



Grace General,
book one

IT WAS
ALWAYS
YOU

LAURA BETH

Grace General

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Grace General, Book 1

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“my *darling*;
you will never be unloved by me
you are too well tangled in my soul”

—Atticus

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CHAPTER ONE

Ten Years Earlier

Being the new kid fucking sucks.

Being the new kid who arrives halfway through the semester sophomore year sucks even more. Elementary school was a little easier; kids don't really notice a new person in their class. But teenagers, man. Teenagers are a whole different breed. They're vultures. Pimple-faced predators. They circle you, smelling for a weakness, taking their sweet time finding the right moment to swoop in and feast, no hesitation as they rip your carcass from end to end.

"Is this really what you want, kiddo?" my dad asked over breakfast this morning. I answered into my orange juice glass that, yeah, I was sure. Maybe moving to Chicago and being stuck with my spiteful, distant mother while my dad deploys isn't what I really want but staying in the same city for more than six months at a time, is.

I can't blame my father—he's a lifer in the Marines, which means moving from base to base when duty calls and setting me and mom up at the larger ones when he deploys. I didn't mind moving around as a kid. I don't make good friends easily, or at all, but I'm *great* at making acquaintances. I'm great at getting over the awkwardness, not caring what I say, who it might impress, or who it might offend. There's no pressure to get comfortable, settle in, and lay down some roots when the clock is always winding down for the next move. What I'm *not* good at is confrontation. So, when Dad asked again if this was what I really wanted for the next two and a

half years—to finish out my high school career at one school, his alma mater—I stared into my orange juice and offered up a fake, but resounding, “Yes.”

Since we haven’t lived outside the walls of a military base in the last fifteen years, and my dad has surely forgotten what rush hour in Chicago traffic is like, I now get to be the new girl, midway through sophomore year, who arrives two hours late on her first day.

~

Not only that, but I’m also escorted to homeroom by the principal, who looks like he is old enough to be an original founding father. The cracked leather elbow patches on his tweed sport coat scratch my arm as we walk side by side down the barren hallway. He mumbles something about my schedule and tucks the corner of a notecard under the tips of my sweaty fingers, cramped from holding up the tower of books he had waiting for me.

“We will have the janitor work on your locker while you’re in Home Economics,” he drawls, flicking his wrist to adjust a cuff link. “After class, the combination should be working, and you may deposit your books at that time, Ms. Watkins.”

“Home Economics? Or Home Room?”

“Home Economics. We pride ourselves in being one of the few schools left in the city that teaches the necessary life skills students lack: cooking, baking, childcare tasks, and light sewing.”

Cooking and sewing? While I won’t lie and pretend I know anything about either of those skills, my goal in life isn’t to be someone’s 1950’s housewife—picture perfect on the outside but often trapped in a loveless marriage and a slave in your own home.

“It sounds like you’re raising excellent Stepford Wives. Teach them to cook and clean all day while their husband is at work. Make sure to have an old-fashioned prepared for him

when he arrives home, five o'clock on the dot." The corner of a book bites into my rib cage. I do my best to shuffle them to the right, letting the blood flow back to my left side as we continue our walk. "Don't forget to air the linens and don your fairest set of pearls. A lady should always look her best."

He stops outside the metal blue door with a vertical window so small and narrow it might as well be the door to a prison cell. The faint echo of the teacher in the middle of her lesson hums on the other side as the principal pauses, his gaze sizing me up. I can tell by his stare that I'm about to receive a lecture—it's the same look my mom gives when I irritate her—so I take that opportunity to rest my shoulder against the cool cinder-block wall, letting it wick away some of the nervous sweat that's gathered under the hem of my tee. I chose a comfortable outfit today, knowing it would be a shit show. My black Joan Jett tee goes well with my favorite lavender Chuck Taylors. I should have kept these ones a little more pristine, but I got bored on the long flight from Arizona. So now the entire class gets to judge the doodles of flowers and kittens, lightning bolts and cactus trees, and anything else that might wander through my ADHD mind.

"Ms. Watkins, I'll have you know we encourage both male and female students to participate in our Home Economics course."

Encourage being the operative word. I'm willing to bet there aren't too many fifteen-year-old boys begging to learn how to sew baby bonnets.

He opens the door, and it creaks, echoing down the narrow corridor.

The teacher pauses mid-sentence, her head swiveling to the side at the sound of the squeaking door.

The principal pauses, gesturing for me to enter ahead of him. I shift my books in my arms and square my shoulders, walking confidently into the classroom toward the teacher with my head held high.

It isn't until I see the feet of the first row of students sitting quietly at their desks, bodies leaning forward to see what the interruption is, that the first-day jitters take over. I abruptly stop, causing the principal to crash into me.

He teeters on his toes, the smell of the cough drop he's been clacking between his teeth stinging my senses. I step out of his way, pressing my shoulder blades to the wall and silently begging him to go first to save me a few seconds of misery.

"Mrs. Nabb," he bellows. "I apologize for the interruption, but this is the new enrollment we discussed earlier."

He turns and gestures to me.

I step forward. My eyes are glued to the teacher in front of me, from her colorful, crocheted vest buttoned over her turtleneck, to her matching patchwork, floor-length skirt. "Light sewing" was how the principal referred to this class, but if this is the shit I'm going to have to learn, count me out.

My gaze moves up to her face, where I'm met with a sweet smile and salt-and-pepper hair that rests at her chin. She steps forward and starts to take the stack of books out of my hands, and I gladly let her. My arms hanging like Jell-O from carrying the weight of them around.

"I see our lockers are still acting up. Let's set these behind my desk for now," she says with a wink, pulling the books from my arms.

A sense of guilt fills my mind for mentally picking apart her outfit.

After stacking the books in a neat pile behind her desk, she places a hand on my back and moves us both to the center of the room. My shoes squeak with each step on the freshly polished floor, and I can feel the judgmental eyes of my fellow students following my every step. I reach my hands up to clutch the straps of my backpack, holding on tight, gaze still locked on the floor, so I don't have to meet the stares of the students.

“Class,” Mrs. Nabb says, pulling up the note card that the principal handed her, “this is our newest transfer student, Jenna ... Oh, wow. This is Jenna Alissandria Watkins,” she says, making sure to exaggerate the rolling of the *r* in my middle name while raising both hands, gesturing toward me as if I’m up for auction instead of being introduced to a group of unimpressed teenagers.

She didn’t have to middle-name me, that’s for sure. It’s a pretty name, I get it. My mom chose the name after her favorite city in Italy, where my dad proposed.

It sounds romantic, but if you only knew the tension that blankets the room when they are together, nothing about the two of them screams romance.

Mrs. Nabb’s lips move as she reads the rest of the information on the cue card. “Jenna, dear, why don’t you have a seat in the empty chair next to Natalie? Natalie, raise your hand for Jenna, please.”

I glance up and peer around the room to see who is raising their hand. My stomach sinks when the only hand I see above someone’s head is attached to the most exotic-looking, beautiful brunette I have ever seen. She looks a hell of a lot older than fifteen, more like the Hawaiian Barbie I used to play with, and by the crinkle of her nose and the squint of her eyes, she’s less than excited to share her narrow, two-seat desk with me.

Keeping my head down, I move quickly to the wooden desk, and pull the empty chair out and away from her, hoping to avoid any tension by giving her the space she so clearly wants. When I think I’m safe, that I’m seated and class can continue and everyone can forget I arrived, I look up and see Mrs. Nabb standing at the corner of my desk, a toothy grin on her face.

“Jenna. Why don’t you take a minute and tell the class a little bit about yourself? What brought you to Chicago, what your interests are. Stand up, dear.” She tucks a hand under my elbow, not giving me a choice on whether I want to stand.

I take a deep breath and rise, prepared to give the same speech I've given at the last three schools. "My name is Jenna. I was born in Chicago, but I've been moving around a lot with my dad. He's in the military. Decided to move back to Chicago to finish high school. That's about it ..." I finish awkwardly and immediately sit back down.

"Tsk-tsk." Mrs. Nabb ushers me to stand again. "Tell us about your hobbies. What do you love?" She pumps two closed fists in the air. "What *motivates* you?"

My hobbies? I haven't lived anywhere long enough to develop legitimate hobbies. At my last school, I lied and said I was on the verge of being a professional acrobat, but a terrible broken ankle put an end to that dream. My parents grounded me when they found out I lied, but I loved pretending I was good at something. Books and TV are my only hobbies because I can take them anywhere, in any climate. But moving here changed everything, and there would be time for "planting my roots" or whatever my dad said.

I shrug under her stare. "I'd like to try out for a sport maybe, since I'll be here for a while. I think I'd be okay at volleyball."

The exotic Barbie next to me grunts at that. "Of course, you would. You're built like a giraffe."

A few of the students around us snicker at her insult, but it doesn't faze me. I'm a fifteen-year-old girl who peaked at five feet ten inches, several inches taller than most boys my age. This isn't the first time someone's bullied me about my height.

Before I have a chance to defend myself, to ask her if all the other smurfs are this crabby in the morning, a deep voice behind me—way too deep to be a fifteen-year-old—barks, "Natalie. Knock the fuck off."

Natalie immediately stops her giggling and whips her head forward.

Great. Just great. With my luck, it's a student teacher, or an assistant principal shadowing the class. Nothing screams cool

new girl like having a teacher defend you against the bullies. Although, a student teacher cursing would be a new touch.

Mrs. Nabb drones on about dough and oven temps, and I'm feeling relaxed in my seat when she clicks the cap back on her dry-erase marker and chirps, "Time to break into groups of two for our cooking lesson today!"

I hate picking partners. In my experience, after the initial new-girl buzz has worn off, I'm seemingly forgotten. I slink back a little further, waiting for everyone else to pair up. I'll partner with whatever sad sap is left.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nasty Natalie sit up a little straighter, lick her lips, and with a casual flick of the wrist, flip her silky black hair over her shoulder, an afterglow of coconut following. As the sleek strands glide effortlessly through the air, I'm reminded that it's winter, and my frizzy blonde curls are unruly by now. How on earth she looks so freshly polished is beyond me.

She turns toward me, eyeing me up and down for a second before sliding her arm across the back of her chair to face the table behind us. "What do you say, Emmett? Be my partner?"

If she had ended the sentence with a moan, it couldn't have been more obvious that she wanted to bang whoever Emmett is.

It isn't until I hear the same dark voice from earlier, the one that told her to fuck off, that I'm shocked wide awake: "No thanks, Nat. I want to ask Jenna to be my partner."

That voice. There is *no way* that voice can belong to a student. Let alone a student my age. Maybe it's a fifth-year senior a few credits shy of graduation, and they needed a Home Ec course to finish off that college application.

I slowly sit up in my seat, run a palm over my stomach to flatten the wrinkles in my rock-and-roll tee before turning slowly and looking over my left shoulder to see who sits behind me.

There's a skinny kid with black, shaggy hair at the table who first gets up and walks away, so I continue turning until I meet the source of that voice.

Dark blue eyes perfectly blend with his fleece pullover. Dark hair, messy, possibly a bit damp as if he put on a ball cap after his morning shower, not caring how it would look because he knew each strand would fall into the perfect place on its own. It puts him into the I-didn't-mean-to-look-good-but-I do category. But it's his size that stuns me.

Maybe he was considered chubby as a younger kid, but puberty blessed him. His weight and height filled out, making him the perfect balance of softness and strength. Seriously, do they pump hormones into the HVAC system here? Kids at this school have developed a lot quicker than the fifteen-year-olds I'm used to seeing.

“What do you say? Do you want to be my partner?” he asks, flashing a warm smile that softens his face, calming my jittering nerves.

I swallow and nod, unable to speak a full sentence.

I stand up when he does, and though I'm tall and girls like Natalie make me feel bad about it, he's still a head taller than me. With a large hand he grips the back of his chair and pushes it under the desk, telling me to go find us an open table.

I slide past him, making sure not to touch him so my hormones don't catch fire. I can feel him turn to follow me, staying a respectable distance away while still guiding me to an open cooktop table. We pass Natalie and her equally beautiful friend, and I notice the eyes they give me as they whisper behind their palms.

Her friend says something in her ear and they both laugh obnoxiously.

“Is this table okay?” I ask him, coming to stand at the furthest one in the back of the classroom.

He nods and opens the bottom drawer on the cooktop, pulling out two folded aprons. “Ignore them,” he says,

motioning with his head to Natalie, perched on top of her table, legs crossed like a lady. “She gets off on making others feel bad. She’s jealous of you.”

“Yeah, that’s what it is. Jealousy,” I scoff. Grabbing the apron and slinging it over my neck, I reach for the ties and pull them behind me. As I watch him put the apron on, I can barely keep a straight face, the strings barely meet around him.

“So, this is really a class where you cook? This is real? We eat ...” I trail off, gaze flicking around the classroom until I see the menu board at the front. “Alfredo? We eat alfredo at ten in the morning?”

He chuckles, his laugh a sand-scratched rasp that warms my core. “Alfredo is kind of a weird choice, even for her. Most days we bake something, which I don’t mind at all,” he says, tapping his stomach.

I immediately recognize his attempt at mocking his weight, but I breeze past it. He might have been picked on as a kid, and while he stands taller than anyone else in the room and is the most handsome teenage boy I have ever met, he probably still feels like that insecure boy inside, and uses humor to deflect.

“Did you have to take this class? Or did you choose to?” Looking around the room, my suspicions are confirmed: There are a hell of a lot more girls than boys in this class.

He shrugs, the tips of his ears reddening. “I don’t mind cooking. My mom is a good cook and makes me help her sometimes. Plus, it’s an easy A, and like I said, free cake mid-morning.” He holds out a broad hand to me. “I’m Emmett, by the way. Emmett Owens.”

I grasp his hand with mine. “Jenna. But you already knew that.”

“Jenna Alissandria Watkins.”

“The one and only.”

He looks at the recipe card as I glance around the station.

Mrs. Nabb saunters up and down the aisles in between the tables, educating on temperature control as I grab the carton in front of us and flip the top open, revealing a dozen eggs. “Why are there eggs if we aren’t baking?”

Emmett holds the recipe card so I can see. “Apparently egg yolks go in homemade alfredo sauce. And we’re making noodles from scratch, too.”

I nearly drop the carton on the table. “We’re making our pasta? You weren’t kidding when you said we cook. Doesn’t she know you can buy alfredo in a jar? Pasta comes in boxes, too. Much easier that way.”

“Jarred sauce won’t fly with Mrs. Nabb.” He playfully elbows me in the side. “Come on, this will be fun.”

The teacher starts to holler out step-by-step instructions as Emmett bends down to pull a large tub out from the cabinets below us.

He flips the top open to reveal enough flour to feed the nation, and hands me a measuring cup. “Want to scoop us two cups of flour?”

I gather my mop of blonde curls in my hands and push it to the top of my head, twisting until it’s semi-tamed and securing it with a pony. A few tendrils fall from the bun around my face, and I blow out a puff of air to move them away. I take the cup from his hand, pausing a moment to see if he steps to the side so I can move closer to the flour bin. He does, barely, so I move closer to him, feeling the softness of his pullover brush the skin on my arms.

All my nerve endings are on fire being so close to him. He smells amazing. I don’t think he’s wearing cologne; he smells more like fresh laundry and soap. He’s probably one of those people who naturally smells good, who can go three days without showering or brushing their teeth and still smell better than me.

I pull the first cup of flour out of the bin and look around the table for the bowl. “Oh crap, can you grab us a bowl?”

Emmett chuckles, tapping a large finger on the table in front of me. “Drop it right on the table, we kind of mix it all in a little pile.”

I pause for a moment, thinking he’s playing a prank on the new girl, and I shouldn’t dump the ingredients on the tabletop. When he doesn’t budge, I do as he says, dumping out two cups of flour on the counter.

“Do you cook?” he asks, capping the flour bin and tucking it back out of sight.

“Well, I thought I did until I found out you can make alfredo without opening a jar. This whole concept is crazy to me. I’ve been to six schools in the last four years, and this is the first time I’ve heard of a Home Economics class.”

“But you plan to stay here?” He sounds almost hopeful as he takes the lead, sprinkling what I think is salt on the pile of flour and cracking a few eggs, adding them to the mess.

I glance around the room, making sure other students are doing things the same way and that this isn’t some weird hazing ritual.

“That’s the plan.” And if most people here are as cool as Emmett, I could see myself wanting to stay in the same place for once.

He pushes up the sleeves of his thick overshirt, revealing brawny forearms that again, are too muscular for the average teenager.

“How old are you, anyways?” I ask.

His brows pull together but his eyes stay focused on the pile in front of him. I watch large hands gently fold the dough over and over, until the powdery pile soon turns smooth and amber yellow. “Fifteen—sixteen this spring,” he finally says. “And you?”

“Same. You’re really tall.” I turn to rest my hip on the counter, letting him fully take the lead on cooking. I swipe a

handful of cheese from the ramekin, wishing I had eaten more for breakfast than a glass of juice.

“You’re tall,” he says, putting the dough aside and digging through the pots and pans before pulling one out. He tosses a pat of butter in, turning up the heat so it sizzles. He pushes the container of heavy cream and another measuring cup in front of me, gesturing for me to pour.

“Principal Skinner said that Home Ec isn’t only cooking. That we sew and stuff, too. Do you do that?” I measure out a few cups of cream and pour it into the bowl as Emmett starts cracking the eggs.

He pours the yolks into my bowl of cream and grabs a whisk, mixing gently but swiftly as he tilts his head to the front of the room where our instructor is standing. I follow his gaze, once again taking in her knit, cropped vest.

“You’re looking right at it. Last semester, she had us all make matching vests.”

My mouth drops open. “No. You’re not serious! That ... that’s what we sew? Did she make you wear them?”

He gives a real laugh, one that’s loud enough to make the heads of Natalie and her minions turn and scowl at me.

“I’m messing with you. We made these aprons,” he says, lifting the hem of the one he’s wearing. “And last month, we all had to pick out a pattern for a stuffed animal. I made a pathetic looking panda that my dog tore apart as soon as I brought it home.”

“Aww, poor panda.”

“It had a good run.”

“I can’t imagine I’d be any better at sewing than I am at cooking. You’d run circles around me. If this was the 1950’s, and you were my husband, I’d be the world’s worst housewife, considering I can barely crack a freaking egg.”

The instructor claps three times to garner our attention and calls out, “Okay, class, focus. Now that your ingredients are

prepped and your cream hot, slowly, and I say *slowly*, mix one third of your hot cream with your egg yolks.”

Emmett grabs a potholder from the drawer and wraps it around the handle of the pan before turning to me. “Ready?”

“We don’t have to cook the eggs first?”

“Nope,” he says, pouring slowly. “The notecard says the hot cream cooks the eggs somehow without scrambling them.”

I lean over, my cheek hovering closely to his broad bicep. So close, the soft fuzz of his shirt tickles my face. He doesn’t seem to mind, continuing to pour the cream without lurching away from me.

“Here, keep stirring this,” he says, handing me the spoon. “Stir slowly, make sure it doesn’t scramble. I’m going to get the pasta in the boiling water.”

“I can do that. I can stir,” I tell him, taking the spoon from his hand and letting our fingers brush once again.

I keep stirring as I watch him work around the station, truly comfortable in the kitchen. I notice his ass as he leans over—I’m sure every girl around here does the same. He somehow seems oblivious to female attention. Or maybe he’s the classic playboy who, at the ripe age of fifteen, has already run through this crowd of girls, and that’s why he’s being so nice to me. New girl, always naive. Fresh meat.

He drops the noodles in the water, eyes flicking up to mine once he senses my stare. He smiles, and I shake the negative thoughts out of my head that the only person to ever be nice to me on the first day of school might have alternative motives.

“How does it look?” he asks.

It takes me a minute to realize he’s referring to the alfredo sauce I should have been watching and not about his ass.

“Good,” I squeak, before looking down for the first time in a few minutes and seeing the mixture in front of me. “Oh wait ...” I trail off. “That doesn’t look right. Does that mean it’s done?”

He leans over, reaching between us to shut off the burner and places a heavy hand on my back, fingers curling right between my shoulder blades.

“Um ... it was done about ... two minutes before it looked like that.”

“Why is it lumpy?”

“Curdled.”

I take the spoon out of the pot and set it in an empty bowl, embarrassment setting in that I literally couldn't stir something and focus at the same time.

We're both looking at the pile of scrambled eggs in front of us before I turn to look up at him, noticing his dark lashes fanning over the most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen. “What about now? If you were my 1950's husband and this is what you came home to for dinner, I bet you'd think differently about me.”

He cocks his head, a glimmer of teasing in his eyes. “I'd settle for jarred alfredo if it meant keeping you as my housewife.”

His comment should make me uncomfortable. I should scoff at how bold it seems, given we barely know each other. Instead, I smile, feeling an unusual sense of comfort in my skin.

By the time the bell rings, signaling the end of my first day at my new school, Emmett Owens has become my first real friend.

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day

I wonder if anyone has been murdered in this house.

Not that it looks like a crime scene or anything, but I'm about to sign my life away only to spend the next thirty years wringing sweaty hands together every time the mortgage statement arrives in the mail. If there is a chance I have to resort to selling feet pics online to keep my house, my realtor should tell me the truth now.

Notice the traditional crown molding, it's one of the original features within the home. Also, arguments over repeated plumbing woes have ended three marriages.

Or, this house boasts a stunning, four thousand square foot backyard! However, every spring a family of feral raccoons gives birth under the back porch, preventing you from using your large yard unless you are ready to win the fight against rabies.

Or in this case, this house checks all the boxes I asked my realtor to find and is under my budget, which in my pessimistic mind seems too good to be true. Hence, my assumption of someone having been murdered in the basement.

"So, what do you think?" my realtor, Jessica, asks.

"Umm ..." I'm ready to throw out my usual response: "It's nice, love the wooden floors." But I pause. When I turn toward her and see the hope in her big doe eyes, I can't lie anymore.

This poor girl has spent the better part of the last eight months house shopping with me, dragging me from neighborhood to neighborhood, showcasing every bungalow, classic craftsman, every single ranch-style home that showed some similarities to my ever-growing list of non-negotiables. If I was her, I would have found a way to ditch my indecisive ass after week one, but here she stands, tall and proud, believing that our time together might come to an end with this home.

She reaches a perfectly manicured hand up to squeeze the bridge of her nose in frustration. “This has *everything* on your list, Jenna. We’re talking about an open-concept kitchen/family room that boasts a set of French patio doors overlooking the backyard. The *very spacious* backyard, might I add. You can’t get any more specific than that!” She walks to the patio doors, heels click-clacking on the wooden floorboards with a hand up like Vanna White to show me said backyard, as if it didn’t pull my attention as soon as we entered the room.

It *is* a ridiculous yard for this part of the city, and the refinished hardwood floors are exactly how I pictured them. Looking past Jessica’s shoulder through the patio doors, I can make out the perfect spot for a stone fireplace. I’ll need a set of Adirondack chairs, for sure. Probably in a darker charcoal color that hides the claw marks from that family of feral raccoons.

“I know, I know. It does check off everything I asked you to find.” It really is my dream home. Well, the dream home I’d perfectly curated in my head when I sat down with her to write down in extreme detail what I was looking for.

“Is it the neighborhood? I know you don’t have children and aren’t married, but this school district ...”

She drones on, my mind refusing to listen after she tossed out that dagger. *I know you aren’t married*. No husband, no kids. Not even a creepy neighbor that won’t stop texting me.

Poor, single Jenna. Maybe I'll need the company of that family of feral raccoons after all.

"No, no. It seems like a fine neighborhood," I tell her, cutting her off. "In fact, I lived in this part of the city for the last few years of high school."

I turn back toward Jessica. Hope drains from her face. "I'm sorry, you're probably so annoyed with me, but I don't think this is the one."

She doesn't falter, instead plasters on a very practiced smile. "I understand if you are in the early stages of looking to buy a home, and you want to look and see what's out there. But when we first met, I was under the impression you were truly looking to buy. I've been putting a lot of effort into this for you, Jenna."

"I am serious about this, I promise. I'm sick of living in my apartment." I always thought finding a home was like finding your wedding dress. Granted, I don't know what it's like to shop for a wedding dress, but I've seen enough reality TV to know it's a process.

You spend hours poring over hundreds of online options, take your best friends to local stores, try on fifty nearly identical dresses to see how they look, and how you feel. And then, when you try on the one, you know.

I thought buying a home would feel like that. I imagined walking in the front door and feeling a certain warmth, a comfort, and I'd see myself staying up all night repainting the living room, surviving on cold pizza until the job was complete. I thought I'd find my happily ever after.

Even though this house has literally everything I told her I wanted, I don't get that feeling.

"I thought I'd be able to see myself living in one of these houses. It checks every box I have. I don't understand why I don't feel like it fits, why it doesn't feel like it could belong to me."

She waves a hand in the air, glossing over my confession. “Oh, that’s because it’s hard to imagine a home when it’s empty.” She strolls away from me, toward the kitchen, running her hand over the dark splattered marble counters. “Imagine your coffee maker right here, and your favorite stack of mugs hanging from these little hooks.” Her hand reaches up to slide a finger through the dainty silver C-shaped hooks, hidden under the cabinets and the perfect spot for the handle of a coffee mug. She waltzes back into the living room, gesturing to the far wall. “I see a TV mounted in this corner over here, a splash of color along this wall. A sectional to tie it all together. Once you paint, decorate the way you want, that’s when it will feel like yours.”

No surprise, her decorating ideas are spot on, but my gut doesn’t agree.

Maybe I won’t ever find somewhere that feels like home. My childhood was spent moving from one military base to the next, getting used to the idea of never feeling settled. I lived life out of a suitcase with a new city, a new school, new acquaintances, and a new set of four walls to call home without ever knowing what that feeling of home should be.

After high school, I moved away to college to become an RN, and most of my nursing career has been spent as a travel nurse, living out of extended-stay hotels or renting an Airbnb on the company’s dime. Whether it was a sketchy back-alley apartment, a high-rise condo in the city, or a three-bedroom home with a pool all to myself—they all felt how this feels. Fine. *Okay*. Mundane. Four walls, a place to store your clothes, microwave dinners, and sleep.

There’s only one place I’ve ever lived that felt like a home. My time there was brief, but it was the only place I felt wanted.

Less than a ten-minute drive from where I stand is a home with similar oak cabinets, refurbished wooden floors that lead from the foyer all the way to the kitchen, and honeysuckle growing along the front steps. A home where there was a

sense of comfort so strong it was impossible not to fall asleep on the worn suede couch, listening to the sound of the rain lightly pattering on the patio doors.

It's been three years since I've seen that house, refusing to drive by or acknowledge its existence. I'm not sure if it belongs to the same family, or if the honeysuckle still blooms each May.

"Jenna?" her voice is a pin, popping the daydream I had fallen into.

"Sorry, what?"

"Did you want to head upstairs to the second floor, or if you've had enough, I have one more we can look at this afternoon?"

I spin on the balls of my feet, forcing myself away from those thoughts, from the memory of my true dream home and walk towards the front door. "I'm ready to move on, let's go see the next one."

CHAPTER THREE

Eight Years Earlier

ick up. Pick up, pick up, pick up,” I mumble into the
“P”phone, keeping it tucked between my chin and shoulder
as I hastily move around my bedroom, rummaging
through the mess in my closet to pull out my volleyball
duffel. I toss it on the bed, then turn to open my dresser
drawer. Scooping out an armful of socks, the ringing ends, and
I hear a groggy, “Hello?”

“Hey,” my voice cracking now that I hear his voice.

The shuffle on the other side tells me he hears the tears in
my throat, begging to burst out.

“Jenna. What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

I can imagine him right now, scrambling out of bed and
slipping on the sneakers he keeps right by his doorway. His
worn football hoodie slung over the desk chair; the scent of his
cologne still trapped within the fibers.

“Can you come pick me up?” The first tear falls, and I
swipe it away as quickly as it came, refusing to give in to its
demands.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“Please,” I beg softly. “Can you come get me? I need a
ride.”

“Jenna,” his voice is low and calm, “where do you need a
ride to at one in the morning on a school night?”

I crack open my bedroom door and listen down the hall for signs of life; the hum of the *Nick at Nite* scripted laughter is the only sound bouncing off the walls. No clanging of glasses, not even a cough from her Marlboro to indicate she is still awake. I tip-toe across the stained yellow carpet to the main bathroom, doing my best to remain invisible as I tuck my shampoo and conditioner bottles into my arms. And to be a bitch, I snatch up the only toothpaste left in the house.

“Jenna,” Emmett continues to hiss, begging for answers.

I wait until I am back in my bedroom, my sanctuary, before I answer him, “Can you give me a ride or not? It’s fine if you can’t, but I wanted to say goodbye, too.”

A loud exhale. “You know I’m already on my way and stop with this bullshit about saying goodbye. You’re not going anywhere without me. How many times have we been over this?”

I swallow a sob at his kind words. Since the first day we met, he’s been my rock, the logic to my absurdness, the calm to my continual storm, and the anchor I so badly need when all I want to do is run away.

“This time it’s different,” I tell him as I load as many pairs of jeans and tees as I can into my already bursting duffel. “This time it’s for real.”

It’s February in Chicago, and though most of the snow has melted, it’s still freezing outside. I’ve decided on the West Coast for my destination, and if I remember right, my aunt lives far enough south that winter coats aren’t needed. I slide on two hoodies and grab my denim jacket to pull over.

“Don’t pull in the drive. Mom will see the lights. Park a block away, by that old tree in the Johnson’s yard that has the broken branch.”

“I know the one.”

“Text me when you’re there?”

He doesn't answer immediately, and I can hear Kenny Chesney playing softly in the background. The same CD he's been playing on repeat since we saw Kenny at Summerfest last fall.

"Aren't you sick of Kenny Chesney yet?"

"Never. He's better than too much love, or whatever the hell her name is."

"*Tove Lo*. She's amazing and you know it." I know for a fact he knows her name, and he probably knows all the words to a handful of her songs since I make him listen to her all the time, but our ongoing joke is one that always makes me smile.

He forces a quiet chuckle. "Okay, I'm by the tree."

"I'll be there in a minute."

I toss my phone into my purse and sling it over my shoulder before opening my closet for the last thing I need. Standing on my tiptoes, I reach up to move over my stack of yearbooks and photo albums to the shoe box hidden in the back. Taking it down, I run my pointer finger over the gold macrame lettering that reads *Jenna's Dream Box*.

What a stupid fucking concept. Dreams are for people who think that if you believe enough, if you manifest the shit out of your future, good things will come to you.

Dreams are for people who aren't stuck in this dump of a house with their alcoholic mother.

I pull the lid off and toss it in the bottom of my closet, staring down at the wad of cash inside. While most teenagers are saving their money from shitty summer jobs and babysitting to buy a car or plan for college, I've been saving mine to get as far away from this place as I can possibly get. Each cone I scooped at the local Frostie Berrie equaled freedom. I offered to work the closing shift—no other teenager in their right mind would agree to work their summer evenings inside an ice cream hut. It paid well and Emmett stopped by once during every shift to keep me company and drive me home afterwards.

I gather the wad of bills and shove them into my purse, thankful I decided to forgo putting it in a bank where my mom could get her mitts on it.

Opening the bedroom window, I peek my head out to check up and down the street, making sure the rest of the block is still asleep. I heave my duffle up over my shoulder and out the window. It hits the frozen lawn with a heavy thud before the world goes silent again. Down the street, I can see the red lights of Emmett's truck and the exhaust pouring into the crisp air.

I slide my nightstand along the wall then climb up and sling my leg over the ledge so I'm straddling the window. I turn around once more, scanning my bedroom to see if I forgot anything else and my eyes catch on the photo tucked into the corner of my mirror.

Last year at junior prom, my girlfriends and I circled Emmett, laughing uncontrollably and doing our best booty-drop dance moves as he stood in the center, refusing to move. He promised me he'd dance if they played a country song, and while he probably meant a slow song, I asked the DJ to play the most fiddle-infused, honkey-tonk country song he had, and proceeded to drag Emmett out on the dance floor by his necktie.

His arms are linked across his chest, face flushed with embarrassment in the photo, but he held onto his promise of dancing with us even if he technically didn't move a muscle.

At the last minute, I hop down and snatch the photo from its hold and tuck it into the inner pocket of my jean jacket. Stepping back up on my nightstand, I once again straddle the window and hop down without another thought at what I'm leaving behind.

I don't stop moving once my feet hit the grass. Grabbing the handle of my duffle and cursing under my breath that it's way too heavy, I race to Emmett's truck. I swing open the passenger door and he squints in the light of the cab dome, his

expression shifting from a grimace to sorrow the moment he sees my face in the light.

“Jesus, Jenna,” he says softly as he reaches to grab the top of my bag, hauling it into the cab and next to him like it’s filled with feathers and not my life’s possessions. “Now will you tell me what’s going on?”

“Can you drive?” I choke out, as I slam the door closed behind me.

He shifts his truck into gear and drives. He doesn’t ask me where I want to go, where he should drive us, he just drives.

We ride around in silence for an hour, and I prop my elbow up on the window frame, resting my chin in my palm. Each house we pass is dark, businesses closed, the only light coming from the glow of the street lamps as Emmett twists and turns through the neighboring residential areas. I can feel the adrenaline dissipate, all the energy I spent crying and rage-packing leaves me weak and my eyes heavy. I fall asleep wondering what the hell I’m going to do with my life.

I don’t wake up until I feel a warm hand on my shoulder, gently shaking me. I sit up abruptly, looking around, not recognizing the scenery.

Emmett shifts the truck into park and we both stare forward, looking out the windshield at the moon and its reflection on the water. The wind picks up, rustling against the sides of the truck and I wrap my arms around myself.

“This is Mattson Park. My parents used to take my sister and me here a lot when we were kids. We’d swim, have a big picnic, and get burned to hell but always had a blast.”

I keep my eyes glued to the windshield, but can feel Emmett turn toward me, his swallow audible as he gets the courage to ask me what happened.

“My mom’s drinking again.”

He exhales loudly, scrubbing a hand over his head in frustration before letting his arm sling over the steering wheel.

“How bad?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. She’s been hiding it for a while, I think. So, I assume it’s pretty bad.”

I don’t tell a lot of people, or anyone really—besides Emmett, about what my home has turned into. Home is a loose word. We haven’t seen my dad since my first day of school here. He returned from his latest deployment last year, settling at a base in Hawaii. The phone calls come less often, each one shorter than the last, usually ending in an argument and my mom hanging up.

I’ve been spending more and more time at Emmett’s house, surrounded by his family. Seeing how a real family unit should treat each other makes me question everything I thought I knew.

There’s no way in hell I’d tell any of our other friends. Nothing intimidates teenage girls more than an angry, alcoholic mother. News like this would be kerosene to the high school gossip mill.

“I was doing laundry; all of my gym clothes were stinky and dirty. I moved the bottle of laundry soap and found her stash of empties.” She probably thought I wouldn’t find them, and I wouldn’t have, but since she’s been sleeping all the time, she hasn’t washed clothes, bought groceries, cleaned, or anything that would indicate she lives in the house, so I had to do it.

“I was pissed, and you know how I can get. When I’m mad, I can’t think straight. I do the first thing that comes to mind. I grabbed the empties and marched into the living room to toss them at her feet.”

He extends an arm over the duffel between us to squeeze my shoulder, slowly rubbing his hand across my back.

I swipe at the tears streaming from my eyes, willing them to stop, to let me gain some sort of composure about the situation.

“She slapped me.”

My mom hit me. She didn't have a word to say about the bottles, about her being physically present but mentally on vacation. With a casual flick of the ash from her cigarette she stood up. And using her spare hand, she hit me, open palm.

My confession makes him whip his head to look at me, and it's like he's frozen. The man who always knows what to say is stunned silent.

I hang my head, feeling so weak, so defeated. All I can think is that I'm ready to give up.

Ugly, wet sobs come pouring out of me as my body sags. "Sometimes I feel like such a fuck up," I choke out. "Why do I always do this? I can't ever keep my mouth shut. I should have thrown them in the garbage and gone to my room. I should have left her alone."

Emmett tries to scoot closer to me, and I hear him curse at the bag tucked between us. He lifts it and shoves it into the back seat. I'm then pulled into his arms, wrapped up in him, and I bury my head into the neck of his sweatshirt, smelling his soap and the remnants of cologne I knew would be there.

"It doesn't matter, you hear me?" he says, squeezing me to accentuate every word. "It doesn't fucking matter. There isn't anything you could have said or done that makes what she did okay. Christ, Jenna. You deserve far better than what you've been given."

He holds me firmly, his grasp unwavering as I release every painful memory through my tears. It isn't until my body relaxes, and I pull back a little, that I notice his hand feeling between the layers of fabric around my neck.

"Are you ... are you wearing two hoodies?"

For the first time all night, I laugh. "Yeah, I didn't have enough space to pack them in my bag. I'm sweating."

He helps me pull an arm out of my jean jacket and I yank off one hoodie as he adjusts the heat in the cab of the truck. We're quiet again, both looking out over the lake at the mini waves forming. I can imagine Emmett and his sister here,

screaming, chasing each other around, covered in mosquito bites, digging their toes in the sand.

“So, what’s the plan?” he finally asks, most likely noticing the time on the clock. “Want to stay at my house tonight? I’m not letting you go home.”

“And have your parents realize how pathetic and crazy I am? No. I called because I need a ride to the bus station.”

Emmett is silent, staring out the window and chewing on his bottom lip.

“I called my dad,” I continue. “He told me they’ve been separated. He has a fucking girlfriend and everything. He wondered if she’s drinking again, the few times they talk, she slurs through the conversation.” I use the fabric of the hoodie I discarded to wipe my face in an unladylike manner before folding it neatly in my lap. “A heads-up from him would have been nice. He said I should go to my Aunt Sarah’s. She lives in Southern California and has space for me until he can get me set up somewhere to finish high school. Who knows if I should finish school? I could find a job and call it good.”

“No.” He shakes his head firmly. “You’re not leaving like this.”

“No?” I’m almost laughing. “I’m not asking for permission. I called to say goodbye and to ask for a ride, so I don’t have to pedal my piece of crap bicycle to the train station at midnight.”

He finally turns toward me, a stony, serious expression on his face. “I said no.”

“Emmett,” I plead, exasperated and worn out by this conversation, by the entire evening.

He continues staring, meeting my gaze with his own. It’s like we’re playing a silent game of who is going to blink first.

“Fine.” He readjusts until he’s facing forward and thrusts the truck into reverse. “Let’s go. I need to stop at home first and get some clothes.”

“What do you mean? You’re not going anywhere.”

“We’re dropping out, moving out west. I’m going to get a job at a pizza shop or lobster shack or something. We can finish our degrees online. We’ll rent a shitty studio apartment we can barely afford. You’ll sleep on some dingy couch we buy off Craigslist from a murderer, probably, and I’ll sleep on the floor. It’ll be great, can’t wait.”

“No, you’re not going to do that. You have a family who loves you more than anything and your mom would die if you left her like this.”

“And you have me!” he bellows. The words come out with such force; I flinch.

Emmett isn’t one to yell, and now that I look back, I don’t think I’ve ever heard him raise his voice until this moment. He will swear, he will make damn sure someone is aware of how serious he is, but he doesn’t yell.

“You have me, and I’d miss you if you left,” he follows up, voice a little softer this time.

“Emmett ... I just—”

“Jenna Alissandria Watkins—”

“Oh my God.” I burst out laughing. “Did you middle-name me?”

“It’s the only way I know you’ll listen to me.” He turns so his whole torso is facing me again, thick forearm slung over the steering wheel. “If you run, I run with you.” He lets that sink in for a moment before continuing. “But if you stay, you’ll prove you’re stronger than your piece of crap family and you’ll rise above them. It sucks, I get that. But God, Jenna. We’re so close to graduating. A few more months and we’re out of here. You can go *wherever* you want without having to drop out of school. Stay—come home with me, and we’ll figure out a real plan.”

Those tears I thought were all cried out are back, filling my eyes to the brim.

“You can sleep in my bed; I’ll sleep on the couch. First thing tomorrow morning we’ll talk to my parents. If you still feel the same way, if you want to leave, I will drive you to the train station.”

“I don’t want them to know ...”

He tilts his head to the side before exhaling painfully and leaning back in his seat. “It’s no secret what’s going on at home. Maybe they don’t know the extent of it, but they know it’s not good.” He reaches a hand up to squeeze my shoulder. “But they love you anyway. Hell, some days, I think my mom likes you more than me.”

I swipe the lone tear that’s fallen from my eye as I chuckle. “That’s because your mom is a baller and my BFF.”

“She is pretty baller,” he whispers.

I consider his proposition for a moment and wonder if he’s right. Maybe dropping out of school when I’m so close to the finish line isn’t the smartest move. I know with every bone in my body that I can’t stomach another night in that house. I don’t have the energy anymore to be the high school student, the athlete, *and* the child who takes care of their parent. Who makes sure the bills are paid and the fridge is full, and the garbage doesn’t stink. For these last few months of my high school freedom, I’d like to feel like a teenager.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” he says with a smirk. “Because I’m ready for west coast life if you are. Sushi rolls, avocado smoothies?”

I playfully shove him. “Shut up. Don’t make fun of my one sad dream. And avocado smoothies? Do you know anything about California?”

He gets settled back in the driver’s seat, hooking an arm behind my headrest to look behind us as he reverses out of the parking spot. “Do *you* know anything about California?”

I roll my head to the side and gaze at him, taking in his handsome features along with the dark half-moons underneath

his eyes from waking up in the middle of the night to come to my rescue.

He reverses out of the lot, turns down the narrow single lane road that leads out of the park, and for the first time in a long time, I have hope.

CHAPTER FOUR

Present Day

“How was house hunting this weekend?” Meg asks, sliding
“**H**in next to me and leaning against the wall in the tiny
room off the nurse’s station.

Once upon a time we were fully staffed, and able to take real lunch breaks in the actual break room. We had chairs to sit in and rest in which now sounds like a foreign concept from an era long, long ago. We have been short-staffed for months, most of our lunches are shoveled in at a pace that would make a competitive eater jealous, while standing in this little alcove. Our unit resembles a large horseshoe, with the nurse’s station at the center and this alcove off to the side, giving staff a bird’s eye view of each patient’s doorway. It allows us to get a bit of a break and eat while still making sure we are watching for call lights or emergencies.

“Meh. Alright, I guess.” I sigh, unwrapping my giant sub sandwich from Kathy De’s deli. “She showed me some really great houses, ones I should have liked, but none of them spoke to me.”

Meg nods along, cracking open a Diet Coke and taking a long swig before opening her Tupperware to reveal baby carrots and a dollop of mustard.

“Really, Meg?” I scold. “We run our asses off all day, barely getting to drink water, get any sort of real break, and when you do decide to eat it’s a sad pile of carrots and a Diet Coke? You need some protein, carbs. Something for your body to *work* with.” Not to mention Diet Coke is weak. If she wants

to survive on carrots and soda, she should at least drink an orange soda.

She rolls her eyes and shrugs, popping a carrot into her mouth and crunching. “I have a date this weekend with a stockbroker, and he’s taking me to Alinea. There is a specific dress I have in mind to wear that flaunts all the necessary curves, but it is currently two sizes too small and doesn’t allow for this,” she says, slapping a palm to her non-existent stomach and pinching her invisible muffin top.

I stare at my best friend, wondering when she became so fucking crazy. Meg is like a Disney princess with a foul mouth. She has the long, thick red hair of Ariel, sparkling eyes like Cinderella, plus huge boobs and curves for days.

“Meg, you are a knockout. You don’t need to starve yourself to impress anyone. It pisses me off that you are considering it.”

She waves me off, clearly annoyed as this conversation is one we’ve had many, many times over. “All this self-love talk coming from my best friend who abandoned me for a vow of celibacy.”

“It’s not a vow of celibacy, you little whore, I’m sick of meeting the same, boring dudes over and over.”

When I moved back to Chicago for good, Meg and I went on a wild string of self-indulgence that included meeting various high-profile men and spending fun-filled weekends on their yachts. Letting them wine and dine us until we got bored and moved onto the next one. We had our fun, but the charade eventually left me disappointed. I wasn’t myself in front of those men, instead I became a version I thought they’d prefer. Someone who favored a fresh Brazilian blowout over wild curls, giggled and agreed with whatever they said even if it wasn’t funny, and never called them out on their materialistic bullshit.

“Jenna, you’re twenty-six and act like you’re fifty, spending your weekends looking for bargains on laundry soap

at CVS instead of going out.”

“Oh! Actually, I found this YouTube channel that teaches you to cook, so I’m done with the couponing thing for now. If I’m looking for a house with a giant kitchen, I might as well learn to cook in it, right?” My Saturday nights have gone from endless cocktails at the club to the grocery store aisles, debating on the importance of purchasing fresh garlic versus jars of pre-minced cloves.

“That sounds like a literal nightmare.” She waves me off. “I still say don’t bother buying a house in the suburbs. Do what I did, buy a condo. There is a maintenance man on site and a pool to use but you don’t have to maintain any of it. I ignore most of my neighbors, but the few I talk to are cool and don’t try to invite you over for Pictionary or some boring couples’ game night where they ramble on about their latest home remodeling project.”

I cackle into my lunch. “Meg, mark my words, someday you are going to meet a dude and be so head over heels in love you’re going to be crying, *begging*, for him to spend a Saturday running errands with you. A family trip to Home Depot to look at new bathroom faucets will become your foreplay.”

Meg crumples her napkin and tosses it at me with conviction. “Don’t you ever wish that type of shit on me. Nothing is more horrifying than the thought of love and commitment and marriage. Get married, buy a fixer-upper in the suburbs, and have two-point-five kids. Your idea of fun consists of Thursday night dinner at a local supper club once a month. If you’re feeling crazy, end the night with some missionary-style sex that most likely doesn’t result in an orgasm. How fucking awful.”

She’s silent for a moment, her focus on dragging a carrot through a trail of mustard before dropping it back in the container.

“Marissa is back with her piece of shit ex-boyfriend.”

Shit. Meg's sister Marissa is a mini version of her, all gorgeous with fiery red hair and talent to match. But, while Meg is more like a praying mantis, biting the heads off men once she's had her fix, her sister is more like a giant panda. All adorable and sweet and vulnerable.

"Maybe he's learned his lesson this time." The lie barely rolls off my tongue before Meg squints up at me.

"You know my rule: If they don't love you right the first time around, they don't love you at all. I've been with some shit men in my past, but never more than once. I'm half tempted to run him over with my car to get him out of our lives for good."

She tosses her container of carrots on the counter and a few bounce out, falling to the floor, so she kicks them away. "That was horribly unsatisfying." She looks at my lunch, eyes the remaining half of the giant sandwich I couldn't finish.

I pick up my dish and hold it up for her. "Italian sub from Kathy De's ... salami, capicola, hot giardiniera piled high, more cheese than is necessary." I wave it in front of her face, hoping to entice her to eat something more substantial for a twelve-hour shift. "Most importantly, not a single fucking carrot on it."

She stares at the container in my hand, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth. I can see the hunger in her sparkling green eyes, and I play on it.

"The dress," she whispers. "What about the dress?"

"Fuck the dress," I whisper back, taking the sub out of my container and putting it in her hand. "Eat the sandwich."

She reluctantly takes the sandwich, curling her fingers around the toasted bun and pulling it to her chest. She raises it to her mouth, lips parting for a bite and she pauses once more.

I cock my hip, throw a hand on it for good measure and give her my best 'you-aren't-starving-yourself-for-a-man-for-as-long-as-I-live' stare. She rolls her eyes, finally raising the

sandwich to take a huge bite. Once its contents meet her taste buds, her eyes roll back.

“Holy shit,” she mumbles through a full mouth. “You’re right.” She takes another giant bite. “No man’s dick is worth passing up a sandwich like this.”

I release my power stance, moving instead to sit on the small counter beside us. I swipe her can of Diet Coke and take a drink as I nod along. Amen to that.

“Ladies, language, please. This is a hospital, not a brothel,” scolds Margaret. She has such quiet steps, I didn’t realize she had entered the alcove. Leave it to the most unfriendly, arrogant nurse on the unit to scold us about our language.

As soon as her back is turned, Meg and I look at each other with a simultaneous eye roll.

“Do you remember what it was like to work with full staff?” Meg asks, taking another giant bite of the sub. The shadows under her eyes catch the reflection of the fluorescent lights overhead, exhaustion written all over her porcelain skin.

We’re going on month three of being short-staffed, and while three months isn’t a lifetime, working back-to-back twelve-hour shifts without a string of real days off in between really kicks your ass. Mandated overtime isn’t for the faint of heart.

“It’s not that we’re short-staffed,” Margaret chimes in as she puts her lunch away, “it’s that they are hiring new graduates with no experience, and we might as well not count them as nurses.”

I internally roll my eyes again. Margaret has been a nurse longer than I’ve been alive, and still twists her graying hair up into a beehive hairdo so tight it gives her an instant face-lift and probably a headache to match. She keeps her reading glasses on a beaded chain around her neck and carries the age-old passage that nurses eat their young.

I’m not a huge fan of mentoring new nurses. I’ll help and answer questions, but I’m too antsy to stand and watch

someone open pill packs with shaking fingers. I've never been one to slow down, to take life at someone else's pace—honestly, I've never had to.

But I've decided to make roots in Chicago, and at this hospital in particular. I've been here for over a year, which is the longest I've been in one city since I became a nurse. So, if I want to see this place succeed and not stab my eyeballs out from fatigue, I probably need to step up and take the reins from Margaret when it comes to training new staff.

“Hey, Cassie,” I call out, flagging down our supervisor as she walks by.

She's clacking her perfectly manicured nails on her cell, not slowing her stride as she pivots toward the nurse's station, following the sound of my voice.

“Any updates on staffing?”

She continues texting, not looking up to address me while answering, “Coincidence you ask. We had a virtual interview with a potential new hire. She has a lot of experience, seems nice. We will probably extend her an offer. We have another student nurse who accepted a night-shift position, but he has yet to take his boards and will need a lot of help.”

“Just what we need,” Margaret mumbles under her breath, “another fresh nurse.”

Ignoring Margaret's comment, I turn back to Cassie. “What about the other one? The one with experience? Hire her up, let's do this.”

Cassie puts a hand up to halt me. “Slow down. She lives out of state and has some licensing to change first. Plus, she is finishing up a medical leave and can't start quite yet. But I think she is worth holding out for.”

She finally puts her phone away, flips open her binder, and pulls out what looks like a schedule. “Speaking of scheduling, we have a few gaps that need to be filled ...”

As she is busy perusing the schedule, most likely reading to fire off some shifts in my direction, one of our newer hires, Brantley, comes around the corner juggling a PCA pump in his arms.

“Margaret,” he stumbles, “are you busy? Can you help me?”

Margaret doesn't break eye contact with the computer as she pointer-finger types. “Does it look like I'm busy?”

“I have this patient who is in a lot of pain, recovering from a spleen laceration and broken leg. The doctor ordered a PCA, but I need help setting it up.”

Margaret finally stops typing to turn toward Brantley, eyeing him up and down as she adjusts her cat-eyeglasses. “Please tell me you've initiated a PCA before. That is something they still teach in nursing school, isn't it?”

Brantley looks down at the pump in his hands, and my heart goes out to him. Maybe I have zero experience training people, but I feel guilty watching their interaction unfold. From what I know, Brantley went to school for accounting, and spent a decade sitting behind a desk offering tax advice until an early mid-life crisis hit him and he decided to follow his original dream of becoming a nurse. He's always scared and nervous as hell when asking for help, but the best way to learn is by doing. So, I stand up, letting my chair roll back with an exaggerated thud as it slams into the desk behind me.

“Sorry, Cass, you'll have to hit me up later for scheduling. I'm going to help Brantley with this PCA.” I walk out of the nurse's station, ushering with my thumb that he should follow me though I have no idea where we are going.

He trots to catch up to my long strides, panting, and mutters “Thank you.”

“No worries,” I tell him. “What room are we going to again?” I peek at the items in his arms, making sure he has all the basic supplies before following him down the hall.

I let him enter the patient's room first, following quietly behind. The lights are all off, save for the small light over the computer. Blinds are closed, the air is cool, and I take in the patient lying in the bed. By the shape and size, I figure it's a female. Her face is covered by a wet washcloth, most likely to cool the post-anesthesia sweats and help minimize nausea.

She's laying on her side, arms across her middle in a protective posture, but even with the blankets pulled up to her chest, I see the thick dressing and brace from her broken leg. I'm glad she has the washcloth over her face because I wince. She will have a hell of a recovery ahead of her.

Brantley opens her chart to the medication page. We take our time verifying he has the right medication and no relative allergies. I go over the orders, explaining what the basal dose is versus bolus dose.

I take the pump from Brantley and usher him over to the IV pole, squatting to attach the PCA to the base of the pole.

Peeking over my shoulder at the patient's whiteboard, I make sure to keep my voice low and calm, "Savannah," I start, "I'm Jenna, one of the other nurses here. I'm helping Brantley set up a pain pump so we can hopefully get you a little more comfortable, okay? Once we get it set up, we will administer a starting dose that you should start to feel in about ten minutes."

Switching places with Brantley, I have him program the pump for her initial dose and continuous infusion rate, keeping my eyes locked on the machine to make sure he programs it correctly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the patient has slowly removed the washcloth and swipes the moisture from her forehead, smoothing away the long hair matted to her face.

Once the pump is set up, I gather our empty packaging and am about to ask Brantley if he needs help with anything else, when a tired and groggy voice cuts through the quiet room.

"Jenna Watkins. You haven't changed one bit."

My hands freeze mid-garbage collection, mind rattling through the rolodex of who the hell would know me here. I haven't spoken to anyone from high school since the summer after graduation, and considering I spent the last six years far away from here, the likelihood that I would know a patient of ours personally is incredibly low.

Tossing the garbage into the bin, I slowly turn back toward the bed, once again taking in the long, dark hair that cascades over her shoulders, the beautiful crystal blue eyes that are the telling trait for the entire family. Blue eyes that keep me up at night, keep my thoughts busy wondering what life is like for him now. Wondering if he ever thinks of me.

“Holy shit. *Savannah.*”

CHAPTER FIVE

Eight years earlier

ince when did my mom start buying boiled peanuts?”
“**S** Emmett’s standing in front of the pantry with the doors wide open, scanning the shelves for an after-workout snack.

He grips the can in his giant hand, studying the label as if he’s trying to decipher a foreign language.

“Since she asked what snacks I wanted last time she went to the store.” I reach around him, pulling the can of peanuts from his hand and prop a hip against the door. I crack open the can, taking a whiff of the smokey goodness.

Emmett stares down at me as I pour a handful into my palm and shove every nut into my mouth. Exaggerating my chewing, I moan to show him what he’s missing out on.

“Should have known,” he says. “You’ve won the prize for favorite kid in the house. Now I know how Savannah felt all those years.” He takes the can from my hand and pours some directly into his mouth, chewing for a moment before grimacing. “What the fuck are these, anyways? Peanuts should be crunchy.” He swallows hard, once again turning the can to read the label as if he will discover it is a pile of worms and not boiled peanuts after all.

“I love it.” Standing on my tiptoes, I reach into the can still clutched in his hand and pop another in my mouth, shell and all. “Did you know that boiling them draws the antioxidants from their shells? Much healthier that way.”

“Riiight,” he exaggerates, throwing another handful in his mouth. His head is tilted back, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he swallows.

For as long as I’ve known him, Emmett has been a little insecure about his weight. When you’re the chubby kid of the class growing up, kids like to make you painfully aware of that. He’s let on that his weight has always bothered him, and that he’s working on eating less chips and exercising more, but if he were to ask me my honest opinion, I’d tell him he’s fucking crazy.

He’s so tall, pretty sure the tallest out of the one hundred-some kids in our class, but it could also be the fact that no one else has ever caught my attention like he has. He’s bigger, sure, but he’s also my rock. My teddy bear. He’s strong and athletic and his size has done nothing but spur my hormones on. But since the summer before our senior year, the work-out bug hit him and he’s been in the gym, lifting weights and putting more miles on the treadmill than I can keep track of. My once husky best friend is slowly turning into a beast, replacing muscle where chub once was. Standing here in this tiny hall, with a cutoff tee and the side of his sweaty abdomen showing, it takes all the willpower a girl can have not to reach up to touch the skin peeking out from his sides.

“Sound like a plan?” he asks, his voice interrupting my thoughts.

“Sorry, zoned out.” I shake my head to focus. “What were you saying?”

He smirks, most likely noticing my shameless ogling of his body. “I said I was gonna go grab a shower, then we can watch *The Amazing Race*. I think a new episode is on tonight.”

I slap the lid back on the peanuts and set it on the pantry shelf, and then close the door with a quiet click. I exhale a silent breath, working hard to push the image of him naked in a shower out of my mind. Being his friend was hard enough, and I completely underestimated what it would be like living with him.

Now, I see him first thing in the morning, before he's brushed his teeth or combed his hair. I see what he's like when he's tired, in a goofy mood, or annoyed and helping his mom with chores. I've decided I like all sides of him. There are some days I think he might like me too.

At first, I chalked it up to his kindness—befriending the new girl at school, introducing me to his group of friends, signing up for classes together. But now he's my best friend, spending every spare minute with me and picking me up from the closing shift at my shitty summer job because he couldn't stand the thought of me riding my bicycle home in the dark.

"Thanks again for the ride," I tell him as he pulls up to my house. I pull a handful of cash from my pocket—a good portion of my tips for tonight—and hand it to him. "For gas."

He stares at the green bills in my hand as if they are the vilest thing he has ever seen. "No way in hell am I taking your money. It's only, like, a two-mile drive. And I'm the one that offered to drive you." He curls my fingers around the money and pushes it back to my chest.

I knew that's what he would do, but the better part of me had to offer anyway. Since the day we met, he hasn't taken a thing from me and reluctantly accepts only a small portion of what I try to offer.

"What are you saving for, anyways?" he asks, putting the truck in park and turning to face me.

Honestly, I'm not sure. Any money I spend goes toward clothes and anything I need for school. My dad supports the house, making sure we have enough money for food and utilities, but I don't like the idea of being completely dependent on someone.

"Maybe a plane ticket."

"To where?"

“I haven’t decided yet. Maybe a one-way ticket to Austin. Boston. Chattanooga ...”

“Chattanooga?” He chuckles. “What’s your plan there? Bass fishing?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “Wouldn’t it be nice to try somewhere new for a change?”

He opens his mouth, words on the tip of his tongue, but his gaze quickly rises to my house.

“Your mom is flashing the front lights again,” he points out.

I look out the passenger-side window to see the front porch light flick on and off. My mom’s passive-aggressive way of telling me to get inside the house. For someone who doesn’t notice when I’m around, she sure seems to give a damn when I’m not there. As if I’m going to soil her already negative opinion of me by doing something reckless, like banging a boy in the front seat of his truck outside our house.

I give Emmett an awkward, closed-lip smile, embarrassed as hell and shove the bills back in my purse.

I keep my head tucked down until I open the front door, turning only to wave at him as I enter the home.

My mom stands at the bay window that overlooks the front yard, arms crossed over herself, pajamas peeking out from under the hem of her terrycloth robe.

She clears her throat as I toe off my shoes.

“He’s a nice boy,” she says with a hint of venom. “He sure is going places.”

“He is,” I bite back. I know my mom well enough to look for the words that are hidden in her sentences.

‘He’s a nice boy.’ What’s he doing spending time with you?

‘He sure is going places.’ You’ll hold him down.

'You two may like each other now, but once you go out in the world and see there is more to life than the boy you know from school, you'll drift apart.' Maybe he likes you now, but that will all change once he meets other girls.

“Hell yeah,” I mutter, clearing my throat and sounding less confident than I was a minute ago. “You know, you act like you think it’s a stupid show, but you always remind me it’s on.” I finally turn around and lean my back against the pantry door, tucking my hands behind me.

He leans into me, a tuft of hair falling across his forehead as he does. An arm comes up to rest on the wall behind me and my chest heaves with the contact. “Maybe I like seeing you happy.”

A lonely bead of sweat rolls down the side of his head, across his temple and down his cheek.

It isn’t fair. Someone who spent their morning at the gym on a ninety-degree day, with limited A/C should smell awful. I should be holding my breath, or cringing at the close contact, but I find myself leaning into him, breathing him in, wanting to soak in every second of him.

Summer is coming to an end, and before I know it, he will be packing his bags, moving to Tennessee to start the Lineman Program.

He could have anyone he wants, and it won’t be long before he finds himself some gorgeous southern belle. One with flawless hair who doesn’t belch, understands proper cutlery etiquette, and who comes from a proper family with a bright future ahead of her.

Maybe my mom was right; a guy like him doesn’t settle for the girl destined to work for tips at the local diner.

“Maybe I like seeing you happy,” he says, flashing that smile that pulls me from my thoughts.

~

“I don’t think she’s gonna do it. She’s gonna tap, I know it.”

Emmett scoffs as he reaches over to grab a handful of popcorn from the bowl centered in my lap, his forearm lingering on my thigh as he does. The contact forces a stream of goosebumps across my flesh. Even in the heat of summer, with the windows open and a sheen of sweat across my back, wearing the tiniest tank top and shorts I own, he sparks goosebumps.

“Yvonne isn’t that big of a priss. I think she could do it. Hell, I could eat that.”

I laugh at that. Mr. I-Can’t-Stand-Boiled-Peanuts is somehow going to eat an entire pound of deep-fried crickets.

He showered and changed and is now wearing jersey shorts and a plain white tee. I should be thankful his shoulders and sides aren’t on display, but the shirt is so tight it’s sprawled across his broad chest and stretches to barely contain his biceps. The smell of his body wash and shampoo hasn’t stopped invading my senses since he came downstairs, and now he’s sitting close, too close. So close, the back of his knuckles graze my leg each time he adjusts his shorts. A couch that normally fits three people is easily too small for the two of us.

“I think you’d get three crickets in and panic,” I tell him, forcing my thoughts back to the show. “Although for that kind of cash? I’d do some gnarly things. Wouldn’t you?”

He shrugs. “If you were my partner, I’d probably force myself through it.”

“Now if that isn’t the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” I tease, before an idea strikes. Shoving the bowl to the coffee table I turn and pull my knees up and under me, facing him. “Oh my God, *that* will be the plan.”

“The plan?”

“Yes.” I nod eagerly. “Who needs to go to college, or find a career and grow up when we can try out for *The Amazing Race*? We could travel the world, Emmett, see *everything*. Explore, while also potentially winning some serious cash.”

“You know there are other ways to travel the world without having to eat disgusting shit, walk hundreds of miles and put off school.” He reaches over to grab the remote from me and flips the channel to a ball game.

“Are you smashing my greatest dream?” I ask, pulling the remote from his hand. He knows better than to change the channel when it’s *Amazing Race Night*. Even if it’s on a commercial break.

He swipes the remote out of my hand and flips the channel back to baseball. “If your greatest dream is to sleep in tents and eat charred insects, then yeah, I’m smashing it. How about you find a job you love, make money, and travel the world to see all those places you want to see on your own terms, without having to compete? I’ll bet you could find a store that sells deep-fried cockroaches.”

“Crickets,” I correct, reaching over and trying to grab the remote from his hand.

He switches it to his other palm and leans away from me. I keep leaning, rising on my knees and using his shoulder as leverage to reach across him.

He’s *so* tall. He’s so much taller than me that the tips of my fingers barely reach his forearm. But I’m not a quitter. I push further, reaching both my arms out to claw at him. He starts laughing at my feeble attempt, wrapping a hand around my back to hold me still. His thumb catches under the hem of my tank, and the faint grazing of skin sends me into a spiral.

I’ve known him for three years now and know his strengths as well as his weaknesses.

And I remember the one spot on his body that he’s ticklish.

With my left hand, I reach up, pretending to grip his shoulder for balance before quickly moving my hand to the

back of his neck and squeezing the sides. It works like a charm and he immediately giggles, bringing his shoulders up to his ears and trying to squeeze my hand out. It's enough to reach my weight over and grab the remote.

Except at the same time I lunge for the remote, Emmett shifts. I lose my balance and fall on him, pressing us both into the sofa. I throw a leg out, my toes bracing against the coffee table, so I don't send us both flying to the floor. Somehow, during the chaos I find myself straddling his waist, our hips pressed against one another.

I feel every long, hard inch of him underneath me.

I no longer care about the remote, or my show, or the fact that a family member could come home any minute and catch me straddling their son. All I can think about is the feel of him between my legs, the thin fabric of both of our shorts doing little to hide how hard he is. And how hot I am between my legs.

I wait for him to move first, to clear his throat and make an excuse as to why he needs to get up, or to tell me that we shouldn't do this, but he doesn't. He looks up at me, his eyes finding mine as his hands come to rest on the tops of my thighs. Fingertips moving up to dance along my soft skin.

"You okay?"

"Fine," my voice barely above a whisper, throat tight as my heart thumps wildly against my ribcage.

I adjust my hands, resting both firmly on his chest, pressing down on his pecs, the move pushing my breasts together and his eyes flick to my chest. Everything intensifies: my breathing, the rise and fall of his chest. I slowly work my hips left to right, adjusting my position over him as his grip tightens.

I don't know if he moves first, or if my hips take on a mind of their own as they start swirling over him. But neither of us argues as I rock against him, his eyes falling shut as his head digs back into the suede couch cushion. It isn't until he forces

his hips up, humping me through the fabric of his shorts that I know he wants this as much as I do.

Finally.

The feel of his hands on me, *finally* on me, touching me in places friends don't touch one another spurs me on and I arch my back, forcing my ass up further into his hands, whimpering as he squeezes me, kneads me, fingertips working their way underneath the hem of my shorts.

"Jenna," he rasps, my name a plea on his lips.

It's a sound I want to hear over and over again. I lean down, letting my hands slide off his chest and grip the arm of the couch behind his head, ready to finally seal our lips together and ...

"Mom, I'm home!"

The sound of his sister's voice and the thump of a duffle bag hitting the floor in the entryway forces me to jump off him. I fall to the floor but quickly scamper up, adjusting the straps on my tank and making sure a boob didn't pop out in the process.

Emmett sits up, reaching for a throw pillow to hide the tent in his pants as his sister Savannah comes around the corner.

"Oh, hey guys," she says with a knowing smirk. "What did I interrupt?"

"Nothing," Emmett says, reaching to grab my half can of orange soda from the coffee table, chugging the rest of it.

"Nanners!" I rush to her for a hug. She wraps her arms around me, squeezing tightly as we rock back and forth. "I didn't know you were coming home tonight."

"Finished exams early," she says, eyes darting back and forth between us. "I wanted to surprise everyone. Should I leave, let you two kids finish what you started?"

Emmett grabs the throw pillow nearest to him and chucks it at her. One by one, she dodges them until he stands up and

wraps his arm around her neck, pulling her into a chokehold. “Shut up, *Nanners*,” he says, wrapping his hand into a fist and bringing it up to her hair, giving her a noogie.

“Emmett,” she squeals, “knock it off, you asshole!” She starts pinching his sides and punching him in the thighs.

I curl back up on the couch to watch their WWE wrestling match unfold.

“Kids!” their mom shouts, opening the door with a thud. The sound of rustling plastic breaks the air around us. “Savannah, is that you?” she exclaims, coming to wrap her arms around the struggling young woman. “Emmett, let her go. Goodness, will you two ever grow up?” She playfully slaps him with the back of her hand, and he releases Savannah.

“Come help me carry these groceries in.”

“Yes, Mom,” they mutter in unison.

Emmett holds back, taking his time to slip on his shoes and making sure his mom and sister are both outside before turning back toward me. “You okay?”

“You should be thankful for the family you have.”

I know he loves them, but I know he gets annoyed by the way his sister embarrasses him. This isn’t the first time she’s barged in on us watching a movie or hanging out and teased us. Although it’s the first time we’ve almost been caught. I’d kill for a sibling like that, for parents so happy to see me they throw their arms around me the second they walk in the door.

He sits on the arm of the sofa. “They’re your family too, you know. My mom would be as happy with a surprise visit from you someday.”

I shrug. Maybe. They’ve certainly taken me in as if I’m one of their own, but that’s the kind of people they are.

“Don’t do that,” he says, mimicking my shrug. “Don’t tell yourself things that aren’t true up here.” He taps his temple. “Come on.” He stands, offering me his hand. “Let’s go carry groceries in before my annoying sister comes back.”

CHAPTER SIX

Present Day

avannah,” I say again, rushing to sit at the side of the bed “**S**where she’s still curled in a protective ball. I reach out to her, wanting to hug her but not wanting to make her any more miserable, so I settle for a hand on her forearm and squeeze. “It’s you, it’s *really* you. I didn’t think ... I only saw a first name when I looked at the chart. God. I would have never thought it was you! What the hell happened?”

She offers a weak smile. “Stupid, so stupid of me. I was on the phone and driving, trying to dig through my purse for the kids’ school schedule because it dawned on me that today might only have been a half day for them. I took my eyes off the road for a second, only a second, and ran a red light.”

I cringe. “Yikes. I know it probably sounds stupid to say this right now given how you feel, but I’m thankful it wasn’t worse.”

She nods and tries to readjust her position but grimaces.

“Here,” I offer, adjusting her pillow for her and smoothing the twisted, troubled sheets. I check the pump, letting her know that in a few minutes we can bolus another dose of pain medication before sitting back down to hold her hand.

We share a silent connection.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” she says again.

In many ways, I am the same. I talk too much and say what’s on my mind, even when it’s not appropriate. I act

without thinking, and still feel like I'm floundering, floating from one topic to the next without feeling like I've found my place. But there are certain parts of me that I've lost over the last few years, that I think about often and wonder if I'll ever experience again.

I let myself smile, a little. Trying to hold back from asking what I really want to ask her. "How are your parents?" I ask instead.

"Dad retired early, and he and Mom are living life on a permanent spring break. They're finishing up a vacation in Italy right now."

Good for them. Their dad was a lineman, which is why Emmett was so determined to go to school and follow in his footsteps. It allowed his mom to stay home with them when they were young, and she could be there for all activities once they got older. His dad missed out on a lot during their elementary years, having to constantly work several states away, but once Emmett and his sister got older, his dad found a job closer to home. He had always promised their mom that they'd travel the world together once he retired, and I love hearing that they get to live their dream.

"They deserve it." I uncross my ankles and gently bounce the pad of my foot on the floor, desperate to burn off this nervous energy from the awkwardness between us.

"What about Brandon, the kids?"

Savannah and her high school boyfriend got engaged at eighteen, went to college together, and got married as soon as they graduated. Everyone thought they were crazy to get married so young, to not take some time apart to experience other people, or life alone, but the last I heard, they were happily married, and added a little boy to the mix with another on the way.

"We're great. Everyone is good. Boys are growing like weeds."

"Boys," I echo.

The silence stretches on for a few more minutes, both of us looking at our hands, and taking turns adjusting the sheets. I continually reach up to press buttons on the PCA to ensure it's working, though I already know it's fine.

“How is he?” I finally ask. I don't need to say his name for her to know who we are talking about. It's been years since I've said his name aloud and I don't think I could physically muster the letters without crying.

“He's doing ... alright,” she says, hesitation lacing her voice.

Savannah had already graduated and moved out by the time I moved in with them, but she visited home enough that we were close, really close, until everything blew up and I knew I had to distance myself from the family. I knew I couldn't stomach learning about his beautiful wife, or that he has a slew of kids of his own. I didn't want to know that they have Sunday night family dinners together and annual family photo shoots to use for Christmas cards that relatives tape to their walls.

I lie through gritted teeth. “I'm glad.”

Even though it's his sister, and she's the closest thing to a real sister that I've ever had, it's not fair for me to unload on her. But no one who knew both of us ever got to hear my side. How it felt when I got that call. When he broke the news and effectively shattered my heart. I want to know if I was a blubbering fool, if I imagined it all. If my mom was right, that he was being a nice guy and taking pity on me because that's what he is, a great fucking guy.

“Jenna, you have no idea, do you?” Savannah's voice cuts through the painful memories.

My stomach clenches at the tone.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know he moved back? My parents wanted to downsize, move into a condo, so they put the house up for sale. He ended up buying it.”

Fuck. I thought he stayed somewhere down south, I certainly didn't think he'd move back, that he would ever be living again in his childhood home. The first real home I ever had—the house we briefly shared together. It's painful to imagine him there with another woman, a kid or two running around their feet.

I wonder if she feels as comforted by those walls as I did. Or if she talked him into pulling up that pale pink shag carpet that runs along the staircase—it screams 1982 but is still so soft and plush when you walk barefoot on it because his mom was a maniac about keeping it clean.

He's here. He's in the city. Even though it's a city of three million people, I feel the urge to run. I don't think I could survive it. I couldn't stomach the thought of being at the drugstore, comparing prices on boxes of tampons only to hear him laugh an aisle over as he teases his wife for taking ten minutes to decide which type of deodorant to try.

I need to leave, I think, abruptly standing up and pulling off my zip-up fleece. I'm sweating, my heart rising to pound in the back of my throat as I contemplate my getaway. I need to leave this room, this hospital, this fucking state. I could pick up a travel gig and be a thousand miles away before the end of the week.

“Oh wow ... I didn't know that. But good for them.”

I open my mouth again to offer a cliché goodbye and apologize for having to run when she reaches to tug at my wrist.

“There's no *them*. There hasn't been a *them* in a long time.” She tugs at my wrist once more to pull me closer to the side of the bed. “I know what happened hurt you. He knows how he hurt you. But it isn't what you think.”

“What do you mean there's no *them*?” I blurt out, taking a seat again at the side of the bed. “What the *fuck* did she do to him?”

Savannah starts to laugh and lurches forward but instantly freezes and grabs at her stomach. “Oh god, don’t make me laugh.” She grips the patient button that’s attached to her PCA pump and pushes firmly, the machine humming as it administers an additional dose of pain medication. “It’s a good sign that after everything that happened, somewhere deep down inside, you still think fondly of him even if you don’t want to.”

Because I know him. At least I thought I did. I know his heart, and if he makes a promise to take care of someone, that isn’t a promise he breaks lightly.

She rolls her head to the side, eyes glazing over with the pain medications now fully in her system. “He’s been trying for years to find you, but it’s like you vanished,” she whispers. “You’re still all he talks about.”

I try to tell myself it’s the pain medications in her system, that she’s in a lucid dream and mumbling nonsense because the thought that he’s single, living here, and trying to get in touch with me is almost too much to bear.

“It’s ...” she starts but stops when Brantley enters the room with a cup of fresh water.

I take it from his hand and offer it to her, watching her take a long sip from the straw through dried lips.

“It’s okay, Nanners, get some sleep, we can talk about this later.” It’s a bald-faced lie, because after tonight I’m off for three days, and she will most likely be discharged to a step-down unit or back home before I return to work.

Even if Emmett is divorced, and back in the city, and maybe there is some truth that he has been trying to get in touch with me, it doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t change the fact that he chose someone else, promised his life to her and left me shattered. For whatever reason, it seems things didn’t work out between them, but I refuse to be someone’s second choice.

Savannah's eyelids flutter for a few moments before falling shut and her breathing evens out. Now that her pain is controlled and no longer keeping her awake, her body can give into the exhaustion.

I stand, smoothing out the blankets over her waist and legs. Squeezing her forearm once more, I whisper "Goodbye," then turn to leave the room.

"Jenna," she mumbles, eyes still shut, "he'd do anything for a chance to prove himself, if you'll let him."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Four Years Earlier

I doubt that there is a single person in this world—not a sane one anyway—that enjoys attending a funeral. But there may be a select few who can tolerate them, who see the event as a final celebration of that person, their loved ones gathering to recall the best memories, and the love they had to offer. Those people can see the purpose of the event and find some semblance of peacefulness in saying goodbye in this way.

I'm not one of those people.

I also never would have expected my first funeral to be my mom's.

I had always imagined she'd live a long life, whether I was a part of it or not. I imagined her getting remarried for a moment, followed by a divorce, and remarried for a third or fourth time. I imagined her growing old and gray and going to visit her in the nursing home to hear her complain about the lack of available champagne with breakfast or the ignorance of the caregivers. Of all the thoughts that quickly crept in and out of my mind over the years, I never would have imagined she'd fall asleep—sober, might I add—at the wheel of her shitty brown sedan and drive head-on into a semi-truck, ending her life immediately.

But standing in the vestibule of the stuffy church, giving forced smiles and awkward hugs to distant relatives and the few friends she kept up with while the stench of apology flowers and potpourri fills my nose forces me to accept the

reality of what has happened. I feel so alone. All I can think is that I wish Emmett was here.

I wouldn't expect him to be here. Getting the chance to talk to him on a regular basis is hard enough, and employers don't let you off to go to the funeral of your high school friend's estranged mom. I know that on this day, with everything looming, he would have been able to make some sarcastic comment about my great-uncle's plaid pants with matching suspenders or the amount of Aqua Net needed to hold his wife's beehive hairdo up, He would at least get a smile out of me. He'd know what to say when strangers are apologizing for my loss.

If it were me and him, he'd let me vent my truth: She has the title of Mom but after the night I almost ran away and instead moved in with Emmett and his family, I never once returned to her house. Worse yet, she never reached out to talk about what happened. I saw her for a split second at my high school graduation, standing by the doorway, almost hidden under the bleachers. I was shocked as hell that she had shown up, and wondered briefly if she would come to the party afterwards at Emmett's house, but she vanished before the ceremony ended. I haven't seen her since.

The woman we are putting to rest today is a stranger to me, but because of societal norms and pressure from my dad, I'm standing here with a smile plastered on my face, commenting on her beauty.

“Let me see if I can change around my schedule, maybe I could get a long weekend off and drive up,” he says.

“Emmett, you know I can't let you do that.” Time off during storm season is limited to actual family emergencies. The fact that he started an assignment in Pennsylvania doesn't make the distance easier. “You know how my relationship with my mom was. It'll be fine. It'll be an awkward few hours, at best. I won't be in town that long. I fly in Friday afternoon; the funeral is Saturday and I'm back in New Mexico by Sunday.”

A long pause on his end. “Jen, I know you say that, but I also know it might hit you hard once you’re standing there in the church. It might all come to reality.”

I offer a shrug he can’t see. “It might. Not gonna lie. But either way, I’ll be fine.”

“My parents will be there, of course.”

My shoulders sag, and a little of the pinching in my neck dissipates. “It’ll help to see them. One of your mom’s hugs can cure almost anything.”

“Call me after, okay?”

“Ready to sit down, sweetheart?” my dad’s voice interrupts my thoughts. He stands awkwardly next to the pastor, twisting a pamphlet between his palms—his telltale anxious tic.

He probably hates the fact he agreed to be here. To say goodbye to his technically legal wife while his new girlfriend stands by his side. Well, not new. They’ve been together since I was in high school, but this is the first time I’ve met her, so she feels new to me.

“Yeah, ready.”

The pastor turns toward my dad and ushers him into the sanctuary.

I fall back, feet frozen in place, staring up at one of the blown-up prints of my mom. When I arrived yesterday, my dad handed me a bunch of photo albums to filter through with the task of picking out pictures that were appropriate for today. Meaning, ones where we looked happy as a family, where Mom looked healthy. I tucked a handful in an envelope, and he spent this morning turning them into portraits. I didn’t look at the ones he chose, the ones that are now in frames lining the vestibule. Looking at them now, I really see them, and all the emotions I thought I had so perfectly hidden begin to bubble to the surface.

There's a picture from one of my birthday parties when I was a kid, maybe early teens. Mom is leaning over the table behind me, one hand holding back my hair as she helps me blow out the candles. Her blonde hair glows with the light of the sunshine coming through the window. I run a hand up to smooth over my blonde curls, one of the few traits she and I had in common.

My dad's head comes around the corner, followed by a prompt throat clearing. "Jenna."

"Coming." I unglue my feet from the floor and turn toward the double wooden doors as the organ starts to play some God-awful dreary hymn. The squeak of the hinges on the outside door catches my attention.

I pause and turn to the sound and squint when the bright sunlight shines through the open crack, only for a moment, because a large frame fills the door, blocking out the stream.

I can't quite make out the face attached to the figure, the sunlight still causing an aura, and though it's been two years since I've seen him in person, I'd know that height, the shape of those shoulders, that *body* anywhere.

My feet are in motion before I can silence the sob that escapes me, and I'm barreling toward the figure with my arms in the air. He takes two giant steps forward and meets me, wrapping me tightly in his embrace, one hand around my waist and the other cradling the back of my head, muffling my tears against his chest.

"You *came*," I croak.

"I *had* to." He pulls me closer, dropping the hand from my head and using it to meet his other around my back, pulling me into him. My forehead finds my favorite spot against the side of his neck. "I couldn't stand the thought of you here alone."

We both know I wouldn't have been alone. I have my dad, his girlfriend—whatever her name is—some cousins, neighbors, mom's friends I haven't seen since high school. A slew of flowers from people who couldn't make it, his parents

... but I know what he means. Without him, without someone who knows the entire relationship I had with my mom, without someone who knows how shitty I am at expressing my emotions, I would still have been alone if it weren't for him. He knows I would have spent the day wearing a mask, hiding how I really feel. Out of sight, out of mind.

I pull back, swiping quickly at the mascara-tinted tears trailing down my face. "I thought you couldn't get out of work?"

I look up at him for the first time, and notice his thick, dark hair is longer than usual, swooped to the side by gel. He wears dark blue jeans and a crisp button-up that hugs his arms. He's gotten more muscular since I last saw him. Overall, so grown up and ungodly handsome.

I reach my hands up to gently tousle it. "I like the hair."

He gives a boyish smile. "I didn't have time for a cut. I can't stay long. Seven hours at most. I'll head back tonight." He swipes a few wisps of hair out of my face.

I did my best to smooth it down and pin it up, but there are always a few stragglers that manage to escape.

"When did you get here?"

He looks down at his watch. "Now."

I reel back at his confession. Pennsylvania is a full day's drive away.

"I explained that it was a family emergency. So, I worked yesterday, slept a few hours, and then left Carlisle around three-thirty this morning to make it in time." He glances at his watch again. "I'm yours for the next eight-ish hours and then I have to leave, I should make it back for the start of shift tomorrow."

"You drove all this way, sacrificing work and sleep to sit next to me while I cry?"

"Jenna," my dad's voice calls again.

I peer over my shoulder, through the clear partition to see the pastor standing at the altar, an open book resting in his palms. His eyes are scanning the back row, most likely waiting for me to be seated so they can begin.

I turn back toward Emmett, wanting him to come sit in the front row with me and my dad, but I know that's too much to ask of anyone. His eyes are scanning the crowd, looking for his parents.

“Left side, middle row.”

He smiles the moment he spots his mom's perm, turning back to me and squeezing my hand. “You okay?”

I nod, squeezing his hand back as we walk in together. He breaks left to slide into the pew next to his mom, her surprised gasp is audible over the organ's steady sound. I continue to the front row and take a seat next to my dad.

The pastor begins, reciting prayers and scripture that promise a life after death. For the most part he scans the crowd, connecting with whoever will feed into his promises. Then his eyes land on me, and they stay on me. He pauses, letting the silence stretch out over the crowd before he reminds us that God is merciful, that we should forgive the sins of those who have passed.

I know it's the childish part of me, the one that still holds grudges and anger as if they will feed me, but I don't want to believe his words. I don't want to believe that she chose to treat me this way for the better part of my life, to neglect me and not bat a perfectly curled lash when I left. Yet now that she's gone, all will be forgiven.

The tears I thought I could hide come out, pricking the backs of my eyes. I'm unable to hide the trembling of my hands, so I tuck them between my thighs, focusing on the string fraying from the bottom of my brand-new dress. I curl my bottom lip between my teeth and bite down, willing myself to hold it together until this is over.

I should say fuck it and run. It would take less than twenty seconds to lean over, tell my dad that I'm sorry, and then I'd be out of here. I could go anywhere. I could take my dad's car and drive, drive out to the lake. Hell, I could walk out into the middle of the lake and ...

The wooden pew creaks under his weight as Emmett quietly slides in next to me, his arm already up and around my shoulder, pulling me tight to him before he's settled. I curl into him, burying myself into his chest and I break. I let out every ugly, wretched sob that's been bottled up so deep inside. All the anger I've held toward her, for her neglect, her mean words, for never coming after me.

For the years I've spent wishing for an apology that never came.

I grip the fabric of his shirt with both hands, and feel his other arm come up, hand covering my face, swiping my tears as they fall. He holds me up, never failing to keep me steady in his grip, letting me cry out every tear I didn't know I had. And when I can regain my breath, when I open my eyes and see the church has cleared out, my dad already in the back shaking hands with other mourners, I finally look up at his face and see his eyes lined with red.

He doesn't loosen his grip on me, his palm still splayed over my face though my tears have dried. And although it isn't quite the romantic backdrop I imagined the first time he would kiss me, I look up at him, wishing so badly he would finally lean in and give us both what we've been craving.

"Jenna," my dad calls from the other end of the church. "I trust you and Emmett will come downstairs for coffee?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Watkins," Emmett answers immediately, nodding to pacify my dad before turning back to me. I watch my dad wrap an arm around his girlfriend—Ramona, maybe?—as he leads her downstairs.

The church is quiet, except for a few creaks in the floorboards as the mourners make their way to have coffee and

sandwiches.

“You don’t have to call him *sir*,” I tease, elbowing Emmett in the side.

“He’s a First Sergeant in the Marine Corps,” he whispers. “He still scares me.”

I smile internally as Emmett stands, adjusting his now wrinkled shirt, damp in spots from where I cried out my frustration on him. He reaches out and grasps my hand in his, pulling me to stand.

“I don’t want to go downstairs.” I don’t want to spend one more second in this stuffy church, pretending.

He looks back to where my dad still stands at the landing of the staircase, and then he twists his head, scanning the rest of the church until he sees a door behind the altar where the pastor must come in and out of. He reaches into his pants pocket, and I hear the jingle of keys as he smiles. “Let’s get out of here.”

He tugs my hand and pulls me toward the back door before his words have sunk in.

We push through the door, the sunlight and cold air slapping me in the face at the same time and I squeal with delight. My dad will be pissed, but I don’t care. I came here; I showed up, and I did my part as the dutiful daughter. Emmett is only in town for another six and a half hours, and I want to soak up every second with him.

He leads me across the parking lot to his work truck, then opens the passenger door and helps me climb in. He shuts the door, and I take a deep breath, inhaling the smell that’s part grease and work truck, part cologne.

“Somehow this truck smells like you,” I tell him as he climbs in the driver’s seat, immediately starting the engine up and adjusting the heat to face me.

“I’m going to pretend you mean that in a masculine way and not like a dirty gym sock way.”

“Ruggedly masculine. Of course.” I kick some Red Bull cans out of the way as I pull my legs up and curl them underneath me. The sun is shining brightly but it’s no match for the bitter bite of the spring air. I wrap my arms around myself, wishing I had thought to grab my sweater from the coat rack.

Emmett looks at me out of the corner of his eye before twisting his big body in the seat and fumbling for something in the back. He comes back around with a dark green sweatshirt and tosses it at me. I unfold it and instantly burst out laughing.

“Why on earth do you have a sweatshirt with Kenny Chesney’s face on it? I know you like him, but I didn’t think those feelings were strong enough to purchase some old-school memorabilia.” I slip it on, burying my nose in the neck of the sweatshirt. I think he’s worn this once already, because I can still smell a hint of laundry soap along with a smell that’s so him. “Now this smells like you, for sure.”

“We were working in this ridiculously small town for a few weeks. I had a short break and wanted to get away from the site, so I strolled through a huge flea market they were having. Spotted that shirt from a mile away and it made me think of you. Do you remember junior prom? You made me stand on the dance floor while you and Heather and whoever else—”

“Tasha,” I interrupt.

“Tasha,” he echoes. “You guys made me stand there while you danced around me, remember that?”

How could I forget? That night will forever be ingrained in my mind as one of the best nights of my life. And now, my whole life fits in two large suitcases, packed with clothes, scrubs, and toiletries, but I have a tiny box of sentimental items I take with me wherever I go, that photo sits at the top.

“That night was so fun.”

“That night was embarrassing.”

“Then don’t make promises you can’t keep, Owens.”

He reaches over to squeeze my knee, still tucked inside his warm sweatshirt as he backs out of the parking lot. “Where to, *Watkins?*”

I crawl over until I’m seated in the center of the cab of the truck, leaning over to rest on his shoulder as he drives. “Anywhere—anywhere but here.”

He drives for hours, creeping through every neighboring residential town, one arm on the wheel, the other never leaving its resting spot on my knees. I become oblivious to the sights and sounds around us until he pulls into a parking lot, putting the truck in park but leaving the engine running.

“Remember this place?”

“Mattson Park.” The park he took me to the night I left home.

“Remember the party we had here the night before you left for school? Kyle Robinson got so drunk he jumped into the water naked.”

“Not before slipping on the dock and wrecking his knee first.” I smile at the memory. “I remember *you* almost skinny dipping that night.”

“Almost being the operative word. I kept it classy and kept my undies on.”

“Oh, I remember.” I turn to him, inching closer in the seat. “Emmett. Seriously, if you hadn’t been there today ...”

He cuts me off as he shakes his head. “I couldn’t *not* be here. I knew it would be rough. I knew you’d pretend it’d all be okay, but it wouldn’t be.”

“You always know what I’m thinking.”

He stretches an arm out, opening a space for me to crawl further into his hug, so I rise onto my knees and cuddle up next to him, his arm draped over me, warming me more than the sweatshirt and the heat from the truck combined.

For the next few hours, we sit like that, him with his arms around me, fingertips grazing up and down my back, reaching up to twist a random lock of loose hair. We talk about school; about my looming graduation and the long hours he works. We talk until the sun sets beyond the water and the clock hits nine and he has to leave.

When he drops me off, I stand on the front porch, arms wrapped around myself as I force a smile and wave as I watch his taillights disappear into the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Present Day

eg and her golden vagina.” The moment I leave my
“Mpatient’s room and the nurse’s station comes into view; the giant bouquet of flowers seated in a glass vase on top of the reception desk steal my attention. Meg kneels on the desk, digging through the tallest flowers to pull out a small white envelope. She hops down and takes a step back, reading the name on the card and clutching it to her chest.

“Jesus, Meg,” I tell her once I’m within earshot, “this has got to be your biggest bouquet yet. I thought you told the last guy who took you out to get bent? Or is this someone new already?”

She turns to face me slowly, a knowing smirk on her face. “Actually”, she says, pulling the card from her chest and handing it to me, “they’re for you.”

Right. Considering I haven’t had a date in well over six months ... or is it eight months? What was that one guy’s name—the ER doctor from the community hospital? Brennan? Considering the last time we saw each other, he suggested I get breast implants and I politely suggested he go fuck himself, and doused him with my cocktail, I don’t think he’d be sending me flowers.

“Nice try, but I’m not that much of an idiot.” I gently push through the crowd admiring the bouquet to walk toward the supply closet. “Quit gawking over your flowers and come hold some legs open while I put a foley in Room 434.”

She follows me through the crowd and tugs at my arm until I stop and focus on the white envelope she's holding underneath my nose. It takes my vision a second to focus, but then I can see my name written in sans script. "Seriously Jenna, they're for you."

I look from the card, to Meg, to the flowers. "Did *you* get me flowers?"

Meg grins, grabbing my palm and forcing the card into it. "No, they're not from me, or anyone else that works here. So, unless you are okay with me ripping into that envelope and reading who they are from, you better open it up."

I grip my palm around the tiny envelope, feeling the corner cut into my skin. It shouldn't be such a big deal. People receive flowers all the time. Except the last time I received flowers, it was my mom's funeral, and before that, possibly the corsage Emmett gave me for junior prom. So, if they are from Boob-Job Brennan (Brandon?), it's a sweet and rare enough gesture that I might consider a second date with him. Maybe.

I take another look at the flowers in the vase, *really* pausing to look at them. Once I realize what they are, I don't need to open the card to see who sent them.

"What are the tall purple ones, anyways?" Meg asks, her voice becoming a distant echo as she pulls me back toward the display. "I haven't seen those before. Any of these types of flowers. Whoever sent the bouquet put a lot of thought into it."

"It's called Larkspur," Emmett says, handing me the corsage still neatly seated in its clear plastic case. "You said I could get any kind of flower as long as it matched your dress. I hope this is okay."

"A Lark-what?" I take the container from his hands, sweat gathering underneath my too-tight prom dress as I study the wrist corsage. I recognize some flowers. White roses maybe, a sprinkle of baby's breath, but this is unlike anything I've seen in the pictures my friends and I have studied.

“Larkspur. It’s your birth flower.”

“Birth flower,” I echo. I didn’t realize having a birth flower was a thing.

“My mom thought it was a cool idea,” he stammers, nervously raking a finger through the sides of his hair. “She said I should do something with meaning, and when I found out the meaning of your birth flower, I knew it would be perfect.”

Cracking open the case, the smell hits me and I bring it to my face, inhaling the freshness before pulling back and admiring the small, horn-shaped, lightly uneven petals, adorned with a smaller flower inside. I have never heard of such a thing. Leave it to Emmett to be this thoughtful. A broad smile stretches across my face as I look up at him. “Emmett ... this is ... this is awesome.”

A smile of relief crosses his face, and he reaches to take the corsage out of the box in my hand. He tucks the box under his arm before stretching the band, ushering for my hand.

I stick my hand out, letting him slide the flower bouquet on my wrist before pulling my arm back and admiring it against my dress. He somehow picked a shade of flower that contrasts perfectly with the purple hues.

“What’s the meaning?” I ask.

“Huh?” Emmett’s gaze is locked on my wrist, hand splayed across my stomach.

“You said there is meaning behind birth flowers.”

“Oh yeah ...” he trails off, adjusting his stance before looking up to meet my eyes.

“Your birth flower is Larkspur. As a plant they grow tall, taller than most other flowers and are resilient as hell. They can withstand cold temperatures and thrive in environments where most can’t survive. Even if they are done blooming, and all dried out, they still hold onto their color, never fading.

They symbolize a beautiful spirit, lightheartedness, and pure fun. So basically, it symbolizes you.”

“Larkspur,” I finally say out loud. “The tall ones are Larkspur.”

“Larkspur? What the heck is a larkspur?” Meg asks.

“It’s my birth flower.” With fumbling hands, I slide a nail under the flap to open the envelope and pull out the card to read the familiar chicken scratch writing.

Jenna—I know you’re mad at me, and you have every right to be. I’ve made some mistakes, but I’d give anything for one more chance to prove how much you mean to me. If you could give me a chance, let me explain, I swear I’d make it right.

The card finishes with his phone number and a request to call him.

“Damn,” Meg says, rising on her tippy toes and leaning on my shoulder to read the scrap of paper grasped firmly in my now sweaty hands. “Emmett ... who’s Emmett? I don’t remember an Emmett ... *Wait!*” She slaps a palm over her mouth and moves to stand in front of me. Reaching her hands up, she grips my shoulders and shakes me. “Is this your high school boy toy? Emmett? The one that ...?”

“Yeah,” is all I can say.

Emmett. *My Emmett.* No question his sister told him she saw me, where I work. But I didn’t think I’d hear from him. And I didn’t think he’d say this.

“Well ... I think it’s safe to say he wants a second chance.”

Right. Except I don’t do second chances. I’ve spent the better part of the last few years working to undo every memory I have of him, but it’s impossible. I would have thought that with time, I’d forget every little nuance, every

conversation we had, that memories would eventually fade and one day I'd hear his name and have to pause and think about what he looked like, but something like this comes up and I'm reminded that time has done nothing to heal me.

"Cool. Well, are you free? I need to get that cath placed." I shove his card into my pocket, take one more look at the stunning bouquet of purple flowers, my favorite color, and turn my back to the nurse's station.

"Jenna," Meg calls after me, her footsteps quickly catching up with mine.

I shove open the door to the supply closet, eyes scanning the shelves for the catheter kit.

"Girl, don't you dare make me run after you again." Meg comes to stand in front of me, effectively blocking the shelves with her body. "Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"Nope," I tell her, popping the *P*. "Three years ago, I may have been curious, but curiosity was blanketed by being pissed off. Really pissed off."

"I remember," she says softly, moving to the side to pull out a catheter kit. "I remember you left the unit that day and came back a different person. You lost your spice, and I had to bust my ass to get it back for you."

I hadn't known Meg more than a few weeks when my world came crashing down. Even still, she was there for me. She let me wallow in self-pity for a few days before telling me to buck up and introducing me to her world. We saw each other every single day until I left for another assignment.

"Sixteen or Eighteen French?" She asks.

"Sixteen."

She hands me a kit, and I pull it to my chest, wrapping my arms around it like it's my security blanket. "Would you do it? Would you call him and hear what he has to say?"

She shrugs, leaning back against the shelving with her arms crossed. "I don't know. I'm more of a man-eater type, you

know that.”

I chuckle, wondering why I’m asking advice from someone who’s longest relationship spanned a month.

“But,” she continues, expression becoming serious, “the way you talked about him, how happy you were to have him in your life—I’ve never felt that, or anything close to that, with anyone. I think he’s an asshole for what he did, but if you guys had what it seems like you had, maybe it’s worth hearing him out.”

“Meg,” I trail off, wanting to know why someone as hilarious and stunning and brilliant as her turned out to be a man-eater and refuses to bat an eye in the direction of every quality man that comes her way.

Within a flash, the softer side of her is gone, and she gives an eye roll so exaggerated it’s annoying. “Come on, Curly Sue.” She tugs the catheter kit out of my arms. “Quit being sappy and tell me whose legs I’m holding open.”

CHAPTER NINE

Four Years Earlier

toast, to surviving the abuse that is nursing school!”

“**A** “Cheers!” I squeal, reaching my shot glass out and meeting the others, letting them all bang together with a clack as half of the sticky mixture sloshes over the back of my hand.

“We did it!” Genevieve shouts, wrapping her skinny arm around my neck and pulling me to her to lay a loud and drunk kiss on my cheek. “We freaking did it, Jenna! We’re nurses!”

Almost nurses, anyways. But I did it. I set my mind to something and completed nursing school. The only thing that stands in the way of me and the greatest job I could ever have is the state licensing exam. The next three weeks will be spent at the library, living off caffeine and granola bars as I try to reread every single set of notes I have taken over these last four years. I decided on extra torture during school by taking a job at a local hospital as a nurse intern while in school. It meant less sleep and minimal free time to hang out with the few friends I made, but with Emmett always on the road and no family to keep in touch with, it didn’t feel like a sacrifice.

That internship became my bread and butter, the best experience I could find that would make the transition to an RN that much smoother, because once I get my nursing license in my sweaty little palms, I leave for my first gig as a travel nurse. The bright lights of Seattle are the next beacon calling me home.

The ceremony today was monumental for my nursing friends. Their family members came, gave hugs and presents and participated in the pinning ceremony while I stood alone. I hadn't invited anyone besides Emmett and my dad, and while I completely understand why Emmett couldn't make it, I kind of thought my dad would show. However, the card I received in the mail a few days ago told me that wasn't going to happen.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, smiling when I see who texted me.

Emmett: I keep thinking of you and your graduation and how fucking proud I am of you.

Emmett: You're going to be a great nurse, Jenna. I'm sorry I couldn't be there today to see you walk the stage. I'll make it up to you, I promise.

His sweet words blur as the tears fill my eyes. Of all the people in this world, he is who I would have wanted to have seen today, sitting in the metal chairs of the auditorium, clapping like a lunatic as I accepted my diploma and nursing pin. I'm sure he would have made a scene, too. Clapping and howling and waving his arms as if I couldn't see him plain as day. His apprenticeship schedule has been grueling, most days working sixteen hours on a trivial amount of sleep. Our conversations sometimes go weeks on hold, surviving on text threads that go unanswered until late at night when the other person is sound asleep.

My fingers hover over the keys, reading his words ten times over and the alcohol in my system debating whether to tell him how much I miss him when my phone is ripped from my palm.

“Hold on,” says Patrick, “you have been holding back on us, because as long as I have known you, you haven't dated. Yet here we have someone named Emmett that seems to have taken an interest in our Jenna.”

I shove him with one arm and pull my phone from his hand with the other. “Shut up,” I mumble, embarrassed by his

statement.

I don't tell people about Emmett because I don't know what to say. I could say he's my best friend, because that's the truth. But the last few years it feels like we've become more than that. With both of our busy schedules, and opposite hours, we have still managed to find time to keep our relationship afloat. Sometimes when we're both half dozing in the late hours of the night, we'll confess our deepest fears to the other knowing the words will never go further than that phone call. Best friend is too small of a term for how I feel about him.

I tell the group a little bit about Emmett, about moving to Chicago at fifteen, meeting him the first day. The start of our friendship, moving in with his family at the end of senior year, his pep talk that led me to enroll in nursing school, which was probably the best decision of my life to date.

"Hold on," Genevieve interrupts with a hand raised in the air like she's still in the classroom. "Question—you're telling me you guys were best friends all those years, had sleepovers at his house—"

"Sleepovers, but not in the same bed, or in the same room," I interrupt. His mom wouldn't have allowed that.

"You were each other's date for all dances, for prom. You never dated other people. Yet he never so much as tried to kiss you? Cop a feel during a hug, anything?" she asks again. "Hate to break the news girl, but it sounds like maybe he's gay and you were his beard."

"Is he hot? If you do find out he's gay, hook me up!" Patrick interrupts.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, he's not gay. And yes, he's hot. He's like ... like ... like a muscled football player meets the nerdy quiet guy." He's the best of both worlds, and while they're not wrong that it seems odd we never kissed, the night on his couch where I was about to kiss him and his sister walked in the door is forever burned in my mind.

I mumble an excuse and slide off the stool, opening my phone as I stand.

“Looks like you’re second-guessing yourself,” Genevieve teases.

“Not second-guessing, curious now. I’ll be right back.”

“Girl!” Patrick squeaks. “You are *not* going to call him at one A.M. to ask him why he never kissed you!”

I finish off my drink and set the glass on the table and turn to leave. “That’s exactly what I plan on doing. Someone order me another shot; I’ll be right back.”

I stumble to the nearest bathroom, shove open the door, and thankfully find it empty. The door slams behind me, and it muffles some of the music screaming from the dance floor. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, hair still wild and frizzy though I’ve spent the morning smoothing it into a half ponytail. Dipping my head, I check the stalls to make sure I’m alone, and that there isn’t some poor drunk girl fighting her stomach.

Finding a dry spot on the sink, I slide up onto it and let my feet dangle for a few minutes as I scroll my phone. I should let him sleep, I know that, but that doesn’t stop me from leaning my back against the mirror and dialing.

I hold the phone to my ear, listening to the soft ringing. The bathroom is quieter than the rest of the bar, but the bass from the music still pounds in my chest, my ears ringing from the change in noise.

“Looks like someone is having a late night.” I hear that familiar sand-scratched voice say and I immediately smile.

“Sorry to wake you.”

A grumbled laugh. “No, you’re not.”

“You’re right,” I admit softly.

I’m quiet for a second, working on building up the courage to ask him the burning question.

“I hate myself for not being there today,” he starts.

“Emmett ... don’t you dare. I know you’d be here if you could.” With the distance between us, and my graduation being on a Thursday night, my excitement became quickly doused in cold water when I realized there wouldn’t be a flight he could take that could get him here in person while still making it back for work the next day.

“Everything okay?” he asks. “Thought you’d still be out celebrating.”

“How come you never kissed me?” I blurt out.

I hear the rustle of sheets and imagine him repositioning so he’s lying on his back, maybe propped up on some pillows. My mind wanders to him being shirtless, wondering what it would feel like to be lying next to his warm skin.

“How come I never kissed you?” he repeats.

I nod. Then I realize he can’t see my nod. “Yeah.”

He takes a big breath in and out. “Well, there were plenty of times I wanted to, if we’re being honest.”

My belly flutters at the confirmation that he felt the same way I did. “But ...” I prompt.

“When we first met, I thought there was no way in hell you’d like someone like me. I was the fat kid with a crush on the coolest girl I had ever met. It wasn’t until you were living with me and my family that I thought, holy shit, she might feel the same.”

My mind whirrs as he speaks, wondering how on earth he wasn’t sure of my feelings. Wasn’t it obvious that I couldn’t stop staring at him? That I wanted to spend every day with him? All these years, he’s let himself believe that he’s the fat kid when he’s anything but - he’s thick, strong, protective... he’s all I’ve ever wanted in a man.

I start to consider the real possibility that in my attempt to protect my feelings, that I came off as cold and uninterested instead.

“But by then, I wanted you to be able to depend on us, and I worried if I had kissed you, if I crossed that line and somehow misread everything between us, you would have run away. So, I tucked away my feelings and decided having a safe place for you to go, people to depend on was a hell of a lot more important than what I wanted.”

My heart aches at his answer. It’s so typical of Emmett. The good guy. The thoughtful one. Most teenage guys would have put their feelings first, wanting to see if they could get to third base with a girl was probably the most important thing on their mind, but not him.

“Would you have let me kiss you, if I had tried?” he asks.

I roll my head to the side, letting the cool wall temper my aching head, wondering if it’s the alcohol or his words making me feel so dizzy. “Yeah,” is all I manage to say, my body flushed with the thought of all the times we could have kissed—in his truck when he picked me up from work, on the couch with the dim light of the television illuminating his face, at the lake under the moonlight.

“Do you remember that night we were watching TV and I ended up straddling you?”

He groans, and I can hear the sheets rustling again. My mind wanders, wondering if he’s adjusted his position, wondering if he’s thinking about that night, if his hand is moving down to grip himself under the sheets.

“All the fucking time,” his voice is raspy, wavering, like a man about to break. “Believe me when I say this, Jenna, if my sister hadn’t barged in, I would have taken your virginity right there on my parents’ couch.”

I’m panting now, wishing I could strip my clothes off and release the ache I feel growing between my legs. “I would have let you.”

“Well, that’s good to know.”

“Good to know for what?”

“For the next time we see each other.”

CHAPTER TEN

Present Day

I look down at the paper in my hand, then to the shelf in front of me, and back to the paper in my hand, wondering if the recipe I chose is a little out of my league. Beef and broccoli sounded easy, but the list of ingredients on my list says otherwise.

“What the fuck’s the difference between oyster sauce, fish sauce, and hoisin sauce?” I mumble under my breath, wondering why I wrote down all three sauces, then wondering if I accidentally combined two recipes when I wrote my list.

What the hell is a hoisin anyways? Is it a type of fish? Can you milk a hoisin? I hope it isn’t the slime from a shell or something. I thought I needed plum sauce. Why didn’t I write down plum sauce?

With a frustrated grumble, I plop down on my butt in the Asian-food aisle of the grocery store and pull out my phone, hoping to google my recipe.

Carts stroll by and I mumble a series of apologies as shoppers pass, pulling my basket closer to my legs. In my peripheral, I see a cart that stops, metal resting against my basket and refusing to move, even when I pull it closer to me to let them pass.

“Sorry, I’m being a hog.” I stand up, keeping my eyes glued to my google search as I use my foot to slide my basket over so the shopper can come closer and look at the shelves. “Just tell me to move if I’m in the way.”

I mindlessly scroll my phone, ignoring the stranger standing a little too close to my basket. It isn't until I hear them say my name that I freeze.

That voice.

That voice used to bring me so much comfort when I was scared. Soothed me when I was pissed at my mom, stressed during school, or worried I'd never make it as a nurse. It's a voice I haven't heard in three years. The same voice that haunts my dreams.

"Jenna," they say again.

I stare at the bottle of hoisin sauce in my hand, gripping it until my knuckles turn white, blinking slowly, not wanting to turn around because I don't know if I'm strong enough to see the face of the person who's talking to me.

Ever since the flowers were delivered at work, and I knew he lived in the city, I wondered if this would happen. I thought I was safe, living far enough away from his house that there was no way we would accidentally run into each other. I've avoided his favorite stores, the ice cream shop I used to work at, and the convenient gas stations in his neighborhood. This store is halfway across the city, but a quick internet search told me that they offer the best selection of Asian sauces. This would have been the last place I ever thought I'd see him.

With the bottle still clutched in one hand, my phone in the other, I slowly turn to my right, trailing my eyes from the floor upward, finding worn, black, steel-toe boots, dark Carhartt work pants, and a heavy coat that hugs a thick—but built—waist. Holding my breath, I look up and into a pair of crystal blue eyes I know so well that I could draw them from memory.

He's become a man, but I'd still recognize him anywhere. Dark hair sticking out in small tufts under a tan beanie. A full beard, which I've never seen him with before, but somehow suits him more than the freshly shaven face he used to wear. He has officially lost his teenage weight. Still husky, but strong—so strong. Broad shoulders bursting under a dark gray

jacket. His size meets strength, and he looks more like a linebacker than the boy I met at fifteen years old. My gaze leaves him, traveling to the shopping cart filled with groceries. And the little toddler in the front of the cart. Blonde, wavy hair, a stark contrast to her dad, and my stomach lurches a bit knowing she must have gotten her beauty from her mom.

“Jenna,” he prompts again with a crack in his voice.

He takes a step to the side, keeping one hand on the cart near his daughter and the other jerks out to reach for me, but pulls back. His eyes flit all over my body, from my hair to my face, to my feet and back again. My mind whirs with questions, and though there are so many things I want to say right now, I can't speak. The anger rises again in my chest, burning my throat as I bite back the words. *How could you? I hate you. What happened? You broke me.* But those words are nothing compared to how much I fucking miss him. Somewhere in aisle seven of the Whole Foods market, all of the anger I've kept so tightly locked in my chest for the last three years starts to evaporate.

“Emmett.”

I drop the bottle and phone in my basket, the glass clanking among the other items and I rush toward him, throwing my arms around his waist, hands finding their way inside his jacket and burying my face into the crook of his neck upon instinct, finding I still fit in my spot after all these years.

He meets my urgency with his own, wrapping his arms around my back and pulling me to him. He says something, but I can't hear it. Everything around me becomes white noise and all I know is him.

His cologne, the same Ralph Lauren one I bought him for Christmas one year fills my nostrils. He eyed it at the mall, but he refused to buy it, telling me he could think of plenty of other things he'd rather spend one hundred dollars on. So, I saved some extra money that summer, spending weekends scooping ice cream when most of our friends were swimming or partying, and I bought it for him for Christmas. He wore it

every day, including the last day I saw him. I would have imagined his wife had purchased him something new over the last few years but taking another deep breath in, I know it's the same one.

His jacket is rough against my cheek, still holding onto a bite of cold from the winter weather, but his body is warm. I breathe it all in, feeling so fucking content and settled as the hug lingers. We don't care about the shoppers milling around us, muttering rude comments since we're blocking most of the aisle. We are oblivious to most of the outer world until the toddler in the cart at my elbow sneezes a few times, and we pull back.

In typical dad fashion, he reaches into the pocket of his jacket to pull out a crumpled tissue and swipes her nose, all while keeping an arm wrapped around my hip.

"Bless you, sweetie." I turn to face the little girl in the cart.

She drops her face down and reaches her arms up for her daddy. Emmett immediately lets go of me to pluck her out of the cart and props her on a hip, and she hides in his big chest.

"She's a little shy," he says, reaching a hand up to palm the back of her head.

"Nothing wrong with that." I keep my gaze locked on her head of blonde curls. "She's a doll." The apples of his cheeks blush at the compliment, something I forget he does so easily.

"You're a *dad*, Emmett." I knew he had a child, but actively tried to prevent myself from imagining what that might look like. Seeing him now, standing in front of me with her in his arms, it nearly takes my breath away.

"I'm the lucky one for sure. She's hilarious. She's two, almost three; goofy as hell when she's feeling better. She's got a little cold from daycare. Normally, she'd be running circles around this place, wouldn't you, sweetie?" He runs the back of his knuckle over her cheek.

She sniffs and rubs her already red nose over his chest, leaving a glimmering snot trail in her path.

His gaze goes from her and back to me. We soak each other in.

He reaches a hand up to grasp the end of my hair, sliding the smooth strands between his thumb and forefinger. “I can’t remember ever seeing you with straight hair,” he mumbles. “You always had the best curls.”

His sweet compliment is like a shot to the heart. My hair has always been wild. I wasn’t blessed with curls like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. Instead, I resemble Carrot Top, all frizzy and wild and kinky. I never took the time to learn how to tame it in high school, and it wasn’t until Emmett and I were done and I dated men in the city that comments rolled in: *Too tangly. Looks messy. Have you ever tried to straighten it?*

If he only knew the amount of time and money I have spent in the salon, getting chemical straightening treatments and Keratin-infused whatever to receive compliments from men I didn’t care about.

“Trying something new these days,” I tell him, not ready to go down the road of what the last few years have been like without him. “Looks like you have some hippie hair going on under there,” I tease, reaching up to twist a tendril sticking out of his beanie.

He reaches his free hand up to tug the cap off, running his hand through the longer locks on his head. “I’m way overdue for a haircut. I haven’t had one since I moved back to the city.”

I stay quiet, wanting to ask so many questions, while at the same time knowing it may break my heart more to hear his answers. “How long have you been back?”

He slips the beanie back on his head and adjusts the girl on his hip. “A little while.” He pauses, probably waiting for me to say something but all I can do is nod along. “Did you get my flowers?”

“Yes.” I took them home. Stared at them for days. Reread his note every time I walked by them. Laid in bed and went through every memory we had together and tried to figure out

what to do. I programmed his number into my phone, but I didn't have it in me to call him. I wasn't ready to hear his voice and fall back into the trap that is Emmett Owens. Instead, I wanted to run again, because I knew that if we were in the same city there would be some indescribable gravitational force that would pull us together.

I didn't think it'd be so soon.

"I know ..." he trails off, pausing to release a shaky exhale. He looks at his daughter again, and I'm sure this isn't a conversation he planned to have with her in his arms. "There is so much I want to tell you," he starts again. "So much we need to talk about."

"Emmett, we don't have to." If we talk about everything, learn what we've missed, everything that happened after that fateful phone call, would it change anything? Maybe it would bring him the closure he needs, maybe he would want to rekindle our friendship. But for me, it would open icky wounds that are barely holding together.

"Please, Jenna. Will you come over sometime? Have dinner with us? Please?"

I look down at his daughter, who, over the course of the conversation, has turned more toward me, chewing on her thumb behind a coy little smile. Emmett has hurt me, but I can already see this cutie will have me wrapped around her little finger.

"Please?" he prompts again, a longing in his voice.

"Pease." A small voice whispers, and it nearly knocks me to my knees how cute it is. I can tell Emmett no, I think, but his daughter hasn't done anything to wrong me, and the fact that she's asking so sweetly does me in.

"What do you think?" I ask her, shrugging my shoulders and letting my hands fall to my sides. "Can I come over and hang out with you?"

Her smile widens and she nods, surprising me with how quickly she is warming up.

I look up at Emmett, who's watching the interaction between us two girls with a smile. "I guess that's a yes, then. I can't say no to that face."

On a whim, I offer a palm to his daughter. "Good to meet you, cutie. High five?"

The little girl smiles and gives my palm a soft hand tap.

Emmett husks out a laugh, and it takes me by surprise. It's been so long since I've heard that deep belly, head-thrown-back laugh he has, and God, how I've missed it.

"She's normally a little slow to warm; she must sense something about you," he tells me, eyes glistening.

"Maybe she senses I'm still a kid at heart."

"Maybe."

He stares at me for a while, the air between us crackling with embers far from being extinguished.

I look back to his daughter before realization hits me.

"Jeez, Emmett," I say, slapping my forehead, "I'm a terrible person. I haven't asked what her name is."

He bounces the little girl once in his arms, pulling a giggle from her lips. "This is Allie."

"Allie." I repeat. Allie Owens. "I love it. Short for something? Allison, Alexis?"

His gaze drops to the floor, and he responds so quietly that if someone sneezed as they walked by, I wouldn't have heard his answer, but it's a resounding smack across the face.

"Allie is short for Alissandria."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Three Years Earlier

enna, come on,” Meg pleads, “I have dates secured with two of the hottest surgeons at Chicago General, and you’re holding out on me?”

I shrug. “Sorry, not really interested in going on an awkward double date with some self-absorbed surgeons we don’t know.”

She pulls a pile of bedding from the cabinet we’ve been stocking, and hands me a top sheet, cueing me to re-fold. “Possibly self-absorbed, yes. But also incredibly sexy, and probably wild. They’d show us a hell of a time.”

I never thought that after all these years I’d be back in Chicago. When I took a last-minute critical staffing assignment, I also didn’t plan to meet Meg, who luckily shares my sarcasm and general annoyance for the human race. Within the first week, she became the best friend I have ever had. Besides Emmett.

Emmett ... who, in a few months, will be done with his apprenticeship and able to stop traveling for work. And after our conversation last month, he’s still ready to move wherever I want to settle. If you would have asked me two months ago, I wouldn’t have known, but once I stepped through the doors onto the fourth floor of Grace General, back in the windy city of Chicago, something compelled me to want to stay.

I purse my lips together to temper a smile at the thought of Emmett and me back in the city together.

“Earth to Jenna,” Meg interrupts.

“Sorry, what were you saying?”

“I was asking why you’d give up a chance like this, but you were all starry-eyed, probably thinking of your little high school boyfriend.”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend, ever. Technically.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s weird. You guys never banged. You haven’t seen his dick and yet you’re ready to promise your life to him.”

“Maybe, I am. If—no, *when* he moves here and you meet him, you’ll see what I’m talking about. You’ll see why he’s better than any doctor you could scrounge up in this city.”

She shakes her head *no*. “I’d rather spend my weekends working hot surgeons.”

I stack the now neatly folded sheet on the pile and she tucks them into the cupboard. “And what if I don’t go on this double date this weekend? Which eligible bachelor are you going to choose?”

Meg opens the next set of cabinet doors. “Who says I’m going to choose one?” She winks, trying to play it off as a joke but from what I’ve learned about Meg over the course of the last eight or so weeks, is she probably isn’t kidding.

Meg continues to rattle but the vibration of my phone in my pocket steals my attention.

Emmett: I know you’re at work, but can we talk?

My stomach sinks, not liking the tone of his words. He never needs to talk “right now,” never sends such a cryptic text, and it has my mind racing. Is he hurt? Did he get injured at work? Is his family okay? Is someone sick?

I mumble to Meg that I have to make a call as I’m already halfway off the unit.

I peek in the locker room to find it empty, then pull up his name to dial as the door slams shut behind me and the overhead lights flicker on.

He answers on the first ring. “Hey.”

That voice. Normally calm, never scared. The voice of my rock sounds rushed and something else I can’t quite place.

“What’s going on? Everything okay? Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m not hurt,” he says.

I wait for a few more seconds for him to continue and tell me everything’s okay, but the words never come.

“Are your parents okay? Savannah?”

I pace the pattern of the tile in the flooring, focusing on the sound of my heels squeaking along the linoleum as I wait for his words.

He exhales, then releases some sort of sound mixed with frustration. “Everyone is healthy, they’re okay. I just ... I have some news. And I want you to hear it first.”

Judging by how this conversation is starting out, it’s not good news, so I race through the options in my head: His assignment got delayed, he has to go on another long-distance job, he lost his license. I need to guess the hurt before he can get the words out.

“Are you messing with me? Is this your way of telling me that you’re done with your apprenticeship early and moving back to Chicago to see me?”

“I’m getting married.”

His words run through one ear and out the other, exploding into the silence of the breakroom. My feet come to a stop a few seconds later.

I close my eyes briefly, shake my head a few times and wonder if delirium has taken over. Pulling the phone from my ear, I look at the screen, and with shaking fingers tap it twice to make sure it’s Emmett’s name written across the front.

My feet take on a mind of their own, slowly pacing backwards until my back is pressed up against the cool cinder block wall and I let myself sink to the floor. I can hear Emmett call out to me, mumbling a series of apologies I don't care to hear.

I put the phone back up to my ear in time to catch the tail end of his words: "And we have a baby on the way."

The room around me spins, everything becoming a blur as the tears build. This can't be happening.

We have spent the last few years—no, fuck that. We have spent every minute since the day we met building up to now, a time when our careers and homes matched up and we could test the waters to whatever has been brewing between us since we were fifteen years old.

Yet on the other hand, what did I expect? If nothing happened between us when we were in high school, living together under the same roof, a bedroom wall apart as horny teenagers, why would I expect anything different once we went years without seeing each other?

The Emmett I know is a fucking catch. He's handsome, so handsome. And kind, always patient, and willing to be the rock in any unsteady situation. He doesn't yell, never rude or condescending, even to those that may deserve it. A hard-working man that would do anything for the ones he loves. And me?

I'm the indecisive military brat, the one who talks too much, who no one can take seriously with her wild hair and questionable taste in music. The one who's own family didn't want her. His news shouldn't come as a surprise.

I pull on the stoic mask that got me through countless first days of school and paste on a smile he can't see. "That's crazy, Emmett. But congrats! You will be a great dad." At least that part I don't have to lie about. Whoever he's marrying, and the children that he makes will be the most loved people in this world. I know for a fact they will never question their worth.

“Jenna ...” he trails off.

I can tell by his tone he’s about to apologize and I’ll be damned if I let him pity me. So, I swipe the tears that have bubbled under my eyes and press my knuckles firmly along my breastbone, hard enough to sting and pull my attention away from the bomb he dropped on me. With a clearing of my throat, I interrupt him, letting the lie flow easily off my tongue.

“Hey sorry, I’m working and swamped. I gotta go. But seriously, congrats; I’m happy for you. Text me your address and I’ll send you guys a little baby gift.”

Pulling the phone from my ear, I can already hear him telling me how unexpected this is for him, how sorry he is, but I whisper a goodbye he will never hear and tap the red button, ending the call and letting my phone clamor to the floor next to me.

I sit on the floor in silence, staring at a scuff mark on the wall for so long the automatic lights flick off. In the darkness of the empty room, Emmett’s face pops into my mind, and I’m reminded of the day we met. Tenth grade. Standing next to him at the cooktop with his warm hand curled over my back, telling me it was okay I ruined our alfredo. That day, something changed inside of me. I never thought I would have to be alone ever again.

My stomach lurches, and I stand, rushing out of the break room and shoving through the swinging bathroom door with both hands as the pressure rises in my chest. I’m barely through the first stall door when I fall to my knees and wretch, unloading my lunch into the toilet. Hot tears stream down my face. I’m unsure whether they are from his words or throwing up, but I let them fall until I’m spent, until I have nothing else to give, so I stand, flushing the toilet and turning to gaze at myself in the mirror. My reflection taunts me, looking every bit as pitiful as I feel. Flipping up the silver handle on the sink, I let the water run over my skin until it’s so cold it stings.

But I let it, because he’s gone.

Emmett. Married. We never exchanged some stupid promise ring, and certainly never pledged our celibacy to each other. I wasn't foolish enough to think he was still a virgin—I'm not one myself. But I never, *never* sought out commitment from someone else. I thought he felt the same.

The icy water pools in my hands, and I splash it over my face, letting the prickle of the water soothe the sting of regret, of anger, of the unbridled self-hatred I have for myself in this moment.

Fuck Chicago. Fuck moving home to “our city.” I'll have my fun, do my time, and finish out this contract but then I'm out of here. I'll kiss this piece of shit city and all the memories I've made here goodbye.

“On second thought, I'm in,” I tell Meg once I storm back into the unit. Maybe I'm not interested in an asshole surgeon, but if Emmett wants to move on from us and get married, well I sure as hell can have some fun, too. “Call up your surgeon buddy and tell him the double date is on.”

Meg gawks at me for a moment, surely wondering why I'm coming back to the unit a shell of the woman I once was. But in true good-friend fashion she reaches over and squeezes my shoulder, almost leaning in for a hug before stepping back and pulling out her phone. “I'll make sure you forget he ever existed.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Present Day

old on, hold on ... you're telling me, he named his
“**H**fucking *child* after you?” Meg’s eyes bulge, blinking rapidly as she tries to process my story.

“He didn’t clarify, but yeah, I think so. I mean, how many Alissandria’s do you know?” If he named her Alexandria, it could be played off as a weird coincidence, but I don’t know.

“It’s not a coincidence. In a fucked-up way, it’s kind of ... romantic.”

The vial of insulin I had been warming in my hands drops to the floor, rolling underneath the supply shelf. “Meg, did you say something was romantic?”

She shrugs, completely oblivious to the fact that she said a positive sentence about love and didn’t follow it up with “*but I’d rather die.*”

“I mean, I know I don’t want any guy I knew from high school crawling out of the woodwork, practically stalking me to get me to talk to him. But since you seem to like that sort of thing ... have you decided if you’re going to show up to dinner?”

That question is one I had been asking myself since running into Emmett and Allie in the grocery store. I promised I’d come over Friday night for pizza.

“It’s dinner,” he had pointed out, “a slice of pizza with two old friends” and his daughter, and a suffocating cloud of tension, too.

“I’ve thought about going as much as I’ve thought about hopping on a plane and moving far away from here.”

Meg reaches a hand up to tug on the baby hairs that have slipped out of my bun.

“Ouch!” I screech, reaching back to soothe the area. “Bitch.”

She forcefully digs a finger into the center of my chest. “Don’t you dare talk about leaving me. He already chased you away once, I’ll be damned if I let him do it again.”

Meg’s right. When I was here before on assignment, she and I spent the entire twelve weeks glued to the hip, and she was my only support when Emmett called and broke my heart. She refused to let me completely wallow in self-pity, so if we weren’t working, we were partying. If we weren’t partying, we were laying on her couch eating Chinese food and sipping champagne. She became the first real friend I had made in my life that loved me for me. Eventually, I grew restless, and terrified of the idea that Emmett might take his new family and move home, so I took the opportunity to run and stayed away for a year until she texted me one day and told me they had full-time openings on her unit. She also threatened to chop my hair off in my sleep if I didn’t apply. Now, two years later, we are back to being attached at the hip.

“Anyways,” she continues, “now that I have your attention, I say go over there for dinner. Be your sweet, funny, hot, charming self. Get him to fall madly in love with you and then kick his ass to the curb.”

I force a laugh, letting her, and myself, believe I’d consider doing that. But that’s easier said when she hasn’t met Emmett. When she doesn’t know what it’s like to be held by him, to have him next to you building you up when you only know how to tear yourself down.

~

“Knock, Jenna. Raise your hand up, close your first, and knock on the damn door.”

The tip of my nose is cold, breaths visible in the crisp evening air, but I need a minute to ground myself before I knock on Emmett’s door. The front door of his childhood home, the home that I once called mine. Grounding myself to the real possibility that Emmett’s ex-wife has redecorated the only home I have ever loved. His mom’s floral wallpaper border was most likely replaced with modern crown molding. Her pale pink carpet ripped to reveal refinished wood floors. All of which are arguably more modern styles, but it irritates me the same.

A shadow breaks my daydream and I gasp at Emmett’s furrowed brow peeking through the vertical window on my right.

He opens the front door to me, pausing in the entryway. “I didn’t hear you knock. Have you been out here long?”

He takes a step back, widening the space and ushering me inside. But my feet are frozen in place. I stare past him, taking note of the dish towel thrown over his shoulder, the dark gray Henley he’s wearing stretching across his strong chest, sleeves pushed up to show his corded forearms, and the faint singing of a two-year-old echoing down the hall.

“Jenna?” he prompts again, this time reaching a hand out to grasp my forearm and pull me inside.

“Sorry,” I stammer, crossing over the threshold into his home, eyes flicking up and around, noticing the paint color in the entryway hasn’t changed. The row of brass hooks remains on the wall, the large family photo that once sat above them gone.

I reach down to slip off my boots and set them nicely in the corner of the doormat, making sure not to trek any of the snow

into his home before shuffling off my jacket and hanging it, along with my purse, on an empty hook.

He watches my every move, keeping quiet until I have all my items put away.

“I remember the day when you used to kick your shoes off the second you got home, not stopping to see where they landed. Now look at you.”

His memories are like a shot to the heart, each one an invisible cut. “This isn’t my home anymore,” I tell him coolly.

His eyes hit the floor. He nods slowly. “Got it.”

When he raises his head, his eyes are back to staring at my face, then move to my hair, following its path over my shoulders, ending at the tops of my breasts. “Do you ever wear it curly anymore?”

Before I have time to open my mouth, Allie comes barreling down the hall, the cape on her princess gown flying behind her as she slams into the back of Emmett’s legs. He reaches an arm behind her to tickle her and with a steady grip pulls her up and over his shoulder until she’s facing me. Upside down but facing me. Her thin blonde hair cascades down and she grins widely.

“Remember my friend Jenna from the store? She’s here to have dinner with us.”

Allie smiles but stays quiet as Emmett flips her over until she’s sitting in his arms.

Instinctively, I offer her a palm for a handshake, before I quickly remember that most two-year olds aren’t well-versed in formal greetings, so instead I drop it and reach out to run my finger along the hem of her dress. “I love your dress. Are you Cinderella?”

A broad smile crosses her face as she nods enthusiastically.

“Cinderella was one of my favorites.” The idea of living with an evil mom and still ending up with the handsome prince

always appealed to me for some unknown reason. “I didn’t know she had a cape.”

Emmett chuckles, planting a loud kiss on Allie’s cheek before setting her down.

She immediately runs away, but once she gets to the entrance of the living room she stops abruptly, face half hiding behind the wall yet still peeking at me. She reaches a small hand out and ushers me to follow her.

“Cinderella doesn’t have a cape, but the Snow-White dress my sister got her came with one. She loved it, so she made my mom sew a cape on her Cinderella dress, too.”

Well, if that’s not the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.

She peeks around the corner again, her little hand waving to me.

I hear a faint hiss of my name being called. “I’m being summoned, I guess.” I shrug to Emmett before turning back around. “Think she has any dresses in my size?”

I follow Allie down the hall, eyes dancing around the space, surprised to see that it looks the same. His mom’s dried potpourri is gone, the floral decorations are no longer on the walls but as I pass the hall bathroom, I can see it’s still painted the same light lavender color. The kitchen boasts the same floral wallpaper border. His mom had a thing for flowers and pastels.

“The house looks almost exactly the same as I remember it.” I turn back to face Emmett, finding him standing directly behind me, almost too close for comfort. I sidestep to the left to give some much-needed space between us. “I can’t believe you kept the carpet.” I point to the staircase, noticing his mom’s light pink shag carpet is still perfectly intact.

“I’ve thought about tearing it up, having the staircase and upstairs match the living room, but it’s still in such good shape I don’t have the heart to do it. You know how my mom was with her possessions, she believed if you took care of what you had, it would last forever.”

That mantra could be applied to a lot of things in life.

“Nenna,” a small voice whispers.

I turn to view the living room as the tail end of Allie’s princess dress disappears into a homemade blanket fort. She has the ultimate set up—the kitchen barstools gathered in a semi-circle around the back of the recliner, creating the perfect child-sized princess fort. Her face peeks out of the slit in the blanket, and she smiles up at me.

“Can I come hang out with you in your fort?”

She nods enthusiastically, but corrects me, “Castle.”

“Castle, of course.” I walk toward the castle, noting the living room looks the same except with new furniture. He put the couch in the same spot along the staircase that his mom had theirs. My eyes rise to the French patio doors that lead out to the backyard, and I stop abruptly outside of the blanket castle when I see it.

The tire swing.

With my eyes focused on the black tire strung up with corded rope, a dusting of snow covering it, I call over my shoulder to Emmett. “Is that the same tire swing?”

He comes up behind me, close enough that the towel slung over his shoulder brushes against mine. “Of course. I think my parents kept it hoping one of you girls would come over and swing on it. Once spring comes, I know Allie will want to use it.”

“One of you girls.” He says that as if I’m still a part of his family. Like I belonged in this home as much as they did.

“What is it with girls and tire swings?”

I lift my head from the rubber of the tire and look up to see Emmett shutting the patio door leading into the backyard. “My sister used to always come out here and swing like you are when she needed to think.”

“Your sister was on to something.” I adjust my legs inside the large tire, feeling the warmth from the sun that’s heated the rubber seep into my skin. I pump my legs a little, trying to swing myself back and forth.

The last few days of summer are dwindling. All our friends are getting excited to go off to college, and Emmett leaves for lineman school in six days. I had planned to apply to schools in the same general area Emmett would be, but my dad pointed out that it doesn’t make sense to waste time and money with college when I don’t have a real plan. He’s stationed in New Mexico permanently and says there are a lot of places for to find work, so two days after Emmett moves south, I’ll pack my life into my biggest suitcase and fly to my dad’s house. There’s a sour burning that started in my stomach the day I realized I won’t have Emmett in my daily life, and it grows stronger with each passing day.

“Whatcha thinking?” Emmett asks, approaching my backside. He reaches a large hand up to grasp the rope and pulls back, letting the tire swing forward with me in it.

The creak of the rope wrapped around the branch sets a rhythm with his pushes, and I let him take control, my legs dangling beneath me.

“Thinking about life. About what’s next, I guess.” I rest my cheek on the side of the tire. “Sometimes I wish I was like you, you’ve had your plan to be a lineman your whole life, just needed to decide where to go. I have no idea where I see myself, what life will turn out like.”

“Have you applied to any schools?”

I ignore his question, pushing my toes off the ground for more momentum as I lean back, stretching my arms long and letting my hair loose. The wind picks up, fingers combing through my locks as I stare up at the sky, shutting my eyes to block out the bright sunshine.

“Jenna,” he chides.

“What’s the point, Emmett? My dad is right, there is no sense in wasting time in school if I don’t know what I want to do. I’ll move out there, get a waitressing job, maybe bartending. Let’s not pretend I don’t have any options.”

He doesn’t see the humor in my situation. Instead, he moves closer, placing both hands around me to continue pushing. “I think that’s more your dad’s opinion. What do you want?”

As a kid, we moved around all the time, and I told myself I wanted to live somewhere long-term, to put down roots. When we moved to Chicago, I met Emmett and loved staying in one place. But the thought of living here without him, without his family, has me feeling all sorts of anxious. I want to move around again, see the country, but I want to do it on my terms.

“I don’t know,” I tell him honestly.

He pushes me again, and I spin myself around in the swing so I’m facing him as he pushes.

“What do you see me doing?”

“I can see you taking care of people, or animals. What about a vet?”

“I do love animals.” But I doubt I’m smart enough for that. Vets also have to be prepared to put an animal down if they are suffering, and I’d end up bawling each time. “That’s like eight years of school though. Veto.”

He rolls his eyes at me and pushes again. “What about something in the medical field? Doctor, nurse, pharmacist?”

“Cripes, Emmett. Is your goal to have me go to school until I’m thirty?”

“No, my goal is to help you find a career you’d be good at. Be able to take care of yourself, too. You hate relying on others.”

“You have high expectations of me. All those careers require you to be caring, and smart, and know your shit.”

He hangs his head back, exasperated. "You're caring. You're smart."

"You're telling that to the girl that got a C-plus in American history."

"Correction: When you are interested in something, and you put your mind to it, you're capable of learning it. But history is boring to you. And a C-plus isn't bad considering you never did homework, never studied, spent each class doodling in your notebook just to blindly take the tests and still passed."

True. "What makes you think I'm interested in medical stuff though?"

"Because you watch those weird ass shows on TV about trips to the ER or tapeworms, and instead of getting grossed out, you're fascinated."

"Imagine going to the bathroom, thinking you have a terrible stomachache, and you find out you birthed a baby in the toilet."

"It interests you; I know it."

"It's probably expensive."

He shrugs. "All schools are expensive; you could do loans."

"What about the caring part?"

"What about it?"

"Well, we agree that people should be caring when in those types of jobs." No one wants to be in the hospital on their deathbed and have an asshole nurse taking care of them.

He's quiet for a few minutes, pushing me further away on the swing. When I swing back to him, he grabs the rope, pulling me to an abrupt stop. He spins the tire until I'm facing him and leans down.

With a hand on each side of me, and those crystal eyes boring deep into my soul, he says "I think you care a lot. And I

think you try to hide it because it makes you sad to care about people.”

We both know he’s right, but I won’t admit it.

It makes me sad to care about my mom, knowing she doesn’t feel the same way. She hasn’t spoken to me since the day I moved in with Emmett and his family, and though we’re a short drive away, she probably won’t care to see me before I move. It makes me sad to care about my dad and have him so far away. But most of all, it makes me sad to care so damn much about Emmett and his parents. To think of how much they have helped me, took me in and cared for me like their own daughter, and soon we will all go our separate ways.

“I thought you were going to be a lineman, not a psychiatrist.”

He laughs, taking a step back and giving the tire a gentle push. “Well, you don’t have to take my advice. If waitressing is your dream, go for it. Some people do make a career out of it and there are restaurants that charge a thousand dollars for a steak, so I imagine the tips are pretty good. But you could also waitress while you go to school and take a few general ed classes. Learn about anything and everything you can, and maybe something will speak to you. My sister met a friend in college who’s a nurse. She said you can travel around the country and fill in at hospitals that need help, work two or three months at a time. She makes crazy money at it, too.”

“I could become a hot-shot nurse and find a job wherever you are.”

“Now, there’s an idea,” he says, finally smiling a genuine smile.

“I think she’d love it,” I manage to say, clearing my throat as the memory fades. “That swing is like a therapist. I may come over to use it now and then.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

hope your pizza preferences haven't changed." Emmett
“I walks back from the front door, muscles flexing under the
weight of the boxes.

“They haven't, but I hope you didn't order a whole
pizza for me.”

He's carrying three large boxes, and I highly doubt little
twenty-pound Allie eats more than a slice of pizza, if that, in
one sitting.

He gently sets the boxes down and pushes them to the back
of the counter, pulling off the top one and setting it aside
before opening the second. The instant the flap opens, I can
smell chocolate and fudge and my mouth waters.

“Triple chocolate chip fudge bomb.”

“Fudge bomb!” Allie darts out of her castle and runs into
the kitchen, arms reaching up for Emmett to hold her as soon
as he's within reach.

“Fudge bomb *after* you eat some pizza, little monkey.” He
plops a kiss on the top of her head and sets her down.

She scrambles to the table, climbing up into her booster
seat like the little monkey she is.

High school Emmett was my first real crush, twenty-year-
old Emmett gave me fantasy after fantasy, but Daddy Emmett?
This isn't quite something I was prepared for when I came
over tonight. Seeing him fawn over his daughter is a shot to
the heart—and ovaries.

He slides the bottom box over to me. “Hope you don't
mind sharing with Allie; she has the same weird tastes you

do.”

I lift the flap to find my usual order—black olives, green peppers, and pepperoni, smothered with extra cheese. “There’s no way she eats black olives.”

He shrugs, feigning innocence. “I don’t know why anyone would.”

I don’t have to ask what’s in the top box. If we’re playing the memory game with our childhood friendship, I’d be willing to bet a thousand dollars that he ordered some sort of meat lover’s topping for himself.

My stomach grumbles at the smell permeating the room, and instinctively I reach up to the cabinet door above me to pull out plates, but as soon as my fingers curl around the handle I pull it back and tuck my hand into my chest. *This isn’t your home anymore, Jenna.* You barely know the man standing next to you. Now isn’t the time to make yourself at home.

Taking a step back, I let Emmett slide in front of me to open the cabinet I had touched, and sure enough, he keeps the plates in the same spot his mom did. He pulls out three of them, handing one to me, holding his grasp firmly when I go to take it from his hands.

“You are welcome to make yourself at home here, Jen. What’s mine is yours.”

I tug the plate a little firmer, pulling it from his grip. “I’m a guest here; it isn’t my place to go digging around someone else’s kitchen.”

He flinches a little at my comment, but I see it all the same. My words might be harsh, but I know he’s trying ... he’s trying very hard to make it as comfortable as he can for me, which strikes the possibility in my mind that it might never be like it was between us.

That’s the thing about a betrayal. Even if someone is sorry, even if they spew apologies and the relationship can continue, there’s always that blip on the radar. The line in the sand that

was crossed. We could pretend all we want that our past never happened, but it doesn't undo what once was.

“What would you like to drink? I have milk and juice in the fridge.” He gestures behind him. “Otherwise, there are a few random cans of soda in the garage fridge that you can help yourself to; maybe a really old beer if you want.”

“Water is fine.” Liar. “I don't drink soda anymore.” Double liar. But I know Emmett usually doesn't drink soda unless it's sitting right in front of him. Well, he didn't used to, so if I open the garage fridge and find a case of orange soda, I'm going to be sad. So, for tonight, I don't drink soda.

The ring of his phone echoes through the empty and tension-filled kitchen, he pulls it from his back pocket and pauses to read the number scrolling across the screen. With a tap on the side, he silences it, tossing his phone on the counter beside him.

His sister told me he has full custody, and that his ex-wife is gone, but she didn't say if they still stay in touch, or if she comes to visit. I look around the living room walls, half expecting to see a lingering family photo of the three of them. Some beautiful blonde with Allie's soft smile looking back at me, a memento hanging around to remind Emmett of what he once had. And though there isn't a single picture or decoration on the living room walls, it makes my stomach churn the same.

With a rolling clatter, I set my plate on the counter. “I'm sorry, I think I have to go,” I mutter the words loud enough so Emmett can hear, but not loud enough for Allie to question what's going on.

In a few quick strides, I'm out of the kitchen and down the hall to the foyer. I rip my coat off the hook, shoving one arm in and reaching for my boots with the other when Emmett comes to hover over me.

Big hands reach down to cover mine, stalling my movements.

“Jenna, please,” he begs, hovering so close I can feel the heat from his body through my thin sweater.

We stay in that position, both of us hunched over with our hands on my boots for a moment, unmoving.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I whisper hoarsely. “It feels too weird.”

He moves his hand to my forearm, gesturing for me to release the death grip I have on my boots and letting them clatter to the floor.

“Don’t run. Don’t ... just stay. We have to get over this awkwardness between us.”

“Do we?” I finally let him pull me up. He turns me to face him, hands firmly grasped around my elbows.

“I meant what I said on that card. I’ll do anything to make this work between us.” He exhales a frustrated breath, letting go of my arms and taking a step back, tucking his hands into his front pockets. “We can take it one day at a time. Today, it’s pizza.”

It almost seems too easy for him to be so open about his feelings. But I think if I was on his end, if I was the one that did the hurting instead of the one who got hurt, I’d be a little more confident in myself, too.

“Daddy, I hungry!” Allie’s voice calls out from behind us, and we hear the scrape of the chair on the floor as she starts climbing out of her booster seat.

“Please,” he whispers one more time, the look in his eyes ripping me in two.

“I’ll stay on one condition.”

“Anything, name it.”

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to look him in the eyes as I make my request, “I don’t want to hear about her. I don’t know if you were going to mention it, to explain to me what happened, but I can’t do it. Not now.” He hadn’t made any

indication that he was going to try to talk to me about the past, but if he's still the same guy inside, he's going to try to be the mature one and clear the air, and I won't have it.

“I think it'd help the situation if I told you about her, she ___”

I raise a hand to stop him, wincing at the few words that made it out of his mouth.

“Please, Emmett. Let me have this one.”

Regretfully, he nods, promising he won't mention her until I'm ready, so I slide my arm out of my jacket, and he reaches for it, shaking it once before hanging it back up on the hook. With my boots placed once again on the corner of the door mat, I let him lead me back into the kitchen and to the table, Allie eyeing us both, surely wondering what the delay is on her pizza.

Emmett pulls out the chair across from her, ushering me to sit and waiting until I do before returning to the kitchen to dish up the pizza. He sets the plates down in front of us; me and Allie with black olives and green peppers, his with a meat lover's special. And though he already told me she loves black olives, when I see her start to peel each one off her slice and pop them into her little mouth, I still laugh in surprise.

Emmett comes back with a small cup of milk for her, and without a word, he sets an ice-cold can of orange soda right in front of me.

The clink of the aluminum hitting the table makes me look up, and I eye the can for a few moments before looking up at him. He pulls his chair back and sits down, taking a giant half-the-slice bite of pizza, refusing to look at me. But when he wipes the corner of his mouth, I see the hint of a smirk leftover.

“*Frozen Two?*”

As soon as Allie asks, Emmett falls back in his chair with a groan.

“Baby girl, we’ve watched *Frozen Two* every single night this week. Aren’t you sick of it yet?”

She purses her lips, knowing he is wrapped around her tiny little finger. “Noooo,” she says sweetly. “*Frozen Two*, please.”

“I think we should let Jenna choose the movie; she’s our guest after all.”

I can barely make it through pizza, and Emmett wants me to stay for a movie, too?

“*Frozen Two* sounds good to me,” I tell him as I wink to Allie. “I’ve never seen the first one. Or the third. Is there a third?”

Both Emmett and Allie gasp at one another before looking back at me.

“You’ve never seen *Frozen*?”

The shocked expression on his face is priceless. He’s acting as if I asked him who the president is, or what city we are in. I don’t exactly have a lot of friends who are in the market to sit and watch Disney movies.

He looks at me for another minute, smiling ear to ear before turning to Allie. “Well, if Jenna is willing to stay and watch a movie with us, we can watch *Frozen*.”

Traitor.

Allie gasps and looks up at me, eyes wide and hopeful. There isn’t a chance in hell I’d be able to say no to that face.

“*Frozen* it is.”

~

“Let it go! Let it go! And I’m one with the wind and starrrrs!” I scream the words at the top of my lungs, butchering them, I’m certain, but Allie doesn’t care. She’s singing right along with me, wrapped in my arms as I spin us around the living room. Her head tilted back, arms swinging wide as we dance.

I should be watching for furniture, or coffee tables, or things that could take me out at the knee but all I can do is watch the smile on her face grow the faster we spin.

“Are you ready, ready for the ending?” She nods along, her smile so wide it’s infectious.

“Let the storm rage onnnnn, the cold never bothered me anyways,” I sing at the top of my lungs, shimmying my shoulders the best I can with her in my arms, her little body trying to copy the one dance move I taught her.

She giggles, pulling me in for a hug as the song ends and our movements slow. *Frozen* has quickly become one of my top favorite Disney movies. It’s refreshing that her true love is her sister, not some douchebag boyfriend. I grew up watching *The Little Mermaid*, which taught me that if you couldn’t speak a word, as long as you had a pretty smile and perky tits a man would still fall in love with you. Not exactly the message I’d want someone like Allie to take away from relationships.

Emmett stands at the kitchen counter, distracted from putting away the pizza boxes and instead watching us spin until I lose my balance and we fall together on the couch.

“More, more,” Allie commands.

“Nenna needs a little break, then we can do some more.”

“Nenna might be tired, sweetie. That’s a lot of spinning and dancing you two are doing.” Emmett pipes up.

“You’re welcome to take my place,” I call over to him. “Don’t pretend you don’t know all the words. If I wasn’t here, it’d be you dancing with her.”

He shakes his head as he turns to bring the empty boxes to the garage. “I plead the fifth.”

“Is Daddy a terrible singer?” I whisper to Allie once he’s around the corner.

“I heard that,” he bellows from the hall, slamming the garage door.

I swing her into the kitchen and catch a look out the dining room windows, seeing the snow falling. My gaze moves to the right, and I see the reflection of Emmett watching us, his tall body leaning over the counter, and I spin around, our eyes locking. Allie stops giggling and her head falls to my shoulder, no doubt coming down from the chocolate fudge bomb and *Frozen* high, and I soak in the moment of her in my arms and his gaze focused on us.

“Well ...” I clear my throat. “It looks like it’s starting to snow. I better go before the roads get slick.”

He stands up and moves to the foyer. “Are your keys in your purse?” he calls out.

“Yeah?” I look at Allie and mouth, “*what’s Daddy doing?*”

She shrugs.

He scoops them out and slips on his work boots. “I’ll go warm it up for you.”

It’s not that cold out, and to be honest I’m the type that’s always running late so I usually get in a cold car and shiver for the first three minutes of the drive, but the sentiment behind his gesture isn’t lost on me.

Allie and I look out the kitchen window as he starts my car, finds my scraper and dusts off the few flakes that have fallen. In true dad fashion, he pulls up my windshield wipers, inspects the rubber on the blades and to top it off, walks around my vehicle and looks at the tires, in what I assume is inspecting the treads. I want to be annoyed, but it’s a level of care no one’s shown me before.

He comes back in and stomps his feet as Allie runs to him.

“All up to your standards, Dad?” I ask.

He raises a brow at the nickname. “You’ll need new tires after this year.”

Such a fatherly comment. How anyone knows what good or bad tires look like is beyond me.

“Whatever you say,” I tease, slipping my jacket on beside him.

“Hey, Allie, sweetheart. Will you go upstairs and start picking out jammies?”

I squat down to give Allie a hug. “I’ll see you again soon, little monkey.”

She wraps her arms around me quickly before padding upstairs.

Emmett watches until she’s safely up the landing before speaking. “Thank you.” His voice is low, unsure. “I’m glad you stayed.”

“Me too,” I tell him honestly.

I barely slept last night, tossing and turning and wondering what it would be like once I got here. If we would be able to pick up from where we left off all those years ago or if the damage makes us beyond repair.

“Will you let me take you out on a date?”

It takes a minute for his words to sink in, the realization of what he’s asking still a surprise. He’d been open about wanting to make things right with me and wanting forgiveness for the hurt he’s caused. After all the years of keeping his feelings hidden, it still surprises me he’s so open.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

I spin around to face him, reaching under the collar of my coat to pull my hair out. “I think that maybe we are meant to be friends. And friends are good. I can handle being friends.”

I think.

He takes a step forward, causing me to take one back to keep some sort of distance between us. He leans in, raising an arm to press against the wall behind me.

“Jenna,” he starts, “I should have asked you out a long time ago. And because I didn’t, because I chickened out and made excuses, look what happened.” His eyes study my face, searching for a reaction. “I’m not messing around this time. I meant it when I said I’d do anything for a chance to prove that to you. I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you.”

“Since when are you so open about your feelings?”

The corner of his mouth ticks up in an almost smile. “Since the day I lost you.”

I want to believe his words. For the better part of our relationship, I would have believed anything he said, thinking he would never lie to me. But the heart can only handle so much, and right now, I can’t let myself get hurt again.

“And what if all I can give you is friendship?”

He watches my face for a moment, looking for any sign that I may give in, that I might lean forward and test the waters between us. But when he sees I won’t, that my stubborn streak is still as strong as ever, he says, “If that’s all you can give, I’ll take it. It’s not what I want, but I’ll accept that.” He drops his arm and steps back, giving a breath of space between us. “But keep in mind, Jenna, I’m not going anywhere, and I’ll be dead before I ever hurt you again. But if friends is all you can give me right now, then friends it is.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I swipe my badge through the reader as the clock chirps five-fifty-eight. “Damn, two minutes early.”

There are some people who get to work twenty minutes early, who like to sit and sip their coffee and slowly peruse the patient charts. That isn’t me. If my shift starts at six, that’s when I’ll arrive. I prefer to roll with the punches and figure things out as I go. It isn’t the most conventional, but it’s worked as my go-to method for the last five years as a nurse, so I won’t be changing any time soon.

My phone buzzes in my purse as I push through the heavy double doors and swing left, walking down the still-dark hall toward the nurse’s station.

I should be annoyed with how fast I smile when I see it’s Emmett’s name. I shouldn’t get butterflies in my stomach all over again, but he’s been texting regularly since I went over there for dinner and it’s the same each time.

His name. Smile. Butterflies.

Anytime I hear anyone’s phone vibrate I’m going to instantly smile; soon he will have me trained like Pavlov’s dog.

Emmett: Every night since you’ve been over, Allie makes me sing that Frozen song when we do our bedtime routine. Shoulder shimmy included.

Emmett: She wants to know when her best friend is coming back over.

I never thought I’d say this, and not so quickly, but I freaking love that girl. It only took one day of hanging out with her, and I’m convinced that kids are better than most

adults. When people say kids are the worst, it's probably coming from the mouths of crabby adults who hate their lives, their job, are mad about the weather or their golf game, and don't know how to have fun. Or someone like the person I used to be, who hadn't ever spent time with a child before. Seeing someone's tired and pissed-off toddler in the grocery store aisle isn't the same as spending one-on-one time with a kid. If they took the time to see life through the eyes of a two-year-old, I think people would be a lot happier.

Me: I'll let you in on a few other dance moves I have stored so you can mix it up from time to time.

Me: I've been thinking of Allie a lot, and I meant it when I said if you ever need a last-minute sitter to let me know. Or a sitter in general. Or if you have a hot date, I'd be happy to be the one that hangs out with her.

As soon as I hit send, I cringe at myself. The last thing I want is to see him go on a date with someone else, and knowing me, the moment he starts thinking romantic thoughts about a girl I'd be fast on my way to moving ten states away. But I need to remind him that friendship is the only thing I can offer.

Emmett: The only date I plan on going on in the future is with you, when you're ready.

I toss my phone into my bag, not ready to respond to that text so early in the morning, or to Emmett's blatant honesty in general.

"Wow, Jenna. Six A.M. on the dot; someone's turning over a new leaf," Meg quips as I enter the unit. "You're really making an effort here."

"*You're* really making an effort here," I repeat back as I turn my nose up at her. I spin the corner, eyes still squinting at Meg, not noticing the five-foot-nothing girl standing right in my way.

I slam into her, hearing the splash of liquid mixed with a gasp and feeling the warmth of something soaking through my scrub pants as I do.

Looking down, I see a dark head of hair that doesn't look familiar. I look further, bending down to grab the leg of my scrub pants and shake it, trying to air-dry the coffee from it. "Well, son of a bitch, good morning to me."

"I'm so sorry," an unfamiliar voice says, as the person I crashed into squats down and tries to wipe the coffee from my pants with her jacket sleeve.

Meg comes over with a towel and tosses it on the brown pool on the floor. "Don't worry about it, Hurricane Jenna letting everyone know she's here."

"Oh shit, are you the new girl? Lana?"

The petite figure at my feet nods, and a small voice says, "Lainey."

Shit. *Lainey*, that's right.

I crouch down and though I know it's Lainey, when I come face to face with her, I would have sworn for a second that it's nasty Natalie from high school, back in the flesh.

She's stunning, the same long, thick dark hair, yet somehow sparkly green eyes. Not a speck of discolored skin or a lonely pimple in sight. This girl isn't quite as exotic looking, her features are a little softer and she has a glaring shyness about her that Natalie didn't have.

She tucks a strand of long, silky hair behind her ear. "Today is my first day. Sorry about this."

"I'm Jenna." I reach a hand up to her shoulder to apologize for the mess, and she must not have expected me to move so quickly because I see her flinch.

She turns away from me for a second, before a crimson flush crosses her cheeks.

“God. Girl, I’m sorry, I’m making a terrible first impression. Here.” I take the dirty towel from her hands, ushering her to stand. “It’s fine, I’ll take the towel. And the second I get my stuff settled and report from the night shift, I’ll run downstairs and get you a new cup of coffee.”

“It’s on me, I’m in the way. I feel awkward,” she says, finally standing at full height and only coming to my chin. “I’m trying to hide, not knowing what to do until work starts. Speaking of, do you know if someone named Margaret is here yet? I’m supposed to orient with her today.”

Ugh, Margaret. She’s probably been here for an hour already to review charts and scold the night staff for anything they didn’t get done. I thought I made it pretty clear to my supervisor that when we hire new staff, we should have them train with nurses other than Margaret, so they actually stick around.

“Hopefully I won’t need to bother you guys too much; once I figure out the layout of the unit and know how things work, I should be fine.”

I study her features a little more as she talks, first noticing her thick, silky eyelashes. I’m certain they are natural, and darker than the three coats of mascara I’ve shellacked on mine. I’m tempted to ask her why she became a nurse and decided to move to Chicago in the dead of winter when she could be doing a modeling photo shoot on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean right now.

“I’ll go find Margaret and let her know you’re here. And I don’t want to taint your impression of Margaret, but don’t be surprised if you find she’s a little ...” I trail off as I search for the most politically correct terms.

Meg murmurs something about a crotchety old bag under her breath.

“A little less than helpful,” I say. “Like I said, I’m Jenna. The crabby redhead is Megan. We would be more than happy

to help you with anything, seriously. Don't worry and come flag one of us down and we'd be happy to help."

And for the first time since I crashed into her, she smiles, revealing a set of perfect teeth. She nods aggressively, repeating her thanks.

Meg's back is to me, most likely staring at the schedule with a frown on her face. "Way to scare the new girl," she says, not adjusting her position to say it to my face.

I throw an arm over her shoulder, pulling her in for a painful hug. "Meg, who pissed in your Cheerios this morning?"

She shrugs me off. "Ha-ha. Men, that's who pissed in my Cheerios. She's quiet for a moment, body incredibly tense under my forced hug before she continues. "Marissa's pregnant."

My shriek silences the hushed clammer at the nurse's station. "Pregnant?" I whisper-hiss, "with what's-his-face's child?"

"You know what they say," Meg continues, "fourth time's a charm when it comes to commitment, and the stress of a newborn is a great way to salvage a relationship." The phone on her hip rings loudly and she lets out an aggravated growl. "Who the *fuck* is calling this early in the morning."

I grab a Post-It note to scribble my patient assignments, letting Meg's irritation fizzle for a moment as she yells at the caller on the other line. Knowing when she's pissed off like this, she's either looking for advice, a fight, or a distraction, and I'm too tired to fight today.

"I went over to his house for dinner with him and his daughter the other night," I tell her once she hangs up.

Meg lets out an audible gasp, finally turning toward me with her face lit up. "How was it?" she hisses, drawing attention from the other day shift staff.

Awesome. Freaking fun. I hope I get to do it again. Instead, I shrug, not wanting to let myself get excited over this. But God, it feels good to have him in my life again.

“It was good, but hard. I remember now how much I liked him.”

“Did you hear about the ex-wife? I’m dying to know who she was.”

“No, no discussion of the ex. He asked me if he could take me on a date, but I said no.”

“Atta girl,” Meg says, raising her hand for a high five.

I politely return her gesture, but not her enthusiasm. I said no, but why did I feel sad telling him no? There is a part of me that wants to so badly, but there is the bigger part that worries he will change his mind about me and leave me hanging, though he says otherwise.

“His daughter, Allie, she’s so cool.”

“Cool is kind of a loose term for a toddler, isn’t it?”

“You’d be surprised. I think having a young kid in your life would do you some good. Pretty soon you’ll find out, Auntie Meg.”

I turn over my shoulder to see Lainey following Margaret, right on her heels but clearly being ignored. “What do you think of the new girl?”

Meg shrugs. “Even though she’s quieter than a church mouse, she’s beautiful, she seems sweet and smart. Let’s hope she likes it enough to become one of us, that is, if Margaret doesn’t eat her alive first.”

“Practice your matronly, nurturing side. Take her under your wing.”

Meg rolls her head over to me to give a death stare, slapping a Post-It note to my chest in the process. “You get the first admit of the day.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

irl, one of these days you need to learn how to cook.” I
“Gpeel the plastic covering from my TV dinner and pop it
in the microwave, starting the three-minute countdown
until I can eat.

I lean my elbows on the counter, using the position to stretch out my neck and back. My body is screaming from the non-stop work shifts, begging for a massage or an orgasm, or both, wishing for an end to the madness.

My phone rings somewhere in the distance, and I consider ignoring it, but Meg was off today and spent the day helping her little sister shop for baby gear. And since I love drama that doesn't involve me, I scramble to my purse, and rummage through it as the call ends. I swipe the screen and audibly gasp when I see the name of the caller.

Emmett.

We have seen a lot more of each other lately. I've been going over there for dinner once or twice a week, we've extended our hangouts to include the aquarium and the children's museum, basically anything we think Allie would have a blast at. But most communication is through a quick text or in person, he's never called at—my eyes flick up to the clock on the stove—almost eight o'clock at night.

I immediately call back, my stomach swirling at all the scary possibilities of why he's calling so late.

“Everything okay?” I ask, ignoring his hello.

“Everything's fine ... just wondering what you are up to and how big of a favor I can ask of you.”

My shoulders sag in relief that they are fine, and I tuck the phone between my shoulder and ear to pull my frozen dinner from the microwave. Double checking the box that I picked out is indeed a chicken stir fry because the mush in front of me looks more like a pile of refried beans.

“You can ask anything of me, you know that.”

“This storm is supposed to continue all night long; they’re predicting power outages all over the city, so though I worked today and work tomorrow, it’s all hands-on deck for on-call tonight. Normally my sister or my mom takes Allie for the night if this happens. I called my sister, and her boys have been sick all day. My parents are in Cabo ...”

I’m tossing my disgusting dinner in the garbage and moving to the hall closet to pull out my boots and jacket before he finishes talking. “I’d be happy to come hang out with Allie. Be there in twenty.”

A huge sigh of relief on his end. “Thank you,” he says earnestly. “You have no idea how much this means to me; I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me shit. I told you I’d be available for her anytime you needed. Just know that I haven’t had dinner, so I’ll be raiding your pantry.”

“Since when is that different from any other day?” he teases. “I made stuffed pork chops and rice pilaf for dinner; I’m gonna get Allie to bed since it’s way past bedtime, but I’ll leave a plate in the fridge for you.”

Stuffed pork chops. Fuck me if that doesn’t sound amazing.

~

Emmett comes down the stairs as I shovel the last bite of pork and rice into my mouth.

When I arrived, I tiptoed upstairs hoping to catch Allie still awake so I could say hi, but the lights were off in her room. I pressed my ear to the door, listening to Emmett’s rumbling

voice reading a fairytale to her, and decided I should leave that moment between them, instead choosing to go have a moment with my plate of food.

“Do you have to leave right away? Or how does that work?” I maneuver around the kitchen island to rinse my dishes and put them in the dishwasher, organizing and loading the ones used earlier in the night, too.

Emmett comes up next to me, rinsing them off and handing them to me one by one.

“Not yet, there isn’t a warning, get a call and have to be at the station as fast as possible.”

“Are you going to sleep then? Or do you want to stay up with me to watch *The Amazing Race*? Season thirty-three!”

He pours dish detergent into the dishwasher and closes the lid, chuckling as he clicks the door shut. “You still watch that shit? I thought you’d have improved your taste a little by now.”

I scoff, picking up the sink sponge to toss at him. “Quit being such a Scrooge, that is an amazing show! I still think I could do it, although I’m rethinking having you as my partner.”

“Right, because you’d be able to eat live octopus.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t really alive. I’ll bet they script that all for the show.” I move over to the pantry, open it, and pull out chocolate chip cookies and pistachios. “I’ll bet it’s a gummy worm or something, the rest is your run-of-the-mill, high-quality acting, which I am excellent at.”

I plop down on the couch, tossing the pistachios on the table and ripping open the packet of cookies. Emmett slowly comes to sit next to me, grabbing the remote and scrolling through channels. With my eyes glued to the TV, I hand the bag of cookies over to him, expecting him to take a handful.

I shake the bag, trying to garner his attention, and when I turn to look at him, he’s staring at me, a peculiar smile

crossing his face.

“Sometimes I think you haven’t changed a bit.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Good. Definitely a good thing. It’s almost like—” His words stop short when his phone rings. He pulls it from his pocket, all the laughter falling from his face when he sees the number rolling across the screen.

He stands, moving down the hall as he talks. I can hear him open the hall closet, rustle with some clothes before he comes back and goes into the kitchen.

“Called out already?” I ask, knowing he has to leave but hoping he could have stayed a little longer.

Every time we are together, Allie is around. And while I’ve quickly grown to love that little monkey, there isn’t ever time for Emmett and me to be one-on-one. At first, I welcomed it, happy to have her there to mask the awkwardness I first felt being with him. But as the last few weeks have gone on, I’m growing comfortable in our friendship again. I’ve been finding myself wanting time with him and was looking forward to the possibility of sitting and watching TV with only him tonight.

He pops a coffee pod into the machine, pressing the start button and pulling creamer from the fridge before coming back to sit on the edge of the couch.

“Looks that way. Hopefully I won’t be gone long.”

“Do you think we will lose power here?”

“Hope not.” He gestures to the brick fireplace in the corner of the room. “The fireplace works, want me to start a fire for you before I go?”

“Even if it does go out, it would take hours before the house feels cold, wouldn’t it? Don’t worry about us.” Plus, I know exactly nothing about maintaining a fire.

The coffee machine sputters in the background, indicating it’s done, but Emmett doesn’t move from his spot on the arm

of the couch. “I’ll always worry about you.”

Allie, I’m sure he meant to say. He will always worry about *Allie*. But he doesn’t correct himself, gives a soft smile and stands, smoothing his palms over the front of his pants.

A shiver wracks through me so I tug the throw blanket off the back of the couch and drape it over my legs, tucking my feet underneath myself. When he first spoke of wanting to be a lineman, I didn’t think much of it, and didn’t know what the job entailed. Now that we’re friends again, talking more and he’s fully immersed in his career, the thought of him having to climb high-rise power poles terrifies me. He’s at the mercy of the weather, icy sleet whipping around him, where each step he takes risks his life.

I throw the blanket over my shoulders, wrapping my arms around my core and stand up to follow him to the door. I lean against the wall as he opens the hall closet and pulls out his coat, staying silent as his thick fingers quickly lace up his work boots. It isn’t until he stands to leave, that he turns to me and tips his head to the side, questioning the expression on my face that I break.

With my head down and arms still trapped inside the blanket, I rush to him, his free arm opening to take me in as I cling to his front the best I can. “Be safe out there,” I mutter against his chest, holding myself against him until I can chill the fuck out and pull my face back without starting to cry first.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” His lips press against the top of my head once before pulling back, reaching for the door.

“Promise?” I call out.

He turns over his shoulder, winking at me as he slowly shuts the door. “Promise.”

~

A warm hand runs along my back, up to my neck before grasping my shoulder, and it takes me a minute to remember

where I am and who would be touching me.

I open one eye, seeing I'm still in Allie's room. Emmett is on his knees next to the bed, a look of adoration mixed with incredible fatigue on his face as his arm still rests on my shoulder.

I was about to go to sleep when the power went out. I texted Emmett and told him what happened but that we were fine, and I'd let him know if it got cold in the house. I went upstairs with the intention of sitting outside Allie's room to listen for her calls if she woke, but once I peeked in and saw how dark it seemed with her night light off, how quiet with her sound machine unable to play music, I became worried. It was probably my mind playing tricks on me, but it felt ten degrees colder in her room already. So, I went to Emmett's room, pulled the plush gray comforter off his massive bed and bundled it in my arms, dragging the tail end down the hall back to Allie's room.

I scooted her little body to the inside wall and curled up behind her, putting the comforter over the both of us. I meant to lay there and scroll my phone, but no one told me that lying next to a sleepy, cuddly toddler is like a sedative. I fell asleep within minutes.

Emmett stands as I sit up, pulling the comforter up and offering a hand to help me out of the bed. I readjust Allie's blankets, making sure her seven favorite stuffed animals are within reach. Looking around one last time, I pause to hear the hum of the furnace and the faint music from her sound machine before quietly shutting the door behind us.

As soon as we are a few steps down the hall, I reach out to grasp Emmett's arm. "Sorry, I don't know if you're one of those parents that is weird about making their kid sleep alone. I didn't want her to wake up scared, or cold, or worried. I wasn't expecting to fall asleep in there."

"You never have to apologize to me for caring about my child."

“What time is it?” I ask through a yawn, my eyelids growing heavy.

“Almost three.”

“Are you home for good? Or could you get called out again?”

He rubs the meaty part of his palm against his eyes, the hours of sleep deprivation etched into his beautiful face. “Hopefully home for good. My regular shift starts in less than four hours. There are still crews out working that can cover.”

“Damn. Well, I’ll head out so you can get to sleep.” I go to walk past him, but he reaches an arm out to stop me.

His palm lays flat against my stomach, fingertips pressing into my skin.

“Don’t you dare drive home right now.” His voice is low and raspy, face tilted down to touch my ear. The hallway is wide, but impossible for two people to be standing there with any real space between them. “I’d never sleep knowing that you’re out there driving, half out of it, with snow-covered roads.” His hand moves from my stomach to my forearm before he slides it down to grasp my hand and leads us to his bedroom. “Take my bed. I changed the sheets earlier thinking you’d sleep in there. I’ll take the couch.”

He lets go of my hand as we reach the threshold of his room. I pause behind him, taking an extra moment to look around now that I’m invited in. The sheets are gray to match the comforter, everything is kept simple, like him. I can still smell the lingering of his cologne, not sure if it is lingering in the room or if it’s on his bedding. I tilt my head down to smell the neck of my sweatshirt, wondering if maybe it’s on me now that I slept under his blankets.

He fans the comforter out across the bed before grabbing a pillow and tucking it under his arm. “You’re welcome to sleep in as late as you want tomorrow. If you’re passed out when we wake, I’ll try to keep Allie quiet.”

He goes to move past me, and it's my turn to reach an arm out and grasp him by the elbow.

"I won't let you sleep on a couch that's half your size when you're only going to get a few hours at best." I tug him with me as I walk toward the bed, letting go once we reach the foot of it. "This bed is plenty big enough for the both of us, and we're friends, right? Friends can share a bed." I lift the corner of the duvet and climb in, shivering a little, unsure if it is from my fake attempt at being cool about sleeping next to him, or if it's from the chill of the winter air.

Emmett stays silent, crossing to the other side of the bed and tossing his pillow down. He pulls the blanket up and lays down next to me, all the while watching my face, searching for what's next.

I roll over so my whole body faces him, reaching to pull the comforter up to bundle me in. He helps grab the excess, pulling it up and over my shoulder, using his hand to tuck it under me until I'm wrapped like a burrito.

He lays his head on the pillow, and tucks an arm under it, mirroring my position.

"Is it weird sleeping in this room knowing how many times your parents banged here?"

The laugh that rips out of him is so unexpected, it forces one of my own.

"Christ, Jenna, only you would think of something like that."

"It was the first thing I thought of when I walked in." I watch the laugh fizzle from his face, and his eyes grow heavy, so I roll over, pulling my knees up to get comfortable.

I can feel him adjust a little behind me, making sure the blankets are pulled up tight before he lets his arm fall over the top of it, resting above my hip. I should remind him that we are friends, and friends may share a bed but don't necessarily spoon, but the warmth of his body quickly spreads through

me, and I wiggle back into his embrace. It isn't long before his breathing evens out and he's fast asleep.

I let myself soak in that moment for a few hours, but when I wake and peek at the bleeding numbers on the clock, I know Emmett's alarm will be going off soon. I take one last look at his handsome face, knowing that I can't let myself get used to this.

With heavy reluctance, I slide out from under his arm and force myself out of bed. I quietly tiptoe out of the room and down the stairs, shuffling into my jacket and boots, making sure to lock the door behind me as I quietly disappear into the dark morning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I don't have a foot on the first step when Emmett swings the front door open. The light from the house glows warmly behind him, illuminating the fresh blanket of snow dusting the front porch.

"What on earth is all this?" he says, eyeing the two giant tote bags tucked under each of my arms.

He takes a step back and moves to the side, ushering me in past him. Once I'm in arm's reach, he grabs the handle of the larger bag and eases it off my shoulder.

I set the other on the floor, making sure to kick the snow off my boots before I step off the mat.

Over the last few weeks, now that Lainey is officially settled, and we have a travel nurse helping out, work is so much more manageable. I have real days off. It only took a week to catch up on sleep, laundry, and the few puny errands I've put off before I found myself miserably bored, so I casually asked Emmett if he needed a sitter for Allie at all during the week.

He was more than happy to keep her home from daycare on the occasional basis, only if I swore that I wasn't doing it out of guilt. I truly want to hang out with her. And when he said it felt good to go to work, knowing Allie was in her own home with someone he trusted, it surprised me how good it felt to know someone considered me a positive influence around their child.

I shiver once I pull my jacket off, hanging it on the hook next to both of theirs.

“I love living in the city, but I hate the cold winters.” Days like today, when it’s barely above zero degrees, make me miss working in Texas.

Emmett takes both tote bags off of the floor and follows me into the house as I go into the kitchen, immediately walking toward the cabinets to grab a coffee mug. “It’s not even December yet,” he points out. “We have a long way to go before winter is over.”

“Do you have to be such a Debbie Downer so early in the morning?” The house is quiet, no cartoons blaring on the TV, no Allie running around, princess cape flowing behind her. “Allie is still sleeping?”

He nods, taking the mug from my hand and crossing over to the coffee pot. “Probably for another half hour or so.”

He pulls the carafe from its warmer, the smell of fresh ground beans filling the air. I watch as he drops two sugar cubes into the cup, the muscles flexing under his long john shirt as he twists to open the refrigerator door to pull out a specialty mocha creamer. He pours a Jenna-sized amount of creamer into the mug before stirring and sliding the cup on the counter toward me. I bring the mug to my lips, taking a slow, luxurious sip, watching his eyes drift over to the giant bags I brought with me.

“Let me show you my haul,” I tell him as I start to rummage through the larger one. “Did you know there is a craft store in this area? Nearly every item is less than three dollars, and they have an entire section dedicated to little kids!” I pull out paintbrushes and modeling clay, colorful painting sets and pipe cleaners, tossing each package on the kitchen island as I go. “They have the cutest little painting kits! They were only two dollars each, and the canvas is chintzy, but they will be such an easy project, and you know Allie will dig it.”

Emmett picks up to inspect each little package I toss onto the pile. His eyes glaze over the more I empty my bag.

“They had all Christmas-themed crafts, so I stocked up on those. We have a Santa with his bag, a reindeer—oh shit,” I run my finger over the cheap wooden ornament. “I think an antler is broken ... but we can glue it. They had so many little wooden ornaments to color, I couldn’t choose. Your tree will have quite the assortment this year.”

While googling fun activities for toddlers, I came across something we can make called slime. It’s only a few basic ingredients, the biggest one being glue which seems a little sketchy, but we can add all sorts of ridiculous little plastic toys, glitter, or foam pieces. I couldn’t choose one, so naturally I bought them all.

“Hope you don’t mind your kid playing with glue. It’s non-toxic and I’ll make sure she doesn’t eat any.”

Emmett is still quiet, strong fingers filtering through the pile that’s accumulated on the counter, his expression flat.

“We can always skip the slime,” I tell him, wanting to find an activity he approves of.

I get to the bottom of the first bag and find my pile of rocks, so I dump the bag over. Half of the rocks tumble off the counter and ping to the floor.

“Shit,” I hiss, scrambling to pick them up, not wanting to take Allie just yet.

Emmett bends with me, gathering a few in his palms before standing and gently setting them on the counter.

“She told me the other day she wanted to paint rocks, is that something she’s done before?”

Her speech can be a little hard to understand sometimes, and I’ve quickly learned that toddlers can say the most random stuff even if it isn’t true, but she told me several times she liked painting rocks. When I confirmed with her that we were thinking the same thing when she said the words *paint* and *rock*, I knew I could make that dream come true.

But with a foot of snow on the ground, I had to buy rocks for us. Then came the question of what size? What kind of rocks? I hope Allie will settle for decorative rocks meant to sit in the bottom of a flower vase. “Is this okay?”

Emmett hasn't said a thing through this entire show of emptying my bag, and I start to wonder if I overstepped. It's easy to be the one that brings small, messy projects over, plays with the kid and leaves. Maybe Emmett doesn't want to have this mess around his house: paint smeared on the kitchen island and the possibility of stepping on tiny plastic stars every day in his future.

“I did too much, didn't I?” I pick up a few of the paint kits and put them back in the bag. I always do too much. My mom used to tell me all the time to choose just one project and see it through before I begin another. I should have chosen one or two small crafts to see how Allie liked them, not one from each aisle.

“No,” he finally says, reaching to still my hands as I hastily pack the crafts back into the bag. “No, yes. It's fine, it's more than fine.” He loosens his grip, but keeps his palms resting on my hands, his thumb slowly sweeping back and forth over my skin. “My family is great; they do what they can. But my sister is busy with her crazy boys, and my parents are gone on vacation half the time. When we get together, it's always a ton of people and so crazy no one gets one-on-one time with her.” He reaches an arm up to squeeze the back of my neck, slightly pulling me toward his large frame. “You being here, giving her that attention, thinking of all the things she would love to do, and working to make them happen?” His eyes glaze over for a second and he clears his throat roughly, his grip on my neck releasing as he pulls away. “It means a lot to me, Jenna. I hope you know that. And it will mean more to Allie.” He steps back, taking my cup back to the carafe and adds another dash of hot coffee to it.

I'm sure it didn't go cold in the few minutes we were looking through all the stuff I bought, but something tells me he needed a little space.

Space isn't something we've been giving each other lately. If I'm not at work or spending a day hanging out with Meg, I'm here with Emmett and Allie. I'll come early in the morning before she's up, and often not leave until she goes to bed. Sometimes I'll stay later, relaxing on the couch with Emmett, watching nothing on TV but more engrossed in conversation. Our touches have been lingering, too. A hand on my shoulder here, the brush of our knees there. Sometimes our bodies touch and both of us take notice but neither of us move. The heat builds between us, the pressure of knowing we both might feel something again, but neither will be the first to acknowledge what's going on. And it won't be long before that dam breaks.

He slides the coffee cup over to me, and I take it between my palms, letting the heat from the cup warm my shaking hands.

"It'll be nice for her to have you once she gets older, when she needs someone to talk about hormones and boys with. I'm doing the best I can as a single dad, and I'll go buy her tampons or take her bra shopping, but having to explain to her how to use them terrifies me."

Now I'm the one that can't speak. It'll be well over ten years before Allie starts to go through that. Is he really thinking that he will still have me in his life in ten years? That he won't meet someone he wants to be with, and our friendship will fizzle once again as she takes the place of the woman in Allie's life?

He looks at the second bag we haven't unloaded. "What's in there?"

"Oh," I take a step back, setting the mug down and raising my hands up in a warning. "Before you panic, let me explain."

His brows immediately furrow, and he stands up tall, side-eyeing the bag, probably wondering if I have a hamster or iguana in there that he now has to take care of.

"I'm cooking you guys, dinner."

His face that once was full of adoration instantly falls. He's probably wishing it *was* a reptile in the bag instead of having to stomach my cooking.

“But before you say anything, I think I can do this one. I found a recipe that's chicken and three other ingredients in a crock pot, you don't have to stir! Then you boil noodles to add. The crock pot cooks it so I won't burn it, and I can boil noodles. It's highly unlikely either of you will get food poisoning.” Most nights boxed pasta and jarred sauce make up my dinner, so this is the next step up. “Allie likes chicken, right?”

He nods.

“It'll be easy, you'll love it.” I turn back to the table, taking in the mess in front of me, wondering which craft Allie will want to do first. I take a sip of the coffee, reveling at how fresh and perfect it tastes before realization hits me. “Follow-up question,” I say, setting my cup on the counter with a clink. “Do you have a crock pot?”

~

“More?” Allie asks, looking up at me with her almond-shaped eyes.

I look around at our makeshift castle that encompasses the entire living room, complete with a tunnel around the back of the sofa. I have torn this house apart finding every single quilt, throw blanket, and sheet Emmett owns, and we have every bar stool and dining room chair pulled into the living room to make the ultimate blanket fort. We had our lunch in the main quarters of the castle, took a two-hour nap snuggled together in the tunnel, and had our afternoon snack sitting outside the “front gates.”

I peer down at her and smile, loving how the color of her eyes matches perfectly with the shades in her Elsa dress. “I think that's as big as we can make the castle, sweetie. Should we go inside?”

“Yes!” she squeals, pulling away one of the slabs of cardboard and tossing it to the side.

I hope Emmett doesn’t mind the mess, but when I found the pile of cardboard in the recycling bin, I dug through until I found a box big enough to cut in half, and with a sharpie wrote “*The castle of Queen Allie*” in big block letters, signifying our gate.

She crawls inside first, and I follow, turning around to close the cardboard gate in time to hear the front door shut and the rustle of Emmett shucking his work boots and heavy coat. I turn to Allie and am about to tell her Daddy’s home and that we should go say hi, when she holds her finger up to her mouth and whispers, “Daddy home, hide.”

It crosses my mind for a second—a hot second—that maybe Emmett won’t be as easy going as he once was. I’m sure he’s exhausted, cold, hungry, and that he had to park on top of a haphazard pile of cardboard in the garage when he pulled in. Allie isn’t my child, and I’m not a parent yet, and yes, I could imagine how exhausting it would be to work all day and come home to a messy house, but I still believe nothing is as important as quality time playing with your kids.

I can feel my blood starting to percolate and am about to unleash Hurricane Jenna if he so much as thinks about telling her *not now* and commenting on the mess. But then Allie pops up through the cardboard, snickering and says, “Daddy, I’m hiding.”

I peek out of a small gap in the blankets and see Emmett standing by the kitchen island, his thick gray sweatshirt and beanie still on. He’s filtering quickly through a stack of mail in his hand but smiling ear to ear at the sound of Allie’s voice.

He tosses the mail on the counter, then tugs the beanie off his head and adds it to the pile. He slides a hand through his disheveled hair, and it’s clear by the bags under his eye that his energy is depleted. The long days paired with cold weather, not to mention being a single parent takes a toll. He reaches both hands over his head to grab the neck of his hoodie,

tugging it off in one swipe, catching the hem of his tee with it. I get a glimpse of his bare back and thick stomach, dark hair sprinkling down and disappearing into the waist of his jeans. I clench my legs together, hoping Allie doesn't catch me peeping on her dad from a few feet away.

There's something so rugged about Emmett these days. Maybe it's because I've only dated men who are in a similar field as mine, usually surgeons if Meg has her choosing. They're wealthy, cocky, confident men who dress nice and preen over their accessories.

But I'm realizing now there is something about a blue-collar man. One that gets up before dawn, works outside braving all the elements, not having the luxury to call in or play hooky when the weather is crummy because people are counting on them. And after a full day's work, he comes home and steps immediately into his fatherly role.

I think I've found my newest fetish.

He tosses his sweatshirt on the kitchen counter and turns toward the living room, fully taking in the expanse of our castle for the first time with a chuckle and a shake of his head. He gets down on all fours, face suddenly serious and prowls his way toward the castle doors. Allie stands and immediately runs to hide behind me while muttering, "Tickle monster."

"I think I spotted a tickle monster," his deep voice booms. "You girls better run and hide!"

Allie is back up and jumping, looking for somewhere to hide. She runs and circles around me as I sit cross-legged, unsure what to expect of their little game. She takes cover behind a few small couch pillows we put in the 'bedroom' of our fort, ushering for me to hide with her.

"Nenna, hide!" she whisper-screams.

I hop up on all fours, ready to crawl and attempt to hide my entire frame behind a piddly couch pillow the size of my head when Emmett claws open our cardboard gate. He grabs my ankle, pulls me down, and drags me across the floor toward

him a hell of a lot easier than I thought someone would be able to manage. He pauses over me, and I don't have time to figure out what he's going to do next before a devilish smile crosses his face. His hand grips the tender area behind my knee, because of course, that asshole remembers the one spot I'm ticklish.

I cry out, temporarily paralyzed and giddy, not remembering the last time I had a true tickle fight. "Allie," I scream in between squeals, "come save me!"

With a warrior's cry she leaps out from behind the pillows and onto Emmett's back. He pulls her off with his spare arm and moves her around and under his body. He tickles her with his free hand as he blows raspberries on her neck.

She squeals, elated with the fight between us. He lets her go, only for her to turn around and wiggle her fingers at him, making some sort of *gitta, gitta, gitta* noise as she does her best to poke and tickle him. He feigns injury, acting like each spot she's hitting is the spot that's going to take him down.

But he's a faker, and Allie hasn't yet found his secret spot.

"Allie, two against one!"

I rise to my knees and we both tickle him, me reaching to pinch that sweet spot behind his neck because, well, two can play at that game.

He laughs, a high-pitched, girly laugh.

Allie hops on his back, thinking she has found his ultimate weakness, and her jump catches him off guard. He starts to fall forward, reaching one hand behind him to grasp Allie so she doesn't fly off, and they both crash on top of me.

We lay like that for a moment, me flat on my back under him, wondering how twenty-six somehow feels like I'm eighty-six when it comes to wrestling a two-year-old. Allie lingers on his back, head to the side now, giving him a hug before she crawls off. "Snackies?" she asks, crawling out of our fort.

“You okay?” Emmett asks as he turns his attention to me.

It’s all I can do to nod, because whether he realizes it or not, he’s on his elbows, forearms framing my head and his thigh is bridged between my legs and I’m thinking all sorts of thoughts about us in this same position, except no clothes involved.

I swallow a dry swallow and nod.

“Yeah.”

He must be able to read my body language, because he doesn’t move, even as we hear the snap of his lunch box lid open, followed by the rustle of plastic.

“She always digs through my lunch pail in case I didn’t eat all of my Little Debbie’s.”

“Oh.” It’s all I can manage to say, somehow making it sound like a question, as if I live in a world where I’ve never heard of Little Debbie snack cakes. But all thinking is rendered useless when his knee juts up further to push my thighs apart.

I reach a hand up to palm his cheek, loving the feel of his scruff against my sensitive skin. “Still weird to see you with a beard ... but I like how it feels.”

I’d like it better in between my legs.

I reach the other hand up, so my hands frame his face, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth as I run my hands over his beard, through his hair and down to his jaw, brushing my knuckles along his the soft bristles on his chin.

He groans, bringing his thumb up to pull my lip from between my teeth but keeps it there, lightly grazing it back and forth, on the border of dipping it between my lips but holding himself back. Inch by inch, he lowers his body until his weight is on me, head dipping down a little, but he’s hesitant, always the gentleman and never forcing himself on me.

Six months ago, I would have sworn I’d never speak to him again even if I had the chance. Hell, a month ago I would have

said my mom was right, that once we were older and into our twenties and had met other people, we'd lose interest in each other. I would have chalked any feelings I had up to dumb teenage infatuation and a memory of a boy who has now changed. But becoming his friend all over again, seeing him as a father, how much he cares for Allie and the responsibility he's taken on ... it only makes me want him more.

If it wasn't blatantly obvious before, I realize now my mom had no fucking clue what she was talking about.

"Hey, Emmett?"

"Hmm?" he responds, eyes closed, half dozing to the feeling of my hands running through his hair.

"Kiss me?"

His eyes snap open, crystal irises darting back and forth between my eyes, a faint flush crawling up the sides of his face. "Fuck yeah," he whispers roughly before grasping my jaw with his palm and crashing our lips together.

There's no hesitation, no tentative, gentle kissing. No awkwardness as we cross the line from friends to something more. He lays the rest of his weight on me, taking his free hand to run it up my side, over my breast and to the other before letting it rest over my throat, holding my jaw in place so he can kiss me how he wants.

His lips are soft and gentle, but firm, taking what he wants as much as teasing with each little nip. He moans my name against my lips, pulling back to look at me as if he's making sure that it's really me. That it's really us doing this and not something he's imagining. He licks his lips once more before coming in for another kiss, letting the hand that was wrapped around my throat fall across my chest.

My body becomes weightless. All the tension, anxious thoughts, and years of self-deprecation dissipate as he holds me, the only sound a heavy pulse coursing through my veins. "Emmett ... I—"

The scraping of a chair across the floor breaks us from the haze. I rise to look over his shoulder as he turns his head to do the same, perking an ear to the side to listen to Allie mumbling.

“If I don’t get out there, she’ll be on the counter doing God knows what.”

I nod, gripping his sweatshirt and pulling him in for one more kiss before reluctantly letting him crawl off me.

“It *actually* smells good in here, by the way,” he snickers as he playfully slaps my hip. “Never thought I’d say that about a meal you cooked.”

I scoff, reaching out to pinch him but he quickly scoots out of the fort.

“If you left out the word *actually*, that would have *actually* been a nice compliment.”

~

“Say it; say the words again.”

“Dinner was great,” he mumbles.

“So, what you’re saying is this was the best meal you’ve ever had?”

He gives an exaggerated eye roll as he slips my jacket over one arm, and the other before sliding it up my shoulders. “I liked what you cooked tonight, that’s all I’ll admit to for now.”

“But you want me to cook your dinner every night from now until the day you die.”

“I don’t think I will get sick from tonight, but let’s not go that far.”

I told myself I wouldn’t get too cocky if the dinner tonight turned out okay, but to my surprise it turned out better than okay. Emmett had two big helpings and though it was spicier than I had anticipated, Allie loved it too. Considering he’s teased me many times over the course of our friendship about

the curdled alfredo and a few other terrible meals I've tried to cook the few times his mom tried to teach me, it's nice to hear his compliments.

He zips up my coat, careful to avoid snagging my hair in its teeth. When he's done, he leans in for another kiss, his hand that's still damp from the after-dinner dishes coming to delicately hold my cheek. "I'll never get sick of kissing you," he murmurs against my lips.

When he pulls back, he brushes my hair over my shoulder before meeting my gaze. "Will you let me take you out on a date? A real date, me and you. Let me take you out for dinner and drinks, or whatever you want."

"How about you decide where we will go for dinner? I'll find us somewhere to go for drinks?"

He cocks an eyebrow at my request. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I have a place in mind I know you'll love."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

here the fuck are you trying to take me?” Emmett stares
“**W**at the neon *Matrixxx* sign above the doorway, feet
planted firmly in place.

“Give it a chance, you might be surprised at what you find.” I tug his arm with both of my hands, dragging his heavy body through the door and we slip past the bouncer with a smile. He nods his head, letting us in without an ID check.

Meg and I have been here so many times, too many times to count, the bouncer could probably pass as an emergency contact if I were in a pinch.

The first floor houses one of the sketchier clubs I have been to, including that one time I took a nursing gig in LA and we found a club where the majority of the women wore legit lingerie and you had to keep your drink clutched to your chest to keep it safe. On Thursday nights, this club lets in eighteen-year-old girls, but men still aren’t allowed until they are at least twenty-one years old.

Red flag.

For the most part, it’s your typical club—dimly lit, music so loud you can’t think, and bodies packed together like sweaty sardines on the dance floor. A second floor balcony overlooks the dance floor, and that’s where the creepers stand, sipping their drink and eyeing the crowd below, ready to prey on the girls who aren’t legal.

Emmett grasps my hand firmly, following me up the stairs and I can barely hide the smile, knowing what his reaction will be when he thinks I brought him here to dance. That’s one of the many, many personality traits of Emmett that I adore. He is

unwavering in his morality. If I were to drag him out on the dance floor, he wouldn't be dancing. Instead, he'd be standing tall like a redwood, thick arms crossed over his chest, a grimace on his handsome face as he stood supervising the safety of whoever he came with.

We arrive at the first floor; I open the door and the beat of the house music pounds in our chests. His hand moves to my hip, his chest pressed against my back, protecting me from the invisible threat. It's only nine o'clock, late for us, but early for the club-goers, so the dance area isn't packed, but apparently still busy enough that Emmett is uncomfortable.

I reach my hand back to grasp his and lead him around the dance floor to the stairs that lead to the second floor. A fog machine mists around our ankles and my shoes stick to the flooring, no doubt the remnants of last night's spilled beverages no one felt the need to clean up.

It isn't until we reach the second floor, still abandoned this time of night, that I feel Emmett allow a little bit of space between us and the mind-melting music lowers to a dull roar. I turn, ready to ask Emmett what he thinks when I'm met with the most fatherly looking, grumpy as hell stare, and I burst into laughter.

My hands fall to my knees, and I wipe a tear from my eye before looking back up at him. "Yeah, I didn't think this was the type of place you'd go for."

His eyes scan the area, taking in the carpeted floors and walls, the empty bar and doorway leading to the coat check closet. Fake leather furniture that couldn't pass a petri dish test even on its best day. "Hell no," he says, looking around and noticing the group of older men overlooking the dance floor. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the idea of you being here while you've been drinking."

"I'm twenty-six years old, Emmett ... I'm not a child."

"I don't care. There are guys twice your age standing over there, watching the young girls on the dance floor like fucking

vultures.”

“Girls travel in packs for safety reasons, not necessarily because they want to.” Make eye contact with the wrong person for more than a moment, and thirty seconds later they might be behind you on the dance floor, grinding themselves against your ass. And men wonder why women go to the bathroom in pairs.

He shakes his head and squeezes the bridge of his nose. “Why’d you want to come here?”

I usher him to follow and start walking toward the coat check, lifting the velvet rope as I slide my jacket off my shoulders. “Let’s sneak our coats back here so we don’t have to carry them all night.”

He follows me into the L-shaped closet but doesn’t shrug off his jacket. I reach a hand out, curling my fingers in a hand-it-over motion. Emmett sighs, reluctance filling his face as he shimmies off his work coat and hands it to me.

“Are we really staying here? I was hoping we could go somewhere we could sit and hear ourselves think.”

I take his coat from his outstretched hand, placing it over mine on the dented metal hanger before tucking it in the furthest corner of the closet. “Come on, Grandpa, there is a sports bar on the third floor that has a live band tonight.”

He follows me up and the further we get from the dance area, the more the atmosphere changes. The obscenely loud house music dims, the air clears and our ears welcome the sound of a faint jukebox playing something that sounds like eighties rock. Peanut shells litter the floor and there are significantly fewer people around. We each take a seat at the bar and Emmett takes off his hat to scratch his head, taking in his surroundings before finally turning to face me.

“Is this better?”

He nods briefly. “A hair, but I’d still prefer we go back home to talk.”

I flag the bartender over, ordering us two beers before Emmett can start “the talk”. I know in a healthy relationship it should probably occur at some point. Two adults, hashing out the past, getting our questions answered and finding the much-needed closure to our frustrations. Part of the reason I wanted to stay out tonight is to prevent any “talks” from occurring. Allie is staying at Savannah’s house, so going back to his place would leave us completely alone without a three-year-old to distract from tough conversations.

Even though I’m considered an adult, that childish notion still lives inside me, telling me to avoid the conversation at all costs so I can avoid the sting of rejection that will come along with it. The bartender sets our beers in front of us, and we both take a long swig.

He sets his bottle down, his thumb gently wiping the condensation from the glass. “Still trying to wash the memory of that first floor from my mind. You wouldn’t catch me dead at a place like that.”

He has no idea how sketchy it can get. I wonder how he would feel, knowing that his ending things between us drove me to clubs like this more than I’d like to admit. Meg and I, putting on our tiniest dresses and working the dance floor in pairs, hoping that each kiss with a stranger or finding a man to fall in bed with would lessen the pain of missing him. I was restless, ready to do anything and everything I could to wash him from my system. Yet somehow, it always seemed to make it worse. I’d lie awake afterwards, another man’s arms around me, my mind always wandering to Emmett, wondering if he was awake, thinking about me. Or if he was curled up around his wife, sleeping soundly.

“You were never the type to go to a club while you were traveling for work?”

“Hell no. We went to bars, sure. That’s common. Some guys went to strip clubs, or clubs like this, sure. But you know me, that’s not my thing.”

I nod along as I take another slow sip, feeling a blanket of tension come over Emmett as he sits in silence, occasionally turning to take in the surroundings.

“Thanks for dinner tonight, by the way, hibachi is my favorite.”

He turns toward me, a small nod as he lifts the beer bottle to his lips. “Are you ever gonna let me tell you about Allie’s mom?”

I play dumb for a moment; thankful he doesn’t refer to her as his ex-wife.

“What about her?”

“It’s something we need to talk about eventually. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” I say, turning back to face the bar. “I don’t want to think about her, I’ve told you that.”

“I know, but you need to know. She was a bartender in some small town, we met at my last—”

I slam my beer bottle on the dented wooden bar, foam rising and spilling over my hand. “Are you kidding me right now? I told you I wasn’t ready.”

“Well, sometimes you need a little push in the right direction.”

“Maybe I took your advice as a teenager, but I’m a big girl now, Emmett. I managed to survive the last few years without you ‘pushing me in the right direction.’” I raise my hands for air quotes, knowing he’s partially right, but I don’t like it.

“Jenna,” he sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant you never want to have tough conversations, but this needs to happen, for us.”

For us. Right now, there isn’t an us. We’re old friends who kissed and went to dinner. We’re old friends who used to have crushes on each other but grew apart when one of us found someone better.

“Don’t turn this around to be *my* fault. I wasn’t the one who got married, Emmett. You *married* someone and had a *child* with them.”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“Fine, you want to have a tough conversation? I feel like a fucking idiot!” I point to my chest, stabbing my finger to my breastbone to accentuate each sentence. “I was the idiot who sat here, single, waiting, telling everyone I didn’t want to date because I was waiting for you. Because you were going to move back and eventually, I would get to be the one ...” I let my finger fall, turning to look over my shoulder at the band starting to warm up behind us. Watching the guitarist tune his strings before turning back to the bar. “God damn, Emmett, we were only a few months away from you being here, from us finally getting the chance to do this right.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

Well then, he knew it and still decided to string me along while he lived his own life, which makes the hurt sting that much more.

The noise in the bar rises, someone pulls out the stool next to me and it scrapes on the floor, their elbow digging into my back. A speaker crackles as the microphone is plugged in, and it becomes too much. My skin feels tight, and the noise too irritating, so I stand up, my chair tipping backwards and falling to the ground with a thud.

“I need to get out of here. I can’t do this.” I stand my chair upright and dig into my purse to throw a few bills down on the bar top for my drink. “Thanks again for dinner.” I grab my purse off the bar and sling it over my shoulder.

I storm to the stairs, placing a hand on the wooden rail for balance as I quickly take the dozen steps down to the second floor.

“Jenna,” I hear him bellowing behind me.

But I don’t stop, I race down the stairs and swing around the second floor, walking through the empty seating areas and

down the stairs to reach the first floor. It isn't until I'm halfway there that I remember our jackets are still in the empty coat check on the floor above. It crosses my mind to abandon it, but November in the Midwest is frigid, and I wouldn't survive the walk to the Red Line without it.

I turn around, taking the stairs two at a time. I'm halfway across the floor before he meets me. Face flushed, chest puffing, looking disheveled and angry. It doesn't intimidate me one bit. He can act like the Hulk all he wants, growl and beat his chest, and I'll meet him toe-to—toe.

“Jenna,” he says, arms up to block my path, “stop and talk to me.”

I push past him and circle the empty bar to the coat check and rip our jackets off the hanger so fast it spins three times before clamoring to the floor.

“Son of a bitch,” I snatch it up and try once, twice, to hang it on the bar, missing every time. With an annoyed scream, I chuck it to the ground, the wire pinging as it bounces and stops at Emmett's feet.

He comes into the L-shaped coat check, so damn tall and broad-shouldered he blocks out all the light along with my path.

I shove his coat to his chest, but he doesn't reach up to take it from me. I shove again, refusing to meet his eye contact. When he stands like the big, dumb, brick wall he is, I unfold it and drape it over his shoulder before trying to squeeze past him. His arm reaches out in front of me, knuckles pressing into the wall.

“Jenna,” he starts again, “you aren't going anywhere. *I'm* not going anywhere. We are going to hash this out right here, right now, once and for all like the adults we are.”

The tone of his voice says the words he isn't saying. *Quit acting like a child, Jenna. Grow up, Jenna.*

Well fine, if he wants a fight, I'll give him a fight. I've been fighting with him in my head for the last few years,

screaming, begging for answers and only being met with silence.

“Fine, Emmett.” I toss my jacket and purse to the floor. “Tell me about her. I’d love to hear all about the woman you fell in love with, the one you promised your life to. Made a child with. Tell me all about the woman who’s better than me. I’d *love* to know.” I take a step back and cross my arms over my chest. “What’s her favorite TV show? Did you make her breakfast in bed? What was your absolute *favorite* Saturday family activity, hmm?” I clasp my hands together and prop them under my chin, letting my immaturity show.

He groans, letting his head fall back, staring at the ceiling a beat before swallowing hard. “Sometimes you can be so goddamn immature.”

“Me?” I shriek, and I shove him.

I’ve never been a fighter. I’ve never fought the bullies that picked on me as the new girl, never pulled the hair of a girl on the bus who made faces at me. Yet I shove him. I take both hands and shove at his chest as hard as I can, and he doesn’t budge. I let my head hang in between us as embarrassment sets in.

“Do it again.” His voice is low and stern.

I swallow my tears, willing myself to look up at him. “What?”

“Hit me. Push me. Yell and swear at me. Do *something*, Jenna. Do anything but what you’re doing now. Do anything except keep this to yourself.”

I pause for a minute, wanting to hit him, wondering if I’d ever have the guts to slap him square across the face. But as the seconds tick by, the adrenaline soon fades. I raise my fists in another half-hearted attempt to shove him, but instead barely move, resting my clenched hands on his chest for a beat before letting them fall.

He catches my wrists mid-air, pulling my arms up to hold them against his, firmly against his body. We’re close, the

thump of his heart audible as I finally mumble the truth. “You broke my heart. I feel like a fucking idiot.”

“Jenna,” he says softly. “It wasn’t like that.”

“But it *was*. I moved here for you, thinking we could finally have a real shot at figuring out this thing between us. And all the while you were secretly with someone else.”

He tugs at my wrists, ushering me to look up at him but I don’t. I let my head hang down further, using my hair as a curtain to shield me as defeat sets in.

“You broke my heart,” I tell him again, my voice cracking with honesty. “You broke my heart and in the same moment, I lost the one person I could run to when my heart was broken.”

“Sweetheart, I know.” He lets go of one of my wrists and puts a hand up to cradle the back of my head. “God, Jenna, you have to know how fucking sorry I am. I’ll do anything, *anything*, to make it up to you.”

His hand moves from my head around to my jaw, gripping it and forcing my chin up to face him. But I close my eyes, refusing to give in.

“Sorry isn’t enough.”

His grip softens but he still holds me, backing me up step by step until my shoulders hit the wall, feeling the thump of the shitty house music reverberating through the cool plaster against my back.

“Look at me,” he demands, voice a level lower than it had been.

I shake my head the best I can with his grip on my chin before I feel his arms fall. Keeping my eyes shut, I assume he’s stepped back, that he’s going to turn and leave, to walk away from me and the immature route I’ve taken. Instead, I feel his hands gently brush the hair behind my shoulders, fingertips tracing up my neck to clasp my earlobe between his thumb and pointer finger. His other hand comes up, and traces

a thumb over my brow, to my temple; I feel his breath on my face as he moves into my space.

“I thought of you every single day,” he starts. “I made a huge mistake that caused a detour on my way back to you, and I hate it. I *hate* that I hurt you. But at the same time, it gave me the greatest gift of my life. I don’t wish to undo my past, but I’ve always planned on a future with you.”

I think I stopped breathing somewhere in his confession, and now my eyes are wide open, taking in his pained expression, the passion on his face, and the immense honesty in his words.

“I’m not going anywhere, Jenna. I won’t leave you again. Even if you can’t give me another chance, I won’t ever leave you.”

His head dips, lips pressed to my skin, finding the bare spot on my shoulder where my sweater doesn’t cover. I tilt my head to the side as his nose traces up my neck, not necessarily giving in but letting my body react to his closeness. Letting my senses override everything with him. His cologne, his musk, it all envelopes me and I’m back to that night on his couch when we were seventeen, skin warm from the sun and the summer breeze coming through the patio doors.

I hook a finger in his belt loop and pull him closer to me. Hip to hip, chest to chest, and his hands come to cradle my jaw. The space between us crackles, and I feel my heart pick up, threatening to thump right out of my chest as he holds my face.

I have spent *years* wishing we would be in this exact position we are now. Both single, living in the same city, both aware of each other’s feelings and no more barriers to keep us from testing the waters and figuring out if it is the promise of teenage hormones between us or if we are meant to have so much more.

And though I’m still bitter inside, and I’m not ready to know what happened and what took him away from me, I

don't want to hold back from him anymore.

“Emmett,” I say as I tug on his belt loop and inch him closer to me. My ears ring with the tone of the music, skin prickling with his closeness. He hovers over my lips. Like the gentleman he is, I know he won't kiss me first. He won't want me to feel pressured, to feel like he's taking advantage of me. He's going to be careful, make sure this is what I really want so I don't run away.

I release the grip I have on his belt and slide my hands to his biceps, up to the back of his neck and rise on my tiptoes to pull him down to me, searing our lips together.

He doesn't falter, doesn't hesitate as our kiss erupts. His hands quickly find my ass and he pulls me to him before pushing me against the wall, kissing me with all of the passion he can muster. We taste and tease each other in the alcove of the coat check in the sketchiest club in the city, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

He breaks the kiss to trail his lips down my neck, licking up the hollow of my throat before nipping me. I close my eyes and keep him held close.

“God, Emmett,” I mutter.

“I know,” he says. “I miss you. I *need* you.”

The kisses turn more frantic, both wanting more, and he mumbles something about getting out of here, about going back to his house but I don't listen because all I can see is him. I want him; I'm so deliriously wet with need for him that I can't wait until we are alone. So, I push him back, adjusting his body to completely block the doorway in the off chance that someone comes wandering back here.

I let my hands wander down past his thick waist and to his pants, keeping my eyes locked on his as I slowly pull the belt from its loop.

He immediately stills my hands, briefly looking over his shoulder and swallowing hard before turning back to me. “We can't do this here.” His words are stern, but his actions tell me

a different story as he runs his hands all over me, squeezing my ass and pulling me close to him, letting me feel how hard he is.

He lets me loosen his belt, slip the button of his jeans through the loop before I slowly lower the zipper, feeling each notch of the metal tick against my knuckles before I reach in and grip him over his briefs. We both suck in a breath at the first real contact we've ever had. I faintly remember what it felt like the one time I straddled him, but to feel it now, all hot and hard in my hand is a whole different story. And thankfully, he's big and thick *everywhere*.

"I want you right now," I tell him as I shove his jeans over his round ass, and he stills my hands again.

"I'm not going to do this where anyone could walk in and see." He grips the waist of his jeans, trying to pull them back up but I stop him.

Stepping up on my toes and peppering kisses to the underside of his jaw, I remove his hands from his jeans, letting my fingers graze over his briefs, over his hard cock, before reaching under and squeezing him, wrapping my hand around all that soft skin. "And when have you ever been able to tell me what to do?"

He smiles the first real smile of the night. "That's probably the thing I like the most about you." With my hand gripping his cock, stroking slowly, letting the pad of my thumb swipe the drop of pre-cum that's already begging to come out, I can see the moment he gives in.

So, I fall to my knees, moving his briefs down enough to let his cock spring out. And with my gaze locked on his I take him in my mouth, slowly moving him across my tongue, pausing to breathe so I don't gag like an amateur, before opening and taking him as far as he can go.

"*Fuck.*" He hisses as a hand comes up to slap the wall behind me. He leans his weight on that hand, using the other to caress my hair, letting it fall through his fingers before

gripping the base of my neck. He adjusts his stance, rocking forward a minimal amount. Enough to tell me he wants the control, so I drop my hands to grasp the backs of his thighs, balancing myself and telling him with my body that I want him to take over.

He rolls his hips, taking his time, moving in a smooth rhythm and fucking my mouth. It's all so erotic, I can feel the dampness grow between my legs. His rhythm matches the beat of the music, a sheen of sweat across his forehead as his movements become shaky.

“You have no idea how many times I've imagined this.” My stomach clenches at his confession. “I jerked off every night in high school, knowing you were in the next room, sleeping in your little shorts, tank top barely covering your tits.” His hands come back down to gather my hair in a makeshift ponytail. “I imagined you coming in my room and getting on your knees, sliding my cock between those pretty pink lips.”

Fuck me. Emmett has always been a man of words. Sweet words. Comforting words. Words that pushed me to do what I want in life. But these words? These words I never expected.

His thrusts pick up pace, and I whimper, needing more of him, wanting to hear more of his filthy thoughts come out of his mouth.

“You like that, don't you? You like knowing you've been teasing me since the moment I laid eyes on you.” His hand comes back to cradle the base of my skull, slowing his thrusts as he does. I adjust my position so I can reach a hand up, stroking his base in the same rhythm he's pumping, and he groans. “Oh fuck. Baby, *baby* I'm gonna come.” He gently pushes on my shoulders to pull out, but I move to wrap my hands around his ass, gripping the back of him to let him know I want it all. He grunts, pumps slowly, his eyes focusing on my face as he comes.

His chest is heaving as he pulls out and quickly stuffs himself back in his briefs, zipping up his pants but leaving the

belt loose as he reaches down to haul me up by my biceps. He pulls me tight, hugging me, muttering a series of praises in my ears before he pulls back and kisses me.

Our tongues tangle and he switches between buckling his belt and adjusting himself in between kissing. “I can’t believe you sucked my cock in a coat closet of probably the sleaziest club I’ve ever been in,” he says against my lips.

“You make me sound like the town whore.”

He pulls back to force me to look at him. “What did I do to deserve that? I thought you were mad.”

“I am still mad,” I admit with honesty, “But I missed you more.”

He dips down to pick up my jacket and purse from the floor, slipping it over my arms before pulling it up and adjusting it over my shoulders. He hands me my purse, then grabs my hand and leads me down the stairs. He grips it firmly through each floor, zig-zagging through the smoke-filled dance floor, side-stepping the spilled sticky drinks before opening the door and letting me pass in front of him.

The cold winter air hits us and he turns toward me, adjusting the hood on my jacket to block the tiny ice crystals from peppering my cheeks. I nuzzle into his embrace, not caring that we are blocking the center of the sidewalk on a busy Saturday night, not caring that it’s the middle of a blizzard and that my hair is getting wet, because I’m in his arms, and every time I’m held in his arms, that’s all that matters.

He loosens his grip and reaches for my hand again, eyes studying my face. “Let’s get out of here,” he says, kissing my hand and finding it cold. He grabs my other and holds them both in his large palms, slowly blowing warm air into the pocket he’s created, warming my hands along with my heart at the gesture.

“Let’s go back to my house,” he says, locking eyes with mine. “It’s my turn to show *you* how much I missed you.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We're barely through the front door when he pushes me against the wall and crashes his mouth to mine in a bruising kiss. Our hands find each other, groping, savoring, touching every inch that we've wanted to touch since the moment we met.

He shucks off his jacket, breaking the kiss to roam his mouth over my cheek, down my neck, kissing my throat as his hands gather at the hem of my shirt. He pulls it up and over my head, tossing it behind him with the rest of our clothes and shoes before his hands are on my ass, lifting me up so I wrap my legs around his thick waist. With my back pressed firmly against the wall, he lowers his head to my breasts, and I groan at his hot, wet mouth licking and biting me, his teeth finding my nipple through the thin lace of my bra.

“You have no idea how long I've wanted to do this. How much I've thought about your body, how you'd look, how you'd taste ... imaging all the ways I could make you scream.”

He's crazy if he thinks that this isn't a two-way street, like I haven't lusted over him since the moment I saw him, touched myself to the thought of his body towering over mine.

I pull his ear into my mouth, biting once before sucking gently. “Did you imagine me sucking your cock? Did you know you'd come in my mouth, and I'd lick up every drop you gave me?”

A full-body shudder escapes him, and he nearly drops me. And I *love* it, love knowing how much he wants me. It's such a fucking freeing feeling, having the barriers between us broken, no more questioning what the other thinks, what the other wants.

I drop my legs, pressing my feet flat on the floor so I can unbutton my jeans and push them down my hips before I lean into him again, wanting his lips on mine so badly I can't focus. With trembling hands, he takes over, shoving my jeans down my hips, before trailing his hands up to unclasp my bra, leaving me standing only in my underwear.

"Did you know," I mumble breathlessly, pulling him into me, "that the very first time I touched myself, the first time I got myself off, it was to the thought of you?"

"Jenna." He groans. "You are going to make me blow it in my pants if you keep talking like that."

"It's the truth," I tell him as I lean back, trailing a hand up my body, letting my fingertips graze my stomach until I reach my chest to squeeze my breasts. I pinch a nipple between my thumb and forefinger, arching my back and letting my hair cascade around me to really give him a show.

"You have the most perfect tits," he tells me, coming closer to shove my hands away, taking them in his own. Perfect is a bit of a stretch. Equal sizes, sure. But they're nothing compared to someone like Meg, and the words of Boob-Job Brennan still echo in my head.

"They're a little small, don't you think?"

Emmett continues staring, kneading my chest, shaking his head furiously at my comment. "Hell no. They're not huge, but they're not small, either. They're fucking perfect, Jenna."

Not too big, not too small, right. Kind of like having the Goldilocks of boobs. Good to know.

He leans down, pulling a pink nipple into his mouth, licking and flicking it with his tongue and it's all I can do to hold on tight. "Emmett," I whine, needing more. I need to feel some friction between my legs. "If you don't take me upstairs right now and fuck me, I'm going to lose my mind."

He chuckles, living for the whining that's coming out of my mouth. He kicks his boots off and unbuckles his belt, smiling at me as I watch every flick of his wrist, every motion,

as he slowly undresses himself in front of me. And when he reaches an arm back to pull off his tee and I finally see his full bare chest for the first time, my mouth goes dry.

My once-boyish, sweetheart, best friend is nothing but a full-fledged man. Working a manual labor job has done him good, so, so good. His burly chest is thick, like the rest of him. Strong shoulders leading to a strong back, his belly a little husky, but I would bet my life savings without touching him that he's solid muscle underneath. His chest is covered in coarse, dark hair, and it's hair that I want to feel scratching my entire body while he fucks me.

“You could make a man feel like a God staring at him like that.”

His words catch me off guard. A compliment from Emmett isn't like receiving a compliment from any other man. When I got that dreaded phone call, when I thought that we were done, and that I'd never see him again, I joined ranks with Meg and went on what can only be described as a rampage.

If we weren't at work, or recovering from a night out, we were partying, finding the hottest guys, having fun, seeing how weak we could make them. But they were always flat, and flat men give flat compliments.

You have a nice smile.

Your hair looks nice.

Everything was *nice. Pretty. Cute.* It's all the same, and it's nothing compared to the words that come out of Emmett's mouth.

His words are dripping with honesty.

I reach for him, wanting to feel his warmth wash over me, only for him to grasp my hand and still me. “Let me look a little longer,” he rasps. The man can look all he wants, but I'm ready to play.

I slowly spin, letting my back arch, sticking my ass out a little knowing that my cheeky underwear has ridden up and is

showing a hefty amount of ass. I make a show about it, twirling, bouncing on my toes, letting him see how wet I am for him. And when I have him distracted, when his mouth is open and his eyes are glazed over, I whisper against his lips, “You can stand there and look all you want, but I’m going to go upstairs and have an orgasm, whether you join me or not.” And I take off.

I rush down the hall, around the corner, grabbing the banister with one hand, attempting to take the steps two at a time but only make it halfway up the first few when a thick arm grabs me from behind, wrapping around my waist and tackling me to the stairs.

I shriek with laughter as Emmett’s glorious body covers my backside, hands moving my hair across my shoulder so he can kiss my back, the side of my neck, all while mumbling threats that sound more like sexual promises.

He manhandles my body, flipping me around and bringing my ass down to rest on a step. I’m sprawled out on his staircase with his body between my legs, completely at his disposal. No words are spoken as he tucks his thumbs under the band of my underwear, sliding them down my legs. He takes my underwear, all bunched up into his hand, and he smells them.

Fucking smells them.

Something I’d cringe at if the act was done by any other man has me moaning out loud. He takes a hand to each knee, spreading my legs, leaving me on full display so he can take in every inch. “Fucking perfect,” he mumbles into the quiet air. “I knew you would be.”

I’m about to tell him something sarcastic, to put his mouth to better use, but all words are lost when he lowers himself a step down and leans in, leaving his face level with my pussy. He tosses my legs over his broad shoulders before leaning in, using two fingers to spread me wide and plants an open mouth kiss right where I need him the most. So hot and damp, I nearly combust. He licks, teases, finds every nerve ending in

my body and sets it on fire. I let my body fall back onto the stairs, not caring that the nose of the step is biting into my back, that my neck is at an awkward angle, and I can't reach out and grasp anything for support. Who gives a shit. I'd sit like this for hours as long as he never takes his mouth off of me.

My eyes fall shut, and I let him take over, feeling him slide two fingers inside, stretching me. It's been so long—too long—since I've been touched like this.

But has it ever really felt like this? I'm already a quaking mess as he strokes his fingers in and out, swirling them, pulling out to stroke my lips as he spreads me wide, sucking my clit into his mouth.

My hands spring out to my sides and I'm desperate for something to hold onto. To grasp with all my might and keep myself from spinning off into space. I stretch an arm out as far as I can and wrap a few measly fingertips around the railing. He moans into my skin, pulling away to scrape his beard against my inner thigh and planting soft kisses in his wake.

“What the ... what the fuck are you doing to me?” I pant out. “This ... it's too much.” I can't fucking think.

Nothing more than a cocky chuckle from him. “I'm going to ruin you. Eat this pussy until you scream my name, make sure you think of me and *only* me every time you touch yourself.”

Well, if that was his goal, consider it done.

He adjusts his position, gripping my thighs and pulling me a little bit further so I lose the pathetic grasp my fingertips had on the banister, forcing me to rest my entire weight on his shoulders. It's all I can do to grasp onto his hair and hold on as he picks up speed, and I can feel the rush starting. It comes up through my belly and down into my legs rendering me senseless as I scream.

He doesn't let up, continues sucking on my clit as my orgasm wrecks me, my legs tremble and I shiver. It isn't until

my clit grows sensitive, that my body is wrung out and needing a break that I gently push his head away and pull that big body up to mine, letting his tall frame cover me that I feel a wave of emotion wash over me.

I've heard that an intense orgasm can bring you to tears, but I've always chalked that up to urban legends, right along with unicorns and pots of gold waiting at the end of each rainbow. But with the tears pressing behind my eyes, you might as well slap my ass and call me Saint Patrick, because goddammit, I think I might cry.

And in that way he always knows what I need, Emmett slows things down, nuzzling into my neck and holding me tight, slowly allowing me to come down from that high.

“You okay?”

“Totally,” I croak out. “Happens all the time.”

His face tilts up to mine, a beautiful smile breaking out at my obvious lie. He takes his time soothing me, planting lazy kisses over my neck, my chest, brushing his lips across mine until I go from vulnerable, to cool, to turned on all in a matter of minutes. And when I reach a hand in between us to grip the monster between his legs, the sensitive man disappears.

He growls, reaching under me to scoop me up, carrying me up the stairs while he kisses me, bumping into walls as we go because we're too busy focusing on each other. I try to tell myself to slow down, that we don't need to cram ten years of want into one night, but that's exactly what it feels like. I'm frantic, needing to get to his room. I don't need a bed, or a room; honestly, at this point, he could fuck me right up against this wall and I'd be the happiest woman alive, and I tell him as much.

He sets me down roughly on his dresser as soon as we cross the threshold and I'm grappling for him, grabbing his cock and spreading my legs, aching for him to be in the one spot he hasn't yet.

“Wait, Jenna, wait.” He stills my hand. “Do we need a condom? Fuck, I don’t know if I have any.”

I shake my head as I guide him back to my center.

“We don’t need one, I’m on birth control. And I’m clean.” I’ve never gone without one, but we’ve already shared a lot of truths today, so I decide to keep that a secret for a little while longer.

“I want to feel all of you.”

He pulls me close, a hand reaching up to toy with my bottom lip before tenderly kissing me.

“Me too.”

I grasp him again, swiping his head against my lips, thriving off the moans and groans he’s making, about to push him in when he grabs my hips again to stop me.

“Argh,” I grumble, surely sounding like a petulant child, but I’m practically salivating with the need to have sex with him, and the last ten years of sexual tension have peaked. “Okay, okay, you’re right, we can go buy some condoms, that’s okay. Let’s go.” I move to hop off the dresser, but his body doesn’t budge.

He takes a step back, leaning his hands forward at each of my sides. His head falls and he stays like that for a moment, and another, before I start to worry.

“Emmett?” I grasp his face with my palms, pulling his head up to look at me and as soon as the whites of his eyes are visible, I can see the storm brewing in his mind.

“I can’t be your friend anymore,” he starts, completely throwing me off. “It’s not enough. And I won’t be your fuck buddy. If we do this, I want to do it right.” His eyes dart back and forth between mine, waiting for my reaction. “I want you, and I want *all* of you. I’m all in, Jenna. You have me, I need to know you feel the same.”

His words force my heart into overdrive, the organ thumping in my chest threatening to break my ribs until it

slows down, finding a smooth and steady pace as what he said starts to sink in. All I've ever wanted was for both of us to be all in, and after what we've been through, I never thought we'd be in a place where I had that chance again. Coiling my arms around his neck, I pull him into me, into the space between my legs and tell him the biggest truth of my life.

"I'm yours, Emmett. I've been yours all along, haven't I?"

He leans his forehead against mine. "But this time, I want it all."

"I promise you can have every bit of me that you can handle."

"And if I want it all, your highs, your worst lows, every day, no matter what happens? Can you give that to me?"

The fact that someone would want those pieces of me, the icky tainted ones most people spend their days hiding from, only shining up and showing the best parts, those pieces he wants.

"I'm yours," I tell him as I line us up again, working my hips forward to inch him into me.

This time he lets me, slowly sinking in until he's fully seated, stretching me inch by glorious inch. I let out a groan, dropping my head to his shoulder, needing a moment to come to terms with the fact that he's inside me. That he's here and he's real and he's *mine*.

He pulls out slowly before pushing back in, and I can feel the head of his cock twitch somewhere deep inside. He continues at that pace, slow and steady, sliding in and out with ease given how wet I am.

"Say it again," he commands, his grip on my hips firm as he starts to pick up the pace.

"I'm yours," I whisper, taking a deep breath as the emotions threaten to steal the moment once again. "I promise."

That promise must be all he needed to hear.

He picks up his pace, driving his hips so hard, the handles on the old wooden dresser clatter with each thrust and I worry for a moment that it won't hold up to the force. This isn't the sex we would have had as teenagers, no awkward first-time nerves, continually asking the other if it feels okay.

No, this is sex between two adults who have spent years pining for one another, wondering what it'd be like to be doing what we are doing right now, in this moment, and I love it.

"Fuck," he grunts, a sheen of sweat beading on his forehead. "I can't slow down, baby. I can't take it slow and savor this. I want you too badly."

I pull him in for a searing kiss. "Don't stop. Take what you want, fuck me like you mean it, and when we're done, you can fuck me again."

His hands trail down my thighs, pulling me to the edge of the dresser, slinging my legs over his forearms. I lean back on my palms, fingers curling to grip the edge of the dresser for support as he pounds into me.

The change in position forces my orgasm out of nowhere, hitting as fast and powerful as a freight train. I cry out, my voice echoing off the walls, and I send up a silent prayer, thankful that we are home alone.

His thrusts pick up speed, and his hands grip my hips so hard I'm sure I'll bruise, but I don't care. I'll take any punishment he has to offer, coaxing them out of him every day if I can, and when he thrusts deep, so deep I feel a cramp in my belly when he comes, I know that he is so intertwined in my being I could never stand to be apart from him again.

He rests his head on my shoulder, letting out a few rough pants before lifting me off the dresser, carrying me further into the room, fumbling with the comforter, and laying me down on his bed. The sheets smell like him, the cool fabric immediately soothing the burn on my bottom from the dresser.

And when he sinks into me again, he takes his time rocking, and the words pour freely from his mouth. Promises

to never let me down, reminding me how much he cares. When he tells me that I'm it for him, I'd later wonder why that didn't scare me. Why his openness about his feelings didn't send me fleeing or spark any sort of fear, but instead is the closest I've felt to happiness in a long time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ou can tell me about Allie's mom now, if you want."

"**Y** My head rests in the space between Emmett's shoulder and jaw. His arms are wrapped around me, holding me to him and my leg is slung over his thigh. We're both still naked, wrapped up in each other, the sheets twisted after the most mind-blowing sex I've ever had. Now that rounds one, two, and three are done, and the last ten years of pent-up sexual energy has been released, I think I can stomach the idea of hearing about his ex.

He cracks one eye open to look down at me. "You're sure?"

I nod, rolling into him and propping myself up on my elbows to see his face. "Apparently three orgasms are the key to lowering my crazy."

I don't really want to hear about her, but if we are really going to do this, to be together and not hold back, he's probably right that it's something I need to know about.

"Well, for starters, *mom* is a loose term for her."

"We agree on something already."

He plants a soft kiss to the top of my head and pulls me closer to him. I nuzzle in, focusing on the wall in front of us as he continues.

"I've told you a little bit about life on the road. It gets lonely, working fourteen-to-sixteen-hour days, six days a week, sometimes seven, for weeks on end. Not a lot of time to socialize, and lots of the guys I worked with were a lot older than me. We got along fine during the day, but after work, many of them would go to the bars or strip clubs in the

evening. Even married, they would often cheat on their wives, or blow half of the cash made in that day's work on strippers. I couldn't connect with them, too hard to make friends at all with all of the disagreements outside of work."

One arm loosens and he starts drawing lazy circles on my skin with the pads of his fingers. "I was in Louisiana for storm work, toward the end of my apprenticeship. It was supposed to be a six-to-eight-week job, then head to Kentucky for a few months, before I'd finally be done. I was so ready to be done, too. To move back here, be with you ...

"My days became monotonous. I'd work all day, text you when I could, eat a greasy dinner at this hole-in-the-wall bar and go back to my hotel room and sleep. Our job kept getting extended, eight weeks turned into ten, and then twelve. I had gone to the same bar most nights and had gotten to know the bartender. Her name was Gina.

Gina.

So that's the bitch's name. Jealousy licks up the back of my neck at the sound of her name, the way it rolls off his tongue so smoothly.

"She wasn't anyone special to me, as awful as that sounds," he continues. "She was cute, around our age, easy to talk to and it passed the time. We didn't ask personal questions; we weren't trying to get to know each other."

I thrash my legs, attempting to kick the comforter and sheets off, the thin material feeling too heavy on my skin with the way this conversation is going. Emmett sits up, gently untangles the bedding from our legs and pulls the top sheet over me. He lays back down, ushering me to lie on my side so we are facing each other.

He pauses his story to watch my face, and I offer up a fake and practiced smile. He chuckles, leaning forward to plant a soft kiss on my lips.

"You okay?"

“I’m already so pissed off and you haven’t gotten to the love part yet.”

He reaches a hand up to smooth the hair away from my face, and I lay down on my side again, facing him.

“One night, I had time to kill, the rain wouldn’t let up and then lightning started, so we had a delay with work. I went to the bar for dinner and had a few beers. I had called it a night, ready to go back to the shitty motel and get some sleep but she asked me if I could hang out and give her a ride home.”

“She needed a ride, that’s for sure.”

“We ... he trails off, not wanting to say the words out loud to me. “We hooked up, right there in the bar. I gave her a ride home, said goodnight. That was it.”

I pull away from him, propping myself up on an elbow, letting my other hand come up to stop his story. “Hold on. You had sex with a complete stranger, *without protection*, in some dive bar down south? Did you get tested afterwards? Did you get a freaking tetanus shot after?”

He’d puffed out his chest at the club we went to earlier, practically scolding me for putting myself in unsafe situations, when it sounds like he’s done some equally sketchy things.

“It was a mistake. I won’t deny that. But I can’t take it back. I wasn’t having any sex at that time, so I didn’t have a condom on me. She said she was on birth control. So ... yeah. Eventually, I moved on to the next job. A few weeks later, she called, telling me she was pregnant with my child.”

Holy shit. That’s a fear that has crossed every person’s mind at some point in their life. What is meant to be a little fun, blowing off some steam possibly ending up in a life-long commitment.

“She went on to say she wasn’t sure about keeping it.”

My heart freezes in my chest, and I pull out of his arms, sitting up to look at him. I tuck my legs under me, wrapping the sheet around my chest for some warmth. Something about

this doesn't add up. The one-night stand. Her not wanting the baby. Him having sole custody. It's painting a picture that's making me feel sick.

"I was scared, felt way too young. I had so many thoughts about what would happen, how that would work with my job, what that would mean for you and me. But I couldn't stand the thought of not having this child. I believe it's a woman's right to choose what happens with her body, and some who have had to make that choice may have chosen differently, but I couldn't do it. The notion of this little baby being formed that was half me, I couldn't stand the thought of living without it."

I nod along. At least I think I do, but it's possible my body is frozen, the shell of me sitting and staring calmly while inside I'm clawing at the walls. Of course, that would be his reaction. This man in front of me is, without a doubt, the kindest and most warm-hearted man I have ever met.

"You have to believe me when I say we weren't in love. We barely knew each other; I wouldn't have called us friends. But she agreed to keep the baby if we raised it together. As the conversation went on, I noticed more issues." He sighs loudly, scrubbing his face vigorously and moving up over his head, as if the situation frustrates him all over again. "She was a bartender, she didn't have any savings, didn't have health insurance. She wanted to be a country music star, for Christ's sake. She couldn't have afforded the bills, the hospital stay, the birth, all that. I did what I thought at the time was right."

"So, you married her?" I choke out. "Just like that, you decided to propose?"

All the time we spent together, he never worked up the courage to do so much as let a hug linger or kiss me. Even after I practically dry-humped him on his parents' couch, he never approached the subject again. But he makes a snap decision over something as serious as marriage because a stranger needed health insurance?

"Hold on, hold on." He sits up to grab both of my arms. "You can't get mad now when I haven't gotten to the main part

of the story.”

“Oh fuck,” I groan, running fingers through my hair and twisting it behind me.

“The next day is when I called you to tell you. And Jenna, hearing the pain in your voice. Knowing I broke your heart, you *have* to know how shitty I felt. I hung up the phone thinking it was all over between us, not knowing if I’d ever see you again, let alone get to where we are now. It killed me to not tell you the truth.

“So, we got married. We went to a courthouse at nine A.M. the next day. No family or friends present, no fancy proposal. She went out and bought a ring for herself with my credit card and we had a courthouse employee as our witness.”

“What did your mom say?” I couldn’t imagine his mom loving the thought of an accidental pregnancy and him marrying someone she had never met. That she couldn’t be present for the wedding, couldn’t go dress shopping with her future daughter-in-law, couldn’t insist on paying for some lavish reception. She is the mom you see frantically wiping tears all through the entire wedding ceremony and reception, so damn happy and talking about how blessed she is to be a part of that day.

He groans, rubbing a hand over his face. “Well, she wasn’t happy. You wanna know the first thing she said to me?”

“Some lecture about the basics of safe sex?”

He smiles at my attempt at humor, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “No.” He wraps his arm around my back, fingertips grazing up and down my spine. “She was quiet for the longest time, and when I thought she had hung up on me, she said ‘what about Jenna?’”

Hot tears sting my eyes. His mom. His whole family. They have cared about me from the beginning, even when he and I were still figuring it out. It’s like they all saw what we had while we were too young and immature to realize it for ourselves.

“Does she know we are together?” I ask, before realizing she wouldn’t know that unless he’s the type of guy that texts his mom right after sex. “Does she know we are friends again? Wait.” I wave my hands in front of me frantically. “Not important right now. Finish the story first.”

“Things were awkward with Gina. I had to finish out my job in Kentucky, so I was on the road at the time. I couldn’t be there to support her through pregnancy symptoms and all that. We barely talked. I missed her OB appointments, but I downloaded this app that would tell me roughly what was happening with both Gina and the baby as things progressed. I knew when the baby was the size of a walnut, when fingernails were forming. When Gina would start to become sick or have food aversions.

“I didn’t like the idea of her bartending while pregnant, on her feet all the time. Around drunk, obnoxious people and cigarette smoke, working late hours and who knows what. So, I got us an apartment in a nicer part of town, paid all the expenses, and left her with my credit card to buy what she needed since she wasn’t working. “

This bitch had it made.

“She enrolled in college and took some online classes. After a month or so of being apart, I finally finished my apprenticeship, and got a job with the local utility company in the town she lived in. Took a huge pay cut doing it, but I had to be there for them.

“But when I got to our apartment, it all came crashing down.”

My mind starts racing to all the awful possibilities. Did he come home and find her with another man? Would she have cheated on him, given all that he was doing to support her? Many men in his situation would have simply walked away, letting the woman decide what to do with the pregnancy. To find a man that not only sticks around, but sacrifices everything to support his new family, would she have thrown all of that away so easily?

Or was she drinking, doing drugs? Had she gone through with terminating the baby and didn't tell him? No, dummy, Allie is alive and well so that clearly didn't happen.

His gaze is now on the ceiling, sad eyes focusing on the slow twirl of the ceiling fan.

“When I moved home, she should have been a few months along, maybe about to start the second trimester. But when I opened the door, she was on the couch, and she was ... pregnant.”

My brows pull together. No shit she was pregnant, Emmett.

Oh.

Oh my God. I lean over, nausea pushing at the back of my throat, and I claw at the skin covering it, not ready to hear the next line that flows from his lips.

“She was nearly seven months along,” he says softly. “She was very much pregnant before we ever met.”

Realization hits me like a ton of bricks. Allie isn't his child. He didn't make that mistake.

I'm going to hunt that bitch down.

He trails a hand up my spine until he reaches the back of my neck and gives it a gentle squeeze. “Are you okay?”

Am *I* okay? That's what he's worried about right now? He dropped a bomb on me, confessing truths that I'm guessing not everyone around him knows. He's reliving his sacrifices, the suffering he went through. All the weight he's carried these years and the love for a child that, by blood, isn't his, and his thoughts are about me.

I roll my head to the side to look at him, letting him see the obvious raw emotion on my face. “I'm thinking a lot of things, most of them going back to the same thought I've had since the moment I met you.” I crawl up his body, pulling my hair to the side so I can lay with my cheek to his chest. “You are the best man I have ever met.”

He welcomes me with open arms and holds me tightly, hands slightly trembling as he runs them up and down my biceps.

“What happened?” I prompt. “Once you both knew how much she manipulated you?”

“She panicked. She said she wasn’t ready to be a parent. She never came out and said she did it on purpose, and I didn’t ask. All that mattered was she wanted out. She told me she was due in two months, and it was a girl. I knew I wanted to name her after you.”

“Did you let her in on that little tidbit of where the name came from?”

“Nah, she didn’t need to know. I told her she could have her out if she would take care of herself through the rest of the pregnancy, have the baby and let me adopt her. I’d keep her on my insurance through all that and still pay for everything like we had originally planned. Maybe it makes a softie out of me. Or I’m a pushover. I had already come to terms with being a dad. I knew the gender, the name. The image of Allie was in my life long before she was born. I couldn’t imagine losing her.”

I can’t believe I agree with him. Knowing him, his heart, how he feels about his family and children, he made the right decision at the time. A part of me still wishes he would have told me everything from the start. Would it have made it okay? Would I have been okay with silence on his end, knowing that although they weren’t in love, he wouldn’t feel right about staying in touch with me when he technically had a wife?

There is no way it would have been okay if I knew the truth. I would have gone apeshit, driven myself down to Louisiana and fought with them both tooth and nail.

“I’m sorry,” he says sheepishly.

“You don’t owe me, or anyone, an apology. What you did for that little girl ...” I trail off, willing myself to fight off the tears. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll probably keep saying it until

the day I die: You are a good man, Emmett Owens. I'm so proud to know you."

I adjust myself again, climbing on top of him. Chest to chest, legs over legs, touching every bit of skin as possible as I pepper him with kisses.

"One of the best I will ever meet."

His arms wrap around me, tilting his head to kiss me harder as his hands roam everywhere before settling on my ass.

"It was so fucking hard being a single dad to a newborn, trying to make it through sleep regressions, teething. I lucked out with some of the wives of coworkers who stayed home with their kids. They helped any way they could when she was a newborn, and I had to work overtime to support us."

He brings his hands up to my thighs and adjusts me so I'm straddling his hips, his cock between us and growing harder by the second. "I thought about you every day, Jenna; you have to know that. I wondered where you were working, if you still looked the same, if you still had an attitude and took shit from no one.

"Some nights, Allie would only sleep if I held her in the rocking chair. I'd stay awake for hours, quietly swaying with her in my arms, driving myself crazy wondering what you were doing on those late nights."

I wonder if those were the same nights I'd lie awake, a stranger's arms around me, nearly sick to my stomach thinking about him.

"I tried so hard to track you down. When all hell broke loose, when I found out the truth, I tried to call you, but your number had changed."

I cringe, regretting doing that within weeks of him calling to tell me he was getting married.

"I sent letters to the house you lived in when we were in high school, thinking maybe your dad or you still owned the house, but they were returned. You don't keep in touch with

any of our friends from high school, you aren't on any social media. Christ, Jenna, I tried to email your old Hotmail email address."

I burst out laughing at that. "You mean you remembered my email from high school?"

He smiles. "I'll never forget BlondieRipCurlGurl1995. It's forever ingrained in my mind because that was the phase where you were going to move to California and be a surfer."

"Remember I had that poster of Kelly Slater on my wall?"

He nods. "I remember being jealous of that poster hanging right above your bed. And remember making me watch *Blue Crush* around three thousand times?"

I had completely forgotten about my surfer phase. My laugh eventually fades, and I turn back to him as he rakes his fingers through my hair.

"It wasn't until my sister's accident and her seeing you in the hospital that I finally knew you were alive, and okay, and in the city. I still didn't know if you would talk to me. I made a lot of mistakes these last few years, but I wouldn't give up Allie for anything. That girl is my world."

I lean down to kiss him. "She's lucky to have you. I can tell already she's going to be kind like you. Smart like you." I kiss him again, the wetness between my legs growing as I slide up and down his length. "She's going to be brave and confident. And the most important part is that she will never question if she is loved." That little girl will grow up never having to wonder her worth.

I pour my emotions into my kiss, unable to think of much besides how wonderful he is, and it makes me feel awful. I spent months on end cursing his name, lying awake at night next to other men, wondering where I went wrong, how I misread the signs, thinking all this time that he never cared about me.

"So, you forgive me?" he asks softly, hands moving to my bottom to roll my hips along his. "For how I hurt you?"

I rise onto my knees and line him up, pausing for a beat, his eyes catching mine as I slip his head inside me. We both groan in unison.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I tell him honestly as I lean down to catch his lips. There’s nothing to forgive. Nothing to cause worry. No more pain to work through.

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

It's a new experience having someone greet me the moment I get home. When I was a kid, coming home after school, my dad was usually at work, and my mom lost in her head. I've gotten used to coming home to a quiet house, making sure to stay silent to not disturb others. But now, after a grueling shift, when my body aches and I'm sure there is some sort of human splatter on my scrubs, and all my makeup has sweat off, Emmett still waits for me by the door, or comes down the hall as soon as he hears the click of the lock. He's smiling, arms stretched out wide for a hug, not giving a crap what I look or smell like.

"I ordered Chinese food, there are leftovers in the fridge," he murmurs into my ear.

"Maybe I'm not as high-class as some girls, because that's probably the most romantic thing you could have said to me right now."

He walks me to the kitchen, pulls out a chair and ushers for me to sit before opening the fridge and pulling out a barrage of white containers. He grabs a bottle of chilled wine and pours a glass, setting it in front of my plate.

I take back what I said earlier, a man, preparing my Chinese food while I rest my aching body and sip on a glass of wine, now *that* is probably the most romantic gesture.

"Allie already in bed?"

He nods. "She wanted to stay up to see you, but she got really crabby around eight and passed out in my arms."

On a normal day, I would have been here by seven at the latest, but a Code Blue right at shift change delayed everything.

It didn't bother me so much before when I worked late. I welcomed the extra cash and put it toward my future home, but now, knowing Emmett and Allie are waiting for me, the days tend to drag by. I want to spend every free minute with them, and for the most part, I do.

He leans his forearms on the counter, fingers toying with the edge of my napkin.

“What's up?”

“What are you doing next Thursday? Are you working?”

I like how he says Thursday, as if I wouldn't know that Thursday is Christmas. As if I haven't already been browsing online sales to find Allie the perfect assortment of princess gowns.

“I work Christmas Eve, but am off Christmas Day, and for the whole weekend. What are *you* doing Thursday?”

He gives a shy smile. “My family wants to make sure you're free to spend Christmas with us.”

My heart flutters, rising into my throat. I set my fork down. I had expected—or hoped, I should say—to see him at some point during Christmas. But I didn't think I'd be invited to the entire family Christmas. It wouldn't be my first time, obviously, having gone to visit them on Christmas Day while we were in high school. But since everything changed, when we lost contact, I purposely cut off contact with every other member. It would have been too hard to have watched the relationship fade out. And that's what would have happened, no matter how anyone argued with me. You can only be friends with the family of the man you loved and lost for so long.

I've seen Savannah briefly during child pick up and drop-offs; she certainly didn't seem to hold any grudges against me

when I saw her in the hospital, but that could have been the pain meds speaking, too.

But his mom—I thought about his mom almost as much as I thought about Emmett, and it broke my heart in a different way. She meant so much to me; always offering advice or a listening ear, and at one point, she was my closest friend besides Emmett. It wasn't until I couldn't call her or taste her cooking or have her help me solve my latest life problem that I realized how much I missed her.

“Do your parents want to see me?” I finally ask, half expecting him to tell me they're mad, that he's the one wanting us all together even if it means an awkward holiday dinner. “Your mom?”

He comes around the island; hand grazing my knees and spins me around the bar stool. He leans down to my level, eyes sparkling in the dim evening light. “Jenna, my mom loves you as if you were one of her own kids. She always has. She's asked me every single day since we've been together, ‘When are you going to let me see my Jenna?’” He mimics his mom in a higher-pitched voice.

“I guess,” he says, his eyes lowered to where our hands are clasped in my lap, “I've been selfish, wanting to keep you all to myself.”

It might be selfish, but I feel the same way. I haven't hung out with Meg as often as we used to, and I know she's pissed about it. I don't want to be the girl that ditches her friends for her man, but it never feels like I've had my fill of him. I want more. More nights together, more mornings waking up with his arms wrapped around me, more breakfasts with him and Allie, movie nights. I want it all.

The vibration of my phone on the island pulls my attention. I reach a hand over and double tap the screen to read the message that came through.

Meg: SOS

“Oh shit,” I murmur.

“Everything okay?”

“Probably not.”

SOS is our code for ‘I need you; shit is going down.’

I punch out a text back to Meg, finding out where she is and telling her I’ll be there as soon as I can.

“I think I’m going to meet Meg for a drink. Just one, something quick. I’ll come over afterwards, if you’ll be awake?” I almost add “if that’s okay.” As if I need his permission to go out.

“Let me make one thing clear.” His eyes dart back and forth between mine for a moment before he continues. “You can go out with your friends as much as you want, whenever you want. Take your time and have fun. I’d never stop you from seeing them.”

I reach my hands up to his chest, sliding them over all that strong muscle before clasping the sides of his neck. “I think I’ve been trying to soak up every bit of time with you and Allie that I can before ...”

“Before what?” he prompts.

I sigh. “I know we have a good thing going here, but there’s still this little, paranoid part of me that worries something will take you away from me again. I didn’t expect to lose you last time. It’s hard not to expect it now.”

The look on his face nearly cracks my chest in half. He stands tall, raking his fingers through the sides of his hair with both hands, and I can practically see the wheels spinning as he forms his next sentence.

“I’ve told you once already, Jenna. I’m not going anywhere this time, no matter what. I’d have to be dead before I’d ever leave you again.”

Knuckles graze the side of my cheek. “Go out, go meet Meg, she needs you. Have a few drinks, dance, do whatever, be safe and know you’re coming home to me tonight. That’s the only selfish thing I will demand of you.”

“If it’s selfish, call me selfish, too.” I rise from my chair and slowly walk him back against the counter until he stops abruptly. I press my body against his. His arms wrap around me running up and down my back in smooth circles.

“It’s your fault. You’re making me crazy about you, you know that?”

He kisses me, holding his lips against mine as opposed to moving them. “Maybe I like you a little crazy.”

~

If the SOS text didn’t let me know that Meg needed help, it was solidified when I told her I wasn’t changing out of leggings and a sweatshirt to meet her out, and she said she would wear the same.

Walking into Lasso’s, our tried-and-true country dive bar, I almost didn’t recognize my bombshell best friend. The Meg I know treats going out to the bars as a show—full makeup, hair curled, wearing an outfit that accents every curve. She slips on the trail of drool men leave once they see her, and she eats it up.

But the Meg sitting at the bar tonight is not that Meg. She’s wearing leggings and an oversized sweatshirt like she said, and her silky red hair is piled high on the top of her head. Face free of makeup—not that she needs it, but she is insecure about the number of freckles she has so never goes in public without at least mascara and some minimal contouring. She’s sipping cheap beer from a brown bottle. Meg never drinks cheap beer.

I pull out the stool next to her and plop down, keeping my body facing hers as I wait for the news. Meg stares ahead, slowly sipping her beer. I take in her profile, noting the

mascara she wore earlier is now cried off. Eyes still puffy from the aftermath.

“Meg, you’re freaking me the fuck out. What’s going on? What happened?”

She takes another long drink, and I can see the liquid trail down her throat as she swallows hard. Setting the bottle down, she pushes it forward, raising a hand to the bartender for another. “Marissa’s single.”

The air is sucked from my lungs. *Fuck*. Marissa. Single. And Pregnant. Pregnant and Single. For the last few weeks, Meg has been very vocal about her distaste for Marissa’s on-again, off-again boyfriend, and has been pleading with her to ditch him for good. Finding out she was pregnant was shock enough, but this?

“I wanted her single, but not like this.”

“How is *she* feeling?” I can’t imagine what she is going through.

Meg is a smidge younger than me, and Marissa is a few years behind her. I can’t remember her age, but I know she isn’t even twenty-one. Still in college, single, and now pregnant.

Meg starts sobbing, huge wet tears dripping down her face. I scoot my chair closer, wrapping my arms around her and squeezing tight.

“I can’t believe I’m crying in a bar,” she spits through the tears.

“Girl, it’s Lasso’s, there is someone either fighting with their partner or crying over their partner every Saturday night. You fit right in.”

Her shoulders shake a little, not sure if she’s laughing or crying, but she pulls back, using a sleeve of her oversized hoodie to wipe the streaks off her face. The bartender comes over and I ask for two more beers, and two shots of tequila.

“I’m *so mad* at her.”

“Why are you mad?”

“She’s so *young*, she’s so *talented*, she could have made a name for herself if she could have focused on school and not boys.”

Marissa is an acrylic artist, and a damn good one too. She’s been selling her artwork to various galleries in the city ever since high school. She’s a student at The School of the Art Institute, and no doubt will have plenty of opportunities once she graduates. But now she has a baby to consider.

“She can still paint. She can still be an artist and live her dream, just because she’s pregnant it doesn’t mean it’s all over; it means it’s delayed.”

“She dropped out of school.”

Oh fuck.

“She’s been doing okay so far, selling a painting here and there and able to live off that income while staying at student housing, but she hasn’t made enough to provide for someone else. To get a quiet, off-campus apartment where she can raise a child. She was working part time at the campus gallery, but her piece of shit boyfriend told her to quit. He promised he’d support them both. He disappeared again, this time taking half of her money with him.”

The bartender comes back, sliding two clear tequila shots in front of us. We grab them in unison, clink our glasses together and down the shots. Meg grabs her beer to chase the shot, but I let the alcohol burn slowly, my mind rattling with all the information.

“I’ve worked so fucking hard to see that girl succeed, and she just threw it all away for a boy.”

Meg doesn’t talk much about her childhood. All I know is that her and Marissa were a product of the foster care system, shuffled around from home to home until a wonderful couple in their late fifties fell in love and adopted them both. The first ten years of Meg’s life were spent playing mom to Marissa. Her hardened exterior comes from years of fielding danger,

and the look on her face matches that of any other worried parent.

The future she had expected for her sister has changed, just like Emmett thought the future with me was over. Tears prick the back of my eyes, tears for Marissa, for Megan, and for how fucking thankful I am that Emmett is back in my life.

“What do I do?”

Her soft voice startles me.

I think for a moment, recalling the conversation with Emmett on his early days with Allie as a single parent, the lack of sleep, questioning everything and not having someone to bounce ideas off when their poop doesn't look right or to hand the baby over to when you're at your wit's end. “Ask her to move in.”

Meg chokes on her beer, swiping the liquid from her chin before setting her bottle down. “What?”

“I know your space is precious, but your condo has two bedrooms. Your treadmill in the spare room doesn't exactly constitute a gym. Hell, leave it there and you can still fit a bed and a crib in there. Babies are like, two feet long, they can fit anywhere.”

She doesn't say anything but seems to be listening.

“She also shouldn't have to give up on her dreams because of this. You don't want her to, either. Your schedule is sporadic, so you will probably have enough space from each other while still being there to help. If you want to help her, having her move in and taking care of those expenses is probably one of the best ways to help, if you can afford it.”

Meg scoffs at my last sentence. Even though she's younger, and she likes to flirt and have her fun, she's damn responsible when it comes to her finances. She owns her condo and has a hefty savings and retirement plan already in place, which is probably why she likes to burn off some steam.

“I can afford it.”

“I figured. But seriously, when the baby comes it will be hard. I don’t know shit about babies, but I think they cry a lot in the beginning and don’t sleep. I’ll come babysit, too. Or you and I can babysit together, two against one!”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad idea.”

I take a sip of my beer, gesturing to the bartender for two more tequila shots. “I’m full of good ideas lately.”

Meg laughs her first real laugh of the night, turning in her seat to look at me. “I like the natural curls, by the way. What brought on that change?”

I run a hand over the mess on my head. Emmett had asked repeatedly when I was going to wear my hair curly, and I had been adamantly refusing until the night he carried me into the shower and fucked me against the wall, ruining the keratin treatment I had done earlier that day. “I figured it doesn’t hurt to learn to wear it this way. Embrace what God gave me. Go natural. All that bullshit. It will save me a shit-ton of money, anyways.”

“Are you only doing it because he wants you to?”

“A little. But it’s also nice to not have to change who you are for a man.”

Meg scoffs, bringing the beer bottle to her lips. “What’s that like?”

Pretty fucking amazing. “It’s the best.” I turn toward her, letting my knees bonk hers. “I hope you feel it someday, too.”

“What is this?” she asks, a finger wagging between us. “This isn’t the Jenna I know. The Jenna I know is as pissed off at the world as I am.”

I shrug, taking another sip of my beer and feeling my face flush.

“Oh Christ. I knew it.”

“What?”

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

I pause, about to lie, to tell her whatever, it's just sex, we're taking it slow. But there's no faking when it comes to Emmett. "I don't know what this feeling is, but ... it's something." I twist the empty bottle in my hand, using the condensation to peel the corner of the label off. "You ever been in love?"

Meg's *Fuck No!* is so loud it garners attention from the people gathered around us. "My only ever sort-of relationship was Marcus, and you know how that ended."

Fucking Marcus.

"You know," I say as I turn toward her, "when your sister has her baby, they will only be a few years younger than Allie. We can have a play date!"

Meg scoffs. "You're doing it again; you're talking about suburbia life."

"We can get up early on Saturdays, grab a skim milk latte and take our kids to the park! Or we can go to a museum, have an early dinner at Chuck E. Cheese and be home, exhausted and ready for bed by seven P.M."

"Shut up." She reaches for another shot before the bartender is able to set it down. But before slinging it back she turns to me and raises it in a toast. "Cheers."

"Cheers to Chuck E. Cheese and early bedtimes?"

"No, you idiot." She keeps her hand raised, and all the humor falls from her face, replaced by a seriousness that isn't characteristic for Meg. "Cheers to a friend like you, who seems to love me whether I'm happy or sad."

My heart cracks with her statement. Meg and I are close, sure. She's the only real girlfriend I've ever had. We tell each other things, but Meg is one of those people that keeps her cards clutched close to her chest. She doesn't like people to see her as anything other than 'on', so for her to toast me for liking her whether she's happy or sad means more than most people would realize."

"Awww, Meg, you—"

“Shut the fuck up,” she says, clinking our glasses together quickly before downing her shot.

~

“Babe, what’s a famous nurse with the last name Barton? Five letters,” Emmett calls out from the bedroom.

“Clara,” I blurt out, surprised I remembered that from nursing school. After a drawn-out conversation with Meg that included another tequila shot and two beers, we shared a plate of loaded chili-cheese fries and effectively called it a night. I took an uber back to Emmett’s house planning to crawl into bed next to his sleeping frame, but with the three tequila shots in my system, I tripped over his shoes as soon as I entered the bedroom, waking him up.

“Why are you thinking about famous nurses?” I ask, turning off the light in the ensuite and leaning against the frame, waiting for Emmett to see my outfit.

Except he’s not looking at me, he’s looking at the folded newspaper in his hand, pencil scratching in the answer to five across.

“Since when do you do crossword puzzles?”

“Since I—” He pauses mid-sentence when he finally looks up and sees what I’m wearing, a look of surprise and adoration crossing his face at the same time.

“You kept my sweatshirt.”

I look down, taking in his Kenny Chesney sweatshirt, the same one he let me borrow the day of my mom’s funeral, not knowing it would be years before he’d ever see it again.

I make a show of smoothing the fabric over my stomach, down my arms, feeling the soft cotton under my fingertips. “There was a dark moment in time where I thought about burning it. Or cutting it into a thousand little fabric squares and mailing it back to you, but I’ll be honest, it’s too comfortable to destroy.”

For the most part, it lived in the abandoned back corner of my closet, collecting dust except for the days when I was feeling particularly vulnerable and in a mood to self-sabotage, so I'd take it out, run my fingers over the embroidered letters, let a few tears fall before I'd bundle it into a ball and throw it back in the closet.

"I'm glad you held onto it."

"I suppose you want it back now?" I ask, running my fingers down to grab the hem where it hits mid-thigh. I hear him start to tell me no, that I can keep it, but his words fall flat once the sweatshirt is up over my head, revealing nothing but a pair of strappy black underwear.

I toss the sweatshirt at his head, and he fails at trying to catch it. His eyes are focused directly on my chest, where the cool air has instantly made my nipples perk.

"What do you think of my new underwear?" I make a show of turning slowly, tucking my thumbs under the dainty silk straps and spinning, letting him see how tiny they are. The lingerie industry is where it's at. The amount of money they ask for in exchange for three pieces of string sewn together is insane, yet I didn't pause handing over my credit card because I wanted to see the look on Emmett's face.

And the look I imagined is nothing compared to the way he's looking at me right now.

He looks like a man about to commit a crime.

The newspaper and his pencil hit the floor, the clatter of the pencil echoing in the otherwise silent room as it rolls into the ensuite to land against the wall.

"Come here," he says, his voice low and slow, sending shivers down my spine.

I do as he commands, perching myself on the foot of the bed, perking my ass up as I climb up on all fours, crawling to him on my hands and knees, prowling, keeping my eyes locked on his until we're face to face.

Propping myself on his shoulders, I lift my legs to slide over and straddle him when he stills me.

“Not so fast,” he whispers before placing his mouth on mine. “Turn around and sit.”

I do as he asks, confused at first, until I turn around and settle between his legs, only to come face to face with our reflections in the mirror. His hands rest on my thighs, running up and down before coming to my center. His nose grazes the side of my neck, my entire body alert and waiting, and he hasn't kissed me yet.

“You have a particularly well-placed mirror,” I tease, letting my head fall back into his shoulder. His hand rests between my legs, palming me over the underwear.

“So warm,” he says, kissing my neck. “So wet.” His hands run up and down my legs, leaving a path of goose pimples as they go. His fingers tickle and tease as they move under the skinny straps along my hips, before he moves his hand under the triangle of fabric at my center. Broad fingers caress me in slow teasing circles, gathering wetness as he goes. It feels so damn good to be held in his arms, feel his chest rising and falling against my back, but like always, I'm too impatient and I want more. I drape my hand over his, following his wonderful torture for only so long before I add pressure, trying to force his fingers deeper.

He brushes my hand away. “Mm mmm, hands off or I'll stop.”

With my eyes closed, I smile at the bold side of him, letting him use my body to play. For someone who's normally so nice, so kind, my thoughtful teddy bear, I'm curious what hidden side he wants to unleash.

He slides the black underwear down my legs, leaving them tangled around my ankles before forcing my legs wide, adjusting his ankles over mine to hold them apart.

He works my nipples with his free hand, pulling and twisting enough to pull a gasp from me, distracting me for a

moment as he slides his fingers in between my legs, circling so slowly, occasionally pulling away, only to gently slap my pussy and I squeal.

“Shhh,” he murmurs, the asshole having the nerve to tease me after what he’s putting me through. “You’ll wake Allie.”

He inserts one finger, gently moving in and out before returning to my clit. It’s enough torture to keep me restless, to pull embarrassing, whimpering sounds from me, without pushing me to where I really want to be. “I need more,” I pant, practically thrashing in his arms.

“I know what you need, baby.” His voice is deep against my ear, infiltrating my system as he pushes two fingers in deep, letting me rock my hips against the motion of his hand, my whole body tingling with the need to orgasm so badly.

My mind has turned to mush, unable to focus on one singular part of me since he’s everywhere, surrounding my senses and invading my blood stream with his touches, the little bites he gives me in between kisses. My plan tonight to show him my new underwear, to taunt and tease him until he was salivating and eating out of the palm of my hand has completely backfired, but I don’t care.

I reach an arm up to grip the back of his head and pull him to me, needing more from him as my orgasm starts to build. My legs quiver, knees trying to pull up and together as I chase that high. And I’m so close, on the verge of tipping before he pulls his hand away, leaving me feeling empty and whiny.

He slaps my inner thigh. “Spread those legs, baby, let me watch.”

I groan and do as he commands, my eyes meeting his in the mirror as I widen my legs, watching his fingers pump in and out of me, his pace increasing.

Something about this whole set up is so erotic. The mirror, him fully clothed behind me, using only his hand and his words to drive me toward orgasm. It’s like watching the hottest porn while experiencing it at the same time, and as

soon as he pushes in, curling his fingers to hit that one spot, I cry out.

He holds me tightly to him, unrelenting as he wrings every ounce of pleasure from me, letting me take my time reaching that high before I come down, kissing the shell of my ear and murmuring sweet nothings that I can't understand because I'm panting too loudly.

He shuffles behind me, gently pushing me forward on the bed, hands grasping my hips and arching my ass up into the air. With my hands stretched out in front of me, I glance up into the mirror and see him stand at the edge of the bed, shedding his sweatpants and t-shirt. All the while his eyes are glued to my backside.

"You're glistening." He groans as he kicks his briefs to the floor. I lick my lips and wiggle my ass, stretching down like a feline.

"What are you gonna do about it?"

He climbs on the bed behind me, grasping the base of his cock and rubbing his head back and forth, picking up the wetness from my earlier orgasm. And once I've waited long enough, when I'm so horny all over again and he's taking his sweet time, I rise on my palms and look over my shoulder.

"Emmett," I whine, trying to back myself onto him, but he stills me.

"Let me look for a second." His voice is quiet, almost thoughtful. His eyes look into the mirror and meet mine as he slowly pushes the head of his cock into me.

"You should see yourself from here," he says, gripping my hips hard as he rolls himself forward. "You're fucking perfect, Jenna. Always are. I'm not gonna last."

My eyes fall shut at his words. *Jenna* and *perfect* are two words that never are used together. I know most people think I'm loud, that I talk too much, that I don't shut up when I need to yet don't speak up when I need to, but the more I think

about his words, the more I feel like I could be perfect in some ways. “You say that every time.”

“I mean it every time. It doesn’t get easier for me. You have no idea how sexy you are.” His words become choppy as he picks up the pace. “I’ve wanted you for so long, it still feels like a dream that you’re here, ass in the air, riding my cock.”

He pushes a hand between my shoulders to push me down onto the bed as he picks up the pace, slamming into me with such force the bed shakes.

I let the ruffled bedding muffle my screams as I roll my face to the side to look in the mirror. And through blurred vision I see him prop one foot up to change his position, deepening the angle of his thrusts. His eyes never leave my backside, vision locked on the area where our bodies meet. Lips hanging open, skin flushed, a sheen of perspiration on his forehead is the last thing I see before I cry out my orgasm.

He groans, pumping faster to ride out his release, pulsating so deep in me I feel a cramp start, before he pulls out, wrapping an arm around me as we both collapse into a pile of sweaty, satisfied limbs at the end of the bed. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t need to. Doesn’t rush to get cleaned up or grab a glass of water; instead, he holds me, pressing kisses to my shoulders, my spine, because that’s how Emmett is. And that’s why I bury my face in the comforter, praying he doesn’t see the tears welling in my eyes and the words caught in my throat.

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

o you think you bought enough princess dresses?”
“D Emmett’s lips brush against the shell of my ear as he leans in to tease.

Christmas Day with the Owens’ family is unlike anything I have ever experienced. It starts with a full breakfast, everything from mimosas and hot chocolate to donuts and quiche. We spent the better part of the morning playing outside, building snowmen. Emmett tried to tackle everyone in the snow except his mom. He even shoveled out the area under the tire swing so all the girls—his mom, included, could take a turn on it. And after a three-course dinner, all the adults are sitting around watching three kids under five years old, hopped up on cookies and without a nap, tear through their Christmas presents.

My Christmases weren’t terrible growing up. My dad wasn’t always able to make it home for the holidays, but living on base, it was common that one parent would be gone, so families would get together and make it sort of a group holiday celebration. There would be a ton of food, my mom would bake, and we’d exchange presents. It was always loud and chaotic, but it didn’t feel like today.

“There is no such thing as too many princess dresses,” I whisper over my shoulder.

I turn back to Allie as she rifles through the box of dresses I bought her. She already has a Belle gown over her Christmas dress, and she’s running each one to Emmett’s mom, asking her if she can add a cape to it. I won’t admit it, but when I

realized there was a dress or costume for every single Disney princess, plus play dresses in general, I ended up going a little crazy.

“Look how happy she is,” I whisper to Emmett as I lean back into him, slapping his knee with excitement.

He’s sprawled on the floor, legs spread, his back leaning against the edge of the couch as he sips his spiked hot chocolate. And I made myself at home, curling my legs up inside of his and pulling his arms around me as we watch her in front of the tree.

With a hot toddy in my hand, Emmett’s arms wrapped around my stomach, and the smell of Pat’s pie baking in the oven wafting through the house, all I feel inside is pure, unadulterated joy.

I look around the room and watch everyone as they tear through their presents. His nephews are busy with their first gift of monster trucks, zooming them up and over the armchair. Emmett’s dad is sitting on the floor, reading the instructions on his new air fryer. My eyes land on Patricia’s and she holds my gaze, smiling at me as her eyes glaze over.

Besides a lingering hug and whispers of how happy we are to see each other; we haven’t had time for more than small talk. I have been hoping to catch her on her own at some point today, or at least make plans to see each other when there isn’t such chaos around us. My chest aches with an apology that I’m desperate to give, hoping she understands why I did what I did at the time, even after everything her and Rich gave to me. She silently excuses herself and crosses to the kitchen, stepping over the mess of wrapping paper and plastic wrap as she goes.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Emmett and he sets down his drink to help me stand and follow her into the kitchen. Her back is to me, and I walk up behind her, reaching an arm to squeeze her shoulder. “Patricia, is everything okay?”

She jumps a little, lost in blowing her nose. Her sparkly eyes are lined with red.

“What’s going on?”

She waves her hands in front of her, fanning her face. “I’m always such a sap for happy moments.” She laughs, fighting through her tears. “I just ...” she trails off, reaching a hand out to wrap around my arm and pull me into a tight hug. “It’s so good to have you back with us.”

My heart swells, and I wrap my arms around her to pull her in closer. “I don’t know if I ever had the chance to truly thank you, for everything you did for me.”

It isn’t every day that someone is willing to let a lost teenage girl move into their house, one that they had only known for a few years, a flight risk from a dysfunctional family. Yet they took me in, treated me as one of their own children, cooked my meals, gave me a room, and paid my way.

My dad was on-board with me moving in with them, he immediately called Emmett’s dad and offered to send money each month to cover my living expenses. They declined, but my dad sent it anyway. The day I left to move to New Mexico with my dad, Pat tucked an envelope in my purse and told me to read it on the plane.

Inside that envelope was the most gut-wrenching, heartfelt letter anyone had ever written to me. They also included a check. Emmett’s parents had set aside the money that my dad had been sending each month in an account for me, matching the amount with their own once I graduated so I could have a cushion while attending college. I bawled my eyes out for the last two hours of my flight, wondering if I would ever meet people who were as loving and gracious as the Owens family. The gesture meant everything to me as a teenager, and now that I’m an adult, the full realization of their care isn’t lost on me.

“We’ve always loved you, honey. Since the first day you came over after school, you have been in our hearts.”

My nose stings. I never considered myself a happy crier; it must be contagious.

I pull back, swiping a lone tear from my face. Wanting to open up to her but feeling a sickness in the pit of my stomach as I say my next words. “I’m sorry I ignored you.”

When Emmett called and broke the news to me about his engagement and baby, I wanted to disappear. I had cut off all contact with him, and I knew I couldn’t stay friends with his mom. The few times she called me after that, I’d end it early, finding some excuse to need to hang up. Slowly but surely, I stopped responding to her texts and let her calls go to voicemail, only to go unanswered. I knew it would break her heart, but what could I have done? Did I expect to stay close to her, call her to vent about my day, about a terrible date I went on? Did we expect I’d go over to their house for dinner when I was in the city with the whole family? There would have been a big, ugly elephant in the room during every call, every visit. Eventually, she would have had to choose sides, and I would have lost her anyways.

She reaches up to swipe another tear. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I understand.” She looks over my shoulder at Emmett, another smile crossing her face before she turns back to me. “I knew how you felt about him, how you two looked at each other when the other wasn’t looking.”

A screech interrupts her as Allie runs through the kitchen, wearing a different princess gown that already has a cape, tapping everyone with her wand as she casts spells.

I follow her as she runs around the island and back into the living room, screaming. She jumps onto Emmett’s chest, he catches her with a grunt and flies backwards, landing on his back and letting her tickle him.

My heart bursts at the sight of those two, so thankful he’s back, that he’s mine, and I get to be the one he saves his smiles for.

“He’s loved you since you were kids,” Patricia says, ripping my attention back toward her. “He’s loved you since you first met. I remember ...” She smiles at the memory. “I remember the day he came home from school, and said he met a new girl with wild hair who said whatever was on her mind. He couldn’t get enough.”

Love.

It shouldn’t surprise me so much to hear her say she thinks he loves me. He’s made his feelings about me clear since he’s been back, but love isn’t something we’ve discussed.

Do you discuss love?

Lord knows I love him. I don’t know when it first happened; was it when we first met? The night he picked me up and convinced me not to run away? When he insisted on picking me up every night from my part-time job so I wouldn’t have to walk home in the dark? Or was it when he drove all night, sacrificing work and sleep to spend a few hours with me the day of my mom’s funeral?

I’ve never told anyone I’ve loved them. I don’t count my parents because that was said out of routine. I *cared* about them; I certainly didn’t want anything bad to happen to them, but it doesn’t feel the same as what I feel for him. I loved my parents because it was ingrained in me that you are supposed to love your family. Loving someone who isn’t forced to choose you is completely different.

“When he was with her,” Patricia says, squeezing my hand, “he lost his spark.

“I know he was happy to have Allie. But before we knew the truth about ... her. He wasn’t the same. He never said it aloud, but I know he always imagined it would have been you some day.”

The rest of her words fade out as the burning in my throat increases, tears stinging my eyes. What a painful thing for a mom to have to go through, to see her son with someone he didn’t love, to wonder if he missed his chance to be happy.

She lets go of my hand to dab at her eyes, laughing at herself. “You’ll have to forgive me. I always get so sappy over the holidays.” Her eyes briefly flit over my shoulder before she whips around and opens a cabinet. “Emmett, dear, where do you keep the blender, I think I need to whip up some of my special grasshoppers!” I feel his warm presence behind me as he rests a hand on my lower back. Keeping my head down, I excuse myself and rush to the half bath under the staircase. Once the door is safely locked behind me, I close the toilet seat and sit down, letting the tears that had built up under my lids fall. I let myself feel it all for a few minutes, the pain of losing him, the relief at finally having him in my life, the realization that I love him.

I love him, I love him, I love him. And I never want to let him go.

Swiping at my face, I stand and let the cool water run, cupping it in my hands as I splash my face a few times, breathing deeply. Wiping the water away with a hand towel, I catch my reflection in the mirror. My hair is especially wild today, the cold winter wind and dry air have teamed together and I’m starting to resemble Carrot Top again. I run some water over my hands and shake it off, trying to smooth some of the curls before I decide to twist my hair up in a bun on the top of my head.

Turning to open the door, I’m surprised to be met with my favorite thick chest.

Emmett is standing there, one arm up and leaning his forearm against the frame of the door, the other resting on his hip. His brows are pulled together in concern.

“Since when did you start listening to me pee?” I tease, approaching him and wrapping my arms around his waist. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the *thump thump thump* of his steady heart. He takes the hand from his hip and wraps it loosely around my lower back.

“What was all that about?” he asks into my hair.

“Girl talk.”

He pulls back to look at me, his hand leaving my back to swoop up to my hair. He takes a piece that fell free and twirls it around his finger. “Girl talk doesn’t leave you both crying.”

“The usual. Her telling me how amazing I am, and that I make everything better. Life of the party. Can’t live without me. That sort of thing.”

A chuckle rumbles from his chest as he finally drops his other arm to pull me in for a real hug. “Now that I can believe. Promise me you’re okay?”

I squeeze him tighter, breathing in his scent and letting my eyes shut. “I can promise this is the happiest I’ve ever been in my whole life.”

His arms pull tighter, one coming up to rest on my shoulders, and he buries his face into my bun as he whispers softly to me, “Me too.”

~

“I’m fucking beat,” Emmett says as he softly clicks the bedroom door shut. After opening presents, we had dessert and played board games. An after-dinner cocktail led to sitting around the fireplace while the kids played with their gifts and the adults chatted. In the end, his family stayed three hours past Allie’s usual bedtime.

We decided to call it a night when all the kids were becoming whiney and ornery, the lack of sleep and multitude of Christmas cookies finally taking a hit on them.

“Me too.” I’m snuggled under the blankets in his bed, watching him slowly undress and change into pajamas, all the while looking at me.

“What’s that look for?” he asks, folding his jeans and laying them on top of his dresser.

“What look?”

“The look you’ve had on your face ever since you and my mom had your ‘girl talk’.” he says, using air quotes around *girl talk*.

All I can do is shrug, but he doesn’t see it because I’m bundled under the blankets. I feel the words catch in my throat. I’m too chicken-shit to say them. Tears start to prick at the back of my eyes, and like the baby I am, I duck my head under the covers.

The bed shifts with his weight as he crawls in, the click of the bedside lamp telling me the room is dark.

His fingers come up to curl around the edge of the covers, tugging them down until he can see my face. “You alright under there?”

I’m fine. It’s that I’m in love with the most wonderful man, and my scarred upbringing has me paralyzed and unable to say the words. I think he loves me. I know he cares about me; I know now how hard he tried to find me, to tell me what had happened, but my stupid determination kept us apart.

“I love you,” I finally murmur, unsure if he can hear it through the blankets still covering my mouth. My face heats up, waiting for his reaction.

And there isn’t one.

His eyes soften a little, but he doesn’t cringe, doesn’t freeze. I half expect him to tell me we’ve only been dating a month or so; it’s too soon, etc.

Instead, he chuckles softly, pulling the blanket down further to expose my whole face. “Did you say what I think you said?”

“Depends on what you think you heard.” I sit up further, pushing the blankets down to my waist so I can face him. I exhale a deep breath, ready to grow the fuck up and tell him how I feel. “I love you, Emmett. I think I’ve loved you for a long time, but I didn’t recognize the feeling because I hadn’t experienced anything or anyone quite like you my entire life. But I’ve seen you grow from this sweet teenage boy into the

sexiest, most wholesome man there ever was, and I know now, I guess.” I shrug, eyes falling to my hands.

The silence lingers between us for hours. Not hours, really, probably only a few seconds. But when you confess your devotion to someone, any second they pause afterwards feels like an eternity.

Until he closes that silence by kissing me. Wrapping his arms around me and tackling me to the bed, kissing me with such passion I gasp into his mouth. Our clothes start to come off. My shirt, his pants, one by one they’re thrown around the room until we are skin on skin.

“You love me,” he finally says, surprise lacing his voice.

“I love you,” I tell him again.

When he moves in to kiss me, I hold him still, searching his face for how he feels.

“Well,” I playfully slap his chest, “are you going to say it back or what?”

An adorable flush crosses his cheeks as his head dips down to my neck. His shoulders shake with a silent chuckle before he raises his head again to look me directly in the eyes. “Did I ever tell you about the day we met, when I saw you standing in the front of our Home Ec room?”

I shake my head no.

“When I looked up from my textbook, I nearly choked. You were the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. So tall, hair sticking up all over, not a trace of makeup on and looking nervous as hell, but so, so pretty. Over the last ten years I’ve traveled half the country for work, stayed in countless cities and small towns, and I have never, *never* met anyone that could compare to you. Of course, I love you, Jenna. I love you for the way you tease me, for your terrible cooking, for the way you treat my daughter and the sounds you make when you come.” He shakes his head. “I fucking love you.”

He doesn't need to say anything more, and he can't, because I grip his head and pull him to me, crashing our lips together. I'm ravenous for him, needing to feel him inside me and all over me, once again invading all my senses because I want to be completely consumed by him. So, when he lines himself up and slides in, I bask in the feeling of being totally loved by someone. Not because we're family and they feel obligated to, and not because the words have become routine for us to say, but because he chose me, out of everyone, all those years ago, and when I felt like he was gone, that we had lost all hope, he still came back to choose me.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Maybe she's an actress, working an undercover gig on a
“**M**reality TV show, *The Secrets of Inner City Hospitals*.”

Meg scrunches her nose as she watches Lainey meticulously stock alcohol wipes and band-aids into the drawers outside patient rooms. “Maybe ... but wouldn't she be a shitty nurse if she was actually an actress? This isn't really a job you can fake.”

I lean back in my chair and steeple my hands under my chin as we both study Lainey. She's been here for about two months, and so far, is amazing. So kind. Works her ass off. She's smart but not cocky, quiet but alluring. I've tried to force her to be our friend countless times and she politely turns me down. “Haven't you seen *Undercover Boss*? Maybe she's actually the CEO of this place and she's pretending to be a lowly floor nurse.”

In all honesty, that makes the most sense so far.

“Until I force her to be my friend and learn otherwise, that's the analogy I'm going with.” I snag my soda from the counter and finish it off before tossing the can into the recycling bin. “Maybe we should get off our asses and do some work.”

Meg doesn't follow suit, instead she leans back in her chair and looks at her watch. “There are only six minutes until my shift is over. I'm going to take every last one of them because when I leave here, I get to go home to a condo filled with moving boxes and baby shower gifts. Tonight, I'm going to pour the biggest glass of wine and put together his crib.

His crib.

I cannot believe Meg's little sister is having a baby boy.

"Sweet Auntie Meg," I tease, ruffling her hair. "Sweet mama Meg."

"Fuck off," she snarls, swatting my hand away. "What are you and lover boy doing tonight?"

I shrug. Allie is staying at Grandma's and Grandpa's for the night. Emmett was on-call last night, and has been working all day, so I'm sure he will be exhausted. But my plan at least includes a hot shower, a massage, and an orgasm, in no particular order.

I pull my phone out and frown. Emmett usually checks in on me during work, or at least responds when I try to distract him. Except I texted roughly three hours ago, and it's been silent on his end.

After giving shift report, I blow a goodbye kiss to Meg and make another half-assed attempt at making Lainey my friend before I head to the locker room to get my jacket and boots, dialing Emmett as I swipe my badge to clock out.

He answers on the first ring. "Hey."

"Hey! How was work? Did you have to stay late? I was starting to worry." I still haven't gotten used to the idea of his job, of the dangers he walks into each and every day.

I put the phone on speaker as I sit on the nearest bench to switch my shoes to my boots, throwing everything in my bag as I wait for his response.

A response that is super delayed.

I tap the screen of my phone, seeing it's still connected.

"Hey, are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. So, you're on your way home?"

"What's wrong?" I wrap a hand around my bag, but my body is frozen in place. Something in his tone isn't right. "Are

you breaking up with me?”

“No, of course not. I just need to talk to you about some things.”

Some things. “Tell me now. You’re making me nervous.” I stand to pace the small corridor in the locker room, recalling the last conversation I had with him while standing in this room.

“It can wait.”

“No, it can’t. It can’t because I can tell you’re freaked out. So I’m freaked out.”

“I’d rather do this in person.”

“And I’d rather hash this out now because the last time you had this tone of voice I was standing in this same fucking room, and you told me you were getting married. So, whatever you have to say, you can say it right now.”

“Goddamn Jenna, it’s not what you think.”

“So, what is it?” I brace a hand on the wall, mentally preparing for his next words.

“Gina’s in town.”

I purse my lips to stifle the nausea boiling in my stomach. I blink once, then twice, squeezing my eyes shut to wake from the nightmare. *Gina’s in town*, I repeat to myself. Why? What does she want? Have they been in contact this whole time?

“Do you know more than one Gina?”

A soft laugh comes over the phone. “No, only one.”

I curl my arms around myself, grasping my elbows and I bend forward to drop my head between my knees. Taking a deep breath, I hold it for a few seconds before exhaling and rising. “What’s she doing here? Bar slut convention in town?”

“Jenna,” he chides.

“Don’t you dare defend her. Have you guys been talking this whole time? Did she come to the house? Is she there

now?”

“I’ve already told you I haven’t talked to her in a long time. I randomly got a call from her today, she said she is in town and that we have a lot to talk about.”

“I’ll fucking talk to her for you.” What could she possibly need to talk about after all these years. She can’t be pregnant and trying to dupe him again. She wouldn’t dare come sniffing around, looking for the family she abandoned.

Or would she?

“It doesn’t matter what she wants, right? Because you aren’t going to give her custody or anything.”

Emmett releases some sort of growl of frustration. “That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

He continues talking, but I can’t concentrate on the words, my whole body becoming prickly, the room too warm with my winter clothes on. What if she does want to be a part of Allie’s life? Would Emmett give that to her? Images flash through my mind of Gina and Allie building forts together, dancing to Disney songs and spending hours painting rocks. Of split weekends where Gina gets Allie for holidays. What if Gina gets to be the one Allie goes to when she has her first crush, when she wants to learn to paint her nails.

My lower lip starts to quiver, and I fall to the ground in a heap. Who was I to think that I could be Allie’s mom? Even if Emmett loves me, and Allie loves me, I still couldn’t take the place of someone’s biological mom. I’ve never been enough for my own flesh and blood family to love; why would I be enough for someone I’m not related to?

“You’re coming over after work, right?”

“Yeah,” I lie, standing again. “Hey, I gotta go, Meg needs something. I’ll talk to you later.”

I push through the heavy metal door and take the stairs down two at a time. Once I reach the safety of my car, I scroll through my contacts until I find his name.

It's late, but if I remember right, Jeremiah never stops working. The phone rings two, three times, and I start to think he won't answer when I hear his familiar accent.

"Jenna, my favorite travel nurse, how the hell are you?"

"Jerry, I need a favor from the recruiter that trumps all recruiters." I pull out my keys and stick them in the ignition, starting the car and cranking the heat on high. "How quickly can you find me a gig?"

The clack of his computer keys echo in the background, and he's quiet for a moment before answering, "I thought you were done with the traveling life."

"So did I, but it looks like things have changed. Any last-minute assignments available? Give me your worst. The worst of the worst, as long as it starts now."

His fingers whizz over the keys again. "I could have you in Arizona by Tuesday."

I pause to think for a moment, staring out of my windshield as yet another snow fall begins. I'm willing to bet that there isn't any snow in Arizona. Or manipulative ex-wives.

"Sign me up."

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

It's after nine o'clock by the time I pull into Emmett's driveway. He expected me to come over after work. Instead, I went to my apartment for a while, then drove out to Mattson Park, watched the ice chunks floating around the dark water, contemplating what I will tell Emmett.

He called twice as I sat in my apartment. I hadn't been there in so long, now spending every possible moment with him and Allie, that my apartment feels like a stranger's. Since I didn't know what to do, I went to get my mail, planned to take care of some housekeeping but there wasn't anything there. Nothing in the fridge but a half-bottle of wine, no dirty laundry, only a light layer of undisturbed dust and dried out plants to welcome me.

I sat on my sofa in the dark, mind swirling with questions, contemplating the decision in front of me.

When I push open the car door, a swirl of wind kicks up and sleet hits me in the face. I pull my hood up, using the sides to cover my cheeks as I keep my head down for the few steps to the house and up the front porch. My hand raises to knock, but I pause mid-movement.

Normally, Emmett has the door swung open and his arms out, ready to pull me into a hug before my knuckles reach the wood. This time, I'm met with silence. I peer to the side of the door, through the single pane glass and notice the house is dark, save for a lamp dimly lit down the hall.

I pull back, wondering if this is Emmett's way of telling me he's done with me, if he's hit his breaking point. A person will

only put themselves through so much before giving up.

“After all we’ve been through, you think you need to knock when you come into my house?” Emmett’s voice, a hint of anger mixed with sadness, cuts through the whistle of the wind.

I whip to my right, seeing his figure outlined in the dark of the night. “Jesus, I didn’t see you there.”

The creak of the chains holding up the porch swing he’s slowly swaying on should have given it away, but the anxious thoughts and wind muffled my hearing. I take a tentative few steps closer to him.

Even in the dark of the night, I can see the stress etched on his face. His hair is disheveled from worried hands running through it, bags under his eyes prominent and he’s sipping something warm from his thermos, the steam radiating through the cool air.

He reaches an arm to the side, and with his sleeve wipes the dusting of snow off the seat next to him, ushering me to sit.

“Maybe I don’t know where I stand after all this time.”

“I think you do.” His voice is stern. “I think you’re in your head.”

I slide the hood of my jacket back, taking a seat next to him. We swing for a few moments in silence, both staring forward, waiting for the other one to speak. He hands me his thermos, gesturing for me to take a sip.

“Spiked apple cider.”

I take the mug from his hands, holding it with both palms to warm the shiver that’s wracking through me, and take a long sip. “Holy shit, that’s good.”

I take another before handing it back to him.

“Want me to go make you one?” he offers, and my heart breaks.

Because I'm sure he's pissed at me, he has every right to be. He's hurt that I've been gone for the last few hours, avoiding him like the plague. Stressed about his ex being in town, but this is the type of man he is. If I said yes, he'd go inside right now and make me a hot beverage because he would put my comfort over his own.

"No, thank you," I whisper, taking a deep breath through my nose to stop the tears from forming.

He nods once, his feet continuing the rocking motion for the swing. He takes another sip, setting the mug on the snowy end table before planting his feet, forcing the swing to halt. A knee starts to bounce as he leans forward, grazing his palms together. "You running?"

I should be offended by that, that he would accuse me of wanting to run away from yet another stressful situation. But really, that's all I've done. You can run from the city and make a new life, run from people who bully you. Run from crummy family members. There is always somewhere to run, and that's exactly what I spent the last few hours contemplating doing. In five days, I could be in Arizona, where it's warm and sunny, no power outages from the storm, no ex-wives sniffing around.

"I reached out to my old recruiter and asked where I could go, and fast, so I didn't have to face this new reality."

He roughly pushes against his eyelids with the tips of his fingers, still facing forward. I'm kind of surprised he is so quiet, that he isn't telling me it will be okay and that I don't have anything to worry about. He isn't telling me that he'd do whatever it takes to make me stay. This man knows me. He knows me probably better than I know myself, and he knows that once my mind is made up there isn't any changing it.

I turn to him, pulling a leg up and curling it under me so I can face him. "I'm scared, Emmett. Terrified. I'm scared Gina will move here, and Allie will feel some sort of connection to her I could never provide. And it's selfish. I'm selfish because I want to be one of Allie's favorite people. I want her to come to me when she needs help. I love her." I pause for a moment,

picking at the skin around my cuticles, and for the first time all night, Emmett turns to look at me. “I love her as if she is my baby, and I didn’t think that was possible. So yeah, I thought about running real far away from here, so I didn’t have to have my heart broken by a three-year-old.

“But when I thought about running, I thought back on those few years without you.” That time in my life was awful. I was so empty, so restless. Unable to find anything to fill that concave hole in my chest. Most days were like living a bad dream. Wanting to wake up and have that realization wash over me that it wasn’t real, but it never came. “Life without you isn’t something I want to relive again. So, no, I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to stay here and face this bitch head-on, because there is *nothing* Gina could ever do that would hurt more than life without you.”

I can see the moment my words click, and Emmett lets out a shuddering breath, his entire body relaxing with my confession. His head falls back for a moment before he reaches for me, tugging at my forearms and pulling a leg until I’m draped over him, straddling him with the wood of the swing biting into my knees, wrapping his arms around me so tightly I almost can’t breathe.

He buries his head in my neck and says roughly, “she will *never* replace you. To me or Allie. She *couldn’t*, she hasn’t, she never did. We love you, remember?” He lifts his head, hand coming around to grasp the back of mine and pulls me into him.

Once I’m buried in the thick collar of his work coat and can smell his cologne and his skin and feel his warmth on my face, I let the few tears fall that had gathered along my lids. He rubs my back slowly, hand coming up to grip the back of my neck before trailing down to my hips.

“I don’t know what she wants, but tomorrow we can call her. Or meet with her. But, the most important part is we make this decision together, right?”

I nod into his neck, pulling him closer as a gust of wind kicks up, scattering a dusting of snow around us, tiny icicles hitting my face. I burrow myself deeper into his body, wishing to fuse myself to him.

He pulls back, placing his hands on my cold cheeks before kissing me.

“I’m sorry I’m so late,” I murmur against his lips. “I’m sorry I had to think about it.”

His hands fall to my butt, massaging gently before he playfully spans me.

“Yeah, you’ll pay later for stressing me out.”

“Let’s get one thing straight, first. I’m all in, okay? But if you and Gina want to try some bougie co-parenting bullshit where she moves into the spare room and we are like a sister wives-style family, you have another thing coming. If that’s the case, I’m installing nanny cams in every square inch of this house so I can keep an eye on her.” I think about her living in close quarters, hiding low like a snake, trying to sneak into Emmett’s room when he’s sleeping, and I’m stuck working a night shift. “No, fuck that. If she moves in, then *I’m* moving in, too, so I can really keep an eye on her.”

Emmett throws his head back, his laugh echoing into the dark night.

I squeeze his shoulders, gently moving my hands up to massage his neck under his thick jacket and kiss him once more. “That’s my only demand out of all of this.” I tell him as sweetly as possible.

“You don’t have to worry about that. The most I’ll give Gina is supervised visits in a public place. But we don’t have to worry about that right now, we can decide that later.”

We.

He reaches a hand up, knuckle grazing the back of my cheek. “Why don’t you?”

“Install nanny cams?”

“Move in with us.”

My hands stop their massage and I pull back, testing the reaction on his face to see if he’s serious or not. His eyes meet mine. No blushing, no hint of a smile ticking the corner of his mouth.

“I’m serious, Jenna. You’re here all the time anyways, and we love it. You made this your home once before; will you move in and do it again?”

I love this house, the worn cabinets, faded shag carpet, and double doors leading out to the backyard. I love the people in it and the people who lived in it before—the only people that have ever felt like a family to me, something no other house would be able to replicate.

I pull him into me, murmuring my *yes* against his lips as a full-body shiver wracks through me.

“Want to go inside?”

I stand and wait for him while he stands, wrapping my arms around his thick waist and setting my head on his chest. “Is Allie at Grandma’s and Grandpa’s?”

He tucks me under his arm as he walks us to the door, our steps in sync with one another. “Just you and me, baby,” he says as he opens the front door. “The way it always should have been.”

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

I should probably go to bed.

I should have gone to bed two hours ago, considering I've been home that long. After checking on Allie and kissing Emmett's cheek as he sleeps, I told myself a quick shower would make me feel better. But after the water ran cold and I wrapped a towel around myself, I caught a glimpse of my tear-streaked face in the mirror, and the feelings hit me all over again.

I look at my pajamas, still folded neatly on the counter, and wonder if I have the strength to put them on. Or if I should give up and curl into a pathetic little ball here on the bathroom floor.

With a heavy sigh that reverberates off the walls of the quiet bathroom, I toss on my t-shirt and brush my teeth, foregoing the pants as it takes too much energy to put them on. On light feet, I leave the ensuite and go into the bedroom.

Emmett's back is toward me, laying on his side, arms across his massive chest, and I want to be right there so badly. I want to be tucked in between those crossed arms, breathing in his scent, locked into the only safe space I know.

So that's exactly what I do, because I'm selfish. Knowing it will wake him, I crawl into bed, lifting one of his arms up, loosening the other, and tucking myself against his chest. When he smiles in his sleep, pulling me to him and wrapping me tightly, it solidifies the fact that he's too good to me.

“Did you have fun?” his husky, sleepy voice mumbles.

I swallow thickly and nod against his chest. “Mmhmm” I squeak out, trying to make it sound cheery even though cheery is the last thing I feel.

In that weird way that Emmett knows everything, he immediately pulls back, reaching for my face to tilt it up to his.

Thankfully the room is dark, but he looks for a minute, and I try to lay my head back on his chest, but he rolls over and flips on the bedside lamp. I squint with the light, but I don't miss the shock at him seeing my bloodshot eyes and puffy face.

“What the hell happened? Are you alright?” He immediately sits up and smooths my wet hair back from my face, looking over every inch of me, my neck, my arms, squeezing my legs. “Are you hurt?”

“I'm fine. Sad.”

He lets out a low chuckle. “I see that, but why? What happened at girls' night?”

Meg and I finally convinced Lainey to go out with us. After months of pestering her and trying to make her my friend, she slowly came out of her shell. She'd join us in the alcove for a quick break, and cracked jokes occasionally. So, when all three of us happened to leave the hospital around the same time tonight, and Meg called out to her in the parking lot that we were going out for a drink, I nearly peed myself when she nodded that she'd join us.

There is something about her I couldn't place. She seems to have it all. She's beautiful, she's smart, she's so kind and never loses her cool, never complains. She has a lot of qualities that the average person would be envious of, but she's timid. It wasn't until a couple beers in, and my persistent nagging, I questioned her seemingly sudden move to Chicago and her history when she finally spilled her guts.

“I’m sad for Lainey. Tonight, I found out she moved here to escape a nasty past, a long history with an abusive ex-boyfriend, and the things he did to her ... the things that woman had to overcome,” I choke, feeling my words get caught in my throat. I’ve never known someone personally who has experienced abuse. We will get the occasional patient in the hospital who experienced something traumatic, and I learn a piece or two of their story. Hearing it from a friend is so very different. It hit too close to home.

“Jesus,” he mutters, grimacing as her story pours from my lips. “What the fuck is wrong with some people?”

“I can’t imagine what that would be like, to be in a relationship and have someone do that to you.”

Emmett wipes my tears as they come, making me cry harder.

“I don’t know why I’m being such a baby about it all. I’m not the one that suffered.”

“I’ve told you before, sweetheart. You’re a caring person. Whether you realize it, or whether you want to be, when you’ve decided that you care about someone, you’re all in. With me, with Allie, with Meg, and now with this girl. I can tell she is someone you’re going to wrap your arms around. When your heart is in it, it will make you sad.”

Lainey still holds onto a lot of anger, understandably, and she still beats herself up for not seeing the signs. She blames herself, which is horse shit. We talked a lot tonight about the world, and about the evil that seems to lurk around every corner.

Lainey grew up with a lot of love. With caring parents, involved grandparents, and a string of accolades after her name. She had love, she *knew* love. It shouldn’t happen to anyone, but it sure as hell shouldn’t have happened to her.

Between the three of us, something like that could have most likely happened to me.

“My mom was a bitch,” I blurt out, laughing, thinking that I should feel guilty for saying that about someone who isn’t alive to defend herself, but it’s true. “She was mean to me my whole life, but I never questioned it or fought back until I became a teenager because it was all I knew, so I accepted it.” My dad supports me from a distance, but he’s never told me he loved me, never said I made him proud by my choices. His version of being a parent is a card on my birthday and an occasional text.

Without having anyone to show me what love felt like, I could have grown up begging for it. I could have ended up with the wrong type of people, the wrong friends, hanging with the wrong crowd, looking for attention from anyone who would hand it out.

“Most of my adult life I’ve had this fuck-off mentality for anyone who doesn’t treat me right.” I was picked on all the time as a kid, and I thought it came with the territory of being the weird new girl, the girl who was too tall, with puffy, tumbleweed-curlly hair. I never fought back. I’d go home and tell my mom what happened, she’d sigh and tell me to get over it. Yet, it happened at every school, every first day, but the last time someone picked on me was Nasty Natalie. First day of sophomore year, and Emmett put a stop to it.

“I think I knew, but didn’t realize it until tonight, that when we were fifteen years old, you showed me what it was like to be cared for, to be wanted. You showed me how people were supposed to treat me long before I knew what love was. Do you realize how good you were to me?”

He invited me into his world on day one. I went to family dinners at his house. He supported me through school, through every crummy part-time job. He studied with me so I wouldn’t fail, sat through volleyball games and cheered through college classes. Whatever the situation was, it was always him.

“God, if I hadn’t met you, I don’t know where I would have ended up.” The tears begin to fall at a pace I can’t control.

He sits up, kissing my face, wiping my tears with his shirt.

“Even if you hadn’t met me, I think you would have done amazing things with your life. That’s who you are, Jenna. You’re wild and crazy and you don’t give up.”

I shake my head in disbelief, “Because of how *you* cared about me, I learned my worth. I learned I deserve better. My mom made me feel like I didn’t have a lot to offer someone, and some days, I still think that’s true. But I love you, and I love Allie, and I’ll do whatever it takes to be in your life.”

He lays back on the pillow, pulling me with him and I curl up against his chest, sniffing as the tears fall. We lay in silence, him grazing lazy fingers over my back, combing through my hair, finding all of the ways to soothe my broken heart. And once I can breathe again, once my tears have dried and I can see clearly, I roll over, pressing myself against his lips. When I pull back to see his face, to apologize for waking him up and sobbing into his pajamas, I’m surprised to see he doesn’t look exhausted, he’s looking at me like ... like I’m the greatest thing he’s ever seen.

“What’s that look for?”

He releases his grip on me and smiles, pushing the blankets off of his legs. He gets up, rushes over to the closet and flips on the light, immediately pulling out old boxes from the top shelf.

“What are you looking for?” I call out after him, moving so I’m kneeling at the edge of the bed. “I’ll be damned if you pull out a hidden sex toy or something right now.”

I rise to my knees, trying to see what he’s digging for as he pulls something from the shelf and tucks it in his pants before stacking the boxes back. He returns to the bed, ushering for me to sit down, so I do, pulling the comforter back so he can sit next to me.

But once I’m seated, he drops down to one knee on the floor in front of me.

All the air escapes my lungs.

“Allie and I went shopping,” he starts.

Fiddling with something wrapped tightly in his palm, he rolls his fist over to show me a maroon velvet box. With trembling hands, he opens the box, revealing a ring. And not any ring, the most beautiful piece of jewelry I have ever seen.

Two delicate white gold bands glimmer against the light from the bedside lamp, the little diamond accents nearly stealing my attention away from the giant rock in the center.

“Allie wanted one band and I liked another; we couldn’t decide on one, so we got both, and soldered them together.” The bands aren’t identical, but they perfectly match, as if they were made to be a pair.

With shaking hands, he pulls the ring from the box, grasping my hand in his. “I love you, Jenna. The day you walked into my classroom I think my heart stopped beating. I went home and told my mom I had met a girl. What I didn’t tell her was that I knew I was going to marry you.

“I don’t have a proposal planned, but we picked up this ring today and I told myself I’d carry it around, and whenever there was moment between us, where I look at you and think—this is it, I couldn’t possibly love her more, I would take that opportunity to drop to my knee and propose.” He looks over his shoulder at the clock on the bedside table. “Should have known it would be within the first ten minutes of seeing you for that moment to happen.” He turns back to look at the ring before his eyes come to meet mine. “Marry me, Jenna, and I’ll promise to always show you how you deserve to be loved.”

My vision blurs as my eyes fill with tears. A crackling sob escapes me, this time from happiness and not from sadness. I grab his face with both hands, forcefully kissing him, his arms still trapped between us. I wrap myself around him, never ever wanting to let him go.

“Sorry it’s not a sex toy,” he teases, and I laugh against his lips, not taking the time to answer because I refuse to stop kissing him.

“Is that a yes?” he asks when I finally break for air.

“Hell yeah, that’s a yes!” I grab the ring from the box, and he helps me slide it on.

I look at the ring on my hand, the man still kneeling at my feet, wondering what I did to deserve his love.

But I think that’s what love is. It’s someone who loves you even if you feel you don’t deserve it, or can’t understand why they’d choose you, but by choosing you, they’ve somehow made you a stronger version of yourself. No matter the distance, how much time has passed, or the angry words once said. Love will make it through, and that, in itself, is a goddamn miracle.

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