



Billionaire

GRUMPY

Grinch

C A M I C A L V I N

Billionaire Grumpy Grinch

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Chapter One

Jenna

Going from Atlanta to Lake Lanier was always a bit of a culture shock. My brother Dean and I had been coming here since we were kids, and even though Mom and Dad were gone, it was a tradition we couldn't bring ourselves to give up. This year, I was traveling with my best friend from school, Lexi, and Dean said he was bringing some stuffy work friend. Gag me. Finance dudes always thought they were something else and treated everyone around them like underlings.

Dean wasn't like that, of course. He was like the diamond in the rough, a nice guy with money. He was still single, but I doubted that would last very long. Then holidays like these would be filled with his own family plans. I had to make the most of this. It could be the last time for all I knew.

I looked over to the passenger seat to see Lexi hanging her head out of the car. Her long, blonde hair was whipping in the wind and her eyes were closed as the cool winter air came in through her open window.

"Lex," I said, "haven't you seen that horror movie, *Hereditary*? Get your gorgeous head back in here. I'm not picking it up on the side of the road."

Lexi sat up and looked at me, her girl-next-door brown eyes questioning my logic.

"I'm not gonna knock my head off," she said, referencing the scene in the movie. "But I'll come back in. I'm cold as shit."

"Well, it is winter," I said back, laughing. "You know, Christmas, hot cocoa, coats?"

Lexi rolled up her window and flipped on the heat. "At least we don't have to worry about snow," she said.

But as I looked at the gray skies, I secretly wondered if there was about to be a Christmas miracle, *White Christmas* style. You know, a giant snowfall right at the exact perfect time. Lexi also looked like she doubted what she'd said, and was now rummaging in her bag, eventually extracting gloves.

"Just wanted to be sure I had them," she said. "In case of an emergency."

"The only emergency we're likely to have," I said, "is running out of snacks. Why did you only pack rabbit food, Alexis?"

She giggled and pulled the cooler bag into her lap. It was filled with protein bars, fruit, veggies, and various soy chips. "I'm getting a head start on my New Year's resolution."

I'd been envisioning a Christmas filled with cookies and spiced rum, and Lexi has been dreaming of a slimmer waistline. I'd definitely have to send Dean for better snacks. I'd start my diet after New Year's like a normal person, thank you.

Despite the gloomy skies and the chill, the drive there was beautiful. Exactly what you'd expect a wooded lake to look like. It was like every fallen leaf and naked tree was placed by a landscaper for maximum effect.

"I can't believe you'd rather hang out with me and my brother than with your family," I said.

"They're just so loud sometimes," Lexi replied. "It will be nice for once to have a quiet little Christmas and just enjoy the season. Plus, you know adult beverages aren't allowed in my parents' house because I have stupid teenage brothers. So at least I can have a drink or two with you guys."

I laughed and shook my head. For a nursing student, Lexi Marin sure did love a drink. Never in excess of course, but if you were looking for someone to go out with on a Tuesday, she was your girl.

Lexi's phone went off, and I realized it had been doing that a lot the last

hour.

“Who in the world are you texting?” I asked. “You’re gonna lose signal here soon.”

“Noneya!” she said, turning so I couldn’t see her screen. “Just a dumb summer fling.”

“Lexi, you don't have summer flings.”

She shrugged and texted back whoever it was furiously, then shoved her phone in her pocket, smiling suspiciously.

“Just a summer fling, huh?” I said, grinning. “I’ll get it out of you before this trip is over, mark my words.”

Lexi mimed zipping her lips and throwing away the key. I rolled my eyes and pushed my shoulder into hers playfully.

Before I knew it, we were pulling into the long driveway, gravel outlined with cut logs. The trees had been cleared to give a gorgeous view of the cabin, and as soon as I saw it, I felt ten years old again.

Dean and his friend were obviously not there yet, which was perfect for me because that meant Lexi and I got first dibs on bedrooms. I knew exactly which one I wanted because it had the newest mattress and an ensuite bathroom. It was the one my parents had always slept in and I’d coveted it since I could remember.

The cabin itself was as picturesque as the drive up here. Nestled neatly against Lake Lanier, the landscaping was clearly the pride and joy of the owners. Equipped with an outdoor firepit and a hot tub, this promised to be one of the best Christmases of my life.

As long as I could avoid Dean’s stuffy friend.

“I’ll grab the bags,” Lexi said as I popped the trunk. “You work on figuring out those digital locks.” I rolled my eyes and nodded.

Three years ago, the owner switched from running the rental themselves to doing it through Airbnb. Along with the switch came an upgrade to the entry—a smart lock. You had to hold your phone up to it to get it to let you inside. I wondered how that was going to work with such a bad signal, but when I got the app up and running, it worked like a charm.

“That wasn’t so bad,” I said to Lex as she climbed the steps and handed me my stuff. “Can’t wait to see technologically illiterate Dean try to figure this out.”

Lex laughed and shook her head. “How does someone who repels tech so hard have a job working with it?”

“I have no idea, and I’m not about to ask. What a snooze fest.”

We pushed open the door and walked inside, our noses instantly filled with the scent of Christmas. When we booked online, it had asked if there were any particular holiday extras we would need, and I didn’t even wait a minute before asking it be decked in Christmas garb. They had really done a great job. There was even a real Christmas tree.

“It’s so cute,” Lexi said, admiring some of the decor. “They have great taste.”

“They really do,” I agreed. “Now, let’s grab bedrooms before the men get here or we will inevitably be relegated to whatever they don’t want.”

“You don’t really think they would do that, do you?”

“Oh yeah,” I insisted, knowing my brother. “Are you willing to risk getting the room with bunkbeds?”

Lexi’s eyes went wide and she dashed down the tiny hallway.

“Dibs on the room to the left,” I shouted, and she slid past the master bedroom taking the very next one.

I was relieved to see that the bedroom looked exactly like I’d remembered.

Worn but clean beige carpeting, stone tile leading to the ensuite. On the far side of the room there was a picture window with a reading nook, something I used to spend hours in when I was a kid.

I could imagine my parents sitting in this bed, wrapping presents, Dean and I trying to steal a peek at them from the doorway. I could remember the one Christmas that Dean cracked open his head from tripping and hitting it on the bedside table. This place was as much home to me as the house my parents had lived in.

I heard the front door click, beep twice, and open. My dear older brother had arrived.

“Hello?” I heard him call from the entrance. There was then some mumbling noise and a deep voice laughed. “I saw your car, nerd, I know you’re here already, and I swear if you took the master—”

“You mean this master?” I said, poking my head around the door frame.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean said, laughing. “I told you she would do that. It’s the reading nook, that’s all she cares about.”

“No, it’s not,” I said in mock insult. “It’s the reading nook *and* the new mattress.”

It was then that Dean’s friend caught my eye. He looked every bit the finance manager Dean said he was. But somehow my brother had failed to mention that his work friend was absolutely gorgeous. I could feel myself drooling already.

He couldn’t have been shorter than six feet, and he had this wavy dark hair that defied gravity in its shape. His eyes, which he had just revealed after pulling off a pair of Oakley’s, were this crazy gray-blue color, and when he looked at me, I swore I could see into his soul.

It was also clear that this “friend” went to the gym... like, a lot. The way

his shirt fit on his frame was no joke. It was tight without being too small, and the jeans he'd paired with it gave me a pretty good idea of how many squats this man was doing.

"Dean," he said, looking from me to my brother. "What is this? When you said rustic, I thought you meant something high-tech with a woodsy feel. This cabin is *barely* good enough for a Boy Scout troop."

Attractive money man said *what?*

"Come on, dude," Dean said, looking around. "It will be fun. Better than spending Christmas alone."

"Is it?" he asked.

Dean patted him on the back, seemingly unbothered.

I looked on in horror as this man insulted my nostalgia and spoiled this moment with his presence.

"Dean," I said in my calmest voice possible. "Can I speak with you in the bedroom, please?" I gave him a sisterly smile that he would know meant I wasn't pleased. He rolled his eyes and followed me in, closing the door behind him.

"Are you kidding me, Dean?" I asked, gesturing through the door to where tall, dark and sour was standing.

"Jenna, please. The man had nowhere else to go—"

"I can see why," I hissed, trying not to be too loud despite the irritation I was feeling. "He's practically the Grinch."

"Don't be so dramatic. Gabe is just used to a different standard of living."

A different standard of living, meaning this wasn't good enough for him. My childhood, my memories, not good enough for him to keep his mouth shut.

"Yuck. His name is *Gabe*? Is there a bigger douchebag name? Did you

think to yourself, ‘Hmmm. Who is the biggest meathead I know?’ Honestly.” Dean crossed his arms and frowned at me. I did the same, putting us at an impasse. “At least I brought Lexi, who’s nice to look at,” I said, still trying to prove my point.

Dean opened his mouth to say something, and I punched him in the ribs. He wheezed for a minute then flicked me in the forehead. It was like being kids all over again.

“I picked Gabe. He’s my choice. You get no say. Just stay away from him if you dislike him that much. Go paint your nails, or braid hair and talk about boys, or whatever you two do together.”

“This isn’t over, butthead. I’ll make him so miserable he leaves on his own.”

“We will see,” Dean replied, reaching for the door. “I’m planning to give him the best Christmas of his life so... good luck.”

Dean pushed past me and burst into the hallway like he’d won the fight. But I was on my guard, ready for whatever this ‘Gabe’ had to throw at me. I was also determined to have the best Christmas of *my* life, and I’d be damned if I let some suit with a frat boy name ruin it.

Chapter Two

Gabe

I honestly felt a little bad about my comment, since the cabin *was* nice, even if it was tiny. I could tell it had hit Dean's sister hard for some reason, but I didn't really get why. All I knew was that she and Dean, who looked at me with a half-apologetic grimace, disappeared into a bedroom to speak in hushed tones while the blonde woman and I were left standing alone awkwardly, waiting for the other two to return.

She sat on the couch, twirling her hair, then pulled out her phone for a minute before shaking her head in frustration and making a noise halfway between a sigh and a groan. "I'm sorry," she said, standing and reaching for my hand. "I'm Lexi, Jenna's friend."

Even though introductions had been neglected, I knew their names because Dean had been talking about them on the way here.

"Gabe," I said, returning the gesture as politely as I could, which I was sure came across as very businesslike, given my background. I supposed it was better than coming across as a snob, which I was sure I already had. "Dean's friend."

"You're... not what I expected," she said, eyeing me with an expression I thought I recognized.

"Why?" I asked, already knowing the answer and wishing I didn't. Despite the fact I was a numbers guy, I was in pretty good shape thanks to a strict diet and workout routine. I didn't do it for the attention, and often did all I could to ignore it, but I'd be lying if I said I never noticed when women gave me *that* look. The "you're really hot for a finance guy" look of surprise that usually was followed by some kind of flirtatious advance, which I always

promptly shut down. I spent far too much of my life working and maintaining my health to worry about things like dating.

Exactly why, however, I didn't get to find out, because at that moment, Dean and Jenna came back down the hall. We all stood there, unsure what to say. Dean tried to give me a look I assumed was supposed to say everything was fine, but Jenna's face told me a different story. She was glaring at me with these piercing green eyes that looked even brighter beneath her dark brown hair. Her lips were pulled back like whatever words she was about to say were poison from a snake's teeth.

"We're going to go unpack," Lexi said quickly before Jenna could say whatever it was she was brewing. She grabbed Jenna, smiling at both Dean and me, though there was definitive tension in her expression as she tried to remain neutral without abandoning her friend. Both girls left the living room, and Dean and I were left alone.

"Come on, man," he said quietly. "Look, I know I encouraged you to come, but you didn't have to. Christmas at this cabin is really important to Jenna and me, so just try to have a good time, okay? I guarantee it'll be fun if you give it a chance."

I sighed but nodded. I could understand the desire to keep traditions going even when the people who started them were gone.

"Okay," I said, relenting. "I'll try. I'm sorry if I said something out of line. I didn't realize that this place was a tradition for you guys. I'll try to look on the bright side."

"It's all good," Dean said, walking around and taking in the surroundings. He stopped by the fireplace and ran his hand across the garland on the mantle. The pine bristles sprung back as his fingers left them. He leaned forward and smelled, but then turned his head to the side to look at the

Christmas tree. “God, I love a real tree. Not like you see in the city. You can’t replicate that smell, no matter how many candles or scent sticks you put around.”

For the first time in at least an hour, I smiled and joined him beside the tree. I cupped one of the baubles in my hand and looked at my distorted reflection in it.

“Yeah,” I said. “There is something nostalgic about it.” Then, a less than happy memory worked its way into my thoughts. Well, it had been happy at one point, but now it wasn’t. “You know, my ex and I used to cut our own trees. I actually proposed to her by hiding a ring in the tree we were going to cut down. I pulled it out and got down on one knee.” Even I could hear the bitterness creeping into my voice the longer I talked.

“Listen,” Dean said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “Hannah doesn’t know what she’s missing, besides a curmudgeonly, cantankerous old man.” I shrugged his hand off, and he laughed. “Come on, man. You haven’t dated anyone in five years. It’s time to move on. My Christmas gift to you this year is permission to go be a person, since you don’t seem to want to give it to yourself. Go out and find someone. Quit being a recluse. You’re in shape, you’re rich, you’re kind of not too old...”

I whacked him gently upside the back of the head and he laughed.

“Not too old to put you in your place,” I said, shoving him away. He ended up in front of a large window overlooking the lake.

“Wow, look at that view,” he said, stopping in his tracks. “It never fails to get me. Every single time since I was a kid.”

I looked out the window where he pointed, and I had to admit, the panoramic view of the lake was stunning. The sunlight was gleaming off the surface of the water, sparkling like a million little diamonds. A few people a

way down the shore were fishing, and off in the distance, I could see a small boat.

“It’s beautiful,” I said honestly. The cabin might have left more than a little to be desired, but the lake and the view of it were incredible.

“We’ll probably want to cut some firewood,” he said, pointing at a small, almost depleted stack beside a stump. “You can take care of that, right?” He elbowed me, then went to the kitchen. He opened all the cabinets and a cooler bag on the counter, which he looked inside.

“Well, I was expecting to see evidence of Jenna in here, but clearly Lexi packed the food because it’s all healthy snacks. And they only brought one box of cocoa mix? We’ll have to do a grocery run.”

I fought the urge to groan. It was such a small thing, but the small things were starting to add up.

“Let’s go unpack, too. You and I will be doing this holiday Boy Scout style.” I wasn’t quite sure what he meant, but then he turned and waved me to come with him, grabbing his suitcase.

I followed Dean down the hall to where the bedrooms were, passing the girls’ rooms. Dean’s sister shot me a look and closed the door as I walked past.

Great. Guess you really only do get one chance to make a first impression, and I screwed mine up. Now, not only was I stuck in this little cabin for Christmas with a group of people I barely knew, Dean notwithstanding, but at least one of them had already made some kind of decision about me based on a single comment. Just what everyone wanted. To spend the holidays in close quarters with unfriendly strangers.

I’d spent the last five Christmases alone since my fiancée left me. My parents died before that, and I’d done my best to make the most of every

holiday. But I couldn't bear the thought of one more "O Holy Night" and rum-spiked eggnog with no one to share it with.

So when Dean came into work last month and said there would be an extra bed at the Airbnb his sister booked for Christmas, I was excited, but nervous. It took him a bit of convincing, since he knew it was either that or he'd have to hear me moan about the loneliness of a solo holiday again, but I eventually caved.

And I'd been dreading the weekend ever since. With good reason, it seemed.

Past the living room was the kitchen and a dining room, then a hall. There were two doors at the end of it, but when I went to one and Dean went to the other, I found myself looking at a bathroom. It was a nice bathroom, don't get me wrong—clawfoot tub and standing shower—but I'd been expecting a bedroom.

"Uh, Dean?" I said, stepping to the side to show him what I'd found. "Guess we won't be duking it out over who gets what room."

"I know. I just wanted to see your reaction," he replied, doing the same and showing me into the room he'd opened, which had a pair of bunkbeds.

"Perfect," I said, following him into the room and putting my suitcase on a chair. "Not exactly what I pictured. So how do we decide who gets top or bottom?"

Dean looked at me and shrugged. "I can take the top," he said, then elbowed me in the ribs with a laugh. "Don't want the old man to break a hip."

I chuckled despite my sour mood. "Oh, yeah?" I teased back with a soft punch at his arm. "Do we need to test who's less likely to break something? At this point, I'm pretty sure you only brought me to chop the firewood."

"You figured me out," Dean said, putting his hands in the air like he'd

been busted, so I threw a pillow at him, and he laughed.

I started pulling clothes out of my bag, stacking them neatly in drawers or hanging them in the tall wardrobe. After a few moments of silence where Dean did the same thing, I finally said, “You really like this place that much?”

“Yeah,” he said, giving me a look like I was crazy. “It’s nice. Cozy. You don’t think so?”

“I don’t know,” I said, tugging at the flannel sheets on the bed and grimacing. “I don’t want to sound like a snob but it just seems kind of... cheap.”

Someone scoffed behind me, and I turned to see Dean’s sister standing there, looking at me in disbelief.

“Cheap?” she echoed in a high-pitched voice. “I’m sorry, did I actually hear you say you thought this place is *cheap*?”

“Jenna,” Dean said, stepping halfway between us as though to protect one or both of us from the other, “I’m sure Gabe didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh, I think he meant it exactly like that,” she said, crossing her arms and scowling at me. “It’s too tiny and cheap for his highness.”

“Highness?” I said back, frustration at her attitude creeping in. “Hardly. I just know what I like, and this isn’t it.”

She threw her hands out to the side in a mock bow. “Then by all means, your *majesty*, you are more than welcome to front the cost of somewhere else.”

“Not sure why that wasn’t an option in the first place,” I said, regretting the words immediately. I knew why it wasn’t an option, but I was annoyed, and my temper was getting the better of me.

“Because some of us don’t have never ending wallets. Some of us have to

work service jobs to get by and save up for six months to book a place this 'cheap.' Because *some* of us have to cling to whatever we can of our childhoods just so that we can have a nice Christmas with all that's left of our family."

She was breathing heavily, and I felt a bit bad at knowing how long she'd saved for this place, but her aggression toward me dampened the pity I felt.

Not by much, but it did.

"Hey, Jenna," Dean said, "why don't I come help you unpack?"

"I'm already unpacked," she shot back at him. "Maybe your 'friend' shouldn't bother doing the same if he's going to be such a negative impact on our holiday."

"Jen," Lexi said. "Why don't we go wrap presents? Don't you think the place will be so much homier with gifts under the tree?"

"It's not going to be homey at all as long as someone is just here to shit all over something special to us."

Her voice broke, and I realized I had been kind of nasty about this. I didn't realize it was a tradition when I got here, but I did know when I called it cheap. But I didn't know how to apologize now without looking like an asshole, so I decided to do the stupid thing and stand my ground.

"Sounds like you've already made up your mind about me and how this holiday is going to go, so I guess there's no point in me trying, is there?"

"Alright," Dean said, finally getting directly between me and his sister. "Jenna, out. Go wrap presents or something like Lexi said. Gabe and I are going to talk and see if we can't work anything out."

"Good luck," she said with a wry laugh before turning and walking out the door, her long, shining hair flowing behind her, leaving me looking like a jerk.

Because I was.

Chapter Three

Jenna

“**W**hat in the world was he thinking?” I asked, throwing my hands in the air, knowing Lexi probably didn’t have any more answers than I did. “Gabe is the poster child for a soulless, corporate robot. How in the world does Dean expect someone like that to have fun with us?”

Lexi shrugged, took a long drink of her hot chocolate, and smacked her lips. She had suggested we calm down with cocoa, but given the circumstances, I’d insisted on giving it a little kick. So we had spiked it with rum so *Gabe* would be more tolerable, but since the booze was loosening my tongue, all it succeeded in doing was making me more focused on how much he irritated me and giving me the motivation to let those thoughts rip.

We were in my bedroom with Dean’s presents in front of me. He and I had a tradition as far as gifts went. One sweater, one set of pajamas, and one funny t-shirt for clothes. One pack of the other’s favorite childhood candy—Butterfingers for Dean. And one gift that was a “from the heart” gift. This year, I’d gotten Dean a new watch, since he’d said his was looking rough. It cost me two weeks’ pay, but I’d gotten him a really nice one at a discount on Black Friday.

“Could be worse,” Lexi said, shrugging like Christmas hadn’t just been ruined by my stupid brother and his “two sizes too small” friend.

“How?” I asked, unsure what could possibly be worse than some hunk of burning coal making ruining my special Christmas his own personal mission.

Dean knew how important Christmas was to me. He knew that it was the time our family had always been the closest, and that it was the time of year that I felt closest to *him* since he did so much to help me through their death.

Hell, he'd personally paid for the cabin up until this year, when I said I'd wanted to do it. He'd tried to insist since he made so much more than me and I still had to pay for school, but it felt important to me to do it.

So why would he bring someone to Christmas who was such a sour apple? It didn't make sense. It went against everything he ever said, including what he promised me when we said we were going to bring friends this year.

"I promise, Jen," he had said to me. "I have this really great friend who always spends Christmas alone. This is going to be the best Christmas we've ever had. You'll see."

And not only did he break that promise, he went entirely in the opposite direction.

"I mean," I said, taking another sip of cocoa before pulling my suitcase open to take out a gift to wrap, "how does someone like that even end up friends with my brother? Dean's a great guy, and Gabe is just... not."

"Dean is pretty great," Lexi said. "Maybe we're just not seeing—"

"Exactly!" I interrupted. "What aren't we seeing? How did he trick my brother into bringing him here for Christmas? How did he pretend to be nice long enough to get an invitation?"

Lexi opened her mouth to answer me, but clearly couldn't think of anything to say. She gave me an apologetic smile and a shrug, then went back to wrapping something with the gold and blue paper she had in her hand. It was a thick, luxe wrapping paper that had probably cost more than I spent on most of the gifts I was wrapping.

I couldn't imagine spending that kind of money on paper that was just going to get ripped off, but Lexi had always believed that the presentation of the gift was almost as important as the gift itself. And she always managed to make gifts look like works of art, so I guessed it helped in some way.

I, on the other hand, believed the thought mattered more than how it looked. And right now, I was holding Dean's gift and was contemplating which paper I should use to wrap it. I had bought a bunch of discount wrapping paper at the end of last year's holiday season, so I had a lot of options. I had some with superheroes, some with wintery scenes or symbols, some that read *Merry Christmas*, and some that were fairly plain.

And when it came to the "thought" I had about him and this gift, right at that moment, I felt like using an old newspaper to thank him for bringing his coworker to our Christmas—right before I threw the several hundred-dollar watch at the wall. Instead, I grabbed a roll of cheap, shiny red paper, not wanting to waste anything too special on the person who brought Scrooge to Christmas, and laid it out flat to measure before I cut it.

Mom always taught us it was better to measure twice, cut once to ensure accuracy. Mom was serious about gift giving, and the wrapping was part of the experience. She and Lexi would have had parties about it if they'd ever gotten to know each other, I was sure. Even with measuring twice, I was lucky if I managed to get it right enough to cover the whole gift without having to cut a patch to cover where I messed up.

Indeed, despite trying three times to make sure I had the right size, I managed to leave a square about two inches big open on one side. Rather than try to blend it in, however, I leaned into my shortcomings and cut a piece from the superhero roll—one of Dean's favorite characters from when we were kids. He always made fun of me for my less than stellar wrapping skills, so I figured I may as well preempt the teasing.

Assuming we had the capacity to laugh at all with Gabe here.

"Ow!" I said as I pulled the paper off the roll. I looked down at my hand and saw a thin red line where I'd managed to slice my finger. "Damn it."

“What’s wrong?” Lexi asked, and I held up my finger. “Oh, a papercut? Ouch.”

“Not nearly as painful as having to interact with *him* for Christmas,” I grumbled.

“Okay,” Lexi said in a voice that was half scolding, half reassuring. “I get it. The guy rubbed you the wrong way. But you’re giving his attitude all the power over you by letting it irritate you this much. If you have a bad Christmas, that’s on you, Jen. Not him. He can blow all the hot air he wants to, but he can only make you feel a certain way if you let him.”

I turned to grab my hot chocolate and leaned against the dresser, sipping it. The rum tickled the back of my throat, and I took a bigger swig, wanting more of its numbing effect.

“I know you’re right, Lex,” I said, “but it wouldn’t be so bad if it wasn’t Christmas. Having to ignore someone on *Christmas* because they won’t shut up and be a kind, decent person should be illegal.”

Lexi’s phone buzzed and she scrambled for it. I pretended not to notice but tried to get a peek at the screen. Unfortunately, she was too far away to see any kind of picture or name.

I continued with my wrapping as Lexi’s fingers clicked across the digital keyboard and when she sent it, she sighed.

“You know what I was just thinking about?” Lexi said wistfully. “My favorite memory of Christmas—before all the kids of course. I was six years old, and I wanted the Barbie that came with a horse to ride so badly that I would literally dream about it.”

In my head, I tried to picture little Lexi, sleeping in her bed and dreaming of the iconic blonde. The idea of it was adorable.

“My parents had told me and Jake that we wouldn’t be getting much for

Christmas that year because they were planning a trip to Disneyland for us, and we had to save for it. But I woke up on Christmas morning and there she was, *with* the separate stable and accessories, *and* my parents had signed me up for horse riding camp in the summer. It really was Christmas magic.”

It sounded lovely, and my mental image of a young Lexi continued. I saw her naturally light blonde hair bouncing as she opened her gift, saw a child version of Lexi’s beautiful smile as she pulled the Barbie and plastic horse free from the wrapping paper. I could imagine being little, getting that gift and losing my mind. I thought back to my favorite Christmas memory, trying to drag up just one that I loved best.

“I think my favorite memory is when my dad took us sledding on the big hill near our house.” I could picture that day as clear as if it were yesterday. I was wearing hot pink snow pants, and Dean wore bright orange ones. “The hill was almost always jam-packed so it was hard to get some good sledding in. But on Christmas morning, Dad woke us up early and drove us over to see the perfectly unblemished snow. Not a single footprint and no one in sight. We sledded for hours until our noses were frozen, and then we went home to drink hot chocolate and open presents.”

Lexi was awed at my story, and I felt a small well of emotion come over me. I missed my parents so much, especially when I did nostalgic things like come to the cabin with Dean.

I quickly grabbed another present and paper to keep me from breaking down, but Lexi sensed my sadness and leaned over to hug me. “Hopefully this Christmas can even top that one,” she said with forced cheerfulness.

I nodded but knew there was no way. Especially not with Gabe, the biggest fun suck I’d ever encountered. I’d have to get past it if I wanted to have any

fun at all—I knew that. But right now, in this sentimental moment, it felt like nothing could be further from possible.

“I guess we’ll see,” I said. I turned back to my suitcase and opened it to see one of Lexi’s presents, a Fenty makeup palette, sitting right on top. I closed it quickly and turned back to her.

“What?” she said, putting a bow on another immaculately wrapped present.

“Nothing,” I said with a grin. “Just... wrap the next gift with your back to me.”

“Oh, it’s like that?” She laughed, tossing a bow at me. “Well, at least make sure you get a bow to cover up wherever you miss.”

“If that’s what you want,” I said, grabbing for the gift to start measuring paper, “you might need more than one.”

Chapter Four

Gabe

“Good luck,” Dean said with a dry laugh at me. “If I know my sister at all, I know that it’s nearly impossible to change her mind once she’s made it up.”

“Well, if I don’t at least try, I may as well just sign the death warrant on this Christmas,” I said as I put the last of my clothes away. “If making the place feel ‘homey’ would help everyone feel more at ease, I’d like to participate.”

“Alright,” he said with a sigh, closing up his suitcase and putting it under the bed. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, though. I wouldn’t be surprised if she burns whatever you try to put out.”

I stuck my suitcase under the bed next to Dean’s and followed him out of the room, walking past the closed doors of the girls’ rooms. I could hear voices coming from within, but I didn’t care to eavesdrop. It was either not my business because it had nothing to do with me, or it had everything to do with me, in which case, it was none of my business. I didn’t have a burning desire to hear people talking about me in a less than savory way. I was good enough at imagining the kinds of things they could say without help.

Dean led me into the dining room, where, on the opposite side of the table, a large credenza stood in the middle of one of the log walls. He opened the doors to reveal a large collection of tablecloths, napkins, candles, and other types of décor. He started pulling things out to hand them to me, and within seconds, I was in danger of dropping the entire stack. One of the glass snowmen toppled from the top, and Dean managed to catch it right before it shattered on the floor.

“Little clumsy there?” he asked with an antagonistic grin.

“Just testing your reflexes. Could have been faster,” I goaded him. Of course, right as I said that, one of the candleholders clattered to the floor, creating a cacophony of crashing sounds. Thankfully, the wood interior of the cabin seemed to absorb the sound so that it wasn’t as disruptive as it might have been.

“And, uh...” Dean picked up the candleholder and waved it in my face, “how are *your* reflexes doing?”

“As you often like to point out,” I shot back as I carefully unloaded the rest of the items in my arms onto the top of the credenza, “I am your ‘elderly’ friend, and apparently those eight years of age I have on you gives me an excuse to be a little slow. Old age, and all that, you know. What’s your excuse?”

“Distracted having to look at your ugly face,” he said, laughing, and I joined in. This was the kind of banter we usually had. Carefree, a bit antagonistic, but never in ill humor. The kind of banter that one usually saw between best friends.

I don’t quite remember how our friendship started, only when it was obvious that it had. Dean joined our finance firm right out of college as a low-level advisor. Despite the fact that he somehow couldn’t work a computer to save his life, he was a whiz with numbers. Within three years, he was working as one of the most watched investment bankers by our higher-ups, and they placed him with me for a mentorship. It was only about a year before our working lunches had turned to talking about dating and sports, and our office happy hours became late nights at the bars.

Dean began to sort through the things on the table and started handing me things, giving me directions on where they ought to go. The glass snowmen

went on top of the mantle along with a small decorative cloth that just peeked out from behind the garland there. The red embroidered tablecloth went onto the dining room table with a green runner, white tablecloths, and gold chargers at every chair. There was a small, ceramic Christmas village that we set up on the credenza with a sheet of fake, glistening snow. Each of the little houses lit up inside, and the skating pond had tiny skaters that spun around when it was turned on.

I stared at it for a while once it was done. We had something similar when I was a kid. My parents had always set it up for me right after Thanksgiving, and I'd look at it every single day, turning the different houses off and on, trying out the other objects, like a truck that honked and a Christmas tree that played music. I don't know what happened to it after my parents died, because I don't remember it being in the house when I went to empty it out.

I allowed myself a moment to stroll down memory lane, then went back to work.

"What's next?" I asked once the table had no decorations left on it.

Dean was lighting a few candles he'd placed strategically around the room. He turned to me and said, "I mean, a roaring fire never hurt the ambiance here."

I nodded and went to the fireplace, only to find that there was only one tiny piece of firewood. It would light, but it certainly wouldn't be "roaring."

I turned back to Dean. "Is there anywhere else they keep firewood in here?" I asked suspiciously, starting to think I maybe knew why he tasked me with building the fire.

He poked his head around the corner with a sheepish but guilty smile on his face. "What?" he asked in a fake shocked voice. "There's no wood? Oh, man. Someone should go chop some..."

I glared at him, but I couldn't help smiling just a little. That bastard. He really did expect me to chop the firewood. To be fair, I was much more invested in staying fit than he was. At only thirty, he was still reaping the benefits of being able to work out minimally and stay in relatively good shape. But, as it turned out, from thirty to thirty-eight, that privilege vanished. That was why I spent so much time at the gym.

Well, that, and while Dean was out living the single city life, I was avoiding anything resembling romance like it was actual poison.

I grabbed one of the unlit candles and threw it at him, which he fumbled and dropped.

"Maybe if you spent a little more time working out with me, your reflexes wouldn't be suffering so much."

"But then," he said like he'd come to the most obvious conclusion anyone had ever discovered, "how would I manage to avoid having to do stupid things like cutting firewood?"

"I knew that was the reason you brought me," I said, smiling despite myself.

"That," he said, "and I needed someone to do the legwork of decorating. Plus, if you weren't here, my sister might be in a good mood, and I can't have that."

I scowled at him. "Hilarious. I love being a problem within moments of arriving and meeting people I don't know." I crossed my arms and leaned against the mantle.

Dean sighed. "Look," he said, coming over and sitting down on the couch beside the fireplace and propping his feet up on the wooden coffee table. "My sister is a really great person. Our parents died right before she went away to college, so that first Christmas was really hard on her. I got us the cabin that

year so there would be at least one piece of normal for her, so it means a lot to her. You didn't know, but insulting the cabin, for her, was like a personal attack because it's such a personal thing."

"I *didn't* know," I said honestly. I looked over at the Christmas village, thinking about how nice it felt to put one up after all these years. "But I get it. I'm really sorry."

"Well," Dean said, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his knees, "You're making good steps toward showing her that." A slow, sly grin spread across his face.

"And let me guess," I said, starting to smile back. "The next best step would be to build a fire?"

"Wow," he said, putting his arms out like he was surprised. "It's like you read my mind."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, walking to the foyer and pulling on my coat. "I assume there's an ax out there?"

"Ought to be, if I remember right from last year." Dean refused to meet my eyes.

"Oh, so you could do it last year..."

"And I *could* do it this year, but wouldn't you hate to see your friend so sore he couldn't even open his Christmas presents from chopping firewood when you could do it?"

"Oh, certainly," I said, "it would be almost as bad as him not being able to open his presents because I beat him up..."

He pretended to look scared, then laughed. "Well, get going," he said. "That firewood's not going to cut itself, and without a fire, Jenna might just have a terrible Christmas and it would be all your fault."

I whacked him with a glove as I walked past toward the back door.

“That’s playing dirty,” I said. “You know I’m a pushover.”

“Exactly,” he replied. “Have fun out there!”

I sighed and shook my head with the hint of a laugh. “Oh, I plan to. Just need to envision your face every time I take a whack.”

“There you go!” he encouraged me. “Motivation is all you need.”

I opened the back door and stepped out into the winter air. It was colder than I expected, being this far south, and my breath created little clouds as I stood and adjusted to the temperature. The lake was no longer glistening as some clouds had begun to offer cover from the sun, which, I was sure, contributed to the dip in degrees. I rubbed my hands together, not wanting to wear my gloves to cut the wood since they didn’t have any sort of grip on them, and I worried the ax might go flying.

I walked over to the stump where the ax was buried in the wood, and pulled it free. It seemed like it was still fairly sharp, which would be good. It meant I’d have to use less brute force. I turned to the pile of little logs that hadn’t been cut yet and picked one that looked fairly even and stood it on the stump.

Whack!

I brought the ax down on it, splitting it evenly in two. It was a good hit, even I had to admit. I glanced up to grab another piece of wood and saw the two girls staring at me through the window, sipping some kind of concoction from mugs.

I wondered if they’d let me have some to warm up once I was back inside, or if I’d managed to talk myself out of such comforts.

I continued to cut the firewood, splitting piece after piece until I had a large stack I could carry inside in a few trips. After gathering the first set of wood into my arms, I turned to go inside and saw dark clouds coming toward

me from over the roof of the cabin. It was already pretty cloudy, but the horizon had taken on a shade of bluish-gray that left me a little nervous, especially with the snowflakes which were starting to come down. I didn't know much about the area, but I did know that snow wasn't exactly common here, so it was enough to give me pause.

If the sky looked this bad now, there was a good chance it would only get worse. With the weather looking like it might take a turn, I knew, more than ever, that there needed to be some kind of reconciliation.

And I was going to start by trying to get Jenna to let me inside.

Chapter Five

Jenna

Where does someone that unpleasant get off being so damn delicious? You know how men like watching Victoria's Secret models walk a runway? Well, women feel like that about watching men do "manly" things—like chopping wood. There was probably something animalistic about it, you know, that they could protect your offspring and all that. But right now, I was begrudgingly picturing how those bulging arms would throw me around a bed.

"You're drooling, Jen," Lexi said as she giggled. "What happened to him being a Grinch?"

I shoved Lex playfully and gave her a disapproving look. "It's a hallmark of awful men to be extremely attractive. That's how you spot them."

Lexi laughed and shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I can think of a few examples who might be the exception." Lex looked at her phone in her hand, and I tried my best to lean in for a peek.

"Are you gonna tell me who he is yet?" I asked, sure that my persistence would eventually wear her down.

"Nope," she said, smiling to herself. "I need to test this one out a little more before I tell you anything."

"Ha," I said, poking her. "I knew it. There is someone."

Alexis rolled her eyes at me, and I clapped my hands together. My plan was working perfectly.

I turned back to where Gabe was still chopping away, and took a sip of my hot cocoa. What in the world would Mister Billionaire want to chop firewood for? Didn't he have people to do that for him? Was this some kind of rich

people workout that hadn't hit Cosmo yet? It certainly appeared to be a good one if his body was anything to go off of.

But with all that money, why wouldn't he just buy it? I certainly would, especially in the cold like this. That man likely had so much fuck you money that he could buy enough firewood for the next year to heat this place.

Gabe turned toward us, grabbing an armful of the wood he'd just cut and walking toward the front door.

"Scatter," I hissed, darting to the sofa and plopping down like he hadn't seen me. Lexi laughed but leaned against the kitchen counter and flipped open a magazine like this was what she'd been doing for the last fifteen minutes instead of watching this man's muscles.

Gabe tapped the door with his foot, and when I looked up, he indicated with his head toward the wood. "Give me a hand here?"

It was bossy and irritating, and I considered pretending I didn't hear him. But trying to be mature, I got to my feet and sprang for the door, holding it open so he could get inside.

He didn't say thank-you. He just dropped the wood down by the fireplace and pulled off his gloves. "Might want to take a look at the weather. Seems like a storm might be coming."

I looked out the window and indeed, snow had begun to fall. "Shit," I said looking at Lexi. Lex had her face in her phone again so I shouted to my brother. "Dean!"

Dean came out of his room and looked at me with mild annoyance. "What?"

I pointed to the window where a light frost was beginning to build. Dean made a face and looked at his watch. "Let's check the TV. Maybe this will pass over."

“Maybe,” I said sarcastically. I could see the clouds from where I stood. The chance that they were just gonna “pass over” was about as likely as Gabe and me becoming friends during this trip.

Dean turned on the satellite TV and flipped it to the weather channel. Sure enough, the weatherman was talking about record-breaking snow right where we were currently sitting.

“Shit,” I said again. “We haven’t even gone into town to get supplies yet.”

Gabe and Dean exchanged looks and then Dean grabbed for his keys, which were hanging on the wall. “We will go now. We won't be that—”

“You’re gonna leave the girls here alone?” Gabe said.

I turned to look at him and raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think we will be okay on our own?” I asked.

Gabe shrugged. “I know how to prep a house for bad weather. Your presence doesn't change whether I’m able to do that, but I think I should be the one to do it.”

I hated how reasonable it sounded when I was so ready to jump on some chauvinistic shit. “I’ll go with you,” I said to Dean. But as I stood and reached for my coat, I wobbled. Apparently, I’d had more to drink than I thought I’d had.

“You’re staying here,” Lexi said, turning me to sit down once more. “I’ll help Dean.”

I shot daggers at my friend at the implication that she’d be leaving me here with this asshole.

“That’s fine with me,” Dean said. “We won't be gone long.”

“Dean...” I said, begging my brother not to leave me here with Gabe.

“You’ll be fine,” he said out loud.

I saw Gabe turn away and go back to watching the TV. I had the decency

to feel slightly embarrassed. He was our guest, after all. “Fine,” I said. “Hurry back, okay? And drive extra safe.”

Lexi and Dean grabbed their coats and bopped out the front door. I wondered to myself what in the world the two of them would talk about. They had absolutely *nothing* in common.

Gabe followed them outside and I could hear him and Dean having a hushed conversation in irritated tones. But I had bigger problems to deal with here. And the main one was talking to my brother right now.

Gabe stomped back in, and I heard Dean’s truck pull away. Mr. Grinch sat down in front of the TV again, turning his back to me.

“So...” I said, trying to start a conversation. “You work in finance.”

Gabe looked at me like I was an idiot and went back to the weather without a single comment.

I pulled my hot cocoa back to my lips, taking a big, rum-laced swig. I was really going to need it if I had to spend more than ten minutes with this guy.

I wondered why he and Dean were friends. All in all, my brother was one of the friendliest guys I knew, and he was my brother so you could be sure I’m not biased. This guy was like a cactus, prickly and inaccessible.

“Do you have a portable radio here?” Gabe asked all of a sudden.

Did they have a portable radio here? The concept seemed so outdated it was hard to picture. Have I ever seen a radio here at all?

“I’m not sure,” I said, still trying to rack my brain for the location of such a thing. “You’d think so. Since there are storms and stuff.”

Gabe gave me a deadpanned look and I really couldn’t blame him. “Storms and stuff.” *Nice one, Jenna.*

“I’m gonna check the bedrooms, you might want to really get that fire going in case we lose power.” Gabe got to his feet and pushed past me,

heading for the bedrooms. His footfalls were incredibly heavy, and you could hear them all throughout the house.

I turned to look at the fireplace. I'd never built a fire in my life. Dad had always done it, and he taught Dean while Mom and I made sugar cookies in the kitchen. In hindsight, I'd always wanted to learn but never asked him to teach me.

But how hard could it be?

I stacked a few logs in the fire and looked around for something to light them with. On the mantle sat a bottle of lighter fluid, and I reached for it, feeling grateful the tools were readily available.

I gave the fluid a few squirts, then closed the bottle and reached for the lighter that sat next to a few Christmas candles. This was a snap. No need to have a lesson when it's this—

The fire flared out at me the second I clicked the lighter, and I screamed, bringing Gabe running.

"What is it?" he asked with real concern.

"The fire flared out at me," I said in shock.

Gabe came to my side and looked around at the things I'd used. "Did you put this on the fire?" he asked, holding up the lighter fluid.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not an—"

"*Never* use lighter fluid for an indoor fire. That's suicide. You'll burn the whole damn place down."

My cheeks flushed and I looked away. I had tried my best and he was treating me like a naughty child. "I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I didn't know."

Gabe prodded the fire with a poker and took the lighter fluid to the kitchen, away from the fireplace. He gave me a long look and shook his head, then returned to his search of the bedrooms.

I was extremely embarrassed, but that only lasted a few seconds when I realized he'd just gone into *my* room, where *my* bed was covered in lingerie. I scrambled across the kitchen and down the hall, hoping to scoop them up before he saw.

But I was too late. I walked in to find Gabe holding up a pair of crotchless panties and studying them. He turned to see me, but didn't look ashamed or embarrassed.

"What in the world were you planning on using these for?" he asked. "Planning to wear them around the Christmas tree?"

If I had been pink before, I was crimson now.

I wasn't sure if it was him holding the panties, or him envisioning me in them, or the idea that I would pack something like that for a family trip that embarrassed me more. The truth was, that I wanted to be prepared in case Dean brought someone superhot. I couldn't exactly think of a better present than some Christmas sex, particularly when I was having the dry spell I was. But I'd be dead before I admitted that to Grinchy Gabe.

"They're Lexi's," I lied, blurting out the words so fast they essentially ran together. "She was showing them to me."

"And Lexi was planning to wear them around the tree?" He made a face of approval and nodded. "She's cute."

"Don't be disgusting," I said, reaching out to smack him on the arm and then thinking better of it and withdrawing.

"I'm only joking," he said. "This underwear would be very impractical for present opening, and it looks like you've got a lot of them." He looked around the room where Lexi's and my piles were stacked high.

"She brought them to show me what she bought the last time she went shopping. She wasn't planning on wearing them at all."

Gabe looked at me like he didn't believe me, but set the lingerie down on the bed once more. He then leaned forward and pulled something off the bedside table and held it up to me. It was a portable radio.

“I guess next to the place you're sleeping is where it is,” he said in an unreadable tone. “Now you know.”

Chapter Six

Gabe

I had damn near begged Dean not to leave me alone with his irritating sister. When he and Lexi started to leave, I followed him outside into the quickly deteriorating weather.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I had asked him, looking up at the sky. “It looks bad.”

“Look,” he said as the snow whipped around us. “I’m only going to be gone for like an hour or two at the most.”

“And you think leaving me here with your sister, who hates me, is a good way to keep things getting better?” I hissed as Lexi sat in the car, waiting for him.

“Maybe,” he said with a shrug. “Maybe you two just need a chance to talk. She’s pissed, but you’re a good guy, and she just needs a chance to see it. Just... I don’t know, be yourself or whatever bullshit people say.”

“Being myself is what got me into this mess,” I grumbled, knowing that arguing was pointless. It had always been pointless with Hannah, and Jenna seemed to be no different. Beautiful but cutting, easily offended, and quick to make you regret whatever you said to make her mad. I hadn’t missed those qualities, and I could have lived without them now.

“You swear she’s not usually like this?” I asked, ready to bolt if I was about to spend Christmas with a younger version of my ex.

“Yes,” Dean said. “I swear. It’s just a really touchy subject. She’s in school to be a nurse. Believe me, not much fazes her on most days. Christmas is her *thing*, which is why she insisted on paying this year. It’s the first year she did it on her own.”

I nodded, still wary but less nervous than I had been before.

“Ready?” Lexi asked, rolling down the window, effectively ending the conversation.

“I think so,” Dean said to her. He turned back to me as I opened the door to go back inside, then looked over my shoulder at his sister, who *I* turned to see was giving me a look that could have made a lion cower. “You two behave yourselves. I’m not cleaning blood off the floor when I get back, so find a way to get along until then.” Then he winked.

As I watched Dean leave, I couldn’t help but feel a foreboding. Behind him, the sky looked even more threatening, with the blue-gray turning nearly charcoal where it peeked through the trees.

We only needed to last a couple hours until Dean and Lexi got back to act as buffers.

But now, after only thirty minutes, here I was, preventing her from creating further disasters like the fireplace, and avoiding bumping into any more of Jenna’s stuff that would create awkward conversations.

Jenna had lingered in her room for a few minutes, presumably putting away the aforementioned panties and then emerged rather silent with a book in her hand. She walked toward the living room where I was attempting to get the portable radio to pick up a signal and flopped down on the couch.

I stared at her, trying to gauge the level of interaction she deemed necessary and realized, when she didn’t say a thing, that it was going to be on me to cross this barrier.

“I, uh...” I said, trying to not seem so aloof. “I’m going to go bring in the firewood before the blizzard hits. Don’t think any of us want to be going out in it if we can help it.”

“Uh huh,” she said in a bored, apathetic voice without looking up from her

novel.

I pulled my coat and gloves back on, then went outside to bring in as much firewood as I could fit in the holder inside. Within minutes the snow was blowing around my face, biting at my bare cheeks and nose. I gathered what I could and went back inside.

I knelt by the fire for a while to defrost my frozen skin, especially my fingers, which had turned a rather pallid shade of yellow from lack of circulation.

“You don’t think they’re in danger, do you?” Jenna asked

“I’m sure they’re fine,” I tried to say reassuringly. Unfortunately, the words seemed to come out with a little more bite than I’d intended. I opened my mouth to tell her I didn’t mean to sound that way, but decided it would be better to just show her I wasn’t as bad as I’d made myself out to be. Instead, I left the room to go get myself something warm to drink.

Just as Dean had said, there was only one box of cocoa mix. I wouldn’t have helped myself, but I knew the others would be back with plenty before long, so I fixed myself a steaming mug of hot cocoa with little marshmallows. I turned to walk back into the room with the fire, but paused.

I looked at the counter and saw the bottle of rum. Maybe the girls were onto something. I poured about a shot’s worth of rum into the mug, then took a sip.

Damn, it really was good. Why hadn’t I ever tried this before?

I went to sit across from Jenna, who gave me exactly one glance up with her eyebrow raised. I nearly retreated to the bedroom, feeling distinctly unwelcome, but decided that Dean was right, and the only way to the other side of this was through it, which meant I had to deal with Jenna being upset with me until I could prove I deserved otherwise or Christmas was over.

Whichever came first.

As I sat patiently, trying to appear casual and unconcerned, I tried hard to shake the worry that this was about to be a repeat of my last Christmas with Hannah before she left. She spent the entire holiday sniping at me or ignoring me, with nothing in between.

When no conversation started, I turned to watching the snow fall outside the window. I had to admit, the view was spectacular. But I knew it wouldn't last long, not with the speed at which the snow was dropping to the earth. Even now I was losing sight of the lake between the gusting flakes and the dark, threatening, looming clouds overhead.

The sound of wind carried through the walls, and I glanced up at Jenna, who seemed to have the same worry I did at that moment, but she shrugged it off and went back to burying her face in her book.

"Okay..." I said under my breath, but I couldn't shake the feeling of doom and gloom as easily as she seemed able to. I had brought a book as well and figured now was as good a time as any to read. I grabbed my hot cocoa, took a long sip, and made my way to the bedroom.

At exactly that moment, my phone, which was useless as far as internet service here, began to buzz and give off a shrill alarm. I looked down and felt the bottom fall out of my stomach.

"Gabe!" Jenna called from down the hall, and I could hear the sheer panic in her voice. "Gabe!"

"Yeah?" I said, knowing exactly what was about to come out of her mouth.

She rushed into the room and showed me her phone which was displaying the same alert as mine was.

Severe Weather Alert: Blizzard Warning! Expect 12-24 inches of snow in the next six to twelve hours. All roads closed effective immediately. Please

remain indoors.

I stared at her phone while holding mine up so she could see that I had the same message.

“It was on the radio, too,” she said.

Dean and Lexi had to be on their way back. Surely, they’d be here in minutes, ready to bunker down with me and Jenna.

Jenna clearly had the same thought, because she turned toward the living room and said, “Come on.”

I wasn’t sure exactly what she expected to find or what she expected was going to happen, but when I got to the living room, I saw her in the foyer pulling on her coat and some boots.

“I bet,” she said in a frantic voice that she was trying to disguise as nonchalant and failing, “that they’re right up the road. We’ll be able to see them if we go outside.”

“The alert said to stay indoors,” I said, showing her the phone again. “If they’re on their way back, they’ll be here soon. If not...”

“If not,” Jenna said with a dry laugh, “then I was right and this is officially going to be the worst Christmas ever. Snowed in without my brother, on Christmas, with the most miserable, cantankerous old—”

“Hey,” I said. “Let’s not make snap judgments before we know for sure. They could be right outside. And I’m not old.”

“Then let’s go check,” she said, like I was being slow and ignoring my protestations. “They’ll need help bringing in the groceries if they’re here, so we can reassure ourselves *and* do them a favor.”

It was clear from the way she was talking that she was panicking, and there was going to be no convincing her to stay inside. I could have let her go out alone, but I was trying to show her that I wasn’t the “miserable,

cantankerous, old” whatever she was going to call me. So instead of arguing more or watching her walk out into a blizzard alone, I pulled on my coat, which was still damp from the snow that had fallen while I was cutting wood, and my boots, which were even more so.

Sighing, I waved at her to open the door, as she gave me a look that seemed unsure.

“You... you don’t mind going first, do you?” she asked, her voice trying to remain annoyed but failing in light of how nervous she was.

I looked at her for a moment, frowning. This could be one of those moments where I could be a decent person and begin to bridge the gap I’d opened between us.

“No,” I said, stepping forward. I turned to her before I opened the door. I put a tentative hand on her shoulder, which she didn’t shake off. I turned to see she looked about as sure as I felt, which was not at all. I walked outside and looked hard through the sea of white, but knew what I’d see before I did. I knew there would be no lights, no sound of a car coming down the road. I knew there would be exactly what there was.

Nothing.

Chapter Seven

Jenna

Seeing the empty road, without a hint of light coming from any kind of car, let alone that huge truck Dean rented, filled me with dread.

“They’re not going to make it back,” I said quietly, then turned to go back inside, stripping off my coat and boots. I began to pace the kitchen floor, sighing heavily and picking at my fingers. It was a bad habit from childhood that still came out when I was really stressed.

“What?” Gabe asked, closing the door behind him and stripping off his outerwear as well.

“They’re not going to make it back,” I repeated, a little louder this time so he could hear me. “I’ve been coming here since I was a little kid. I know how long it takes to get into town. There’s no way they did the shopping and got back on the road yet. They’re going to be stuck in town with no way to get back.”

I fought the urge to panic, choosing instead to sit down by the fire and try to breathe. Dean was smart. He’d know exactly what to do. He wouldn’t let the two of them get hurt. No, my real concern was how long could I deal with Gabe before I went crazy.

It was bad enough when it was the four of us, but at least then, I could count on Lexi and Dean to act as a buffer. Without them, with just me and Gabe, who I didn’t even know, in this tiny cabin, things had just gone from bad to worse.

He seemed to be contemplating his phone, typing out a text and then holding his phone up in the air, trying to get a signal.

Miraculously, at that moment I got a text from Lexi.

Can't make it back. Roads are too dangerous.

What? I couldn't have read that right. I went over the words at least five times before it sank in. A part of me had still been hoping they might figure out a way to get through the roads, but her message had dashed every single one of those thoughts from my mind.

You're kidding, I replied. ***What are we supposed to do?***

Don't worry, Lexi wrote back. ***Dean has a plan.***

I felt an ounce of relief before I was hit with the realization that—for real—I was going to have to spend time with Gabe. There was a long pause while I waited for her to elaborate, but when she didn't, I furiously typed back, asking her what the plan was, wanting to gauge exactly how much patience I was about to need.

What's the damn plan, Lex?

One... Two... Three little dots blinked on the screen to indicate that Lexi was replying and then suddenly she wasn't. In fact, my phone wouldn't even send a message to her. I had lost the signal completely.

"Oh, fuck no," I moaned, trying to keep it together. But it seemed impossible when I was drowning in my own self-pity.

Gabe walked over to me and tentatively asked, "What's going on?"

"I lost signal," I gasped in desperation. "I have no way of contacting them. Or anybody for that matter." This was like a horror movie that was specially designed just for me. Stuck with a grumpy Grinch on my favorite holiday without any way to contact my brother and beg him to come save me.

Gabe too pulled out his phone and looked at it, then sighed deeply and shrugged. "I guess we're gonna have to deal with being stuck here together."

I slid down against the kitchen cabinet and cradled my phone in my hands.

"I don't suppose there's any chance of a landline, is there?" Gabe asked.

My heart leapt and I got to my feet trying to think about where I might have seen a landline. Surely if this cabin had been around since I was a kid, a landline had to exist *somewhere*.

“Should we start in your bedroom this time?” Gabe asked with a small laugh.

I turned to face him, ready to be furious. But when I saw how hard he was trying to hold in his smile, I couldn’t help but laugh a little, too. “Maybe,” I said. “Clearly I have no idea what the hell is in this cabin.”

Gabe chuckled and walked toward the master bedroom. I followed closely behind, hoping that along with the portable radio, there were a few other relics of the nineties.

But no such luck. Not in that bedroom or any of the others. However, we did find a giant Maglite that I would have definitely made a joke about if I wasn’t so stressed out.

“Well,” Gabe said. “I guess we’re about to get to know each other, whether we like it or not.”

I whimpered unintentionally and he looked at me with sympathy.

“I know I’m not your ideal company, but maybe I can try and distract you until they get back.” He reached out his hand to me. “Hi, I’m Gabe. I have a tendency to come off as an asshole—”

“Hot chocolate?” I asked, wanting to stop this awkward interaction before it could go any further.

Gabe frowned a little, then nodded. “Sounds good.”

We both went to the kitchen where I turned on the electric kettle. Gabe grabbed my coffee mug and his, and set them in front of me.

For the first time, I realized the mug Gabe was using was the one my dad had always used. It was a silly tradition, but we each had a favorite here at the

cabin. I always went for the coffee mug that resembled a fluffy marshmallow with chocolate dripping down its friendly face while Dean liked the one that read, *This is probably hot chocolate*. I hadn't understood the joke until I was halfway through high school, but now that I was adding rum to my drink, I was surprised I ever missed it.

Lexi had been drinking out of the mug Mom liked. It was a big green mug that had a cute little frog on it and read, *M.I.L.F. (man, I like frogs)*, another joke that evaded me for years. But Dad's choice, it was really something special. His mug was a little penguin that turned from gray to white when you poured in a hot drink, and when it would change colors, dad would yell, "It's Christmastime!"

"What's your book about then?" he asked, attempting once more to have some small talk. It was nice that he was attempting, but good lord, was I unprepared to go from zero to a hundred with him.

I pulled the kettle from its stand as it bubbled away and grabbed for some more hot chocolate packets. "It's about grief. How to turn grief into passion." I poured a pouch in each of our cups and then added a little rum, not failing to take a swig of it first.

"That's interesting," he said genuinely.

"It is," I said, pouring water into one and then the other mug and watching as it steamed up with the yummy smell of rum and chocolate. "It really changed my perspective on grief. I used to think it was a bad thing, that it needed to be avoided and squashed, not felt if we could help it. But after reading this—"

And then the lights went out.

I screamed like a kid in elementary school and suddenly Gabe was pressed against me.

And just like that, I felt my Christmas dream crashing harder than my quickly fading buzz from the spiked hot cocoa.

“Get off me,” I said, pushing him away. Gabe stumbled backward into the opposite wall of the tiny galley kitchen.

“I thought you were hurt,” he said, flipping on the Maglite and pointing it at me.

“Get that out of my—”

A horrible noise like the groaning of a metal ship resounded and Gabe and I caught each other’s eyes moments before the pressure of the wind burst the window on the far side of the living room, eliciting another shriek from me and a loud “*Shit!*” from him.

We both scrambled to our feet and stumbled for shoes so we didn’t end up cutting our socked feet on broken glass. The cold—which had been no more than a chill in the air—was now arctic against our faces and our beautiful Christmas tree was getting covered in snow by the minute.

The vision I’d had for my perfect Christmas vanished before my eyes. Instead of Dean and Lexi, I was gonna be accompanied by this jerk and his money manager face. Rather than a warm, home-cooked meal, I’d be forced to choose between a peanut butter and a chocolate chip protein bar. I could feel tears springing to my eyes and forced myself to stifle them because they were likely to freeze to my face at this point.

“What are we gonna do?” I shouted at him over the roar of the blustering winds.

“I don’t suppose there is another fireplace, is there?”

“No,” I shouted back. “Why?”

“Because if not, we need this room. And that means we have to patch up that window until we can get the owners out here.”

I was truly shivering now, and I wondered for a moment if this was how I was going to die. “How do you plan to do that, Bear Grylls?”

He leaned in so I could hear him better, and grabbed his coat and hat. “There’s a shed about fifty feet from the house. I’m gonna see if there are any boards and tools. I want you to gather all the blankets you can find, any first aid, and all the food you can scrounge up, and wait in the master bedroom with the door closed. Conserve the heat as long as you can.”

I nodded, but found myself ever so slightly worried about him out there. “Are you gonna make it?”

Gabe smiled a little but didn’t answer. And then he pushed open the door and disappeared into the whiteout.

Chapter Eight

Gabe

The roaring wind blew torrents of snow around me, the tiny frozen flakes feeling like razorblades as they assaulted my skin. I could barely see two feet in front of me, let alone the fifty feet between me and the shed. I had never been more thankful to grow up in the northeast. This was just regular winter weather around there.

I knew the general direction of the shed from earlier, but the harder the storm raged, the more I felt like I was being veered off course. Indeed, within a few minutes, my shin slammed into something hard and solid.

“Ow, shit!”

I grabbed my injured leg, hopping on the other one in pain as I tried to see what I’d run into. I saw something sticking up, and when I reached out my hand to feel for what it was, I found myself grabbing the handle of the ax, which I’d buried back in the stump after cutting firewood earlier.

Even amidst the whiteout, I could see dark crimson splotches of blood painting the snowy ground. Thank God Jenna was a nurse. I’d definitely need one by the time I got back.

I looked around me, trying to remember where the shed was in relation to the firewood, and turned my body in the direction I thought I’d find it. Then I began to walk forward again into the white abyss, hoping my internal compass and natural sense of direction wouldn’t fail me now.

This disaster made me think of another time in my life when I’d been in such thick, unforgiving snow. It was a Christmas after my parents had passed, and we were planning to spend the holiday with Hannah’s family two hours north of the city in upstate New York. We had our dog, a little black mutt

named Jasper (who Hannah took with her when she moved out) with us, and a backseat full of pre-prepped food and presents we were bringing. The day started cold but sunny, then out of nowhere, the sky went dark gray, and the wind began to gust in thick waves of white.

I remember thinking to myself that it seemed almost impossible that the weather could turn that drastically, that fast. Hannah too was nervous because she'd been in a fairly bad car accident as a kid when her dad's truck slid across some black ice.

We were still an hour from our destination when the road became undriveable, and I pulled over to the shoulder before it became impossible to do so. We sat there for nearly an hour, hoping the squall would pass, but we weren't that lucky. In fact, the exact opposite happened as snowdrifts began to pile up on every side of the car, blocking us in.

"We don't have enough gas," I said, watching the meter slowly go down.

Eventually, the snow covered the exhaust pipe, and we had to turn the car off so we didn't suffocate. With no heat and no way to signal for help, we'd freeze to death before we were ever found.

"What are we going to do?" Hannah asked, clutching Jasper, who seemed to know something was wrong. It was exactly the same question Jenna asked me before I walked out into this frozen hellscape.

"You? You stay here," I said, steeling myself. "I... am going to go for help."

"You're *what?*" she shrieked. "Gabe, no. You cannot go out there. You'll freeze to death."

"If I don't, we're *both* going to freeze to death. At least this way, we have a chance."

We argued for a few more minutes, but I knew pretty quickly that she

knew I was going to have to go before the doors got snowed shut.

I ended up walking for about a mile, feeling like my nose, fingers, and toes were all going to fall off, when a snowplow happened to drive by and saw me waving. I navigated him back to Hannah, and the lifesaving man gave all three of us a ride into the nearest town, where the diner had remained open because they, like us, hadn't expected the storm to hit out of nowhere and block everyone in. They were kind enough to let us (and Jasper) wait out the storm until the roads were clear and we could get our car free of the snow. We ended up missing Christmas dinner, but after that, Hannah and I felt closer than ever at having been through something like that together.

Until we didn't.

The weather had been a lot like this, though I would expect that kind of weather in upstate New York more than here in central Georgia. I hadn't planned on going into survival mode this trip, and certainly not into emergency repairman mode.

Though every step was like walking against a wall, I kept going until my feet hit something slick and I had to windmill my arms to stay upright. As I did so, however, I felt the ground beneath my feet give way with a loud *crack*, and I sank several inches into the freezing water at the edge of the lake.

My boots and socks were soaked, and I knew I needed to work quickly before they froze and frostbite could set in. It was already sending jolts of pain up my legs just from the chill in the water.

I turned, setting myself back in the direction I thought was right, and kept walking, doing my best to ignore the way the snow and ice clung to my face, the way my feet felt heavier with every step. Finally, after what felt like forever, I made it to the door of the shed. I reached out to try the handle, but

it took several tries as my gloves slid right off the frozen metal. Much to my horror, it was locked.

I let out a sound of disbelief and saw my breath come out like a thick fog. I tried to smash the handle off with my hand, but it was too cold and I was too numb to do much. I turned, trying to think of anything that might help, when my mind drifted back to the stump and the ax buried in it.

The trip back to the stump wasn't as much of a struggle as the walk to the shed had been, since the wind was behind me, but it nearly blew me over, face-first into the snow more than once. The final of those times, I stumbled and my face nearly came into violent contact with the yellow handle of the ax.

I caught myself on it before I slammed into it, then gripped it as well as I could, but my gloved hands kept slipping off the smooth surface.

“Dammit!” I cried out, my voice completely drowned out by the wind.

Knowing I was likely putting my fingers at risk, I pulled off my gloves and tucked them into my pockets, then grabbed the ax and yanked as hard as I could, thankfully freeing it.

I rushed back to the shed, now able to follow a path I'd made in the snow—not the same one that had put me into the lake. I raised the ax and smashed the lock with a loud bang. Then I opened the door and flung my body inside, closing myself in and away from the blistering wind.

Inside it was still freezing, but without the gusting snow, it was less brutal, and the difference almost made the bitter air feel downright toasty. But the slight tingling as I started to lose sensation in my fingers told me I couldn't get too complacent. If I went hypothermic, my only hope of survival was inside the house which was rapidly filling with snow.

I set the ax by the door and looked around, hoping for anything that might

help me repair the window, but the first thing I saw was a shelf of canned goods.

“At least there’s that,” I said to no one but myself.

I looked through and found some cans that might be okay eaten cold or cooked over a fire just in case. There were jarred peaches, likely homemade given where we were. I dug through a bit more and found some beans, canned vegetables, some Chef Boyardee, and, if things got really dire, some Vienna Sausages.

I opened my coat and stuffed in as many things into the interior and exterior pockets as I could fit, but knew it wouldn't mean a damn thing if I didn't get that window boarded up. I ventured deeper into the shed and, to my delight, found a workbench, complete with several sheets of plywood, a large blue tarp, and a cordless drill with some screws lying beside it.

“Yes!” I practically shouted. Of course, the difficult thing now would be transporting everything back to the house. It would take multiple trips, and I was already feeling the effects of the cold getting to me.

Well... no use worrying about it, I decided. It wasn't like I could do anything else, and if I didn't, I may as well lay down in the snow, since that was what would eventually happen inside.

I stuffed the tarp and the drill down into the front of my coat, then pulled on my gloves to carry the largest piece of plywood. Against all odds, I realized I was going to make it in one trip.

Assuming I made it at all.

I pulled my hood up, tightening the strings to keep it as close around my face as I could, then, with a deep breath to steel myself, I walked back out into the blizzard.

I followed my tracks first to the stump, then back to the door, but I didn't

go in. I knew, if this fix was going to hold, it would have to be done from the outside so it couldn't be blown in. I felt my way along the side of the house to the broken window.

And now came the hard part.

I pulled out the tarp, hoping it would be sturdy enough to withstand the gusts long enough for the next step, and reached up to the top corner of the window, letting the tarp overhang the size it needed to be. I took a screw out of my pocket and promptly dropped it into the snow.

“Shit!”

I had just enough to finish the job now, but I realized I wouldn't be able to do it with my gloves on.

“Well,” I said to myself, “time to see how tough you really are.”

I yanked off my gloves and tossed them in through the window, knowing that I wouldn't be able to worry about them *and* fixing the window. I pulled out another screw and lined the tarp up where it needed to be, then used the drill to drive the screw into the window frame.

Once the first screw was in place, I had an easier time since the tarp was at least held against the wall, though the wind kept trying to blow it inward and I had to keep fishing it back out.

Once the tarp fully covered the window, I lifted the plywood and fastened it against the wall, preventing both the wind and the snow from getting inside. There might still be some draftiness, but, for the most part, it would hold up against the storm.

I could feel ice crystals on my face and knew I had to get inside as fast as possible. My muscles ached with the strain of trying to get to the front door around the other side of the house, but within a minute or two, I was prying open the heavy door.

As soon as I stepped inside, I dropped everything carefully on the floor and stripped off my outerwear. I couldn't believe how hard I was shaking in such a short time. Just like that winter with Hannah, the windchill had to be deep into the negatives.

Once I was out of my frozen coat and boots, I carefully placed all the canned goods in the cabinet near the sink. That way, when we wanted to make something, it was a short distance between the fireplace and the food. There was also a cast iron pot that would come in handy when it came time to warm things up. We could stick it right in the fire.

After everything was put away, I turned my attention to the direction of the master bedroom and went to it, knocking, hoping my act of heroism would have earned me at least a little mercy in Jenna's eyes. If I was really lucky, maybe we'd even get along.

Chapter Nine

Jenna

I didn't like Gabe, but I certainly didn't want him to die. Even more so, I didn't want to be left here all alone to fend for myself. What if snow caved in the roof or someone broke in? Was I supposed to be able to take care of myself?

He went out into the wintery storm in what felt like slow motion. I'd pissed him off enough that he would rather freeze to death than deal with me.

"Gabe?" I shouted, trying to force my voice to ring out over the wind. "Gabe, please answer me."

But nothing came back to me. He was already dead, and I was left alone in this freezing hellscape.

No, I reminded myself, it would take longer than ten seconds for him to freeze to death, no matter what the temperature was outside. I cursed my idea to come here in the first place. But how could I have known that it would snow like this? And how could I have known that Dean would bring someone I loathed and would end up getting trapped with?

I closed the door and tried to think of a plan. Maybe I could keep the fire going long enough to stay warm until rescue crews got here. Maybe I should go out there after him and convince him that he was being stupid and that he was gonna get himself killed.

CRACK!

I nearly jumped as the sound, so loud it penetrated the stormy cacophony, hit my ears. It echoed twice again, and now I was nervous. Gabe had probably gotten lost on the lake and that horrible cracking noise was a tree limb breaking under his weight sending him into deep water. The snow

would clear and they would have to fish him out like the hundreds of other people who had met their fate at Lake Lanier. There was a whole graveyard beneath it. What was one more dead body?

Or maybe...

Maybe someone had been watching. Someone had been waiting for us to split up so they could murder us. I always heard about criminals who took advantage of chaos, and this was definitely chaos. This was gonna turn into some weird horror movie where you thought it was about Christmas but ended up with the whole family choked to death with Christmas lights.

Don't be ridiculous, Jenna, I thought. *Not even a serial killer could survive out here.* Which meant Gabe was likely toast. Or... something cold, unlike toast.

There was a lot of noise from the front of the cabin and I hoped to fuck it was him fixing the window. Anything would do so long as it kept in the heat once we relit the fireplace.

Fifteen minutes later there was a bang, which was the front door opening, some steps down the hall, and a knock on my door where I had been waiting under a mountain of blankets.

"Gabe?" I asked timidly.

"No, it's the pizza delivery guy. Yes, it's Gabe."

I rushed to the door and pulled it open, staring at him covered head to toe in snow, icicles hanging from his eyebrows. This was about to be bad for him very quickly if I didn't get him heated up.

It was then that I noticed a large cut below his knee, blood crusted around it.

"Oh, my God!" I exclaimed. "We've gotta get that bandaged up."

"I was kind of hoping you'd say that," Gabe replied sheepishly. "I guess

my sense of direction failed me a little.”

It definitely wasn't as bad as it first appeared, nothing a few butterfly closures couldn't handle. The brutal part was the cleaning. I couldn't help but feel bad for him as I poured copious amounts of rubbing alcohol on it.

In the end we got him patched up all right and he looked up at me gratefully.

“Thanks,” he said. “You're a good nurse. I'm gonna change my pants now if you don't mind.”

I nodded and pushed past him, a giant armful of blankets in hand, and went to the living room fireplace. After tossing the coverings behind me, I grabbed a few logs and tossed them on the fire, then used *only* the lighter to get it going.

Once dressed, Gabe followed me with a few more of the blankets I found, plus some hot water bottles and towels, and watched as I worked.

“I see I taught you something after all,” he said with a hint of a smile.

“I learn from my mistakes,” I snapped. “God. It feels like it's never gonna be warm in here. And look at our poor Christmas tree. And there's glass all over the floor—”

“Do you ever stop whining?” he asked in irritation.

“What?”

“Do you *ever* stop whining?”

I was taken aback by this confrontational question, but it took the question to make me realize it was true. I was acting like a spoiled little princess rather than the educated nurse that I was. I'd saved people's lives. There was no reason for me to act like a damsel in distress. Especially when Gabe had been the one outside suffering to make sure we were insulated.

“Sorry,” I said softly.

“It’s all right,” he replied. “I just really will walk out to my death if you don’t knock it off.”

I nodded, feeling ashamed and turning my eyes to the fire as it sparked to life.

Gabe kicked off his boots and hung up his coat before coming up behind me and placing a hand on my back, patting it like someone’s great aunt who never learned how to properly hug. “What are the chances that the hot chocolate is still actually hot?”

“Slim to none.” I sniffled. “But there is a metal kettle, too. Not just an electric one. We could put it over the fire.”

“You know how to do that?” he asked. “That would be great.”

I nodded and got to my feet, working quickly in the interest of heating him up fast.

The kettle was easy enough to set up but it took me two tries to get it hanging in the fireplace. By the time it actually boiled, Gabe was nestled under a giant blanket, and his cheeks were getting color back.

I poured the hot water into the mug he’d been using and handed it to him, giving him a spoon to stir with.

“Thanks,” he said in genuine appreciation. “I’m sorry your Christmas is ruined.”

“It’s fine,” I said, acknowledging to myself that it was not fine, but I didn’t want him to think I was whining any more. “Drink up. We need to get those organs warm.”

Gabe nodded and nearly chugged the drink, despite the fact that it was scalding hot. Then he looked at me and grabbed my hand. “Like my own personal Nurse Nightingale.”

I laughed and shook my head, then turned to walk away. But Gabe had me

by the wrist, and faster than I could process, he pulled me into a kiss.

His lips were still cold from being outside but tasted deliciously of chocolate. I could feel my head spin as the breath was literally taken from my lungs, and time stood still around us.

But just as quickly, I pulled away, surprised that he'd done that. And when I did, he looked embarrassed.

"I... I just..."

"It's fine," I mumbled, a heat rippling across my face like a wildfire. "Things were tense. Sometimes impulses happen."

"Yeah..." he said, looking away. "Exactly."

My heart was still racing from the tiny zap of energy that transferred between our skin when our lips touched. I hated to admit it, but amidst all the panic, it felt pretty good.

There was a long silence between us. I sat down and picked my book up, and he stared at the fire. Then eventually, Gabe tried to socialize again.

"That's the first time I've kissed someone since Hannah left," he admitted.

I had no idea who Hannah was, but I assumed it had to be a girlfriend or lover or something. I didn't know if I wanted to open that can of worms, but Gabe decided to keep going. "She was a great kisser. I could never get on her level."

Now things were officially awkward. I didn't give two shits about his ex... whatever, and certainly wasn't interested in reminiscing over her with him.

"Do you want me to go read in my room?" I asked. "It just seems like you might want some *alone* time." I leaned heavily on the alone, trying to impart my not so chaste meaning. He sighed and shook his head, almost smiling as I did.

"You're pretty snarky for someone who was just panicking like you were."

“You’re pretty cavalier for someone who damn near ruined my family holiday,” I replied, snapping harder than I meant to.

“I’m pretty sure the snow ruined your holiday, not me.”

He had a point. Technically, I wasn’t with my brother and Lexi because of the weather, which unfortunately, I couldn't blame Gabe for.

“Fine,” I said, retreating back to my book. “You didn’t ruin it, but you certainly put a damper on it with your criticism.”

Gabe sighed and turned to face me more. “How many times are we gonna go over this? I’m sorry that I came off as a douche nozzle when I walked in. I was surprised, and it led me to reacting badly. Can we please move on?”

I huffed to myself in disappointment. At least guilt-tripping him gave me something to do.

I looked over at him to say something, but he had turned back to the fire once more, and now he’d taken off his shirt. His head was tilted back and his eyes were closed, giving me the perfect opportunity to examine that body up close.

His shoulders were unfathomably toned, and he had a thick scar running across the left one. His arms were like tree trunks, and with all the wood chopping he’d just done, I wasn’t really surprised. His facial profile was statuesque with features that looked like they could have been carved from marble.

Oh, my God, I was actually drooling. I lifted a hand to my mouth to find a trail of spit descending my chin, and I wanted to melt into the floor from embarrassment. Thank goodness he didn’t see me, or I would have had to get up and walk out into the snow to accept my fate.

This is what you asked for, Jenna. I reminded myself. You wanted Dean to bring a hot friend for you to bone, and you totally neglected to wish for him

to be charming or nice. You asked for good-looking. Curse my past self and her superficial wishes. Right now, I would have done anything to be sitting here with someone I could hold a conversation with, let alone sleep with. Neither of those things looked like they were on the schedule any time soon.

“I might try to get some sleep,” Gabe said. “I don’t wanna go to the bedrooms because there is gonna be almost no heat. I would recommend you do the same. Unless that is, there’s a secret fireplace in that room along with all the other things you didn’t know were there.”

I glared at the back of his head and much to my luck, he turned just as I was giving him a middle finger.

“Classy,” he said. “Exactly the kind of nurse I’d want at my bedside.”

“And you’re exactly the kind of financial advisor I’d want handling my money,” I snapped back. It was hard to believe that twenty minutes ago we’d been kissing. He was driving me crazier than ever. Especially because I couldn’t stop thinking about him naked...

“Look, I’ll keep to my couch and you keep to yours. Okay? We don’t have to talk or interact in any way. We will just wait for Dean and your friend to get back.”

“Perfect,” I said, feeling a strange disappointment in my guts. “A little peace and quiet is just what I need right now so I can pretend I didn’t just waste two grand on spending Christmas with someone I can’t stand.”

“You’re more than welcome to spend it somewhere else,” Gabe said, the irritation in his voice no longer hiding behind a veil of professionalism.

“Guests first,” I hissed, grabbing a blanket and turning over on the couch so my back was to him.

If things weren’t tense already, they would be now. We were stuck together for God knew how long, and we definitely wanted nothing to do

with each other. The kiss was simply an interlude to the war, and I was certainly not going to let him have the higher ground. All I could do was count down the minutes until Dean and Lexi returned.

Chapter Ten

Gabe

I was amazed at how well I slept despite the situation. Jenna and I each took a sofa in the living room so we could be near the fire, which I tended a few times during the night.

“Do they typically let high-level investment bankers sleep that long?” Jenna said as I sat up. She had a steaming mug in her hand.

“No,” I said, rubbing my neck where it was a little stiff from the position I’d slept in. Usually, I was late to bed and early to rise, making sure I had an eye on any stocks I needed to be watching. But I realized, when I checked my watch, I slept until almost noon. “They don’t. In fact, it’s a good thing I’m on vacation, because if I wasn’t, I’d be getting messages about how very fired I was.”

Jenna laughed, and I was surprised to hear what a lovely sound her genuine laugh was. “Fair enough. Do you want some?” she asked, holding up her cup.

“Sure,” I said. “Unless you’re planning on poisoning it.”

“Don’t tempt me,” she said, and I was only about fifty percent sure she was teasing me.

It was a nice departure from the Jenna I’d met yesterday, who’d been so insufferable I was genuinely worried about how I was going to make it through being snowed in together. This Jenna had a little bit of a fire to her, and, God help me, I liked it.

A few minutes later, she came back with a mug for me. I noticed there was no rum in it this time. I looked up at her and saw her staring at me. She looked like she wanted to say something, but instead, she turned and went back to the couch she’d slept on, sitting down and opening her book.

That kiss last night had come out of nowhere, and I wasn't sure where that left us, especially after the conversation that followed. She seemed a little lighter than the day before, but there was still a note of unsureness on her part, something I could relate to.

"I thought we weren't talking to each other," I finally said.

She shrugged. "I was already bored with no one to interact with while you were sleeping. Didn't want to feel so lonely with you awake, too."

The idea that my presence would make her feel less lonely helped me to relax a little, though it brought with it a host of new anxieties. After we'd kissed, things had been so uncomfortable. But, I had to admit, the kiss itself had been good.

Or maybe I just forgot what it felt like kissing someone.

"Well," I said, taking a sip of my hot chocolate to cover how awkward I felt at this new tension between us and failing. "It's still snowing."

"Yeah," Jenna said, looking away from her book but not meeting my eyes. "It really is."

Silence blossomed between us again. *Great job, Gabe*, I scolded myself. *Way to make it less weird.*

After a few moments, I decided to busy myself by tending the fire, hoping she might pick up the conversation. When she didn't, and I couldn't pretend to be stoking the already roaring fire any longer, I finally gave up and went back to reading my own book.

But within a few hours, we'd both finished what we'd brought to read, not having planned on needing much. Once we were both left with nothing else to do but watch the fire burn, Jenna finally broke the silence.

"I do love a fire at Christmas," she said wistfully, staring at the flames. "My dad would always build it while Mom cooked. Neither Dean nor I am a

great cook, so we usually get stuff that's easy to make or pre-made, but he makes the fire every year so that at least part of that tradition lives on."

"I get what you mean about the food," I said. "My parents always laid out a huge spread, even when it was only the three of us. I don't really have the time for that kind of thing, and Christmases are usually a solo event for me, so Chinese food happens more years than not."

"Speaking of time..." she said, eyeing me curiously. "What kinds of things do you do with your time? When you're not ruining holidays, that is." She shot me a grin at the end to let me know it was a joke, and I laughed.

"Ruining other days?" I teased back, chuckling. "No, I pretty much work."

"That was kind of what Dean said, but I don't think I really believed him. No one could possibly work that much."

I shrugged. "Well, the last five years have been kind of a blur for me. There hasn't been a whole lot else to do."

"Why's that?" she asked.

I opened my mouth, but hesitated. I wasn't sure I wanted to share this, but we were snowed in with no one else for company. Besides, maybe being a little more open would help her to see me as less of a Grinch. "My, uh, my fiancée left me about five years ago. Right before Christmas, actually. And my parents had died a few years earlier, and I don't have any siblings or extended family. It was the first Christmas I spent truly on my own."

"That's horrible," she said. "I lost my parents right before Christmas when I was eighteen, but I always had Dean, at least."

"After a couple years, I got used to it. I just work to fill the time now. Dean is always trying to get me to loosen up and 'live,' but I think I'm past the point in my life where I want to go partying to meet random hookups."

Jenna nodded. "I know what you mean. I'm only twenty-four and that kind

of scene doesn't interest me."

"Not what it sounded like yesterday," I teased, holding up my coffee mug. "Sounded like you were pretty regretful."

"Well, isn't that what people do when they panic?" she asked, blushing. "Don't they suddenly wish they'd done everything differently even if they're perfectly content with their lives?"

"Is it?" I asked.

"You have no idea. I'm in school to be a trauma nurse and the things people say when they think they're going to die almost never mean a thing." She shook her head. "It's that could have, would have, should have kind of thinking. Ninety nine percent of people who survive really awful trauma never make a change."

"That's not very encouraging," I said. "You'd think people would 'see the light' or whatever and fix what was wrong in their lives."

"Yeah, you would," she said, looking a bit disappointed. "But people are creatures of habit." She paused for a moment. "What would you want to have fixed if you thought you were going to die?"

"Well," I said slowly. "I have enough money. More than enough, really. So, I don't know, probably travel. Maybe try for some more personal connections."

"What?" she said in a playfully sarcastic voice. "Old Ebenezer doesn't have many personal connections?"

"Ebenezer?" I laughed. "That's one I've never heard before."

"Well, you came in and humbugged all over the cabin."

"And I know that I've already said this," I said, "but I'm sorry. It was really rude of me. I had no idea how much it meant to you."

She gave me an appraising look, like she was deciding whether or not to

believe me this time, or maybe whether or not to forgive me. She must have come to a positive conclusion, because she said, “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “And no, I don’t have many personal connections. After Hannah left, I just had a hard time with it. And when I started making more money by working longer hours, it became a bit of an addiction. I guess I just started using money to fill the void that other people weren’t filling.”

“That’s... really sad,” she said.

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “Sometimes when I do go out with Dean, I try to be more open, but I guess I’m really out of practice or something because it always seems impossible.”

“I feel that, actually,” she said. “I always end up being a wallflower when we go out just because I’m weighing everyone against my education. ‘Is *this* person worth my GPA going down? What about *this* one? Or *that* one?’ And by the time I’ve finished all of my analyzing, it’s time to go home and I’m alone again. Not that I mind. Sometimes it seems easier.”

“It really does,” I replied. “Not at Christmas, though. My last five have been spent alone in my penthouse, working. And despite my incredible faux pas when I got here, I’m actually really grateful to not have to spend one more holiday alone.”

“I bet.”

I glanced around at the decorations, some of which I’d done myself the day before. “Most years I don’t even bother with decorations. I have a tiny little tree I put up sometimes, but most years, the only lights I bother with are the backlights on my laptop and television.”

“That’s also really sad,” she replied, and I could hear a note of pity in her voice, something I couldn’t stand.

“It is what it is,” I replied, suddenly noting how very warm I was. “Is it just me or is that fire doing a good job of making it a little toasty in here?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jenna said. Having already doffed her blanket, she reached for the bottom of her sweater, pulling it off overhead.

If I’d known what was about to happen, I’d have looked away or closed my eyes, but I didn’t expect her t-shirt to be attached to the wool of her sweater, and for me to get an eyeful of a very lacy bra—one I hadn’t seen in the bedroom yesterday.

I stared for a second while she struggled with the fabric, taking in an eyeful of her soft curves before she managed to get the sweater off and the t-shirt back in place. By the time her eyes were free again, I was pulling off my sweater, making sure *my* eyes were covered so she didn’t know I’d been staring.

Once we were both in short sleeves, I saw Jenna’s eyes go a little wide as she looked at me. Dean had always teased me for being so intent on being fit when I didn’t plan on dating, but the truth was, I didn’t do it to get girls. I did it because both of my parents died from health conditions really young, and I didn’t want to go the same way.

Of course, she wasn’t the only one eying the other with interest. Now that she was fully clothed, I allowed myself a moment to appreciate how beautiful she was, even after having slept on a lumpy couch.

But it was *only* for a moment as I thought about how her brother—my best friend—would react to me eyeballing his little sister, who was significantly younger than me.

“Is there anything to do around here besides reading and drinking cocoa?” I finally asked, breaking the silence but not the tension.

“Not as far as...” she started to say, but then her eyes lit up. “Wait!”

She stood and dashed from the room toward the hall without another word, and I was actually a bit concerned as to what I was waiting for. When she came back a moment later, she had something in her hand and, despite the way she was hugging herself, she was smiling.

“Holy hell,” she said. “It really is freezing in there.”

“In the bedrooms?”

“Yeah. Where I remembered I had... this!” She held up her hand to show me a pack of playing cards.

And that was when things started to really get interesting.

Chapter Eleven

Jenna

Gabe and I sat across from each other on the floor of the cabin pulling the cards out of their packs and shuffling them. He was much better at it than I was, and it made me want to try and be impressive. Of course, this resulted in me spilling cards absolutely everywhere and Gabe being polite enough to pretend he didn't see.

I watched as Gabe laid out the formation for Solitaire, and I followed in suit. I'd really had more of a joint game in mind, but if this was what he wanted to do, I could get on board. I'd spent nearly the entire two-thousands playing solitaire on my PC. I was practically an expert.

The wind blew furiously against where he'd boarded up the window, and it took everything in my power not to get anxious. What would happen if that covering failed? Were we doomed to just end up frozen?

I looked up at Gabe to ask him if he thought it was strong enough to hold but saw him deep in thought about a move. He looked really handsome when he was that focused, and suddenly the worries about our makeshift window covering faded.

His hands were almost graceful as he lay down card after card, pausing between to make decisions. I could almost picture him at a desk with a suit and tie being Mr. Wall Street.

Regardless of how I initially felt about him, my heart was warm watching him, and I was extremely conflicted over whether to try and start new or hold my ground. Perhaps the hot cocoa we'd made after all would sway me. Rum always made me more friendly.

“Done,” he said, and I gaped in awe. Sure enough, he’d completed his game in about seven minutes. Eight-year-old me would have been very impressed. Hell, twenty-four-year-old me was very impressed.

He picked up the cards and shuffled them again, laying them out to start over. That was when I got a bold question, and with how well things were going, I decided to ask it.

“So why did you and your fiancée break up?”

There was thick silence between us and he didn’t look up from his game but didn’t play either. I worried almost immediately that I’d crossed a line, but he soon spoke.

“Hannah walked out a week before Christmas because I was never fucking home,” he said, his voice absolutely laced with regret. “And she took the damn dog.”

Oof. That hurt me and I was a cat person. But why would him being busy make her leave him? “I guess I don’t understand,” I said, trying to clarify.

“I am, and always have been, a workaholic. I grew up very poor and it made me develop a bit of a preoccupation with earning as much money as I can as fast as I can. Nothing, and no one ever has gotten in my way, including her.”

Doing my rotations in the hospital, I was well aware of what a workaholic looked like. I couldn’t even count how many times I’d seen young doctors pull seventy-two-hour shifts, and many times I’d find them sleeping in empty rooms.

“What about you?” Gabe asked. “You ever had anyone serious in your life?”

“Hardly,” I scoffed. “I’ve barely got time to eat most days let alone date. And sadly for me, I’m *not* one of those nurses who wants to snag a doctor so

my social pickings are limited.”

Gabe raised an eyebrow. “You *don't* want a doctor?”

“Hell no,” I replied, flipping two of my cards over. “Those guys are the biggest douchebags on the planet... maybe besides you.” I stuck out my tongue at him and he laughed.

“Fair enough. I’m pretty sure you and Hannah would agree on that.” He shook his head, chuckling, and I put down my card to ask him another intimidating question.

“Is Dean seeing anyone?”

Gabe looked up at me, eyebrows raised. “He hasn’t told you either? I know he’s been seeing someone but I have no fucking clue who.”

I felt my heart sink a little. My initial suspicion that this would be one of the last Christmases together was closer than ever to coming true. It wasn’t that I didn’t want Dean to find someone. Dean had always been a hopeless romantic. But there was no guarantee it would be someone who enjoyed these traditions as much as we did, and I’d never ask my brother to choose between me and love.

“You seem upset,” Gabe said, studying my face.

“It’s nothing,” I replied. “Just thinking about the future.”

Gabe shifted and moved next to where I was sitting, putting a hand on my back. “I don’t think you have to worry about anyone splitting up you and Dean. He talks about his little sister like you’re what makes his sun rise. He’s so proud of you and your career, and he’ll tell anyone who will listen. Even some people who won’t.”

The sentiment warmed my heart and I couldn’t help but smile a little. Even though we bickered, I loved my brother, and knowing he was proud of me felt like an extension of Mom and Dad being proud of me too.

I looked down at the cards and my cup of rummy hot chocolate and realized my cheeks were flushed. G guessed I'd drunk more than I realized, though not so much to lose my ability to think.

"Do you...?"

"What?" Gabe replied, looking interesting.

"No, nothing," I said back. "It was a dumb idea."

"Tell me," he said. "I doubt any idea from Dean's brilliant sister could be dumb."

I pondered for a second, knowing this plan would definitely shake up the dynamic between us. But honestly, I didn't care. "Do you wanna do something else with these cards?" I asked.

"What did you have in mind?" he replied, raising an eyebrow.

I grabbed up a handful of playing cards and waved them in front of his face. "Strip poker."

Gabe's mouth actually dropped open, and while it was very fast, I noticed him look me up and down. "Are you sure?" he asked, seemingly unable to believe the offer.

"Sure," I said, "Why not? We're both consenting adults."

Gabe nodded in agreement and scooted a little closer. "I'm in if you are." He looked nervous, which was somehow endearing, and piled up all his playing cards too.

"We only need one deck," I said. "And yes, I'm sure. You wanna deal?"

Gabe hesitated, then nodded, taking them from me and doing some fancy shuffling trick. "Right," he said when he was satisfied with the rearrangement of the cards. "Let's do this."

It took me exactly two hands to have my rings and necklace off.

I could see his eyes sneaking peeks at me, and I would be lying if I said it

didn't turn me on. The way his pants sat led me to believe he was feeling the same.

"You know," he started as he shuffled again. "I knew I wanted to marry Hannah when she took me to a Yankees game."

I looked at him in confusion. "Okay..."

"There's more," he established. "It was one of the few days I took off in the year and she had bought me these great tickets to the game. In between innings, she asked if I would walk her to the bathroom to be sure she found her way back. Of course I agreed, and followed her to the women's restroom. When we got there, she looked inside really quick then pulled me in after her, locking the door to the whole bathroom."

He dealt the cards out before us, only half paying attention to where they were landing.

"Then she begged me to fuck her on the sink. Right there, in between innings. I couldn't believe how adventurous she was. It drove me wild." I laughed and he blushed, rubbing the cards between his fingers. "How about you?" he asked. "What's your wildest hookup story?"

This was always my favorite question to answer because I had a doozy of an answer. "It was essentially a porno," I replied. "I was a TA, I needed a better grade from my crypt keeper of a professor, wore something skimpy to class, and then..."

"Yeah?" Gabe said with just a little too much eagerness in his voice.

"Well, I found him after class and asked if I could do any extra credit. My sweater was unbuttoned down to here of course." I indicated to the point in the middle of my breastbone, and Gabe's eyes went wide. "Well, he said there was a paper I could write, and I really didn't feel like writing another paper, so... I sucked him off."

The bulge in Gabe's pants twitched and I tried not to look too hard at it. He shifted the way he was sitting, moving what appeared to be a very large cock, and blushing as he tried to keep it restrained.

"I'm sorry," he said, gesturing to his lap. "It has a mind of its own sometimes."

"Don't worry about it," I said, now feeling buzzed and brave from the liquored-up cocoa. "I brought a suitcase full of condoms. Being horny isn't unfamiliar to me."

Gabe opened his mouth to say something again but instead pointed to the cards. "Wanna keep playing?" he asked.

Honestly, no. I didn't want to keep playing. I wanted to rip that thing from his pants and sit on it. But there was Dean to consider. How would he feel if he came back and found out I'd been sleeping with his friend? No, that would end in disaster for both Gabe and me.

"Sure," I said, adjusting my bra for maximum cleavage. Gabe definitely took notice and sighed as he looked up to the ceiling in what I could only assume was an effort to stay... calm.

The hand was another loser for me, and I cheekily removed my earrings.

"You're running out of jewelry, Jenna," he said grinning.

"Well, you could lose a hand or two," I said playfully.

"Never," he replied. "I have a reputation to uphold."

I laughed and leaned back on my hands. "And exactly what reputation is that?"

Gabe shrugged and finished off his hot cocoa. I followed suit, getting a big mouthful of rum at the bottom. I shuddered and made a face at him to indicate that the alcohol had gathered there. Gabe chuckled to himself, setting up another hand.

“This game is gonna last a long time if you only ever take off tiny pieces of jewelry.”

“Like you said,” I replied, checking for my watch. “I’m almost out. You’re really eager to see what’s underneath here. Aren't you?”

Gabe didn’t reply but instead focused on another fancy shuffle. I took that as a yes and suddenly I felt like there was no boundary I wasn’t willing to cross. Gabe was hot, and I was tipsy. Plus, it had been a while since I’d had a really good lay, and Gabe looked like he knew how to give a really good lay.

Dean be fucked. I was gonna make this a strip poker for the ages.

Chapter Twelve

Gabe

She's Dean's sister .

I thought the words as a reminder to the logical, thinking side of my brain. The part of me that was in control. Clearly the less intellectual, emotional, need-driven Gabe, was distinctly ignored.

A small pile of Jenna's jewelry sat between us as she took her turn shuffling and dealing the cards.

A pair of twos, the jack of spades, the nine of spades, and the seven of diamonds. Not exactly a winning hand, and she was right. I really did want to see that lacy bra again—and hopefully anything that might match it.

And even more than that, I wanted to see what was under them.

Jenna looked at her hand, and I saw the hint of a smile flicker across her face. Damn it. She was terrible at holding a poker face. I wondered briefly if it was on purpose, given how I would expect a trauma nurse to be able to handle herself around people who were going to die. Either way, my hand was looking pretty shitty, and I knew I couldn't let myself lose that easily.

Not yet, anyway.

"I'm going to take two..." Jenna said, laying down the cards she wanted to trade. "And what about for mister big winner over there?"

I chuckled, trying to decide whether to take the three I really should have, or to bluff to try to make her think my hand was better than it was. Ultimately, I hate to report, pride won out over intellect, and I said, "Two as well."

She raised an eyebrow as though challenging me. "Two it is." She pulled two cards for each of us off the top of the deck and looked at hers. Her eyes

lit up for the briefest split second, and, when I looked at my own cards, I knew I was fucked.

My hand now consisted of two twos, the six of diamonds, the jack of spades, and the queen of hearts.

“Alright,” she said with a cheeky grin. “What do you have?”

I smiled as bravely as I could, knowing there was a good chance she had a better hand than me, and laid down my cards.

“Pair of twos, queen high,” I said, leaning back with my hands behind my head like I’d just won a huge jackpot. Either I was right and she was finally going to have to remove an article of clothing, or I was wrong, in which case I was about to give her a big thrill.

I knew before she even opened her mouth what the answer was, and I allowed myself to look as disappointed as I wanted to at having lost the hand.

“Three of a kind, fives,” she said. “Wow, mister big shot winner. Guess it’s time for you to start taking things off. You gonna start big with that sweater, or...?”

“Oh, I’ll start big, all right,” I said with a sly smile. I reached for the buckle of my belt, slowly pulling the leather strap until it was almost free. Her eyes went wide as she watched me prepare to remove it, but, at the last second, I moved my hand to my wrist where my Rolex sat. I undid the clasp, pulled it off, and dropped it on top of her pile of jewelry.

“Clever,” she said with a giggle, though I could hear the hint of a growl behind the words as she realized I wasn’t going to go down without a fight.

We played through another two hands, with her losing one and me losing the other, when we came across a disagreement as to the rules as written versus the rules as interpreted.

I pulled off one of my socks, then sat back down to deal a hand, when

Jenna held out her hands in protest, scoffing, and said, “Hey, hey, hey! Whoa! What the hell is this?”

“What the hell is what?”

“*One* sock?” she demanded, pointing at the article of clothing which had clearly offended her. “One. One sock.”

“So?” I asked, fully knowing where she was going with her complaint, but wanting to draw it out of her the way she’d drawn out removing her jewelry.

“So,” she said slowly, “that is half of an article of clothing, sir. You owe me the other sock.”

“If jewelry counts as items of clothing, each sock counts,” I countered, pointing at the pile in question.

“I counted both my earrings as one,” she argued, laughing despite the intensity of her words. “Pairs of items count as one. Give. Me. That. Sock.”

She’s adorable like this, I thought, a realization that shocked me. A day ago, this girl had been my nemesis in trying to make it through the holiday. And now, here I was, growing fond of her and, God help me, wanting to be much closer to her than I currently was, but deliberately putting it off for the sake of building the tension even more, looking forward to the moment when it would break.

“Alright,” I said, putting my hands up in surrender. “You win. Here is the sock you require.” I pulled it off and laid it beside the other one, with Jenna watching every movement I made as though I could somehow cheat my way out of taking off a sock.

I started to shuffle the cards again, and I realized it had been a solid fifteen minutes since we’d had any kind of conversation outside of the game.

“So,” I said, dealing out another hand, “I know your wildest hookup story, which, I have to admit is a doozy.” She blushed, but looked pleased with

herself, and I felt my cock twitch at the confidence she showed. “Tell me. What’s your *first* hookup story? How did the girl willing to go down on her professor lose her virginity? Because I bet that’s a great story.”

Jenna laughed. “You would think that,” she said. “But I hate to tell you, it’s a really dull story.” She glanced at her cards. “Three, please.”

“Tell me anyway,” I said, giving her the requested cards and taking two for myself. “I bet mine is even less exciting.”

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s compare, then. I’ll tell you mine, you tell me yours, and we see whose is the most boring.”

“Deal,” I said, laying out my hand at the same time she did hers to find that, once again, I’d won.

“Dammit,” she said, removing her own socks—both of them—and laying them next to the rest of the things we’d taken off. “Okay. So to set the scene for you, it was eight years ago. I was a junior in high school, and I was dating a member of the football team. We’d already done a little bit of fooling around—I’d gone down on him and he’d fingered me a couple times—but we’d never actually gotten undressed.”

“How it usually goes, I suppose,” I said. “That’s kind of the natural progression for a lot of people, right?”

“As far as I know.” She took the cards and shuffled them, dealing out another hand. “Well, this guy, Paul, was one of the starters for the homecoming game, and I’d told him that, if he won, we could go all the way. Looking back, I’m pretty sure he jizzed in his pants just thinking about it, but I have no way of proving it.” She laughed, then motioned to my hand. “How many?”

“Just one,” I said, and she bit her lip, taking four for herself. “So, what happened next?”

“Well, the day of the game came, and they lost—badly. He was in such a foul mood after that, that I literally didn’t even want to be around him that day, let alone let him inside of me.” She laid down her cards. “Two pair?”

“Full house,” I said, showing her my own.

“Fuck,” she said with a giggle before removing her sweater, once again pulling her t-shirt up with it to give me the briefest glimpse of her bra, though, this time, I didn’t try to hide my staring. “Excuse you,” she scolded me. “You can wait for that until you earn it by beating me again.”

“Deal,” I said.

“I thought it was your turn,” she teased.

“Not what I meant, but yes, it is.” I took the cards and shuffled them, dealing out another hand. “So, he turned into a sullen teenage boy, as teenage boys often do, something I can speak to having once *been* a sullen teenage boy.”

“You?” Jenna said in mock incredulity. “Sullen? Mister ‘this cabin is too small’ can be *sullen*?”

“I know,” I said, shaking my head like I couldn’t believe it either. “It’s a shocker, but it’s true.”

She gave another of those laughs that sounded like bells tinkling, and I had to fight against getting hard again. This girl was beautiful, smart, and funny, and I couldn’t believe I hadn’t given her the chance to show it to me when we first met.

Because she’s Dean’s sister, that voice in my head said again. And she’s younger than you. A lot younger than you.

Somehow, however, those things seemed unimportant as the firelight glistened on her skin and hair, and, losing another hand, I finally removed my shirt.

“Well,” she said, starting her story again, “Paul got all sullen, and, by the time the dance rolled around that night, I hadn’t even heard from him. I wasn’t sure if he was going to show up or not. Half an hour of the damn thing went by, and I was still waiting, so I went outside to call him, and there he was.”

“He showed up?” I asked.

“Oh, he showed up, all right,” she said with a slightly bitter laugh. “He showed up, drunk in the bushes outside the school, getting head from another girl.”

“What?” I said, not having seen that one coming.

“Yeah,” she said.

“And you still slept with him?” I asked, now starting to question the validity of her story, since she seemed much smarter than that.

“Oh, hell no.” She laughed, this time with vindictiveness rather than bitterness. “No, I went back inside and found one of his teammates who was single, took him to the boys’ locker room, and fucked him on one of the benches. We dated for six months after that.”

I shook my head, smiling at her. “You have some fire to you, don’t you?”

“You’re just realizing that?” she said, licking her lips for effect as she stood to remove her pants.

My jaw fell as I saw the blue thong begin to peek out, then come into full view.

“See something you like?” she asked.

I nodded, unable to even pretend to be clever. “Yes, I do.”

“Well?” she said, sitting down, my gaze unable to tear away from her body, which was now on full display, with only her matching lingerie set visible. “I told you mine. How’d you lose *your* virginity?”

I laughed. “Well,” I said, “I think you’ll find I win the boring contest.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she said.

I shrugged with a grin, knowing for sure there was no way she could pretend I had half as interesting a story as she did.

“I was eighteen. It was my high school sweetheart, in her bedroom when her parents were gone. We used a condom, and I failed to make her come, as most teenage boys do.”

“That was *it*?” Jenna said. “That was the whole story?”

“That was it,” I confirmed, standing to remove my pants as I lost yet another hand, leaving us both in nothing but our undergarments.

And *that* was it.

Chapter Thirteen

Jenna

The fire felt unbelievably nice against the copious amounts of bare skin I had on display and, I'd be a damned liar if I said I didn't like the way Gabe was looking at me. He kept biting his lip and shivering like it was taking all his willpower not to touch me. The fabric covering my breasts felt insignificant, knowing it wasn't hiding anything from his view. My nipples had been hard for the last twenty minutes, at least.

"I really like the design of this," Gabe said, reaching out and touching the stitching on the cup, his fingers grazing my tensed bumps softly. It was something I'd bought from a local lingerie boutique. Royal blue with lace over the cups, dipping low enough to allow me to wear deep V-neck dresses.

"Yeah," I said dreamily, leaning in to his touch without meaning to. "I did, too. That's why I bought it." That and the matching underwear, which happened to be a barely-there thong—something he was currently taking off of me with his eyes.

Gabe wasn't so bad himself. Along with the gorgeous top half, his legs were strong and sexy, and he had a tattoo on his thigh with a bunch of symbols I didn't recognize. But that was far less interesting to me than what was currently still covered. Even flaccid and through his boxers I could see a huge cock resting against his thigh. I wondered if he could see that I was getting wet over the sight of him, hoping I wasn't giving him a giant ego.

But Gabe didn't seem to notice what I was doing at all. He was way more focused on continuing the card game, and for good reason. I could see where this was likely going, so I was sure he could, too.

"You ready for another hand?" he asked. "Or is this you calling it quits?"

“No way,” I said in a drunken sort of defiance. “I’m not stopping until I get to see that.” I pointed to his bulge, and surprisingly, he looked embarrassed.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” he said, shifting so my view was obscured. “Now those... those I’d like to see.” he said, indicating my tits.

I shifted my body a little closer to his, the skin of my hand grazing his. “I don’t have to lose a hand of cards to show them to you. I’ll take this bra off right here if you do the same with your boxers.” I giggled.

“No deal,” he said, laughing. “I’ll win my boobs fair and square.”

A deep throb came from within my panties and I whimpered audibly. Then, I tried to play it off like I was clearing my throat.

Outside, the wind howled and some of the gust blew in through the tiniest gaps in the makeshift window coverings. I nearly shrieked at how cold it felt against my skin, but instead I looked around for a blanket.

“What do you need?” Gabe asked with genuine concern.

“Blanket!” I managed to get out between my chattering teeth.

Gabe leapt to his feet and snatched the one off the sofa he’d been sleeping with the night before. Then he sat down beside me and wrapped it around us both.

“Maybe strip poker wasn’t the best idea when it’s subarctic outside.”

I laughed, leaning in to his firm body a little, trying to steal the warmth from it. “Any chance you could liven up that fire?” I asked.

“Certainly,” he replied. Then he stood and grabbed the poker, adding wood to the blaze as he went.

I took the blanket and climbed onto the couch. Gabe was done in a matter of minutes and sat down beside me, prodding at the opening of the blanket.

“Get your own.” I laughed.

“This is mine,” he said back in defiance. “Let me in.”

I sighed heavily, opened my heat burrito, and allowed him to slide in beside me. He pulled me into him so we were sitting chest to back, his legs on either side of me. His hands rested on my hips, and almost subconsciously he began to squeeze them.

“Excuse you, sir,” I said, pretending to be furious. “I’m not sure what you think you’re doing. But that is reserved for winners of strip poker, and I’m afraid you didn’t finish the game.”

“No,” Gabe said in my ear. “I’m pretty sure these were for the winner.”

His hands went to my breasts and I gasped as he gave them a firm squeeze. I felt him get hard against me, and I shuddered, my ass subconsciously arching against him.

At first, he rubbed them like he was giving me a massage, but his fingers quickly dipped below the fabric, running across my nipples with their icy touch.

I moaned and this time he bucked against me, my noises propelling him into carnal desire.

“God, those are good,” he whispered in my ear. “Big and soft and with deliciously hard nipples.”

The fabric of my panties was definitely soaked now, and he wasn’t stopping any time soon. In fact, he ran a hand down my stomach, gently toying with the outside of my pussy.

“Gabe...” I gasped, still hellbent on not letting him know how much he was affecting me.

“Shh,” he said. “I’m only here to keep you warm.”

He was definitely warming me up, all right. In fact, I was nearly sweating. I could feel him gyrate against me and I knew I wanted to have him inside

me. God, I was weak. A few mugs of boozy hot cocoa and an hour of friendly conversation and I was already begging this man to be inside of me.

Gabe slid his free hand down my arm, taking my hand and tucking it inside his boxers where I found exactly what I expected to find.

He was impressively thick and he shuddered at my touch. I could smell his body wash as I touched him, which was impressive considering it had been at least twenty-four hours since he'd taken a shower. Guys with this kind of impeccable hygiene were hard to come by. I was certainly reconsidering most, if not all, of my opinions on him being a slimeball.

"Jenna..." he sighed. "God that feels good."

His skin was soft beneath my touch and it was a very pleasant contrast to how unfathomably hard he was. I ran first one, then two fingers up and down his shaft while he continued to play with me, his lips going suddenly to my shoulder.

"Is this okay?" he asked, breathing against my skin.

"Mmhmm," I said as his kisses electrified my skin.

I could feel his teeth graze and nip at my neck, then his massive hands clenched my hips and pulled me forcefully against his cock.

"This is so fucking wrong," he growled, sounding as though he were fighting against some kind of inner demon. "But God, I want you so bad. And I should get to have what I want on this trip, too, right?"

I moaned an affirmative and he yanked me into him once again, his dripping thickness creating a slick spot between my ass cheeks he ground into.

He suddenly paused, then went silent.

"Is everything okay?" I asked tentatively. I hoped I hadn't messed this up for us already. I could see even now that he was the kind of man to take

control and dominate me.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s just that... could I taste you?”

My heart—and other parts—thudded at the request. I hadn’t had anyone go down on me since undergrad and I wasn’t about to turn down the offer. “Yes, please,” I breathed, waiting to see what he’d do next.

Gabe grabbed me around the waist and shifted so my back slammed into the soft and forgiving couch. With two fingers latched around the waistband, he ripped away my lacy thong and tossed it aside.

“Fuck,” he said, looking down at me and taking in my body. “I love a girl who’s natural. I’m a man, I don’t want to put my dick in someone ’scaped like a teenager.”

The compliment was unusual and made me blush. No one I’d ever slept with had complimented my tidy pubic hair before. Somehow, it made me even more thrilled to be beneath him, waiting for him to devour me.

Gabe slowly lowered himself to his belly, using that immaculate arm strength he had, and ran his nose right across my center, taking in the scent of me. He let out a deep, slow groan and then I felt his fingers running across my skin.

“It’s been a while,” he said. “I hope I’m not rusty.”

“I’m sure you’ll be—”

His tongue plunged deep against my wet flesh and he ran it across the entire span of my electrified pussy.

Without intending to, I arched up into his face.

“Oh, Jenna,” he said into my throbbing center, and the sound of him saying my name damn nearly undid me.

I was hyperaware of the way he was gripping my thighs, each finger its own point of pleasure as he squeezed it into my soft, smooth legs. My hands

in turn went to his soft wavy hair, gripping it for support animalistically.

But Gabe looked up and shook his head. “Don’t make me pin those hands to the sofa with my belt. I’m in charge now, Miss Nurse.”

Now this was what I called a Christmas miracle. I could see stars in front of my eyes as he used his tongue to work every inch of me. From clit to the lowest part of my opening, it seemed like he couldn’t get enough.

Then suddenly his fingers were inside of me, too, stroking me from within, in tandem with his tongue dancing across me.

“Oh, God, Gabe,” I cried, nearly screaming in pleasure. For the first time since we got here, I couldn’t have been more thrilled that my brother and Lexi were nowhere to be seen. The isolation of the cabin and the fact that Gabe and I were totally alone lent itself to absolute release in a way I’d never experienced before. I could be as loud as I wanted without shame.

“You’re like candy,” he said between long sweeps of his tongue against my clit. “I could die here very happily.”

“Me too,” I gasped. “Just do me in now because I can’t imagine anything ever topping the feeling of this moment.”

Gabe got a wicked grin on his face and grabbed me by the hips, turning me so I was flipped on my stomach. He yanked hard, pulling my ass into the air and then shifted to a different angle. This opened a whole new realm of possibilities.

Where his tongue was very focused on my apex before, now I felt it darting in and out of my slit, his massive hands clutching my asscheeks. And his fingers... well...

I could feel a lovely, shivery climax building and I knew that if he kept it up, I would come all over his tongue. He apparently knew it, too, because at

the last moment, he slipped two fingers in my pussy and left one finger to massage my other entrance.

“Oh, Gabe, yes...”

The world around me went black and gold and my eyes rolled back into my head. I only thought that ever happened in cringey pornos and when you were trying to convince boys who didn't even know where the clit was that you were having an orgasm.

I spasmed harder, my limbs locking and my fingers clutching the sofa cushions like I was fucking Rose from *Titanic* and they were the only thing keeping me afloat.

Gabe gasped as my body went limp and collapsed down on the soft surface. He got to his feet, cock still at attention, and went to the sink to wash his hands.

I'd never seen a man do this before, but knowing he had the intention of thoroughly fucking me and seeing him make sure the hands he'd be using to do so were clean was so thoughtful. It made me wonder how low the bar we set for men really was.

Gabe returned to my side and stood before me, grinning down at me and biting his lip. “The old man's still got it,” he said happily.

“I don't know what ‘it’ is,” I said. “But if you're talking about your ability to turn an adult woman into a sweaty goo, then yes. You've definitely still got it.”

Gabe took a step toward me, then back again, holding up a finger and going to where his wallet sat on the counter. He pulled out a condom and went to rip it open.

“Wait,” I said, holding up a hand to stop him.

His face fell only a little before he nodded. “You don't want to go the

whole way. I understand. We're still pretty new to each other."

"No," I said, grinning and sliding off the sofa to my knees. "I just wanna return the favor."

Gabe dropped the condom in surprise then got a wicked grin across his mouth. "I guess you're gonna have to test out just how long I can take those gorgeous lips on my cock."

I opened my mouth and licked my lips, and I could see Gabe shiver. "Yeah," I said. "I guess I will."

Chapter Fourteen

Gabe

If the taste of her was phenomenal, the feeling of her was otherworldly. Any lingering memories of Hannah disappeared in the scent of Jenna's body.

I licked my lips, savoring the juices she left there as her lips wrapped around my length, her tongue gently flicking against my tip.

“Oh, God, yes,” I moaned. I hadn't had anyone do this—do anything to me—in five years, and I worried I was going to finish fast and this would be over. I felt like a teenager getting laid for the first time, ripe for an embarrassing finish. My first time, I'd actually finished before I had my pants off, but I was so embarrassed that I kept going forward anyway.

I managed to stay my climax, holding it back like water trying to burst through a dam. The amount of concentration I was currently having to exercise was unprecedented. Not even my job got this kind of focus. “That's a good girl.”

She moaned, and the vibrations tested my willpower yet again. I lowered my hand to her hair, holding it back. I watched as she bobbed up and down on my dick, the sensations reawakening this need in me.

“Jenna,” I groaned. “God, Jenna, you are so good at that. That's right, baby. Suck Daddy's cock just like that.”

She stopped and looked up at me in surprise, and I hesitated. Hannah had loved when I'd take control like that, or so she'd said. It was so ingrained in me that any sexual situation brought it out, even when I was alone.

“Was that too far?” I asked, worried I'd ruined the moment, and that any minute we'd be back to an awkward, pissed off silence.

But much to my surprise, Jenna only smiled with her mouth half open, ready to take me again, which she did—right after she shook her head and said, “No, Daddy. I liked it.”

Fuck. This girl was a goddess, and I was getting laid for the first time in five years.

“Turn around,” I commanded. “I want to touch you while you do that.”

She did as she was told, and spun so that she was on all fours with her perfectly round ass facing me. I licked my thumb and ran it over her swollen lips, then slipped between them to play with the sensitive nub where my tongue had been before.

She whimpered, mouth still around me, and shivered in what I could only assume was pleasure since she doubled her efforts on my cock. I slipped one finger, then two, inside of her warm center, playing with the spot inside I remembered women loved.

Shortly, I felt myself getting too close, so I stopped her to give myself time to come back down from the edge of orgasm. With no sense of decorum, I tugged at her hair, pulling her away from my thick, pulsing cock and grabbing her around the waist to flip her over. Once I was hovering over her, my cock pressing into her stomach, I lowered myself toward her delicious pussy once more.

“You don’t have to—”

“I want to,” I said, “And I’m going to, unless you say no. Do you want to say no to Daddy?” I asked.

“Please do it, Daddy,” she said, the word falling from her lips like honey. “Please play with my clit and put your fingers inside me.”

“Getting greedy, are we?” I said with a chuckle before I dipped my head to lap at the fluids which seemed to be freely flowing, preparing her to take me,

something I fully intended to happen. I slipped my fingers back inside of her as I licked and played with her throbbing bud, and she let out an audible gasp.

“Oh, my God,” she moaned, running her fingers through my hair. “Oh, God, yes, Daddy, thank you... Oh... *ohhhh...*” She let loose with a cry that had my cock throbbing with the need to be inside of her, to hear those sounds as I thrust into her.

Once she'd come down, I let up and moved back up to kiss her lips again, even more hungry than I'd been for this contact the first time. One of her legs hitched up beside me against the back of the couch, and I felt my hardness slip along her entrance. I was so close to simply sliding inside, but knew I needed to be more responsible than some teenager getting laid in his backseat.

I kissed her, feeling her wetness on my tip and groaning at the sensation, one I hadn't felt in so long. It was like heaven, and Jenna was the goddess I was here to worship.

But not without protection.

I leaped from the couch to grab the condom I'd dropped before, tearing it open as quickly as I could. I had no idea why I kept it in my wallet. It wasn't like I ever used it. But I always made sure to replace it when they'd get close to the expiration dates.

Just in case.

I pulled the condom on, quickly as I could without breaking or tearing it, then went back to lay on top of her. I started kissing her again and, after running my hand up along her side from her hip, reached up to grab one of her breasts. They were so soft and supple that I groaned in delight, and then I dipped my head to take one of her perfect pink nipples in my mouth.

“Fuck,” she moaned as my tongue swirled around it and I suckled slightly

at the hard little nub. “Yes... thank you, Daddy...”

I toyed with her that way for a bit longer, taking in every movement and sensation that I'd nearly forgotten in the last five years. Work had become my obsession for so long, with me pleasuring myself nearly every night and simply falling asleep alone, that I had completely voided my mind of how incredible the feeling of a woman beside me, beneath me, was.

Her juices gushed over my length again, and I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to have her. I gently nudged her legs open with my knees and sank into them. Then, I reached down between us to position myself.

“Is this okay?” I asked, stopping before I went any further, wanting to make sure she was not only on board, but that she wanted this as badly as I did. “You can say no.”

“No,” she said, and I started to move, but she grabbed me. “No! I mean, no, I don't want to say no. This is okay. Please. Please, Gabe... Daddy... I need it.”

With her consent given, I grabbed myself again and guided my cock into her crease, then into the warm, delicious center.

“Fuck!” I gasped. “God, yes, baby girl. You feel so fucking amazing.” Fully sheathed inside of her, I began to thrust and pulled back to look at her as I did.

Her eyes were on mine, and her hands gripped my shoulders, the nails biting into the skin and urging me forward. Her mouth was slightly open as she breathed heavily, taking every inch of me like she was made to do it.

“Oh, thank... you... Daddy...” she said in time with my movements. She moved one hand over her head to grip the couch's armrest, preventing her head from slamming into it over and over as my thrusts became deeper and harder.

Once again, I felt myself veering close to my climax, so I pulled out and slipped my arms beneath her to hold her to me. Then, I rolled backward so I was on the bottom and she was on top of me.

The view of her tits from this angle was like heaven. They bounced perfectly in time with the rest of her body as she rode me, first sliding her hips forward and back, then raising herself up and lowering back down onto me, quickly at first, then torturously slow, grinding and undulating.

“Oh, God,” she gasped suddenly as she started to thrust faster. “Oh... oh...”

I felt her clench around me, her soft center becoming tight like a vise as wave after wave of pleasure hit her. She dug her nails into my chest, as she began to slow, but seeing her so deep in the thrall of ecstasy was as intoxicating to me as my own enjoyment of the moment.

I reached up and grabbed her by the wrists, pulling her slightly forward to give myself room to move. Her hands were suspended over my shoulders and her fantastic ass hovered just high enough that I was barely past the tip within her, which was perfect. I began to move my hips, thrusting up into her slowly, letting her feel every inch of me sliding into her before, just as slowly, lowering my hips to pull most of the way out of her before repeating the process.

I was throbbing at the feeling, and knew I didn't have much longer, especially not if she kept being this fucking delicious. My cock was aching with the need for release, and I began to slam into her harder and faster.

I felt her come again and again, twice more, each time pushing me to my edge and forcing me to exercise every ounce of control I had.

When she came for the fourth time, I knew I couldn't hold out any longer. I sat up, holding her against me so that her legs wrapped around my hips and

her arms went around my neck as one of mine circled her waist to keep her pressed tightly to me and the other went to her hair, holding her face to mine so I could kiss her, even more deeply than I had yet.

Her skin bore the slightest sheen of sweat, as did mine, and the feeling of our bodies sliding against each other, if I wasn't already at my brink, would have brought me there. I pulled away from the kiss to look at her as I bucked my hips, forcing myself in and out of her as she moved in time with me, creating an even more intense sensation.

"I can't hold out much longer," I said, pressing my lips to her neck and feeling the slow build in my groin as my orgasm prepared to unleash itself. "I'm going to..." I moaned and bit down on her shoulder, eliciting a groan equal to my own.

"Yes," she said, her arms tight around my neck, forcing me against the soft skin where her neck met her collarbone. She shivered against me. "I'm going to come again. Please, Gabe... Please, *Daddy*..."

"As you wish, baby girl," I growled.

I moved with renewed vigor, no longer trying to stay myself, but giving myself full permission to let the animalistic need to fill her propel me forward. In a swift motion, I laid her on her back again before diving back inside of her, driving my cock as deeply as it could go.

When I felt her come again, I let the feeling of her tightening around me finally unleash what it had been trying to do all along.

"Oh... fuck... yes, Jenna... fuck..."

I finished, spilling every drop I had within me into the condom, which, thankfully, did its job. I lay there, still inside of her, panting as the blood slowly began to return to my brain.

It seemed the same thing was happening for Jenna, because when I pulled

out, she sat up rather quickly and grabbed for a blanket to wrap around herself.

“Well,” she said, clearing her throat. “Thank you. That was, uh... that was... nice.”

“Yeah,” I said, unsure how to react to her sudden shift to a colder stance. “Really nice.”

“Yeah,” she repeated, and then we both fell into an awkward silence.

After a few moments, I opened my mouth to say something, but we tried to speak at the same time.

“That was better than nice, actually,” I said at the same time Jenna said, “Well, I think it’s probably best we don’t do *that* again.”

“Oh,” I replied, surprised but accepting if that was what she wanted. “Did I do something wrong?” I asked, wanting to make sure I hadn’t done anything to make her uncomfortable or upset.

“No!” she said, and she was so genuine in that response that I really believed her. “I just... well, this was a great way to pass the time until the power comes back on, but I’m sure it will be back by morning, and Dean and Lexi will be back because it will be Christmas eve, and it’s not like this is going to turn into anything. So, while it was fun, and I’m grateful, I don’t think it would be a good idea for us to keep doing it.” She looked at me with a look I couldn’t decipher. “Do you?”

“No, of course not,” I said, hoping that was the right answer and feeling a bit like an ass when I saw her deflate a bit. “But, yeah, it was... fun. More than fun.” I discarded the condom and pulled my underwear back on, then moved toward her. “Are you sure—”

“Well... goodnight, Gabe. We should probably get some rest before the others get back tomorrow.”

And with that, she rolled over on the couch, pulling the blanket over her as the firelight danced in the shine of her hair, leaving me standing there alone, but wanting nothing more than to crawl in behind her and spend the entire night making love to her.

Chapter Fifteen

Jenna

I told myself it had been a bad idea as soon as we finished, but I was never very good at keeping promises to myself. Gabe and I proceeded to have sex twice more in the night, each time better than the last. He was a careful and giving lover, and he made every other man I'd ever been with look like an amateur.

When the sun finally peeked through the frosted windows, waking us from our slumber, I found myself in his arms. Something I'd sworn not to do as I was dozing off last night. Of course, that was before he made me come four more times. From what I remember, by the time we actually slept, both of us were too exhausted to bother moving apart.

The cabin smelled like a dying fire and cinnamon, likely from the copious amounts of scented holiday sticks that were hanging everywhere. This was the first sunlight we'd seen in two days and it bounced off the ornaments on the tree, sending rainbows shooting every which way on the wood walls.

I turned in Gabe's arms, studying his face as he slept. Even unconscious, he looked serious and wounded, and yet somehow angelic. I could see the boy beneath the man whose hair was just beginning to gray at the temples. It was so hard to spot I wondered if he had even noticed yet, and I vowed not to be the one to tell him.

It was only as I decided to wake him that I felt my stomach rumble in a way that couldn't be ignored. I wondered how many snacks were left from the roughage Lexi had brought. I'd definitely eaten some of the nuts, and I'd seen Gabe rifle through the bag of food as well.

So now I had to make the decision of whether to move and potentially wake up Gabe so we'd be forced to face our joint shame in the daylight, or starve to death. Maybe that was a little dramatic, but still—I was hungry.

I used my core muscles to scoot down in his arms, shimmying so I could slide out of his arms entirely. There was a moment of panic where my hair got caught on the metal piece of his watch he'd somehow slipped back on. Somehow, by the grace of the Christmas spirits themselves, I got it untangled and stood without waking him.

I was halfway across the kitchen when I realized I'd fallen asleep wearing his shirt. That was the kind of cutesy romantic shit real couples did, not one-night stands who hated each other. I looked at where he lay on the couch shirtless in his boxers and pajama pants and couldn't stop the smile that came over my face.

I'd definitely been right about him throwing me around with those muscles.

When I opened up the sack of food that was left, I found a pathetic selection of protein bars and dried fruit. I hated protein bars. No matter what people said, they tasted like dirt.

Lexi always went on and on about how if you just threw a Quest bar in the microwave, it would taste exactly like a brownie, but she was so full of shit.

“Maybe if that brownie was crusted with concrete,” I'd replied, making a face.

But now, I picked one up from the top of the pile tentatively and unwrapped it. It smelled exactly like I remembered, and when I tried to tear a piece off, it was like ripping a piece of clay.

“The trick is to heat them up,” said a voice behind me, and I turned to find Gabe watching me with amusement.

“Yeah, yeah,” I replied, shoving the chunk I’d torn into my mouth. “That’s what they all say.”

Gabe stood and walked over to me, coming up behind me and putting his hands on my hips. “I don’t suppose there’s another one in there?”

I turned and handed him the rest of mine. “Here,” I said. “I’d rather starve.”

Gabe laughed loudly, a beautiful, deep, church bell kind of laugh. If the electricity ran on joy, I had no doubt that laugh would have turned it back on as it echoed through the space. Then he kissed the top of my head and I melted right there in his arms. Casual fling be damned.

“Well lucky for you…” he said, opening the cabinet below me. “The shed had a few things other than wood and tools.” He reached into the cabinet and extracted three cans and two glass jars. The glass jars each read, *peaches* and the cans read, *beanie weenies*. Something like that would have typically made me gag but at this point, I’d try anything. “I saw they had a cast iron pot, so I figured we could cook these on the fire.”

I grabbed one of the jars of peaches and popped the seal, pulling out some juicy, soft fruit and popping it into my mouth. “Oh, my God,” I said, groaning as loudly as I had the night before. “I cannot think of anything more delicious than this right now. God bless Georgia.”

Gabe laughed again and grabbed the cast iron pot, taking it to the fire with a can opener. I watched from the kitchen, blanket around my shoulders, eating peaches with my fingers.

In this capacity, it almost felt like he and I were together, having a rugged weekend away. Minus the blue tarp that was now our window, and the fact that we couldn’t use half the cabin for lack of heat.

“How are we supposed to change our clothes?” I said, walking over to him.

“I hardly doubt I can live in your shirt with no underwear.”

Gabe’s attention was quickly diverted and he reached for the bottom of the t-shirt, tugging it up playfully. I squealed and backed away, smacking his offending hand. “Just something to pass the time, remember?”

Gabe shook his head and chuckled, then got to his feet and stretched. “While those are cooking,” he said, giving the beanie weenies a stir. “I will make the sacrifice and get you some fresh clothes. What do you want?”

For a moment, I wasn’t sure if I wanted Gabe rustling around in my suitcase. But then I thought about the fact that he’d been inside me. The condom lying in the middle of the living room floor was proof of that.

“That would be great, thanks.” I said, staring at him as some rays of light broke through the frosted window. In this light, and after last night’s romp, he really did look like some Greek god.

Gabe put the spoon he was stirring with down and went to the bedrooms. I could hear him gathering things for a bit, then he peeked his head out.

“You know, the bath will still work considering it runs on gas heating, not electricity. Do you want to wash up?”

God, yes, I did. I could smell myself and I doubt Gabe was much better after our activities from the night before.

“Please,” I said, nodding.

“Let me just turn on the water now so the steam can heat up the bathroom before you go in. Looks like there are plenty of towels—and there’s some shampoo.” He crossed over into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. I heard the water turn on, and within ten minutes, I could see steam rolling out from under the door. Gabe quickly emerged and closed the door after him once more. “I left your clean clothes in there so they’d be warm, too.”

I went to where he stood, putting my peaches down on the counter, and hugged him. He may have started off as my worst nightmare but he was quickly becoming my knight in shining armor.

“Thank you, Gabe,” I said. You’re really good at taking care of someone. I’d know, I’m a nurse.”

Gabe chuckled and I bit my lip, smiling. “Happy bathing,” he said, ducking past me and returning to his pot of food.

It certainly would be.

The moment I entered the windowless bathroom it was like heaven. It felt like I was in a sauna at the gym only with less sweaty people—well, besides me. I went to the clawfoot tub and put a finger in to test the water. It was scalding against my icy skin, but with a little added cold water it would be perfect.

I turned to look at the shelf full of bathing products, and selected some fruity-smelling soap and shampoo/conditioner combo. It was then that I noticed there were six or so candy canes hanging off the various knobs and handles of the cabinets before me. They were the good Hershey kind with mint swirled chocolate. I groaned in happiness and grabbed one, quickly ripping off the plastic wrapping and putting it hook first into my mouth. Then I climbed into the tub and sank up to my neck in the heated comfort.

The smell of minty candy and hot water filled the bathroom, and I sighed. Now this felt like a Christmas I could enjoy. Festive sprigs of cinnamon and pine quickly warmed to join the mixture of scents, and when I closed my eyes, I was in Christmas heaven.

I had been in the bath for a little over an hour when a knock came on the door and I jumped, dropping what was left of my candy cane into the soapy water.

“No...” I lamented, staring sadly at it as it sank. “What’s up?” I shouted at Gabe through the door, trying not to sound irritated.

“I was wondering if you’d like to put up the tree together,” he said. “It’s kind of a mess at the moment, but we could fix it up before Dean and Lexi get back. Only if you want to, of course.”

If there was one thing that could pull me out of my lost candy cane blues it was that, and I quickly stood and pulled the plug for the tub.

Gabe had indeed left a stack of towels for me, plus some Christmas-themed flannel pants and matching shirt with a sports bra, and some reasonable looking underwear. This guy had definitely lived with a woman before.

I slowly dried my body, savoring every moment of comfort, knowing I’d be going back into the chilly living room shortly. If I could have, I think I’d stayed in that tub until Dean and Lex got back. Though my stomach was growling a little, and fixing the tree was really good inspiration to depart my Christmassy wonderland.

I emerged from the bathroom to find Gabe across the hall waiting for me. He had a towel and clothes of his own in his arms, and he smiled.

“How was it?” he asked.

“Magical,” I replied, feeling the rosy glow of my warmed cheeks lingering.

“Excellent,” he said, getting to his feet and holding the door open.

I stepped aside and he went in, taking his turn to finally feel warm again. I turned and looked around at the task that lay before us. The first thing I needed to do was sweep up the broken glass. After that, all we’d need was a little Christmas magic.

Chapter Sixteen

Gabe

The warm water enveloped me like a cocoon, bringing feeling back to my frozen extremities. The fire and Jenna's touch had been wonderful for heating up my numbed skin, but once she had left my presence and I was left on my own again, the chill had crept back in.

I lathered my hair and skin, cleaning off the sweat and remnants of our activities of the night before as the sounds of the wind slowly died down outside the cabin. The storm had already begun to blow itself out by the time we'd woken up, but I could hear the lessening in the gale with every passing minute.

If the snow stopped soon, there was every chance that the roads could be plowed within the day. And while part of me was glad Jenna would likely have her brother for Christmas, and that I would know my friend was safe, I couldn't help but be just a bit disappointed. I knew that once Dean returned, Jenna and I would go back to a much less intimate arrangement, and the idea left me more than a little melancholy.

When I'd arrived, Jenna had seemed so insufferable and unwelcoming, but I now knew that my own actions had played an even larger part of that than I initially realized. The Jenna I'd gotten to know over the last day and a half, when we had nothing to do but spend time together and get to know each other, was like an entirely different person. She was smart, funny, and clever, with a compassionate nature and, by God, if she wasn't the sexiest person I'd ever been with, I would drink my own bathwater.

Just thinking about the way she felt the night before, the way her lips felt on my skin, the way it felt to be inside of her had me twitching, needing

another release.

But I wasn't about to waste it alone—not when we might only have hours left to explore this connection and each other.

I got out of the bath and dried off, pulling on a new pair of boxers, pants, and a sweater, then went back out to the living room to see what Jenna had gotten up to while I took my turn in the bath.

Sitting on a blanket before the fire, she had the cards spread out in the solitaire formation again. She looked up at me as I entered and smiled, flipping a new card.

“Good bath?” she asked, her eyes traveling up and down my body in a way that told me she might have had an idea of the kinds of thoughts I was having in there by myself.

“Not nearly as good as it was to see you when I got out of it,” I said, surprising myself with how easily the flirtatious, sentimental comment came to me. But it seemed to have the desired effect, since Jenna immediately blushed and her smile widened as she looked down at her cards.

“So...” she said after a moment, looking out the unbroken window. “The weather seems to be letting up.”

“Yeah,” I replied, my smile fading slightly, “I noticed that.” I tried not to look too put out by the lightening skies, but the idea of losing this little bit of time together was even more disappointing with her in front of me.

“Dean and Lexi will probably be back soon.” It might have been my imagination, but, despite the hopefulness I knew she was feeling, I could have sworn I saw the same hint of sadness I was experiencing, myself.

“Yeah,” I said, unsure what else to say about that particular topic. We remained in silence for a moment, then I remembered what the plan had been before I got in the bath. “So, do you want to get started on that tree?”

Jenna smiled and nodded, gathering up the cards and sticking them back in the box. She stood, and the sweater she had on was such a perfect complement to her lovely curves that I stared for longer than I probably should have, though I felt certain any chastity between us had been blown away by the storm as much as the window had.

We wandered the house, looking at the destroyed decorations in the living room and dining room, casualties of the broken window and the storm that had raged inside the house while I'd gathered supplies from the shed. The tree lay on its side, several of the ornaments broken, and even more scattered around haphazardly. The tablecloth had been blown off and lay in a corner, with two of the four gold chargers broken in half. The garland on the mantle was bunched up in a messy clump, and the glass snowmen were little more than exploded shards of glass on the floor.

"Well," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "This is a disaster, isn't it?"

"No kidding," Jenna said with a mirthless laugh. "No chance we could just open up the window and let the storm blow it all away so we could just pretend we never saw it?"

"We don't have to do this," I reminded her. I was more than willing to ignore any kind of responsibility until real life walked back in the door. Until then, we could keep just enjoying each other.

"I know," she said with a resigned sigh. "Believe me. I can think of... several things... I'd rather do." She gave me a look and licked her lips, and I felt another twitch below my belt. "But Christmas is tomorrow, and if Dean and Lexi make it back, I want everything to be perfect—or, as perfect as it can be with half the stuff in here broken or ruined."

I nodded in agreement, looking around.

"So where should we start?" I asked, unsure what would even make sense.

“Let’s get everything off the floor. Then we can go from there.”

I grabbed a broom and started sweeping up anything broken while Jenna gathered the things that were still salvageable and put them on the table to be sorted. The tablecloth was soaked from the snow that had covered it when it blew off and had since melted, but it was still usable, so we laid it out by the fire to dry. I picked up the tree to see what all had survived it falling over. Jenna had collected several ornaments which, once she’d taken care of everything else, she brought back to the living room and laid them on the couch.

“How does it look?” she asked.

I glanced down at her with a smile. “Looks beautiful from here,” I said cheekily.

She gave me a playful smack on the arm. “I meant how does the place look? And the tree?”

I looked at what she’d managed to pull together and was impressed. Somehow, she made it look even better than before. The garland was perfectly arranged, the tablecloth, now dry, ran the length of the table with the runner and no chargers, which, I had to admit, was actually an improvement.

“You’ve done an amazing job,” I told her. I put a finger under her chin and tipped her face up toward mine to kiss her and felt her give a shudder of pleasure.

“Thank you,” she said breathlessly once we broke apart. She cleared her throat. “And, uh... the tree?”

I looked at it. I hadn’t gotten to do much with it, since I’d spent most of the time so far cleaning up broken glass and plastic. Less than half the ornaments

remained on the branches, and several of them had been tangled in bent or broken boughs.

“We can fix this,” I said uncertainly. “Right?”

Jenna grimaced. “I really don’t know, but we should try.”

“You’re the boss,” I said with a wink.

“You could have fooled me last night... Daddy,” she replied, and now I had to actively fight against the stiffening in my pants.

“You’d better quit,” I said, grabbing an ornament from the couch in each hand and turning to hang them on the tree.

“Or what?” she asked, sidling up to me with an innocent expression. She reached out to hang an ornament, but dropped it onto the floor. “Whoops!”

She bent down to pick it up, but instead of grabbing it off the floor, her knees went to the floor and her hand went to my knee... and then she began to slide it up.

“Jenna...” I said with a sharp gasp as her fingers curled around my package.

“Yes, Daddy?” she said in that same *who me?* kind of voice.

“What exactly...” But I didn't get to finish the question, because at that moment, she showed me exactly *what*.

She reached up and undid my top button as her face went to my bulge, her lips running over the outside of my pants, bringing with them just enough sensation to stiffen me even more. My hands went to her hair, pulling it back from her face in a swift motion.

“Mm...” she moaned, pulling down my zipper and allowing my almost fully hard cock to nearly be free, only the thin fabric of my boxers preventing it from tumbling out.

Her hand went to my dick, cupping the underside of it along with my balls,

playing with them through my underwear. The feeling was so sensual and erotic that I nearly dropped to my own knees from sheer pleasure.

“God,” I groaned, grinding into her touch, needing more. “You really know what you’re doing. You certainly did earn that better grade when you were a TA, didn’t you?”

She looked up at me and laughed, but the sound didn’t last long as she eyed me hungrily.

“You should get more comfortable,” she said innocently, looking at the wall nearby.

“Is that so?” I asked, taking three short steps so I could lean against the bare stretch of wall. “Like this?”

She stood and came over to me, grabbing my face and pulling it to hers for a kiss, which I happily offered. After a few seconds, I felt her hand travel down my neck, then my chest, and, finally to the band of my underwear, which she toyed with for *almost* too long for me to let her stay in control. She pulled away and knelt down again, slowly, leaving little kisses along my chest and hips before sliding my underwear off and, at last, freeing my cock.

The look in her eyes as she saw it was intoxicating. It was like she couldn’t think of anything she wanted more and, now that it was in front of her, she couldn’t believe she had it.

She pulled her hair back from her face, looking up at me with innocently expecting eyes, and I reached down to gather it into my own hand. She smiled, running her fingers along my length with such a light touch that I shivered before finally pressing her lips to my tip.

She slid her mouth along just that rounded, sensitive part of me, gently suckling. I thought my head might explode with how intense every little sensation was. Her hands gripped the base and slowly stroked while her

tongue swirled around my opening, licking away the precum I'd been freely dripping.

Before long, she was taking me deeper, with more urgency, like she couldn't bear not having more of me inside of her. My grip on her hair tightened and she moaned, the vibrations sending me into a mental state I couldn't even describe. Before I even realized what I was doing, I'd begun to buck my hips, holding her against me by her hair as I fucked her mouth, feeling the back of her throat as I slammed into it.

I could feel her starting to struggle to breathe, and I pulled out to give her a rest. She stroked me slowly and deliberately from base to tip and back again as she caught her breath, smiling at me the entire time like she had a secret.

"Fuck," I said, running my fingers through her hair. "I'm getting close."

"I know," she said before running her tongue along the underside of my cock, along the sensitive ridge. "I can taste it." She made eye contact with me as she licked away another thick drop of precum.

"God," I said, not for the first time about something Jenna had done to surprise me. Something that made me feel so good I almost lost my footing. "Jenna..."

She took me into her mouth again, this time without needing any urging from me. She began to bob her head back and forth, taking me deeper than I thought I could go, and certainly deeper than I would have done without her permission.

My hands went to her hair, which I gripped like it was all that kept me from floating away. She made a little noise of surprise, but began to pump even faster.

"Fuck," I said, nearing my edge and ready to go over it. "Yes, Jenna. Yes, baby girl. You suck Daddy so fucking good... so fucking... good... I'm

going to come.” I wanted to give her the chance to pull away if she didn’t want me to finish in her mouth, but she reached around and grabbed my ass, holding me to her face.

With a loud groan, I emptied myself into her throat, feeling the sweet sensation of her swallowing me down as I did. I panted, the descent from my orgasm leaving me breathless.

Jenna wiped her mouth, grinning like she’d won something. She stood and, without a word, went over to the tree and started hanging ornaments like nothing had happened.

“Well?” she said, looking back at me over her shoulder after a moment. “Are we decorating the tree or not?”

Chapter Seventeen

Jenna

By late afternoon, Gabe and I could actually see out of the windows. The snow had lessened in its force and was now falling in a light, delicate swirl. Looking out into it, I wondered if the windchill was tolerable enough to venture into the great white. The way the snow blanketed everything, like a winter wonderland totally devoid of footprints, brought me back to a memory of my father on Christmas morning, and despite the still freezing cabin, my heart was warmed.

Gabe, who was sitting and reading the book I had brought and finished, looked up at me, then out to the sprawling front grounds. He seemed to know what was on my mind, because he got to his feet and joined me where I stood.

“Looks beautiful,” he said, but when I looked at him, his eyes were on me rather than the snow.

I blushed and looked back out the window. “Yeah,” I said. “It really is.”

“What would you think about braving the cold for some snow action?”

I turned to face him, my back pressed to the doorframe, and smiled. “Maybe. If I did, would you come with me?”

Gabe nodded and pushed a piece of my hair behind my ear with a grin that could have made me melt into the floor. How did someone this absolutely gorgeous and deceptively sweet end up giving me the time of day?

“That was sort of the point,” he said. “Be warned, though. I’ve got a wicked aim for snowballs.”

I pushed him away playfully. “Who said anything about snowballs?”

“You don’t really expect me to go out there and not throw a snowball, do you?” he asked, rubbing his hands together like he was warming up to make one.

“Oh, you’re so on,” I said, darting away from him and toward the door, where my coat and gloves were. “I may have the aim of a toddler, but I’m fast. Do not underestimate me.”

Gabe rushed around, grabbing some of his winter gear that had ended up around the house after he came in from the cold the other night. He pulled his socks on without thinking, and went sliding across the kitchen floor to the front door, nearly bowling me over.

“Careful!” I said, laughing as I caught him by the arms. “If you break a bone, you don’t get to lose to me in a snowball fight.”

“Lose?” he said, tugging on his boots. “Just because I *seem* like a gentleman doesn’t mean I have any mercy when it comes to war.”

“War, is it?” I said, rushing outside before he even had his coat on to get a head start on making my snowballs.

“Hey!” he called after me. “That’s cheating!”

“Two can play the no mercy game,” I reported, laughing as I dove into the snow.

It came up almost to my knees, and moving through it was hard. After a few slow, restricted steps, I turned back to Gabe.

“The fight might have to wait,” I said, but a second later, I dodged a snowball he’d tossed at me. “Hey! Close range? Not cool.”

He shrugged, tossing another ball up in the air and catching it. “All’s fair, right?”

“Oh, you’re so on!”

I made my way through the snow by running with high knees as much as I

could. We both took opposite sides of the yard, building little forts and arming ourselves with stacks of snowballs.

After about ten minutes of preparation, the battle began. My aim was as terrible as I'd said, and Gabe's was fantastic. He darted around the yard, his strong legs cutting through the thick snow like it was nothing as he dove to the side, dodging any decent throws I made and sending some back my way.

By the time we had worn ourselves out, and we were both sucking in the frigid air with a bit of difficulty, the sun had begun to peek out from behind the clouds, changing everything with just a hint of its rays. What had before been a sheet of dull white now sparkled like a sea of diamonds, looking like something enchanted rather than the natural disaster it had actually been.

"Wow," Gabe said, smiling and walking toward the back of the house.

I followed him, wondering what exactly he was doing, but when I got around the side, I could see it clearly. As the snow sparkled brilliant and white, the lake reflected more of the sun's yellow tones, but it all looked like gemstones, priceless and stunning.

"Wow," I echoed.

Gabe grabbed my hand and turned me to face him, wrapping his gloved hands around my waist. "I'm sorry for anything I said about this place seeming cheap or not being worth it. Really. This"—he motioned toward the view—"is anything but cheap. This is incredible."

"Thank you," I said, the genuine humility in his words once again sending butterflies through my stomach.

He leaned in and kissed me, both of our lips cold and dry, and I laughed at the feeling of it.

"Not exactly the reaction a guy wants," he said, but the smile on his face told me he wasn't offended. "What do you want to do now? You want to

head back inside?”

“Not yet,” I said, knowing he and I would only have so much time alone together before Dean got back, and knowing that, here in Georgia, if the sun was out, the snow would likely melt quickly, no matter how deep it was. “You know what I haven’t done since I was a kid?”

He shook his head and shrugged. “No. Tell me.”

“I haven’t built a snowman since I was like, ten,” I told him. “Can we do that? Can we build a snowman?”

Gabe broke into a huge smile. “I think that sounds like a lot of fun.”

We spent the next hour gathering up snow and rolling it into three giant balls.

“Gabe!” I laughed at one point. “If you make that any bigger, we’re going to have a snow giant, not a snow *man*!”

“And what’s wrong with that?” he replied, continuing to make a base that came up to his ribs.

“How do you plan to put on his head?” I asked, pointing to how high it would have to be to be proportionate.

But Gabe just smiled and said, “Like this.”

He turned his back to me and walked to the shed, which I noticed had a broken door handle. He went inside, then emerged a moment later with a ladder.

I laughed, doubling over and feeling the cold air burning my lungs. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious about making sure my snow giant has his head where it belongs.”

I didn’t even bother asking him how he would lift such a heavy ball of snow, because, after seeing those muscles up close, I had no doubt he would

do just fine with that part.

Once we rolled up a second ball, this one coming as high as my forehead, Gabe lifted the damn thing with a grunt, and I knew it had to be really heavy for him to struggle. But he made it up the ladder and got the snowman's middle in place. The head was the smallest, but we'd used so much snow that we had a hard time finding any that wasn't full of grass.

Despite that, the snowman ended up complete, only without any features. Gabe rushed around the yard, gathering up branches that had blown from the trees. He stuck two that had the right shape into the sides to make arms, then he ran inside and came back out with a chocolate protein bar and a baby carrot from Lexi's snack stash.

"It's going to be an absurd little nose, but he can't very well go on without one, can he?" He laughed as he climbed the ladder. "And his eyes will be weird rectangles, but at least he won't be blind."

"I don't think he'll be blind either way, since he's an inanimate object, Gabe," I said, still giggling at him.

"Shh!" Gabe said in mock offense. "He'll hear you!"

"Without ears?" I countered.

Gabe climbed down the ladder with a smile. "Why, you..." He grabbed me and kissed me deeply, and I returned it with enthusiasm, feeling light and a little dizzy.

Dizzy?

Gabe pulled away and looked at me, the smile evaporating.

"We need to go inside," he said suddenly.

"What's wrong?" I asked, but even I could hear my voice losing its clarity.

"Your lips are blue," he said, running a gloved thumb over them.

Blue lips. Slurred speech. Lightheadedness.

Gabe rushed me back into the house and stripped off my snow gear, which was becoming rapidly damp as the snow melted onto it. The cold plus the wet was making for a bad combination, and I knew we had to do something fast.

“Gabe,” I said in a voice that was much calmer than I felt. “I’m hypothermic.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he said, unlacing my boots. “That’s why I’m trying to warm you up.”

“Okay,” I said.

After taking off his own wet things, he picked me up and took me into the living room to set me in front of the fire. Most of my clothes were still damp, even from under my coat, so Gabe peeled those off me, too, until I was completely naked and wrapped me in the warmest blanket.

“I’m going to make you some cocoa,” he said, rushing from the room to fill the kettle.

I remained silent, trying to conserve my energy as much as I could. If I didn’t start warming up fast, I could lose consciousness.

He came back and put the kettle over the fire, then came back to me.

“You’re still cold,” he said, touching my face and hands. “What can I do?”

“Body heat helps,” I said.

“I’m assuming that’s legit and not a come on?” he said with a forced laugh.

“Gabe, please,” I said, but he was already taking off his clothes to climb inside the blanket with me.

It was the first time Gabe and I had had this kind of contact. We had no physical barriers between us, but the touch wasn’t sexual. It was just him using his own body to try to help me, and the intimacy of that could have made me weep if I wasn’t still shivering.

After about thirty minutes, I still hadn’t warmed up.

“Your lips are still blue,” Gabe said, the concern in his voice thick and potent.

“My fingers are still numb, too,” I said, the tremor in my voice outdone only by how my words were still slurred.

“What can I do?” he asked, rubbing my hands between his, trying to warm them up.

“I don’t know...” I said, my mind feeling like it was chugging. I felt like there was an obvious answer I just couldn’t put my finger on.

“Wait!” Gabe said after a moment of silent thought. “What about a bath?”

“A bath?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “A warm bath. That always works for me. The hot water can warm me up almost no matter what.”

“Well, let’s hope this isn’t one of those ‘almost’ times when it doesn’t work,” I said, leaning against him and closing my eyes. It was so comfortable, I felt like I could just drift off...

“Oh, no, you don’t,” he said suddenly, standing up and leaving me colder than before without him or the blanket to keep out the chill. But in seconds, he’d wrapped me back in the blanket and scooped me into his arms. “You can sleep after we get you warmed up, if you still want to. But for now, I need you to stay awake and make sure I’m doing this right. I need my nurse to talk me through this.”

Despite the seriousness of the moment, I couldn’t help but smile softly at how worried he was about me. How could I have ever thought he was a Grinch?

As he carried me into the bathroom, I curled in against him, feeling, for the first time in a long time, like I was well and truly cared for.

Chapter Eighteen

Gabe

I turned on the tap and watched the water begin to flow from the ornate faucet. I'd sat Jenna on the toilet behind me, still wrapped in a blanket, and, in the chilly bathroom, she was shivering worse than ever.

"Please hurry," she said, and I could hear her teeth chattering.

I cranked the handle to turn the water all the way to hot, but Jenna stopped me.

"You c-can't put me right into hot water," she said. "It will shock my system. I have to warm up slowly."

I looked down at the water, which was steaming, then back at her. "Well," I said, "we can warm up the bathroom first, then make sure the water is a safe temperature."

Using the same trick I'd used to heat the day before, I cranked the hot water all the way up and let the steam fill the room, feeling it slowly raise the temperature. Another glance at Jenna, however, told me it was too slow. She was still purple in the lips, and now her eyes had taken on a glassy quality.

Shit.

I adjusted the heat of the water to what felt like it would be a normal body temperature, then unwrapped her from her blanket, eliciting the tiniest whimper as she was once more exposed to the air, even with it being warm in here.

I lifted her and lowered her gently into the tub, and she recoiled slightly, her arms tightening around my neck as the water met her skin.

"Is it too hot?" I asked, stopping before I set her all the way in the water. "Do I need to make it cooler?"

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “It was just startling. It’s perfect.”

I released her into the tub, then rolled up my sleeves and ran to the kitchen for a bowl. When I came back, her lips were returning to a pink color, and she looked less spaced out.

“Feeling better?” I asked as I knelt down beside her and started scooping up the water and pouring it over the parts of her that weren’t covered by the water.

“A little,” she said, though her voice was still kind of weak.

“Do you think you want the water to be a little warmer yet?” I asked. She nodded, and I pulled the plug at the same time I turned the tap back on, adjusting the temperature to be warmer than before without being too hot. Once the water had warmed up, I plugged the drain again.

“This feels amazing,” she said quietly, swirling her hands through the water.

“I’m glad,” I said, genuinely feeling relieved that she was warming up and feeling better. I reached into the cabinet behind the tub and pulled out a washcloth and some body wash. “Can I wash you?”

She looked at me in slight surprise, but smiled and nodded. I knelt on the floor behind her and put my hands into the water, starting first with her hair—not shampooing it, but giving her a scalp massage with the warm water on my fingers.

“Oh,” she moaned softly. “Thank you. That’s so good.”

“Of course,” I said, moving down to her shoulders. “What kind of Daddy would I be if I didn’t take care of you?” I dipped the washcloth into the water and lathered it up with some body wash, then gently began to scrub. First her shoulders, then lifting each arm out of the water to wash it as well. Then to her chest, which was halfway in the water.

Once I reached the point where I needed her to exit the water for me to be able to properly wash her, I stopped, and she looked at me.

“You could just get in with me,” she said, giving me a coy grin. “It would make it easier for you to reach.”

“I suppose I could,” I said, raising an eyebrow suggestively at her.

I stood up and stripped off my clothes, tossing them to the side. She scooted forward to make room, and I climbed in behind her, feeling the warmth of the water and her smooth, slick skin enveloping me.

She slid in closer to me, a movement that could have easily made me hard if I had been in that kind of a mindset, though I was rapidly approaching it.

But for now, I took the washcloth and ran it over her body, her stomach, her hips, and her legs.

She moaned and leaned her head against my chest, and, without thinking, I leaned down and kissed her hair. She turned her head to look up at me, and I was pleased to see she was smiling. The slightest tilt of her chin told me that she wanted a kiss somewhere else too, and I bent my head to oblige.

Once she was completely clean and fully warmed back up, I ran a bit more hot water to keep the bath nice and warm. I was about to relax into silence, but then Jenna spun in the tub.

“Your turn,” she said, taking the washcloth from me.

“My what now?”

“Your. Turn,” she said, lowering the washcloth into the water to get it wet before pressing it to the center of my chest.

The feeling of her rubbing and cleaning me was so erotic in a way I couldn't have expected. It was a feeling that had me looking at her through a lens of pure trust. The kind of connection we were experiencing, with caring

for each other, both in an emergent situation and in a more mundane but still intimate way, was giving me a renewed lens on romance.

I thought I'd left it all behind forever when Hannah left. I thought there was no point, because it only ends in heartbreak anyway. But in all our years together, we'd never done anything like this. She never would have played in the snow with me or insisted on washing me in the bathtub.

Which wasn't to say there was anything wrong with the way Hannah and I related to each other. But it was different than this, and I found myself, even more than before, dreading the moment when this would come crashing down. Soon, Dean would be back, and any kind of romance between me and his sister would have to end.

Even if I wanted nothing more than to say, "*Fuck it,*" and just come clean. To tell him I cared about Jenna and while I valued his friendship, I wasn't willing to walk away from this.

Jenna dropped the washcloth, having thoroughly cleansed me, and spun back around to lean against me, which only exacerbated the thoughts and feelings I was having. I wrapped my arms around her, wanting to remember this moment and what it felt like to hold her.

"Mm..." Jenna said, shifting slightly, and, suddenly, the intimacy took on a different tenor.

As she rubbed against me, my cock awakened to her presence and began to stiffen beneath the water, something Jenna clearly took notice of, since she gave a soft gasp and shifted again,

My hands, which had been on her waist and shoulder as I held her, began to move, one to her breast, with my thumb grazing her nipple and feeling it harden beneath my touch, and the other to her thigh, gently stroking up and

down from her knee, but never quite giving her the satisfaction of slipping into her crease.

“Gabe...” She moaned, panting beneath my teasing touches. “Oh...”

I got my fingers even closer, the hand on her breast now pinching slightly at the little pink nub which had tightened.

“Say please,” I whispered in her ear, and I felt a shudder that had nothing to do with how cold she’d been before.

“Please,” she gasped, her hands gripping my legs on either side of her as I finally gave her the satisfaction of my touch.

My fingers slipped between the lips of her pussy, and I could feel her natural wetness even under the water. I used a bit of it to lubricate her clit as I began to gently rub and circle it with my pointer finger.

Jenna gasped again, arching into my touch, but I moved my hand from her nipple to hold her in place.

“No,” I said, gripping her against me. “Hold still. Let Daddy take care of you.”

I felt her heartbeat speed up in her ribcage, pounding in a high-paced rhythm as she nodded, accepting my terms for giving her what she wanted.

“Good girl.”

She moaned loudly, laying her head back against my chest as I continued to play with her and tease her, using that little bundle of nerves to pleasure her until she was shaking in my arms.

“Gabe...” she whined. “Gabe...”

“Come for me,” I said, continuing the same motion which had already been bringing her to the brink of climax.

She cried out, her back arching again, though this time I allowed her, and I had a very specific reason to do so. As she writhed and gasped and

whimpered, I reached between us and stroked my cock, which was fully hard now.

As she slipped into the descent of her orgasm, she lowered her body back against mine, but I stopped her just long enough to position myself at her entrance, which was slick with her fluids.

“Jenna,” I said, suddenly very serious. “Is this okay? I promise to pull out, but if you’d rather wait until we get out, and we can use a condom—”

“I trust you,” she said over her shoulder, her hands on my legs once again for balance.

I didn’t need more encouragement than that as I slipped inside of her, feeling her completely for the first time, and by God, did she feel like heaven.

“Oh, Jenna...” I moaned in ecstasy before leaning back for leverage. “Hold onto the sides of the tub.”

She did as I said, and the shift in position gave me the perfect angle to thrust up into her. My arms were still around her, one at her hips and the other at her waist, keeping her pressed against me as I bucked my hips up over and over again.

“Oh, fuck,” she whimpered. “That feels so incredible...”

“Yeah,” I said with a chuckle deep in my throat. “You do.”

After a few moments, I pulled out of her so I could spin her to face me, letting her straddle me in the oversized tub. She began to ride me, one of my hands on her hip and the other cupping and toying with one of her perfect, bouncing tits.

“That’s Daddy’s good girl,” I said as she slowed her rhythm, gyrating rather than bouncing for a moment before going back to an up and down motion. “Fuck... yes... that’s a *very* good girl.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” Jenna said in a voice that sent me into a frenzy.

I lifted her off me and spun her around so she was still astride me, but facing away. She gripped the front of the tub as I held onto her hips, slamming into her as she rotated her hips forward and back, letting me drive even deeper inside of her.

It was only moments before I couldn't take it any longer. I stood, still within her, so that she was bent over in front of me and I began fucking her furiously from behind.

She gasped and cried out with every thrust, and I felt her tighten and clench around me in climax.

"Good girl... I love it when you come for me. Think you can do it again?" I asked.

"Yes." She panted. "Yes, I can come again for you."

I slowed my thrusts, sliding almost all the way out and back in, letting every single inch of me fill her in a way that let her feel every ridge and line of me, the way I felt every inch of her.

"You there yet, baby girl?" I asked, knowing I was nearing my own climax and not wanting to finish without giving her one more orgasm.

"Yes... yes..." she said before moaning and whimpering, her center forming a vice around me as I allowed myself to let loose.

"That's my girl," I said, thrusting as deeply as I could into her. "You know exactly how to make Daddy feel good, don't you?"

"Yes, Daddy," she said.

I pressed into her five, ten more times, then felt myself about to go over the edge.

"Daddy's gonna come, baby," I said in a strained voice. "Is on your back okay?"

"Yes," she said, and it was good she did, because at that moment, I pulled

out and began to spill myself over her lovely skin.

“Oh, fuck... God, yes, Jenna...”

Once I'd finished, I grabbed the washcloth and cleaned her up, both where she was damp from her juices and where I'd made a mess of my own on her. I pulled her back into the water once she was clear of any remnants, holding her against me once more.

“Now...” I said, my voice breathless and tired, but feeling better and lighter than I had in a long time. “What do you want to do next?”

Chapter Nineteen

Jenna

I was starting to get used to being naked in front of the fire and I had no idea how I was supposed to go back to drying my body without it when it was clearly the superior way. Gabe and I had mounded up a big pile of blankets and collapsed onto them, napping completely unclothed and waking up for twenty to thirty minutes at a time to chat about life.

It was our own peaceful little holiday bubble.

With Gabe lying out like this in the daylight, I could really appreciate the finer points of his sculpted body. I asked him about the scar on the inside of his thigh (he got it skateboarding in college while trying to show off), and the birthmark on his ribs. He told me his dad had had one just like it. I asked him if he missed his parents.

“Wouldn’t anyone?” he asked. “Being an adult doesn’t alleviate you from feeling like an orphan.”

“God, it’s so true,” I replied. “I remember the first Christmas without my parents. I laid in bed wondering who was going to send me presents from Santa. I was eighteen years old and definitely knew Santa wasn’t real and yet, without them I felt like an abandoned child.”

Gabe nodded, tracing invisible shapes across my stomach as he stared into nothing. “I don’t know how I would have gotten through my parents’ deaths without Hannah. I think that’s why I proposed to her, to be honest. Not because I didn’t think I could live without her, but because she had really been there for me and I knew she wanted to get engaged. It was the only way I could think of to thank her.”

I turned my head to look at him with a challenge. “That’s a terrible reason to get engaged.”

“I know that now,” he said. “I just wanted to give something back, and I certainly couldn’t cut my hours at work. That was probably what she really wanted.”

We sat in silence again until we both drifted off in the warm, sunny living room, and woke again an hour later.

“So how did they go? Your parents I mean,” Gabe asked once we’d gotten some snacks to eat, still totally nude.

“Car crash,” I said slowly. “It’s the thing that made me want to be an ER nurse. People told me and Dean that they didn’t feel anything, but they were both hooked up to machines for days before they died. I felt so helpless and didn’t ever want to feel that again.”

Gabe gave me a horrified and concerned look, then pulled me into a hug, wrapping his fingers into my hair. It was so comforting and raw. I suddenly remembered that if the snow had stopped and the sun was out, Dean and Lexi would be back soon, and this would all have to end.

How did I go from hating this man’s guts to wanting him to hold me like this forever? Once again, it was like Gabe could sense what I was thinking.

“I’m really gonna miss this when I go back to New York,” he said, hugging me even tighter. “I’m sure you’ll be glad to be rid of me.”

“No,” I said. “I won’t.”

I looked up into his eyes and I felt like my heart was about to explode. It wasn’t butterflies or fireworks, it was like a golden thread between us tightened and we were exactly where we were supposed to be with the person we were supposed to be with.

He leaned in and kissed me, cradling my head with his fingertips while

using his thumb to caress my face. I couldn't help but notice that every time he kissed me it felt just as good. In fact, there wasn't a single time he put his hands on me that it didn't feel good, no matter what we were doing.

He leaned backward and I fell onto his chest. I nuzzled my face against it, soaking in the pepperminty smell that had come from the bath and relishing in the sound of his heartbeat.

"I wish I'd had a nurse like you when my parents got hospitalized," he said suddenly. "I never really felt like their nurses cared since they were old."

"What happened to them?" I asked. "If you wanna tell me, of course."

"Influenza," he said, staring up at the ceiling. "The fucking flu. Because we grew up poor, my parents fell into the common traps of vice and terrible food and by the time I had made enough money to get them out of that lifestyle, they were both in terrible health. All it took was one bad flu season and they were both gone. One week apart."

I could really empathize with losing your parents all at once. It was harrowing and gave you an existential vertigo that no one should ever have to experience.

"I think losing my parents like that is the reason I have never been in love," I blurted out. My hand went to my mouth as if I could stop it but it was too late.

Gabe sat up a little and I did the same, though he stared at me while I stared at the floor in embarrassment.

"You've never been in love?" he asked. "Not even silly, high school, puppy dog love?"

I shook my head and sat all the way up, pulling a blanket over me, feeling exposed. "I didn't even try to date in high school, I was too busy ensuring I got into college. By the time college rolled around, I lost Mom and Dad. And

knowing someone could be taken from you like that made me hesitant to let other people into my life in a close capacity.”

Gabe stroked my hair and crooked a finger under my chin to pull my eyes up to his. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of in that, Jenna,” he said. “Being in love is one of the most frightening things someone can go through, but it’s also one of the most rewarding.”

I laughed sardonically. “How? All the couples I ever see are constantly fighting. The women are unhappy because the men are flaky and disinterested, and the men bored because the girl they married is finally comfortable expressing her needs. No offense, Gabe, but it seems a little hard to take that kind of advice from someone who drove away their fiancée by working too much.”

I thought maybe this statement would make him upset, but he just shook his head and chuckled. “Fair. I guess it’s something you will have to see for yourself.” Gabe stood and gave me a very enticing view, looking down at me and wiggling his eyebrows playfully. “I think I’m ready to wear clothes again. You?”

I nodded and started to get to my feet, and Gabe held up a hand to still me. “Stay here where it’s warm. I’ll get them.”

“You sure?” I asked. “You seem to be making an awful lot of uncomfortable cold trips to fetch me clothes.”

He nodded, making a confident face. “Please. Back home I pay shitloads for this kind of cryotherapy. I’m looking at this like free sessions.”

I giggled and waved him on, and he hurried away to the bedrooms. When he came back, a stack of warm clothes in his arms, he looked anxious and anticipatory.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, a lump suddenly appearing in my throat.

“I–uh...” He put a hand through his hair and looked around. “I get nervous giving gifts.”

“Huh?” I asked, taking the clothes and beginning to get dressed.

“Well, when I knew I was coming here to meet Dean’s little sister, I felt it would be rude to show up without some small gift for her.” From behind his back, Gabe pulled out a long, gray box with a white ribbon around it. “Since technically it’s Christmas Eve, I thought maybe you’d let me give this to you.”

I was stunned. I certainly hadn’t prepared like that. “I don’t have anything for you...” I said sadly. “I didn’t—”

Gabe knelt down and took my hands, setting the box on the floor beside him and smiling softly at me. “I don’t need a damn thing. If this Christmas is your present to me, then it’s the best one I’ve ever received.” I felt tears come to my eyes and he stroked my cheek. Then he handed me the slightly weighted box, and sat back to watch me.

I opened it slowly, wondering every second what it could be.

“Dean recommended it,” he said. “I wanted to get you something practical that you might not splurge on for yourself.”

I pulled the lid off the top and gasped at what I saw.

Inside was a shiny, new Littman digital stethoscope, one of the top on the market. I pulled it out of the box and flipped it over in my hands. On the reverse side, was my name engraved in cursive.

“I... Gabe...”

I had been waffling over how I was going to afford a really great stethoscope. I’d been using the ones at the hospital until I could afford to buy my own. But on a waitress’ salary, that was going to be damn near undoable.

“I’m not done,” he said bashfully. “The other thing doesn’t have a box.”

“I don’t...”

“Jenna, these few days with you have been a roller coaster of emotions for us both and yet, we somehow managed to work together and surpass just getting along. Finding someone who meshes with you like that is rare in life.”

Oh, my God, is he going to propose to me?

“This is the first Christmas I’ve ever had where it felt magical, at least since I was a kid and maybe even then. You did that for me, Jenna. You took the chance on someone who rubbed you the wrong way the minute we met. And that’s why I want to do something magic for you, too.”

Gabe took both of my hands and looked me in the eyes.

“Jenna, would you...”

Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God! I liked him a lot but I didn’t know if I liked him enough to get engaged after three days of being together.

“... let me pay for the rest of your schooling? And pay off what debt you’ve already accrued?”

My heart stopped. That was not at all what I expected him to say. It was so much fucking better.

“Gabe!” I gasped, trying to find the right words to express my surprise.

“You don’t have to answer now. Think about it. Let me know before we part ways.” Gabe smiled at me and kissed my forehead. “Because, Jenna, even if I never see you again, you have made such an impact on me these last few days that I can’t help but believe you will be a wonderful nurse. And we can never have enough of those.”

My heart was pounding as he spoke and a swell of tears overtook me, leading into a full-on meltdown.

I fell against his chest and he held me close, stroking my hair and wiping away my tears.

“You have no idea what a huge relief that would be for me,” I said, trying not to get snot on him as my whimpering became an ugly cry. “Trying to do school and work a fulltime job is miserable. This would change my life, Gabe.”

I looked up at him and I could see his eyes go watery as well before he leaned in and kissed me deeply. For the first time since my parents had died, I felt adored and taken care of, and I realized that I really, really liked Gabe. Almost enough to want to take a chance on losing him for the opportunity to see where this could go.

Gabe deepened the kiss, nipping at my lips and tugging gently on my hair before pulling away smiling. “So, is that a yes?”

“That is absolutely a yes,” I replied. “And a thank you.”

Chapter Twenty

Gabe

I was so deep into kissing Jenna that at first, I didn't notice the low hum of the heat kicking on. But when every single Christmas decoration lit up at once, it was clear that the electricity was restored.

As if it were Christmas morning itself, Jenna and I jumped to our feet, cheering and hugging each other. We'd survived the hellish winter nightmare turned lovefest. Being trapped in a small space with someone who hated my guts had far exceeded my expectations, and now I wasn't sure I was ready to leave.

"I love heat," Jenna said, dancing around with pure and innocent joy. "I love light."

"If I'd known this was what it would take to excite you I wouldn't have bothered with the gift," I said playfully.

Jenna stopped and turned to me, seemingly remembering the stethoscope as she bent to pick it up, clutching it to her chest and flinging herself into my arms. She looked adorable in her Emory sweatshirt and boy short panties, and I wanted to watch her like this all day.

"Thank you, Gabe," she said, getting quiet and nuzzling against me. "I couldn't have survived this without you."

"Damn right," I said, and she gave me a look of confusion. "Did you see *you* light that fire with lighter fluid?"

Jenna burst out laughing in a way that reminded me of tinkling church bells and I beamed at her adoration.

"You know what we should do," I said, looking around. "Now that the power is back on, we should cook up all the rest of the food we found."

Plus...” I went to the freezer where days ago I’d found something of interest. I pulled the door open in a very flashy manner and Jenna gasped. “I found these in here days ago.”

Inside the still-frozen machine there were two full-size pizzas and a tub of unopened vanilla ice cream, along with a bottle of Baileys.

“Oh, my God,” Jenna said in a high-pitched shriek. “Those have been there the whole time?” She looked at me in half amazement, half interrogation.

I laughed at her expression, which only added to how cute she was, and nodded. “It was my backup plan. I wouldn’t have had a way to cook the pizzas, but I could have eaten the ice cream and drank the booze.”

Jenna charged me in mock anger and punched me playfully in the ribs before ripping the food and liquor from its protective case. Faster than I thought possible, she had the oven preheating and was scooping ice cream into bowls, accenting it with candy canes.

“Very festive,” I said, coming up behind her and wrapping my arms around her, painfully aware that this might be one of the last times I do so. Jenna and I hadn’t really discussed where we went from here. Maybe this would be the Christmas fling that I didn’t see coming and I’ll be telling my grandkids about it on my deathbed. Or maybe... just maybe...

Jenna began to hum a Christmas carol and grabbed her phone for back up, broadcasting it to the Bose speakers all over the cabin. She and I hummed along, laughing and kissing as we prepared our Christmas feast.

Once the smell of pizza and cinnamon peach sundaes filled the house, Jenna and I sat down at the decorated dining table and ate dinner together. It almost felt like being on a date because the dynamic of the situation had changed with the electricity. We had light, sound, and most importantly, food that wasn’t canned.

“I remember this one Christmas,” Jenna said. “Mom burnt the ham and so we ordered Chinese food to eat instead. Every year after that, we had lo mein alongside our traditional food as a sort of reminder of that wacky dinner.”

I smiled, sharing the sweetness and vulnerability of the memory, and decided to share one of my own.

“There was one Christmas where my parents couldn’t afford presents so instead, we took a road trip around the country with my dad doing odd jobs along the way to pay for gas. I remember as a kid how cool it was to see the seasons change from one half of the country to the other and then back again.” I stirred my peaches with my fork and felt a pang of melancholy. “My dad always said he wanted to take that road trip one more time before he died. Of course he never got to...”

Jenna reached for my hand almost right away and I pressed it to my forehead gratefully.

“We could take that trip together,” she said tentatively. “I mean, if you wanted to. I love traveling.”

I looked up at her, my heart so full from the idea that a tear slid down my cheek. “Do you really mean that? That would be amazing.”

Jenna nodded. “Anything to have a reason to see you again.”

So she wanted to stay in touch, too.

Merry Christmas to me.

“I want to see you again, too,” I said, leaning in and kissing her hand. “I didn’t want to be too pushy, but the thought of parting ways now...”

“Me too,” she said. “I think there could really be something here, Gabe.”

I nodded in agreement. “Dean’s not gonna like it, but I really feel something for you, Jen. I’m not ready to see you walk away.”

Jenna blushed and nodded, “Me too.”

She looked a little teary so I tugged on her hand, pulling her into my lap. She wrapped her arms around me and laid her head on my shoulder while we both stared at the roaring fire that we couldn't part with despite the electricity.

Jenna kissed my neck from where her head rested and the hairs stood up at the base of my skull. Jenna's lips on me now conjured all kinds of sensual memories and it was hard to keep my composure.

By the second time she did it, I could tell she had intentions of her own.

I pulled back to look at her and she nodded. "Take me to bed, Gabe."

I didn't need to be told twice. I scooped her up in my arms like I was carrying a bride across the threshold and took her to the master bedroom which was finally warm enough to sleep in.

As I flipped on the light with my pinky finger, the room looked different, cozier than the space I'd first seen or the one I'd been stumbling through to find clean clothes. Not only that, but the prospect of making love to Jenna in a proper bed aroused more than my sense of hominess. She had always deserved to be touched in the comfort of a giant bed, but we hadn't had that luxury.

We did now.

I sat Jenna on the edge of the bed and began to strip away the layers of clothes between us. I now knew her body as well as my own, and every familiar inch I'd see I'd feel more overwhelming affection for her. By the time I had her completely naked, I was firmly sure I was in love.

"Should I do a Christmas strip tease?" I asked her jokingly. She laughed and clapped her hands.

"Go on. I'd love for you to Magic Mike with a Santa twist for me."

I grabbed some silver tinsel and wrapped it around my neck, sticking a

candy cane in my mouth and as she laughed louder and louder, I made “sexy” faces at her and danced around the room, stripping off my clothing.

I was certainly not hard when I finished that, but we’d both laughed ourselves to tears, and the insatiable nature we’d started developing for each other left us feeling more entwined than ever.

“Kiss me,” Jenna breathed as I stood inches from her.

Once again, I didn’t need to be told twice. I pressed against her, tilting her chin up and wrapping my fingers around her ear so I could kiss her deeper than I had yet.

Jenna moaned into the kiss and wrapped her arms around me, her fingers running across the skin on my back. Her warm, soft skin against mine revived the arousal that the silly dance had robbed me of and I could feel my fully hard cock pressing against her stomach.

I tilted my head in her direction and she scooted back away from the edge. I followed her, hovering over her and staring down at the most beautiful and lovely creature I’d ever seen.

From down the hall, the soft Christmas music still played, and I could hear the fire crackling. I reached for the remote that controlled the lights by the bedside and dimmed them, leaving mostly Christmas lights twinkling to create ambiance. Her green eyes caught the flickering and they looked like sparkling emeralds. It took my breath away and I felt like I might fall into them, happily.

“What?” Jenna asked.

I shook my head, “You’re just so incredible,” I said. Then I decided to push my luck. “And you’re mine.”

Jenna’s eyes went wide and for a moment I thought she would fight me. But then she nodded, raising her arms above her head and wordlessly

beckoning me to take her. To claim her.

I ran my hands across her breasts, eliciting a sigh of content from her gorgeous, ruby lips. Leaning forward, I took one of her nipples into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it and feeling like a fucking hero every time she whimpered. My knees pressed into her thighs as she squirmed beneath me while I licked, sucked, and teased.

“Gabe...” She groaned. “God, you know how to touch me...”

I wouldn't have said so but her praise made me feel invincible.

I quickly withdrew my lips from her delicious cherry buds and trailed a line of kisses down her stomach and hips, ending between her thighs. I breathed in the smell of her soft hair and excited wetness, shivering at how much of an aphrodisiac it was for me. The smell of Jenna was better than anything I'd ever had before.

As I'd become accustomed to doing, I danced my tongue across her tender skin and she dug her hands into my hair. I paid close attention to the way she moved, the sounds she made, and the way her breath hitched when I'd get her close.

“How am I supposed to go a day without this now?” she asked, whimpering. “You own my body. I am yours.”

There was something about this declaration that made me need her now, and as I plunged my tongue deep inside her, she echoed my sentiments.

“I need you inside me, Gabe.”

“Whatever you want, Angel.”

I pressed my hard cock at her opening and watched as she arched up against it. I slid inside of her slowly, noting how I could see myself in her lower stomach as I entered.

“God, you're so big.” She moaned.

“I hope that’s a good thing,” I replied cautiously. I hated to be hurting her and not know.

But Jenna just nodded enthusiastically with her eyes fluttering as I began to move inside her.

I went slowly at first, watching her fingers clutch the sheets on either side of her and emit noises that would have driven any man wild. But her desire for more had me fucking her like it would save my life within minutes.

“God, baby, you’re so perfect,” I panted, relishing in the way she fit so tightly around me, molded to take me deep.

“You’re perfect for me,” she replied. And I couldn’t have agreed with the sentiment more.

I held her face as I made love to her, kissing her and rubbing my thumb across her beautiful lips. But when I felt myself get close, I pulled back and grabbed her hips, turning her over so our bodies could be even closer.

She felt small beneath me, and I grabbed her wrists, pinning them above her head as I penetrated her once more. She gave an aroused little yelp and pressed into me, her body begging me for more.

I dipped my head to kiss her shoulders and neck, and to whisper in her ear about her loveliness. Soon I felt her body clench around me, and she went stiff and silent, biting down on my wrist as she came.

“That’s a good girl, Jen. You are my good girl.”

The sensual nature of her silent orgasm spurred me on and I began to pound into her like I couldn’t stop myself. She moaned my name over and over again, occasionally shouting exclamations and affirmatives.

“Fill me,” she said.

“Are you sure?” I panted, trying to hold back for a confirmation.

“Fill me,” she reiterated. “It’s safe.”

I could only assume that meant she was on protection and I allowed myself to fully take in the pleasure of her body. The way I stretched her to accommodate my size, the way she mimicked my body movements with her own, smaller, more delicate ones.

“Yes... yes...” I panted in her ear.

“I’m gonna come again.” She moaned. And that was enough to finish me.

Wave after wave of my orgasm spilled deep inside her as she squeezed around me. Her body shook with mine as we were overtaken with our climaxes and I saw stars as we finished in tandem.

When the shaking ceased, I rolled to the side and pulled Jenna against me, flipping a blanket over us both.

We lay in silence for a bit, and I thought Jenna dozed off a bit because her breathing became low and even. But out of the quiet satisfaction, she eventually said, “I wish we could stay here forever.”

I kissed her head and pressed my nose alongside hers. “That wouldn’t be very practical to you becoming a nurse.”

She giggled gently and nodded against me. “I know. I just feel happier now than I have in a long time.”

“I can agree with that,” I replied. “You make me something more. Something better.”

The room went quiet once more until Jenna said, “You know we’re gonna have to tell Dean when he gets back.”

The thought of it made my stomach churn. I was fourteen years older than Dean’s little sister. If I was her brother, I’d have a few choice words for me for sure.

“We will deal with it as it comes,” I said with reassurance I didn’t quite feel myself. “For now, let’s rest. Finally in a bed, our backs will thank us.”

Jenna yawned and giggled softly.

“Goodnight, Gabe.”

“Goodnight, Angel.”

I watched her as she fell asleep, knowing that no matter what Dean said, Jenna was worth some discomfort with my friend. Tonight was the beginning of something special, and I would be damned if I let something this special slip away again.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jenna

Waking up, in a bed, in Gabe's arms was heaven. You know, the place he'd taken me the night before? It had taken every ounce of energy to stop myself from being the naïve woman and shouting, "*I love you!*" at the top of my lungs.

Last night was a rollercoaster of emotions. We'd laughed, we'd cried, we'd reminisced. We'd made love like it was the last night of the world and for the first time ever, I'd fallen asleep, in a bed, in the arms of someone who wasn't trying to kick me out post orgasm.

When I opened my eyes and found Gabe still sleeping, I slipped out of his arms in the manner I'd perfected by now, and went to the kitchen to make my Christmas morning hot cocoa. It was my own personal tradition and I wouldn't be missing it now.

I took the last packet of hot cocoa and dropped a candy cane in it before using the electric kettle to fill my mug with water. I'd been making it this way since I was little, since the first time we came here. Granted, Mom used to help me pour the hot water, but it was still my own invention, in my silly marshmallow mug. The same mug I was drinking out of now.

I turned and leaned against the counter, taking my first sip and relishing in the nostalgia. From where I stood, I could picture Mom and Dad telling Dean and me which presents to open first, and not to mess with each other under the tree. My heart ached for my brother. Him being here was the only thing that could have made this better because he was as close to Mom and Dad that I could possibly get now.

I decided, as I sipped my cocoa, to have a bath and think about how I was going to explain Gabe and me to Dean and Lexi. Poor Lexi, she'd been stuck with my boring, know-it-all brother for days now and she definitely wouldn't have had the same experience as me—she has really good taste in men. Even now, considering the idea of the two of them hooking up made me laugh. She was so far out of his league, it was comical.

I walked past the master bedroom and peered inside to see Gabe had turned over but had not yet awoken. I paused for a moment in the doorway, staring at this strange, beautiful man who was so rough and rugged on the outside, but inside was just longing to be seen for who he was. That little poor boy who just wanted one more road trip with his parents and would never get it.

Gabe snored gently and turned over once more. He was lucky I was an adult now. There were many years that I would wake up my mom and dad at the crack of dawn for presents, usually being told to go back to bed until at least seven-thirty. But Gabe would be spared my Christmas gusto and sleep at least until I finished bathing.

I turned away and entered the bathroom, quietly closing the door behind me and flicking on the light. I ran the water and added some peppermint oil to it since I'd eaten all the candy canes that were in here before.

I peered in the mirror to look at my own reflection and, despite the fact that I looked tired, I looked extremely happy. Gabe—Mister Grinch himself—was changing the very way I saw myself. Almost like I could see me through his eyes by the way he cared for me.

When the water had reached a point where I could fully submerge myself, I slid in and under the water. It was scalding hot but I could almost feel the sweat of the night before washing away. Being a nurse, I'd developed a liking

for the feeling of getting clean. Although, usually it was stuff much grosser than sweat after a shift at the hospital.

Three days ago, if you had told me this was where I'd be, I would have told you that you were nuts. Not only was I leaving this nightmare alive, but I was happy. On top of that, I was pretty sure I had a boyfriend. Gabe hadn't officially asked me but there was something in the way he told me he didn't want to be apart that made me feel confident it was coming.

But the question still remained...

How would I tell Dean?

I ran through scenario after scenario, even practicing out loud telling him everything from begging for his approval to telling him I didn't need it. I knew Lexi would support me if I was happy, but my brother was so overprotective it was nuts.

By the time I drained the tub I was no closer to an answer.

I grabbed Gabe's t-shirt off the back of the bathroom door, slid it on, and left the hot, steamy bathroom. For the first time in days, I picked up my phone and turned it on, pleased to see I had a signal. I opened my text messages but I had none from Lexi or Dean and I worried that perhaps something disastrous had happened.

But I didn't have to wonder for long because I heard the sound of a diesel truck crunching up the path to the house, and within seconds, Dean's rental truck came into view.

"Shit," I said to myself, finishing off my cocoa. I didn't have time to run and hide, as I saw Lexi spot me and wave. This was the moment, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I watched helplessly as the two of them climbed out of the truck, bags of what I could only assume were groceries in their hands. Dean nodded to me

to open the door for them and I did.

“You’re alive,” Dean said, grinning. “And I don’t see Gabriel’s body on the front lawn so I feel safe assuming he’s alive, too.”

“Dean, listen...”

Dean dropped his bags and hugged me. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

“Dean, I—”

“Good thing we bought more cocoa. Looks like you drank the rest. And where did you get...”

Dean’s voice trailed off and I looked to see him staring behind me. I didn’t want to turn around, but I knew I would only be able to avoid the oncoming explosion so long.

“Oh. Hi. Welcome back!”

I turned to find Gabe standing in a Santa hat with a garland wrapped around his dick. He slowly covered himself up and I tried my hardest to sink into the floor.

This was definitely *not* how I needed this to go. Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion as the look of horror on Dean’s face turned to anger.

So much for him giving his blessing.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gabe

I pulled off the Santa hat to cover as much of myself as I could while Lexi blushed and giggled, and Dean stared vacantly like he'd been hit upside the head. Behind them, Jenna was looking at me in a mix of amusement and horror.

“Oh. Hi. Welcome back!” I said as though I wasn't standing before them wearing nothing but a piece of Christmas garland wrapped around my cock. “Good to see you're safe.”

“You guys, too,” Lexi said, her voice still filled with laughter. “Looks like you've... uh... managed to find a way to get along.”

I chuckled guiltily, and her words seemed to bring Dean back to his senses.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he said, like the situation wasn't obvious to anyone with eyes and a brain.

“Well,” I said, unsure of how to broach this subject with my friend, when I'd hoped I'd have more time to figure out a gentle way to tell him that I had fallen hard for his incredible sister. “Uh, as it turns out...” My words faded out, with me not knowing what I could possibly say.

“Don't be an idiot, Dean,” Jenna said, half laughing, rescuing me from my awkward stumbling.

His eyes went wide as he turned back to her. “You stay out of this,” he said, pointing at her.

“Excuse me?” she replied, crossing her arms, all humor leaving her face.

“This isn't about you,” he said. “It's about *him*, and he and I are going to have a little chat.”

“What the hell do you mean, it isn't about me?” Jenna demanded.

“Dean,” Lexi said quietly, putting a hand on his arm, but he shook her off.

“I think this conversation would be a lot more productive if I had clothes on,” I said, turning and rushing back to the bedroom. Behind me, I could hear Jenna and Dean arguing, and I felt a little bad for Lexi, who was obviously stuck in the middle.

Once I was dressed in jeans and a sweater, I walked out to the living room, where Jenna was sitting next to Lexi with her legs crossed, looking angrily at Dean, who was examining the boarded-up window.

Jenna looked up as I entered and smiled, an expression I returned before quickly switching to a more neutral look as Dean turned around.

“Get your coat on,” he said without making eye contact with me.

“My coat?” I repeated. Surely, he wasn’t kicking me out on *Christmas Day*?

“Yeah,” he said, pulling his back on and pointing to the window. “If this happened, there’s probably more damage I need to report to the owners. You’re going to come with me so we can make a list. And while we do... we’re going to talk.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Dean,” Jenna said, standing between us. “You’re acting like a—”

“It’s fine, Jenna,” I said, walking toward the door to get my coat. “I think I can handle a conversation.” I sincerely hoped neither she nor Dean could hear the anxiety in my voice, because I was doing my best to sound way more confident than I felt.

Once I was fully outfitted in my winter gear again, which was still slightly damp from the day before, I went back into the living room, where Dean was standing, waiting for me.

“Come on,” he said, turning away and waving over his shoulder for me to

follow him.

I walked past Jenna, who grabbed my hand and stood to give me a kiss. I was glad she did, because the idea of facing Dean had nearly made me forget exactly what I really wanted out of this talk. But her touch, her lips, were the perfect reminder.

“I’ll be back,” I said, running my thumb along her cheek and turning to find Dean at the back door, staring at me in rage.

“Now,” he said, and walked outside, leaving the door open, letting the cold air in to force me to follow quickly, or to let the girls get cold again.

Once I was outside, I closed the door behind me. Dean was standing right outside the door, staring up at the snow giant Jenna and I had made. He was starting to look a little worse for wear, the Georgia sun taking a toll on his perfectly rounded form.

“Nice snowman. So you did something *other* than fuck my sister while I was gone?” he asked, rounding on me.

“Dean,” I replied. “I didn’t—”

“Didn’t fuck her?” he scoffed. “Oh, so was the garland for me? You shouldn’t have.” The sarcasm dripping from his words was thick enough to choke on, but I knew I had to keep my cool for this conversation to go anywhere positive.

“Yes,” I said, figuring honesty was the best policy here. “Jenna and I slept together.”

“No shit, Gabe,” he said. “Did you even wait five minutes after I drove away?”

“What?” I asked. “You know me better than that.”

“Do I?” he asked, his voice much higher than usual. “Because the Gabe I know doesn’t go after *anyone*, let alone naïve young girls, and definitely not

his friends' sisters."

"I didn't 'go after' anyone," I said, walking past the snowman to the shed, where I'd broken the handle. "Believe me, when we got snowed in, I was ready to venture out into the snow alone just to get away from her."

"Hey," Dean said, his anger suddenly taking an odd turn. "Don't be a dick about my sister."

"Deal," I said, putting my hands in the air like I was surrendering. "I have no intention of saying anything bad about her anymore."

He looked like he was torn between wanting me to be nice and wanting me to not have had sex with Jenna, but whether fortunately or unfortunately for him, both of those were exactly what he was getting. His mouth opened and closed like he couldn't decide what to say.

"Look," I said. "It's not like anything was planned." I pointed to the shed. "You might want to mark that down. I had to break into it to get the wood to fix the window, and to collect some canned goods since we didn't exactly have a lot of food."

"Don't deflect," he snarled.

"I'm not," I told him. "It all matters. The window broke the first night when we were still not getting along, but we had to work together to come up with a solution. Not to mention, with the heat out, we had to spend a lot of time together in order to be warm."

"So, what?" he demanded. "You just started talking about how much money you have to mesmerize my sister and lure her in?"

"What?" I said, unable to prevent myself from laughing at the ridiculousness of the question. "No. Come on, Dean. Think about it for a minute. Jenna's a smart woman. She already knew I had money, but that

wasn't even a point of conversation except for how it related to the fact that I was a workaholic with no one in my life but you."

"And you used that connection to get close to someone young and impressionable so you could seduce her."

"No!" I said, finally getting frustrated enough to yell. "Dean, you know me. You know I'm not some predator. And I'd never *use* our friendship for anything. I honestly didn't mean for any of this to happen, but it has, and honestly, I'm so happy it did."

"You're happy?" he demanded. "Yeah, I bet you are."

"Dude, stop," I said. "Listen to what I have to say before you make assumptions and get all up your own ass."

"Fine," he said, sitting on the stump I'd cut wood on the first day and spreading his arms in a gesture of faux goodwill. "I'm listening."

"We had to work together. We had nothing to do but talk and... Jenna's amazing."

"I'm aware," Dean interjected. At a glare from me, he rolled his eyes and waved for me to continue.

"I don't even know when the feelings started, but I swear to you, it happened very organically. Just through conversation and spending time together. I got to know her better than I've known most people, and we both realized we had this incredible connection and chemistry—"

"Please," he said with a look of disgust. "Please do not tell me about your *chemistry* with my sister."

"Fine," I said. "Well, she took care of me that first night when I was half frozen after fixing the window, and I took care of her yesterday when she got hypothermia—"

"She *what?*" he said, looking toward the house. "How did that happen?"

I looked up at the snowman and gestured to it, then pointed to the front yard. “Turns out your sister sucks at throwing snowballs. But she’s really good at talking someone through saving her life.”

Dean shook his head.

“I just don’t get it, man,” he said. “She *hated* you. How did that change?”

“I guess I succeeded in fixing that first impression. Dean... I’m really falling in love with her.”

“You can’t know that,” he said, suddenly angry again. “It’s been three days.”

“Three days of constant contact and a lot of shit that needed to be worked out together.”

“And what happens when you go back to New York and she goes back to school? What happens when you guys have to deal with long distance?”

“We haven’t worked out those details yet,” I admitted.

“Of course, you haven’t,” he said. “Because you’re not thinking with your head. Just with your dick.”

“Dude, chill,” I said. “I’m not going to sit here and pretend that sex with Jenna had nothing to do with helping me to fall for her, but it wasn’t the only thing that did it. She’s so fucking smart, and funny, and adventurous. She makes me want to find a way to experience life again, like I haven’t since even before Hannah.”

“You still didn’t answer my question.”

“Because I don’t have an answer,” I said. “I have ideas, most of which are a lot easier with the kind of money I have saved up, but I don’t want to sit here and tell you I have a grand plan until I talk to her.”

“So what?” Dean said. “Are you looking for my blessing? Because I just can’t, man.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Like I said, we haven’t had a chance to fully decide what we want to do. And yeah, I’d love your blessing, but I guess all I’m really hoping for is that you won’t consider it such a breach of trust that our friendship would end, and that you won’t try to stop me from seeing what might be here.”

He put his head in his hands and shook it back and forth. He stayed that way for a long moment before he finally looked back up at me.

“Fine,” he said.

“Fine... what?” I asked when he didn’t elaborate.

“Fine, I won’t stand in your way,” he said. “And I’m not going to ditch you as a friend. Just... don’t let me walk in on anything like that *ever* again, okay? As far as I’m concerned, you and my sister are both chaste, born-again virgins who will never touch in that way again. Understand?”

I fought the urge to laugh, knowing it was probably the wrong time to do so.

“Yeah,” I said instead. “I understand. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said, and my heart sank. “I didn’t make any promises about standing in *her* way. I might still manage to convince her to stay celibate her whole life.”

Now he finally cracked a smile, and I allowed myself to laugh.

“Alright,” I said. “Do you wanna keep looking for damage?”

“Oh,” he said, “I just assumed you’d pay for it all. I was more thinking about causing some damage myself, if you catch my drift, but I think I’ll save it in case you break my sister’s heart.”

“I don’t see that happening,” I said, “but if I ever do, I will willingly submit to whatever you feel is appropriate.”

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “Because *your* idea of ‘appropriate’ is

wrapping your dong in garland to seduce someone, and I just think you need to do some reevaluation there.” He sighed. “Besides... maybe this will soften the blow for Jenna.”

“What blow?” I said slowly, suddenly apprehensive.

“Well... you’re not the only one who was getting laid this weekend.”

It took me a moment to realize what he was saying.

“Lexi?” I asked. “But what about the girl you’ve been seeing?”

Dean looked at me like I was slow. “Who do you think that girl is?” he asked. “We met at her birthday six months ago and hit it off. We’ve been talking ever since.”

“Wow,” I said. “You know, this would be a really good chance for me to make some comments about glass houses, but I think I’ll just say that I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks,” Dean said, giving me an appreciative smile. “And now...” He turned to walk back toward the house with an enigmatic smile. “I have something to do.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jenna

As soon as the boys left, Lexi rounded on me and screamed in a high-pitched girly shriek.

“Oh, my God. How the fuck did that happen?” she asked, nearly bouncing with excitement.

I shrugged and shook my head, truly having no idea. “It just... happened. I think trying to figure out how to survive without electricity and with nothing to do made it more important for us to at least find a way to get along.”

“And clearly you two got along,” she said, biting her lip with glee. “Who made the first move?” she asked. “You or him?”

“Him,” I said blushing. “He kissed me after I bandaged up his leg for him —”

“Bandaged up his leg? What is this, some kind of rom-com?”

“So when the window blew in, he went out into the snowstorm and found stuff to insulate the room. He tripped or something and he was bleeding when he got back in.”

“Who the fuck is this guy?” Lexi said, in amazement. “He sounds like some billionaire wilderness man who must fuck like a stallion to have captured your heart like this.”

“Who said anything about my heart?” I replied. “Can’t a girl get laid and have it just be for fun?”

Lexi folded her arms and gave me a look. “A girl can. You cannot.”

I laughed at how well she knew me and rolled my eyes. I happened to glance out the window at the exact moment Dean and Gabe walked past and

Gabe looked in at me with a little wave. My heart did a somersault in my chest and Lexi made a knowing noise.

“My point exactly. You’re smitten.”

I looked at her, finally giving up the ruse and nodded. “I totally kind of am. He’s dreamy.”

Lexi clapped her hands together and cheered. “Good for you, Jen, you deserve it. And see, he didn’t ruin your Christmas after all.”

“He certainly did not.”

“So, what’s the sex like?” she asked. “Must be good for you two to be this playful.”

I nodded. “I think we might have had sex more than we ate.” Lexi laughed and I couldn't help but follow suit. “He is very well endowed, a dominant but gentle lover, and he tells me...”

I suddenly felt a little embarrassed revealing all the details of my affair with her, but she was clearly as enthralled as an old lady watching a soap opera.

“Yes?” she said, her eyes begging to know. “He tells you what?”

I bit my lip and leaned closer as if that would prevent the walls from hearing. “He calls me his good girl and has me call him... Daddy.”

“Oh, my God,” Lexi said, shrieking again. “You little harlot. I love it!”

I laughed at Lexi’s antic, but the blush on my cheeks stayed. My mind was playing all of Gabe and my intimate moments back to me, and it made me want to go to him now and kiss him.

When I came back to my surroundings, Lexi was staring at me. “You really do like him, don’t you?”

I nodded and hugged his t-shirt around me. “He got me, Lex. I’ve never had anyone care for me like that before. He’s someone I want badly enough

to risk the pain of possibly losing him.”

Lexi nodded, smiling in a way that indicated she was truly happy for me.

“Come on, you,” she said, grabbing my arm. “Let’s get you in some clothes and we can start making some Christmas dinner.”

I nodded and allowed my best friend to lead me to the bedroom that still bore signs of last night’s dreamy scene. Lexi looked around and then turned to me.

“You’ll let me know which surface is safe to sit on, right?”

I indicated to the reading nook with a grin. “That might be the only place, though,” I joked.

“Filthy,” she bantered back. Lexi took a seat in the window while I changed into some clean, warm clothes.

“So, what did you and my smelly brother get up to?” I asked, my memory finally reminding me she’d had to spend the same amount of time with Dean.

“Hardly anything,” she said. “We watched a lot of TV at the hotel.”

I turned to her and raised an eyebrow. “You guys got a hotel?”

Lexi rolled her eyes at me. “No... we slept in Dean’s truck. Of course we got a hotel, dummy.”

I gave her a questioning look to try and see if she’d spent the time with Dean in a similar fashion to my last few days, but she laughed.

“You’re utterly ridiculous.”

Alexis got to her feet and went to her suitcase to grab the presents that had been left there. When she bent over, something shiny and silver fell out, fluttering to the ground.

My eyes went to it. Her eyes went to it. Then our eyes met each other.

“Lexi... That’s a condom.”

“It’s not a condom,” she insisted, scooping it up. “It’s a condom wrapper.”

“*Alexis!*” I yelled in shock. “You acted like I was being crazy. You fucked my brother!”

Lexi got quiet and her face turned the same color as the reds on the wrapping paper all around us.

“It’s not what you think,” she said. “It’s... Dean and I have been talking for a while. Six months at least. We only made it official when we got stuck in the city.”

I was stunned. How could I not have realized Mr. Summer Fling was Dean. They’d met at my birthday party last June and really seemed to hit it off. But I never heard either of them talk about the other again. I didn’t think anything of it at all, how stupid of me.

“And by official you mean...?” I asked, not sure if I wanted the answer.

Lex nodded and held up the condom wrapper.

“Well, at least you used protection,” I said. Lexi looked at me with heavy guilt and I shook my head to try and reassure her. When that didn’t work, I went to her side and hugged her.

“If Dean makes you happy, then I’m happy. At least if you two get married, I’ll know what kind of sister-in-law I’ll be getting.”

Lexi finally laughed and nodded. “I think we’re a long way from that,” she said. “Dean is a little commitment phobic.”

I nodded dramatically. “It’s so true. He has a hard time committing to what he wants for lunch, let alone a person.”

“But what about you?” Lexi asked. “It seems you’re enmeshed in a whirlwind romance. Any chance he’s gonna pop the question while you’re together? Be fiancés from afar?”

I laughed and shook my head. “No way. Though, he did offer me something much better than a ring. He’s paying my nursing school tuition.”

“No way,” Lex said. “That’s a freakin’ keeper.”

I nodded. “It will be so nice to focus on my rotations rather than staying up all night at a diner.”

“I’m really happy for you, Jen,” Lexi said, giving me a hug.

“And I’m really happy for you, Lex.”

“Merry Christmas to us,” she said, grinning.

“Merry Christmas to us.”

After I got dressed and did my hair, Lexi and I went to the kitchen to start cooking dinner while the men were still scouting the damage from the storm. She and my brother had gone all out with the food choices, including a whole ham and a whole duck.

“I tried to stop him,” Lexi said. “But when Dean has his mind made up—”

“Believe me,” I replied. “You don’t need to tell me how pig-headed my brother is. I’ve known him for twenty-four years.”

Lexi laughed and stuck some dough she had made into the oven. “Keep an eye on that, will you?” she asked me.

But before I could reply, the front door burst open and the two men came inside. Dean looked at Lexi and Gabe gazed at me with a smile. I suddenly warmed from my toes to my fingertips and resisted the urge to run and kiss him.

Dean, however, seemed unable to resist this urge because as soon as he caught Lexi’s eyes, he went to her and hugged her.

And then he dropped to one knee.

I covered my mouth with my hands, gasping, as Gabe’s eyes went wide.

“Lexi,” he said, his voice tight with nerves and emotion. “We haven’t known each other that long, and we’ve had even less time together in person. But you caught my eye immediately when we met, and you caught my heart

just as quickly. Talking to you every day has been the highlight of my day, every day since then. Your quick wit and willingness to put me in my place makes me a better person, and I find myself trying to be someone you would be proud of. Because there is no one I could possibly imagine doing that for. You are the first person I say good morning to, and you are the person who I fall asleep talking to. You are the person I dream of, and you are the person I dream of a future with. You are my favorite person to share the details of my day with, and the person I miss the most when I can't talk to you. There is nothing I love more than seeing your name when my phone lights up, and nothing I love to hear more than your voice saying my name. There are a million reasons I could give as to why I would want you to be my wife, but when it comes down to it, the why is what I can spend the rest of our lives showing you. For now, what matters is this. Will you be my wife? Will you make this the first of every Christmas we get to spend together? Will you marry me so that we don't have to spend any more of our lives apart from each other?"

Lexi's eyes filled with tears and my jaw dropped. I couldn't have imagined in a million years that this was coming. Not from Dean. Lexi nodded happily and Dean grabbed her, getting to his feet and lifting her into his arms to kiss.

Gabe and I both applauded, then quietly went to each other and shared a small kiss of our own.

"I guess that worked out for us," I said against his face as I hugged him.

"I guess it really did," he replied.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Gabe

“Did you know?” I asked Jenna quietly.

“That my best friend was seeing my brother? That my brother was planning to propose to said best friend?” she said. “Hell, no. If I had, I would have had a lot less guilt about sleeping with *his* best friend.” She gave me a sweet but sly smile, and I had to fight the urge to take her into the bedroom right then and there.

Dean and Lexi were still sitting with their heads together, whispering excitedly. Lexi was holding onto the hand which now bore a rather large diamond ring.

“It’s too bad we don’t have any champagne to toast with,” I said to Jenna.

But Dean must have overheard me, because he looked around at me and said, “It’s funny you should say that.” He kissed Lexi, and I felt Jenna tense slightly beside me. “I’ll be right back.”

He went to the kitchen, where all of the supplies they’d brought from town were. He came back seconds later with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, unwrapping the foil from the neck.

“Where the hell did you get that?” Lexi asked with a giggle.

“I snuck down the wine aisle while you were in the bathroom,” he said with a cheeky shrug. “I was really hoping you’d say yes, but if you hadn’t, at least I had some nice champagne to drown my sorrows.”

Lexi smacked him playfully on the arm as he twisted off the metal cap, revealing the cork.

“Wait,” he said. “Everyone put on your coats. I’ve always wanted to do this.” He looked at me. “Can you find some glasses and a big ass knife?”

“Why?” I asked slowly, fear suddenly creeping in beneath the happiness I felt for my friend. “Dean? Why?”

But he was already out the door.

Lexi followed after him, still very giggly, which I assumed was a result of getting engaged on Christmas, leaving Jenna and me alone in the living room.

She turned to me with a smile I knew well by this point, and I took a step closer to her to give her what her eyes were asking for. I kissed her deeply, relishing in the feeling of her so close. Her hands went to my hair, her fingers twisting in the strands as mine went to her waist, holding her against me.

“Lots of surprises this Christmas,” she said when we broke apart.

“Yeah,” I said. “I can’t believe I didn’t know that Lexi was the girl he was seeing, and I really can’t believe he didn’t tell me he was going to be proposing to her on this trip.”

“Oh, for sure,” she said, smiling at me and leaning into me. “But that wasn’t what I meant.”

“And what did you mean, then?” I asked, thinking I already knew the answer, but wanting to hear it from her lips.

“I mean,” she said, “that you were a surprise. Everything about you. You surprised me with your grouchy introduction, then you surprised me with your helpfulness and willingness to brave that storm to keep us safe. You surprised me with how kind you really are, and you surprised me when I realized I was really falling for you.”

“You are?” I said, lighting up when she said it.

“Yeah,” she said. “I really am.” She went up on her tiptoes to kiss me again, and I lifted her into the air. She threw her arms around my neck and shrieked in delight.

“Are you two coming?” Dean shouted from outside.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just a minute!” I turned back to Jenna, who was still in my arms. “I guess this would be a good moment to tell you that I have thoroughly and completely fallen for you, too.”

She beamed at me and kissed me again. I set her down and smiled back at her.

“So what do you want to do about that?” I asked, hoping we’d have enough time before Dean came back inside to force us outside with them.

“I...” She shook her head, still grinning. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’d really like to see where this goes, but... I know it won’t be easy.”

“Definitely not,” I said. “I work in New York, and you go to school here in Georgia.”

“But,” she said, “Dean and Lexi made it work long distance, and look at them now. Besides, I’ve been thinking about applying to Columbia for a nurse practitioner program after I graduate. Would... would you like that? If I moved to New York?”

I paused. My immediate answer was “yes,” but I thought about how quickly Hannah and I had rushed into things. Granted, we never had half of the connection that Jenna and I did, but the fact still remained that we had been doomed from the start. I was always working, and she needed so much more than I could offer in terms of time.

“I think...” I said, really giving myself time to consider. “I’d like to see how the rest of this week goes.” She looked a bit crestfallen, but I wasn’t done. “Because if it’s anything like the last few days, I can’t imagine anything I’d want more.”

She broke into a huge smile.

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

After another kiss, I grabbed her hand and found the champagne glasses as

requested, as well as the “big ass knife.” I led her outside to where Dean and Lexi were currently making out, with the bottle chilling neck-down in the snow.

“Ahem,” I said as we approached, and they both looked up.

“Took you long enough,” Dean said, his eyes going to our joined hands.

“Dean,” Lexi said in a softly scolding voice, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Sorry,” he said, smiling down at her and kissing the top of her head.

“Anyway, you found the knife?” I held it up and he clapped his hands together. “Perfect. I saw a video on how to do this, and I’ve always wanted to.”

“How to do what?” Jenna asked warily, and the sentiment seemed to be echoed in Lexi and myself as well.

“I’ll show you.”

He grabbed the bottle out of the snow, holding it up.

“They said you need the neck really chilled,” he said. “Seems pretty good to me.” He walked over toward the lake, standing close to the edge. “I figure, there are enough things hanging out at the bottom of this lake, what’s a couple more?”

“Dean...” Jenna said. “What are you—”

“Knife, please,” he said, holding out his hand to me.

I eyed him with suspicion, but handed over the knife anyway.

“Whatever you’re about to do,” I told him, “remember that you just got engaged. Don’t go doing anything that’s going to get you killed.”

“Why do you all seem so worried?” he demanded. “This is fun! Tis the damn season, and I plan to make the most of it.”

He took the knife from me and held the bottle of bubbly out in front of him, facing the lake. The cork was pointed at a forty-five-degree angle

toward the water, and he put the flat of the knife against the side of the bottle.

“Dean,” Lexi said, suddenly sounding as worried as Jenna and I were. “Dean, what are you—”

But at that moment, Dean showed us exactly what he planned to do as he swiped up with the knife, clearly with the intent to cut off the cork rather than opening it normally.

But it failed.

“Aw,” he said, looking at the bottle, spinning it in his hands. “Why didn’t it... oh! That’s why.”

“What’s why?” I asked, but Dean was already taking up his position again as the girls both took a step back and covered their faces.

“I was holding it wrong,” he said, then looked back at us with a slightly unhinged grin. “Here we go!”

He swiped the knife up, and this time, the cork—and the top inch of the neck of the bottle—came off in a clean cut. As champagne began to pour out freely, Dean motioned for me to bring the glasses over. I held them underneath the stream, which stopped rather quickly, but Dean simply poured the wine like a civilized person.

I looked at the bottle, which was nearly empty after the initial spray had sent so much of it into the lake, but Dean didn’t seem to care. In fact, he simply turned and took two glasses from my hands, handing one to Lexi, and raised up his glass.

“A toast!” he said in the most dramatic way possible. “To Lexi. My fiancée. I love you more than I knew I could, and I am so grateful that you agreed to be mine.”

“Why wouldn’t I, you lunatic?” she asked.

Jenna wrapped an arm around my waist, and I draped one over her

shoulder as we clinked our glasses together.

“They’re pretty cute together,” Jenna said to me quietly.

“Yeah,” I said. “And I never thought I’d use cute and Dean in the same sentence, but there you are.”

“Technically,” she said, “I used them. You just agreed.”

“Right you are,” I replied, leaning down to give her a kiss.

But right at that moment, Lexi rushed over to us to give Jenna a hug, squealing.

“Can you believe I’m *engaged*?” she gushed.

“I can honestly say, if I hadn’t seen it myself, I really wouldn’t believe it, Lex,” she said with a laugh. The girls began to talk, slightly pulling away from me, which was fine.

I sidled up beside Dean, who was watching his fiancée and sister talk.

“I have to admit,” I said reluctantly. “That *was* pretty cool. And I’m sort of jealous I didn’t get to do it.”

“I have another bottle if you want to later,” he said, winking at me.

“Nah,” I replied. “No use wasting more good champagne when we could be drinking it and celebrating. Congratulations. Really. That’s so amazing.”

“Thanks,” he said, tapping his flute against mine. “So... you and my sister.”

“Me and your sister,” I said. “You’re not going to try to give me ‘the talk’ again, are you?”

“No,” he said. “I just want to make sure you’re really in it to win it, and that you’re not just seeing this as a fling.”

“I assure you,” I said. “She has a much better chance of breaking my heart, I think, than I do of breaking hers.”

“Good,” he said, then we sank into a silence as we continued to watch the

girls talk and laugh and look at Lexi's ring over and over.

"You know," I said. "I have an idea."

"Yeah?" Dean said, looking at me. He knew this tone, and it meant I was brewing up something big.

"Yeah," I said. "But I need you on board to really make it work."

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

I threw my arm around his neck to pull him in closer to me, and I whispered to him what I was thinking. The more I talked, the happier his expression got, until finally, he looked at me and said, "I'm in."

"Oh, wow, Dean!"

Lexi gushed over the gift she'd just opened, a blue cashmere scarf that matched her coat perfectly.

"It's perfect," she said.

It was an hour after we drank out champagne, and we'd come back inside to warm up by the fire before exchanging presents. Jenna had given Dean a watch I was sure she couldn't afford—something he was sure of, too, given how he got a little teary-eyed when he opened it.

We were finally down to the last present, which turned out to be a bracelet for Lexi that, by total chance, happened to match her new ring. The girls hugged, with Lexi thanking Jenna profusely.

Jenna stood up and stretched. "Well," she said, "what do we want to do now that that's done?"

"Done?" I said, looking at Dean in confusion. "Did she say she thinks we're done?"

"I think so," Dean said, shaking his head like he was disappointed.

“What are you two talking about?” Jenna said, sitting back down and eying us suspiciously.

“Well...” I said. “Dean and I have one more gift. Kind of a last-minute thing, but...”

“For me?” Jenna asked, even more wary.

“For both of you, actually,” Dean said, grinning at Lexi.

I pulled out my phone and navigated to my mail app, where the email I’d just gotten about an hour earlier was sitting in my inbox.

“Sorry it isn’t wrapped, but it would be kind of hard to do that, anyway.”

I handed it to Jenna, and she and Lexi put their heads together to look.

“Dean,” Lexi said, looking up at him. “This can’t be right.”

“What do you think it is?” he asked with mock innocence.

“It *looks*,” Jenna said, “like an airline gift certificate. For five thousand dollars.”

“Well,” I said, “I was hoping that would be enough for you two to come visit once a month. Dean and I can do the same on a different weekend, so we’ll see each other pretty often.”

Jenna’s mouth dropped open.

“You mean it?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I want to see where this goes, because I think there’s really something here. What about you? Do you want to give this a go?”

She smiled and leaned forward to kiss me.

“Why wouldn’t I, you lunatic?”

Epilogue

Jenna

It had been exactly one year ago that Gabe and I met, and I had to admit that my current accommodations were definitely a lot fancier than they had been back then.

The marble tile of Gabe's penthouse master bathroom sparkled where I'd accidentally spilled water getting in and out of the bath. Turned out when you're pregnant, you have to pee a lot.

A knock came on the bathroom door and Gabe poked his head in. He looked absolutely gorgeous in the cashmere sweater I'd gotten him to wear for today, and if I hadn't already half melted because of the hot water, I'd have been a puddle over him.

"How are you, Angel?" he asked, coming to my side and squatting down by the tub's edge. "Do you need some water? It's kind of hot in here."

I shook my head, leaning in to kiss him. "That's very thoughtful of you, but I'll live."

Gabe reached across me and placed his open hand on my belly. "Just wanna be sure that my girls are taken care of."

I laid my hand on top of his and smiled at him, causing him to lean in for another kiss.

"I can't wait to see Lex and Dean," I said. It had been six months since we'd seen them at their wedding. Dean had taken a job in Atlanta so Lexi could finish school, and while it killed him to be away from Gabe (not me, of course), the pay was good enough that it just made sense.

"Me too," Gabe said, brushing his hair back with his hand. "Only one more year 'til they move back, though."

I did a small excited dance from where I was and Gabe laughed.

“You’re so adorable,” he said.

“Well, I hope you think so,” I replied, holding up my hand and wiggling my wedding ring at him. “Otherwise, it would make all this really awkward.”

Lexi and Dean had gotten married about six months after our stay at the cabin, and then mid-September, when Gabe whisked me away to Paris for a finance conference, he and I eloped. It was so unplanned that we were both wearing jeans and a t-shirt when we said, “I do.”

We were planning to have a more official celebration when we got back, but it was only about a week later I found out I was pregnant. Then all plans of silly uses of money like second weddings were off. We had a lot to get ready for.

Gabe kissed my head and pressed it to his forehead the way he liked to do when he needed to remind himself I was here. He’d done it nearly every night on the road trip we’d taken to retrace the journey his parents had traveled when Gabe was a kid on Christmas. It was amazing how much he opened up on that trip. And that was definitely when our daughter was conceived.

Out of nowhere I smelled something burning. Gabe appeared to smell it too, because he quickly got to his feet.

“Shit. That will be the bread,” he said.

“Well, go take it out,” I replied, laughing. “Don’t just let it burn.”

He nodded and jogged out of the bathroom leaving me shaking my head. I loved that husband of mine but he was a little bit distractible. An odd trait for someone who managed an entire financial company.

After five minutes and no return from Gabe, I decided to get out and check what was going on. I carefully climbed out so as not to slip on the floor and fall. Marble was so slippery when wet and the last thing we needed was a trip

to the ER. If Gabe was protective of me as his best friend's sister, he was a literal bodyguard now that I was his wife and the mother of his child.

I went out the door that led to Gabe's bedroom—or rather, our bedroom—and could hear voices coming from down the hall. I got dressed in double time, excitement pounding through my veins.

Once I had enough clothes on to be decent, I darted down the hallway and into our enormous kitchen to find my brother and best friend, holding hands and talking to my husband. I couldn't help it, I screamed, running first to Lexi and hugging her tight.

“What, no love for your brother?” Dean said playfully, flicking my hair.

I turned to him and hugged him, and he kissed me on the top of the head.

“Look at you, you whale,” he said playfully, poking my belly.

“Rude, Dean,” Lexi said, pinching him on the arm. “You look as glamorous as ever,” she then said to me. “Did the hospital agree to let you put that job offer on hold while you make a person?”

“On hold?” I asked. “Hell no. I worked my ass off for that degree. I'll be damned if some small person inside me prevents me from using it. I'll be in labor and still showing up for work.” Lexi and I laughed, and my heart sang at how good it was to see her again.

Dean and Gabe too had launched into a conversation about work and about how Dean was missing a great season for the Knicks. When the two of them talked about sports I just zoned out typically, but now I grabbed Lexi's arm and dragged her away to see how the nursery was coming.

Gabe and I had decided on a green theme before we knew it was a girl, but the adorable forest motif was appropriate for any baby so we kept it. With hand-painted vines crawling up the walls and little stuffed lions and tigers in her crib.

“Oh, Jen,” Lexi said, walking around and looking at things. “This is beautiful.”

“Thanks, Lex,” I replied, coming up next to her and hugging her. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“Only one year and we will be reunited,” she said with a smile.

“One long year.” I sighed. “But it will be worth it in the end. The four of us are gonna do everything together.”

“Totally,” my best friend replied, pushing her blonde hair over her ear. “Absolutely everything.”

We eventually wandered back to the kitchen and found that the men were carrying trays of food to the dining room.

“Is it food time?” I asked excitedly. Lately I was always hungry and this food smelled amazing. Gabe nodded and waved some bread in front of me like a lure to lead me to the table where we would be eating. He hardly needed it, I was already on my way in, Lexi in tow.

“Oh, my God, Gabe. This looks amazing,” Lex said as she sat down next to Dean.

“Seriously, dude,” Dean agreed. “You missed your calling as a chef.”

Gabe laughed and shook his head. “I’ll stick to being a hobbyist chef, thank you.” Then he picked up a dish and began to scoop some mashed potatoes onto my plate.

“So, what’s new with the two of you?” I asked as I began to eat. “Not like I talk to you *every week*,” I said, laughing.

“Not too much,” Dean said. “I’m up for a promotion already, though I’m not sure if I will take it. We’re talking about buying a boat... Oh and we’re pregnant.”

“Dean. A boat in the city? You have to be...”

A minute too late I realized what he said.

“Congrats you two,” Gabe said, standing to shake Dean’s hand. I jumped to my feet, screaming with excitement and Lexi joined me.

“You knew you were gonna tell us, didn’t you?” I said, laughing. “That’s what you meant by doing everything together. I meant go to concerts and you’re over there thinking about being parents together.”

Lexi nodded, grinning with pride, though not as much as Dean was.

“Next Christmas we will have some babies to take to the cabin. Shame they are still working on repairs this year.”

“Yeah,” I said back. “But absence makes the heart grow fonder. And I can’t wait to start a whole new set of traditions with *our* kids. Mom and Dad would be so proud, Dean.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “They would.”

The night wore on and we played charades, watched the snow fall on the city, and drank hot chocolate until we could drink no more—Lexi and I forgoing the rum, of course.

When Lexi and Dean had gone to the guestroom to sleep, Gabe and I finally found ourselves alone again. Gabe pulled me into him, kissing me slow and deep.

“You know,” he said. “If you’d told me a year ago on that drive down from New York that this was where I’d be now, I’d have called you crazy.”

“Me too,” I replied. “I couldn’t stand you from the minute you walked in.”

“You were no bucket of candy canes yourself,” he said, laughing, then leaning in to kiss me once more. “But I’m glad this is where we ended up. Our story is some perfect Christmas magic.”

I nodded, laying my head against his shoulder.

“It really is,” I agreed. “Merry Christmas, Gabe.”

“And Merry Christmas to you, Jenna.

THE END

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