an embarrassed look. “Hard to do that without the family. And that's you. And the boys, but I don't want to show too much of them.”

She still didn't understand. “Pete knows we're divorced, right?”

“Of course. That's part of the point. They'd showcase how good our relationship is, how well we work together raising our kids, that kind of thing. The Redemption of Billy Club. That's how he's pitching it. I've matured, I've grown, I've left my past behind me.”

She let out a spurt of laughter. Not because it sounded ridiculous, but because he sounded so disgusted by the whole pitch. “You hate the idea.”

“Of course I fucking hate it. I don't want some idiot reporter prying into my life. Or yours. It's the off-season, I'm

supposed to be soaking in the jacuzzi and smoking cigars.”

“Cigars?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Not literally. The point is, I’m supposed to be relaxing, not putting on some kind of show.”

“Well, we do work well together as co-parents.” She had to point that out, since she took pride in that fact. “That part’s not a show.”

He surged to his feet and paced to the mantelpiece at one end of the living room. She’d filled it with framed family photos and quite a few shots of him on the field. If someone didn’t know better, they might think this house belonged to a still-married couple. “I know we do. But it’s no one’s fucking business.”

“We could be role models. Like Divorced Barbie and Ken.”

He whirled around. “Are you saying you’re willing to do this?”

“That was a joke. No one aspires to be divorced. But...” She broke off and looked down at her hot chocolate. Maybe she needed to think about this more. Draw up a list of pros and cons. It had already formed in her mind. Finances and career benefits on one side, family disruption on the other.

As a baseball family, they were already used to disruption. She knew the kids would adapt. And she’d get some international travel opportunities out of it. She could work from anywhere. She’d just have to find a portable drafting table and bring along cases of her favorite pencils and other tools.

But all pros and cons aside, one fact kept rising above the others. This was the one she kept coming back to, the one that

had inspired her statement that she was in favor of this change.

If Billy was in Japan, there would be months when she didn't see him. Maybe she could finally eject him from her overly-romantic heart once and for all. Maybe she could finally, genuinely, move on.

"It's just one reporter?" she asked him.

"I think so. Maybe a photographer too. But just one media outlet. An exclusive, that kind of thing."

That made sense. You could control the message a lot better with one reporter at a time.

"When would this be?"

"Lord, I don't know. Whenever Pete sets it up. Maybe next month, to take advantage of the holiday season and all."

"No," she said firmly. "Nothing during the holidays. The kids will be home and things will get crazy. They can either come before the school break or after the kids go back to school. Let's keep the holidays media-free."

"Fair enough." He walked over to stand in front of her. "Just so I'm understanding, you're giving the green light to this, yeah?"

"What do *you* want?"

"I want to see where it goes," he said after a brief pause. "I don't want to be counted out because of the past."

She caught an undertone that made her wonder if he was referring to more than the Japanese team.

"Then I'm in, too."

She let out a breath, feeling as if she was pounding a nail into the coffin of her stubborn romantic dreams. She and Billy

were done, she knew that. In her mind, she knew that. It had been her choice. She'd suggested that their only harmonious path forward would be as an ex-couple. But her damn heart was slow to catch up. Not to mention her libido.

She still wanted him, just as much as she had since the age of seventeen, when he'd first asked her to the movies. That fact made her absolutely furious with herself.

"It's a good career move, and the boys and I will work with it. Annika always talks about Japan, so maybe she can bring them to visit a couple times."

She caught his wince, and suppressed a smile. Annika liked to keep Billy on his toes. She considered it a service to the family, making sure that he was very aware she kept an eye on things. Lord knew their father didn't bother. He was too busy with his painting.

"We can talk about that down the road," Billy murmured.

"Fair."

"Do you think...?" He stopped and shoved his hands in the pockets of his sleek black trousers. "Will the boys...do you think they'll be angry? Forget me? Anything like that, I won't go."

"Billy." Impulsively, she put a hand on his arm, then immediately dropped it. The feel of his hard baseball-honed forearm was too much for her. "You'll be FaceTiming every day like you do now, right? All those online video games you play with Zack, the Wii, the whatever else. They'll get to go on Japanese adventures, and you'll be back here during the winter."

He was nodding along with her.

“They’ll miss you, but they won’t hate you. If they’re angry with you, well, then they’ll be angry. Just let them say so and make sure they know you still love them even if they’re angry.”

She certainly knew what it was like to be angry with Billy Cooper. The experience had just about broken her heart in two. Her life was so much more pleasant now that she could detach from all that hot emotion.

“The thing is, my father wasn’t even around for me to be angry at him. When I saw him in LA...” He turned away from her, then sank back down on the sofa, shaking his head. “I didn’t feel much at all. If that happened with Zack and Bean, I’d...”

“Oh Billy.”

Her heart ached for him. Without thinking, she hopped up from the armchair and landed on the couch next to him. “The boys know you love them. You’re never out of touch...except when you’re playing. Even then, you always give them that little sign after you make a play.”

Two fingers to the heart. That was for them.

“It’s completely different from you and your father. You’re a good dad, Billy. You always think about the kids first.”

He lifted his eyes to meet her gaze, and she suddenly realized where she was. Mere inches from him, her body angled toward his, a breath away from a hug.

Quick as a wink, she scooted away from him, onto the next couch cushion. Then, just in case, she grabbed one of the pillows and clutched it to her. She needed an object between them. Something to block the flow of connection.

God, she was ridiculous. She could withstand Billy's charisma and their chemistry, but his vulnerability always hit her right in her soft spot.

Gathering her wits about her, she set aside the pillow and rose to her feet, as dignified as she could possibly manage. "I should go check on Bean."

"Bean's fine." The slight gruffness in his voice gave her a mini-thrill. "Fell asleep the minute I tucked in the covers. What's with the Band-Aid on his thumb?"

That question served as the perfect dose of cold water on her heated thoughts. "He got it caught in the car door. Not the real car," she added quickly when Billy sat up straight. "A toy car. That red one you got him in Chicago."

He let out a snort. "Only Bean could find a way to get hurt playing with a toy car."

They both smiled in the exact same way—partly amused, but mostly rueful. After the fact, it was possible to see the humor, such as it was, but in the middle of one of Bean's disasters, there was mostly terror.

"He's fine," she assured him. "Annika says Bean is the most resilient kid she's ever seen, and obviously she sees a lot of them." Time to get herself back on track. She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "I should get some sleep. We're doing a shift at the food pantry tomorrow."

"Can I take the kids for a hike afterwards?"

"Sure. They'd love it."

He got to his feet too, a sexy unfurling of his absurdly fit body. "Thanks, Jenna."

“Thank you. I can use some time to take care of a few things.”

“No, I mean, thanks for everything you said about the boys. I really appreciate it. You’re kind. Kinder than I probably deserve.” The gravity in his blue eyes somehow made him more attractive than ever.

She swallowed back the lump in her throat. “Give yourself some credit. You’ve worked really hard to stay connected with them under difficult circumstances.”

“See? You’re kind. You always have been. You’re an exceptional human being.”

“Stop that,” she snapped.

“Excuse me?”

“It started with that toast, now you’re complimenting me again. It’s a little disorienting.”

His forehead wrinkled in confusion. “I’m not supposed to be nice to you? Is that one of the divorce rules?”

It probably fell into the category of Keep Clear Boundaries. But that one could be extremely difficult to stick to.

“How am I supposed to show the reporter what a good co-parenting relationship we have if I can’t be nice to you?”

Oh sweet heavens. He was right. This was going to be a challenge because they’d have to spend more time together than they normally did.

But if she got through it, then Billy would have a great opportunity, there’d be plenty of college money for the boys—and any other money they might need—and she’d be able to move on with her life. Win-win-win. It would be worth it.

“We should keep the focus on the boys. It’s all about them, not us, and definitely not me.”

He ran a hand over the back of his head, still looking puzzled. “Where is this coming from, Jenna? I didn’t know you had a problem with compliments.”

The problem was when he used that gentle voice, when he said sweet words with so much sincerity, she wanted to melt on the floor at his feet.

But she couldn’t tell him that. “If you’re too nice, it’ll look fake to the reporter.”

He tipped his head. “Whatever you want. I’m just grateful you’re up for this. Grateful in a not-nice way,” he added quickly. “Kind of a crabby, mean grateful.”

“Thank you.” She was ready for him to go now. He seemed to sense it, so he headed toward the door, snatching up his coat he’d left on the back of a chair.

“Wait.” He turned back. “Won’t I look like a jerk if I can’t be nice to you in front of the reporter?”

“Just...act professional.”

“Professional,” he said blankly. “Professional what?”

“We’re professional co-parents. Think of it that way.”

“Hm.” He shrugged on his coat, an old hunting jacket in red and black plaid. The bright side was that it hid his muscular form. The down side was that it gave him an extra dose of rugged appeal. “Well, this should be interesting.”

She didn’t exhale completely until he’d left, when she sank onto the couch, on the opposite end of where he’d been sitting.

This should be interesting.

That it would.

Then again, life with Billy, before, during and after their marriage, was always interesting.

five

Pete was overjoyed that Billy was willing to do the profile.
“The ex too? Love it.”

“Her name is Jenna.” Billy gritted his teeth as he made that correction, not for the first time.

“Listen, I can barely remember the current wives. Give me a break. I’ll get this set up, you focus on keeping fit. No slacking off this winter. The Dragons might want to fly you in for an in-person meeting.

“Got it.”

“And no partying, right? No bars, no clubs, no—”

“Fuck you, Pete. I told you all that’s over. Besides, who’s going to notice in itty-bitty Lake Bittersweet, Minnesota?”

Pete was already gone, as was his habit. Billy had never once gotten a “goodbye” from him on the phone.

But keeping fit was an excellent idea. Sometimes a guy just needed a long, pounding run. It had nothing to do with blotting out thoughts of a certain blond ex-wife, or ridding himself of excess sexual energy. Nope, nothing like that. Just trying to keep in shape.

Billy put on his winter workout gear and went for a jog down one of the trails that wound through the eastern-shore

neighborhoods. He wore his ear buds so he could listen to music as he ran, and so he didn't miss any calls from Jenna or his brothers or anyone else he actually cared about.

His mother was back in rehab. He'd already sent money for that and knew he wouldn't hear anything from her until she was out. Maybe this would be the one that worked, but he knew better than to get his hopes up. In meetings, he talked a lot about his guilt that he'd been able to quit, and she struggled so much. *You gotta live your life, not someone else's*, his sponsor said. Words were so easy compared to reality.

After pounding the dirt road to the tune of a thrash metal band, he switched to Duolingo. Might as well learn some Japanese, just in case. He and Jenna were going to wow this reporter, he was going to get this contract, and Anson Bones, the new manager, could suck it.

"Hoomuran," he repeated after the Duolingo narrator. That was how you said "home run" in Japanese, apparently. So far, so good.

A movement near one of the big summer houses caught his eye. Was that a side door that had just swung closed? Other than the guest house he stayed in, the houses out here weren't generally occupied during the winter, unless someone decided to come for Christmas. Jerome Mason sometimes rented his house out; in fact, Kirk Williams had rented it last Christmas, and then Bliss and Granger had stayed there the following spring and summer. Quite a few locals made money over the winter by checking in on the empty estates. And sometimes teenagers liked to sneak in and cause random mischief.

Random mischief. That could have been his motto back in his teen years. And his minor league years. And all of his years up until two years ago, come to think of it.

“Hello?” he called as he jogged toward the side door where he’d seen movement. The house was modeled after a Tudor estate, with brick chimneys and dark wood gables. He couldn’t remember who owned this one, but it had to be one of the most expensive properties on the lake. Didn’t it have a French name? He noticed a security camera mounted on the corner of the house, but figured it was probably off this time of year. “Is someone there?”

He stopped, sweating in the cold morning air, and waited for an answer. All was quiet, but he could have sworn he saw movement inside the house. He couldn’t see a vehicle anywhere in the vicinity. If teenagers had come out here, there would be something—car, bicycle, skateboard. Besides, why would they come here in the morning? Breaking into summer houses was more of a nighttime thrill.

Wiping sweat off his face, he jogged back to the road. He made a pin of the location and sent it to Granger, the new town constable, whose official number was posted on the town website.

This is Billy Cooper. I was jogging past this house and thought I saw movement. What should I do?

I’ll handle it, came his quick response. Nice double-play at the end of game six against the White Sox.

Thanks. Got lucky.

Would he ever get used to people remembering what he did on the baseball field—good or bad? Probably not. Then again, he preferred that to when people remembered some of the shit he’d done off the field. *Remember that night we...No. I don’t want to.*

He picked up the pace, jogging out of the neighborhood and veering onto the highway, which was fairly empty at this hour. An occasional rig rattled past him, but he ignored them and focused on the road ahead, or the cloud of steam puffing from his mouth, or the tall pines and bare-branched maples towering over him on his right.

Low clouds seemed to touch the tips of the trees, and a cold mist swirled past him. He wondered if there was snow in the forecast, and realized that he should have checked before he jogged this far from his little guest house.

Eventually he found himself at Deuces, a roadside diner that doubled as a sports bar in the evenings. The open sign in one of the windows was lit, and another spelled out “Coffee,” although the last “e” was blinking on and off, as if trying to fully wake up.

Did that count as a “bar” that he shouldn’t go near? Was Pete going to find out and rip him a new one?

Fuck that. He’d been going to Deuces forever and he owed the owner a “hello.” Archie Dominguez was the one who had convinced Billy that he had enough talent to try to make baseball a career. He owed him a lot more than a “Hello.”

As soon as Archie caught sight of him, he came around the bar and flung open his arms for a big old hug. Archie had been born in the Dominican Republic, but wound up in Minnesota because his father had played for the Twins. Archie had played catcher for three seasons of AA before walking away from baseball while he still had functioning knees.

“Look what the kitty-cat dragged in,” he practically shouted. He was a large man with a big booming voice and an even bigger personality. A few people sitting at the bar turned

their heads to see what all the fuss was about. Billy kept the hood of his thick sweatshirt right where it was.

He and Archie hugged, pounded each other's backs, then shared a fist bump on top of that. "Superstar, back at the bar," Archie crooned.

"Wouldn't go that far," Billy rhymed. They grinned at each other. Archie was only a few years older than Billy, but his hard-living ways showed in the deep lines alongside his mouth. He'd been thrown in the Lake Bittersweet jail—which was just a locked room in the firehouse—a few times for brawling at the Cue Ball. Now that he owned his own bar, he'd been able to avoid such arrests.

"Coffee?"

"Sure, man. I could use a kicker. I have to run all the way back."

"Need a stretcher? I can rig one up."

"I just might, now that you mention it."

Archie poured him a big mug of coffee that smelled of the nutmeg he always added to the grounds. Then came cinnamon and a few spoons of sugar. Coffee Dominican-style, nothing like it. When he flashed a silver flask, Billy shook his head "no."

This had happened last year, too. Didn't Archie remember that Billy didn't drink anymore? Or did he just choose to forget? Maybe he didn't believe it was possible. Billy had run into that a few times with his old drinking buddies.

"I quit that shit two years ago, remember?" he reminded Archie as he accepted the mug.

“I know. Just testing.” Archie leaned back against the counter and folded his arms across his chest. “Proud of you.”

“Thanks.” Embarrassed now, Billy stirred his coffee to dissolve the sugar. “But you go ahead, man. Do what you want.”

“Considering it’s my bar, I will.” Archie grinned to take the edge from his words. “When’d you get back?”

“Couple weeks ago.”

“Good season, *amigo*. You were fun to watch out there, when that *idioto* manager let you play.”

So he wasn’t the only one who’d noticed. “Why do you think I’m out here jogging in twenty degrees? Pedro’s on my ass.”

“Yeah, you better watch that one. Hey, anytime you want to leave more signed photos around...”

“I got you. I’ll drop some off later.” Archie used them to promote the bar, and he was fine with that.

“Good, I’ll spread the word among the female population.” Archie winked at him. “Reminds me, a girl came in earlier asking when you’d be here. Didn’t recognize her.”

“What girl? What did she look like?” He racked his brain for anyone who knew about his connection to Deuces, but who Archie wouldn’t recognize, and came up empty.

Archie shrugged. “Normal. Young-ish. Blond-ish.”

“Not Jenna.”

“Fuck, man, of course not. I know Jenna. The only time she comes here is when she has to pick up her dad.”

Jenna’s dad...

A memory came flooding back of the first time he'd met Jenna's father, right here at Deuces.

Jenna was supposed to meet him at their usual place by the lake, but she was late, and when she flew down the path toward him, he knew something was wrong. Her face was bright pink and streaked with tears.

"Is your car here?" she demanded before he could even speak.

He gestured to where his ancient hand-me-down Sentra was parked. "Yeah, what's wrong?"

"I'll explain on the way." She grabbed his hand and they raced toward his car. He'd never seen Jenna like this. Compared to him, she always had her shit together. Good grades, good attitude, good friends, a good after-school job at city hall. She was like a sunshiny day in the form of a pretty girl. He never told her this, but he often felt like the dark side of the moon compared to her.

But now she was frantic, and she needed his help.

"I can't reach Annika," she said when they were zooming down the road headed out of town. "She has to turn her phone off in class. I couldn't get the car started. I rode my bike here."

"Should we go back and grab it?" He started to slow down.

“No! Just bring me back when we’re done. And Billy.” She made him turn away from the road to meet her desperate gaze. “You have to promise me you’ll never say anything about this to anyone. Not your brothers, not anyone.”

“About what?”

“Promise!”

Even if he wasn’t crazy obsessed with her, even if he didn’t live for the moments he got to kiss her, he would have promised her anything. She was so panicked, so urgent.

He understood when they walked into Deuces and found a man staggering in the middle of the bar, a wine bottle raised in the air as he recited some kind of epic poem by memory. He wore a conductor’s hat and a hobo-looking coat, and looked about as different from Jenna as a person could—except for those gray eyes, which were just like hers.

“Sometimes my father goes on a bender,” she explained in a whisper as they hesitated in the entryway, which was papered with flyers and business cards. “He won’t let anyone get close to him except me or my sister.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just drive. I’ll do the rest.”

He didn’t like that; he knew how to handle people under the influence. He was an expert at dealing with his mother, guiding her into a bed, making sure she wasn’t on her back, covering her up so she didn’t get cold.

Jenna approached her father cautiously, step by step across the floor planks littered with sawdust and peanut shells. “Papa? Are you ready to go home?”

He swung toward her, brandishing the wine bottle. “What’s the next line? What is it?”

She recited a few lines in some flowery poetic Old English type of verse, and Billy realized that taking care of her father was nothing like taking care of his mother.

Except for the standing-by-while-they-threw-up part. And the getting-them-to-safety part.

He’d never seen Jenna’s house before. They always met in town because she said her house was too remote and her father didn’t like visitors. Maybe that was true. But as he drove Jenna and the ranting man in the backseat down a long dirt road that seemed to wind on forever, he realized that wasn’t the only reason. She’d been embarrassed. Or anxious about what her father would say or do.

He helped her wrangle Richard Scarlett into his bedroom, moving past enormous canvasses piled against walls and tarps covering hidden works-in-progress. The house was a converted barn, with high-raftered ceilings and a loft reachable by a ladder. Jenna had told him that her childhood bedroom was a loft, but he’d pictured something more spacious than a cramped dark space crammed up against the ceiling.

“Who’s that?” Richard demanded as he flopped onto his bed—handmade frame, exposed foam mattress. He pointed at Billy.

“That’s Billy. He’s my friend.” Jenna didn’t look at Billy as she found a comforter balled up on the floor and spread it over her father. “He’s helping us, so be nice to him.”

“You like him, don’t you? I can tell you like him. I want to paint him. Will you pose?” he asked Billy.

“Uh...” He stole a panicked glance at Jenna.

“We can talk about it tomorrow.” Jenna dug in his nightstand drawer for a bottle of aspirin, which she set on top of it.

“Pose for me. You want to be with my daughter? Pose for me.”

“I’ll do it,” Billy said quietly, feeling his face heat. He and Jenna had only gotten together about a month ago. But he was crazy infatuated with her, and she seemed to be just as wild for him.

“So you want to be with her.”

“Yeah.”

“There ya go.” He waved a hand at Jenna. “Doing my paternal duty. Now you know.”

Jenna’s face was pink with embarrassment. “Good night, Papa. I’ll bring you some water. Make sure you drink it in the morning.”

“Go. Get out.” He flopped an arm in her direction, then let it collapse onto the bed. Billy saw that his hands were covered in paint, mostly yellow and green.

“Should we stay?” he whispered to her once they were out of the bedroom.

“No. Believe me, you don’t want that. Hungover Papa is much worse than Drunk Papa. That’s what Annika always says.” The woeful expression on her face tore at his heart.

“Let’s go, then.” He held her hand tightly as they left the house. “Are you okay?” he asked as they settled back into his decrepit Sentra.

“Are you?” The question was a challenge, and when he turned to meet her gaze, he saw a deep gnawing fear that made him feel as if he was looking into his own soul.

“Do you think seeing your father like that changes anything for me?”

She chewed at the inside of her mouth. Everything about Jenna was so fresh and bright, like a daisy washed by rain. It killed him to see her so nervous. “Maybe,” she ventured. “I wouldn’t blame you. He does that every few months or so. The rest of the time, he barely looks up from his oil paints.”

“You don’t understand, Jenna. Take your father and multiply that by ten, then subtract the paints, and you have my mother.” His throat closed up around the words. He didn’t like talking about his mother because he still missed her, despite everything. He called her sometimes, and sent her money through Western Union whenever he had any extra. His brothers didn’t know.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

He and Jenna gazed at each other in perfect mutual understanding. That helplessness, that clawing love combined with fear...she got it. She got all of it.

The next time they kissed, it was different. Deeper. More real. More...everything.

“How is he?” Billy asked Archie through the lump in his throat. “Jenna’s father.”

“I don’t see him much. You know how he is. The silent time, until he wants to drink wine and recite poetry. I’d go

check on him but I don't know where he lives.”

“Jenna probably keeps an eye on him.” She and Annika referred to him affectionately as “the Hermit” because he didn't generally appreciate visitors.

“Not so much anymore. I guess he told her not to come around for a while so he could finish some masterpiece. Jenna told me all about it right after, asked me to let her know if he turns up. She's such a doll, that one. Real sweetheart.”

Jenna hadn't mentioned any of that to him. Why would she? They didn't communicate about anything personal that didn't involve the boys.

“Refill?” Archie asked.

“Only if you tell me what you're doing with that photo up there.” He gestured with his chin at a publicity shot of Pedro Carro, his nemesis, the new hotshot shortstop who was getting all the attention. It was an action shot of a wicked throw to first base.

“Oh this?” Playing innocent, Archie ripped the photo off the wall and walked it over to the dartboard, where he pinned it right in the middle. “Just waiting for our next showdown.”

“My man.”

They fist-bumped and Archie twirled a dart around in one hand, before flinging it at Pedro's left foot.

As he was reading his own dart, Billy's phone pinged with a message from Pete.

L. Delaney from Love + Life Magazine, tomorrow lunchtime. Best behavior.

Quickly he Googled *Love + Life Magazine*. It was a women's magazine devoted to empowerment, relationship

issues, and fashion.

He aimed at the dartboard and barely hit the outer ring.
Uh-oh. Bad omen?

six

What was the perfect outfit that would telegraph excellence in co-parenting but also a complete lack of romantic vibes? Half of Jenna's closet was on the bed when Annika appeared in the doorway. Her sister propped one shoulder against the doorjamb and surveyed the mess.

“Are you doing a Marie Kondo thing?”

“Uh, no. None of my clothes spark joy right now. I'd be naked if I Marie Kondo'd my life. We're meeting with the reporter in about an hour. I need a freaking outfit.”

Annika lifted her eyebrows as she polished an apple against her green sweater. Annika had a gift of always looking elegant, no matter how casual her clothes. It was her height, Jenna figured, and her confidence. She always looked as if she didn't give a damn what anyone thought of her, which she didn't. If she turned mismatched socks into wrist-warmers, it became a trend at school. If she made a mini-kilt out of their father's old painting smock, it wound up on social media. After their mother had run away, Annika had stepped into the mama-bear bedtime-story role. She always started every story the same...

Once upon a time, there was a girl who lived in a castle near a lake.

Jenna had loved those stories so much she'd adapted them for the boys. She knew she was lucky to have Annika, but occasionally she wished her sister could understand what it felt like to be a less-confident, more-anxious person such as herself.

"Yeah, walk me through this again," Annika was saying. "In order to get Billy on a team in Japan, you have to pretend you're the perfect ex-couple?"

That sounded about right. "We have to show that he's not an immature jerk anymore."

Annika snorted. "It's going to take more than an outfit to do that."

"Stop that."

"I'm teasing. I tease. That's what I do. Billy's used to it. It would freak him out if I stopped."

"Well, maybe we'll all get to find out some day."

Annika sank her teeth into the apple. Her straight eyebrows drew together in concentration as she scanned the pile of clothes. "Okay, I take it back," she said when she could talk again. "Billy is a lot of things, but he isn't a jerk, never has been. How about that blue wrap dress? Total Stepford wife vibes."

"Exactly. It would look like I'm trying too hard."

"Pants, then. It's got to be pants. No one wears a dress this time of year unless they're trying to make an impression." She strode toward the bed and plucked out a pair of indigo skinny jeans. "These will make you look young and cool. Which you are," she added quickly, before Jenna could object. "Maybe a hoodie?"

“Too casual.”

“A sweater, then. Turtleneck, you always look great in those.” She tossed Jenna a soft dove-gray sweater. “And boots. Gotta wear boots, you need a little extra height to meet a reporter.”

Jenna held the pants and sweater against her body, modeling them together. Annika nodded in approval. “Earrings too. Tiny bit of mascara. Lip gloss. Nothing too blatant. And you’re good to go.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Jenna marveled. “You’re a trauma nurse, not a stylist.”

“I’m not defined by my profession, just like you’re not defined by once being married to Billy Cooper.”

Maybe not, but it was a pretty important fact.

Jenna slipped off the hoodie she was wearing and pulled on the turtleneck. Immediately she felt the shift from raggedy mom to semi-professional upstanding citizen.

“How’s this?” she asked when she was completely dressed in the outfit her sister had picked out.

“Perfect. A waste of your energy, but you look good.”

Jenna turned to her tray of earrings, most of which were mismatched, and searched for something that said “professional co-parenter with a baseball star.” Little baseballs? Was that too on the nose? “Annika, why are you against this Japan idea? It could be great. And even if it isn’t, it’s just two years.”

Annika gestured with her half-eaten apple. “I’m not against it. But it’s all about Billy. What about you?”

Jenna shot her sister a sardonic look. “The next time someone wants to pay me millions to do botanical drawings on another continent, I’m sure Billy would support me.”

“You joke, but you’re so talented, people should be flying you around the world.”

“Well, they’re not, and even if they were, drawing mushrooms will never make the kind of money a baseball player can. He’s trying to take care of the boys.”

“Is he? Or is he trying to take care of his career?” She threw up her hands before Jenna could respond. “Withdrawn. I know Billy works hard for the family. I’m just saying, your career is important too.”

Jenna beamed at her. “I know you think you’re cynical and jaded, but I don’t believe it. You’re looking out for me and even complimenting my ex-husband.”

Annika sighed and frowned down at her apple. “Sometimes it’s like you’re not even actually divorced.”

This wasn’t the first time Annika had made that point.

“We are divorced, it’s just our own version. Maybe you should stop worrying about me and consider looking out for yourself.”

Annika backed out of the room. “Gotta get rid of this apple core.”

Jenna laughed to herself. Annika got asked out all the time. She drew men like mosquitoes on a hot summer day. And slapped away most of them. But lately, Jenna had seen her texting and smiling much more than usual. Something was up, she was sure of it.

“Coward,” Jenna called after her. “Sex-starved coward.”

“Oh no, you didn’t!” Annika called from down the hall.

“Will you pick up the kids?”

“Already told you I would.”

Jenna sighed as she examined herself in the mirror from all angles. She wouldn’t mind a sex date herself. Not a real date, that took too much emotional bandwidth. But some uncomplicated sex with someone she trusted, that would be tempting.

She heard the sound of Billy’s Tundra roaring into the driveway and hurried to apply some mascara. No, she scolded herself as the image of his wide shoulders and strong hands came to mind. *Billy does not represent uncomplicated sex with someone you trust.*

The thought made her hand quiver, and a blob of mascara ended up on her cheek. Carefully, she wiped it off, then saw that another smudge had ended up on her brow line. From outside, Billy honked. Shit. What was better, to be late or to be smudged?

She was Jenna Scarlett Cooper, dammit, she could do both!

Laughing at herself, she grabbed a Handiwipe and her purse and hurried out the door.

Billy was wearing a blazer, the one he used during important TV interviews and photo shoots. Had she underdressed? That blue dress, maybe that was the one...

“You look great,” Billy said with his light-the-world-on-fire smile. “Perfect. We even match.”

He pointed to the deep blue shirt he wore under his blazer. It was nearly the same color as her pants. They looked for all

the world as if they'd coordinated their outfits. Should they clarify that they hadn't?

"Blue seems like a good divorce color," she said. "Blue denotes sadness, but it's also loyal. True blue and all."

"Huh. When I think of blue, I think of..." He paused. "The Toronto Blue Jays," he confessed. "That's about it."

She laughed, and he cocked his head at her. "I think you have a mascara bit on your eye. Want me to..." His hand hovered close to her face. She shook him off.

"I got it." She swiped at it with the Handiwipe, then showed him her face. He shook his head. With a sigh, she handed him the wipe.

"It's too bad the reporter can't see us now," he joked as he dabbed away the mascara. "Modeling platonic grooming between ex-spouses."

More like, modeling strategic blocking of feelings of attraction, she thought as she held her breath until he was done. That was one of her secret Rules for Divorce. Don't mingle breath. It was too intimate. Also, smells were very powerful, and one ill-timed inhale could whisk you right back to the danger zone.

As they drove toward the Loon Feather Bistro, considered the nicest restaurant in town, she asked, "Is there anything we should talk about before we meet him? Or is it a woman?"

"All I know is last name Delaney, first name begins with L, but they're from a women's magazine. Anyway, does it matter? All we have to do is answer their questions and be ourselves."

"Oh no. Heck no." She wagged a finger at him. Of course Billy would take a fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants approach to

this. “We have to be on the same page. We can’t just go in there without a plan.”

“Isn’t the plan to just...be divorced and open with her about how we manage it?”

She rolled her eyes at that optimistic scenario. “What if they ask about...I don’t know, finances, for instance? Some stuff is private. We have to decide what’s off limits.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “How about we just tell them what my last contract was? They probably know anyway. Basic research.”

“How about telling them that I got hired to do the new edition of *The Guide to Midwestern Mushrooms*?”

“You did? Hey, that’s great news. Congratulations.” His reaction was so genuine that she felt slightly ashamed that she hadn’t told him before now. Why hadn’t she? He always celebrated her good news in a completely wholehearted way.

“Thanks. It’s not quite as prestigious as the Pacific Northwest edition, but it’s pretty cool. And I should clear at least a few thousand dollars.” She made a face at the low rates of pay that went with her field. It was a niche market, for sure. But it meant she could work from home, using samples sent to her by field researchers, and there was something about the precision and tidiness of botanical drawing that really appealed to her.

“To hell with that, Northwest mushrooms are crap compared to our Midwestern ones. We’ve got the grooviest shrooms in the country. I don’t care what they say, you got the better assignment. And you’re going to kill it.” Billy’s staunch loyalty made her feel warm all over. He’d never stopped being her biggest supporter, not even in the middle of divorcing.

“Wait. Stop. We should re-enact this whole thing for the reporter. I tell you some good news, you celebrate with me. She’ll eat it up.”

“Oh, now it’s a she?”

“I hope so. You can flirt with her and I can shine with her.”

He shot her an affronted look. “I’m telling you right now, I will not be flirting with her.”

“Or him?”

“If it’s a him, sure.” As usual, he didn’t miss a beat. “I’ll do a bro-flirt. We’ll go shoot pool or something.”

They grinned at each other. Really, it was too bad the reporter was missing all this. “You know what, I think we’re ready.”

Billy pulled into the Loon Feather parking lot and put the truck in park. The restaurant’s plate-glass windows reflected the midday sun as they looked out over the lake. “Let’s do this.”

She grabbed her coat and stepped out of the car. A pinprick of cold landed on her cheek. She looked up at the sky and caught the first meandering snowflakes of the fall drifting toward the ground.

“It’s snowing.” She put out her hand to catch a flake in her palm. Another followed that one, then another. “The boys will be so excited.”

“Hell, I’m excited. First snow, that’s a good omen. We won our last playoff game right after a flurry.” Billy came around the truck and slung his arm over her shoulders. The familiar weight sent a rush of emotion through her.

“Oh no. No no.” She slipped out from under his arm. “We need clear boundaries for this. No physical contact.”

“It was a friendly gesture. I’d do the same with my brothers.” Shoving his hands in his pockets, he gazed down at her, his blue eyes glinting.

“I’m not your brother, I’m your ex-wife, and it gives mixed signals.”

“Okay.” He dipped his head to acknowledge her point. “Anything else I should avoid? No direct compliments, no physical contact, no discussion of finances...damn, sounds like the last few months of our marriage.”

That made her laugh. As more tiny snowflakes landed on her cheeks, a kind of giddiness came over her. She loved the first snowfall of the winter, the way it covered everything in soft white, like a clean slate. She swatted him lightly on the chest. “Cute, Cooper. Very cute. But you know we had plenty of sex all the way to the end.”

“And a little while after. What’s that called, extra-inning sex?” His eyes were alight with mischief as he teased her. Oh man, why’d he have to remind her of that?

“Two points.” She had to acknowledge his baseball reference, it was only sporting.

“Hey, you two. Any chance I can include any of this in the piece?”

Oh crap. Jenna swung around. A woman in a tailored wool coat grinned at them with an expression that said she’d just stumbled onto an even juicier story than she’d expected.

seven

Billy took charge, mostly because the way Jenna's jaw dropped open, she wasn't going to be saying anything. "Absolutely not. Are you L. Delaney?"

"Lacey Delaney, that's right." The reporter stuck out her hand. His quick impression was mid-thirties, brunette, all smiles. "Billy and Jenna Cooper, I presume."

"Jenna Scarlett," he corrected her. "We're divorced. But you know that."

"Jenna Cooper is fine." Jenna finally spoke. "I kept my married name for our children, but I use Jenna Scarlett professionally."

"To take advantage of the connection to your father?"

Jenna flushed, and Billy realized they were really going to have to watch their step with this reporter. She was sharp behind that beaming smile.

"No, that's not the reason. In my field, no one knows who my father is. I'm surprised you do. You must be a good researcher." Jenna aimed a sunny smile at Lacey Delaney.

The reporter smiled back. "I am, which is why I know that he's gaining a solid reputation in gallery circles. No huge sales

at this point, but he's on a good trajectory. Perhaps I could talk to him—”

Billy intervened again, before Jenna shifted gears and went feral. Her father was her sore spot. When it came to him, she was both fiercely protective and often mortified. “Let's get inside before we turn into snowmen. Snow-people,” he corrected quickly. You never knew what a reporter might jump on. “Where are you coming in from, Lacey?”

“New York,” she answered as they all headed for the entrance of the Loon Feather. The bistro was Lake Bittersweet's most expensive restaurant—meaning mid-range in any reasonably sized city. Its biggest selling point was its location on a rise with sweeping views of the lake. It also had an expansive bar that, once upon a time, Billy would have taken full advantage of.

“Billy! You're back!” The young hostess hurried toward them, her face alight with excitement. Uh oh. He'd had a brief fling with Cassidy two years after the divorce—the first and only time he'd gotten involved with anyone in Lake Bittersweet.

He shot her a warning glance, but it was too late. Lacey, with her sharp eyes, had already taken note.

“Hey Cass. Jenna and I are doing an interview with this fine reporter here. We need the best table you got.”

“Of course.” She got the message right away and led them toward a table in the corner, with views in two directions, the lake and the forest. The snow was falling hard now, patches of white collecting on the ground.

He noticed that Cassidy didn't look at Jenna for more than a quick second. During their short time together—maybe a

week?—she'd asked him probably twenty times if he and Jenna were going to get back together.

Jenna herself showed no reaction to Cassidy; maybe she didn't know about their fling. He'd never said anything, and it had been so short. Blink and it was over. He knew she'd had her moments too, though he very much did not want details.

“Mets or Yankees?” Jenna asked Lacey, deploying the smile Billy used to call her “toothpaste” smile.

“Oh, I'm not much of a baseball fan at all. This is a personality profile. I work for a women's magazine. We delve into relationships, cultural trends, celebrity couples, that sort of thing.” She pulled out a pair of reading glasses to examine the menu.

Not a baseball fan...crap. That meant his biggest weapon was completely neutralized.

Jenna's smile didn't falter. “That sounds so fascinating. What an exciting job. You must get to travel all over, not just to tiny towns in rural Minnesota.”

Lacey put the menu down and peered over the tops of her glasses with sharp green eyes. “Did I catch a hint of wistfulness, Jenna? Have you traveled much?”

“Sure, I take the boys to Twins Stadium often in the summer. That's a keystone of our co-parenting.”

“How about outside Minnesota?”

She shook her head “no,” biting her lip in a sign that she was embarrassed. Billy was starting to regret that he'd put her in this position. *Japan*, he reminded himself. *Big contract*.

“You've never been outside of Minnesota?” Lacey pressed the issue. “Even when the Twins made the conference finals

last year?”

“We planned to come, but my youngest boy sprained his ankle and we had to cancel.” She held up a hand to stop any follow-up questions. “Besides, I’m holding out for the World Series. Got that, Billy?”

“Loud and clear.” He grinned to emphasize the point, and for the first time, saw Lacey react to him with something like feminine awareness.

The server arrived to walk them through the specials. Risotto something or other, a Porterhouse steak, blah blah. He loved food, but the fancy stuff was wasted on him.

“What kind of oil do you use for your French fries,” Jenna wanted to know.

“Um...I can check?” The server took a note.

“Thank you. While you’re at it, maybe you could also find out if they ever bake the fries instead. I know that seems like a misnomer, but they’re actually quite good that way.”

Billy sat back and caught Lacey’s eye. “This might take a little while,” he murmured as Jenna asked more questions—what vegetables did the medley contain, what kind of mushrooms were in the risotto. “Jenna likes what she likes.”

“Really? That surprises me. She seems like the kind of woman who doesn’t like to make a fuss.”

Oh man, this reporter was dancing close to the edge here. “First of all, whatever you think about how Jenna seems, you’re probably wrong. She can’t be categorized. Second, she’s not making a fuss. She’s making sure she orders the right thing.”

“Potato, po-tah-to.”

He added an edge to his voice. “Jenna loves food and she loves talking about it too. You should try her pot roast. It’s better than anything I’ve ever eaten anywhere I’ve played.”

“You’ll have to invite me over, then.”

Oops.

The waitress disappeared, no doubt to do her research.

“Sorry about that.” Jenna’s eyes were bright, her cheeks pink. She always got revved up when she talked about food. “Hot tip from the server, get the mushroom risotto. A fresh shipment of Shitakes just came in. And Billy, she says their blue cheese burger is flying out the door. I told her to reserve one for you just in case.”

“I’ll take it.” He smiled at her with unguarded tenderness, caught up in her excited mood.

Jenna turned to Lacey. “Risotto for you? I told the waitress I’d collect our orders while she quizzes the chef about a few things.”

“Not a mushroom fan. I’ll probably go for the Cobb salad.”

Billy watched Jenna’s face fall. Damn, that was two disappointments in one. Not just the disrespect for mushrooms, but the choice of the most boring thing on the menu.

“You’re in for it now, Lacey,” he told her. “To Jenna, those are fighting words.”

“Cobb salad is fighting words?” Lacey took off her glasses and popped them back in their case. She wore a white blouse under a utilitarian black blazer, an outfit that gave Billy no

clues to her personality. Maybe she was just all business. Fine with him.

“The mushrooms,” he murmured. “Jenna’s a fan.”

“No fighting, I promise.” Jenna held up a hand in surrender. “But did you know that there’s mycelium network growing under every inch of the earth under our feet? It’s possible certain trees use the network to communicate with each other.”

“That sounds scientifically questionable.”

Jenna drew back. “Just because it seems magical doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

Under the table, Billy put a hand on Jenna’s knee. Getting feisty with Lacey wouldn’t get them anywhere. In fact, he was starting to wonder if the reporter was deliberately poking and prodding to get a reaction from them.

Lacey took out her phone and tapped a note, then scrolled to her voice memo app. “Are you both okay if I record this interview?”

They shared a glance. Billy could read in Jenna’s eyes that she wasn’t comfortable with Lacey yet. Weren’t reporters supposed to put their subjects at ease before they went in for the pounce? That didn’t seem to be Lacey’s style.

Jenna gave a tiny nod and a shrug, and he turned back to Lacey. “Sure, that’s what we’re all here for, right?”

“I’m here for a baseball star’s tips for post-divorce co-parenting. But I’m sure you have your own agenda.”

Ouch. Well, she wasn’t wrong. *Japan. Japan.*

Lacey turned her penetrating gaze on Jenna. “You first, Jenna Cooper. Why did you agree to this interview? I checked,

and you've never been interviewed before.”

“Actually I was on TV one time after Billy got signed. I said five words. ‘I’m very proud of Billy.’ I should have skipped the contraction, then it would have been six words.” Her smile was a ray of sun shining across the table. Even Lacey reacted with a blink. Not too many people could withstand a full-scale Jenna charm blitz.

“Fair point. But you’ve never sat down for a full interview. Why now?”

Jenna ran her tongue across her lips. Billy wished the first question had come to him—it was only fair. But to butt in with his own answer would make it seem like he was a conversation-hog, or a mansplainer. Better to hold his tongue.

“Well, our situation...it’s not that uncommon. There are so many couples who are no longer together, but are still dedicated to being the best parents they can be. I think a lot of people can relate to what we’re doing, and all the challenges we face, and they might be interested in seeing how we get through the rough times.”

Wow. Good answer. He wanted to hug Jenna. Never underestimate Jenna Scarlett Cooper, he wanted to crow. *In your face, nosy reporter!*

“It’s interesting that you focus right away on the challenges and the rough times. Would you say those outweigh the good times?”

Oh shit. Jenna had set a trap for herself, and Lacey had sprung it. Was it time to step in? He opened his mouth, but Jenna spoke first.

“No, of course not. But if you wrote an article that only talked about how smooth life is after a divorce, it would

probably be pretty dull and scientifically questionable. Although I'm sure you'd make it as fascinating as possible." Another irresistible smile. Not the "toothpaste" smile, but the "we're in this together" smile.

Lacey laughed. "True enough. Readers do love drama."

Wham. Another point to Jenna. Maybe he was going to enjoy this process. Come to think of it, he hadn't spent this much time with just Jenna—without the boys—in quite a while.

"So since we all know the agenda here—drama—how about we start at the beginning? Why did the two of you end things? Your youngest child was only three at the time, is that right?"

Good moment for Billy to step in. "According to my agent, that sort of question is outside the lines. He said we wouldn't have to talk about the divorce."

"I'm asking about what led to the divorce."

"That's..." He squinted at her. "The same damn thing. We're not talking about that. It's private, and not the point. The point is how we handle our co-parenting relationship now."

Her gaze flitted between the two of them. Billy could feel Jenna's tension, and for a fleeting moment, wished he could hear how she would have answered that question. Would they have the same answer? His would be "I fucked up because I didn't have any clue how to be a husband and a father away from home for long stretches of time." Hers would probably stop after the "Billy fucked up" part.

Finally Jenna broke the silence. "I think it's fair to say that our marriage couldn't survive the pressures of a major league

baseball career.”

“That sounds like something out of a press release.”

“Yes.” Jenna nodded. “We consciously uncoupled. But I would say we left it all on the field.”

“One point. General, not baseball specific,” Billy murmured to her, out of earshot of Lacey. Those were the rules.

Lacey narrowed her eyes at them. “Fine. We’ll leave it at that for now.”

Billy’s jaw ticked. He felt Jenna’s hand on his leg, squeezing lightly to remind him to play it cool. Talking to this reporter was like hopscotching around hot coals.

But her hand felt good on his thigh, light and warm. He wished there was a way to make her keep it there, but if he covered her hand with his, she would immediately reclaim hers.

The waitress reappeared, and Jenna snatched her hand back. Damn it. They launched into another deep convo about their lunch orders, while Billy worked on regaining his cool. He stole a glance at Lacey and saw that she was jotting down some notes on her phone.

She was definitely trying to get a rise out of them. Better be careful.

Someone else brought them glasses of water, and three glasses of white wine.

“Those are from me,” Lacey said, looking up as she claimed one of the glasses. “You don’t have to drink them. I’ll be happy to pick up the slack.”

Billy pushed his toward the reporter. “All yours.”

“So it’s true. You don’t drink anymore. Do you feel that’s a factor in your post-divorce relationship?”

Why did she ask such uncomfortable questions? What sort of easy answer was he supposed to cough up?

Jenna to the rescue. “Billy was already a great father before he quit drinking. So maybe it’s a factor, but it’s not the only one.”

“A great father. Interesting. But not a great partner?”

“You’re twisting my words. I didn’t say that.”

“So he was a great partner?”

Jenna grabbed for the glass of wine and took a nice big swallow. Billy knew she didn’t drink much either, but she hadn’t quit cold turkey like him. She hadn’t needed to.

“He was a great parenting partner. *Is* a great parenting partner. That’s what we’re talking about, right?”

Nice save. Under the table, he patted her on the knee.

“We’re talking about anything that comes up.” Lacey lifted her glass and tipped it at Jenna. “Cheers.” She watched as Jenna took another swallow.

Was she trying to get Jenna drunk? Billy knew it wouldn’t take much. Jenna was a lightweight and usually needed a nap after at most two glasses.

“Okay, let’s switch gears.” Lacey slipped her glasses back on and checked her notes. “What have you found to be the most important thing in terms of successfully coparenting?”

“Communication,” said Jenna. At the same moment, Billy said, “Patience.”

Then they both switched words, almost as if they'd planned it. "Communication."

"Patience."

Lacey smiled that wolfish grin. "Final answer?"

"They're both super-important. You have to remember, Billy's gone a lot, so staying connected is a challenge. The kids need to know he's always thinking of them. Do you know about the sign he gives them every time he plays?"

"No. Tell me."

"Well, this is an exclusive. No one knows about it except the boys, but I think it's really sweet and I don't mind sharing. Do you, Billy?"

A little bit, maybe. It was something personal between him and his boys. But then again, it was aired on television, so how private could it be? "It's fine. At least once a game, when I know the cameras are on me, like during an at-bat or after a good play, I tap two fingers to my heart. One for each of my boys. They always look for it."

"It makes their day, every time," said Jenna. He felt something against his calf and realized it was her boot. She was deliberately rubbing her foot against him.

That wine must be kicking in.

"Adorable," Lacey cooed. "Our readers are going to love that."

Billy moved his leg toward Jenna to signify that he was perfectly fine with how she was touching it.

"What about you, Jenna? Did he ever do a sign like that for you?"

“Oh yes,” she began, but Billy jerked his leg to stop her before she spilled that secret. “I mean, no, not for a while. We used to...but that was a different...never mind. Next question.”

“I don’t know, I’m kind of liking this one. Our readers love romantic gestures. The name of the magazine is Love plus Life, after all. There must be something I can share with them.”

“No,” Billy said firmly. “There’s nothing.”

“I suppose I could always tell them how the two of you played footsie under the table all through lunch.”

Billy snatched his leg back to its proper position. How had she known? This reporter ought to be working on top secret investigations, not profiles. “That’s ridiculous. I have long legs, that’s all.”

“Whenever he did a post-game interview, he would make sure to use the words “love” “you” and “forever” at some point,” Jenna blurted. “That’s the secret. That’s all. We’re not playing footsie. Why would we do that? Why would you even put that in your story? Why would anyone care?”

“Love. You. Forever.” She scribbled the words into her app. “That didn’t bear out, did it?”

Jenna’s wine-flush deepened into embarrassment-flush.

“It did,” Billy said firmly. “I *will* love Jenna forever.”

“Right. Mother of your children and all.” Her snarky tone hit him wrong.

“Listen, Lacey.” He propped his elbows on the table and leaned toward her. “I love Jenna in all kinds of ways, none of which are your fucking business.”

Lacey's expression was avid as she pushed her phone closer. He saw the red button blinking. Recording. Oops.

"Jenna, would you like to add anything to that?"

Jenna's answer was short and to the point. She shoved her chair back and said, "I have to use the bathroom," and fled the table.

"You shouldn't have gotten her that wine," Billy told the reporter.

"Maybe you should go after her. I can tell you want to."

He squinted at her, wondering what the hell she was getting at. "What makes you think you know anything about us?"

"I'm good at reading people. It's part of my job. And I'm pretty sure I'm reading a romance right now. Don't worry, my readers will go crazy for it."

eight

Neither Jenna nor Billy said a word until Billy's Tundra was safely out of sight of the restaurant. Then they both spoke at once.

"Oh my God, is she going to write about me throwing up all my wine?" Jenna said.

"She thinks we're getting back together," Billy blurted.

"*What?*" Jenna looked over her shoulder, as if the reporter might be following them. "Is that what she's going to write? We can't let her do that. It'll be too confusing to the boys."

"You think they're going to read *Love + Life* magazine? Maybe in Zack's treehouse along with all his manga comics?"

She had to admit that sounded unlikely.

"They might hear about it. People gossip."

"Yes, especially in elementary school," he said dryly. He drove with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the door frame, in that casual way of people who were supremely confident in their physicality.

"Why aren't you upset about this? Wait, let me guess. You think it would help your reputation?"

Her stomach twisted. Even though she was going along with this interview, she didn't like her private life being used to support some kind of narrative. They had no control over what was going to end up in the story, or how people would react to it. To her mind, working with the media was like playing with fire.

But they were doing it for a good reason, she reminded herself. Japan. A big contract. Billy very far away. A chance to move on.

"I'm not upset because I like to pick my battles," he said mildly. "That was just the first interview. We still have plenty of time to give her another impression."

"Since when do you pick your battles? Remember the night we stayed up until midnight arguing about whether to floss or brush first?"

"I remember. Zack wouldn't go to sleep and we were both exhausted and, I don't know, it seemed really important at the time."

"Dental hygiene is always important," she said primly.

"Which is why we ended the argument with hot fudge sundaes."

"Right..." She laughed as it all came back to her. "It made sense at the time."

"Something about not going to bed angry, but both of us falling asleep on our feet, and next thing you know, I was getting out the whipped cream."

She shivered as she remembered something else Billy had done with that whipped cream.

“Anyway, I’m not that thin-skinned kid anymore,” Billy added. “I really do pick my battles now. You learn that pretty quick in the big leagues. And I don’t just mean baseball. The big leagues of life.”

She gave him a sidelong glance under her lashes. He really was a different guy now, more mature than the one she’d married. She’d fallen in love with that “thin-skinned kid.” But this version of Billy was...even more attractive? They didn’t fight the way they used to, either. But she attributed that to the fact that they weren’t together anymore, so she didn’t have to torture herself about how he spent his nights in baseball-world.

“So what do you think we should do about this situation? Nosy reporter with a narrative she’s trying to spin...it makes me nervous.”

“Just keep going. She’s very observant. She’ll see pretty quickly that we’re just two people who respect each other as co-parents. We’re not putting the band back together.”

She snickered at that phrasing. “Interesting way to put it. Are you the lead singer in that scenario? You left the band to launch a solo career?”

“Got kicked out of the band,” he corrected with a grin. “For good reason,” he added quickly.

Not wanting to get into that discussion, she turned to gaze out the window of the Tundra. The snow was falling more thickly now, collecting on the branches of the pines along the road. The forecast called for only an inch of snow, but to her it looked like more might be coming. The boys had only worn their parkas to school, not their boots.

Don’t baby them, she scolded herself. Direct quote from Zack—“Don’t baby me, Mom!”

She was about to suggest that they pick up the boys, since school was about to let out, but Billy's phone buzzed. He dug it out and handed it to her. "Who is it?"

The gesture touched her. He must trust her to see whatever popped up on his phone. That was...new-ish. Back when girls sometimes got hold of his number, a simple glance at his phone could give her a stomachache and spark an argument.

"It's from Archie at the bar."

He nodded, and she handed it over. "Billy here." After listening for a moment, he said, "Be right there," then swung the wheel around in a screeching mid-road U-turn.

Jenna grabbed onto the seat. "What it is? Bar emergency? Can you take me home first?"

"You're probably going to want to come. It's about your dad."

"What?"

"When I was at the bar the other day, Archie told me he hadn't seen your father in a while. So I went and checked on him. He wasn't home, but everything looked fine. I asked Archie to call me if he surfaced, or if anything out of the ordinary happened. Well, it did."

"What happened?" Her heart was pounding a mile a minute. The last time she'd seen her father, he'd told her to get out and not come back. He was working on a huge canvas that required all his attention and he didn't want to be distracted.

The fact that Billy had gone to check on him...she didn't know what to make of that. But she couldn't think about that yet.

"Well...he's...uh...he's having a moment."

Anxiety flooded through her. She loved her father, but he epitomized the eccentric artist. She used to live in dread of what crazy thing he'd do next. "Just spit it out, Billy. What'd he do now?"

"He's sort of..." He caught her expression. "Don't worry, it's not as bad as you're thinking. He's standing on the bar butchering Jay-Z lyrics. And he's wearing a kilt and playing an accordion."

"Is he drunk?"

"Archie says he didn't serve him anything, but he can't vouch for before he got here. He's not too worried about it, but since I told him to call, he did."

Jenna covered her eyes with one hand. "God, he's impossible. Why did you go over there?"

"Archie said you had some kind of falling out, and he hadn't seen him in a while. I just thought I'd say hello, and put my eyeballs on him. We always got along pretty well."

That was true. Her father could be quite sexist; ironic that he'd gotten stuck raising two girls.

"Well, that's kind of you, but you don't need to get involved in all that," she said stiffly. "Annika and I can deal with him."

His jaw flexed as he fixed his gaze on the road ahead. Had she hurt his feelings?

"I didn't know it would bother you," he said softly. "I'll back off."

"Well, it's not so much that it bothers me, as..." She bit her lip, not sure if she should go further. It wasn't Billy's fault that her father was a handful. He was just being thoughtful.

“Go on. I want to know.”

“Okay then. It’s my father. He asked me to stay away for a while, and it’s given me time to think about a lot of things. I spent my whole childhood dancing around his moods, trying not to annoy him while he was creating his next masterpiece. Then he’d surface and either be wonderful or head off to Deuces for a drink. Even now, he treats me like a...a kitten. Cute enough, but not especially important.”

She whooshed out a long breath. She’d never dared to say any of that to her father, and sharing it with Billy unnerved her. Dancing around people’s feelings was still her default.

Billy went quiet for a long moment. “I’m sorry. Obviously, he’s dead wrong. You are important, and you’re not a kitten. You’re more of a...”

She waited, bracing herself for some other annoying animal comparison. Mama bear, because of the boys? Porcupine, because she could send out barbs when she felt threatened?

“Phoenix,” he finally said.

“Phoenix? Rising from the ashes of a burned-down marriage?” She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. It was more complimentary than “kitten,” but it still defined her in relationship to her marriage.

“Not just that. Everything. The boys. And you built this great career for yourself out of your skill and talent. Remember when you were sure you’d be working at the donut shop when you were eighty?”

“That might have been wishful thinking,” she murmured.

He laughed. “See? You always managed to hang on to your sense of humor even in chaos. Especially in chaos.”

With her unconventional childhood, she'd learned that skill early. "We'll see how it goes when we get to Archie's." Up ahead, she could see the opening in the trees where the driveway to Deuces began.

"One more thing," Billy said as he turned down the driveway. "I hope you never dance around me like you did with your father. Whatever it is you need to say to me, you can always say it."

She bit her lip, letting that sink in. "Communication, right?"

"Right." They bumped down the gravel driveway to the roadhouse. "Listen, if you want me to drop you off so you can handle it on your own, I will. I can even leave you the truck. I'll hitch a ride back."

Her breath caught. Billy had really heard her complaint, and he wanted to accommodate her. This was why they worked so well as exes, she reminded herself.

"Thank you, but there's no need for that. In this situation, the more the merrier. That sounds bad. It's not going to be merry."

"Jay-Z's lyrics are pretty powerful," he agreed, deadpan.

She made a face at him as they pulled up outside the bar. Scanning the parking lot, she spotted the fat-tired bike her father rode in all weather. He refused to burn any more hydrocarbons than necessary, which, among other things, meant that her childhood had been on the chilly side.

The bike was fitted with two panniers so he could do his shopping. When he needed bigger items, he attached a light aluminum trailer to the bike.

For a man in his early sixties, he was extremely fit. At least physically. Still, he was getting older, like everyone, so for his last birthday, Jenna had given him an electric booster. He'd scoffed at it, but she could see now that he'd actually installed it.

So maybe he did listen to her sometimes. Just not while she was present.

They both got out of the truck. Jenna wished she wasn't wearing her nice interview clothes. The last time she'd talked her father down from a binge, she'd wound up with wine stains all over her favorite cashmere sweater.

"Want a different jacket?" Billy offered as she pulled on her wool coat. "I have a spare Twins workout jacket in the back."

She shook her head "no," not wanting to give anyone the wrong idea by showing up wearing Billy's clothes.

After a pause to send Annika a quick text, she hurried inside Deuces, which was, blessedly, nearly empty. It didn't generally fill up until Happy Hour, by which time she hoped to have her father safely in his bed. She was aware of Billy pacing behind her, letting her take the lead.

Sure enough, there was her father marching up and down the bar, a kilt swirling around his legs, an accordion under one arm.

At least it wasn't the bagpipes. Sometimes, when he got weepy, he played those, sending all the birds in the immediate vicinity into panicky flight.

"*I got ninety-nine problems,*" he was declaring to the mid-afternoon drinkers hanging out at the bar. "*But a ditch ain't one.*"

A ditch? Jenna felt a bubble of laughter well in her throat. One thing about her father, he got absurdly goofy when he'd had too much to drink. Ordinarily, he didn't talk much beyond the essentials. When he had some wine in him, he wouldn't shut up.

"Papa," she called as she came toward the bar. "What are you doing up there? These people are trying to drink their beer in peace."

Richard Scarlett spun around, his kilt flowing around his legs, confirming that at least he was wearing long johns underneath. His graying dark hair flowed nearly to his shoulders, probably because she hadn't trimmed it lately. He wore glasses with round lenses tinted pink, and had tattoos marching up his neck. They depicted a hawk on top of a pyramid on top of a turtle. If asked, he could talk endlessly about the meaning of those symbols to his personal worldview.

"I'm an entertainer," he said grandly, gesturing with the accordion. "These people need me. *Have you ever seen a crowd going apeshit?*"

Next to her, she heard Billy snort at that Jay-Z lyric. This crowd couldn't look more indifferent if it fell asleep.

"Papa, did you know it's starting to snow? Want to come down and see?"

"Snow?" He stopped and sniffed the air. "I smell no snow."

"You have to go outside to smell it. Come on, I'll show you."

Sometimes she wondered if growing up with her father had been good training for having kids. Distraction was such a useful tool.

“Who’s that there?” Her father peered behind her. “Is that Billy? Where ya been, Billy-boy?”

“Hey there, Richard,” Billy said.

“Someone help me down.” Richard marched to the end of the bar and handed his accordion to Archie.

Typical. Jenna could have predicted exactly how this would go. Billy to the rescue. But at least he was climbing off the bar now, helped by Archie and Billy.

“Thanks, Archie,” she murmured to the big bar owner as Richard huddled with Billy. “If he did any damage, I’ll cover it.”

He waved that off. “It’s not your responsibility. We’ll work it out. He painted a mural on my garage last year, I still get comments about it. He’s covered for another few months.”

“Well, thanks. And thanks for calling...well, Billy. But you can call me too, you know. Any time.”

Archie scratched at his beard. “I’ll remember that. I knew you were on the outs, so...I didn’t know you were with Billy, but that worked out.”

Oh dear. She’d better fend off any potential rumors right away. Lake Bittersweet loved to gossip. “Just a coincidence. As ex-spouses, occasionally we have business to discuss.” She caught his quick glance at her outfit, so different from her usual t-shirt and jeans. “I like to dress appropriately for that type of discussion.”

“Jenna, kiddo, you don’t have to explain a damn thing to me. Not about your dad, and not about your ex-husband.” He grinned at her widely, and she could have hugged him for his easy acceptance of...whatever. “Or about the two of them together.”

She glanced at them and felt her face heat. As Billy herded her father toward the exit, the latter kept breaking stride to jump in the air and click his heels together. It read more as leprechaun than rap star. Once again, she gave thanks for those long johns he was wearing. At least he wasn't flashing all of Archie's customers.

"Thanks again, Archie," she said as she hurried after them.

How many times had she tried to clean up her father's messes? Too many to count, that was for sure.

Every so often, the thought of escape flitted through her mind. There was a whole big world out there, and she'd never seen any of it. She'd been saving up for a trip around the world when she'd gotten pregnant. Now she had the boys to take care of—and her father, too. As difficult as he was, she'd worry about him too much if she left Lake Bittersweet. Ever since he'd told her to leave him alone until he finished his canvas, her anxiety had been amping up. This was the longest time she'd gone without reassuring herself that he hadn't forgotten to eat or hydrate or shower.

No, the truth was, she was planted here in Lake Bittersweet, and she just had to accept that.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who lived in a castle near a lake. And never left it?

Maybe, if things worked out with this contract, she'd be able to schedule a trip to Japan...then cross her fingers that it wouldn't be derailed by some crisis involving her father or the kids.

It was ironic, really, because as far as she knew, her father never worried about her. Her concern for him was an entirely one-way street.

“That’s because he’s a narcissist,” Annika always said. “They only care about themselves.”

Jenna knew it was true, but it was hard for her to remember that because it seemed so impossible—how could anyone care only about themselves? It didn’t make sense to her, so she always ended up hurt by Papa’s self-centeredness. Or she’d make excuses for it. *He’s a genius. He’s a great artist. He’s going to end up in the history books. He’s extraordinary and no one should expect him to be normal.*

But as she got older, other thoughts would sneak in. Why are you making excuses for him? Did you choose another self-absorbed man to marry? How do you break the cycle?

Well, she *had* broken the cycle. She’d divorced her baseball star husband. She’d refused to make her entire existence revolve around him and his career and his off-field shenanigans. And she’d planted a big red flag in her brain. *No more self-absorbed people allowed.*

In the Deuces parking lot, with the snow softly falling, she watched Billy patiently coax her father into his truck. He showed the same patience when he helped Bean get a splinter out of his foot, and when he listened to Zack recount the blow-by-blow plot of a Percy Jackson book. He was even patient with her while she interrogated waitresses about risotto. Patience wasn’t generally a narcissistic trait.

She’d made a mistake about one thing. Billy wasn’t self-absorbed like Richard Scarlett was. He’d just been a young guy trying to juggle a wild new life.

And she’d been a young and anxious wife unable to handle the stress of his fame.

But that was then, and this was now.

She hurried to hop into the backseat of the Tundra. Billy buckled in her father, then settled himself behind the wheel. From where she sat, she had a close-up view of the hair curling on the back of his neck. She dragged her gaze away and focused on the snow swirling around them.

Billy and I are in a new phase of our relationship. That reporter has it all wrong.

nine

After Billy told Pete about the fiasco of the first lunch interview, he recommended—after some swearing—that Billy show off his parenting chops. “Take her somewhere with you and the boys. And tell them to behave themselves.”

“You don’t have kids, do you?”

“No, I have clients and that’s plenty.”

So Billy invited Lacey to join him and the boys for an after-school adventure—ice skating on a shallow pond he knew in the woods. Lake Bittersweet never froze completely, although sometimes you could skate around the edges. But the pond froze early and hard, since it was only about a foot deep and completely shaded by trees.

She met them at the head of the trail, where he presented her with a thermos of hot chocolate and a pair of hockey skates.

“These are Jenna’s. She said you can use them if your feet are anywhere between size eight and nine. She sent extra socks in case yours are on the smaller side.”

“Very thoughtful. She isn’t coming with us today?”

“No, she’s busy.” The mycologist who had hired her to illustrate his mushroom guide had moved up one of the

deadlines, and Jenna was panicking. “Deadline,” he added, pretty sure that would get some sympathy from Lacey.

It worked. “Oh, I know all about those. I assume you’re stepping in to take some of the load off?”

“Exactly.” He smiled. “It’s all part of being an effective co-parenting team.”

Too cheesy? Too bad. They needed to make up some ground. Lacey was way too focused on potential sparks between them, and not enough on how well they worked together.

“Kids,” Billy called to the boys, who were already racing ahead down the trail. “Slow down, stay where I can see you.”

“Dad!” came their combined cry of protest. But they slowed down to more of a hop than a gallop.

Lacey zipped up her sheepskin jacket and wrapped a wool scarf around her neck. “Let’s do this. So tell me what else you’re doing to help Jenna while she tries to make her deadline. Are you cooking meals? Taking the boys to school? Making cookies for the PTA bake sale?”

“Uh...” Crap, was there a bake sale no one had told him about? He should find out. Look up some recipes. Get floury. “I’ve been picking up pizza orders like a champ.”

He caught the quick expression of disapproval on her face. Damn, she was right. He should step up his game. Pizza was the cliché single-dad fallback meal. Nothing against it—the boys loved pizza night—but he shouldn’t always rely on Jenna to make the real meals.

Tonight, he’d make dinner, he decided right then and there. And some damn cookies, PTA bake sale or not.

Jenna would be thrilled. Or horrified. It was fifty-fifty.

“No spoilers, but there’s a good chance there will be a healthy non-pizza meal on the table tonight.”

“Really? That I have to see. When’s dinnertime in the Cooper household? Six? Seven?”

Oh shit. What had he done? Could he gracefully back out somehow? He should text Jenna before any kind of dinner invite happened. But she’d told him to only call for emergencies. Which meant boy-related emergencies.

“Seven,” he said, even though they generally ate closer to six. An extra hour would give him extra time to prepare.

“Excellent. My editor had been pressuring me for a home visit. That’s when you can really see how a family interacts.”

“Great. Looking forward to it.”

He sent Jenna a quick text to fill her in, then muted his phone before she blew it up with exploding-head emojis.

At the edge of the pond, the boys were already busy lacing up their skates. Zack’s curly blond head was bent over his skates; he’d already lost his hat. Just like his mom, he despised hats. Bean looked more like Billy when he was young, brown-haired and skinny. He had a magical grin that melted hearts wherever he went, but Billy wasn’t sure he could take credit for that.

They were both excellent skaters, although Bean wound up sprawled face first on the ice at least once per session. He was so used to it that he just laughed it off. To each other, Billy and Jenna joked that he was a natural-born hockey player who’d keep skating even if he crashed through the ice.

“No one on the ice until I test it,” Billy called to them.

“Dad!! It’s fine. It’s like two inches deep.” Zack yanked his shoelaces tight.

“I don’t care. It’s also cold and ice is sharp.”

“Just because Bean—”

“Enough.”

Bean made a face at his big brother, and honestly, Billy couldn’t blame him. Being accident-prone was already no fun; to have it pointed out by your older brother was adding insult to injury.

“Just hold your horses.” Billy sat on a log so he could lace up his own skates. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt, including our guest. Best behavior, remember?”

Zack snapped his mouth shut.

“Actually, I prefer business as usual.” Lacey sat on the log next to him and worked on loosening the laces of Jenna’s skates. “No need for best behavior around me.”

Zack blinked innocently. “Dad said he’d give us ice cream if we behaved ourselves. Are you going to give us something too?”

“Zack! Extorting the reporter will lead to loss of ice cream.”

“But if *she* gives us ice cream instead...”

“Zack.”

His oldest son shrugged and abandoned the subject. “Are you really a newspaper reporter?”

“I write for a magazine. But I got my start writing for newspapers.”

“Like, news and stuff? Do you know about climate change?”

Lacey glanced at Billy, who shrugged. “It’s a big worry for him. He reads everything he can get his hands on.”

“I actually wrote wedding announcements when I started out.”

“Oh.” Zack let out a sigh of disappointment. “That sounds really boring.”

“Sorry,” Billy mouthed to Lacey, who showed no reaction to the brutally honest opinion of a ten-year-old. “Who cares about dumb weddings?”

“Your parents had a wedding. I even looked it up. There was an announcement in the *Lake Bittersweet Chronicle*.”

“You had a *wedding* announcement?” Zack shifted his weight back and forth from one skate to the other. “What did it say?”

“I don’t even—”

“It said that they got married at the ballfield,” Lacey interrupted. “The bride—your mom—wore a sky-blue sheath dress with a halter top neckline and daisies instead of a veil.”

Jenna had worn her old prom dress, which she’d barely fit into because Zack was on the way. She’d refused to spend money on a new dress. She’d refused to let him spend money on a ring. Their only expense had been the reception afterwards. Barbecue at the firehouse, courtesy of his brothers.

His heart twisted at the memory. After the shock of getting pregnant had worn off, Jenna had rearranged her entire life. She’d been saving money for a trip to see the world, but had instead spent it on a house. Thomas had helped with that too.

But Billy hadn't changed much about his life. He kept going to tryouts. Kept all his focus on his baseball career. Jenna had signed onto his baseball dreams. They'd both agreed that it was the best way to support the family. If he got a contract, they'd all benefit. In those days, she'd been one hundred percent in his corner.

It had been wonderful, glorious.

But now that a few years had passed, he could see that it hadn't been balanced. Everything had been about him. What about Jenna's wishes and desires? He hadn't paid enough attention to that, and so he hadn't deserved her love, and bit by bit, late night by hungover morning, her love had slipped away.

"Dad! Can we skate yet?"

He jerked back to attention. Lacey was looking at him strangely. "Sorry," he said quickly as he jerked his laces tight. "Just remembering how beautiful the wedding was."

"Who chose the ballfield as a wedding venue?"

"Jenna, actually. She, uh, we wanted to save money. It only cost twenty bucks to rent for an hour. We almost went over, but the minister rushed the vows and squeaked it in just in time."

They'd raced through their vows and coughed on infield dust when a wind had come through. Damn it, if he could do that wedding over, but better, he would.

"We were young," he explained to her as he got to his feet. "No money. I hadn't gotten my first major league contract yet. Those early years were pretty tough. Young and broke."

"And in love."

“Well, yeah. Very much in love. No question about that.”

Okay, enough fucking wedding talk. He rose to his feet and stumped his way across the frozen ground to the ice pond. Frozen marsh grass was embedded in the crusty ice at the edge. He could see bubbles under the clear surface. Methane, probably. He and his brothers used to light those methane bubbles on fire.

He stepped onto the ice. Rock solid. Gingerly at first, he stroked across the surface. Then he picked up speed and raced across to the other side, his whoops of joy echoing across the pond and off the tall pines standing guard around the edge. The pond was frozen almost solid.

“Come on in, the water’s fine!” he called to the kids and Lacey. The boys whooped along with him and a minute later, the three of them were spinning and racing and playing tag. Zack found a chunk of ice and they kicked it back and forth like a hockey puck.

“Next time, we bring sticks,” Billy promised. “We need to get you guys ready for hockey season.”

“There’s a girl at school who wants me to learn ice dancing with her. I told her no way,” said Zack.

“Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know. I just like going fast. I said we could just skate together sometime.”

Did Zack really have to be *so much* like him? “Going fast is always fun, but it’s not the only way to have fun, right?”

“Like what else?”

“Like trying something new for a friend. Maybe you’ll like it better than going fast. It’s worth a try, don’t you think?”

“You don’t think it would be, you know, weird?”

Ugh, was Zack already worried about what other boys thought? He never had before. Galen had taught him how to knit a couple years ago. Billy had been thrilled that maybe all the unwritten rules that hemmed guys in were starting to fade away.

“You mean, girly?”

“Yeah.”

“Zack, some of the best things in life are girly.”

Zack made a face and skated backwards away from him. “Whatever.”

Billy followed. “I don’t want you to miss out on something fun just because another kid doesn’t get it. I never would have become a baseball player if I’d done that.”

“What do you mean?”

Billy skated fast around him. “Hockey was the hot sport at the high school back then. I only tried baseball because I started hanging out with Archie. Turned out I was a lot better at it than hockey. Now all those guys who said baseball was boring are giving me shit about missing double plays. People are always going to have something to say. That’s why you have to listen to yourself.”

Bean skated by, followed by Lacey, who was windmilling her arms as she tried to find her balance. “Did I just miss a random act of parenting?”

“Yeah, want us to reenact it?”

“Please.”

He snorted out a laugh. Zack was already darting across the lake after tagging Bean “it.” No reenactments would be happening. “Sorry. Keep an eye out for more parenting, it could occur at any moment.”

Bean chose that particular moment for his traditional face-first sprawl onto the ice. Billy winced as his son slid on his belly several feet, then stopped. “Be right back.”

He pumped across the ice to his son, and kneeled next to him. “You all right, kiddo?”

Bean stuck a hand in the air with his thumb turned sideways. Billy wasn’t sure which direction he meant to point it. “I need a verbal response, please.”

“Good,” Bean croaked.

Billy realized he’d gotten the wind knocked out of him. Gently, he helped him onto his knees, then rubbed his back. Bean swiped ice crystals off his reddened face. “I tripped on something.”

“What, air?” Zack swooped to a stop next to them, spraying more ice crystals at them.

“Zack, be kind,” said Billy sharply. It was the kind of thing no one had said to him and his brothers growing up. But he didn’t want to repeat history. He wanted to make his own.

“Air can make you trip,” said Zack, ready to argue his point to the death. Someday he was going to dominate a debate team, Billy had no doubt.

“I tripped on that.” Bean pointed behind him. Billy looked over his shoulder and saw Lacey skating toward them. Then he zeroed in on what Bean was pointing at, and his heart nearly stopped. A long crack had formed in the ice, right in the

middle of the lake, where it was deepest and it took the longest to freeze.

“Stop there—” he called to Lacey, but it was too late.

With a sound like a ricochet, the ice cracked open. Lacey tried to stop her forward movement by turning just before she reached the split in the ice. But she couldn't quite manage it, and as the centrifugal force claimed her, she lost her footing. She landed on one hip, slid across the ice toward the crack, then crashed through the edge of the crack. Or at least part of her did—she managed to keep her upper half out of the water. She tossed her cell phone across the ice, as if trying to save it before anything else.

“Go back to the shore, boys,” Billy ordered his kids. “The less weight the better.”

“You're heavier than we are,” said Zack. “We'll help her. Me and Bean.”

“No. Absolutely not.” Billy got to his feet, and immediately felt the effects of the crack. The ice no longer felt solid under him. “Shit.”

“Language, Dad.”

Was that really the most important thing right now? “Lacey, the pond is quite shallow. You can stand up and try to haul yourself out.”

“Okay,” she called, her teeth chattering. She gave it a shot, but couldn't quite get her legs out of the water.

Ignoring Billy's orders, Zack darted across the ice toward her. Billy realized it might be her best hope. He was much lighter than Billy. If he got into trouble, Billy would go after him, no matter how much ice he broke in the process.

Bean started to follow, but Billy kept a firm grip on his shoulder. “You just took a fall. Stay here.”

To Zack, he called, “Light on your feet. Take it nice and easy. When you get to her, go onto your stomach and spread your weight around. Remember, it’s shallow so no one’s drowning today.”

Billy was proud to see that Zack followed his directions to the letter. Gingerly, he stretched out on the ice next to Lacey and held out his hands.

“Forehand hold,” called Billy. “Lacey, grab onto Zack’s forearm. Zack, grab hers. It’s more secure that way. Lacey, you have leverage now, is that enough to pull you out?”

“I think so,” she gasped as she fumbled one skate-bearing leg onto the ice. The skate didn’t make it easy, so heavy and clunky. But taking it off would take too much time, and then her feet might freeze.

“Nice and controlled,” he told Lacey. “Forceful movements are not your friend.”

“I think Zack is my best friend right now.” She managed a laugh through her chattering teeth. Good sign. Their arms were entwined now. Billy cursed his weight, his adulthood, the fact that he had to let his son handle this situation while all he could do was watch and yell instructions.

But it worked. Slowly but surely, Lacey was able to use the pivot point provided by Zack to swing her body onto the ice and then quickly roll away from the edge.

“You did it!” Bean jumped up and down, and another sickening crack sounded beneath them.

“Everyone to shore,” Billy yelled.

Billy snatched Bean into his arms and sped away from the crack. Every second, he expected to plunge through. He glanced behind him and saw Zack and Lacey racing toward the eastern edge of the pond. Smart move—it was the closest and they wouldn't have to cross the widening crack.

As he skated, he kept his head on a swivel, checking on Zack and Lacey until he saw them make it safely to shore.

Then, just feet away from solid ground, he felt the ice give way under him. He tossed Bean onto the shore just before he plunged ass-first into ice cold water on his way to hitting the lake bottom.

ten

Wrapped in towels, giddy from adrenaline, Zack couldn't stop talking about his heroic moment at the pond. "I wouldn't let go no matter what, even though she was really heavy!"

"Towel incoming," Jenna warned as she dried his hair. She didn't need him saying anything else about Lacey's weight. The look in the reporter's eyes as they all trooped through the door, wet and shivering, made her fear for the reputation of herself, Lake Bittersweet, and perhaps the entire upper Midwest.

Everyone had taken turns in the shower, and Jenna had emptied out her linen closet of towels. She'd supplied Lacey with a set of comfy sweatpants and a hoodie. Apparently the reporter had been too shaken up after her experience to drive, so Billy had brought her along with them.

Which meant that along with the shock of seeing her entire family wet and bedraggled, she had to remember to make a good impression on Lacey. Plaster on a smile. Bustle around making hot chocolate and distributing towels. And not, definitely not, yell at Billy for putting the kids in danger. After all, he'd kept Bean out of the water, which was a minor miracle.

“There wasn’t any real risk,” Billy muttered to her as she heated milk for more cocoa. “That pond is two feet deep.”

“You don’t know what’s in that pond.”

“What are you afraid of, a baby Loch Ness monster?”

“Bacteria, you—Hey, Lacey, are you warmed up?” She plastered a smile on her face as the reporter padded into the kitchen wearing Jenna’s slippers. “Would you like some brandy in your cocoa?”

“Oh hell yes.”

She added a splash of brandy to Lacey’s mug, but not her own. She wasn’t going to make that mistake again.

They all trooped into the living room and huddled around the fire, as close as they could manage without getting singed. Snuggled in a blanket, Bean rested his chin on his knees and glowered at the fire.

“I could have been a hero like Zack, but Daddy didn’t even let me move! And then he threw me!”

“Sorry, bud. I really am. Did it hurt when you landed? You rolled perfectly, just like I told you.” From his position on the rug, back propped against an armchair, Billy reached over to ruffle his hair. But Bean pulled away.

“Mom checked and I didn’t even get a bruise! No fair!”

“I got a bruise!” Zack held up his right arm in triumph. “From pulling in the lady!”

Jenna winced as she surveyed his arm. Then she reminded herself it could have been worse. No broken bones. No frostbite. There could still be colds or sniffles on the horizon, but she could deal with that. Any day that Bean came home

unscathed was a good one, even if his ego was slightly damaged by being a bystander to his brother's heroics.

"How are you feeling, Lacey?" she asked the reporter, who was on her second mug of spiked hot cocoa. She tried a mild joke. "Are you getting cold feet about this story?"

Billy snorted. At least he got her jokes.

"Good one." Lacey lifted her mug in a toast. "I admit this cocoa is helping. I might need the recipe."

"It's pretty simple. Make cocoa, add alcohol."

"Genius."

Jenna exchanged a glance with Billy, and saw her own amusement reflected on his face. Maybe they should have dunked Lacey in ice water and then fed her brandy ages ago.

"I am grateful to young Zack here." Lacey tipped her mug toward him and took another sip. "He really stuck with it. My hero."

Zack glowed, his hair sticking out in all directions as a result of Jenna's toweling. "I want to be a fireman when I grow up, like Uncle Thomas. They rescue people all the time."

Jenna sat down next to Bean, who was morosely sucking his thumb. He'd been growing out of that habit lately, but still went back to it in stressful moments. He snuggled against her, his warm weight making her heart ache. She wasn't sure how to make him feel better. Being the youngest could be tough—she and Billy both knew how that felt. And on top of that, his accident-prone nature made them all extra-protective of him.

"If you ask me, you're all heroes for getting through that without any trips to the emergency room. Well done, all of you." She squeezed Bean against her side. "Excellent rolling,

Bean. That's something that firefighters teach, but you already know it."

"It was so funny when Daddy threw him!" Zack crowed. "Just like, boom. Here, have a kid." He mimicked Billy's dramatic action.

"It wasn't funny!" Bean pulled out his thumb to fling those words into the world, then put it back in.

Jenna shot a glance at Billy. Sometimes these competitive brother dynamics got away from her. But they came naturally to Billy.

"It sure wasn't funny to me," he agreed. "If I missed, Bean might have gone right into the pond, or hit a log or a tree."

"Exercising your baseball skills?" asked Lacey.

"Maybe so. But it's a team sport, and so was this. It was like the perfect double play, me and Bean. Right, Bean? And you hit that landing just right."

Jenna could sense Bean coming out of his funk. He yanked his thumb out of his mouth and didn't put it back this time. "It was like flying."

"You know it." Billy put out a hand for a high five, and Bean slapped it enthusiastically.

Jenna's heart swelled. She was so grateful for Billy, so thankful that they generally agreed on things involving the kids, and that he always wanted to do his part. That was all she wanted from him. He could forget all about her and their marriage, so long as he stayed present for the kids.

She poured all of that emotion into a warm smile for him, forgetting for a moment that they had a highly observant

witness. Billy's lips quirked and he tilted his head to acknowledge her unspoken message.

Her gaze caught on his mouth and a thousand kisses flashed through her mind. Young voracious kisses, punctuated by laughter and fumbling under clothes. Sexual kisses, the intimate kind you shared when you knew how to please someone. Blissfully hopeful kisses, like the first married kiss on that ballfield in the park. Profound kisses, such as when each boy was born.

So many kisses.

And here they were, sitting on opposite sides of the living room, a legal partition separating them.

It wasn't just the legal division, she reminded herself. That was just the official part. Behind that was the anxiety of reading about the clubs, the parties, the baseball groupies. The pain of listening to Billy lie about them.

There final blow was a whispered conversation on the back porch out of earshot of the kids, just after photos of Billy were posted on a popular sports blog called *The Dugout*.

In the photos, he was surrounded by girls doing tequila shots with him. "The Billy Club lifestyle," screamed the headline. "Play all day, party all night. How long until he burns out?"

"They're all over me, it's not like I chase after them," Billy kept saying.

"Can you swear to me that you've never done anything with any of them?"

That pause. That fatal pause. That flicker in his eyes. The way he couldn't quite meet hers as he shook his head. All of it like a dagger to her core.

"I didn't think so. I can't live like this, Billy. I can't do it."

"What do you want from me?"

She wanted so much. She wanted him to quit drinking, to deal with his emotional issues, and to be a husband who didn't cause her pain.

"Out. I want out."

"You must be accustomed to handling injuries in the family," Lacey was saying. Jenna startled as she dragged herself back to reality. Living room. Fireplace. Ex-husband. Reporter.

"With a baseball player husband and two active boys, I mean." Lacey lifted her eyebrows at her.

Jenna cleared her throat. She had a role to play here, and it wasn't to relive the past. "Billy's been lucky so far." She crossed the fingers on both her hands. "He's only been on the DL twice during his career."

"You keep track?" Lacey tapped a note in her ever-present iPhone. It had survived the incident with only some new scratches on the screen.

"Of course I keep track. Not the way I used to," she confessed. "I used to watch or listen to every game. I don't have that kind of time anymore, thanks to these two." She gestured at her boys. "But we do watch quite a few games," she added. "And we see several in person every season."

“We get to watch in the players’ box, it’s so cool!” said Zack. “They have food and everything.”

Jenna made a little face, since that box was her least favorite part of attending games. She always felt out of place among the wives. Not that anyone was nasty or rude, but she was generally the only ex-wife there, which was awkward. The others didn’t know what to say to her, or treated her as if she’d come down with some fatal disease called divorce. As if she represented the worst possible thing that could happen to a baseball wife.

Then again, it could just be her imagination. As someone who’d spent her whole life in teensy Lake Bittersweet, Minnesota, much of it being raised by an eccentric genius artist, it didn’t take much for her to feel out of her depth.

“You didn’t enjoy the players’ box?” Lacey asked.

Jeez, how did she manage to catch every little nuance? That woman was damn good at her job.

“Of course I did,” she said with all the pep she could summon. “But I usually preferred to be closer to the field. The box is more about socializing. When I go to a game I like to watch the game.”

“Really? Are you a baseball fan?”

“Of course!”

“Jenna knows more about baseball than your average hardcore fan,” said Billy.

“Because of your husband?” Lacey asked, already jotting that down in her notes. “Ex, that is?”

“I was already a fan before Billy and I got together. It was because of *Field of Dreams*, she explained, feeling a little

sheepish. “I saw that movie about fifteen times. That’s how I fell in love with the game.”

“So you liked fictional baseball.” Lacey smiled as she took a sip of her cocoa. That brandy was doing its job, making her softer, more relaxed. “The games are a different story. They can be kind of slow, no?”

Maybe not *softer*.

“Slow?” Jenna shook her head. “That’s only because so much strategy is going on. My sister and I used to try to guess what the players were saying and thinking during those long pauses. Of course we’d make up things like, ‘that’s the last time I eat liver for breakfast, I can still taste it every time I burp.’ Like, ridiculous things. We had no internet and my dad hated TV except for baseball games. So we figured out how to entertain ourselves.”

She drew in a breath, surprised that she’d rattled on so much about that. Looking around, she realized that her entire family was listening.

“You never told us that, Mom!” Zack said, almost indignant, as if he was supposed to know everything about her.

“I never talked about that?” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “It was silly.”

“It was hilarious.” Billy stretched out his legs and leaned back on his elbows. “Like a comedy routine. With voices and everything. I laughed my...butt off listening to them. I’ll never forget the first time I played opposite one of the players they did the voices for. I kept hearing Annika’s voice going on about how itchy that new laundry soap was and how he was dying to scratch his balls.”

Both kids burst out into howls of laughter. Jenna bit her lip as she stole a glance at Lacey. She and Billy weren't particularly careful about language around the kids. He was a ballplayer, after all, and had been known to curse like a pirate. Not that "balls" was a dirty word...or was it?

One of her biggest parenting challenges was that she knew her own upbringing had been...odd. She didn't know the "normal" ways of doing things, so sometimes she overcompensated. Like when she preplanned every lunch bag for the next month. And sometimes she let things slide that other mothers might not permit.

Whatever. She had two boys and they knew what balls were. So sue her.

She caught a wink from Billy, and they shared a secret smile.

"You're doing great," he always used to tell her, from their very earliest days of being parents. He'd always been a cheerleader like that. He'd never made her feel like she didn't know what she was doing...possibly because he felt even more at sea than she did. Out of their respective childhoods, she was happy that at least she'd grown up in one house—the castle by the lake—with an artistic if unpredictable father who gave her and Annika lots of creative freedom.

He might have been neglectful, but he didn't push alcohol on them.

"I understand Annika lives with you?" Lacey was asking. "I'm hoping for a chance to interview her as well."

"That's totally up to her." But Jenna already knew that idea would go nowhere. Annika didn't approve of any of this. "But

yes, she lives here. She works a lot of night shifts. She's a nurse."

"And she's an important part of your co-parenting system, is that right?"

"She is. Ever since..." She glanced at the boys. They soaked in everything the adults said, so she always watched her words when discussing anything to do with her and Billy. "She's lived here about three years. It's very helpful to have her around. School pickups, play dates, that kind of thing. Plus, she's fun, right boys?"

The boys nodded through their yawns. Billy got to his feet and poked at the fire with the ironwork poker her father had made during a passing interest in welding.

"And Billy, how is it for you having your ex-sister-in-law around? I can imagine there might be some tensions, or areas of disagreement."

Damn that woman. She really had a knack for poking at sore spots.

"Never," Billy drawled. "Annika loves me and supports me a hundred percent. She even asked me to sign the photo she has pinned to her dart—"

Jenna interrupted him by jumping to her feet. "I'm taking Bean up to bed," she announced. The reporter might misinterpret Annika's particular brand of teasing. "Come on, Kiddo. You're completely beat. I wouldn't be surprised if you caught a cold out there." She bent down to scoop her youngest into her arms.

"Zack, you too." Billy set down the poker and offered his hand to Zack, who grabbed onto it and hauled himself up like

a rock climber. “You’ll probably dream about ice rescues and daring acts of heroism.”

The last thing Jenna saw as she carried the drowsy Bean from the living room was the speculative expression on Lacey’s face. What kind of notes was the woman writing? Just like with those ballplayers on TV, she could write the script herself.

It’s a scene of cozy domesticity right out of a movie. But what sort of movie? Is it a disaster movie in which the audience is left wondering who will need rescuing next? Is it a psychological cat-and-mouse game between a divorced couple and the dogged reporter there to uncover the truth behind the facade? Is it a romcom with a sappy happy ending when a deluded couple discovers they’ve been doing divorce all wrong? Or is it a good old-fashioned sports redemption movie?

Jenna was still chuckling to herself as she came out of Bean’s bedroom. Just recently, Zack had clamored for his own room, so she’d moved her own bedroom downstairs. She got more privacy there anyway, not that it mattered with the sorry state of her love life.

“What’s so funny?” Billy whispered as he closed Zack’s door behind him.

“I was just thinking it would be a funny premise for a horror movie. Reporter out for revenge after one too many things go wrong during an interview.”

“You have a morbid streak, you know that?”

“I’ve been told. It gets me through the day.”

With a slight smile, he tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The touch was so gentle, her breath caught. “Then I’m

all for it. I would be anyway, because it's one of the things I dig about you."

"Oh really?" She knew this was a dangerous line of conversation, totally against the Rules for Divorce, but she couldn't resist. "Any other dig-worthy qualities I should know about?"

His slow smile broadened. "Fishing for a compliment?"

She flushed, which always happened when she got embarrassed. But hers wasn't a dainty pink kind of blush, it was an out-of-control blotchy reddening that took over her face like a rash.

"That's fine, I've got plenty of them. I'd tell you more, but your face might get so red it spontaneously combusts." With a grin, he dodged as she swiped at him.

"That'll teach me to fish for compliments. All I get is insults."

"I wouldn't say it's an insult. It's an observation. I think you might be as red as a Cardinals cap right about now." He touched her cheek lightly.

She swatted his hand away, even though she knew that he was deliberately provoking her, and she couldn't help smiling at their ridiculous banter. It was a nice release from the stress of trying to be on their best behavior in front of Lacey.

"Maybe I should cool down by crashing into an ice pond like a big old hippopotamus," she taunted.

"Oooh, burn." He clutched at his heart. "I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

"Not while I'm around." She felt both lightheaded and lighthearted, and also filled with fizzy desire. She and Billy

were right next to each other, with almost no space separating them. If she was honest with herself, she wanted to be even closer. If she made a drawing of this moment, she'd put champagne bubbles all around them. Or lightning bolts of sparks.

A noise from the bottom of the staircase caught their attention in mid-goofing around. Jenna looked down to see Lacey passing by the stairs, glancing up at them with those observant eyes. She jumped away from Billy as if he was on fire.

Or maybe it's a porno. Tagline: there's no sex like forbidden sex between two exes.

eleven

Billy took the call from his agent during his morning jog. Thin gray clouds skittered overhead, and dirty snow crusted the edges of MooseJaw Road. These days, instead of running in the direction of Archie's bar, he sometimes went the other way, towards Richard Scarlett's property.

Someone had to keep an eye on the man, and it seemed like something he could do to ease Jenna's mind. He'd reported that the Hermit was back in the studio, doing his thing, working on an enormous canvas.

"Hey, Pete. Whatcha got for me?"

"Good news and bad news."

"The universe needs balance, huh?"

"What?"

There was never any point in getting philosophical around Pete. "Nothing, go on. Bad news first."

"We need a new plan. The profile isn't going to cut it."

"You've read it?" His heartbeat ticked up, although that might have been because he'd just hit the two-mile mark. Lacey Delaney had left town a few days ago and he and Jenna had been bracing themselves for the worst.

“I weaseled an early copy.”

“Let me guess, we come off like idiots. I nearly drowned the reporter and Jenna drank too much wine and threw up.”

“It’s not that. She wrote it so it seems like you’re getting back together. Like some kind of sexed-up romance novel. Heated gazes and all.”

Oh God. Jenna was going to be furious. “That’s better than calling me Billy Club, right?”

“Only if you’re actually getting remarried. Otherwise it looks like you’ll flirt with anyone, including an ex. Are you getting remarried?”

“Of course not. Jesus.” He sighed, puffs of breath forming in the cold morning air. “What’s the good news?”

“It sounds like you and Jenna are having fun. Happy for you.”

“*That’s* the good news?” He really was screwed. “I knew that woman was trouble. She was out to get us from day one.”

“That’s not how it comes across. I think she liked you. She just has a romantic way of looking at things. Like this line. *They think I don’t know they’re touching each other’s legs under the table. I don’t know what they’re trying to communicate to each other, but I can practically feel the sparks they generate. Enough to set their cozy little town on fire.*

“Jesus.”

“I’m telling you, it’s practically soft-core porn. Even *The Dugout* got hold of it. Did you see their last post? Let me just read the first line here. ‘Billy Cooper and his ex-wife talked to a women’s magazine about co-parenting, but it probably didn’t

go the way they expected. Steamy reunion rumors are already circulating.”

Billy winced. “Aw, crap, I’ll call *The Dugout*. I know those guys. They’ll fix it.”

“Too late. We need a new plan.”

“Please tell me you have one.”

“I have some ideas. There’s the Helping Hands awards ceremony coming up.” Billy had poured hours of his time—and a hefty amount of donations—into that charity, which helped sick children who needed special care at the Mayo Clinic. “You and Jenna could attend together.”

“But won’t that make it look like we’re getting back together?”

“And you’re definitely not? Because I could work with that.”

“No, goddamn it!”

Sure, sometimes it felt like he and Jenna were in sync in a way they hadn’t been in a long time. Sure, he still felt a core attraction that would probably always be there. And sure, they still supported each other in all things. But she’d made it very clear there was a line she’d never cross again. He just had to accept that.

Feeling overheated, he took a break from jogging and paused by the side of the road. He ripped his hoodie off, dragging his t-shirt along with it. He gave himself a moment to cool off before putting it back on. A car whizzed past, slinging a rooster tail of dirty snow at him.

“I got it. Make it a family affair,” said Pete. “Jenna brings her sister, you bring a brother or a friend. You’re trying to

emphasize the point that you're a family guy and that your wild days are behind you."

"That sounds like it could easily go wrong. People are still going to speculate."

"As long as we can show the Japanese a united front, we can dismiss everything else as gossip."

"Jesus, Pete, all I want to do is play ball. Why does any of this matter? All they should care about is my fielding percentage and the fact I got more homers than any other shortstop in the league last year." He pulled his shirt and hoodie back on and resumed his jogging.

"And they do. They're very interested in you. But you have to understand that they want players who will contribute to team discipline and harmony, not disrupt it. That's why they haven't fully committed to making an offer."

"I'm a great team player."

"And if we can show that you're a great team player in your personal life as well as on the field, we'll be in the perfect position to maximize the contract. What they're offering, well, in Japan the salaries are generally lower than in the MLB. But a new corporation just bought this team and they're pouring money into it. This opportunity won't come along again any time soon."

Billy was starting to wonder if he should take the Florida idea more seriously. Florida was much closer than Japan and the Rays probably weren't as picky about things like the state of his ex-marriage.

But he didn't want to go to hot and humid Florida. He was a Minnesota boy acclimated to cold and snow. He'd take a blizzard over humidity any day of the week. Once he'd run his

own stats in comparison to the humidity readings during each game. Once that humidity got over sixty percent, his performance cratered. Moving to Florida might destroy his career. He was actually surprised that the Tampa Bay Rays hadn't done that same research.

Or maybe they had, and they wanted him for his headline-grabbing past. Flashy players did well down there. Too bad he didn't want to be that guy anymore.

What guy did he want to be, anyway? What kind of guy *was* he? He used to talk about that kind of thing with Jenna back in the old days. "I want to make my fucking mark," he'd say. "I want people to know who I am and what I can do."

They used to love dreaming and planning together. The elaborate fantasies they'd shared about the future...well, some of them had come true. He was a bona fide major league baseball player with his name in the headlines. They weren't always the good kind of headlines, but still.

"I'll talk to Jenna about the awards dinner. It might be hard with the boys in school."

"It's on a weekend. No excuses."

"Fine. Any other ideas?"

"Yeah. Men's magazine. I thought a woman's magazine might be a better fit, but maybe I had it wrong. The focus would be how a ballplayer stays in shape during the offseason. You could talk about how you've seen the light and ditched the clubs for smoothies and weight training. I can picture the headline. From Billy Club to Billy Hot Tub."

Billy snorted. "That doesn't sound any different, but I know what you're going for."

He slowed down as he reached the gravel driveway that led to Richard Scarlett's place. There was a mailbox with the name Scarlett painted on it in perfectly executed red curlicue lettering; Jenna's handiwork. She'd painted it in fifth grade, spending hours on the hummingbird perched in the letter S.

"Listen, I have to go. But I'm willing to try the men's magazine angle. It couldn't be any worse, right?"

"Kid, that sounds like famous last words. But I'll work on it. Make sure you go to that awards dinner. United front, remember. Teamwork. Dedication. There's a word in Japanese. *Wa*."

"I know all about *wa*. I did my research." *Wa* was something the Japanese teams really valued, and meant something along the lines of "team spirit." Sacrificing individual glory for the sake of the team, more or less. He could do that. Except he was sacrificing individual glory for the sake of his family. Did that count as *wa*?

"That's my boy. That's why you're my favorite client."

"Which you say to all your clients."

"Eavesdropping now?"

"Educated guess."

"Smart one, too, which is why you're my favorite client." He dropped from the line, which was how he always ended calls.

Billy checked the mailbox and found it stuffed full. It hadn't been emptied in a while. In fact, the mail carrier had left a notice that, in official-ese, meant they weren't going to cram any more stuff into the box and Richard would have to drive to the post office for his damn mail. The joys of rural life.

He collected the unwieldy pile of mail and jogged toward the house, dodging iced-over ruts as he went. This driveway needed some work. Maybe this coming summer he'd get someone to come out and spread some gravel.

Yeah, like he'd remember something like that while he was playing in Japan. That was the problem with being away for long stretches. So many things just slipped through the crack.

A light was on inside the house. Kitchen. Billy jogged around to the back door and knocked. A few moments later, Richard Scarlett swung open the door, an espresso pot gripped in one hand. He wore a green velvet bathrobe and a huge grin.

"Billy Cooper. What are you up to this fine December morn?"

Billy blinked. This was a whole different Richard than the one he'd helped off the bar at Archie's. "I was just jogging past, so I picked up your mail. It's getting a little full in there."

"Brilliant. You can put it there." Richard gestured toward the trash can and padded across the stonework floor to the stove. He wore thick felted slippers, which were absolutely necessary in the winter with that insane floor. Jenna had told Billy she'd dropped a grand total of twenty-three glasses/mugs/dishes on that floor as a kid, and none of them had survived. "Thanks for your help the other day."

So he remembered. Billy hadn't been sure he would. Sometimes, Jenna said, he never referred to such incidents again.

"No problem. Happy to help."

"You're a good kid." Richard set the espresso pot on the burner of the old Wolf cast iron stove. Everything in this kitchen was old. Richard didn't believe in modern appliances.

He liked things vintage verging on antique. “Jenna’s a smart girl. She made a good choice.”

Should he remind Richard that they were divorced? Nah, he decided. It was nice to momentarily bask in his approval. Lord knew it probably wouldn’t last. But when he was in a good mood, Richard was a charmer.

“Do you need to get back to your run or do you have time for some coffee?” he asked.

Damn, this was really getting strange. Richard was usually so caught up in his work that he barely noticed when someone stopped by. He certainly didn’t initiate chats.

“I can take a short coffee break.”

“Good.” With an approving nod, he set out an extra mug. Handmade pottery, like every dish in the place. Richard hated anything mass-produced. “Because I want to talk to you.”

Uh oh, that couldn’t be good. He was just an ex-husband. What could Richard possibly have to say to him?

Maybe it was baseball related. The man was a fan, after all.

“If it has to do with the Twins, you should know that I probably won’t be with them much longer. The new manager likes the new guy and my contract is up.”

“This has nothing to do with baseball. It’s Jenna.”

Oh shit. This could be a minefield. “Shouldn’t you talk to her directly?”

“I’d rather communicate with you. She gets upset with me so easily. You know how she is.”

Billy set his jaw. If Jenna got upset with her father, no doubt she had good reason. He didn't want to pretend otherwise, but he also didn't want to get on his ex-father-in-law's bad side. He gave a noncommittal grunt.

"She hasn't been here since the other day, with you. There's something I want to show her. She can bring a casserole or two with her too. She used to make sure my freezer was stocked for when I was working on a complicated piece and had no time to cook."

Had he ever cooked? Jenna told stories of Annika poring over cookbooks trying to learn how to roast a chicken. "You want me to tell Jenna to go back to bringing food over for you?"

"Exactly." Richard clapped a hand on his shoulder, then swung around to take the espresso pot off the burner before it bubbled over. "I knew I could count on you."

"Sorry, I'm not going to get in the middle of that."

Richard turned back around, his thick eyebrows coming together in a bushy frown. "Why not?"

"That's her business, not mine. I don't tell her what to do."

"Because of that 'divorce'?" Richard used actual air quotes along with that question.

Billy laughed. "I didn't tell her what to do before the divorce. Besides, didn't you tell her to keep her distance until you finished your painting?"

Richard tossed his silvering, shaggy hair away from his face. It was streaked with cobalt blue left from his last painting. "It's finished. That's what I want to show her. It explains everything. If Jenna would come look at it, she'd understand."

“Understand what?”

“Everything.”

Were all hermit genius painters so cryptic? “You can’t narrow it down a little?”

Richard waved a hand through the air. Billy noticed that it was more gnarled than it used to be, after more days and years of clutching a paintbrush. “She always had questions. I couldn’t answer ‘em. I’m a painter, not a talker.”

That sounded like a copout to Billy, but he didn’t want to offend his ex-father-in-law by saying so. He took a stab in the dark.

“Are you talking about questions about her mother?”

Richard inclined his head.

Jenna’s mother, Sue Ellen, had been very young, much younger than Richard. When Jenna was little, Sue Ellen fell in love with someone else and ran off to be with him. Richard had been so furious he’d trashed some of his own paintings. That had apparently scared her so much she hadn’t fought for custody—or at least that was the story Jenna had pieced together. Richard never talked about it. Sue Ellen had disappeared into her new life and rarely reached out to Jenna and Annika.

He knew that her choice had made Jenna question her own worth. Why had it been so easy for Sue Ellen to walk away from her daughters? He also knew that she’d been terrified of making the same mistakes her mother had made—marrying too young, marrying the wrong man. Jenna had always sworn she would never disappear on her kids the way Sue Ellen Scarlett had.

Generational curses. He knew all about those.

He knew about neglectful fathers too. He'd rather break his own throwing hand than be one of those.

"If you have something to tell Jenna, you should try to do it. With words, not just a painting."

Richard grunted. Then he scratched at his beard. Then shifted his shoulders inside his robe. "Just tell her my painting is done. She can come see it."

"She's busy with her own artwork. They moved her deadline up."

From Richard's blank stare, he knew the man knew nothing about his daughter's project. He shook his head. "The mushroom guide? *Mushrooms of the Upper Midwest?*"

Richard's instant loss of interest grated on Billy's nerves. "I should get back to my run now. I'll tell her your painting is done."

"Wait."

Richard poured steaming black coffee into an espresso cup. The fragrance filled the old farmhouse kitchen, making Billy's mouth water. He was very much ready to get out of here and find some breakfast.

"Mention chicken piccata too. And that meatloaf of hers."

Oh my God. Billy bit back the million retorts he wanted to make. *Pick up the phone and tell her yourself. Why is it always about you? Why aren't you more proud of your incredible daughter? Why are you so selfish?*

Billy jogged away from the house, wondering what it would be like to grow up with someone so focused on themselves. What had that done to Jenna? Was that why she'd been so willing to put Billy and his dreams first?

And what about him?

Was he really, underneath it all, still the same selfish kid he'd been when he and Jenna had gotten married? He wanted to believe that he'd changed, but here he was, asking Jenna to do things like impress a reporter and attend a boring awards dinner.

If he could do it over again, would he pass on the baseball contract?

No, of course not. They'd both been so excited, and rightfully so.

Would he behave better during his off hours? Would he put more effort into making sure Jenna's dreams were center stage too? Would he be more responsible, more considerate, more *there*?

He would. He knew he would. His heart ached with that certainty. Too bad there were no do-overs in life.

twelve

It didn't happen often, but when Jenna got the chance to lose herself in her illustration work, she became almost another person. Someone so free and powerful that she could fly across the sky with pure grace and bliss. She could immerse herself in the precision and perfection of the object she was drawing—because she'd learned that every piece of nature had its own specific and particular beauty. Her job was to convey it as accurately as possible, but in a functional way—this is the stamen, this is the plant's vascular system, and so forth.

Really, she could have used a botany degree, but she'd never been interested in college. So she'd taken online courses and learned everything she needed to get the job done.

Her current subject matter was a Newfoundland Chanterelle, which she loved for its whimsical burnt orange shape, like trumpets played by forest gnomes. Normally she would be lost in the work of tracing its flared rim and delicate understructure. But she was in a rush because she had to finish this drawing before she and Billy left for the Helping Hands Awards.

On the other side of her closed office door, she could hear the boys banging around. Annika had no interest in traveling to the Twin Cities for a dinner on one of her few nights off.

Instead she'd volunteered to stay with the boys. They were all busy building an elaborate indoor blanket fort that took up the entire living room and half the dining room.

Jenna jerked as something thumped to the ground. This was hopeless. She wasn't going to do the Chanterelle justice if she couldn't concentrate. She'd just have to do it when they got back from Minneapolis. Number of things were getting put off until then. For instance, cooking chicken piccata for her father. She just hadn't had a chance with her looming deadline.

Billy had piqued her curiosity with her father's message about "everything" becoming clear. At the same time, it irritated her that the message had come through her ex-husband. Some things just never changed.

As she was putting away her pencils, a knock on the door made her jump. Billy's low voice filtered through the door.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we should get on the road early. It just started snowing and they keep bumping up how many inches we're going to get."

With a last regretful look at her work, she stepped back into real life. Which for various strange reasons suddenly included an appearance at a fancy awards dinner.

She opened the door, and her heart did its usual skip and jump at the sight of Billy. When was it ever going to stop that silliness?

Billy wore jeans and a thick sweater that she recognized as one of his brother Galen's early works. Its heathery gray shade turned his eyes to slate blue and made her itch to grab her pencils.

"I'm all packed, let me just grab my stuff."

“It’s already in the car. Annika told me where it was, and where I could put it.” He grinned wryly. “Guess she didn’t want to come?”

“No. But Thomas and Galen are coming, right? We still have the united family front happening?” She really didn’t want to appear as a “couple.” The last thing she wanted was to end up back on the local sports blogs that loved to gossip about “Billy Club.” *The Dugout* would jump all over it. She could just imagine it—*Billy Club Back for Strike 2?*

“Oh yeah, they’re both onboard. Carly’s staying with the baby, but Brenda’s coming. Galen even got his hair trimmed again.”

“He did? Maybe I should have done something with my hair...” She pulled off the tie that kept her hair out of her face while she was working. Flipping up the ends, she spotted a number of splits. “Hang on, let me grab my scissors—”

“Your hair is perfect. Don’t change a thing.”

She eyed him through the pale fringe of her hair. “You just don’t want to be late.”

“And you’re procrastinating.”

“I’m doing this for you, remember.”

“Fine. Cut your hair if you like. Put it in curlers. Give yourself a perm. Whatever you want. Your needs come first.”

She let her hair fall back onto her shoulders and narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you mocking me?”

“Actually, I’m not. You’re right. This whole shebang is for me, and if you want to do something with your hair before we go, you should be able to.” He brushed his hands together. “I’ll

even help. What do you need, a mirror? Scissors? YouTube video?”

He *was* serious. He really was trying to put her needs first—without her even asking him to. Maybe Billy Cooper had changed, or at least grown up a little.

She suppressed a wistful sigh, and decided that a few split ends were easier to handle than Billy getting close enough to help her trim her hair. “Forget it. I’ll put it into a twist when we get there. No one will care.”

“It’s up to you.”

Really? Honestly, she could get used to this. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Jenna gave the boys their goodbye hugs, though she had to crawl under a sheet draped between the couch and the TV cabinet to do so.

Annika emerged from another branch of the fort, over by the coat rack. “Have fun, you two.”

Jenna gave a double-take. She detected no hint of her sister’s usual watchfulness. And now that she looked more closely, she saw that her sister’s cheeks were pink and she looked...hmm, was that happiness?

“It’s not really about fun,” she said primly. “This is work. This is all about the Mayo Clinic children, and about showing the world what a good guy Billy is.”

Annika snorted. “Okay, but Galen said there’s an open bar. He seemed most excited about that.”

“I hope they stocked up on club soda and lime.” Billy put on his most virtuous expression. “As everyone knows, I haven’t had a drink in two years.”

“There’s other ways to have fun at a fancy dinner, and if I know Billy Cooper, you’ll find those ways.”

Jenna shared a confused glance with Billy. Was that an insult or a comment on Billy’s zest for life?

“That’s a compliment,” Annika said quickly. “In case it didn’t sound like one.”

“Have to admit, I wasn’t really sure.” Billy scratched at the back of his neck.

“You know, I think I have resting bitch voice. I always sound like I’m being nasty even when I don’t intend to be.” Annika broke into a wide smile, the sort that transformed her face from interesting to incandescently beautiful. “In case I’ve never said it, I’m really proud of you for quitting drinking, Billy. Keep up the good work. Go you. Ugh, now I sound sarcastic again. Somebody stop me.”

Taking mercy on her sister, Jenna gave her a hug. “We should get on the road if we’re going to beat the snow. Have fun with the fort. Text or call if you need anything.”

“All good, don’t worry about us. If anyone tries to invade our fort, we’re armed to the teeth and they will pay with their...” She shifted smoothly as she caught Jenna’s expression. “Armed with pillows. And we’ll be fine. Don’t worry about a thing.”

As they rolled out of town in Billy’s Tundra, Jenna said, mostly to herself, “I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“Of course they will. What’s up with Annika?”

“What do you mean?”

“No verbal jabs. A full-on smile. Is she getting laid?”

She swatted him on the leg before she could think better of it. Hard, hard muscle. Sweet lord. “Please do not speculate about my sister’s sex life.”

“Fine. I’ll stick to yours.” He slid a wicked sidelong look her way.

“Also off limits and against the Rules of Divorce. Let’s just have quiet time in the car.” It was the kind of thing she said to her boys.

“Only if you we can play ‘the wheels on the bus go round and round’ over and over until our ears bleed.”

As they both laughed at the memory, a flurry of snow came at the windshield like a whirling dervish of ice crystals.

“Maybe quiet time is a good idea,” Billy muttered. “At least until I get a feel for the roads.”

They both stopped talking and concentrated on the road ahead. They only had to drive for an hour and a half until they reached the small regional airport where they’d hop on a plane to Minneapolis. That flight would be less than an hour, and get them to the dinner in plenty of time. But they might have underestimated the trip back.

It suddenly occurred to her that they could very well get stranded somewhere along the line.

“I hope flights aren’t getting canceled,” Billy murmured after a while. “Can you check?”

After a quick phone call, she informed him that all flights were a go. “It’s not snowing as much up there, the plows are able to keep up with it.”

The snow kept falling in thick curtains of white. The windshield wipers raced to catch up, their frantic movements

almost hypnotic. Jenna was very glad that Billy was driving. She felt completely safe with him behind the wheel. If she was driving, her neck and shoulders would be a solid ball of tension.

They both slumped in relief when the snow eased up just before they reached the Bemidji Regional Airport.

“Nice driving,” she said as he pulled into a parking spot.

He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. Her soft heart got the better of her. The poor man still had a flight and a dinner ahead of him.

“Here, let me.” Steeling herself, she reached for the back of his neck and massaged the tight tendons. He dropped his head and let her work. She felt his muscles relax under her strokes. She remembered exactly how hard he liked his neck rubs—not too deep, but not gentle either.

In the back of her mind, she knew this was asking for trouble. Right at the start of a whole day and possibly a night together, she had no business having physical contact with him. But he’d done such a good job getting them safely to the airport, and it felt so good to touch his skin again...

Stop. She ordered herself. And snatched her hand away. “We’d better check in.”

Billy’s phone buzzed. While he answered, she collected herself and pulled on her coat. She had to remember to be on her guard during this trip.

“Shit,” he muttered as he ended the call. “Thomas and Galen have to cancel. Thomas got stuck in a ditch and they’re trying to get his truck out.”

“Oh no! Is everyone okay?”

And then it sank in. “Oh no,” she said with an entirely different intonation. “So much for the family event. Should we cancel?”

Billy scrubbed a hand through his hair, then rested his forearms on the steering wheel. “I can’t. It’ll look bad if I don’t show up at this point. It would seem like a ‘fuck you.’ But if you don’t want to come, I can call a cab or an Uber to take you home.”

“I’m not driving in the snow with some random stranger.”

“You can take my truck. I’ll find my own way back. If you leave right now you can probably beat the worst of the snow.”

Drive back alone, with the snow accelerating into blizzard territory? Not a chance.

She weighed the situation, finding few to no options. “What will you do if I don’t go?”

“Go solo. It’ll be fine. Don’t worry about that.”

“Couldn’t you call someone, you know, last-minute?”

“Pull out the little black book, you mean?” He gave her a lopsided smile. “No. I couldn’t.”

She wondered what he meant with that very definitive “I couldn’t.” That was different than saying, “I won’t.” “Why not?”

“Because I don’t have one.” His tone of voice told her they’d reached the end of that topic. “You could come to Minneapolis and skip the dinner,” he suggested.

“So it doesn’t look like we’re back together?”

“Right. You said that was what upset you about the profile. I wouldn’t want to make it worse. But if you come, I’ll try to

keep you out of photos. And I'll make it clear that we're simply supporting the cause as a united family."

"So you want me to come, even though it's just us?"

A flash of surprise crossed his face. "Of course I do. If nothing else, it'll be a lot more fun if you're with me. You have no idea how tedious these dinners can be."

She smiled despite her better judgment. "I'm not sure you're supposed to have fun hanging out with your ex-wife."

"Sorry, is that specifically against one of your divorce rules?"

"I don't believe it's mentioned."

"Then as far as I'm concerned, we can do whatever we want. So are you in or out?"

She was in.

"I didn't buy a new dress—with your money—for nothing. You realize it cost more than my prom slash wedding dress? Prices sure have gone up."

They grabbed their things and headed into the terminal.

"You got that dress at the thrift store," said Billy. "That's not a good comparison. But it sure was beautiful."

"If you liked that one, wait'll you see the one I just bought." She winked at him as they hurried through the softly falling snow. "It's to die for, and not just for the price tag. Which might actually and literally induce a heart attack, so consider yourself warned."

"I don't care how much it cost. Hey, you know if this new contract works out, you can buy a dress like that every week."

As if that was what she'd spend that money on. Besides, Billy always left one very important thing out of calculations like that.

What if he remarried and started a new family?

Or rather, *another* family? She knew that he would never disappear from their family, but he was free to have more children some day. If he did, even his abundant resources would be stretched more thin. Why did he never raise that possibility?

Billy was a catch, after all. *Two points for a baseball reference. Or is that a fishing reference?* She shrugged, continuing her line of thought. Not only was he a ballplayer, but he was one of the good-looking ones who got their photos used on BookTok and Instagram thirst posts. He was fit, strong, smart...and that was just on the surface.

Not many knew about the layers underneath, his struggles, the money he sent to his mother, the way he always came through when anyone needed something from him. He was a jewel. He'd always been a jewel, but in a rough and gnarly state when she'd met him. Now he'd been polished by the tumbling stream of life and his underlying good nature shone bright—at least to her. Ever since he'd stopped drinking she'd begun to see him differently. Before that, she'd been able to dismiss him as Billy Club, the reckless party boy. Not anymore.

On the plane, she pretended to fall asleep, and then actually did sleep. By the time they made it to the suite that he'd booked in the hotel where the dinner was being held, she was wide awake again.

“It's just for changing,” he assured her. “I thought there were going to be more of us.”

“Good thinking.” She ignored the luxurious bed peeking through the open door to the bedroom.

“But as you’ll notice, there are two bedrooms, so even if we get stuck here overnight, you won’t be stuck with me.”

His smile was rueful. Her heart was a jackrabbit. *You traitor*, she lectured it. *Get a grip.*

“I’ll take the big one,” she told him. “I have more stuff.”

“No argument. We should head downstairs in about an hour.” He checked his phone. “Oh shit. They finally got Thomas’ truck out of the ditch, but there’s a solid six inches of snow already. And it’s not slowing down. There might be two feet before it’s done.”

“I guess I’d better get used to this room.”

“Sorry.” With his hands in his pockets, that sweater enhancing his eyes and the planes of his face, he was flat-out delicious.

“You don’t have to apologize for a snowstorm. I’ll call Annika.” She whisked herself inside the bedroom she’d claimed, and rested her back against the closed door. Her pulse was jumping. *Shit shit shit.*

A night in a hotel room alone with her ex. Lacey might have to write a whole new article after this.

thirteen

In life, as in baseball, sometimes you had to just laugh at the way things turned out. Like the time he'd fielded the perfect double play ball and fired it off to the wrong base. Or the time he'd bobbled an infield fly and then tripped over it in the dirt. Or the time he'd been distracted by a Billy Club sign in the crowd and gotten nailed by a single to the chest.

That was exactly what this situation was—a single to the chest. But he couldn't let it knock him off his feet the way that one had. He had to shrug it off. Play on. Adapt.

Both of the suite's bedrooms had their own bathroom. When he heard Jenna's shower go on, he figured he should do the same. As the water coursed over him, he tried not to picture Jenna in *her* shower. Was she humming, the way she used to? Soaping her smooth curves? Had the scar from her c-section faded away? What about the scar on her scalp, from when a fishing hook had gone awry? He'd rushed her to the Urgent Care because the amount of blood that clotted her blond hair made him lose his shit.

When they'd closed it up with nothing but a butterfly bandage, she'd teased him for his panic. He'd been nineteen at the time, and that might have been the moment when he realized that he loved her.

He soaped his private parts, wishing he could take the edge off the semi-arousal he'd been experiencing ever since Jenna had rubbed his neck in the truck. He'd be a more responsible platonic companion if he could get some release. But somehow it felt wrong to jerk off when Jenna was right there in the same suite.

What if *she* was pleasuring herself? Maybe she'd taken down the shower wand and was directing the flow of water between her legs. And maybe she'd slide her hand down there too, find her own nub in that soft nest of hair. Rub herself until her body trembled and her nipples turned a deep blood-flushed rose. Maybe she'd touch them. Squeeze them. Run the water over them until they were hard and peaked. She'd have to bite her lip to stop the moans. And when she came, she'd...

Fucking stop it.

He came out of his trance to find his hand on his cock. It was rock hard and hot to the touch. Shit. There was no way he was going to get his erection under control with Jenna right next door. He'd have to just bang it out.

He came hard into his fist, his other hand braced on the shower wall, his jaw clenched. *Taking one for the team*, he told himself. If he was distracted by wanting Jenna, bad and risky things could happen tonight.

Anyway, maybe his little fantasy had been right, and she'd done exactly the same thing? He knew she still responded to him physically. That was why he'd been so surprised when she rubbed his neck. She was usually meticulous about not touching him.

Not that he'd complained. No one had ever been able to soothe away his post-game aches and pains like Jenna. Not even the team trainers. She knew exactly how to touch him

and she had a sensitivity that he responded to on some kind of molecular level.

Out of the shower, he vigorously towed himself off, lecturing himself the entire time on not crossing any boundaries with Jenna. Their post-marriage relationship worked because they respected each other's boundaries. If he ruined that, it could take a long time to rebuild the trust they'd established. And that would have cascading consequences he didn't even want to think about.

Do not mess around with the most important thing in your life, he told himself. And no, it's not fucking baseball.

Once he had himself in firm control, he dressed in his tux—Dior, purchased on the advice of his agent who told him that there would be galas and fundraisers in his future and that he needed to be prepared.

Then he went into the common area of the suite and stopped dead.

Jenna stood between the TV cabinet and the couch, messing with the clasp of a necklace. Her head was tilted down, her hands fumbling at the back of her neck, and she made it look so graceful that she could have been a statue.
Woman Donning Necklace.

Her position gave him a quick minute to soak in her appearance without her noticing. She wore a sleeveless sheath dress with a heart-shaped neckline that left her delicate collarbones and shoulders bare. Its color was a shimmery misty green with a metallic sheen. He hoped it had some kind of slit, because it hugged her body so perfectly that he wasn't sure she could walk in it. Maybe that was why she was barefoot. Her toes were digging into the carpet as she struggled with the clasp. She'd painted her toenails silver.

That time he'd painted them for her and they'd gotten carried away and unknowingly spilled the entire bottle on the bedroom floor while he was licking her to a shrieking orgasm

...

Stop that. Why were these memories sneaking into his brain like this? After so many years of carefully keeping them at bay?

He cleared his throat. "Do you need help with that?"

She glanced up. She'd put on makeup—mascara and something shimmery on her eyes that made them shine like the moon. "No. I got it. I just have to..." She twisted her face as she focused on the clasp. His fingers itched to help her. It would take him half a second, and he could just ignore the soft skin and the baby hairs that always curled up at her hair line.

Boundaries, jackass. Boundaries.

"Got it!" Triumphant, she dropped her arms and straightened her dress. "Is this dressy enough? I have shoes," she added quickly. "Not going barefoot."

"You look perfect." No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep the burr of desire out of his voice. She caught it, too. He scrambled for a fix. "Unless you're planning to wear your snow boots. Then I might worry."

"What else would a small-town girl from Lake Bittersweet wear?" She skipped to the door, where she'd left her boots, and jammed her feet into them. As if performing for a photographer, she kicked one foot behind her, then shifted to the other, adding various comically sultry expressions to her poses.

He was laughing by the time she was done, which was much better than lusting. "It's the untied shoelaces for me."

“Oh, you want me to tie them? We don’t bother with that where I’m from.”

She toed off the boots and bent to pick up a pair of elegant high heels, dangling them from one hand. “I want to wait until the last possible second before I put these on. My feet aren’t used to them. I’m just hoping they don’t bleed.”

“I can carry you down to the ballroom,” he offered.

“Yes, that will definitely stop any rumors about us. By the way, how are we going to handle that? Should we sit at different tables? Or the same table, but not next to each other?”

He didn’t like either of those ideas. He wanted her to be close by so they could survive the tedium together. “That would be suspicious, like we’re trying to make a point. Let’s just...don’t do anything a couple would do. No touching.”

“No eating off each other’s plates.”

“Right. No sharing a single strand of spaghetti.”

She held up a finger. “Unless all they serve is a single strand of spaghetti. I reserve the right to not starve myself.”

“Fair enough.” For what he’d paid for the tickets—all five of them—they’d better serve more than one piece of spaghetti. Then again, he might not mind if Jenna’s pretty lips were on the other end of it. She’d applied lip gloss that shimmered along with her dress. They looked plump and enticing and...

“Is there something on my face?” she asked, already lifting a hand to check.

“No. No. You look good, that’s all. I’m not used to seeing you with makeup. I’m...adjusting.”

Self-conscious pink flooded her face. “You look good too. Nice tux.”

“Thanks. It’s the same one I wear at every event I have to dress up for. Everyone’s sick of it.”

“I doubt that.” She picked up her clutch and a silvery wrap that she’d left by the door. “Shall we?”

“Let’s do it.”

“Wait! Let’s take a photo first, so we can send it to the boys.”

She came to his side and they both smiled for her phone, which, by long-ago established habit, he held because his arms were so much longer. She sent the selfie to Annika’s phone, with a request to share with the kids.

She pinged them back immediately. Jenna flashed the screen at Billy to show him. *HAWT!! Where’s the others?*

Uh oh. Annika wasn’t going to be excited to hear that he and Jenna were on their own. Jenna left her on read and tucked the phone into her clutch. She probably didn’t want to explain the situation to her always protective older sister. “I think I’ll put my shoes on here so I can practice on the way down. Can you...”

He took her wrap and clutch from her so she could sit down and slip her shoes onto her feet. After she stood up, she staggered a few steps toward him, then grabbed onto his arm. “Shit. I forgot how to do this. I think the last time I wore heels was high school prom.”

“I mean...you wore them for about ten minutes. Then you danced in your socks.”

“I didn’t wear socks to prom. Those were tights.”

“Oh, I remember. It was hell getting them off you in the truck,” he teased as she tried to right herself.

She made a face at him as she straightened back up. “I just realized we have a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“I can’t be hanging on to you all night. That will give the wrong idea. But I also might fall on my face if I don’t.”

“Safety first,” he said virtuously, offering his arm again.

“No.” She wagged a finger at him as she walked back and forth on the carpet. Still wobbly, but gaining confidence. “I can do this. Annika and I used to play dress up and practice being career women with high heels.”

“Not models?”

“No. Why models? I always played an international diplomat and Annika played a CEO.” One heel caught in the carpet and she caught herself just in time before twisting her ankle.

“Walk it off, walk it off,” he encouraged her, as if they were at batting practice and someone had just gotten hit with a pitch. “You got this.”

“This isn’t the Olympics,” she snorted.

He shifted into dramatic sports movie mode. “You’ve trained your whole life for this. All those early-morning practices. All those late-night lifting sessions.”

“Don’t forget the carbo-loading,” she said through her laughter.

“That’s right. It all leads up to this moment. This is when champions are forged and names are written in the history

books.”

“Stop! You’re making me laugh too much.” She wobbled perilously for a moment. He winced, wondering if he should dive to her rescue. But she steadied herself, stood tall, and glared at him. “That wasn’t fair. Now let’s get down there before I get a blister.”

He offered his arm again, for support, but she waved him off. “No touching. No drinking. No...coziness.”

He squinted at her.

“You know what I mean. We behave like two people who used to be connected but who aren’t anymore. Like...” She searched for a comparison as he handed over her wrap and clutch. “Like you said before...members of a band that broke up in the seventies over drug use.”

“Hey. I object. No drugs were involved. What if they broke up over creative differences?”

“Fine. Creative differences it is. Everyone wanted their own solo album.”

He opened the door for her. The heels gave her so much height that her hair brushed his nose as she passed under his arm. It smelled like lemons and honey. “But they’re getting back together for one more show,” he said as he followed her down the hallway to the elevator.

“But all the same creative differences still exist, as shown by their solo work, which shows they went in opposite directions.”

“I wouldn’t say opposite,” he murmured as the elevator doors opened. “I’d say complementary. You’re the Lennon to my McCarthy. The Stevie Nicks to my Mick Fleetwood.”

The discussion continued while the elevator carried them to the ground level. “You could be the Beyoncé to my Destiny’s Child,” she said thoughtfully. “They still sing together sometimes, but it’s mostly Beyoncé in the spotlight.”

“Not bad. But you’d be the Beyoncé.”

“Why me? You’re the one everyone wants to see.”

“Any Midwestern mushroom, tropical butterfly or boreal lichen scientist would consider you the star.”

Her eyes widened. “You remember all my contracts.”

“Of course I do.”

Why was she so surprised? She seemed so touched that for a moment, he thought she was going to kiss him. Then the doors opened to welcome more awards dinner guests into the elevator.

He caught appreciative glances from the two women who’d walked in, but barely noticed because the men were openly admiring Jenna in her mist-green dress and her graceful updo. She noticed too, and edged closer to Billy, as if she wasn’t used to attention from strange men.

She probably wasn’t, since Lake Bittersweet was filled with people she already knew, except in the summers when she was busy with the boys. It didn’t seem fair, now that he thought about it. He met new people all the time, including women. How was she supposed to meet someone new?

On the other hand, selfishly, he wasn’t mad about it. If Jenna got involved with a new man, he wasn’t sure how he’d handle it. Things would definitely get more complicated. Even the thought made his stomach tighten with...sadness? Regret? Wishes for another chance to get things right?

“Billy Cooper?” said one of the women, her eyes filled with warm excitement. “I heard you were coming, but I never imagined I’d be in an elevator with you.”

“See? *You’re* the Beyoncé,” Jenna whispered. “I might have to call you Queen B from now on. You don’t mind, do you?”

He grinned down at her. He’d been absolutely right. Jenna was going to make this event much more fun.

fourteen

Jenna knew very well that the best-looking man at the Helping Hands awards dinner was by her side. That wasn't just her opinion, either. It was cold, hard, very obvious fact. She didn't need all those flattering glances and surreptitious up-and-down scans to confirm it. She also knew that many of the people checking out Billy must be curious about the woman he was with.

She lifted her chin and kept a smile on her face. She was Jenna Scarlett Cooper, and just because she hadn't hit a grand slam lately didn't mean she wasn't a Beyoncé in her own right. For instance, with her last illustration, she'd hit the *Morchella esculenta* out of the park.

She also resisted the urge to step closer to Billy, or hold his hand, or take his arm, or any other gesture that could be read as "claiming him" or even just "dating him."

This was a joint appearance in support of a worthy cause. That was it.

The first stop on the gauntlet was to pose for the photographer. They carefully kept several inches of space between them as Jenna delivered her most formulaic smile.

"This is Jenna Scarlett, my former spouse," Billy told the photographer for his notes. "All my donations are in both of

our names, so I asked her to come support the Helping Hands organization along with me.”

“You said former spouse?” A woman shooting video stepped alongside the still photographer.

“That’s right.” Billy smoothly shifted to address her instead. “We’ve always presented a united front on the most important things, and this cause definitely qualified.”

“Nicely done,” Jenna murmured as they wound their way past linen-draped tables to the one closest to the stage. A few other members of the Twins were already seated, and there followed a flurry of back slaps and hellos and man-hugs. The only awkwardness was between Billy and the backup shortstop, Pedro Carro. He introduced his wife, who looked even less excited to be there than Jenna. Maria looked utterly bored with the whole event, even her husband.

The players and their dates were all kind to Jenna, and no one questioned her presence. Still, she felt out of place and wished she could take the edge of discomfort away with a glass of white wine.

But she’d sworn to avoid alcohol after the disaster with Lacey, so club soda and lime it was.

Servers in snappy black uniforms zipped through the ballroom delivering plates to each guest. Rosemary pork and scalloped potatoes. A vegetable medley with yellow squash and broccoli. There was no chance to mind-meld with the chef or the server, and she wouldn’t want to draw attention to herself anyway. So she picked at a roll and wondered what Annika and the boys were doing right now. Had they abandoned the blanket fort and put on a movie? How much snow had accumulated? Was the power staying on?

She pulled her phone from her clutch and checked the weather. Good Lord. A foot of snow had already fallen. Maybe she could take the boys sledding tomorrow. There was a good sledding slope within walking distance, so they wouldn't even have to wait for the plow trucks to finish up.

"Foot of snow," she whispered to Billy. He was busy buttering a roll and exchanging trading rumors with the player sitting next to him.

"Good thing I booked a room."

The player—Randy Barnes, first baseman from Edna, Oklahoma—overheard. "Y'all are staying over? I'm only asking in case y'all want to host the afterparty."

"No," Billy said firmly.

Jenna couldn't help laughing at Randy's pleading pout. "Trying to make trouble, Randy?"

"Always and forever. Look, don't mind me. My ex and I can't even say 'hello' without arguing over who should say it first, or who said it better, or what hidden meaning they might have put in there. My hat's off to you two. I'd rather take a rattlesnake to a dinner like this than my ex."

"I'm with you on that." The conversation broadened as another player joined in. Marco Perez, outfielder from Oaxaca. Even though she'd never met him, Jenna knew all about him. She knew all the players because she still kept track of the team out of habit.

"You aren't even married," Billy pointed out.

"I still have exes. Many, many exes. All my exes live in Mexico. I like to keep a border between us."

“No exes in Canada?” Jenna asked, amused by his lighthearted style. “That’s the border we’re closest to.”

“Too close.” Marco shuddered dramatically. “I cannot risk it.”

“Exes aren’t so bad. Are we?” She nudged Billy, who sat up straight and answered as if he’d just been called on in class.

“No, dear. Of course not, dear. Exes are the bestest.”

Everyone laughed and Jenna pretended to throw a roll at him.

“I think it’s absolutely fantastic that you get along so well,” a stunning woman across the table chimed in; the supermodel wife of the star pitcher, Dwight Booker. Chelsey, that was her name. She spoke with a slight British accent, and already looked buzzed from visiting the open bar. “Maybe some marriages simply aren’t meant to be.”

Jenna felt her hackles rise. It was one thing for her to decide that, entirely another for a stranger to say so.

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Randy. “That’s what they got prenups for.”

Chelsey shuddered. “Don’t mention that word around me.”

That got a laugh from Dwight, who seemed to enjoy his wife’s bluntness.

“I assume this handsome hunk didn’t leave you high and dry when he left?” she asked Jenna as she leaned across the table. “I’m sure you deserved every penny.”

“We’re...it’s...that is...” Jenna stammered as she tried to figure out a diplomatic, Minnesota-nice way to say “mind your business.”

Dwight came to her rescue. “That’s private, Chels. Let them be.”

“Does anyone really have a private life these days?” Chelsey waved a carefree hand in the air. “Everyone knows everything. Billy gets it. It goes with the territory of being a star.”

“But I’m not a star,” Jenna pointed out. “I’m just a girl from backwoods Minnesota.”

Chelsey’s sultry gaze swept her up and down, then wandered to Billy. “Your sexy ex certainly is.”

Her teasing smile gave Jenna an uncomfortable flashback. It had always amazed her when people flirted with Billy right in front of her.

Maybe Chelsey was someone who flirted almost automatically, as part of her supermodel persona. It had been so long since Jenna herself had flirted with anyone. Should she take some notes? *Lean forward so your target can see down your shirt. Make every comment sound like a sex invite.*

Chelsey whispered something to Dwight, and he glanced away, hiding a smirk.

Were they talking about her and Billy? A horrible memory struck Jenna. That time on the back porch when she’d confronted Billy, and he’d hesitated before saying he hadn’t cheated...she’d always known that he was keeping something from her.

But something else had bothered her, too. Whatever his secret was, had the team known? Had any of the players’ wives? Did Chelsey know? Was that why she kept giving Billy those knowing little glances?

Her heart raced with the memory of those old worries. She'd worked hard to get a grip on her anxiety. She'd met with a counselor a few times, and learned certain breathing techniques that helped. What were they again?

She was inhaling a slow breath when Billy squeezed her thigh under the table.

"You okay?" he whispered in her ear. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

His touch grounded her. She snapped back to the current moment, to a charity dinner and an ex-husband she trusted. "I'm fine. Just...thinking weird thoughts."

"Like what? I always enjoy your weird thoughts."

She lowered her voice to a hiss. "I can't talk about it here."

"So, weird and inappropriate?"

Did taking notes on flirting qualify? "Quite possibly."

His low laugh felt like velvet across her nerve endings. "Gotcha. We can talk about it later."

She stole a glance toward Chelsey and saw that she was watching them whisper to each other with a speculative expression. "Don't look now," she muttered to Billy. "But is Chelsey watching us? And why?"

"How am I supposed to tell you that if I don't look?"

"Standard three-step protocol. You wait a few minutes, then stretch, then accidentally let your eyes go that direction."

He smiled at that reference to their old people-watching-at-parties technique. Then followed the three steps perfectly.

"Who cares if she is?" he said when he was done.

"Ha. I knew it."

“I think she’s just jealous of how good you look in that dress.”

She snorted at the thought of a supermodel being envious of her. “Oh really. That’s what you think is going on?”

“Sure. It makes you look like Venus rising up out of the ocean.”

She gave him a light push with her shoulder. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Flatter me. Unless it’s about my parenting or my botanical illustrations. That’s fair game.” She stole another glance across the table and saw that Chelsey had moved on to flirting with Pedro Carro. Maybe she had a thing for shortstops.

“Okay, you look like Venus rising from the laundry hamper,” said Billy. When she gave him a glare, he winked at her. “Come on, how am I not supposed to compliment you? I appreciate you coming tonight and giving it a hundred percent.”

“You mean you appreciate that I wore something that doesn’t have Sharpie marks or moth holes in it?”

“That too.” He grinned at her with so much affection and understanding that her breath caught. “Mostly, I just appreciate you. Look, it’s time for the speakers already. The time is flying, thanks to you.”

The lights in the ballroom dimmed as the organizer took the stage. The darker it got, the more aware Jenna was of Billy’s big body next to hers. There was a time when she’d loved him so much that she’d been completely attuned to every change in his body—an injury he hadn’t talked about,

the beginnings of a cold, emotional stress. She'd loved him with every particle of her being.

Letting him go had been the hardest thing she'd ever done in her life. But also the most necessary. After they'd signed the divorce papers, she'd finally been able to breathe. Her mind had cleared. But her heart had been shattered.

Now things were so much better between her and Billy. She could sit next to him without tormenting herself about the women eyeing him. She didn't have to worry about what he was doing when she wasn't around. It wasn't her business anymore.

She had to give him credit too. He'd done everything he could to make the change seamless for the boys and for her. Not once had he made her feel guilty or somehow to blame, even though she'd initiated the split.

She...well, she loved him for that. A different kind of love. Not the all-consuming physical and clingy kind. The kind that respected the other person's autonomy.

With a sudden wave of affection, she reached for his hand under the table and squeezed it. His grip was strong, his skin warm and dry, the shape of his hand so familiar that she wanted to kiss it.

He glanced down at her in surprise. "Thank you," she whispered. "I appreciate you too."

He lifted her hand and did exactly what she'd just been thinking about doing. He pressed his lips to it in a kiss.

fifteen

As soon as his lips touched her hand, Billy knew something was different. He and Jenna knew each other about as well as two people could. They'd been through so much together—passion, family, heartbreak—but this...fizzy wildness coursing through his blood was something he hadn't felt before. It was deeper, more layered.

Irresistible.

A flash had gone off right when he kissed her hand, but he refused to worry about it. The ballroom was dark, and he was by no means the most famous person here. Why would anyone bother to take photos of them?

They let their hands fall back under the table, but didn't let go of each other. He had no idea what it meant, and he didn't want to think about it. They were just holding hands, after all.

And kissing. But just her hand. True, they'd agreed on no physical contact, but that was before he'd felt the texture of her skin against his lips and...

Jenna slipped her hand away from his. It felt empty and cold without her. Where was his favorite glove Lancelot when he needed it?

“Ladies’ room,” she explained to the table in general. She headed for the exit, which required her to round the table, specifically the part of the table where Chelsey sat. She was hurrying, moving too fast. Billy opened his mouth to tell her to slow down because of those damn shoes when she wobbled and started to fall. She saved herself by grabbing onto Chelsey, who let out a startled yelp. Billy shot to his feet, all set to dive across the table to help her.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.” Jenna tried to stand up, then slipped and grabbed onto her again. “It’s these shoes. I’m not used to them. Are you okay?”

One strap of Chelsey’s dress was halfway down her arm and one of her extensions had fallen from her crown of a hairstyle, but she managed a sultry smile anyway. “Quite all right, darling. Are you?”

Jenna finally made it back onto her feet. Her face glowed pink with embarrassment. “Incredibly mortified, but uninjured. I’m really sorry.”

“You’re adorable. Now get to the ladies’ room, it must be an urgent situation.”

“Yes. The urgent situation is that I’m sort of a clumsy idiot.” Jenna left, walking as carefully as if she’d just been stopped for drunk driving.

Billy sat back down, wondering if he should follow and check on her. But Randy leaned in close to tell him about a conversation he’d had with Pedro, the other shortstop, who was quite sure that he’d be the starting shortstop in the spring.

“What are you going to do?” he whispered. “You gotta do something. You can’t just let him take your spot.”

“I don’t want to talk about that shit tonight. I’m trying to have fun.”

“Yeah, I can tell, man. You brought the right gal for that. Love me some Jenna.”

Billy’s glare took the first baseman by surprise, and he dug into his potatoes without another word. It took Billy by surprise too. It shouldn’t matter to him what Randy said about Jenna, so long as it was respectful.

Jenna took quite a while in the restroom. She was probably trying to get her face to return to its normal color. Her blushes could last a while. He figured she was also checking on the kids.

When she got back, sliding into her chair, he whispered, “How are they?”

“They’re watching *Lilo and Stitch*. I told them we wouldn’t be back tonight, but I don’t think it made much of an impression.”

“How are you? Still freaked out about how good you look in that dress?”

“No. I looked in the mirror. I look pretty good for a backwoods girl.” Her sassy smile caught him off guard.

“That’s what I’m talking about.” He patted her knee. Damn, now that they’d started with the hand-holding, he couldn’t keep his hands off her.

She didn’t object to his compliment, even though it was against the rules. Nor did she push his hand off her knee. That was also against the rules. Apparently the rules were going out the window, and he was fine with that.

So he left his hand on her leg, enjoying the pleasure of silk fabric and firm flesh underneath. No one could see, after all, and it was totally innocent, just a gesture of support after her embarrassing pratfall practically into Chelsey's lap.

Or maybe not so innocent if you asked his cock. It was stirring to life like the naughty bit that it was. Touching Jenna had always had that effect on him, even after they split up. Mutual desire had never been their problem.

The rest of the dinner passed in a warm dark haze. Out there, speeches were being made and awards were being delivered. In their little bubble, none of that even registered, except as a cue to applaud, or stand, or otherwise take a break from the sweet touch that connected them.

It wasn't sexual, he kept telling himself. It was affection, appreciation, mutual enjoyment.

But along with all of those wonderful things, an undercurrent of arousal hummed between them. There was no mistaking it, not just on his end, but Jenna's. He felt the flutter of her pulse against his wrist, and sensed the quickened pace of her breathing.

This is dangerous.

But it didn't feel dangerous. It felt natural. It felt wonderful. It felt as if they were taking quiet steps into a new world. Almost like one of the meadows they'd stumbled across in the early days when their favorite dates were hikes in the woods. He'd first kissed her in one of those meadows, surrounded by wild geranium and ragweed. Her sweet vibrant body had melted against him, and everything inside him had shifted.

This is risky.

But why? They were two grown adults who knew their own minds. They knew themselves and they knew each other. Anyway, he wasn't thinking about sex. Okay, part of him was thinking about sex, but he knew better than to listen to that part. He just liked being close to Jenna. He'd missed it. He'd never found that feeling of closeness with anyone else.

Jenna didn't end their delicious contact until her phone buzzed toward the end of the dinner. She flashed the screen at him.

Call me asap. Not urgent. Just asap.

She slipped away from the table again. After a moment, he decided to follow her. If the asap was related to the storm, he wanted to know about it. He found her in the hotel lobby, speaking intensely into her phone.

She looked up when he came close and pulled the phone away from her face. "Eighteen inches of snow. And the power went out."

"Shit. They have plenty of firewood, right?"

The house depended on a propane heater, which needed power to run. The backup was the woodstove. He always made sure the wood shed was stocked, but this early in the winter there wasn't generally a need. He couldn't recall what state it was in.

"Annika says they should be fine. She's not worried. But she might get called in to work. That happens a lot when there's a power outage. The streetlights go out and people get into accidents. They know she's not supposed to be on call this weekend, but if there's a real need, she might have to go in."

"Is she on the line?"

Jenna nodded and handed the phone over to him. “Hi Annika. Listen, if you need to go save lives, you should do that. Just give Galen a call. He’ll ski over right away, no questions asked.”

“Will do. I guess it’s a lucky thing not all the Cooper brothers achieved escape velocity.”

“Maybe so. Are the landlines still working?”

“Zack, can you check the landline?” After a moment, she said, “Yes. Still up.”

“Good. There’s also a generator on the back porch. If you need that for any reason, it should be ready to go. There’s a hundred-foot extension cord you can snake through a window. Just make sure the exhaust doesn’t blow into the house. I keep enough fuel in it for at least forty-eight hours of continuous operation.”

“You do? When did you arrange all that?”

“I always have,” he said briefly. Did she really not know that he handled things like that for the family? “If for some reason the water stops, there are twenty gallons of drinking water in the back of the pantry. There’s also an emergency kit there. Satellite phone, flashlights, emergency radio. Silver crosses.”

“*What?*”

Jenna gave him a little shove, though he could see she was amused.

“Kidding. Sorry to say, but the house is totally unprepared for vampire attacks. Or zombies. I’m still researching how to prep for those.”

“Cute. When are you guys coming back?” He caught the worried undertone in her usually one hundred percent confident voice.

He caught Jenna’s glance. As much as it came naturally to him, he didn’t want to take charge unilaterally. “What do you think, Jenna?” He held the phone so they could both hear.

“We could try to get as far as Bemidji tonight, if the flights aren’t canceled.”

“But even if we made it to Bemidji, the roads may not be plowed yet. We could be sleeping in my truck.”

“God, don’t do that. Stay where you are.” Annika sounded resigned to the situation. “I’ll tell the clinic not to call me. Don’t worry about us, we’re fine. We’re having fun.”

Jenna’s hand was in his again. From the tightness of her grip, he knew she was stressed by being so far from the boys during a storm. “We’ll try for first thing tomorrow, or as soon as the roads clear. Sorry about this, Annika.”

“It’s fine. No stress. I’m more worried about the two of you and the classic stranded-in-a-hotel-room situation.”

“Two beds, two bathrooms,” Billy said. “Two grown adults.”

She answered with a rueful laugh. “Good point. You don’t need me telling you to behave yourselves there in the big city.”

Jenna snorted. “Oh, we’re behaving ourselves, all right. I already accidentally molested a supermodel and nearly broke both ankles.”

“Take care of her, Billy. No front page headlines, please.”

“You got it.”

The call ended, and Jenna slipped her phone back in her clutch.

“She keeps being extra-nice to me.” Billy rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “It’s throwing me off.”

“I’m telling you, something’s up with her. I’d say she’s in love, except I’m not sure how it happened. There’s this one man she met this summer...” She trailed off, eyes shadowed, her thoughts clearly going back to the storm. “They’ll be okay, right?”

“They have heat, backup electricity, water, plenty of food. We’ll be back tomorrow. Try not to...never mind. I know you’re going to worry. But they’re going to be fine. It’s an adventure they’ll talk about for years, the night they got snowed in with Auntie Annika.”

Jenna nodded, as if she was trying to convince herself he was right.

The sound of applause floated from the ballroom, followed by shuffling feet and chairs being pushed back. “Want to beat the crowds?”

When she nodded, he took her arm to hurry her towards the elevator. Right away she stumbled—those cursed high heels—so he swooped her into his arms and dashed for the elevator. She gave a soft shriek of surprise, then said, “Go, go, go...” as if he was sliding into first base instead of between the doors of the elevator.

They made it just in time before the hordes exited the ballroom.

“Nice!” Still in his arms, Jenna offered him a high-five. “Did that count as a baseball reference, the ‘go-go-go’?”

“Absolutely. Two points to you.”

“You didn’t strain anything, did you? That was an all-out sprint with no warmup.”

“Oh, I was warmed up.” He grinned down at her and winked to take some of the heat out of his comment. It didn’t really work. Warmth flowed between them like smooth liquor down a thirsty throat.

“You can put me down now,” she said a few moments later, as the floors flicked past on their way to the higher-level suites. He set her down on her feet, saw her wobble, and decided he’d had enough of those damn shoes.

“Stay right there.” He crouched at her feet and undid the strap of the first shoe. “Lift your foot.”

She rested her hand on his back while she followed his command. He slid off that shoe, then did the same with the other one. With a sigh, she squished her stocking feet into the carpet of the elevator. “Thank you. The nightmare is over.”

He stayed where he was because she was still holding onto his back and he loved the feeling of supporting her, of being there when he was needed.

All he’d ever wanted was to be the right man for her, he realized in a flash. But he hadn’t known how to *be* that man. He hadn’t known how to be a man at all, really.

The attention, the sudden fame, the money...it had confused and distracted him. It wasn’t until he stopped drinking that he’d been able to see things more clearly, to understand himself. The divorce had made him really think about some uncomfortable truths. Like...he’d been selfish and not completely honest and he’d hurt Jenna.

Slowly he got to his feet. Jenna’s head tilted as she tracked his movement. He stroked a lock of hair behind her ear, then

another one. Her eyes closed halfway with the catlike pleasure of being stroked.

Did he know how to be a man now, the right man for Jenna? He believed in his heart that he did. But he never wanted to hurt her again.

He dropped his hand and faced the door, because if he kept his eyes on her, who knew what would happen.

sixteen

No matter where she went—restroom, lobby, elevator—Jenna couldn't escape the sense that something was changing between her and Billy. She'd tried to fight it. She'd fled to the bathroom and given her reflection in the mirror a stern lecture. She'd mentally made anatomical drawings of the gilded pinecone centerpiece on the table.

None of it was any defense against the tide of attraction rising between her and Billy. Not just attraction...connection.

She had no idea where this was going to take them. Part of her wanted to trust it to carry them off to someplace magical. But she had to be smart. Not just for herself, but for the kids.

Back in their suite, Billy turned on the local weather news and they watched the snowfall predictions rise with each graphic. He loosened his tie and undid the top buttons of his tuxedo shirt, giving him a late-night dissolute playboy look.

Which she appreciated, actually. It brought her back to her senses.

She went into her own room and changed into the comfy yoga clothes she normally lived in. In her fluffy socks, with her makeup wiped off, she felt more like herself and less like someone playing dress-up. She thought about Billy on the phone with Annika, explaining all the storm preps he'd set up

for them. Keeping his eye on the important thing—making sure they got through the storm.

In so many ways, she trusted him. Could she trust him enough to ask him the question that had haunted her for so long? That moment with Chelsey had brought back so many uncomfortable memories, so many old fears and anxieties.

“They’re all over me, it’s not like I chase after them.”

“Can you swear to me that you’ve never done anything with any of them?”

One thing she’d learned about her anxiety was that she did better if she just faced it instead of letting her imagination drive her nuts.

Calling on all her new confidence, she padded back into the living room.

“Billy, can I ask you something?” No. Scratch that. She was tired of dancing around the men in her life. “I need to ask you something,” she corrected.

Billy was still frowning at the TV as if the anchors were personally responsible for the snowstorm. He must have been running his hands through his hair because it stood on end the way it did after an especially frustrating at-bat. He looked up at her and blinked at her serious expression.

“Sure. What’s up?”

No more dancing around things.

“That time I asked you if you’d ever cheated.” Her heart was pounding hard, as if she was running a marathon. Her stomach clenched and she thought she might be sick. “Remember, we were on the back porch so the boys couldn’t overhear. You shook your head ‘no.’ But there was something

in your eyes...I mean, I thought there was something else that you weren't saying. Maybe you thought I couldn't handle it. And maybe I couldn't."

She knew that part was true. Back then, her handling-things ability was minimal.

"But I can now. Handle it, I mean. So I want to know."

"Know what?"

"Everything. Whatever you weren't telling me." She let out a long breath. If she was going to put her trust in this new connection with Billy, she had to know. Even if it was bad. She could handle bad, or at least, now she could. She couldn't handle secrets.

He turned off the TV and sank into the armchair next to the couch. With his long legs spread apart, his big body slouched against the cushions, he was breathtaking. But she couldn't focus on that right now. Everything hinged on whatever came out of his mouth next.

"You're right, there was something else."

Her entire body froze. *You asked for this*, she reminded herself. *Keep breathing*.

"About a week before that conversation, I blacked out at a club and woke up with a girl on my lap. We were mostly dressed, and I don't think I could have done anything anyway, that's how drunk I was. But when you asked me that question, if I'd cheated, I couldn't say for sure."

Her voice clogged in her throat. She couldn't say a word.

"After our conversation I went back to the bar and went around questioning people. What'd I do? Who was I with? Trying to fill in the holes. No one said anything about me

leaving, or fucking anyone. They said I was a little out of control, dancing and drinking too much, but that was it. That girl...I didn't remember her at all. When I woke up, she talked like we were dating or something. It was freaky. She wanted me to call her. Remember when I said I lost my phone and had to change my number? It was because of her."

Jesus. Her instincts had been right.

"So that night, when I asked you if you'd cheated—"

"I said no." His gaze lifted to hers, then dropped again.

"But you couldn't be a hundred percent sure."

"Right. I didn't want to lie to you. I figured it wasn't really a lie, because as far as I knew, I'd never done anything with anyone. I'd never *chosen* to, never tried to, never wanted to. But maybe..." He shrugged, shaking his head again.

"Maybe I picked up on some...uncertainty?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I probably should have just...told you the whole thing. But you were already so stressed out about everything."

"About you," she corrected.

"About me. *I* knew I wasn't cheating. At least, I did up until that night. I still don't think anything happened, but I couldn't fucking remember. And that girl was sketchy as hell. I didn't even find her attractive. I guess it's all fun and games until you wake up with a stranger in your lap."

He attempted a wry smile, but didn't entirely succeed.

"That hole in my memory, it shook me up. It's part of why I quit drinking. I'd never blacked out like that before. It's still the most horrifying moment of my life. And I'm including all those fucked-up moments with my mother when she drank."

Jenna's heart went out to him, the way it always did when he mentioned his mother. He had deserved so much better; all the Cooper brothers had. But Billy, as the youngest, had been the most vulnerable, in her opinion.

She slid to the end of the couch closest to him and leaned over the arm to take his hand. "Did it ever occur to you that you might have been drugged that night?"

His head shot up and he stared at her with shock in his eyes. "Drugged? Why? Who?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe you drank from the wrong glass. Or maybe someone was trying to rob you, or mess with you. Sabotage the Twins shortstop. Or extort you. Those are just the reasons off the top of my head."

"You and your morbid imagination."

"Don't you watch any crime shows? Stuff like that happens all the time."

A line appeared between his eyebrows as he focused on the memory. "I had to run to the bathroom and vomit my guts out. I just figured it was bad whisky mixed with too many French fries."

"Oof."

"It was vile. Still don't really like French fries."

She tilted her head at him. "Do you think I'm way off base here?"

"Baseball metaphor. Two points," he said absently. "No, I think you might be right. I felt like shit, not just the next day but for a while."

Gently, she brought up the other thing that his story had made her think about. "It must have triggered stuff from your

childhood.”

His eyes lifted to hers, suddenly alert. “Fuck, you’re right. It was the kind of thing my mother used to do. Black out, do shit she didn’t remember. No wonder it scared the crap out of me. No wonder I was so ashamed and embarrassed. That was why I didn’t tell you. But I should have.”

She stroked his hand, feeling the tension rising in all those masterful muscles and tendons. He could field a ball like nobody’s business. But that didn’t mean he could handle everything that came his way.

“I should have believed you when you said you weren’t cheating on me,” she said softly. “I thought you were hiding something. But I should have trusted that it wasn’t *that*.”

With his gaze holding hers, he gave a slow nod. She knew it had always bothered him that she worried so much about the women who swooned over his baseball star status. No matter how much he reassured her, her anxious imagination got the best of her.

“Thank you,” he said simply. “That means a lot to me. I never wanted to be a cheater. I never wanted you to think that I was.”

“I know.” She whooshed out a long breath. “Why couldn’t we have had this conversation years ago?”

“Older and wiser?” He pointed a finger at himself. “Or maybe just older, in my case.”

“No, you’re wiser too. You told me, this time. That means everything to me.”

“Everything?” His lips curved in a tender smile. “If I’d known that, I would have spilled all this shit years ago.”

“Timing is everything.”

“Are you saying we met too early? Before we were ready?”

She shook her head so fiercely that her hair whipped against her cheeks. “Of course not, I’d never say that. We have Zack and Bean and that means it all happened the way it was supposed to. But maybe...” She gave him a rueful smile. “Maybe we met before we knew anything about relationships.”

“That’s for damn sure.”

She got to her feet, feeling as if a weight had been lifted off her. He was telling her the truth, all of the truth. But she had to give herself credit too. She’d asked the hard questions, and listened to the answers. She hadn’t danced around anything.

It felt good. Solid. Powerful.

He snagged her and tugged her close to him. He gazed up at her as if she was a goddess in yoga pants. “The only thing I knew for sure was that I would have done anything to be with you.”

The longing in his voice sent a chill down her spine. He didn’t sound like he was talking about the past. He sounded as if it was still true.

“Maybe we didn’t do so bad,” she whispered. “Here we are, after all. Still friends.”

Friends.

The word hung between them, so inadequate. It didn’t even begin to describe their relationship. They were so much more than friends; and yet, she *would* call him a friend. She

could always rely on him, after all. She could even confide in him.

“I’ll always be your friend,” Billy said slowly. “Don’t get me wrong. But—” She put a hand over his mouth. She didn’t want him to say it. Whatever he was going to say, it would change things.

“Remember when we used to curl up together in your old Sentra?” she murmured. His first car had been so dorky that he’d somehow made it cool. “The back seats went down and there was all this storage space in the back. You had your baseball gear stashed back there, boots and cleats and bats, and we’d just make a nest for ourselves in the middle and hold each other?”

“I remember.” His voice was nothing but a husky murmur. “We slept together like that. Before we slept together.”

“Right. Way before. Can we do that again?”

His eyebrows lifted. “You want to sleep together?”

“I do. I’m nervous about the storm and the kids, and it was always so comforting curling up with you. We were kind of like...” She paused, not finding the right words.

“Like kittens missing their mama cat,” he supplied.

“Yes. Exactly.” Back then, they’d both felt alone in the world, in their own way. That was part of why they’d gravitated to each other. Now she felt alone in a different way. So far from her boys, so helpless to do anything except hope and pray they’d all be okay.

“I’d love to sleep with you.” He said it cheerfully, skating over the double-entendre. If he meant that other kind of “sleeping together” too, he didn’t show it.

He rose to his feet and extended a hand to her. She nestled her hand in his and they walked toward his bedroom. “I bet mine has less stuff scattered everywhere,” he teased.

“You’d be right. Some things never change.”

As they crawled under the covers, carefully keeping some clothes on—she wore her yoga pants, he kept his underwear on—she fervently hoped that some other things never would either. She hoped they could always trust each other enough to cuddle together without thinking about sex. She hoped it would always feel this natural and safe with him. She hoped he’d always smell like soap and grass stains. She hoped they would always be there for each other, whether married or divorced.

For a while, she slept more deeply than she had in months. Nothing kept her awake—not worries about the storm, or her deadline, or Bean’s next accident, or Zack’s attention span. She didn’t even dream. Usually she had vivid and elaborate dreams that she could barely explain the next morning.

Sometime in the middle of the night, she swam out of sleep into the soft darkness and noticed a hand on her breast. Billy was still asleep; she could hear his low snuffle-snores. He’d turned on his side to face her, and wound up with his arm on top of her. She lay on her back, her left leg flung over his.

The weight of his hand was...arousing. He wasn’t doing anything, but then again, he didn’t have to. The warmth of his flesh penetrated through her ribbed baby T to her skin. She felt it in her nipple. It was rising, tingling. Hardening. A maddening sensation that made a pool of heat spread through her.

She should wake him up. No, she should just lift his arm off her body without disturbing him. But she didn’t want it off.

She liked it right where it was.

Her heart pounded. Maybe that would wake him, just the beat of her heart. What would he do once he saw where his arm was? He'd probably snatch it away. He'd be afraid that he'd crossed a line.

His hand on her breast definitely broke a rule. But only if she didn't want it. And now that it was there, so many forgotten sensations came flooding back.

The first time he touched her nipples, his hands trembled and shook. Trying so hard to be cool. It was summer, and she was wearing a bikini so they could swim to the little cove where an owl hooted at night.

He slid the straps off her shoulders and lifted her breasts to his mouth. The wild pleasure made her shake against him. Eager to make him feel the way she did, she touched his thick penis through his swim shorts. He took her hand inside to touch his bare skin. She was panting so hard she thought her chest would explode. Still mostly underwater, he came into her hand, and then was so embarrassed he turned red.

"It's okay," she kept telling him. "I don't mind."

God, they were so young. But even then, he tried to do right by her. He found the slick place between her legs, found the spot that made her gasp. But it didn't work; she couldn't achieve an orgasm in that cove where people swam all the time. She hadn't known her own body well enough. But he found a way and used his big strong hand to work his magic.

After that, he made it his mission to bring her to a climax. And boy, had he. The back of the Sentra. The loft of the barn at her house. His brother Thomas' house when no one was around, including his kid Danny. Then there was the meadow out past the creek. A canoe that one crazy time when they paddled out to see the Northern Lights. God, they were so wild for each other.

Teenagers.

Teenagers in love. The one thing she'd never doubted was that she and Billy had been desperately in love with each other.

She shifted her legs away from his. Her nipple was still tingling with a heat that made her pussy clench. Maybe she could just scissor her legs together to relieve the tension building down there. A little secret masturbation. Billy would never know. She had to do something. It was driving her crazy, that warm weight bearing down on her.

A soft snore drifted from Billy's mouth. Still asleep. Good.

She snuck her right hand under the waistband of her yoga pants and into the warm slick place between her legs. This was what her sex life generally looked like these days, after all. Except for the man on top of her. She didn't usually have that anymore, which was no doubt why she was so heated by nothing more than a hand on her breast.

Biting her lip, she slid her fingers across her clit. Oh God, she needed this. Being with Billy was like...well, like having a hand on her breast all night long. Constant low-grade arousal verging on flat-out lust.

Billy shifted and she snatched her hand away from her sex. What was she thinking? Jesus, what if he woke up and caught her mid-orgasm? How would she explain that? *Yes, Billy, you still turn me on so much that I need to come just from lying next to you. Yup, that's how sex-starved I am.*

Billy's hand twisted against her breast. She scrunched up her face, waiting for his next move, then decided she couldn't take it anymore. That hand was the problem. That rough-skinned, skillful, magical hand that knew her body better than anyone else in the world. She had to evict it off her chest.

Carefully, she lifted his hand away from her and moved it to the bed instead. Unfortunately, the rest of him shifted too, and now the entire front of his body pressed against her. Was that his...oh yes, he too was getting aroused. A midnight hard-on. She remembered those well. They used to turn to each other in the middle of the night and make love half-asleep, their bodies moving together like waves against a beach.

She held her breath. The entire left side of her body tingled in awareness. There was no chance of going back to sleep now. She was too conscious of his every breath, the sleepy scent of his skin, and that hardening member next to her leg.

Something had to be done.

She rolled away from him, toward the edge of the bed. There was a whole bedroom set aside for her, she should use it. Indulging herself in a snuggle with her ex had been stupid.

“What? What's wrong? The kids?” Groggy, he pushed himself into a half-sitting position.

“The kids are fine. Everything's fine. Go back to sleep.”

“Where are you going?”

“My own room. I can’t sleep.” Irritation coursed through her. She knew it wasn’t him, just general sexual frustration.

“Come back.” He snagged her arm and rolled her back toward him, so they were face to face. “Don’t leave. You’re so cozy.”

“Well, you’re not cozy. You’re...pokey.”

“Oh.” He lay back down on his side. “Sorry. You know it just happens. It’ll go away. You don’t have to worry.”

She ground her teeth together. He didn’t get it, and she didn’t want to explain it.

Then he did get it. “Oh.”

seventeen

Billy might be half-asleep still, but he wasn't an idiot. If he was getting hard from being next to Jenna, she might be feeling the same kind of things. He'd picked up on the edge in her voice, and at first diagnosed it as worry. But it wasn't that. It was sexual frustration.

He could help her with that, if she let him.

It was so dark in the room that he could barely make out her body, even though she was right up against him. The darkness made it feel as if they were somewhere else, in some other dreamworld where reality didn't quite reach.

"Jenna, let me..." He abandoned words and used touch instead. He skimmed his fingers across her body, from hipbone to mound to hipbone. She was still wearing her yoga pants, so he didn't touch skin. But even the contours of that part of her body made his cock tighten. Usually, he studiously avoided even looking at her hips and ass and other potentially arousing parts. Let alone touch them...

She sighed. "We..."

"Shhh. It's okay. This doesn't count. We've been carried off to another world, didn't you know? There's no rules here. No gravity. Nothing that happens here will carry over out there."

“That’s...” He knew she wanted to say “that’s ridiculous,” but she let it go. She must really want this. And he wanted it for her. He wasn’t worried about himself. He’d take care of himself in the shower later. He didn’t expect her to suddenly want to have sex with him. That would be going too far, even in this dreamworld of a hotel bedroom.

But giving her an orgasm, relieving the frustration he heard in her voice, that would be his pleasure and honor.

He felt her legs fall open. *A sign.* A big old welcome sign.

Almost holding his breath, he trailed his fingers across her belly, where her shirt had ridden up, and under her yoga pants to the soft nest of silky hair. She let out a long breath and her body relaxed under his touch.

He didn’t say a word, didn’t make a sound. Didn’t want to break this magical, unexpected mood. Maybe he was still dreaming. It was possible. He’d been dreaming of her before he’d woken up and caught her rolling away from him. In the dream, she’d smiled at him the way she used to, as if he was an entire galaxy of stars rolled up in one man. She’d blown him a kiss and he’d dropped to his knees...

Between her legs she was so hot, so juicy, how was she not spontaneously combusting? Silky moisture clung to his fingers as they glided through her folds and across her clit. The muscles of her thighs flexed and then relaxed. She made a sound that went right to his heart because he’d never thought he’d hear it again. That little squeak that held all her need and lust and sex-want in one little sound.

He knew just how to stroke her. That muscle memory hadn’t gone anywhere. But he also knew that it wasn’t always the same. He always had to pay attention to what she needed in this particular moment. Which was why he shoved aside

everything else and lost himself in her sighs and her movements. Her clit pulsed hot against his finger. Plump and swollen, it begged him for more. Should he give her more? Like, go inside her with his fingers, make them into a hook, find that one spot, finger-fuck her until she screamed...

No. The invisible barrier flashed in his mind like an orange construction cone. Don't go there. Not inside. Too intimate. Not yet. Stick to this, to this glorious slippery flesh that got wetter and hotter as he stroked and teased and...

She convulsed in a sharp spasm of an orgasm, her body pulsing again and again. He held his grip on her pussy. One wrong move and he knew her orgasm would slip away, turn from ecstasy to disappointment.

He never wanted to disappoint her again. Not in bed and not out of it.

The orgasm didn't want to let her go. Or maybe she didn't want it to end. Together, his hand on her sex, they rode her climax as far as it would go, until she was limp and quivering and gasping for breath.

He drew his hand away and breathed in the unique intoxicating scent of her on his fingers. She smelled the same, and yet a little different. Like wine that had matured just a little more. Was that a ridiculous thought, that he could discern a difference years later? Not for a connoisseur, it wasn't. He knew his Jenna.

For instance, he knew that she was going to have regrets. She'd worked so hard to keep things drama-free between them. They both had. Now she'd be worried that they'd thrown it all down the drain for a moment of pleasure.

Could he preempt her second-guessing spiral before it started?

“What if I was still asleep, and everything that just happened was a dream?” he said softly.

“Hm?”

Maybe he'd called it wrong. She didn't sound upset. She sounded very, very satisfied.

“Thought experiment. That's all.”

From her happily splayed position, she rolled onto her side to face him. “I can't think right now. I feel too good. Thank you.” She meant it too. There was real gratitude in her voice. “I want you to feel the same—”

“It's okay. There's no need. I just wanted to take care of you.”

Without answering, she danced her fingers across his hips to the erection that still strained under his underwear. He couldn't help it if he was still turned on. How could he not be, after touching her and listening to her gasps and moans?

She closed her hand around his erection and he snapped his mouth shut. No more objections forthcoming from him. No fucking way.

As if respecting the same invisible boundary that had appeared in his mind, she only used her hand. She stroked him lightly, surrounding him in warmth and pressure. He closed his eyes, even though it was dark, and imagined her mouth on him, thought of her nipples, rosy-brown against her lightly freckled skin, remembered the slickness of her pussy, the hard nub of her aroused clit, and he exploded into her hand. Too fast, fuck it all. Too fast. He wanted more, wanted to start over, savor every moment of it.

He gave an unhappy groan.

“Are you okay? What’s the matter?” Jenna stilled her hand, which was still wrapped around him.

“I’m just fucking mad at myself for coming so fast. Now it’s over, and fuck. Give me a moment.”

She laughed softly and uncurled her fingers from his cock. “Oh. Well, as long as it wasn’t me.”

“Yes, it was you. It’s your fault for being...you. Made me come so fast it feels like the early days all over again.”

“Not like then.” She shook her head; he felt her hair brush his chest. “Back then we came fast because we were so freaking horny. Now it’s because we have experience.”

And because it’s been building up, he wanted to say, but didn’t. He wasn’t ready to admit how much he still thought about her, still lusted after her. She’d moved on. He’d tried to, and in some ways he had. But she still had a hold on him. He couldn’t deny it, especially after what they’d just done.

Doesn’t count. Dreamworld. Remember?

Don’t kid yourself.

He rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom to clean himself up. Afterwards, he stared at himself sternly in the mirror. *Don’t start thinking this changes anything. Don’t get your hopes up.*

What even were his hopes?

His reflection stared back at him. *You know what you want.*

Shut up, loser. You can’t have that. It’s over. Been over.

Is it?

He turned away from the asshole in the mirror and went back to the dark bedroom. The bed was empty. Jenna was gone. And his entire heart caved in.

He got the message. Not a surprise. It was just a freak middle-of-the-night thing. Never to be repeated. Not to mean anything. Just a mutual pleasuring that was now over.

Climbing back into bed, he tried to make himself believe it was for the best. He was going to Japan, after all. Even if Jenna was willing, how would that work? All the same forces that had torn them apart the first time still existed. He was still part of the baseball world and all that came with it.

A brush of air against his back, and the bed bounced under Jenna's weight. "I used the other bathroom," she explained as she clambered under the covers. "A two-bathroom suite, can you imagine? That's one more than our house has."

And his heart soared. She was back. And he was lost. Or found. He wasn't sure.

The next time Billy woke up, it was because his phone was buzzing. It must have been after seven to get through his "do not disturb" setting. He rolled over and grabbed it off the nightstand. A quick check of Jenna told him she was still deeply asleep. They hadn't talked any more last night, just drifted together into sweet, companionable sleep.

The text was from Galen—not his regular cell phone, but the satellite phone he took with him on wilderness trips. It included a photo of his truck barely visible under a mountain of fresh snow.

We got buried. When are you coming back? Annika left a message asking for help. Now she's not picking up the landline. Cell towers are down here.

He texted back, *Soon as possible. Keep trying. Let me know what's up. I'll try too.*

But his call to Annika's cell phone went straight to voice mail. He tried the landline next but got Jenna's cheerful recorded voice.

Okay. Dreamworld was officially over.

He shook Jenna awake. She sat bolt upright, with that parental sixth sense alerting her that something might be off. "What?"

He showed her Galen's texts. "Annika's not answering either phone."

She scrambled for her own phone and scanned her recent activity. "I didn't get anything from her. If something was seriously wrong, she would have reached out."

Sure, that made sense...unless she couldn't call for some reason. Maybe the landline had also gone down. Bad storms sometimes knocked over telephone lines. It could happen. But why had she asked Galen for help?

"I'm calling Galen."

"Good. I'm going to get dressed, then we should get going."

He nodded as he called his brother's sat phone. He allowed himself one quick glance at Jenna's round ass in her clingy yoga pants. Last night's moment was definitely over. He hadn't seen any sign in her eyes that she even remembered it.

He should follow her lead and banish it from his memory. It would be better for both of them if he did.

Galen answered on the first ring. “Are you on the road?”

“About to be. What’s going on?”

“The whole town’s socked in. I have three feet of snow outside my door.”

“Did you ever talk to Annika? Do you know what she needed?”

Jenna was back, in the midst of adjusting the cobalt-blue sweater she’d pulled on. She’d changed into jeans but was still barefoot. He switched the phone to speaker. “Jenna’s here too.”

“Oh hey, Jenna. I hope you guys had fun, sorry we missed it.”

Jenna showed not one flicker of secret “oh we sure had fun” amusement. “Any word from Annika and the boys?”

“No, but just about everything’s down. They just started plowing. We’re still trying to get the front door open. It’s nuts. Freak storm of the century. As soon as I can get out, I’ll strap on some snowshoes and head to your house.”

“Thank you, Galen.” Her heartfelt words made Billy’s gut tighten. If he hadn’t asked her to this damn awards dinner, she’d be home dealing with this crisis herself. “They’re probably fine, but I’ll feel a lot better after I talk to someone.”

“They have backup power, right?”

“Generator,” Billy confirmed. “I have it all set up. I wrote out instructions anyone could figure out, Annika won’t have a problem. They have plenty of firewood, plenty of water.”

Was he trying to reassure the others or himself?

Jenna leaned close to his shoulder to speak into the phone. “We’ll be there as quick as we can, but who knows what the roads are like.”

“They’re probably crap,” said Galen in his usual blunt way. “So be safe. Don’t rush. Last thing we need is you guys in an accident.”

Good reminder. Billy felt Jenna nod, and did the same. He ended the call and turned to meet Jenna’s gaze. Her gray eyes were dark with worry. “They might still be asleep. It’s still early there,” she said.

“Then let’s go home and wake them up.”

That got a smile from her. “Sounds good. You get dressed, I’ll make some coffee. We can grab some food at the buffet breakfast downstairs. It’ll save time. I’m going to call the airline and make sure the planes are up and running.”

When he finished dressing and packing, he found Jenna in the living room with a Styrofoam cup of steaming coffee for him. Her phone was on speaker, playing hold music. “I’m still on hold at the airline, but let’s just go.”

He nodded and slung her bag over his shoulder, then grabbed the handle of his own rolling suitcase. They left the suite and headed for the elevator, both sipping their coffee, like two office workers on their way to work. It was all over, just like that. Back to “professional co-parenting.”

He wished he could stop the elevator and have one more moment with her. One more kiss. One more out-of-time experience before reality closed in again.

The door opened and they followed the flow of early-rising guests toward the breakfast buffet.

“Well hello, if it isn’t the sexy exes,” a voice purred as they stepped into the dining room. “I thought about you last night. I couldn’t help wondering why you left so early and didn’t even give the afterparty a pop-in.”

Chelsey looked camera-ready even at this early hour. “If you ever get tired of being a baseball wife, you should be a morning show anchor,” Billy told her. “No one else looks that good first thing in the morning.”

“Au contraire, mon frère. Both of you look yummier than my morning non-fat decaf. That’s probably why you made the top spot on *The Dugout* this morning.”

Uh oh. “What’d they say?” Billy asked warily.

“‘Reunited for a good cause,’ blah blah. They spent most of the post on the afterparty. Now aren’t you sorry you missed it?”

Absolutely the fuck not; but he didn’t tell her that.

She tilted her head in invitation. “Join me for breakfast? I despise eating alone.”

“We’re strictly takeout this morning.” He didn’t even have to check with Jenna, who had finally gotten through to an agent, to know that lingering over breakfast with Chelsey was the last thing she wanted to do. “We need to get home.”

Chelsey narrowed her eyes at him, then checked Jenna, then back again. “Something’s different this morning. With both of you.”

“Our town got hit with a huge snowstorm.” Jenna looked more worried than ever as she rejoined them. “And the airline just told me they aren’t flying into Bemidji yet. They said maybe later this afternoon.”

“*Maybe?*” He shook his head. “I know airline-speak. That means it won’t be until tomorrow.”

“*Tomorrow?*” Panic washed across her face. “Billy, we can’t wait until—”

“We won’t. We’ll rent a car. We’ll drive back from here. Forget the planes.”

“That would take hours, and we don’t even know how the roads are.”

Chelsey interrupted. “Are private jets allowed? Our pilot can fly you there. We’re not scheduled anywhere until tomorrow.”

“Really?” The hope dawning on Jenna’s face would make a grown man cry. “We could pay you. Well, Billy could.”

Billy nodded, though he had no idea how much a flight on a private jet would run.

“No need for that. Dwight’s contract is much bigger than our darling Billy’s. I’m more than happy to ride to the rescue of a backwoods Minnesota girl and her sexy ex. I was watching you both last night and I decided that I’m jealous.”

“Of what?” Jenna blinked at her.

“You two have a good thing going on. Special.” She gave them an actual genuine smile, and for the first time, Billy thought that maybe Chelsey wasn’t so bad. “I’ll call Dwight. He’s still sleeping.”

“Rough night?” Billy asked, deadpan.

“Don’t ask if you don’t want to know.” With a cheeky smile, she pulled out a crystal-encrusted phone to call her husband.

A half hour later, he and Jenna were in a cab headed for the airport. The pilot had confirmed that one runway at Bemidji had been cleared, and since the larger airlines were still playing it safe, they could sneak in a quick landing.

If Billy weren't so worried about the storm, he might have enjoyed the leather seats the color of buttercream and the offer of champagne by the lone flight attendant. Two passengers, one flight attendant. It seemed absurd.

Jenna asked for coffee instead of champagne.

“Espresso? Cappuccino? Mocha?”

“Just...sure. One of those. Something with foamy milk. Maybe it'll settle my stomach.”

Jenna must be really distracted with worry if she didn't even want to get specific with her order.

After the attendant left, Billy reached across the aisle and took Jenna's hand. He didn't tell her it would be okay, because how the hell would he know that? But he could reassure her that they were in this together.

“Just gotta point out that a supermodel said she was jealous of you,” he told her, hoping it would make her smile.

He felt like a superstar when it worked.

She held onto his hand tightly until they were airborne, at which point she turned her attention to the thick clouds roiling under the wings of the plane. It didn't clear until the pilot announced they were starting their descent.

“Clear skies,” Jenna said, her face brightening. “That's a good sign, isn't it?”

“It's gotta be. At least no more snow is coming.”

She nodded, and kept nodding, and he figured he knew what was running through her mind, same as his. *“They’re fine, everything’s fine, please God let everything be fine.”*

Knowing Jenna, she probably had a more creative mantra going on. He remembered the time Zack got a high fever, when he was four. She’d spent her time at his bedside making a mental list of all the wonderful qualities she saw in her son. She’d turned it into a mantra with the idea that imagining all the good he could do would help bring him back into the world.

Maybe it had worked, because his fever came down and he was back to his vibrant self in a matter of days.

Billy had been on a road trip at the time, which left him with nothing but FaceTime during the entire crisis. This time, he’d be here every step of the way. So at least there was that.

“Should we talk about last night?” Jenna said abruptly as the plane descended toward the runway.

He jumped. So she did remember; he’d been starting to wonder if she did.

“Do you think we need to? Don’t worry, I know it doesn’t change anything between us.”

Her expression went blank for a moment, as if she was disappearing inside herself. Had he said the wrong thing? But wasn’t that what she wanted, for things to continue as they were?

“We didn’t even kiss. Do you think that’s strange?”

He thought about it for a moment as the plane descended toward the tiny airport. “I guess it didn’t seem strange at the time. We just went with the flow.”

“And the flow didn’t include kissing for a reason. A good reason.”

He braced himself; this ought to be good. “What’s the reason?”

“Kissing is too intimate. Everything we did, it was all on the surface. Did you notice that?”

She was right. There’d been no penetration of any sort, not even a tongue kiss.

“I did notice, now that you mention it. I imagined those orange cones that control traffic. It just felt like...” He shrugged. “Like certain things were off limits.”

“Exactly.”

His stomach cratered. He got was she was saying. She was making the point that what they had done last night didn’t bring them any closer together. Not where it counted. Not *inside*.

The plane hit the runway, bouncing up and down a few times. Jenna grabbed for his hand again, the gesture so automatic that he grinned to himself.

Jenna might tell herself that last night didn’t change anything. But his gut told him different. A month ago, she wouldn’t have grabbed for his hand like that. She would have gone for the armrest, which was right there under her arm. But no, she’d reached all the way across the aisle to hold his hand.

How could he make her see that things had changed? He wasn’t exactly sure, but she’d just given him a major clue. Of the many things they *hadn’t* done last night, she’d focussed on one. Kissing. He could work with that.

eighteen

At least that was settled. Jenna didn't want any awkwardness or open questions hanging over them while they dealt with this next crisis. Thank God she and Billy were on the same page. Nothing that they'd done last night meant anything. Now she could relax and focus on the important thing. The kids.

Billy took the wheel while she monitored her phone for texts and information. As they drove down the freshly plowed highway toward Lake Bittersweet, snow drifts loomed on either side of the road. It felt like driving through a tunnel of snow. Icy ruts trapped their tires as if trying to tug the Tundra off course.

She still hadn't gotten any communication from Annika at all. She'd even called the clinic, but they said she hadn't come in, even though they were swamped and could have used her help.

Galen had finally dug his way out of his house and was snowshoeing over to hers. It might take a normal human an hour to get there, but Galen was a wilderness expert and estimated it would take him half that time. He promised to text the second he got there.

She scanned through the weather reports. “It’s a historic snowstorm,” she told Billy. “The biggest December snow dump since they’ve been keeping records.”

“Wow. Why didn’t we get any damn warning about it?”

“Apparently it was supposed to pass on by, but it got stalled out and just kept dumping on us. I’m translating from forecaster lingo,” she explained. “I’ll bet you anything it’s a climate change thing. Everything’s getting more extreme than it used to be.”

“Here we go,” he murmured.

“Excuse me? What does that mean?”

“It’s one of your favorite topics, that’s all.”

“Because it’s so important.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t.”

“No, but you said, ‘here we go,’ as if I was about to launch into some rant that you’re sick of hearing.”

“Did I say I’m sick of hearing about it?”

“Your tone of voice said it loud and clear.”

He shot her a sidelong grin. “Maybe I just like seeing you get riled up, and wanted to make sure it happened.”

She stared at him indignantly. “You’re deliberately trying to wind me up?”

“It’s better than worrying, isn’t it?”

So that was his master plan? She had to admit, it had kind of worked. For a moment, her anxiety had faded to a dull roar. “I also worry about climate change, you know. Maybe we should switch to a less stressful topic.”

“I’m game.”

“Ooh, two points to you.”

He squinted at her. “I don’t think ‘I’m game’ is a baseball phrase, but I never turn down points.”

“I guess those points will get an asterisk.”

His grin widened. “Now that is a baseball reference. Some stats get asterisks because of—”

“I know. You don’t have to mansplain baseball stats to me. Have you forgotten how freaking encyclopedic my baseball knowledge used to be? I studied that stuff as if I was going for a degree.” She covered her face with one hand. “It’s embarrassing, now that I think about it.”

“I thought it was sexy as hell.”

She peeked through her fingers. “I’m sure you did. But that wasn’t the point.”

“Really? I always thought you did all that research to impress me. And it worked, by the way. I’d always thought you were hot, but you hit another level after you reeled off the home run leaders of the previous five years.”

She ticked off the names on her fingers. “Cabrera, Pena and Teixeira, Bautista, Bautista, Cabrera.”

“You know what, it’s still sexy as fuck.”

They both laughed. Warmth sparked deep in her core, but she mentally poured cold water on it. They weren’t doing that again. They’d decided.

“So why did you do all that work if it wasn’t to bring me to my knees?” he asked.

She tilted her head at him. “You know, that’s a very good question and it’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot. It was actually a giant red flag right at the start of our relationship.”

“Really?” He took his eyes off the road for a micro-second to frown at her. “How do you mean?”

“I immersed myself in baseball because I wanted to be part of your world. It was...too much.”

He frowned as the truck hit another ice rut and slid along the frozen ridge. “Too much how?”

She wondered if he could possibly understand. Even for her, it had been hard. It had taken getting divorced for her to see it.

“I was so wrapped up in you and your baseball career and everything having to do with you, I had no idea about myself at all. I didn’t think it mattered. I didn’t think *I* mattered. It’s, um, well, it’s one of the symptoms of growing up as the child of a neglectful parent.” It was always so much easier to shift into generalities like that. “You can read about it. I have a book. It talks about anxiety too. It really opened my eyes to some of my issues. Once you see, then you can work on it.”

“Are you saying you didn’t feel like your own person?” He shot her a horrified look. “Did *I* make you feel that way?”

“Focus on the road, Billy. No, you didn’t, at least not on purpose. But you...well, I guess you benefited from my total Billy Cooper immersion.”

He was quiet for a long time, making her wonder if she’d gone too far, given him too much of her truth. This was a level of self-understanding she’d taken a long time—with some books and counseling sessions—to work out for herself. She

hadn't talked to him about any of it because...well, why would she? They were through.

So why was she bringing it up now?

When he finally spoke, she knew why. Because the Billy of here and now was open to it. They never could have had this conversation before.

"Yeah, you're right," he said. "I did benefit. I ate it up. And I think I know why. I never had anyone care about me or think I was important like that. You were the only one. I soaked it in like a starving puppy. I should have realized it wasn't going both ways. I'm sorry, Jenna."

His apology left her breathless. She put her hand to her chest, and realized that even though she'd sounded cool and collected, her heart was hammering. Speaking out, telling her truth...she wasn't used to it.

"I wish I'd known it was a red flag." His voice was filled with regret. "I would have...been different. Do you ever wish you could have a do-over on certain things?"

A do-over. Her heart ached at the thought. But life didn't really work that way. If it did, she could think of all kinds of things...

"No do-overs in baseball," she said lightly, through the ache in her heart. "But if there were, I might skip the awards dinner right before a snowstorm."

"Copy that."

She looked at her phone again. "Shoot, I missed a text from Galen." She scanned through it. "He says service is very spotty. He tried to call but it didn't work. Only texts are going through." She thumbed to the previous text. "He got to the house but it's empty! No one's there."

“*What?*” The shock nearly made him drive off the side of the road. She waited until he got the Tundra straightened out.

“No one was home.” She read from Galen’s text. “The house is warm enough. Wood stove is out, but someone did make a fire in it. I estimate it’s been out for about two hours. The damper is closed.” She looked up from the phone. “Maybe Annika was trying to make sure the house didn’t freeze up while they were gone?”

“But why would they leave? Where did they go? It makes no sense.”

She kept scanning. “No footprints in the snow, so they must have left while it was still storming. Maybe in the night.”

He jammed his foot on the accelerator and the truck leaped forward.

“Billy!”

“What?”

“It won’t help anyone if we slide off the road.”

“I’m not going to do that. I’m going to drive like a bat out of hell until I get to Lake Bittersweet and find Zack and Bean.”

“And Annika,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, Annika. So she can tell me why she didn’t contact us.”

She grabbed his forearm, tense with corded muscles. “I’m sure she would have if she could. Slow down, Billy!”

“Honey. You know me. I’m a trained athlete with world-class reaction time, pinpoint throwing accuracy and absolute

focus on the baseball diamond. Do you think I'm going to let us crash?"

A bolt of lust hit her right in the solar plexus. When Billy was intense and hardcore protective like that, he made every part of her—body, heart and soul—long for him.

Had she really been thinking that she could pretend last night didn't matter? Delusional. Because her body didn't forget a thing.

"No," she said softly. "I think you'll get us there safely. I might have a heart attack on the way, but..."

"You will not. Because you trust me."

He was right. She really did trust him. Not because of his "world-class reaction time"—which would be arrogant if it wasn't true—but because he was Billy.

They didn't speak for the rest of the drive so that he could put that famous focus to work. Jenna had to squeeze her eyes shut now and then, and by the time they reached the outskirts of Lake Bittersweet, her hands were cramped from white-knuckling it.

Very few vehicles were on the road other than the plow trucks still working on clearing away the snow. As they passed the first houses, everyone seemed to be either shoveling or snow-blowing or making snowmen...even one snow mermaid. It was Sunday, so kids weren't in school anyway, but a snow day vibe filled the town nonetheless. Kids in snowsuits dragged sleds to the top of drifts. At one point they drove through a snowball fight that pitted one side of the street across the other. Which meant they got splattered with snowballs from both sides.

Jenna loved a snow day, but she wouldn't be able to enjoy this one until she knew where everyone had gone. The kids must be alive and kicking; surely she would know if they weren't. Maybe they'd all gone off on a snow adventure and Annika had lost her phone in a drift.

In the middle of the night, though? How had they left the house in a snowstorm in the middle of the night? None of it made any sense. Unless an alien invasion had occurred and her entire family had been whisked away in a spaceship. Then it would make sense. Or maybe Thanos was real and her family had evaporated. That made sense.

She bit down hard on her lip.

"I know what you're doing," Billy said in a low voice. "You're catastrophizing. I don't blame you, because it's a weird situation. But there's a reasonable explanation for all this and when we find out what it is, we're going to...I'm not going to say laugh. But something."

"I know. You're right. My stupid anxious brain goes down a rabbit hole and it's hard to make it stop."

He reached over to squeeze her hand. "I know."

"How do you even know that word, 'catastrophize'?"

"I read books, too."

He grinned at her as they rattled down her street. Her house was at the end, in a cul-de-sac. The plow trucks always piled the snow at the far end, which made for great snow-fort building and climbing and sledding.

But no one was playing on the snow pile.

She jumped out of the truck and raced down the path that Galen must have dug through the snow. The front door was

unlocked. She pushed it open, and knew right away that no one was there. “Hello? Hello? Anyone?”

“Out here!”

She ran back outside to find Galen trudging from around the side of the house in his snowshoes and a plaid hunter’s jacket. Above his thick beard, his cheeks were bright red from the cold. He exchanged a long bear hug with Billy. “How many laws did you break getting here?”

“I figure it was one law, broken many times. So what’s the story here?”

“Nothing new. But something strange.” He pointed to the street in front of the house. “You can’t see it anymore because they plowed, but there were some weird drifts in the street this morning. It was hard to tell what caused them because the wind messed them up. I took a photo.”

He showed them his phone, but Jenna couldn’t tell anything about the shadows in the snow.

Billy zoomed in on the photo, then out again. “Chopper,” he said suddenly. “I think those marks are from the skids of a helicopter.”

“A *helicopter*?” Jenna suddenly couldn’t breathe. “Like... medivac?”

They all stared at each other. The world went gray at the edges. She felt her feet give way under her just as Billy scooped her into his arms.

nineteen

“It’s been a rough day,” Billy explained to Galen as he carried Jenna into the house. “We had to take a private plane, and...” When Galen squinted at him, he hurried on. “She’ll be okay.”

Galen followed after him. “Let me check her pulse. I can triage her. I splinted a guy’s arm on one of my canoe trips last year. Didn’t even use my first aid kit, just some willows I found—”

“Galen.” Billy cut him off. “Do something useful like figure out why the fuck a helicopter landed here. And where it is now.”

Galen gave a mock salute. “Yes sir, little brother sir. I’ll call the clinic and the fire department and the hospital and the...”

The door closed behind Billy, cutting Galen off in mid-list. Billy loved and respected his brother, but right now his kids were missing, his ex was unconscious in his arms, and the house was buried in snow.

He lay Jenna down on the couch. He unzipped her parka so she could breathe more freely. Gently, he shifted her legs into a more comfortable position, then brushed her hair back from her pale face.

The house was chilling down. He should make a fire in the stove, but he didn't know if they'd be here long enough to tend it. He had to find the boys. He needed to be out there looking...but where?

“Annika, where are you?” he muttered out loud. “No note? No nothing? That's not like you.”

“Not like who? What?” Jenna sat bolt upright. “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

“No, I did not.” She looked around wildly, then back at him. He held her gaze steadily. “Okay, maybe I...momentarily lost...the helicopter. Did they find out...what's...”

“Galen is making some calls.” He didn't want to bring up the hospital in case that made her faint again.

But Jenna had clearly gotten ahold of herself by now. “We need to call the hospital in Braddock, the clinic—”

“He's on it. Just...sit here for a second. Let me get you some water.” He hurried into the kitchen and poured her a glass from the tap. Then he hesitated. If the power was out, the town water filtration system might be compromised. They'd have to boil their water.

Instead, he filled a glass of orange juice from a carton in the thawing refrigerator. He should get the generator going so they didn't lose everything in the freezer. After that he should boil some water so they had some to drink, just in case. Was it too late to pour antifreeze down the pipes to make sure they didn't freeze if the house got too cold?

First things first. He rushed back into the living room to see Jenna back on her feet, swaying slightly.

“I told you to sit.”

“Billy, the kids are missing! I can’t just sit.” She took the glass from him and drank deeply. “I think I was a little dehydrated.”

“You think? You haven’t had a drop since Minneapolis.”

“I was afraid I would throw it up.” She finished the glass and handed it to him, which amused him to no end. Hey, it was nice to feel needed. He set the glass on the table. “I still might,” she warned him.

“No biggie, I’ve seen you throw up plenty of times. I’d say over fifty. Mostly when you were pregnant, but then there was that time when we stayed up all night playing beer pong and you had to run out to the lake and ...”

She clutched at her stomach. “Can you please not?”

“Sorry. Look. I’m worried too, of course, but wherever they are, Annika is with them. You trust Annika, right?”

“Annika thinks we got together too young.”

Ouch. He knew Annika was protective of Jenna, and therefore wary of him, especially since the divorce. But they also had a good-natured teasing kind of vibe. If she thought their love story was a mistake, well, that hurt.

“Okay. She has the right to think what she wants. But I still trust her with the boys, don’t you?”

Eyes wide, Jenna stepped toward him. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I said that.” She touched his arm. “Can I take it back? I don’t even know if it’s true anymore. She hasn’t said it in a long time.”

“Maybe she’s right. We were young and optimistic. We didn’t stay together, so...” He shrugged a shoulder, trying to

give the impression of not caring, which was very much untrue. He'd never consider marrying Jenna a mistake, and it would break his heart if she did.

Jenna shook her head, her gray eyes never leaving his.

“No, she's wrong. Annika's too cynical. She's skeptical about love and romance and...” She was so close to him that her scent saturated his senses and he lost track of what she was saying. She snapped her fingers. “That guy!”

“What?”

“She's been seeing someone. Well, not seeing. He doesn't live here. She met him this summer when he and his son came into the clinic. He was going to come back for Christmas break, and I'm pretty sure he's already here. I overheard her on the phone joking about his staff getting the house ready. Anyway, he's very wealthy. I remember her mentioning that he has a private helicopter.”

“That's great, Jenna.” He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off the ground. “You're a genius. What's his name?”

“I don't know! She never says his name. She refers to him as ‘the not-so-terrible guy I've been not-seeing’ or something like that.”

“That Annika, she's such a sap,” said Billy dryly. “Do you know where he's staying?”

“One of the big summer houses on the eastern shore, that's all I know. Probably not far from your guest house.”

Galen came bursting through the door, as was his habit. “They're not at the hospital. I don't know if that's good or bad.”

“I have an idea where they might be. Do you remember that billionaire Jason rescued from the burning boat last summer?”

Galen looked confused, but nodded. “Sure. He gave the fire department a huge donation, which is how they could afford a fire boat. Caldwell something?”

“Do you know where he’s staying?”

But in the next moment, it didn’t matter anymore, because the landline rang. Jenna and Billy both dove for it, with Billy reaching it first. He handed it to Jenna because she looked like she might tear him apart if he didn’t.

“Mom?”

Zack’s voice was loud enough so he could hear it too. He nearly dropped to his knees with relief.

“Zack! Where are you? Is Bean with you?”

“Yes, we’re all here. Aunt Annika got sick and she told us to call this friend and he came with a helicopter and picked us up. The snow was blowing everywhere. It was so fun! Bean was pretty scared.”

Jenna’s gaze clung to Billy’s as they listened together. He realized that his arm was tight around her shoulders, and that she wasn’t shrugging him off.

“Honey, where are you? We’ll come get you right away.”

“You can’t. The roads aren’t plowed over here.”

“We’ll take a boat.” Billy nodded, and beckoned to Galen.

“We need a boat, can you ask Thomas if we can use his?” he murmured to his brother.

Galen shook his head. “Thomas hauled out his boat for repairs. I have some canoes...but that’s not a fun ride in this weather.”

No, he wasn’t going to subject the boys to that.

Galen’s phone rang, and he stepped aside to answer it, then went back outside.

“What about the helicopter?” Jenna asked. “Can they bring you back here in the helicopter?”

“It’s not here. He took Aunt Annika to Minneapolis.”

“Oh my God, this just gets...” Billy felt Jenna’s hand dig into his forearm like a claw. “Are you *alone*? They left you alone?”

“Of course not! Tyler is here, he’s really cool, and also there’s a cook, and a nanny. She’s been taking care of us. There’s so much to eat here! But we miss you, Mom. I kept calling the phone but I guess you weren’t home yet.”

“We just got here. Our cell phones aren’t working. Oh sweetie. Listen, what’s the name of the house? Do you know who owns it?”

“Hold on.”

Zack disappeared for a moment, while Jenna covered the receiver. “I’ll ski out there. I don’t care, I’m not leaving them in some strange billionaire’s house with no one around except a nanny and a cook.”

Billy’s lips twitched. “Yeah, it’s a real nightmare scenario.”

She glared at him.

“But of course I’m coming with you,” he added.

Zack came back with the name of the house—Sans Souci. Billy knew it, as did everyone else in town. It was one of the most luxurious properties in the area, and the only one with a fancy French name, which locals pronounced “Sansussy” and which meant “no worries,” basically. He’d jogged past it regularly before he’d started taking the route past Richard Scarlett’s house.

“What do you know about this guy?” he asked Jenna after she’d instructed Zack to get the nanny, or the cook, or whoever was handy. “He must be some kind of hotshot if he’s renting that place.”

“Annika won’t say anything about him. I think they’ve been FaceTiming and texting and all that. I know literally nothing about him, except that he has a son. And a helicopter.”

The nanny came on the phone at that point, and Jenna grilled her about how the kids were doing. She relaxed considerably after she learned that they’d watched Ice Age one and two and eaten their weight in grilled cheese sandwiches.

“Can you tell me anything about Annika?”

“All I know is that she had some kind of medical incident that required a hospital. Mr. Caldwell took care of it.”

“Do you have a way to reach him?”

“Of course.” She rattled off a phone number. “He said for you to call him anytime.”

“We’re going to ski over and pick up the boys. We should be there in an hour or so.”

Billy made a little face to warn her it might be longer than that.

“Roughly,” Jenna corrected.

“Actually, Mr. Caldwell said to tell you that he hired one of the volunteer firefighters to drop off a snowmobile for you. He figured you would want to get here as soon as possible.”

“Wow. He thinks of everything.”

“That he does.”

“I think I like this guy,” Billy said after they’d hung up the phone and gone to hunt down the snowmobile.

“I’m not so sure about him. Why didn’t he leave us a message or a note? Or call us? Just because he’s rich enough to whisk Annika off to—” She broke off suddenly. “She’s going to be okay, isn’t she?”

“Hey hey.” The terror on her face made him reach for her. “She’s in the right hands. We’ll find out more when we talk to her. Do you want to call Caldwell before we go?”

They’d have to call from the landline, which meant going back inside the house, taking more time...

Jenna shook her head. “I want to see the boys first.”

He nodded his understanding. One crisis at a time.

“Here’s the snowmobile.” He found it tucked next to Jenna’s car, both vehicles buried in snow. “Now I really like this guy,” he said as he knocked snow off the leather seat. It was the most expensive model he’d ever seen.

“It probably belongs to Sans Souci.” Jenna had clearly decided to withhold her approval of Annika’s new man.

“Hang on. Are you going to give Caldwell the Billy treatment?”

She laughed, her cheeks pink in the cold air. “It would serve Annika right if I did. Let’s see Mr. Caldwell handle it

half as well as you do.”

Touched, he stopped brushing snow off the machine and turned to face her. It felt, somehow, as if they’d gone through a whole lifetime of emotions over the past forty-eight hours. It was now literally impossible to make her blurry. She was crystal clear, all the way down to the streaks of tears on her face.

“You noticed.”

“Of course I did. You know she’s just being protective, and you love her like a sister, and you know how important she is to us, so you roll with her teasing. And that’s why underneath it all she loves and respects you too.”

Under his gaze, she turned pink, then shifted her attention to the snowmobile. “We won’t all fit on this. It’s built for two.”

“I’ll be the shuttle driver. If you want to wait here, I’ll go pick up Bean first, and then—”

“Oh no.” She shook her head firmly. “I’m going, too. The sooner I see the boys, the more I’ll relax. I’m not used to having them be chopper-napped by a billionaire.”

Billy helped her onto the seat of the snowmobile. He was about to take the wheel, then stopped. “Want to drive or sit shotgun?”

“Why, Billy Cooper, how egalitarian of you.” She cocked her head. “Let me think. I grew up with an eccentric artist opposed to all forms of mechanized snow transport. You grew up riding anything you could get your hands on. I’m a botanical artist, you’re a pro athlete. I think I’ll go with you being the driver. But I do appreciate the offer.”

He figured the fact that she'd gotten her sarcasm back meant that she was no longer in a state of fear. "Anytime," he said gallantly as he took the seat behind the handlebars. She put on one of the helmets dangling from the controls.

"Do you mean you'll be snowmobile chauffeur anytime, or offer to let me drive anytime?"

"Either. Both. Whatever works." He put on the other helmet, then turned the key in the ignition.

He barely heard her response over the roar of the high-performance snowmobile engine, but he was pretty sure it was complimentary. She was smiling, a tender, affectionate curving of her pretty lips.

Should he kiss her now?

No, idiot. She wanted to see the boys, not smooch on a billionaire's snowmobile.

He put the machine into gear. Her body was nestled behind his. He smiled to himself, knowing that the wind created by the speed of the snowmobile would have her clinging to him for warmth before long.

They passed Galen, who was still talking on his sat phone. Jenna waved to him and gave him a thumbs up as they passed.

Navigating Lake Bittersweet in the snowmobile was no easy matter. A few of the streets had been plowed, but most hadn't. Snowmobiles weren't normally allowed on the streets, but he'd dare anyone in town to try to stop him. Extenuating circumstances.

Snow blasted against their faces as they bumped through town. The helmets had face shields, but some snow managed to sneak in anyway. It was amazing how it managed to find

every little crevice and gap in their clothing. Jenna huddled close to him, just as he'd predicted.

It felt...perfect. Like that was exactly where she was supposed to be. Pressed up against his body, burying her shivers against him.

But if that were true, if she was supposed to be by his side, why hadn't they stayed together?

We've always been together, the thought struck him. *Just in a different way*. She'd always held the primary, the only place in his heart. No other woman had ever come close.

He'd tried, all right. After the divorce, he'd partied. He'd dated. He'd slept with several women. But he'd always felt distant from those women, as if they were strangers. None of them had stuck in his mind long enough to make an impression. No one compared to Jenna.

Other divorced men managed to meet someone new and move on. They remarried, they had new families. But he never had. It still seemed almost impossible to imagine.

We were always together.

They reached the outskirts of town and the road that curved around the lake to the eastern shore. Nothing had been plowed out there yet; there weren't enough people to warrant it. In the fresh snow, he was able to increase their speed so they flew across the billowy white surface. He heard Jenna let out a *whoop* so he joined in.

“Woohoo!!! Yeah baby!” he howled as they zoomed down the eastern shore road. Flying high, with Jenna's arms around him...nothing could be better.

“We should check on Papa,” she called over the drone of the engine.

That brought the woohoo's to an end. "Now or after?"

He could see her struggle with the answer. She wanted to see the boys more than anything, but they were obviously perfectly safe where they were. Who knew how her father was doing?

"I should have called him from the landline," Jenna fretted. "I didn't even think of that."

He decided that it was too tough for her to decide between her father and her sons. Taking things into his own hands, he swung the vehicle around and headed back toward the junction toward the Scarlett road. "Quick check, then we'll speed demon our way to the boys."

She snuggled against him gratefully. At least it felt grateful, but maybe it was just that the wind was even colder now that they'd changed direction. Either way, he couldn't get enough of that feeling—that snuggled-up, us-against-the-elements togetherness.

That was it. No one else had ever been *in things together* with him. He'd always known that Jenna was there for him, in his corner, at his side.

But had he done the same for her? Or had he just accepted that incredible gift without question? And if he somehow, miraculously, got another chance, would he do better?

twenty

Her father's property was completely still, as if a giant had settled a soft white comforter over it and everything was hibernating peacefully. But Jenna knew that when it came to her father, you never knew what might be happening inside. His mood swings didn't depend on the weather; they were related to what was going on with his painting.

Billy pulled up right outside the front door, which was made of old barn wood and blocked by an impressive snow drift. He stepped off the snowmobile and sank up to his hips in the snow.

"I suggest you stay where you are," he told her as he worked his way through the snow. "No need for both of us to get wet."

It ought to be her. It was her father they were checking on. Her responsibility. But she didn't make a move. Billy knew all about her father and his eccentricities. It was relaxing, in a way. The few times she'd dated since their divorce, she'd tried to picture introducing the guy to her father, and her brain had glitched out.

She watched his strong body wade through the snow and tried to chase away the images that had flooded her mind the second she'd settled next to Billy on the snowmobile. She

couldn't stop reliving last night. The pleasure and release that Billy had given her were...priceless. Necessary. She wasn't going to regret it. She refused to.

But that didn't mean she was going to let it happen again.

Billy pounded on the door. It opened almost immediately, letting in a cascade of snow. Her father, in robe and slippers, peered out at Billy. "Power's out," he announced.

"Yeah, it's out all over town. Feels a little cold in there. You all right?"

"I'll be okay. Can't get the fire started. No wood. Been sketching something new. Hated to take a break even for firewood."

"I'll be back in a second." Billy closed the door to keep the cold out, then trudged back to the snowmobile. "He needs some help. Firewood, heat. Lanterns. Why don't you go ahead to the boys and I'll stay here. Come pick me up when you're ready."

Jenna didn't want to leave him. She hadn't left his side in...how long? It seemed like forever, in a weird way. "I can stay with Papa instead," she began, even though every fiber of her being wanted to get to the boys.

"No. You go to Zack and Bean. They need their mother, and you definitely need them."

A flush of pure gratitude swept through her. Not just because Billy understood, but because he was willing to deal with her always-unpredictable father.

"Thanks," she whispered. Then reached out and grabbed him by the collar of his parka. His eyes flared. A moment later, his lips were on hers. God, the feeling of his mouth, so familiar but so outrageously new and...grown up...laying

claim to her...offering her his heart, his body, his soul...
Kissing her as if she was a goddess, *his* goddess, his
everything...

She parted her lips and his tongue swept inside, and pure
joy streaked through her.

“Do you know how much I’ve wanted to do that?” he
growled when they finally stopped to catch their breath.
Numbly, she shook her head.

The sound of her father’s front door opening broke the
moment.

Billy’s eyes burned into hers. “Later,” he muttered.

It wasn’t a question. She nodded. *Later.*

She watched him disappear into her father’s house.

What am I doing?

Whatever it was, it felt irreversible now. She and Billy
were headed somewhere and wherever that was, she wanted to
go there.

She slid forward to grab the controls and maneuvered the
snowmobile out of the front yard and down the driveway.
Driving by herself wasn’t nearly as fun as with Billy. She
couldn’t just lose herself in the speed and freedom. She had to
focus on the road and the snowdrifts, even though her heart
was still beating fast and furious from Billy’s kiss.

There was something different about that kiss. Almost...
determined. Mature. Focused.

She shook off thoughts of Billy and concentrated on the
drive. Alongside the road, the woods were quiet and still,
covered in sparkling snow. Even the fancy summer houses

looked humbled by the storm. Some of them looked like gingerbread houses with too much icing.

That thought made her realize she hadn't eaten since breakfast. Her stomach growled. She sorted through various meal options back at the house. If the fridge was out, there might not be much. Maybe she should bring the boys to her father's house and they could all cook up some chili or something.

But none of that turned out to be necessary, she discovered as she pulled up outside the front portico of Sans Souci, a Tudor-style home with steep eaves and at least three chimneys rising from the roof. A treehouse built into a maple tree overlooked the river; the boys would love that. Even from outside, she could smell the delicious aroma of fresh baked bread and vegetable soup. She parked the snowmobile and stepped under the portico, onto flagstones with no more than a dusting of snow.

She knocked on the mahogany door and when no one answered, she pushed it open. Had no one locked it? "Hello?"

"Mom!!" Two pairs of feet came racing down the hallway, and there they were. Her boys. Healthy and happy. The relief sank into her very bones and she kneeled on the floor to hug them both tight.

"You're okay! I missed you. I was so worried."

"You didn't have to worry," Zack declared. "Just because Annika got sick and the helicopter crash landed, doesn't mean you have to worry. We're fine, right Bean?"

Bean nodded, though he had his thumb in his mouth, which meant that some anxiety still lingered.

Jenna hugged him extra tight, so grateful to have his small body in her arms again that she could have cried.

Crash landed? When had that part happened?

“It was an adventure,” Bean said, not quite pronouncing the word right.

“I’ll say. I can’t wait to hear all about it. Can you take me to whoever’s been watching over you?”

“That would be me, mostly.” Jenna looked up to see a brightly smiling young woman with electric-blue extensions piled on top of her head. “I’m Soraya, I’m Tyler’s nanny. I’ve been taking care of these two since they showed up last night, but they’ve been no trouble at all. The boys have all been having fun. Ain’t nothing like friends during a snowstorm.”

Jenna spotted another boy hanging back behind Soraya. She guessed he was about the same age as Zack. Since he seemed on the shy side, she gave him an extra big smile. “Thanks for letting my kids hang out at your house, Tyler.”

He glanced up and gave her the sweetest smile she’d ever seen on a little boy. If his father’s smile was anything like Tyler’s, Annika was in trouble.

“Have you had any word about my sister?” she asked Soraya.

“Last I heard, they were still running tests. But I’ll give you Cal’s number and you can call him yourself. But don’t call him Cal. That’s my nickname for him.”

“Then what should I call him? I don’t even know his full name.”

Soraya gave a laugh of surprise, filling the room with warmth. “Are you telling me a strange man whose name you

don't even know took your kids for the night and magic carpet rode your sister to Minneapolis? No wonder you came out here right away."

Jenna laughed too, which was only possible because she still held her two boys close to her. "It's been a day."

"And a night. I'll say. His name is Brent Caldwell. If you want to call him right now, I'll take the boys in for their lunch." She must have caught Jenna's flash of envy, because she added, "Come to the kitchen when you're done, there's plenty. Not much else to do besides cook now that the power's out. Me and Mallory, that's the cook, we've been churning out the food. We could feed half of Minnesota by now."

She guided Jenna to the phone set on an elegant little catchall table, then shepherded the three boys out of the foyer. A set of numbers was written on a notepad next to the phone.

Jenna picked up the phone to call the mystery man who'd appeared in her life in such a bizarre way.

"Yes?" A strong male voice answered. Jenna realized her heart was hammering. She'd shoved aside worries for her sister while she dealt with everything else, but if anything happened to Annika...she couldn't even think about it. Annika was her best friend, her protector, her biggest support, the only one who knew what it was like to be raised by Richard Scarlett...

"This is Jenna Scarlett. I'm calling about Annika."

"Jenna! I'm so relieved that you called. You must be at the house now, with your kids."

"Yes, and thank you for the—"

"No need for thanks." He hurried onwards, as if he didn't like being thanked, for some reason. "You're calling about

your sister. She's okay."

"Oh, thank God." Her hands were shaking so hard she nearly dropped the phone. "What's going on?"

"They're doing some tests, and we'll know more soon. But she's awake and coherent and cussing me out for making a big deal over what might be nothing."

Then Annika was definitely okay—at least okay enough to still be herself. "You did the right thing, I'm sure," Jenna assured him. "Annika never pays attention to her own health, she thinks she's Superwoman."

"That might be part of the problem."

A stab of guilt shot through her. She was so used to leaning on Annika, had she allowed some health issue to sneak in without making her sister tend to it? Annika was always so self-sufficient and self-assured. But Jenna knew a lot of that was bravado developed from always being the "weird artist's" kid.

"Can I talk to her?"

"They won't let anyone in right now. But as soon as she can, I'll have her call you. Will you be at this number?"

She thought quickly. Her father didn't have a landline, so her only options were her own house or here. She didn't want to take a chance on missing Annika's call while zooming back and forth from her own house. "I'll stay here until she calls."

"Sounds good."

"And Brent, thank you for taking care of Annika. And my boys. And getting that snowmobile for us, that was very thoughtful."

"It's my pleasure."

But before she hung up, she had to get something off her chest.

“We could have used a note. We didn’t know what was going on until Zack called the house.”

“You didn’t find a note? Zack was supposed to write one while I was coming over with the chopper.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, never mind, then. He probably forgot and stuck it in his pocket or something.”

“That must have been scary, having no idea what was going on.”

“It’s okay,” she assured him, feeling bad about scolding him after everything he’d done. “Don’t worry about it. As soon as Zack called, it all made...well, not sense, exactly, but...”

He chuckled. “It was a crazy night. I look forward to meeting you and telling you all about it someday.”

And he was gone, before she’d even had a chance to ask him if things were serious between him and Annika. Her sister had always been such an anti-romantic. Her cynicism had even started to rub off on Jenna after the divorce.

Wouldn’t that be ironic, if the two of them traded places and Annika became the sappy-in-love sister? Jenna would be the pragmatic, jaded, self-sufficient one.

As she hurried into the kitchen to get some of that fresh bread and soup, she dismissed that thought. How could she be jaded and pragmatic when one kiss from Billy melted her to her core? Face it, she was a sap who believed in love, and always would be.

If anything, now that Annika had met a kind, thoughtful billionaire whom she clearly liked and who may have just saved her life, maybe Annika would see things Jenna's way for once.

twenty-one

Billy heard the sound of the snowmobile just as he was finishing up the stack of firewood he'd piled next to Richard Scarlett's woodstove. *Jenna*. His pulse sped up. He'd missed her while he'd been helping her father.

He'd found enough hurricane lights to keep the place lit in case the power didn't come back anytime soon. He also made Richard a grilled cheese sandwich, his go-to meal for the kids, and heated up some cans of soup.

Richard spent virtually all of that time with his current painting, which he kept muttering to as if they were having a conversation.

This was what Jenna had grown up with. Billy had known it, but he'd never experienced it for himself. It was such a strange feeling to be so completely ignored, especially while you were bending over backwards for a person. Was that why Jenna had been so eager to make her life all about *Billy's* life? No wonder she hadn't believed that she herself was important.

He called to Richard. "Jenna's back." The man gave a grunt but didn't turn around.

When he opened the door, he found Jenna looking bright-eyed and much more relaxed.

“The boys are fine,” she said quickly. “Great, actually. And I just had the *best* slice of fresh-baked bread that I’ve ever encountered in my life. Soraya’s awesome, she’s the nanny. The cook has got some serious skills. How’s Papa?”

“Wrapped up with his masterpiece. I got him all set up with light and food and heat. I asked him if he wanted to come with, but he refused.”

Jenna nodded as if that didn’t surprise her. “When the muse speaks, nothing else matters.”

“Which is bullshit. *You* mattered.”

Her eyebrows lifted, her lips quirking in amusement. “Okay. Where did that come from?”

“Oh, maybe from having to say his name six times to get his attention. And then having him brush me off even if I’m literally keeping him from freezing to death. Anyway, what’s next? I can stay here with him...”

It was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to be with Jenna and the boys, until it was time for just him and Jenna. Then he wanted to show her how important she was in every possible way, starting with her toes and moving on up to her inner thighs, and the sweet curve of her hipbone, and the belly with those beautiful silver stretch marks, and her nipples, especially her nipples...

“Billy.” Jenna snapped her fingers to bring his attention back to her—the real-life her standing in front of him instead of the fantasy naked version of her. “I came to pick you up. I think we should all stay at Sans Souci tonight. They invited us, and it’s very comfortable there. We can go home when the power comes back on. I still haven’t gotten a callback from

Annika. She's supposed to call the landline there, so I want to get back as quickly as possible."

"Is she okay?"

"Brent says that she is, for now, but they're still running tests. I guess she had some kind of seizure. The boys were describing it. Very graphically," she added, looking a little pale at the memory. "I wonder if Zack will want to be an author someday. Gory comic books, maybe. He has quite the gift."

They went to find Richard, who lit up at the sight of Jenna. "Did you come to see the canvas I finished?"

"No, Papa, and I don't have time now. Annika might call any minute, and...Are you sure you don't want to come stay at a fancy house tonight?"

He turned away, back to the canvas he was sketching on. "Nah. Come back when you're ready."

This time, Jenna drove the snowmobile while he looped his arms around her middle, enjoying the scent of fresh bread that wafted from her.

"Thanks for taking care of the Hermit."

He knew that was what she and Annika called their father, affectionately, but she'd never used that nickname with him. Maybe he'd finally earned his way into the Scarlett family club.

"It was no trouble. Well, his axe needed some sharpening. That thing's not safe. I took care of it."

"Was he freaked out by all the snow?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure he noticed it. Unless it was oil paint on his canvas, it might as well not have existed."

She laughed. “Now you know why I was able to sneak out so easily in high school. I wouldn’t even call it sneaking out because he always forgot what the rules were anyway.”

“Oh, I remember.” He gave her a little squeeze from behind. “You could even say that Zack owes his entire existence to your dad’s lack of rules.”

She gave him a quick glance over her shoulder. “Um, no. If he had any rules that kept me from seeing you, I would have broken them.”

There was no mistaking that hot look in her eyes. Thank God. Part of him had worried that she might have changed her mind while they were apart. But if anything, she seemed to have shaken off any doubts that might be holding her back.

Good.

Because he didn’t plan to give her any reason to doubt him, ever again.

As Jenna pulled up outside Sans Souci, he realized he’d been here recently. Just a couple of weeks ago he’d thought some teenagers had broken in. It must have been the Caldwell clan...but then why hadn’t anyone answered him? He shrugged it off, since obviously everything was fine now.

The boys were overjoyed to see him. They all—the three boys and the fun nanny, as he instantly nicknamed her in his mind—spent a happy evening playing games and telling stories. The boys were tired of recounting their big adventure, so the only details he got were that Annika had fallen onto the ground and started shaking. Then she’d given her phone to Zack and said, “call that number.” Her phone wasn’t working, so he’d called from the landline. That was when the helicopter had come, and—

“Oh no!” He dug in his pocket. “I forgot the note!”

Jenna and Billy both laughed, since that was such a Zack thing to do, and he’d been so brave and resourceful about the rest of it. “You had a lot on your mind, kiddo,” Billy told him. “You did great. And you kept calling the house, so we weren’t in the dark for long.”

At some point, Annika finally called and Jenna spent a long time on the phone with her. When she came back to the big game room, she was more subdued than she had been. “They still don’t know anything,” she whispered to Billy. “They’re going to stay another few nights.”

He offered her his hand, which she gripped tightly. He knew how important Annika was to her. She was important to all of them. He vowed to never take offense at one of her teasing jabs again.

Jenna’s hand dropped away from his before they reached the tight circle of game-players. She probably didn’t want to confuse the boys, or get their hopes up. He knew in his heart that they’d be overjoyed to have their parents back together. They’d adjusted to the divorce, as kids do, but he occasionally got a question along the lines of, “why can’t you stay with us when you’re here?” or “why do we all still have the same name if you’re not married anymore?”

He definitely didn’t want to face questions like “why are you holding Mom’s hand if you’re not married anymore?”

He squatted down on the floor with the rest of them and they resumed their raucous game of Exploding Kittens—one of Bean’s favorites. The boys were at an awkward age when Zack could play so many more things than Bean could, and poor Bean wanted nothing more than to compete with his big brother. With most games, he had no chance of keeping up, but

in this particular game, no one could touch him. Before long, he was jumping up and down crowing with delight because he'd beaten them all for the third time.

Billy tossed down his cards in exaggerated disgust. "How is this game harder than baseball? I haven't lost three games in a row since...well, it happened in September, but that was a fluke."

"I won again, I won again," Bean crowed.

"You shouldn't gloat." Zack was practically gnashing his teeth. "It's rude."

"He's just excited," Jenna said softly. "It's not often he gets to beat his big brother."

Zack grumbled, but when Jenna gave him a harder look, he produced a smile. "Way to go, Bean."

Jenna beamed at him, and Billy patted him on the back to add his approval of a gesture that obviously took an effort.

"It's hard being the youngest. But it can also be an advantage. I think that's why I made it in baseball, because I was so determined to keep up with my brothers that I pushed harder than anyone. I outdid everyone's expectations, especially mine."

"Not mine," declared Jenna. "I always knew you were destined for greatness."

"Knew?" Billy raised his eyebrows at her. "Or were insanely optimistic because we didn't know anything, like how low the odds were, that sort of thing."

"A little of both?" Jenna laughed.

"Hold up, hold up." Soraya, the Fun Nanny, waved both her hands in the air. "First thing, you're *that* Billy Cooper?"

“He’s that Billy Cooper!” crowed Zack. “The best baseball player in the world!”

Soraya leaned forward to whisper to Billy, “Billy *Club* Billy Cooper?”

That old nickname was like a splash of cold water. How long would it be until he could leave those days behind him for good? It had been two years since he’d even set foot in any kind of club. Not even a Sam’s Club.

“Old nickname,” he murmured. “But yes.”

“Wow. My sister is a huge fan, and I mean huge. She wrote you a letter once. You sent her a signed photo. She has it pinned on her cork-board, or she did, until she switched to hockey.”

He didn’t remember a letter, but they went through the publicity department so often he didn’t even see them. “Was it snail mail or email?”

“I mean...she wrote it out and everything. I helped her get it in the mail. She was so young she didn’t even know how to buy stamps. But she really looked up to you. She plays softball.”

“I can sign something else for her if you want,” he offered. “Snowball?”

She chuckled. “Nah, like I said, she’s all about hockey now. But she’ll love it that I met you and that you’re a cool dude. Not how—” Smoothly, she shifted gears. “Not like some major leaguers.”

He knew she’d almost said, “Not how I thought,” or something like that. Face it, he’d probably never shake the “Billy Club” rap. It was what it was.

“Thanks.”

But she wasn't done with her questions yet. When Zack and Bean ran to the kitchen for a snack, she asked them, “So you two are exes? Yeah, I'm going there, because we just played Exploding Kittens and now we're bonded.”

Jenna shared a glance with Billy, then nodded. “We like to say we're co-parents rather than exes. That way our relationship isn't referred to as something in the past. Because we're still, you know, in a relationship, just a different kind. And that's probably way too much information.”

“No. No, that's great. That's awesome that you can do that. You must both be really good exes. How do you do it?”

God, this again? Billy wished he could go eat popcorn in the kitchen with the boys.

“Well...” Jenna began, but Soraya cut her off.

“It's okay, you don't have to get into it. I know why it works.”

“Oh really?” Billy rested on one elbow and lifted his head to listen. “This is gonna be good, I can tell. Why does it work?”

“Because you're able to block out all that sexual tension.” She waved a hand between the two of them.

Billy could practically feel the heat from Jenna's blush.

“Oops, did I say the wrong thing? Cal always says I have no sense of discretion, and that he's the only billionaire chill enough to hire me. That part's true, but as for discretion, that's kind of a case-by-case thing. We bonded, y'all. I hope I didn't offend you.”

“No, no,” Billy reassured her. “We already figured out the sexual tension part for ourselves.”

“And now y’all got yourselves a dilemma, huh. Should you dip back in, or should you stick to the program like it is? Can you resist the forbidden fruit,” she added dramatically.

Jenna gave a strangled sound and jumped to her feet. “I...I should check on the kids.”

As Jenna fled into the kitchen, Fun Nanny clapped a hand over her mouth. “Shit, I’m the worst,” she said after she’d recovered. “Why’d I have to go and offend her for real? I should never have mentioned all that Billy Club stuff.”

He shrugged, though he too wished she hadn’t. “I guess I’ll never shake that nickname.”

“You had some fun, that’s all. A whole lot of fun from what they say.” She winked, her false eyelashes fanning against her cheeks.

His gut tightened. Was “fun” really the right word?

“I was young then. I like my life better now.”

“I hear that. Hey, if you need me to babysit while y’all get busy, I’m available. I’m kind of twenty-four-seven here. That’s because Cal pays me bank. Then again, that’s because I’m worth it.”

She flung her blue extensions behind one shoulder.

Billy jumped at the opportunity to change the subject from “Billy Club.” “How long have you worked for Caldwell?”

“Couple years. I’m a singer, and he’s real flexible about gigs and so forth. Most of the staff has been around a long time. He hires only the best!” She struck a pose.

“No argument here. You’re great with the boys. And the cook...wow, that bread, holy shit.”

“Mallory’s just a temporary fill-in. You should try Amy’s cooking, she’s the full-time cook. Now we might need a fill-in for the fill-in.” Mallory had gone to bed early with a fever. Billy hoped she hadn’t infected either of the boys.

“When did you all arrive here?” Maybe he could solve the mystery from his last visit to this house.

Before she could answer, a shout came from the kitchen. Soraya jumped to her feet and hurried off to tend to the crisis.

Billy’s mind wandered to the bedroom he’d picked out on the second floor. It was the farthest away from where the boys were staying. Quiet, private. Jenna had chosen one down the hall. They’d conducted an entire silent conversation using winks and head gestures. By the end, he knew she’d be coming to his bedroom later.

The thought made him both unbearably excited and also...

Terrified. Because whatever he and Jenna did, they needed to be absolutely sure about it. They had the boys to consider. It was one thing to get swept away with desire. Making a clear-eyed, sober choice was another.

All that talk about “Billy Club” from Soraya had rattled him. Maybe he didn’t have it in him to be the wise and mature man Jenna deserved. He wasn’t that kind of guy. He was just a goof-off, a decent ballplayer who liked to party too hard. In the end, maybe he was just Billy Club, and always would be.

It was almost enough for him to want a drink. But he wouldn’t go there. Not with so much on the line.

He got to his feet and paced around to calm his jumping nerves. This was the same feeling he got before a big game.

Antsy, excited, slightly sick to his stomach. But no game could possibly matter as much as this.

Jenna came back into the room, holding a big bowl of popcorn, her eyes filled with merry laughter and her fine blond hair falling from her ponytail holder.

He met her moonlight gaze and just like that, a sense of peace flooded through him. Peace and certainty.

For Jenna, he could be that man. For her, he already *was* that man.

twenty-two

Jenna tended to Bean first. Her little one needed her to cuddle with him until he fell asleep, but he was so worn out that it didn't take long. But then Zack needed to talk. He was worried about Annika, and whether he'd done everything right. After she'd reassured him that he was incredibly brave and smart, he finally dozed off.

At which point Jenna raced down the hall to the room she'd claimed. Soraya had given her a nightgown to wear, but it was so far from her usual style that it felt ridiculous. It was a floaty, silky piece of fabric with one ribbon holding it together at the front. She debated whether or not to bother with it, but her clothes were so sweaty from the long, crazy day that impersonating a Victoria's Secret model seemed like the better option, overall.

She tiptoed down the hall to the bedroom at the very end, a smallish room under the eaves that was probably considered subpar by the standards of this mansion. But since it was the most removed from the rest of the bedrooms, Billy had jumped on it.

Later...

Later was now. And her pulse was jumping like the popcorn she'd made earlier. They were doing this. They were

really doing this.

When she tapped on the door, Billy opened it, wearing an absurdly luxurious velvet robe in crushed purple. She burst into laughter. “Did Elton John leave that for a future guest?”

He struck a pose. “Looking like a true survivor,” he sang. “Feeling like a little kid.”

Giggling, she ducked past him and he closed the door behind her. The room was chilly but cozy enough, with a queen-sized four-poster bed made up with the fluffiest comforter she’d ever seen. Billy had lit a candle that burned steadily on the nightstand. The room had no curtains, but it still felt entirely private. Condensation clung to the corners of the windows. Outside, there was nothing but dark sky and probably the lake beyond that. No one else was out this way on a stormy winter night.

He caught her hand as she completed her survey of the room. “I have to talk to you.”

Talk? Her stomach tightened. She didn’t want to talk. She wanted to lose herself in the swirling excitement that had been building between them. But talking...maybe that meant he’d changed his mind. “Are you...don’t you want to...”

“No! I do. You know I do.” He put her hand against his crotch so she could feel his hardness. It sent a massive shudder of desire through her. It had been so long...and they used to have so much fun...

She bit her lip to hold back her whimper of desire. “Then what?” she whispered.

“I just want you to know something first.”

Oh God. He’d secretly married. He already had another family. He wanted them to live as a polycule of some sort. No,

he'd gotten impetigo and had weird blotches all over his body...he'd grown a tail...he'd...

"Jenna," he said sternly. "What crazy things are you thinking right now?"

"You don't want to know. Go ahead. What did you want to talk about?"

He closed his eyes briefly, as if summoning either patience or courage. Or both. Or something else. Maybe a demon. *God. Just say it. My brain is going in circles here.*

"I want you to know that I'm serious about this. Us."

"Serious?" She could feel her eyes going wide and her face flushing. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not going into this casually. It's real for me."

What did that mean? Real? Serious? He didn't mean...he couldn't mean get back together. Impossible. What if they screwed it up again? They couldn't take that chance.

She opened her mouth, not entirely sure what words would come out, but he spoke first.

"Before you come at me with a million questions, the answer is, I don't have all the answers. I just know I'm serious. Whatever that looks like, we can figure it out together."

Something was missing here. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but it felt like they'd skipped a step. Why were they all of a sudden talking about "figuring things out" when they were supposed to be having fun in bed?

She didn't want to hash things out. If they talked too much, they might stumble on an obstacle they couldn't figure out.

And then she'd be back where she started, sex-starved and craving him.

“Can't we just get into bed and see how we feel afterwards?”

He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, looking troubled. “I just think we should be really clear and honest with each other, for the sake of the boys.”

“Okay, then let's be clear.” She put a hand on his chest and pushed him toward the bed. “I have no idea what this means, us going to bed. But I want you and you want me. I don't expect anything. Neither should you. The only thing we need to do is protect the boys. They don't need to know anything yet, because this could go anywhere or nowhere. But it's definitely going nowhere unless you get that Elton John robe off your body immediately.”

He laughed, shaking his head, but he didn't resist when she untied the gold rope at the waist of his robe. Underneath, he wore nothing. Not even boxers. And lord almighty, she'd forgotten what a beautiful piece of man-art he was.

“Then I'll be honest too,” he said. “I don't know where it's going, but I know where I want it to go.”

“Is it somewhere where we can just have sex and not talk so much?”

“Not exactly, but—”

She sealed his mouth with a kiss. There was a point at which talking didn't necessarily clarify things. The mind had a way of gathering clutter, like a magnet attracting tin cans. Bodies, on the other hand...that was pure. Pure desire. Pure attraction. Pure physical need.

After a short hesitation, which felt like an eternity to her, he seemed to make up his mind. He crushed her mouth with his, using both hands to cradle her head. His hands were so strong, his grip so tender, his mouth so hungry...her head spun and she had to grip his shoulders to stay steady.

With one hand, he untied the ribbon that held her nightgown together. After the silk parted, he cupped her breast with his hand. Warm rough skin against her nipple. Her flesh filling his palm. She gasped from the delirious joy of it. They were doing this. *They were doing this.*

“You’d better steal this nightgown,” he murmured against her lips. “Either that or I’m buying you one just like it. I nearly came in my robe when I saw you.”

“If you do that, you’ll have to steal the robe too.”

He chuckled and lowered his head to drop kisses along her neck. He moved more slowly than she expected, more slowly than he used to. His deliberate pace told her he was savoring it more, as if each kiss was the most important one in the world. As if he found every inch of her skin worthy of his entire focus and attention.

Billy had always been a considerate lover. They’d learned together how to please each other, and they had always done so. He’d never left her hanging. But there was something different now. She got the sense that each moment of contact held worlds inside it. Emotion, appreciation, gratitude, an entire story of growing up and changing and learning.

That was probably just her imagination doing what it always did—going wild and confusing the hell out of her.

He reached her clavicle, and drew his tongue along the sweep of it. His warm breath on her skin made her eyelids

flutter. “Billy,” she whispered.

“Hmmm.”

But she couldn't put her question into words. What's behind that tenderness? What are you feeling? What's in your heart?

He slid the silky robe away from her shoulders and continued his parade of kisses down the middle of her chest. She should have been cold, standing there in the barely heated room. But she wasn't, not with the heat they were generating.

He paused over her heart. Surely he could feel it racing like a hyperactive bunny rabbit. He pressed a long kiss right over it, as if sending it a message. *Relax. I got this. You're in good hands.*

Tenderly, he gathered her breasts in his hands and lowered his head to worship them with his mouth. That was how it felt, as if she was his goddess and he was paying tribute to her body. Oh, the slow honey pleasure of his tongue drawn across one nipple, then the other, each breast held securely in his warm grip. Thumbs following after his tongue, warming where he'd left wetness behind. Everything was slowed down, as if he'd deliberately shifted into a lower gear. Slow jam style. A different beat, one that didn't rush, that took every moment for the thing of beauty it was.

Her head fell back and she surrendered her body to him. The part of her that wanted to race to the end took a backseat. Because she knew they'd get there. It didn't matter how long it took, or how many detours happened along the way. Billy would get her there and it would be spectacular.

“You're more beautiful than ever,” he murmured against her nipple, plump and wet from his tongue.

She gave a half-scoffing laugh. “Do go on.”

“I’m serious. Your body, your breasts, you’re more...lush. It’s beautiful.”

Lush seemed like a very kind way to say “don’t get nearly enough exercise between work and the kids,” but okay.

“This part here.” He traced her lower belly, where the flesh pooched out. “I love this so much. I want to bite it. So soft and juicy.”

He knelt on the floor and gripped her hips, then tongued his way across her belly. It was a part of her body she’d been self-conscious about ever since Bean was born. Never again would she have that flat belly she used to show off with crop tops and hiphuggers.

Maybe she’d had that all wrong, she thought as he nibbled and licked the sensitive flesh. Why should her body stay the same? Everything changed with time. Why should she look on her body with anything except appreciation for how it carried her through the world, nurtured a family...and oh, by the way, gave her so much pleasure?

She dropped the robe to the floor, letting go of the last bits of self-consciousness that had lingered ever since she’d seen Billy’s still-magnificent form. Her body had changed in the last three years, but he seemed thrilled to discover all the nuances. She wasn’t going to argue, not when it felt so good to feel his hands digging into the more bountiful flesh at her hips, and his tongue linger over her stretch marks.

This is us, he seemed to be saying. We’ve done some living and that’s a beautiful thing.

His mouth reached the nest of curls covering her sex. Her thighs trembled with the shock of desire. He shifted his hands

to her ass so he could tilt her just so. Like that, standing naked in the candlelight, she gave herself to his eager searching lips and tongue.

With that same slow deliberate pace, he made his way to the beating pulse of her desire, the tight bundle of nerves that jumped and throbbed in anticipation of his touch. And there it came. The scrape of tongue across her clit. She gasped as pleasure seared across her vision. *It's been so long.* How had she lived without this feeling? This bliss?

She shoved aside the thought, along with all other thoughts. The only thing that mattered was the slow swirl of his tongue exploring her most intimate core. Then the fingers sliding inside her, one, two, three big knuckles brushing against her clit, which was still under sensual assault from that wicked tongue...

She plunged her hands into his hair, to steady herself, to keep him from stopping, to urge him on, to thank him, she didn't even know what. But she was in no danger of falling, because he still kept one strong hand tight on her ass and...she could trust him. She could let herself go, let these wild sensations catapult her into a frenzy.

But not until he picked up the pace, which she desperately wanted and needed. Moving on their own, her hips clenched and ground against his mouth.

"Shhh," he murmured against her clit. The vibration nearly sent her out of her mind. But she got the message. *It'll come. Let it come.* So she forced herself to take a breath and abandon herself to the rhythm of his strokes. So good. So good. *Oh my god.*

It was building, a thunderdome of lightning on the horizon, sweeping across the landscape of her body, clearing everything

in its path. As he fucked her with his fingers, he sucked her clit with a deep fierce greed...and then he wasn't going slow anymore, he was giving her every bit of the friction she needed and she couldn't even keep up, her body was taking over and then the whole world erupted into flashes of brilliant light and mind-shattering pleasure and she was bucking against his mouth in a small corner room in a random lakeshore estate she'd never been to before and somehow this moment was always going to happen.

Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a castle near a lake...

She was weeping, she realized as she came back to herself. Tears of release and happiness stained her face. *It had been so long. She loved this man so much.*

How had she fooled herself for so long? She loved Billy. She needed Billy. She wanted Billy.

twenty-three

Having his head deep between Jenna's thighs while she came against his mouth...*oh yeah*. The satisfaction went deep. The ripples of her orgasm kept going and going, and he did his part to keep it that way. It had taken them so long to get to this place. Maybe he'd been trying to get here ever since they'd agreed to part ways. Now he was going to enjoy every last second of it.

But she had other ideas. As the pulse of her climax faded, she pushed his head away from her. He glanced up, surprised, her taste still on his tongue, as she pulled him to his feet. "On the bed," she commanded.

Commanded.

That was new. So was that fierce look in her eyes, and the traces of tears on her cheeks. This was a different Jenna, someone who'd been through some shit and was out to claim whatever pleasure she could.

He was here for it.

He stretched out on the bed and linked his hands behind his head. She jumped onto the bed after him, her body damp with sweat and flushed from her orgasm. The way her chest turned pink after she came...he'd always loved that. On all fours, she crawled on top of his body and straddled him.

“Were you crying?” he asked softly, extracting one hand so he could run a thumb across her cheekbone.

“You know me. A lot of things get me teary-eyed.”

“Are these good ones?” He cupped her cheek and searched her eyes. They were dark, pupils dilated, almost mysterious.

“Yes. I...” She wrenched her gaze away from his and ran her hands down his chest. Her soft touch sent ripples of reaction across his skin. “I forgot what it’s like to be close to you like this.”

“We were close last night at the hotel.”

“I remember.” A slow smile curved her lips. “But you weren’t inside me.”

“I still haven’t gotten inside you, and it’s fucking killing me.”

That smile widened, grew more naughty. “Your fingers just were.” She dipped her head toward his cock, which reared up between his legs like a soldier desperate for attention. When her warm mouth closed around his tip, his entire body jumped. She gave him long gentle suckles that stole his breath away.

“Now your penis has been inside me,” she murmured when she came up for air. And licked her lips.

His jaw flexed. He wanted his penis inside her body, deep inside the heat and softness he could already feel in his muscle memory. But her mouth was good too. He lifted his hips, eager for more. With a sassy smile, she gave him what he wanted. More licking, more sweet wet suction of his cock until it was so hard and thick it could probably take off from his body like a bottle rocket.

Then she pulled herself up straight, her lips still wet. “Do exes need to use condoms?”

“I don’t care what exes do, but I’ll do whatever’s best. Are you still on birth control for your period?” Ever since Zack, she’d needed help to keep her periods from being too painful. When she’d missed a month, she’d wound up pregnant with Bean, but then had gone back to it. But his days of knowing these intimate details about her were over.

“Yes. We’re fine that way. But...”

He knew what that hesitation meant, that slight narrowing of her eyes. She wanted to know just how active he’d been over the past three years. And how reckless.

“Do you want the detailed version or the thumbnail that says I’m clean and haven’t slept with anyone in over a year?”

“A year?” The surprise on her flushed face would have put a damper on things if he wasn’t way past that point. Then she waved the topic away. “That’s good enough for me. Long version later.”

He grinned. “It’s a date.”

“I don’t know if I’d call that a date,” she began, then squealed as he tumbled her off his body and flipped her onto her back. He pinned her arms to the side.

“It’s a date. Say it’s a date. Say, yes Billy, we’re going to have a date.”

At first she was giggling too much to say the words. He nudged his left leg between her thighs, found the damp hot flesh, pressed. She gasped and arched her back. He plunged his hand where it had been before and felt the pulses and flutters and juice that told him she still wanted him. “Say it,” he ordered.

“We’re going on a date,” she gasped.

He grinned down at her. “That’s all you had to say. Now we’re going to fuck.”

She bit her lip, arched her chest toward him. He nipped at her nipples, found one and sucked hard. He wanted her with a violent need that would have scared him if he hadn’t known how to control it. He just had to focus. Not move too fast, not plunge his cock into her the way he wanted...ah, fuck it.

He pulled his hand out of her wet body and drove into her. With a strangled cry, she wrapped her legs around his ass and bucked against him. She wanted it hard, he could tell, just as hard and intense as he did. He plunged into her, again and again, showing her with each stroke just how hot she made him, how hard he was for her, only for her, always for her.

They moved together like one sweat-soaked being, the same thrusting rhythm taking over their bodies as if it had control, not them. They were just the lucky ones along for the ride. He went deep, so deep, aiming for her core, wanting to lose himself inside her, to join with her and melt together with her. Her breath was hot against his neck, her flesh slick and glorious, her whimpers like music.

He came explosively, suddenly, with absolutely no damn control at all. His orgasm triggered one for her, the flutters of it gripping his penis and sending more jolts of pleasure all the way up his spine. The best feedback loop ever.

Afterwards, he wrapped that ridiculous robe around himself again and padded down the chilly hallway to the bathroom. He found a washcloth, soaked it in warm water, then hurried back to Jenna. She allowed him to gently pat the sweat from her body. Like a rag doll, she flopped her limbs wherever he guided her.

“You always did turn into a big blob of jelly after sex,” he teased her as he ran the washcloth between her legs.

“Did you just call me a big blob?” She shivered, probably because the washcloth was cold by now.

He tossed the cloth onto the nightstand. “That’s me, always the sweet-talker.”

She laughed, lifted an arm, then let it drop. “I am jelly and it’s all your fault. You turned a normal-ish, mostly functional human being into pure jelly.” Her eyes were drifting shut. He gave her a light swat on the ass to rouse her.

“Don’t you want to pee before you go to sleep?”

That had always been one of her strictest protocols, since she was prone to UTIs.

“Ugh. You’re such a mean ex. Why couldn’t you have forgotten all those gory details?” Grumbling, she rolled onto her side, then onto her front, then off the bed. He knew his woman. “Can I borrow your swanky robe? It’s cozier than that cobweb I was wearing.”

“Elton says it’s all yours.”

“Thanks, Elton. I always did love you.” Wrapped in the robe, which was so big on her she had to lift the hem off the floor, she skipped out of the room.

He pulled back the covers and climbed in, spread-eagling his arms and legs so he could warm both sides of the bed. Would they claim the same sides they used to? He’d always been on the left, her on the right, closer to the door. That made it easier for her to slip out to tend to a kid who needed attention. Sometimes one of the kids needed to climb into bed with them, in which case he’d nestle in the middle.

Jenna had told him that Bean still did that occasionally, after a bad dream or a difficult day at school. He'd felt a stab of pure envy and nostalgia since he'd loved the coziness of those moments, the feeling of deep peace and slumber.

When she'd first talked about divorce, he'd thought, ever so briefly, about fighting for custody. And then he'd banished the thought forever. The best thing he'd done for the boys was to spare them and Jenna a custody battle. He'd trusted that she would let the boys see him as much as they—and he—needed, and that was exactly what she'd done.

When she came back, closing the door behind her, she paused at the look on his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I was just thinking...” *I love you. You're a remarkable human being and I'm so grateful.* “Thanks.”

“For the awesome sex? Sure thing, man.” All jaunty, she hopped toward the bed and bounded onto it. “If you didn't warm my side up, I will...” He moved aside to make room for her. After flinging aside the robe, she dove under the covers with a deep sigh. “You warmed my side. You're a hero.”

Her body nestled against his. Her skin had chilled from that short trip to the bathroom. “Cold night. It must be close to zero out there.”

“Hmmm.” Her contented tone told him she didn't care what temperature it was outside.

“Think the boys are warm enough?”

“The rest of the house is perfectly warm. We're the only ones in Siberia here.”

“Good thing, too, with the noises you were making.”

She swatted his chest, but the motion had no energy behind it. She was already yawning, and would probably be asleep in a matter of moments. He caught her hand against his chest. “I wasn’t thanking you for sex.”

“Oh. Was it not to your satisfaction?”

He snorted to show how ridiculous that question was. “I was thanking you for being the person that you are. For everything. From the moment we met until the moment you kicked me to the curb, to this moment now. I’m incredibly grateful for you. No matter what happens.”

She was quiet for a time and he thought maybe she’d fallen asleep. But then she spoke. “I feel the same. But I didn’t kick you to the curb. I’m sorry if that’s how it feels.”

He turned on his side to face her and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear so he could see her face. “What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t really about you. It was *me*. I put so much of myself into you, and then you were out there doing your thing, and that was all wonderful, I was just as proud as if I was the one hitting home runs. But then I started hearing rumors and reading things in the paper and I...I just couldn’t keep myself together.”

“You were jealous. I get it. But—”

“No no, that’s the thing. I mean, yes, I was jealous. But that was the obvious part, the easy part to figure out. It was easy to be jealous and mad and angry at you. The hard part was *me*. I told you before that I didn’t feel like a whole person. I felt torn apart, like there was nothing there where *I* was supposed to be. I had to...pull back from *you* and figure out how to be me. Me without you.”

Afraid to move a muscle, he listened closely to every word. At the time of their divorce, she'd never been able to fully explain her need to not be married to him anymore. She'd focused on his partying and the rumors of girls, and he had no answer to that other than to assure her that he hadn't cheated.

But he'd danced with other women, gotten drunk with other women. Once he got some drinks into him, he was Billy Club. He couldn't blame her for not wanting to be married to that man anymore. So he hadn't fought the divorce. Through the din of new fame and applause and an alcohol haze, he'd heard the pain in her voice. He'd listened to that, and given her everything she asked for.

Now he was even more glad that he had.

“Do you still feel that way? That you're not a whole person?” He found himself holding his breath for her answer. If she did still feel like that, then the two of them had no chance. He wouldn't Bigfoot into her life again.

“You know...I really don't.” She rolled onto her side to face him. The candlelight made her eyes glow such an incredible shade of moonlight gray that he was sorry there was no artist present to record it. “I have a lot more confidence now than I used to. I hope you don't mind.”

“Why the hell would I mind?”

“Because in any given situation I might think I know better than you. And I'll probably be right.” Her impish smile gave him life.

“Fuck yeah, you will be. I've been saying that for a while. Quietly, to myself.” He laughed as she pounced on top of him

and began to pummel him mercilessly. “No fair, you’ve been learning fighting techniques from the boys.”

“That’s right. Never back down, never surrender, until Mommy shows up and ruins all the fun.”

“She’d better not ruin this fun.” He slid his hands onto her ass and squeezed. He loved the way her satiny cheeks felt under his palms. He molded the curve of her waist and brought his thumbs to her ribs. Her breasts quivered from her quickened breathing. He blew a stream of warm air onto one nipple and watched it pucker.

“Bring it here,” he ordered in a low, thick voice. Lust was gathering hotly in his cock, making it stir from its sleepy state. “Bring those beautiful breasts down here so I can suck you senseless.”

She shifted on his hips and noticed that stiffening rod against her inner thigh. “You want to go again?” The surprise in her voice made him chuckle deep in his throat.

“You bet I do.”

“But it must be way after midnight. Maybe almost dawn. I have actually no idea what time it is. Where’s my phone? Where’s yours?”

“Shhh. Don’t worry about that. Just come on down here.” He put a hand on her sleek back and drew her toward him. When her nipple came into his mouth he closed his eyes at the fleshy satisfaction of it. He suckled deep until he heard her moan and felt her body soften and stretch under his hands.

Oh yeah, he definitely wanted to go again.

He and Jenna had a lot of time to make up for.

twenty-four

In the winter wonderland that was Lake Bittersweet after an early blizzard, Jenna and Billy couldn't keep their hands off each other. Everywhere they went, they somehow managed to sneak away and make out like overgrown teenagers. On their way to Brenda's grandmother's wedding, they snuck down an alley and kissed behind the Lake Bittersweet Wilderness Adventures office. Who cared if they were a little late to CeCe and Blaine's wedding? Not Jenna.

Once the town had gotten the roads cleared, they took the boys sledding. As Zack and Bean hurtled down the hill, screaming bloody murder, Jenna felt Billy's hand on her ass. Even through snow pants and long underwear, her flesh heated and her insides melted. Instant dreams about what they might do later that night careened through her brain.

With Annika still in Minneapolis, Billy more or less moved in. Officially, he was helping out with the boys. Unofficially, he came to Jenna's room after the kids were asleep and they pleased each other until they couldn't stay awake any longer. During the day, Jenna existed in a state of either sleep deprivation or sex-bliss, or maybe both.

When Billy wasn't hanging out with the kids while she raced to meet her deadline, he threw himself into the town's

recovery efforts. He volunteered to drive a plow truck to help the crews still clearing some of the more remote roads. Every evening he came home exhausted and sweaty, but exhilarated from the time spent in the snow.

And raring to go another round between her sheets.

Jenna spoke to Annika every day. Hearing her sister's voice roughened from all the tests and oxygen masks and stress was difficult. But other than that, Annika was her typical wry self.

"Why is it that I never get sick, but when I finally do, it's something no one can fucking figure out?"

"That's my sis," Jenna said proudly. "Unique. One of one. The only one. Someone should write a song about you."

"Goddamn, how do you find something positive in every situation? How are we even related?"

"Maybe we're two sides of the same coin, and now the coin has flipped."

"What? I'm on too much medication to understand what you're talking about."

"You were always the one who didn't believe in love, but now you're the one who's being taken care of by a besotted billionaire."

"Besotted?" Annika crowed with laughter, then coughed. "Brent, did you hear that? You're besotted."

"What did he say?" Jenna pressed when Annika's end of the call went silent for too long a time.

"Oh. Nothing." From her sister's flustered tone, Jenna had a pretty good guess. Yes, he was besotted. So was Annika, in Jenna's opinion, though she wasn't quite ready to admit it.

“Do you know yet when you can come home? If it’s too much longer we’re all going to come to you.” She and Billy had already discussed piling the entire family in the Tacoma and driving back to Bemidji for another flight to the Twin Cities.

“The doctor promised I’d be home by Christmas. Tyler’s the one who’s happiest about that. I feel terrible keeping his dad away from him for this long. But he wanted to stay in Lake Bittersweet instead of coming to the Twin Cities, so Brent let him.”

“He’s been playing with Zack and Bean a lot. They’re having a blast.” Every day, Zack would ask if they could hang out with Tyler, so Jenna would call up Fun Nanny—the nickname Billy had given her—and they’d arrange something. They often stayed for dinner too. Apparently Tyler had never before eaten macaroni and cheese with cut-up bits of hot dog, which was Zack’s personal favorite.

“Yes, I know, and thank you for that. Brent thanks you too.”

“It’s no trouble. The boys love him. It’s funny because he’s closer to Zack’s age, but in some ways he clicks more with Bean. Zack remains the leader of the pack, which is how he likes it. Bean gets a little extra backup in certain situations, and I think Tyler likes how they compete over who gets to be his friend. It’s an interesting sort of cousin dynamic.”

“Man, I miss everyone so much,” Annika moaned. “Please don’t tell me they’ve grown six inches since I’ve been gone.”

“You’ve only been gone a week.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

Jenna laughed. “No one’s grown six inches. Nothing changes that fast.”

But something had. Something big. She debated telling Annika all about her and Billy’s new relationship phase, but she didn’t. For one thing, she didn’t have a label for it. It was “serious” and “real,” according to Billy. But they were still feeling their way toward what that meant for their lives.

She loved him. That much she knew. But was she ready to be in a relationship with him again?

Besides, after three years of listening to Jenna talk about her Rules for Divorce, her sister might lose all respect for her since she’d broken them all over the past week.

“So if you’re coming home by Christmas, will you be here with us, or somewhere else?” Jenna was trying to be delicate about it, but what she really meant was, “are you holiday-official with this new billionaire boyfriend of yours?”

“Well, Brent was hoping that you’d consider bringing the boys out to Sans Souci. He has the staff already working on a meal plan and decorations and so forth.”

Jenna couldn’t help it; she let out a spurt of delighted laughter.

“What?”

“Your new boyfriend has a ‘staff’.”

“He’s not...he doesn’t...” Annika gave up and dissolved into laughter right along with Jenna. “His staff is excellent, by the way. Very hard-working and effective.”

“Oh my God.” Jenna laughed even harder. “I’ll talk to Billy about it,” she managed when she finally got a grip on herself. “About Christmas, not the hard-working staff.”

“Billy? Why does it depend on him?”

Oops. Her amusement had made her relax too much. “He’s their dad and they want to see their dad on Christmas.”

“Yes, of course, but...something’s different. Just the way you said that. ‘I’ll talk to Billy about it.’ It’s the kind of thing you’d say when you were married.”

“You’re overthinking it.” Irritated, Jenna colored in the fallen linden branch that she was using as a backdrop for her *Hygrophorus Waxy Cap*. The tip of her pencil snapped, leaving a gouge in the paper. “Or maybe it’s all that medication you’re on.”

“Low blow. Hey, what’s happening with Japan? Is Billy going to play overseas?”

“We don’t know yet. Billy’s getting nervous because his agent isn’t returning his calls. He feels like something’s up.”

“Do you still want him to go?”

“I...I mean...sure...” Annika’s direct question had Jenna totally flustered. Did she still want Billy to leave? Honestly...no.

She closed her sketchbook and shoved it aside. That pit in her stomach was back, the one that kept trying to warn her about getting involved with Billy again.

Mercifully, Annika changed the subject. “How’s the Hermit? Has he even noticed I’m gone?”

“I haven’t seen him since right after the storm. He wants me to admire his latest masterpiece, but he hasn’t asked once about my mushroom guide. I’m just...well, a little fed up, I guess.”

“You know what? I’m proud of you for saying that. It’s good to see you speak up for yourself.”

Jenna was still smiling over that wonderful compliment when Annika ruined the whole thing.

“I’m getting tired, so I’m going to hang up now. But I’ve been hearing some things from Lake Bittersweet about Billy. I’m sure it’s all bullshit, and I nearly bit someone’s head off over it. But I wanted to warn you...sorry, the nurse just got here. I have to go. Bye! Love you!”

Jenna couldn’t get her focus back after that. What kind of things was her sister hearing? Ugh, this was almost like the old days, when rumors would fly around and people would give her funny looks and her stomach would tie itself into knots.

No. She wasn’t that anxious girl anymore. Whatever it was, she could handle it.

Billy had taken the boys and Tyler for a cross-country ski, and they weren’t due back for another hour. She decided it was as good a time as any to finally check on her father.

She hopped in her car and drove through town. Most of the downtown businesses had finally gotten their holiday decorations in place. All the cheerful twinkle lights made everything look bright and happy. She especially loved the golden trumpet-bearing angels outside city hall. As she passed the SweetBitter Café, she noticed a sign for the special of the day, a peppermint mocha.

That was exactly what she needed to get through this visit to her father. She pulled up to the curb and hurried inside, where sparkling snowflakes dangled from the ceiling and silver tinsel adorned the espresso machine.

As soon as she walked in, Rick Gonzalez, the owner, looked up from the drink he was foaming and mouthed “don’t leave,” to her.

She placed her order with the girl working at the counter, who she didn’t recognize. But for some odd reason, the barista seemed to know her. She giggled as she wrote her name on a to-go cup.

“Do you mind if we take a selfie?” she asked as Jenna handed over payment for her mocha.

“Um...you mean...me and you? Two total strangers?” But she didn’t object when the girl pulled out her phone and took a quick photo. Maybe she’d just started the job and was memorializing her very first peppermint mocha.

Cup in hand, she stopped at the end of the counter and waited for Rick to join her.

“Happy special holiday foamy drink season,” she told him, lifting her cup in a toast.

But the normally chatty Rick didn’t smile back. “I need some guidance, sweetie.”

“Guidance?”

“What I’m supposed to tell all the people asking if Benna is a thing again?”

She cringed at the mention of that silly name from high school. “It really should have been Jelly.”

“And we were all jelly of you guys. Anyway, be that as it may, I need an official approved statement. Consider me your public spokesperson, since everyone else seems to think that’s what I am. All I want to do is run a coffee shop, but apparently I’m a news source.”

Jenna patted him on the shoulder. “Tough life. But you know you love being the one who knows what’s going on.”

“*Es verdad,*” he admitted.

“Wait, that’s actual Spanish.”

Rick was famous for making up his own Spanish-sounding exclamations.

“*Si,* I finally started to learn my own mother tongue. *Lingua de madre.* I’m on day sixty-two of my Duolingo streak. That’s five ahead of Billy, who is...what to you again? Ex? Ex-ex? Triple ex-ex?”

“If you’ve seen Billy, why don’t you ask him what to tell people?”

“I did. His answer had more than my standard quota of obscenities.”

With a sigh, Jenna took the lid off her mocha and blew on it to cool it down. “Does ‘no comment’ work?”

“Only if you want people to keep speculating.”

“Won’t they do that no matter what?”

“*Es verdad,*” he admitted.

“I think you have that particular phrase down,” Jenna said dryly. “How about this. ‘Don’t you have better things to worry about the week before Christmas?’”

“You’re killing me. Of course the rumors are flying. You two were the Lake Bittersweet golden couple. The baseball prodigy and his high school sweetheart.”

“Personally, I like to think of us as ‘the amazing botanical artist and her boy toy.’” Jenna took a sip of her mocha,

wondering how she'd ever thought she and Billy could keep things secret in Lake Bittersweet.

“So he's your *boy toy* now? Can I use that?” He was practically drooling at the prospect.

“Rick, get a grip. You can not. Why are people talking about us, anyway? Is it that magazine article? That reporter can't be trusted, she drank too much brandy after she fell into the ice.”

“Are you serious?” He paused, then frowned at her. “Are you telling me you don't know?”

“Know what?”

“Oh shit. I figured you guys knew and were sticking to radio silence.”

“Rick, what are you talking about?”

He whipped out his phone from the pocket of his apron. “There's this account on Instagram that's been posting photos. It's called BillyFan103225. Who knew there were so many Billy fans? Anyway, it's been posting photos every couple days and hash-tagging Lake Bittersweet.”

He handed her the phone, cued to the account in question. She scanned the grid of photos. One shot was taken from behind, Billy jogging down the road, the focus on his sweatpants-covered ass. Another showed Billy bare-chested, taking a swig from a water bottle. So far, the standard “thirst trap” type shots.

Then things got weird. She stopped on a shot of Billy kissing a woman's hand. He was dressed in the Dior suit he'd worn to the Helping Hands dinner, standing in the lobby of the hotel they'd gone to. That woman had to be her; it was her

dress, her body. But it wasn't her head. She didn't have red hair or a nose ring.

Photoshop?

But the next photo was definitely her. In this one, she was tumbling into Chelsey's lap. But somehow the photo made it look like she and Chelsey were about to make out. It looked so much naughtier than the actual incident.

Who had taken these? And who had altered some of them? There had been official photographers at the dinner, but what about the others?

She scanned through more photos...in one of them, she and Billy were kissing behind the Lake Bittersweet Wilderness Adventures office. This one hadn't been altered. There they were, clear as day, kissing passionately.

But the next one had been photoshopped. This photo chilled her to the core. It was a blurry shot through the bedroom window of Sans Souci. The candlelight was dim, the scene romantic and sexual...Billy's bare back from behind, his head just barely blocking her breasts, her head thrown back, face impossible to make out, but the hair...jet black.

Heart racing, she handed the phone back to Rick. "Who took these?"

"I don't have the foggiest. No one does. I suppose it's a fan, like it says."

"It's not a fan. Why would a fan post these? Some of them are altered, manipulated. They're making it look like..."

They were making it look like Billy was fooling around. With her *and* with other women.

"Why didn't anyone tell me about this?"

Rick clasped his hands to his chest. “So sorry, *amiga*, I thought you knew. Everyone’s been tagged. Even Billy.”

There was no way Billy had seen these. He didn’t tend to check social media in the off season, or at least she hadn’t seen him do so lately. She wasn’t even on social media. It had caused her way too much angst when she and Billy were married.

Her hands were shaking as she put the lid back on her mocha. “Will you keep an eye on that account and let me know when it posts again? And what they post? I’m not on any of those sites. And let people know someone’s altering these shots. They’re not real. This could do real damage to Billy.”

“Absolutely. Least I could do.”

“If you see any clues about who it could be, call me right away.”

“Well, there’s already a big clue.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “What?”

“It’s someone who’s here right now. One of the shots shows my Christmas decorations, which I just put up yesterday. But I don’t think it’s someone who lives here. The account just started recently. You let me know if you need anything else, *chiquita*. *Mi casa es su casa*.”

“Yeah, okay.” She pulled on her mittens, then paused. “Wait, does ‘mi casa es su casa’ even apply here?”

“I’m doing the best I can, babe. It’s still a foreign language, no matter my last name.”

They exchanged a quick hug goodbye, and Jenna headed back to her car. A wind had come up that tunneled down the

main street like spinning knives made of ice. Even the few moments it took to reach her car left her shivering and shuddering. She was too shaken up to deal with her father now, so she headed for home.

As soon as she'd warmed up enough, she called Billy.

"Where are you?"

"Almost home. We're half frozen. We were fine until we stopped to make a fire in the snow. Would have been better to keep moving." His deep voice was always so reassuring. She felt herself relax even though nothing had changed, this was still a crisis in the making.

"Am I on speakerphone?"

"Yes, do you want to say hi to the boys?"

"Yes, but we have to talk later, Billy. It's important."

"Looking forward to it."

The tone of his voice told her they'd definitely be doing more than talking.

She poured cheery energy into her next words. "Hey, my favorite snow lizards! How was your ski?"

The boys all talked at once, and her thoughts wandered back to the photos.

They kept running through her mind after she hung up the phone. The violation was a shock, and so was the fact that some of them had been altered. Someone had an agenda, and they'd roped her into it, and it felt terrible and disorienting.

But something else had jumped out at her from those photos. She looked...happy in them. So had Billy. They looked happy together, happier than she'd been in a long time.

twenty-five

Billy had known something serious was going on by the tension in Jenna's voice. But still, the call from Pete right after he got the boys settled in with hot chocolate was a shock.

"Brace yourself. Someone's posting shots of you playing the field. Not the baseball kind."

"I'm not playing any fucking field. What the hell?"

"Then what are you doing? 'Cuz they're making it look real bad. I mean, real bad. I'm doing my best, but you can probably kiss Japan goodbye."

Try as he might, Billy couldn't bring himself to care about Japan right now. What if Jenna saw those photos?

"It's a lie. I'm not doing anything. I'm hanging out with Jenna, that's it."

"Then you better hope she doesn't see these, because wow. Billy Club is back, baby."

A deep rage flooded Billy. If a bunch of lies torpedoed his career, he'd live with that. If they killed his relationship with Jenna... "Unless you want to get fired right this minute, you'll never use that name again."

"Got it," Petey said after a minute. It was so rare that Pete's motormouth ever slowed down that it took a moment

for Billy to continue.

“Can you find out who’s doing this? I need to know who’s fucking with my life.”

“How would I...” he cleared his throat, changing course. “I’ll see what I can do. I’ll put my tech guy on it. But you should watch yourself. Someone’s following you around with a camera and a nasty agenda. The good thing is that so far, *The Dugout* isn’t touching it.”

“Can you make sure they don’t? Tell *The Dugout* I’ll give them an exclusive first chance I get.”

“Got it.”

He hung up and went back to the living room, where the three boys were arguing over who had the best whipped cream beard. He should probably tell them not to play with their food, but he was too sick at heart to bother.

How could he put Jenna through this again? The blog headlines and social media posts had torn them apart last time. He couldn’t expect her to tolerate it now, when they weren’t even married anymore.

He had to take some kind of action. Otherwise he’d go crazy. His mouth was dry from fear, so he went into the kitchen to get some water. A movement from outside caught his attention. He rushed to the window and spotted the flash of a red cardinal against the snow.

Idiot. Afraid of a cardinal and not even the baseball kind.

But the moment reminded him of Sans Souci, and the time he’d spotted movement there. Maybe that was a clue. He pulled out his phone and called Gina Moretti.

“Hey, it’s Billy Cooper. Are you still working with Dream Getaways?”

“No, but I’m still close to Sally. What’s up?”

“I need to find out who was at Sans Souci on the first Tuesday of December. I’m pretty sure it was before the Caldwells arrived, and I know their security systems are topnotch. It wasn’t a break-in.”

“I’ll see what I can find out. And Billy...hang in there.”

Obviously she’d seen the infamous photos. He gritted his teeth. “Thanks.”

Next he called Archie. “Hey man, remember when a girl came to the bar asking for me? I need to know everything you remember about her.”

He heard Jenna’s car drive up, and went out in the snow to greet her. Then he remembered that someone might be watching, and snapping photos.

Clearly, she had the same fear, since she hurried into the house and refused to talk about anything serious until the boys were asleep and the two of them were closed up in her bedroom, blinds down, curtains closed.

“Pete’s investigating,” he said immediately. “He texted me already with some info. He talked to a psychologist who thinks it’s someone with a fixation on baseball players.”

She let out a long breath. “So you heard.”

“Pete told me. He, uh, sent me some of the shots. I’m so sorry, Jenna.”

He braced himself for her anger, her hurt. Head up, shoulders back, no way around it.

“It’s not your fault,” she said softly. Her gray eyes were the color of doves, the color of mercy. “Some of those shots were faked. The others were...I mean, they’re us.”

“Yes, but—”

“Billy. It’s not your fault.” She came closer to him, put her arms around him. “I can tell you’re beating yourself up. Please don’t do that. I know you’re not doing anything wrong.”

With a groan of sheer relief, he clutched her to him and held her against his body. Her hair smelled of snow and lemons, and her body was warm and alive and she didn’t hate him, wasn’t angry at him...

She looked up at him, her face showing the stress from the day and all its revelations. If nothing else, maybe he could do something about that. “You’re so beautiful,” he said as he set her down on the bed.

Her lips curved in a soft breath of a smile. “I’m really glad you think so.”

“I want you to think so too. I want you to understand how incredible you are, and how much...” He wanted to tell her how much else was in his heart, how very connected he felt to her, how there was no one else in the world who would ever make him feel the way she did.

But words felt so insufficient. He decided to show her instead. He gently pushed her back until she was lying on the bed. “Let me take care of you,” he murmured as he pushed up her shirt.

He heard a sigh overhead; that was all he needed.

He swirled his tongue around the raised rim of her navel. The original scar, he thought, the one every human being

experienced at the very beginning of life. *We're all scarred. How do we live with our scars?*

He tugged down her pants and pushed aside the elastic of her underwear and slid his finger across her soft mound. She moaned as he zeroed in on her clit. The little bundle of flesh rose to meet the pad of his thumb. Her thighs trembled.

He murmured words against her clit, unsure if she could hear them. "It's you and me, baby. Whatever, whenever."

She tilted her head back and whimpered toward the ceiling. He pulled her clothes further down her legs so he could get unimpeded access to her juicy core. Using the flat of his tongue, he rasped friction across her pulsating clit. Her hips pumped, hot, needy.

She was about to come, but he didn't want her to yet. He wanted to draw this out as long as possible.

Why. Was this it? The last time?

He dismissed that fear and tugged her to the edge of the bed, then pulled her onto his lap. Anchoring her against him with one arm, he used his legs to spread hers apart. Cool air flowed against her sex.

A tremor raced through her body.

"Billy," she moaned.

"Right here, baby. I got you." *I always will.*

"That feels so good."

Of course it did. He knew what his woman wanted, he knew what she needed. In bed and out.

"Please, Billy."

"I got you," he repeated.

He stroked her until she bucked against his hand like a wild mustang, until she nearly slid off his lap from the force of her orgasm.

Then he let her push him back down on the bed and climb on top of him. He was rock hard for her already. She straddled him while he pulled her sweater all the way off her body. Pulled her bra down, crushed her breasts in his hands.

Wild for each other, they fucked like two desperate creatures who might never get another chance at pleasure.

Stop thinking like that.

He lost track of time, immersing himself in the sweaty bang of their two bodies colliding, joining, straining. Then Jenna twisted her hips in that particular way that always made him come, and he had no way to stop himself. He emptied himself into her, feeling so good, so complete, and yet so uncertain.

Why did he keep thinking about the end?

“Talk to me, Jenna,” he whispered when they were in each other’s arms, hearts still racing, his stomach in knots. Had he succeeded in helping her to relax? “Are you okay?”

“To be honest, I don’t know, Billy. I keep thinking about the boys.”

“What about them? They settled their whipped cream beard contest peacefully. Tyler came up with separate categories.”

But she didn’t laugh the way she usually would have. Sitting upright, she looked at him with troubled eyes. “Are we being irresponsible parents?”

“What do you mean?” The kids were happy and healthy and about a thousand times better off than he’d ever been growing up.

“We got married so young. Then we couldn’t emotionally handle your baseball success. So we got divorced. Now we’re sleeping together and someone’s stalking us and taking pictures. I keep thinking, what if they go after the boys?”

“There weren’t any photos of the boys that I saw.”

“I know. That’s the first thing I checked. But we don’t know what’s behind all this. I feel...very exposed. And even if I could handle it, I don’t want the boys to get in the middle of it.”

His heart shriveled up...he could practically feel it shrinking inside his chest cavity. He could win over Jenna in bed, no problem. But when it came to the boys, protecting them would always come above her desires.

He cupped her face in one hand. “Sweetheart, we’ll find who’s doing this. I promise. I’m not going to let anyone hurt the boys, or you. I’m here and I *will* protect you.”

“I know you’ll always do what’s best for them. But what if...I think what’s best...”

He could see her summoning her courage. “Whatever you need to say, you can say it.”

She gave a sound that was part sob, part laugh. “You might hate me.”

Through the sick feeling gathering in his gut, he managed, “I won’t hate you. I promise. Speak your mind, Jenna. Don’t dance around my feelings, remember? I’m a big boy.”

He braced himself for what he knew was coming next.

“We need to stay apart from each other,” she finally said. “There weren’t any photos of just me. They all had you in them. If you stay away, if we don’t do things all together...”

“Then the boys won’t get dragged into this.”

“Exactly. I can’t let anything happen to them. I don’t know what’s going on, but we have to keep them safe.” He heard the fear rising in her voice. He pulled her into his arms to soothe her.

When she’d stopped trembling, he asked, “How long?”

“As long as it takes. This didn’t start happening until we... whatever you want to call it.”

He knew what he *wanted* to call it. But that seemed more out of reach than ever.

“And us?” He was afraid to hear her answer, but needed to know.

“I don’t know. I really don’t, Billy. Nothing, for now. The kids are more important. And I...I don’t even know what this is, with us.”

Say what you want it to be. Say you love her. Say it. Say you want a do-over.

But wouldn’t that make everything more complicated for her? He couldn’t do that to her, not when she was trying so hard to do what was best for their children.

Respect her choice. Back off.

“I got you, babe. Like I said. Whatever you need.”

“Really?”

“Really. Whatever, whenever.” He pulled her back into his arms and gently got her all set for sleep, covers tucked around

them. “But I think we can get away with one more night of snuggling. We’re safe in here. We’ve got blinds, we’ve got curtains, and as soon as I turn this light out, it’ll be pitch dark.”

“That sounds nice.” He could tell from her murmur that she was already drifting off.

He stroked her hair, which still danced with static electricity. That was life with Jenna, always tidying her hair. A deep ache of tenderness pulsed in his chest.

A moment later she was asleep. He turned the light off and darkness settled around them. He was still wide awake, thinking through everything she’d just said...and hadn’t said. She hadn’t said she didn’t love him, or that she didn’t want to be with him. She wasn’t angry about the photos. All she’d said was that she was worried about the boys and wanted to do what was best for them.

So did he. But he also wanted her to be happy and stress-free. If that meant keeping his love to himself, then he’d do that. For her.

twenty-six

Jenna woke up feeling as empty as her bed with no Billy. He'd left some time in the night, after holding her until she fell asleep. After she'd essentially told him he had to stay away, he hadn't gotten angry, he hadn't argued. He wanted the best for the kids, just like she did.

And she loved him for that, more than ever. Her heart ached with it, overflowed with it. And he didn't even know because she'd never told him that she still felt that way.

Or maybe she felt that way *again*. Because it was different this time. Not as fiery, but so much deeper.

She rolled over and checked her phone, wincing when she saw the time. It was almost ten in the morning. Her publisher had told her she didn't need to send any more drawings in until after the holidays, so sleeping in wasn't the *worst* thing in the world. But what about the boys?

Billy was probably on top of it. Maybe he was making them his special peanut butter pancakes before he left for his lonely guesthouse across the lake. Her mouth watered at the thought. Sometimes the boys asked her to make them, but she always told them Billy was the only one who could do it right.

She quickly got dressed and went in search of the rest of her family. The house was empty, but Billy had left a note.

Jenna - Tyler invited the boys to build a snow fort at Sans Souci. I'll drop them off and then go to my place. If you need me to pick them up, let me know. Also, a message from Soraya—Annika and Brent are coming back today in the helicopter.

P.s. Zack, do not put this note in your pocket!

He'd signed off with his flourishing autograph, which probably made the note worth something on eBay. She gave it a little caress—Billy had touched it—and tucked it into her own pocket. God, she was ridiculous.

She made herself coffee and listened to the quiet echoes inside her house. No Annika, no boys, no Billy. She could hardly stand it.

At least she was safe from prying eyes with cameras. Billy had left the curtains closed. So thoughtful. She knew he felt terrible about what was happening, and guilty too. Even though it wasn't his fault, it wouldn't be happening if he wasn't a highly attractive baseball player.

But that was Billy. Billy was Billy, along with everything that came with him. She loved him. And she'd sent him away without allowing him to know that.

Draining her coffee mug, she decided this would be the perfect time to finally drive out to her father's place. Yes, then afterwards she could head for Sans Souci and join the boys.

In the mudroom, she climbed into her snow gear. Layers of protection were required for proper snow fort building. She was a bit of an expert, having worked on many snow forts with the boys. Once they'd made an entire snow tunnel system starting at the back porch and ending at the woods behind the house. It seemed like an odd skill for a single mother of two to

have acquired, but there it was. She was good at anything involving...

She froze.

Thanks to her anxiety, she was good at anything involving self-protection. Walls. Shields. Yup, walls were her thing. Foxholes, too. She was really good at building forts and crouching in foxholes during a winter snowball battle.

But life wasn't all foxholes and fortresses. If she'd stayed behind the castle walls of her odd childhood, she wouldn't have Zack and Bean.

Bean...she thought about her youngest son as she sorted through the basket of mittens and hats, looking for the extra-warm fleece she wanted to wear. If anyone had cause to want to stay inside and avoid risk, it would be her accident-prone youngest. If there was a puddle of melted snow in the foyer, he'd find it and slip on it. If there was a crack in a mug, somehow he'd be the one leaked onto.

But not once did he let that stop him from running after fun. She didn't want him to, either. She wouldn't mind if he was more careful, but the last thing she'd want was for his spirit to get dimmed.

Was it normal to consider your own six-year-old son to be a role model?

She found her father cleaning his paintbrushes over his old cast-iron sink.

“Here to see my painting? About time,” he grumbled.

Nice to see you too, Papa. It's been pretty crazy around here, Papa. My work is going well too, Papa. Don't you want to know how Annika's doing, Papa? "I haven't heard you sound this excited about a painting in a while, Papa. I can't wait to see it."

"You waited long enough. I painted it for you."

Great. Clearly, he was in a mood.

"Does it have frogs and mushrooms and all my favorite things?"

"Huh? Oh." He grunted. "Not like that, no. But you'll like it."

He strode to the corner of the living room where stacks of paintings leaned against the wall. He found the one he wanted and heaved it into his arms. It always amazed her how casually he handled his old paintings. They were works of art that might be worth thousands of dollars, but he treated them like records in a bin.

"Here." He turned the canvas over so it faced her. The vivid colors of the oil paints made the painting vibrate with life and emotion. It wasn't like anything she'd seen him paint before. A woman lay splayed on the floor in a pool of cobalt blue. A small child with hair the color of marigolds crawled toward her, howling. Shards of broken pottery lay next to the woman, a river of milk spilling across the floor. The scene's violence and distress jumped off the canvas.

The painting rang a distant bell in the back of Jenna's mind. Something like that had happened to her. More than once. "What is it?" she whispered. But part of her thought she might already know.

"The baby's you. That's your mother."

Gruff words; her father never was much for words, until he got drunk and recited epic poems or rap lyrics.

“What happened?”

“She fell. Dropped you, dropped her bowl. I found her like this. You were fine. But she wasn’t.”

Jenna stared at the painting, noting the cast iron sink against the wall, an easel, a barrel stove, all still here in this spacious room. “She got hurt?”

“She didn’t trust herself anymore. It happened a few times.” He gestured at the canvas. “A week after that, she left.”

Jenna felt the blood drain from her face. For so many years, she’d wanted to know why her mother had left, and no one would say. She hardly saw her mother, and when she did, she hadn’t wanted to upset her by pelting her with questions. And Papa...he didn’t bother to answer questions he didn’t want to.

“That’s why she left?”

“I think so. There was a man. But this...” He gestured at the painting. “This too.”

“And you never told us?”

“It was her choice.” A defensive edge came into her father’s voice. “Didn’t you ask her?”

“No. I almost never see her!”

“Not because of me.” Her father leaned the canvas against the wall and surveyed it. “I told her she could come back anytime.”

“Papa...” She was so furious she didn’t know what to do with herself, where to turn...or who she was actually angry at. “Why didn’t you ever mention this before?”

“Why did it matter? She left because she left. I didn’t know why. It might have been me. Or that man she met. Or this.” He gestured at the canvas again. “You were fine, both of you girls. You didn’t need her. You had each other.”

“No. No no no.” She marched to the canvas and took it from him, turning it to face the wall. “You should have told us. I needed to know.”

He grunted, but she wasn’t through yet.

“I always wanted to know, but I didn’t let myself think about it. I didn’t ask. Oh my God. *I should have asked.* I should have spoken up. But that doesn’t let you off the hook, Papa. You should have told us.”

Her father was looking at her as if he’d never met her before. As in, who was this person who looked like Jenna but sounded nothing like her? “Maybe,” he finally said. “Guess I should have.”

Jenna barely knew how to respond, so she just nodded, and turned the painting around again so she could see it. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from that image of her mother. How scary that must have been—for both of them. One time, she’d taken her eyes off Zack on the changing table and he’d rolled onto the floor. He wasn’t hurt, but it had taken her weeks to recover.

“Do you remember when that happened?” her father asked.

Jenna shook her head. “Not exactly. Just feelings. Like being desperate to get to her. Terrified. I was too young, right? I was three when she left?”

He inclined his shaggy head. “About that. Annika was seven or so.”

“Oh my God! Annika!” Hearing her sister’s name rang another bell—something she should have thought of earlier.

“What about Annika?” Her father was actually listening to her and responding. It was...a weird feeling.

“Her seizure. The boys described it just like that.” She gestured at the fallen figure of her mother. “What if it’s hereditary?”

For the first time in her life, she and her father gazed at each other as full, mutually respectful equals.

“Could be,” he said softly. “You did inherit the artistic gene, after all.”

Her mouth fell open. Was Richard Scarlett actually acknowledging that she too was an artist, in her own completely different way?

Although that felt good, she didn’t really need it anymore. She was a fantastic botanical artist, whether the Hermit knew it or not. Besides, there was something more important on her mind now.

Seeing her mother collapse—falling with her—part of her had never forgotten it. But that wasn’t even the end of it. Her mother had *left* after that. Really left. In other words, the fear that had been sparked by that seizure *then came true* because her mother wasn’t there anymore.

And then no one gave her any answers about that. Her father had buried himself in his painting. Annika had stepped in as best she could. And Jenna had shoved all her questions and confusion deep inside.

No wonder she struggled with anxiety. Her mind was always working overtime to anticipate the worst. Was that what she was doing right now, with Billy and the photo-stalker? Building up her walls out of sheer anxiety? Retreating back to her safe castle?

Billy. Suddenly she was desperate to see him.

twenty-seven

Billy had intended to drop the boys off and head back to town. The camera stalker was interested in him, not his kids, so they'd be safe after he left. Then he could work on his next priority—finding out who was behind the photos.

But Bean clung to his left leg, refusing to let him go until they'd picked a good spot for the fort. He gave in, thinking of how much the boys had been through, between the storm and Annika's seizure.

He chose a spot well out of sight of anyone in the area, between the back terrace and the side door that opened onto the kitchen.

"It'll be a secret tunnel!" Tyler yelled. "We can hide in here and surprise my dad when he gets back!"

Annika and Brent were due to return that morning, and Tyler couldn't contain his excitement. Apparently he was used to his father being gone on business trips, but he didn't like it. Yet one more thing that all three boys had in common.

"You gotta help us, Daddy!" yelled Zack. "We need logs!"

"Please, Daddy, please!" said Bean.

Telling himself it would just take a few minutes, Billy threw himself into packing snow, piling logs for an

understructure, crawling inside each section to make sure it was safe.

The first attempt collapsed on top of him, and his sons had to dig him out, laughing hysterically the entire time.

As they hurried to reconstruct the tunnel, Soraya came out, shivering under her parka. “Good, you got this, right, Billy? I need to tidy up the house before the boss gets back.”

Before he could explain that he was leaving any minute now, she added, “If y’all need anything, Mallory’s right inside, baking up a storm. I’ll be vacuuming, so ask her first.” She used air quotes for the word “vacuuming,” and winked at Billy as she put her headphones on.

Fair enough, Billy figured, as she disappeared inside the house. She deserved a music break. He’d stay just a few minutes longer, then tell Mallory she was in charge.

The aroma of cinnamon and sugar wafted from the house; Mallory was already preparing for the big Christmas feast the Caldwells were planning. All the Coopers had been invited, but Billy would have to beg off. He couldn’t risk giving the weird stalker such a prime target. Him and Jenna and the boys in one place...nope, couldn’t happen.

That empty feeling in his chest expanded until it seemed to take up his entire heart. He’d have to get used to it—again. He’d come so close to his heart’s desire. And yet it seemed further away than ever. Jenna had gotten spooked. He couldn’t blame her. Seeing those photos must have brought back such terrible memories of the Billy Club days. He couldn’t ask her to go through that again. She deserved her peace.

He finished packing snow into a gap between two logs and carefully crawled out of the tunnel they’d just completed. The

three boys stood over him.

“It didn’t bury you this time!” Zack crowed.

Billy reached up to give him a high five, then stood up and brushed the snow off his clothes. He’d go now, as soon as the boys had tested out the fort. “Who’s next?”

“Me, me, me!” They jockeyed for position, pushing and elbowing each other.

“Be smart, guys,” Billy told them. “You don’t want to trigger an avalanche.”

“Avalanche!” Zack jumped up and down as if that would be the best possible fun.

Tyler adjusted the goggles he used in the snow. “Follow the leader! Me first!” He dropped to his knees and crawled through the opening. “It’s so cool!!” he yelled.

Zack jostled Bean out of the way and went in after them.

Bean scowled for a second, then his apple-cheeked face cleared. “I’m next! You coming, Daddy?”

Billy wasn’t sure the fort could handle so many people with so much energy. “I’ll stand guard. Armed with snowballs.”

“Can we have a snowball fight after? Will you be on my team?”

“You bet.”

“Yay!! Snowball fight!”

From inside the tunnel, the chant echoed. “Snowball fight, snowball fight!” Bean crawled inside and disappeared. The boys stopped yelling about snowballs and whispered to each other.

Billy grinned, all his problems momentarily forgotten. He was with his boys on this bright snow-sparkling day, they were happy and healthy, and he could ask for nothing more from life than that.

He filled his lungs with the fresh winter air. The trill of a chickadee broke the quiet, and then the *cheer-cheer* of a cardinal. Soraya must have stopped vacuuming. Come to think of it, he hadn't heard the vacuum for a while.

The kitchen door opened and he heard the crunch of boots on snow.

"Chocolate chip cookies?" asked a soft female voice.

He turned and saw Mallory, in leggings and snow boots. Her hair was loose from the beanie she usually wore to keep it out of her face. Dirty-blond, it fell over her shoulders. The sight triggered a vague sense of recognition. The color wasn't far from Jenna's, although Jenna's hair was a brighter shade.

He thought of its silky texture and wondered if he'd ever feel it again.

"Sure." He smiled at her and took one of the cookies, and popped it in his mouth. Delicious. "Another masterpiece from the chef extraordinaire."

"I'm not just a chef." Her offended tone took him by surprise.

"Is it just a side gig? Like Soraya and singing?"

"Not exactly."

She was waiting for something. Maybe for him to take another cookie. But he didn't want another one. Thinking of Jenna had made his stomach tighten up with tension, and he'd only eaten the first one to be polite.

“Don’t you want another?” she asked.

“Maybe later. Is Soraya done with vacuuming?”

“Why do you keep talking about Soraya?”

His eyebrows lifted. She sounded almost...jealous. That was weird. Something seemed off. He took a step back, and she took one toward him.

Definitely off.

“Did someone say cookies?” yelled Zack from inside the tunnel.

“We’ll have cookies later,” Billy called to him. “You boys stay where you are.” He realized that their little two-step had put her right at the opening of the snow tunnel.

Mallory gave him a funny smile. “You really don’t remember me, do you?”

“Should I?”

He wasn’t scared of her—he was twice her size—but she gave him a sketchy feeling.

“It’s okay. You’ll remember me now.”

He tried to answer, but his mouth wouldn’t move right. It came out as more of a grunt. He felt sluggish, tired. He could go to sleep right now in the snow. But he couldn’t do that.

His thoughts swam. *The cookie.* She’d put something in the cookie.

“You’d better come with me while you can still walk.” She grabbed his arm and dragged him after her through the snow. Whatever she’d given him had left him with very little motor control, but he had enough to dig in his heels and shake his head.

She raised her voice. “Come on!”

This feeling, this thick, slow, sickening sluggishness...he'd felt it before. And suddenly he did recognize her.

“I...know you.” Except the words didn't sound right. More of a gurgle than an actual sentence.

At least the boys were inside the tunnel. *Stay where you are*, he wanted to yell. But speaking wasn't possible anymore.

A furious young voice interrupted them.

“Stay away from my dad!” The cry came from Bean, who was crawling out of the snow tunnel. “Stop pulling him!”

Bean—his valiant little accident-prone son—coming to his rescue. Being the hero.

Billy made a motion to tell him to get back in the snow fort. Maybe Bean didn't notice, or maybe his mission was too important. He raced past Billy and pushed Mallory hard enough to make her stumble backwards.

But not hard enough to topple her over. She grabbed him around his waist and hauled him off toward the kitchen. “Better come get your kid,” she taunted Billy. “Before you pass out in the snow.”

Not wasting a minute of consciousness, he staggered after her. One step, another, another, enough to keep him close to Bean. Whatever she had in mind for Billy, he'd handle. The only thing that mattered now was his kid.

twenty-eight

Jenna couldn't stop thinking about that painting, even as she left her father's house and headed for Sans Souci. It crystallized so much about her childhood, and her anxiety.

"No wonder you're a mess," she said out loud as she steered around a stray chunk of ice from a truck's wheel. "It's amazing you're as functional as you are. You're not a bad mom, overall. You're a decent artist. You're a loyal sister. You're a freaking fantastic ex-wife."

She should be happy with all of that. And she was. But what if she was cheating herself out of even more happiness? What if she didn't need to stay in the foxhole of life anymore? What use was all that confidence she'd developed if she didn't use it to claim her own happiness? If she didn't claim...Billy?

Billy was the love of her life. Her soul mate. Her heart. Her man. Her love. And last night, she'd poured cold water all over any thought of them being in a relationship. He'd heard her, too. She could tell from the way he'd gone still, then chosen his words very carefully after that.

"I got you, babe. Whatever you need."

The disappointment had screamed from every syllable.

Well, she was disappointed, too. She was disappointed in herself. *You're not the young insecure girl you used to be. You're a grown woman who can make mindful choices. You know your value. You know what you mean to Billy.*

Yes, she did know. But it would be nice to hear it from the man himself. He'd said he was "serious," but he hadn't said he loved her.

He's being careful. He doesn't want to upset the balance that we're used to. He wants to respect my boundaries.

Which made him a good man, more mature and thoughtful than he used to be. But it also meant they were at a stalemate. He didn't want to cross a line, and she was still mentally playing it safe.

How were they going to shake things up and get out of this rut?

She reached Sans Souci and saw Billy's truck parked out front, but no other signs of life. She scanned the snow-buried yard, uninterrupted billows of white all the way to the edge of the woods. They could be out back by the kitchen, or maybe they were still inside. They could still be fueling up with hot cocoa and tomato soup before tackling the near-zero temperatures.

"Hello," she called as she pushed the door open.

No answer.

Well, it was a big house. She tried again, and again got nothing. She held her breath and listened for the usual laughter and shrieks. That was odd, for sure, because when Zack and Bean and Tyler played together, there was always lots of noise.

She stepped into the foyer and looked around for any familiar winter gear her kids might have tossed onto the floor.

Nothing. So either they were still outside or they were still wearing it.

“Hello! Is anyone here?”

Maybe they were playing hide-and-seek. If so, she had her work cut out for her, because there were probably a million hiding places in this building.

It's not that.

With crystal clarity, she knew that something was wrong. Just like that, her damn imagination kicked into gear and every horror movie she'd ever seen flickered through her brain.

With an effort that took all the mental discipline she had, she shoved those fears aside. She didn't need to panic, not yet. This situation required her to think rationally and not drive herself crazy.

But what should she do? She had no idea what was going on. Should she call for help? What would she say? *I got weird vibes at Sans Souci, please come immediately.*

Her kids always ditched their winter gear as soon as they came inside. They must still be playing somewhere in the snow.

She went back outside, making sure not to let the closing door make a sound. Some instinct was telling her to move with stealth. Maybe it was a self-protective instinct, but wherever it came from, she was going to follow it.

Outside the house, she looked for footprints in the snow. But the only one she saw were on the shoveled path that led to the side kitchen door. She followed them, and as she came closer to the kitchen she saw piled up snow that definitely be the beginnings of a snow fort. They must be inside, oblivious to anything except their project.

When she reached the fort, she knelt down and peered inside.

Empty.

But there were plenty of footprints leading to the kitchen. She stepped closer and peered in the window.

Her heart just about stopped beating.

The scene she was looking at made no sense. Her whole family was there, a tableau of male Coopers. Billy slumped against the kitchen island, both forearms resting on it, as if he could barely keep upright. She tried to catch his eye, but his head kept lolling down. A horrible thought made her stomach clench. Was he drunk? In front of the kids?

Zack was plastered against Billy's other side, but Jenna could only see the top of his blond head. It was unusual to see him cling to his father like that. He must be worried.

And Bean...Bean was clutched in the arms of a woman Jenna recognized as the Caldwell's cook, Mallory. Her dirty-blond hair was loose from its usual beanie. She was dressed in velour leggings that Jenna would have envied under other circumstances. Their backs were to her; she could see Bean's stocking feet dangling in the air.

Why was Mallory holding Bean?

Jenna hadn't spent as much time with Mallory as she had with Soraya—Fun Nanny. Mallory had always seemed standoffish and uninterested in games and popcorn and so forth. She generally made the food and disappeared. Had she struck up some kind of friendship with her youngest boy?

Speaking of Soraya...Jenna looked around the room and saw her slumped in a chair in the corner, by the cozy hearth

built into the kitchen. Tyler stood next to her, as if keeping guard over her.

What was going on here? Was this a dangerous situation or was everything just...weird? No one seemed to be hurt, except possibly Soraya. And Billy, unless he was drunk.

Of course he wasn't drunk. Billy didn't drink anymore. She believed and knew that with all her heart. So what was wrong with him?

And where was Tyler? She didn't see him anywhere.

She focused on Billy. *Lift your head. Look at me.*

After a few moments, Mallory said something she couldn't make out and waved her arm in the air. Billy tracked it, and miraculously, his gaze finally landed on Jenna.

His eyes widened, then he deliberately unfocused them and let his gaze wander the room.

He didn't want to give away that she was here.

She lifted her phone to show him she was going to call for help. He gave a microscopic nod.

Quiet as a winter vole, she backed away down the path until she was out of sight and earshot. She called Granger on her cell phone, but he didn't answer. Heart sinking, she left a message. "Something strange is going on out here at Sans Souci. Can you please come out here as quickly as possible, or send a spare firefighter?"

Then she texted Thomas and Galen. *Please come but be careful. Something strange is going on but I don't know what. Billy's inside with the boys, and the cook has Bean and... please come.*

Texting complete, she hurried back to the window and peered inside again. Billy was making clumsy gestures with his hands...probably trying to distract Mallory from any chance of hearing Jenna's call for help.

Mallory had released Bean so he could put his feet on the ground, but she held onto him with an arm around his neck. Bean's thumb was in his mouth. These days, he only sucked his thumb during moments of extreme stress, so her poor baby was definitely struggling with this situation, whatever it was. Was Mallory threatening something? What had happened to Soraya? Why was she doing this...whatever "this" was?

Had Mallory taken the photos? Was she the stalker?

Stepping out of sight again, she pulled up the BillyFan account on Instagram. Thumbing through the photos, she saw that all of them had been taken after the Caldwells had arrived for their vacation. Even the location of the photos made sense now, including the one that had really freaked her out, of her and Billy in the candlelight. Mallory must have climbed into the treehouse and used a long lens.

She crept back to the window. Inside the kitchen, Mallory had started pacing back and forth, hauling Bean along with her. Billy caught Jenna's eye and beckoned for her to get out of sight. She ducked away from the window and decided to make one more call. To Brent Caldwell.

"Who is Mallory?" she demanded when he came on the line.

"Mallory? You mean, my cook?" She could barely hear him over the drone of the helicopter. Good; they were on their way.

“How do you know her? How long has she been your cook?”

“She’s a fill-in. My regular cook got sick, I had to scramble to find a replacement. She met us here, and she’s been great. What’s going on? Is that what Tyler’s been calling about? I missed a couple of calls while we were taking off.”

A wave of chills swept through her. “So you don’t know anything about Mallory?”

“She had an excellent resumé and references. Her last job was for a member of the Minnesota Twins, actually. Maybe your husband knows him. Pedro Carro, the new shortstop.”

twenty-nine

Billy felt like he was moving through molasses. But at least he could move now, and his thoughts weren't as muddled. He could understand everything Mallory was saying, even if he couldn't respond very well.

His slowness of movement had one benefit. It allowed him to mask his shock at the appearance of Jenna outside the window. He couldn't let Mallory know she was here.

Mallory had already explained that she'd made her move when Jenna wasn't around because she would just make everything worse, the same way she had back when she and Billy were married.

"She was always in the way, even after the divorce," Mallory ranted. "Every time I tried to talk to you, you ignored me. I tried everything."

Including drugging him, just like now. Mallory was the woman who'd been on his lap when he'd woken up in that club. Jenna had been absolutely right; she'd slipped him something.

"Sorry," he managed.

"Too late for apologies. I've moved on."

“Then...put...him...down.” He pointed with his chin at Bean. Some motor control was returning, but he didn’t want her to know that.

She clutched Bean tighter, making him squeak in surprise. “No. I don’t trust you. He’s the only reason you’re listening to me right now.”

She had a point there. If she didn’t have her hands on Bean, he would have tried something by now, even in his half-drugged state. But not only was he too weak still, but he didn’t know if she had other weapons aside from her ability with drugs.

“What...you want?” He tried a disarming smile, but had no idea what it looked like.

“Don’t you worry. I don’t want you. I found someone better than you.”

“Good.” One-word sentences worked a lot better.

“Oh, he is good. He’s the best on the team. He can make plays at shortstop you can only dream about.”

Make plays at shortstop... Was she talking about Pedro Carro, the new shortstop? Pedro was married, but Billy had heard rumors about the man’s horndog ways. If he’d cheated with Mallory, Billy wouldn’t be too surprised. But what did that have to do with him?

“Pedro?”

“That’s my man. He’s the best in the league and his stupid so-called wife can’t even bother to come to the games half the time.”

Maria Carro had three kids and ran an online jewelry store, so she generally only came to the most important games. Billy

had always admired that, actually, and thought that she and Jenna would have gotten along if Pedro had joined the team earlier.

“But he won’t leave her,” Mallory continued. “I had to do something to make my mark. I told him I’d do something for him that no other woman would do.”

With a triumphant grin, she shifted Bean to her other side so she could pull something from her pocket. “I’m going to make sure he has a spot on the team wrapped up.”

All his muscles tensed, but all she produced was her phone. “As soon as you can talk right, you’re going to make a video and say that you’re leaving the Twins forever.”

Billy tried not to laugh. Did she really think a random video would be binding in any way? “Okay.”

“And you’re going to sign something too. I already wrote it up. You’re going to exercise that escape clause you put into your contract. Too bad it requires you to pay a penalty. Oopsies. Guess you should have been nicer to me.”

That penalty was enormous, and not worth paying unless he had a great offer from another team. Last he heard, his chances with Japan were shot. Could he explain that he was basically held hostage by an unhinged groupie?

That would probably make him look even worse. Maybe he should make some kind of move. She was getting antsy. The hand holding Bean in place was twitching. Her eyes were darting from side to side. Was she on something? She had to be. Probably using her expertise with substances on herself as well.

And Bean...Bean had that look on his face that meant he was sick and tired of being stuck with this strange woman and

he was about to bolt.

Billy shook his head “no,” trying to drill that message into his son. As unstable as this woman was, he didn’t want Bean taking any chances. He still didn’t know how she’d drugged Soraya. Maybe she’d used a cookie, or maybe she had a hypodermic hidden on her body somewhere.

In his worry about Bean, he’d nearly forgotten his other son, who was still by his side.

“Are you talking about Pedro Carro? He isn’t nearly as good as my dad!” Zack shouted.

She ticked a finger back and forth. “Pedro told me he’d have that spot if you weren’t a so-called ‘fan favorite.’ His fielding percentage is almost the same and his batting average is even better.”

“Why do you even care? My dad’s going to Japan!”

Billy worked his tongue back and forth in his mouth, trying to get it to work right again. It was frustrating letting his son do all the talking. Also possibly dangerous; he didn’t know what might set her off again.

As Mallory focused on Zack, Billy risked a glance at the window again. Jenna hadn’t come back into view. He hoped she wasn’t panicking too much. He hoped she didn’t use this incident as final proof that they shouldn’t be together, ever again. Most of all, he hoped they all came out of this unharmed.

“Didn’t you hear, you dumb kid? After I posted those photos, they got cold feet because your dad is obviously still a—well, I shouldn’t say.”

Zack didn’t need the words; he got that point. “Don’t insult my dad!” he yelled. “He’s the best ballplayer in the world, and

the best dad! Leave him alone!”

Billy forced his hand to grab onto his son’s shoulder, terrified that he’d do something reckless. Mallory tightened her grip around Bean’s neck, making his son’s eyes widen in panic.

Damn it. Why couldn’t he get this stupid drug out of his system faster?

But then everything changed at the sound of Jenna’s calm voice. “Zack, stay where you are. Mallory, you’d better let go of my son or guess who’s going to get a video of this whole thing?”

Billy creaked his head to the side to see Jenna enter the kitchen, her iPhone held before her.

“Pedro has kids. Do you think he’d be impressed if he saw you strangling a little boy?”

“What are *you* doing here?” Mallory hissed. But Jenna’s approach must have worked, because she loosened her grip on Bean’s throat. He gasped and hauled in air.

“Same as you. I’m trying to help my man. That’s what you want, right? You want to prove your worth to Pedro Carro? You want a ballplayer to love you? You should...a ballplayer’s love is something to fight for.” She stepped farther into the room. “I should know.”

“Yeah, you should. But you dumped him. You have nothing to do with this.”

“But I do. I love him.”

She took two more steps into the room, closer to them all, still recording.

Mallory grabbed Bean by the arm. “Stop where you are. See? I’m not hurting Bean. Just don’t come any closer.”

Jenna aimed the phone at Bean.

“Bean, honey, tell me the truth. Do you want Mallory to let you go?”

“Yes!” Bean shouted.

Mallory kept shaking her head, clearly wanted to spit nails, but not wanting to end up on Instagram.

“See that, Mallory?” Jenna’s voice was soft, understanding. “Why don’t you prove to Pedro that you’re not the kind of woman who keeps a child away from his mother. You want him to know what a good person you are. Someone worthy of the second-best shortstop on the Twins. You can prove it right now. Let Bean go.”

With a sound like a snarl, Mallory pushed Bean away from her. Billy cringed as Bean stumbled over his feet—this was exactly the kind of situation that would usually end with Bean face down on the flagstone floor.

But amazingly, he found his footing and raced into Jenna’s arms. Jenna caught him up with a little cry and they clung to each other, Bean’s little legs wrapped around his mama.

Zack glanced up at Billy, silently asking if he could run to his mother too. Billy nodded, and he darted across the room toward Jenna. Mallory didn’t try to stop them. She was staring at the floor, chewing on the inside of her mouth, muttering something to herself. Wherever her unbalanced brain was taking her, it wasn’t a happy place.

Zack reached Jenna and she scooped him against her side. Finally Billy’s entire family was safe. His heart expanded inside his chest like a sun. Nothing else really mattered. He’d

sign whatever Mallory wanted. He'd quit the Twins, pay the penalty, hell, he'd quit baseball. So long as his family was safe.

He met Jenna's gaze, knowing that his love and gratitude were written all over his face. If only he could tell her in words. If he got the chance, he wouldn't waste a second, not again.

Jenna set Bean down on the floor. "Boys, there are people coming to help. Why don't you go wait for them by the front door and give a shout when they get here. Zack, keep close to Bean, okay?"

"Are you coming too, Mommy?"

"I'll be right behind you. Your daddy and I just need a minute."

Zack actually took Bean by the hand—something he didn't do much anymore—and they both raced out of the room.

"Thank you for letting him go and not hurting him," Jenna said softly. But Billy could tell from the steel in her eyes that she would never forgive the woman for scaring her kids.

Mallory lifted her head, a weird, wild, almost tender look in her eyes. "He liked me. Kids like me."

Billy and Jenna exchanged a worried look. Mallory seemed to have settled on a new direction. His stomach tightened with a knot of worry. The kids' leaving changed the dynamic. She didn't have hostages anymore, but she also didn't have anything holding her back.

Below the level of the counter, he flexed his hands, finding more movement in them. He worked his tongue back and forth in his mouth. He subtly tightened and loosened other muscles

—chest, biceps, thighs—to figure out exactly how much strength and control he had at this point.

Mallory suddenly swung her gaze toward him, and he froze.

“You didn’t make the video. You didn’t sign the papers.”

“How’s he supposed to do any of that when you drugged him?” Jenna demanded.

“Shut up, Jenna.” Mallory crouched down to rummage in the bag at her feet. Looking for the document he was supposed to sign? Something else?

His muscles coiled and tensed. He had no idea how fast he could make a move. Jenna was still closer to the door than to Mallory. He hoped she’d stay back there instead of trying anything.

Mallory found what she was looking for and straightened up, still holding the bag. Besides whatever she’d given Soraya, she could have all sorts of potential weapons stashed in there as backups. Now that he’d been dealing with her for the past half hour or so, he knew she was deeply unhinged. He wouldn’t put anything past her.

“I changed my mind.” Mallory brandished the papers she’d brought and crushed them in her fist, then tossed them aside. “Jenna’s right. Pedro is the number two on the team. You’re number one.”

“So?” One word. Keep it simple. His tongue was moving almost normally; hopefully the rest of his body was too.

“I’ll take you. That way you don’t have to quit.”

“That’s not going to happen,” said Jenna. “Billy’s taken.”

“You’re divorced. Everyone knows that.”

“But you’ve been taking pictures. You know it’s more than that.”

“No. No. I don’t know that. Billy sleeps with people. That’s what he does.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Jenna didn’t hesitate, and there wasn’t a bit of doubt in her voice. “He isn’t like that and he never was. He didn’t sleep with you, did he? That’s why you went after Pedro instead.”

“Shut up, Jenna!” Mallory screamed. Billy flinched and prepared to pounce no matter what Jenna said. She turned to him and he saw the pain and delusion in her eyes. “This is between me and Billy. I like your family. Your kids are cute. I didn’t hurt them. I could have, but I didn’t. I’ll take really good care of them.”

He cleared his throat, determined to get more and better words out, and to not miss this chance to speak. “I love *Jenna*. She’s the one, always.”

The relief of being able to speak, even if only a few words, and being able to say those words in Jenna’s presence... incredible.

“Shut up. You’re lying. You just want me to go away.”

“It’s true.” Jenna chimed in gently. “He’s being honest with you. We both are. We love each other.”

“He loves you?” Her voice sounded so outraged that Billy almost sympathized. Almost.

“He does. And I love him. And we both love our kids.”

“Then fuck you both.” With a move so fast, Billy barely had a chance to register it, she pulled a knife from her bag and hurled it directly at Jenna.

Before Billy even knew what was happening, his body was flying through the air, stretched to his full length, as if reaching his glove for a line drive between second and third bases. Pure muscle memory in blazing, lightning-fast action. The knife sliced through the air. He saw a flash of silver as the light hit the blade. He heard Jenna scream. He felt a burning sensation slash across his arm.

And then he hit the floor and knew nothing more.

thirty

Jenna felt the slash of that knife as if it had hit her own body. She rushed to Billy's side. He lay sprawled on the floor, unconscious, with a scary four-inch knife sticking out of his arm. Mallory came toward them but Jenna threw her body over Billy's and screamed at her. "Stay away from him. Back off. Back off!"

She sure had found her voice over the past few days.

Voices and footsteps sounded from the hallway, and a moment later people flooded into the kitchen. Earl Granger, Thomas, Galen, and a few volunteer firemen rushed to help her with Billy.

Mallory went into full meltdown, screaming and kicking at the firemen who tried to restrain her. But Granger knew how to handle a suspect, and before long he had her handcuffed and in custody.

"I'm taking her to the sheriff," he announced. "Jenna, I'll need statements from you and Billy."

"Later," Thomas said firmly as he knelt next to Billy.

Granger nodded and squeezed Jenna's shoulder as he passed by, hauling Mallory along with him.

As she came close to Jenna, Mallory hissed at her. “You think you won, but you didn’t. You divorced him and it’ll never be the same between you.”

“You’re right.” Jenna glared up at her. “It’ll be *even better*.”

Mallory twisted her pretty face into a nasty scowl.

Granger glanced at the phone Jenna still held in her hand. “Were you recording? We’ll need that for evidence.”

“Nooo!” cried Mallory. She lunged toward Jenna, but Granger held her back.

“I guess you’ll find out how it feels to have your photo used without your consent.” Jenna almost felt bad for her. Almost. “Good thing it’s only going to the police, not social media. What they do with it is up to them.”

Mallory blanched, her entire body slumping in Granger’s grip. It was probably sinking in that no member of the Twins or any other team would go near her again. Her obsession made her...predictable, in a way.

And then unpredictable. The sight of that knife winging toward her had been almost as terrifying as seeing Billy fling himself in its path.

For *her*. Not for the boys. She would have expected him to take a knife blow for the boys. But this was for her. He’d put his body on the line for her. In other words...he’d been willing to sacrifice everything, including his baseball career. Without working body parts, he’d be no use to anyone on a baseball diamond.

She tenderly stroked his cheek while Thomas, who had medical training as a former firefighter, tested his pulse and

checked his pupils. Another fireman examined the knife embedded in his arm.

“Is he...going to be okay?” She barely managed to choke out the words and make them understandable.

“He’ll need surgery. But he’ll be okay.” She heard the burr of emotion in Thomas’ voice too.

Billy’s eyes opened just a crack. She gave him the most loving, mistiest smile of her life. “You’re going to be fine. Just fine.”

Thomas nodded. “You are, despite trying to play the hero.”

“No hero,” Billy managed. “Jenna got the boys out. She’s the hero.”

Thomas gave Jenna an approving smile, then got up, along with the other paramedic, to confer with the firefighters who had just arrived with a gurney.

For the moment, it was just her and Billy. She imagined there was a force-field of love around them, and inside there was nothing but safety and peace.

“Billy.” Jenna took his other hand and nestled it against her cheek. “You absolutely are a hero and I love you so much. I almost died when I saw you fly through the air like that. If something happened to you...I just...I couldn’t bear it.” The sobs took over then and she couldn’t get the rest of her words out.

“Best play I ever made.” He spread his hand wide to encompass her cheek. “That knife was headed right for your heart. Your beautiful heart.”

“No, I’ve been a...a fraidy-heart. I’ve been protecting myself, and I don’t need to anymore. I need you. Just you. I love you.”

“Oh God, Jenna, I love you too. All I want is to be with you. I want to do this again, you and me. The wedding, the marriage, all of it. I want a do-over. I don’t care where I play, or when, or fuck, maybe I won’t even be able to play...” He glanced at the knife in his arm and winced. “Damn. That’s a big knife.”

“She had a knife,” Jenna whispered. “All that time, with Bean, she had a knife.” Her body shook as the realization sank in. Mallory could have pulled that knife out at any moment and threatened them, scared the boys, or God forbid, hurt someone.

Billy cupped his hand around her neck. “It’s okay, Jenna. It’s over. The boys are all right. She didn’t hurt them.” The reassuring sound of his voice sank into her bones. His voice always had such an effect on her.

Billy was her safe haven, her adventure, her soul mate, her everything.

He kept talking, as if he knew she needed to hear his voice. “I couldn’t move for a while because she drugged me. I was trying to get my control back when you showed up. You knew how to handle her. You were incredible. You got the boys out of there.”

“Wait. The boys. Where are they?” They both looked around, saw the gurney and the firefighter prepping it for transport, spotted Thomas overseeing the process, Soraya still unconscious in the corner, but no sign of Zack and Bean.

“Thomas!” Jenna called, a frantic edge in her voice. “Where are the boys?”

“It’s all right.” He came to their side with a blanket to put under Billy. “They’re with Annika. The chopper just landed out front. We’re going to use it to take Billy to the hospital. I’m sure the boys are filling Annika in on everything.”

His dry tone helped drain the fear away. The boys were fine. Annika was back. Billy loved her. She loved him. Not only that, she knew him better than ever, respected him more deeply than ever. And...she knew herself better. She believed in herself. This time, they’d make it work.

But right now, the firefighters had to get him to the hospital. She reluctantly stepped aside so they could roll him onto a blanket and lift him onto the gurney. It was tricky because of the knife in his arm, but they told her they wanted the surgeon to deal with the knife.

“Can I ride with him in the helicopter?”

“No.” Billy’s voice was tight with pain. “Stay with the boys. They need you after what they just went through. It’s going to be fine.”

Oh yes, this was the Billy she’d always known existed even when he was just a teenager. This Billy put other people ahead of himself. Her heart ached with love for him. He’d make an excellent member of a Japanese team that valued *wa*. Maybe she should contact the Chunichi Dragons and tell them everything that had happened. Maybe they’d change their minds and sign him after all.

If he went to Japan, she was going with him. They’d all go with him. She was done with being separated from Billy.

Out on the snowfield that used to be a lawn, she spotted Annika in a tight circle with the boys and a tall man who had to be Brent Caldwell. He was hovering close to Annika as if his only job was to make sure she didn't collapse again.

It seemed to be working. Annika looked pale and maybe a little thinner, but she radiated something Jenna had never seen before in her self-possessed sister. Something like...joy.

When they spotted the gurney and Jenna trotting alongside it, they all came hurrying toward them. Brent Caldwell carried Bean, who had probably been struggling in the snow. She appreciated his thoughtfulness, along with the use of his helicopter and everything he'd done for Annika.

"Dad! What happened?" Zack cried as he nearly collided with the gurney. A firefighter tried to shoo him away, but Billy reached for Zack with his uninjured hand.

"Nothing I can't handle," he said jokingly. "Get it?" He gestured with his chin at the handle of the knife in his arm.

Annika met Jenna's gaze in an unspoken question. *It's okay*, Jenna reassured her silently.

"Only Billy Cooper would make dad jokes about the knife sticking out of his arm," she teased. But her tone was affectionate and her expression full of concern.

"That a compliment?" Billy asked with a wry twist of his mouth.

"Actually, it is. Go figure."

"What's gotten into you?" They were all trooping through the snow alongside the gurney on its way to the helicopter.

"If you want me to be hard on you again, you're going to have to get better first," Annika teased.

“Deal.”

“I didn’t make that deal.” Jenna wasn’t about to get left out of this conversation. “You can give Billy a hard time if you want, as long as you remember that he saved my life *and* that I love him and that we’re going for a do-over.”

“A what?”

“You’ll see. It’s not just a do-over, it’s a *do-better*. The next wedding’s going to be fancy.”

“Fancy, huh?” Billy groaned as the firefighters forged through deeper snow. Jenna was glad she’d worn her snow-fort-building clothes, even though she’d metaphorically smashed her own internal snow fort into smithereens. “I can live with that.”

They reached the helicopter, which was idling, its blades still. The firefighters paused to make some kind of adjustment to the gurney. Billy beckoned to Zack and Bean.

“Love you guys,” Billy told them as he put two fingers over his heart—his familiar gesture from the diamond. “If you’re worried about me, just cut it out. Get it?”

They all groaned at yet another dad joke.

“Does it hurt?” Bean asked. His eyes were about as wide as Frisbees.

“Like a mo...mouth ache,” he corrected in time. “I mean, a toothache,” he corrected again. “But it’s going to be fine.”

“Yes, it is.” Jenna added her own vote of confidence. “He’ll be fine. We’re all going to be fine.”

“You should have seen Bean,” Zack said proudly. “He tried to stop the cook all by himself. He grabbed onto her leg and nearly knocked her over.”

“He did?” Jenna looked over at her youngest son, still being carried by Caldwell. “That was so brave.”

Bean lit up like a candle in the snow. “I can be a hero too!”

“You are. You’re a hero.” Jenna could have cried, seeing her youngest son so proud of himself, and her older son boasting about his brother. Had any moment ever been so sweet?

“Tyler went to call his father, and I tried to stop her too, but she said she might hurt Bean. So I stayed with Dad,” Zack said.

“You did exactly the right thing.” From the gurney, Billy grinned at both boys, then Tyler too. “You all did. Proud of you.”

The firefighters finished their adjustments to the strap and picked up the gurney again.

“Gotta go,” called Billy. “I’ll see you all soon. I’ll be back for Christmas, I promise.”

Could he really promise that? Christmas was three days away. Jenna decided to trust him. With that look in his eyes, she wouldn’t bet against him.

“That’s right, we’ll see him at Christmas,” she declared. “He’ll be off the injured list by then.”

Billy flashed two fingers at her, and she gave him a wink. Two points to her... but all the points to both of them.

“Give him a hug and let him go,” she told her sons. “Gently.”

“Now you, Mommy!” Bean clamored after he’d kissed Billy goodbye, leaning in from his perch in Caldwell’s arms.

“Yeah, now you.” Billy grinned as he beckoned her to him. She leaned down and they plunged into the deepest, sloppiest, most obvious movie kiss possible when one person was knee-deep in snow and the other was flat on his back on a gurney.

When she drew away, everyone applauded. “You all saw that, right?” Billy crowed. “Benna is back, and better than ever. Save the date, y’all!”

“What date, Daddy?” Bean scratched his head, looking confused. “Who’s Benna?”

“I’ll explain it later.” Jenna reached out her arms for her youngest child. “I can take him now,” she told Caldwell. He was an interesting-looking man, attractive, with deep-set eyes that seemed to see everything. With a kind smile, he handed her son over.

But, Bean being Bean, he slipped between them and landed face-down in the snow.

Everyone cried out as Jenna fished him out, with a little help from Annika. “I’m going to take him inside,” she told Billy. “I love you. Text me as soon as you get there. I love you so much.”

Their hands clung together, and then the gurney was whisked away. “I love you!” was the last thing he called from the open hatch door of the chopper. “Save the date!”

Laughing, her heart a ball of pure fire and love, Jenna watched the helicopter lift off, with her soul mate onboard. It would have felt weird to part like this, but Billy was right, the boys needed her. And they were a team, her and Billy. No matter where they were, they were a team. They were together, now and forever.

She turned back to the house, Bean's warm weight a comfort. Annika came with her, her tall form pacing through the snow next to her. God it was good to have her back. But... so many questions.

"Annika, you look ridiculously happy. Is that because of..."

"That tall drink of water back there? Yes, it is. Oh my god, I have so much to tell you, I don't even know where to start."

Jenna shifted Bean on her hip. She thought of her father's painting, of her mother's collapse. She had so much to tell, too. The revelation about why their mother had left, the possible genetic clue she'd discovered. The way she'd spoken her mind to her father. The way he'd accepted her critique of his piss-poor communication and neglect.

"I don't care where you start, but I want to hear everything."

"Mmmm, I don't think you want *everything*..." Annika teased.

"Bean, cover your ears," Jenna commanded. When Bean had clamped his mittened hands over his ears, she told her sister, "Now talk."

"Wow, what's gotten into you? You didn't used to be this bossy."

"I was, I just hid it." Jenna winked at her sister.

"Fair enough. I always knew you had it in you. And you and Billy, well, I'm happy for you. Sincerely, whole-heartedly. I'm not even worried at all. Go figure."

"Thank you for that." Jenna's eyes moistened, though that could have been from the cold air wafting off the snow.

They reached the back terrace, where the snow had been cleared, and she set Bean down. He bolted off to find Tyler, or a snack, or something. Jenna turned to Annika and folded her arms across her chest. So much had happened since the last time she'd seen her sister. The entire world had changed. Annika had gone through something just as intense, and if appearances didn't lie, just as romantic.

"I want to hear it all. Just pretend we're kids again, with no internet and a TV that only shows baseball games, and Papa's painting and it's just you and me."

"Okay, then, I guess I'll start at the beginning."

"When you were working at the clinic and a billionaire came in with his little boy after their boat burned down?"

"Who's telling this story, you or me?"

"You." Jenna folded her lips together and pretended to zip them.

Annika flashed her brilliant smile. "Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a castle near a lake..."

The Dugout: Exclusive!

Exclusive! Hot news and hotter rumors out of the Twins infield! The inside scoop says that everyone's favorite headline grabber, Billy Cooper, is heading overseas. We can't call him Billy Club anymore, but we can call him a Dragon. He's signed a one-year contract with the Japanese team the Chunichi Dragons. In an exclusive interview with *The Dugout*, the star shortstop told us that he's bringing his whole family—

his wife Jenna and two kids, Zachary and Barnaby—along with him. Something about fulfilling his wife’s travel dreams.

Yes, you heard that right. *Wife.*

Billy and his ex-wife are planning to remarry. (Does that mean she’s his ex-ex-wife?) Rumor has it Jenna Cooper was key to the negotiations with the Dragons. There’s word of a secret video she recorded in Lake Bittersweet. We’re not quite sure what’s on it, but when she showed it to the Dragons management, it convinced the team that Billy Cooper would be the perfect guy to plug a hole in their infield.

And that’s despite his recent injury at the hands of a disturbed “fan.” Word has it he’s healing well and is expected to recover completely.

Now the gossip: Does that video have anything to do with the recent arraignment of said “fan”—a familiar face around the Twins’ favorite hot-spots? Mallory Clark is facing charges of stalking and attempted manslaughter. No confirmation so far, but we’re working on it.

And does all of this have anything to do with the news that Pedro Carro has been unexpectedly traded? No one’s spilling the tea on that yet, but you better believe we’re following up on every lead we find. And where does this leave Anson Bones, a manager who’s now down two shortstops? Insiders say he might be the next one out the door.

Does that mean Billy Cooper could be back in a year? He’s a local boy, after all, so we wouldn’t bet against it. He’ll always be a Twin to us. By way of a goodbye, Billy sent us this:

“I loved my time with the Twins. Thanks to the team, the incredible fans, and my agent, Pete Strauss. One last thing.

Sure, baseball is great. But have you ever looked at a field guide to our local Minnesota mushrooms? If you're reading this, check out the next edition of Mushrooms of the Upper Midwest, especially the illustrations. It'll blow you away."

Okay then...for once, we have no comment. Billy Cooper, everyone. End of an era. For him and his family, the start of an even better one.

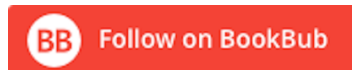
Thank you so much for reading. Read Annika's story this holiday season! You can find all the [Lake Bittersweet novels here](#).

For more contemporary romance set in a small town, explore the completed [Lost Harbor, Alaska series](#) here.

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about the author

Jennifer Bernard is a *USA Today* bestselling author of contemporary romance. Her books have been called “an irresistible reading experience” full of “quick wit and sizzling love scenes.” A graduate of Harvard and former news promo producer, she left big city life in Los Angeles for true love in Alaska, where she now lives with her husband and stepdaughters. She still hasn’t adjusted to the cold, so most often she can be found cuddling with her laptop and a cup of tea. No stranger to book success, she also writes erotic novellas under a naughty secret name that she’s happy to share with the curious. You can learn more about Jennifer and her books at JenniferBernard.net. Make sure to sign up for [her newsletter](#) for new releases, fresh exclusive content, sales alerts and giveaways.



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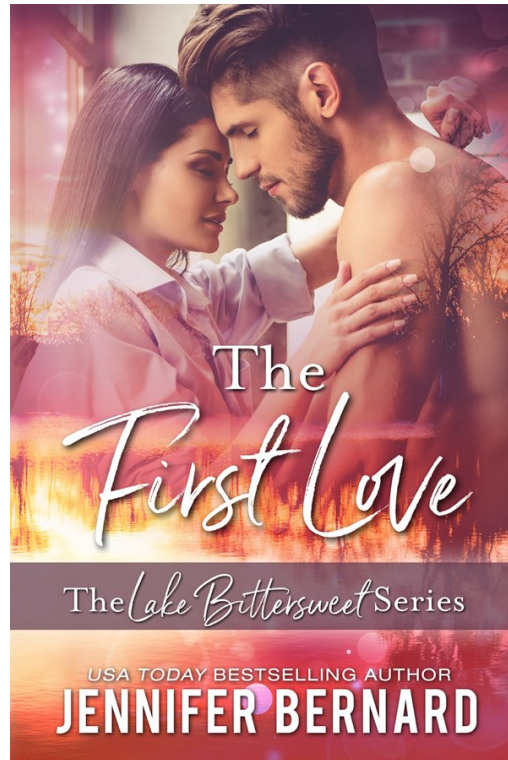
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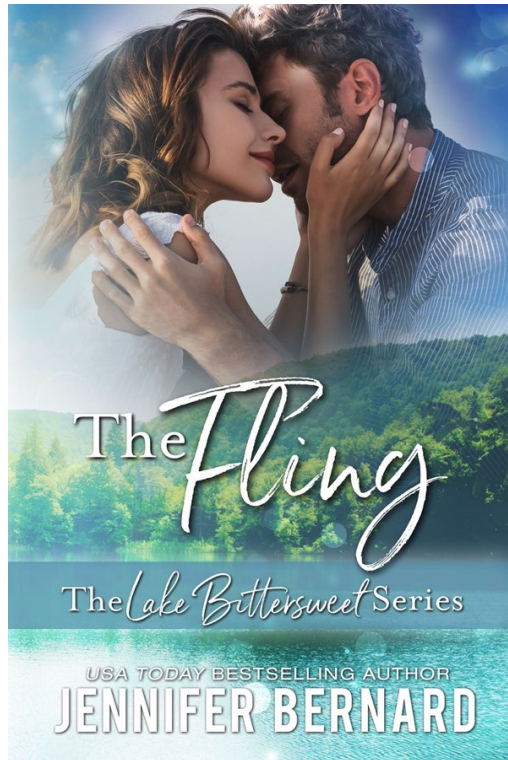


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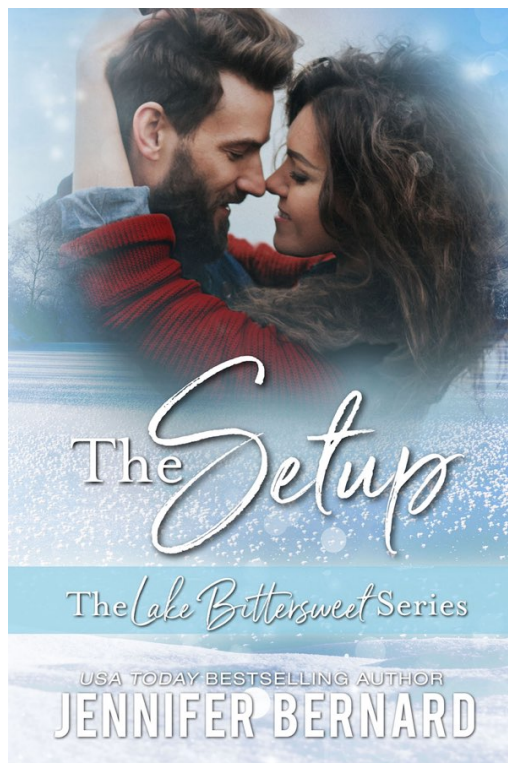
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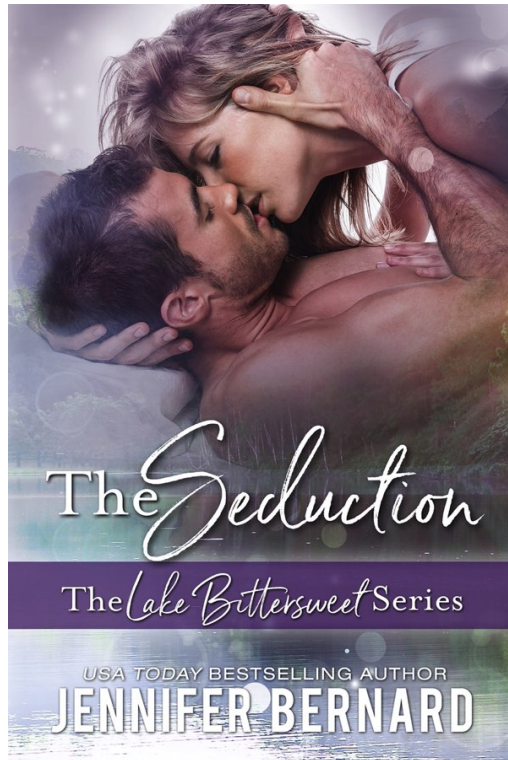
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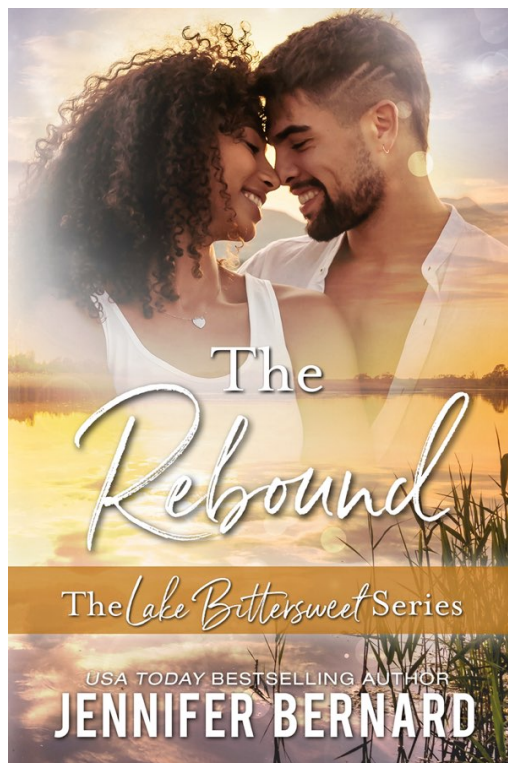
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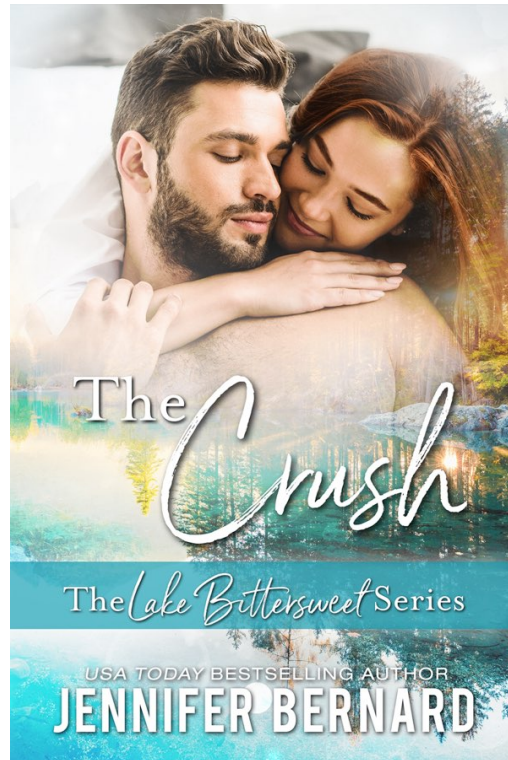
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Lost Harbor, Alaska



Mine Until Moonrise ~ Book 1



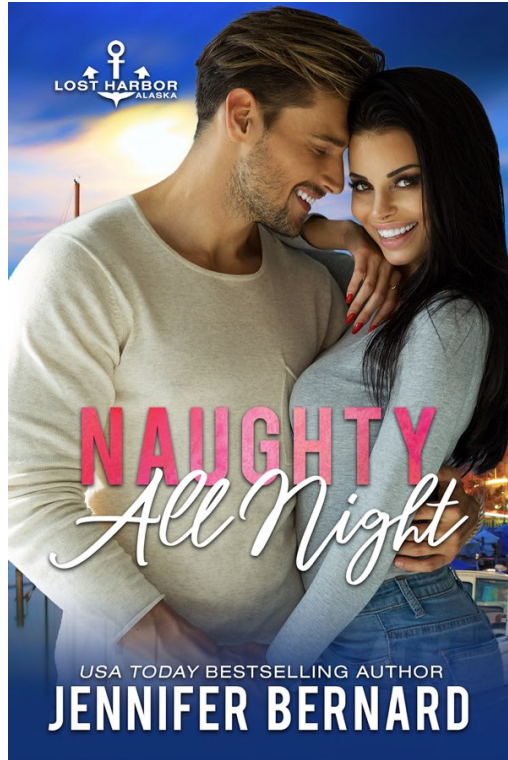
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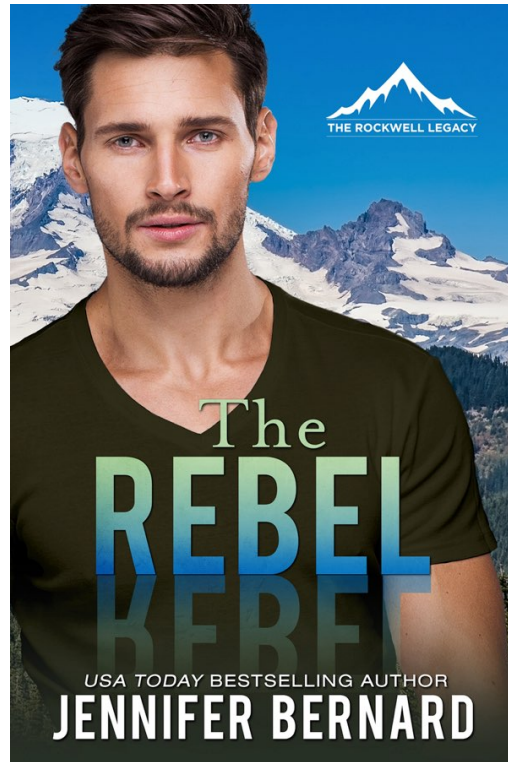


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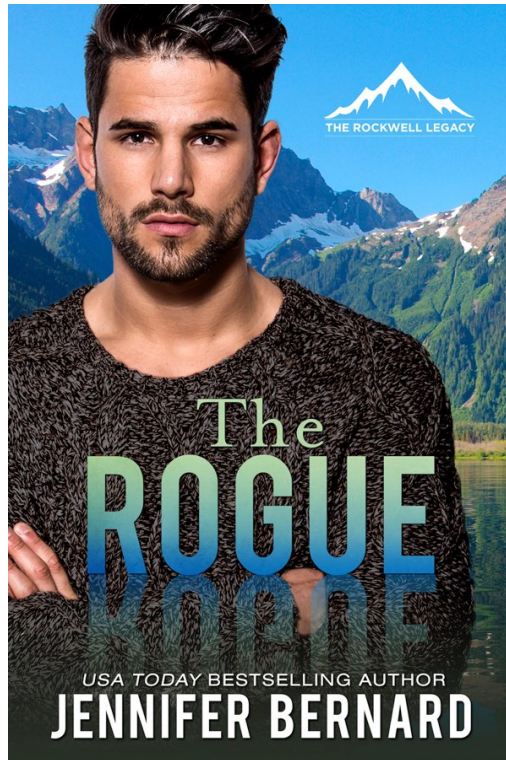


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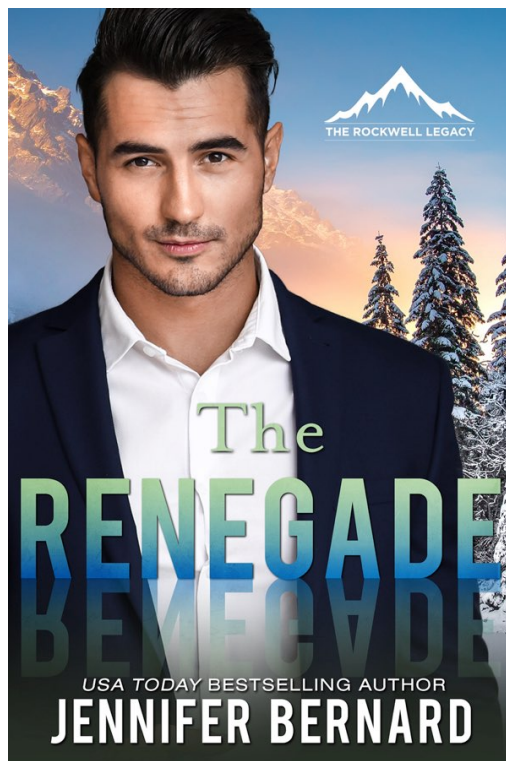
The Rockwell Legacy



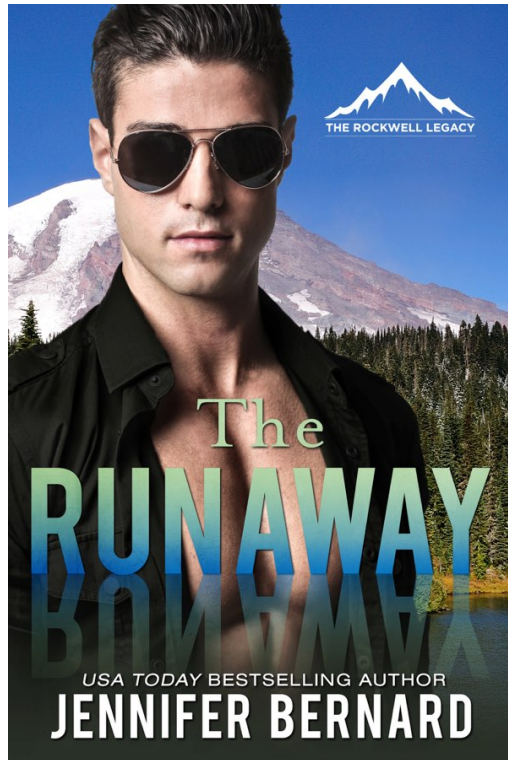
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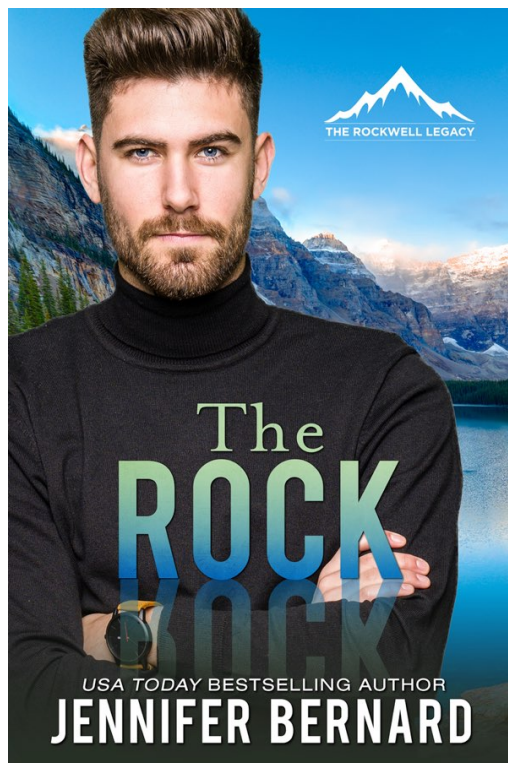
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The Renegade ~ Book 3



The Runaway ~ Book 4



The Rock ~ Book 5

Jupiter Point ~ The Hotshots

[Set the Night on Fire](#) ~ Book 1

[Burn So Bright](#) ~ Book 2

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The Bachelor Firemen of San Gabriel Series

Love Between the Bases Series

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