

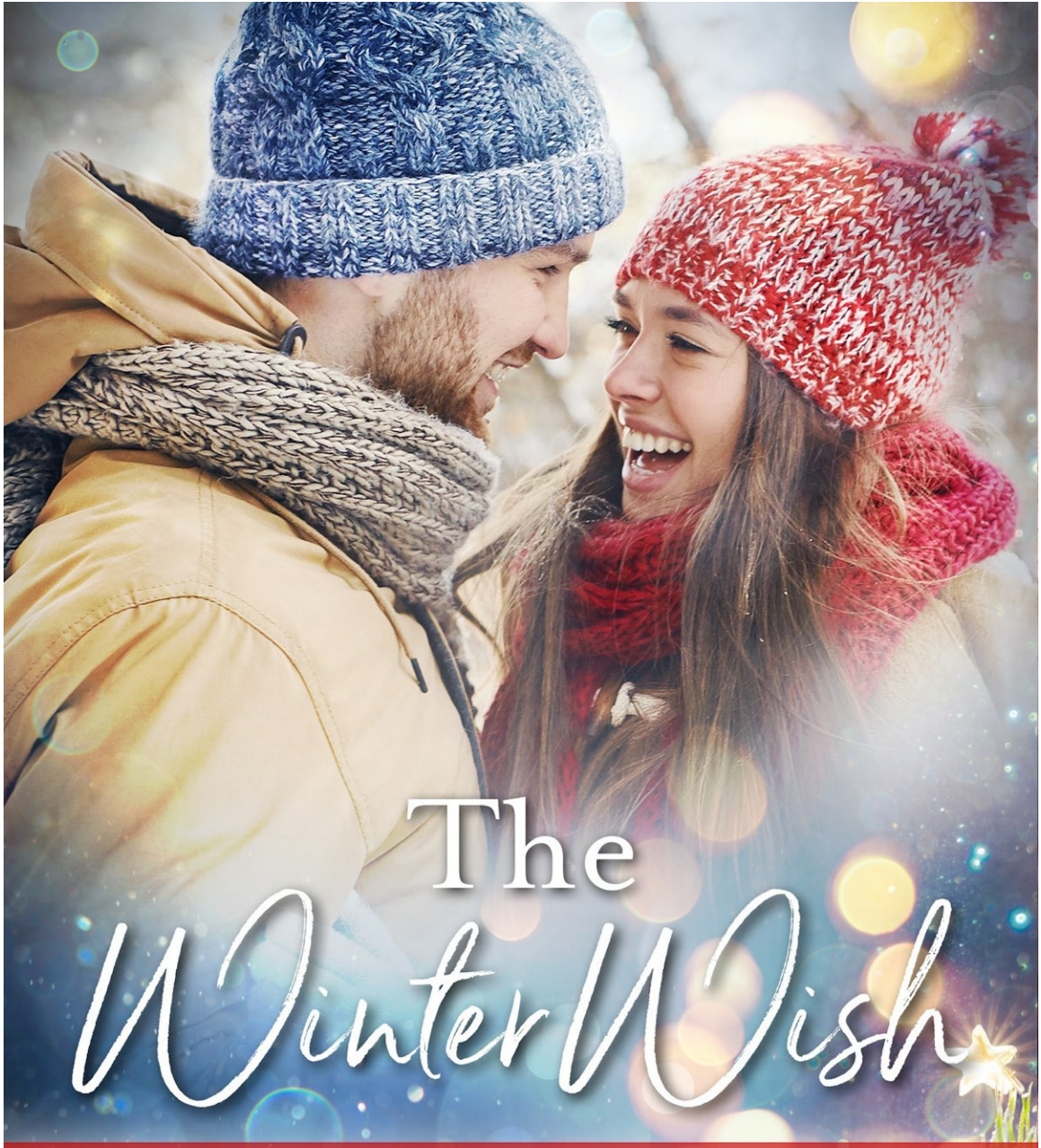


The
Winter Wish

A Lake Bittersweet Novella

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER BERNARD



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one

It was back.

Annika had tried to get rid of it. She'd registered a complaint. She'd mentioned a hypothetical allergy. She'd considered circulating a petition, a plan she'd quickly dropped because she knew she'd be the only person at the Lake Bittersweet Urgent Care who signed it. The only thing she hadn't done was climb onto a chair and take it down herself. Cameras would catch her in the act, she knew, and she'd be forever after known as the Mistletoe Bandit.

Staring up at the sprig of gray-green leaves with its jaunty red ribbon, she had to admit defeat.

"You win," she told the mistletoe. "We'll just have to learn to coexist. But don't go expecting me to kiss anyone."

"Oh honey, are you talking to the Christmas decorations again?" Her friend and fellow nurse, Paula, pushed through the double doors that led to the exam rooms. She wore pink scrubs with a candy cane pattern; quite a contrast to Annika's plain and unfestive blue ones.

Annika frowned up at the plant, which dangled from a light fixture in the ceiling. Along with the mistletoe, twinkle lights were strung along the reception counter and all the windows. A large fir tree adorned with holiday cards and wooden ornaments sat in the corner. Underneath it, the resident doctor had set up a vintage train set. The clinic wasn't big—a reception area,

six exam rooms, a small lab, and one unisex bathroom. At this point, the clinic-to-decorations ratio seemed a little unbalanced.

“Christmas isn’t for another two weeks. Besides, the tree is one thing, but I feel like the mistletoe is overkill. It’s a health hazard, isn’t it, with so many viruses going around? Aren’t we encouraging people to spread infection?”

“Didn’t you read the memo?” Paula stuck a pencil into her thick twist of hair and pulled out her phone. “I have it in here somewhere.”

“I missed a mistletoe memo?”

They both laughed at that tongue twister. “Here it is.” Paula read aloud. “New Mistletoe Policy. To maintain the holiday spirit while reducing the spread of germs, please follow the new clinic policy regarding mistletoe. Instead of a kiss, anyone who stands under the mistletoe will get a wish instead.”

Annika laughed so hard she had to rest her hands on her knees. “I’m sorry, doesn’t Santa Claus set the official mistletoe policy?”

Paula grinned and tucked her phone back in her pocket. She went to the reception desk and grabbed the chart for their newest patient, a teenage boy with a stiff neck and a severe headache. “What are you even doing here? Didn’t I tell you to take a day off? You’re working too much, it’s freaking me the F out.”

“It’s hard to take a day off this time of year. So many opportunities for overtime.”

“I hear that. I barely got started on my shopping. Move over, girl.” She elbowed Annika aside and took her place under the mistletoe. “I wish my shopping was all done and that Annika Scarlett would take a damn break.”

Annika made a face at her. “Only one wish, sorry. Official clinic policy.”

Paula laughed and hurried back toward the exam rooms. Annika moved behind the reception desk, where the computer awaited her. She had to update the morning charts; but first, she pulled out her phone.

What’s with the mistletoe/kissing/Christmas thing? She texted Brent. *And*

can anything be done about it?

As she waited for his response, she worked on the charts, which needed only about three-fifths of her brain. The remaining two-fifths were occupied with picturing Brent Caldwell pulling out his phone in whatever high-powered board meeting he was in. Would he smile when he saw her name flashing on his phone screen? Would he wish it was one of the sexy shots she sometimes sent?

He'd asked her to lay off those because once he'd inadvertently torpedoed a deal because he was too distracted by a shot of her nude under-boobs.

Her phone pinged and her heart jumped the way it always did.

Brent texted: *Google says the Druids valued its healing properties and the Greeks started the kissing thing at their winter festival.*

Three dots followed, as he texted something else. She waited.

Are you anti-kissing?

Depends on the kisser and the kissee. I had to dodge a doc last year.

Want me to come down there and kick some lab coat ass?

A thrill flashed through her. As the older sister, with a runaway mother and a preoccupied father, she'd taken on the role of protector from an early age. No one had ever done the same for her. When Brent said things like that, it pleased her on a primal level, even though he was in Chicago and not in ass-kicking range.

I have other plans for when you get here.

So do I.

She braced herself for an eggplant emoji, or maybe a bed, but that wasn't Brent's style. Instead he sent a long string of flowers and wrapped present emojis. And a Christmas tree. And a crown. Luckily, no mistletoe.

I can change my schedule to pick you up, she offered.

No need. I'm bringing the helo. Quickest and least disruptive.

Sure. Okay. That was billionaire logic, she figured. If it was her, she'd be going the most-economical-while-still-being-comfortable route. Possibly a

Greyhound bus, or maybe a ride-share with someone from high school who she'd have to make awkward conversation with and argue about what music to play.

But she didn't protest. She was just happy that he was coming.

And also, nervous. Very, very nervous. What if he didn't live up to all the fun they had with their texts? What if they didn't have any sparks in person? No physical chemistry? Or rather, what if their chemistry had evaporated since the summer, when they'd very definitely shared an attraction?

She and Brent had been texting back and forth since a scary incident one night in midsummer. Brent and his son Tyler had taken the speedboat belonging to Sans Souci, the estate they'd rented for a family reunion, out on the lake for some stargazing. Somehow, the engine had caught fire.

Brent and his nine-year-old son had jumped into the lake, but Tyler wasn't much of a swimmer. Jason Mosedale, one of the local firefighters, had happened to witness the fire, and he swam out to rescue them.

Once onshore, Brent had rushed Tyler to the clinic to get checked out. That was where Annika had met them. At first she hadn't paid much attention to the dripping-wet man hovering over his kid. She'd focused on Tyler, who'd lost his glasses in the lake and kept coughing up water.

She had a knack with kids, partly because she was helping raise her sister Jenna's two boys. Never talk down to kids in an emergency situation. Let your own calm manner give them something to cling to. Be firm and decisive, but also respectful and empathetic. And humorous if it felt right.

"Bet you didn't expect to end up in the lake tonight, did you?" she asked as she checked his heart rate.

He shook his head.

"Well, let me tell you a story, then. I got thrown into the water once. I

was being bullied by an older kid. He tossed me off the dock and wouldn't let me climb onto the ladder."

Tyler's eyes widened. "What did you do?"

"I played a prank on him. I pretended I was drowning and then I hid under the dock. There was just enough space so I could breathe. He freaked out and ran to get help. A fire engine came. All these firefighters ran down the dock. I could hear their boots on the planks. So I took a deep breath and floated out onto the water, face down, as if I'd drowned."

Behind them, she heard Tyler's dad's muffled snort.

"But I miscalculated," she finished up. "You can't really fake having no water in your lungs. I got into even more trouble than my bully did. Okelie-dokelie...you're good to go."

"I'm fine?"

"You are absolutely fine. I'd recommend staying warm and cozy for a day or two. Play some inside games, read books, paint flowers, whatever you like to do. What do you like to do?"

"I can draw dragons."

She held up a hand for a high-five. "That's a wonderful skill. Dragons aren't easy. All those scales are a nightmare. And it's hard to get flames right."

Afterwards, while Tyler was in the bathroom, Brent stepped in front of her before she could hurry to the next patient. "Who are you?" he'd asked.

"Excuse me?" She'd pulled back, offended, but finally giving him a real once-over. He had a look about him, a sort of quiet charisma. Dark hair with streaks of silver, intense dark eyes, an intensity she found...well, sexy.

"I'm a trained trauma nurse working as the nurse on call tonight. Who are you?"

A flash of surprise. Was she supposed to know who he was, other than Brent Caldwell, father of Tyler?

"No, I mean, really who are you? What was that story? Did that really

happen? Did you grow up here?"

She frowned at him, her naturally wary nature responding to these unusual questions. "What does that have to do with anything? I assure you I'm fully competent to treat your son."

"Of course you are." He dismissed that comment with a wave of his hand. Still watching her with those deep, penetrating eyes. He waited patiently for her to answer. Something about his close attention drew words from her.

"I grew up here, yes. It really happened, yes. Well, most of it."

He raised his eyebrows.

"The bully got a call from his mother telling him dinner was ready," she admitted. "He left and I came out from under the dock and climbed up the ladder. The next time I saw him I put superglue in his hair. I figured you probably didn't want that particular ending."

A smile slowly spread across his face. "No firefighters?"

"Nope."

"You didn't get in any trouble?"

"I did not. I rode my bike home and I was dry before I got there." She didn't mention that her father wouldn't have noticed if she was sopping wet unless she dripped all over one of his masterpieces. Richard Scarlett had one interest, his painting. Or maybe one and a sixteenth, to be fair. He tried when it came to Annika and Jenna. Sometimes.

"The rest was all imagination?"

Was he upset that she'd embellished the story for his son? Was that crossing an ethical line? "Sorry."

"No. No sorries. You should be exactly as you are."

She was so surprised she didn't answer. Which gave him the chance to ask for her number. He didn't come up with any kind of Tyler-related excuse. He just asked if he could keep in touch.

Even more amazing—she said yes. She gave him her number. She didn't

do that kind of thing very often at all. She tended toward short-term entanglements with Lake Bittersweet guys she'd known all her life. Men who wouldn't take too much time or attention. But there was something about the way Brent Caldwell held himself—confident but not domineering. Interested but not clingy. Straightforward but not simple. She found him intriguing in the extreme.

“I don't have a lot of time for a social life,” she warned him as she put her number in his phone.

He smiled slightly and sent her a text so she had his number too. It pinged, but she didn't read it until later, after they'd left.

You're spectacular, the text said.

Annika glanced at the clock mounted on the clinic wall. That always felt like the “official time.” According to the clock, there were twenty-four hours to go before she saw Brent Caldwell again. Should she buy a new outfit? Cut her hair? Try to look more like someone that a billionaire would be interested in?

“You should be exactly as you are,” he'd said to her that first night. But so much had changed since then. She'd learned who he was, for one thing. Brent Caldwell of Caldwell Industries, one of the leading eco-tech firms in the world. Not just a billionaire, but a concerned citizen.

And a widower. He'd lost his wife when Tyler was three. Car crash. She'd looked up all the details online, and her heart had broken for him and his son. Since then, he'd buried himself in his work. She'd found very few mentions of any new women in his life. Mostly he escorted his sister or a cousin to big charity events and so forth.

They'd also exchanged thousands of texts. He knew more about her past, her childhood, her sister, her nephews, her life in Lake Bittersweet, her job,

her eccentricity, her quirks, her bravado, her vulnerability, than any other human being alive. Communicating over text had liberated her to reveal things she didn't normally share. Maybe she'd thought she'd never actually see him in person again. He lived in Chicago, after all, not Minnesota.

But he was coming back to Lake Bittersweet for the holidays. He'd booked the same palatial estate, Sans Souci, because despite their boat fire, the two Caldwells had loved their time here. She was going to see him again. Soon. Twenty-four hours soon. Holy smokes.

"Mom, look!"

Annika glanced up to see her nephew Zack jumping into the air in an attempt to swipe at the mistletoe. He missed.

"Let me try!" His younger brother, known to everyone as Bean, mimicked his jump, but missed by even more. Annika winced as he nearly face-planted on the clinic floor. Jenna plucked him by the back of his jacket just in time. She was so used to saving him from disasters that she barely registered the moment.

"Boys, leave the mistletoe alone," Jenna told them. "Don't you know it's Auntie Annika's favorite holiday tradition?" Her younger sister gave her a sunny wink and a smile. She wore a bright pink hat over her blond hair; it perfectly matched her wind-flushed cheeks.

The boys spotted the train set under the Christmas tree, and raced each other to it.

Annika presented her own version of a sunny smile to Jenna. "Oh come on, you know my favorite holiday tradition is drinking all the mulled wine and trying to decide if I should call Mom."

Jenna made a sympathetic face. "Can I save you some time and say 'no, don't bother?'" Her glance fell to Annika's phone next to her on the desk. "Are you already trying?"

"No, no. That's..." Annika quickly turned the phone over. She'd only given Jenna a few hints and oblique references to her communications with

Brent. Honestly, she wasn't sure what to say about all that. And Jenna had her own stuff going on. Annika was almost entirely sure that she and her ex-husband, Billy Cooper, were tiptoeing toward getting involved again. "Someone else."

"Uh huh."

Annika hurried to change the subject. "What's up? Is someone sick?"

"I was just wondering if you'd thought about the Helping Hands dinner."

Jenna and Billy wanted her to attend an event in Minneapolis tomorrow night. As a baseball star, Billy supported a number of charities, Helping Hands among them. But Annika had no intention of being out of town on the night that Brent arrived.

Unless it was to flee the country out of sheer nerves.

Which she wasn't going to do because despite her worries, she couldn't wait to see Brent in person again.

"Sorry. Nothing to wear. Only night off. How about I hang with the boys?"

Jenna narrowed her gray eyes at her. Annika and Jenna didn't look much alike, except for their eyes. But Annika had deep brown hair to go with the moonlight gray, while Jenna was all sunshiny blond.

"There's something else, isn't there?" Jenna asked suspiciously.

"What do you mean?"

"You tell me."

"Oh for Pete's sake. I'm working here." Annika made a show of pecking at the computer keys.

"Definitely something else," Jenna muttered, before she went to corral the boys.

Annika got halfway to her feet, then sank back down in her chair. Light-headed. The same thing had happened yesterday, and the week before. Low blood sugar, no doubt. Overworked. Underslept. Overexcited. Under-relaxed.

Was it too late to book a trip to a quiet beach for Christmas? Every time

she thought about Brent coming, her heart raced. She couldn't remember ever feeling this much anticipation about seeing a man. It was almost scary. Was he going to meet her sister, her family? What if the magic was gone? What if their entirely virtual relationship couldn't withstand a collision with reality? How crushed would she be?

She filled her lungs with oxygen and rose to her feet. Steady, this time. She was fine. Nervous, but fine. After a quick glance at Jenna and the boys, still playing with the train, she slipped under the mistletoe again.

Okay, a wish. Fine. My wish is that things go well with Brent...or at least not be a total disaster.

two

Brent Caldwell gazed out the window of his private helicopter, a Sikorsky S-76 with cream leather seats, as it descended toward the tiny town scattered along the shores of Lake Bittersweet. The center of the town twinkled with lights, like a thousand fireflies glowing in the dusk. Other lights spread along the curve of the lake, fewer and fewer of them, until they stopped at the far side, where protected wilderness began.

One of those lights was Annika's clinic. Another was Annika's house, or rather, Jenna's house, where both sisters lived. Yet another was the converted barn where Annika had grown up and where her hermit genius artist father, Richard Scarlett, lived. And then there was Annika's high school, her elementary school, her favorite coffee shop, the bookstore where she spent hundreds of dollars every year, the community indoor pool where she swam laps because she didn't like cold water, the new yoga studio that she was trying out...and so on and so forth. The entire town was saturated with Annika, at least for Brent.

He'd soaked in every detail that she'd shared over the past five months. From the very first moment he'd seen her, he'd wanted to know everything about her. His curiosity about the stunning woman in scrubs was voracious. And it hadn't faded since then. To him, everything associated with Annika had magic to it. And that included the entire town of Lake Bittersweet,

possibly even the whole state of Minnesota.

His pilot worked the controls to steer them toward the GPS coordinates of Sans Souci. As soon as they landed, Gordo would be free until after Christmas. Brent had invited him to stick around, but also offered to pay for his transportation somewhere else, since he'd basically be stranded in Lake Bittersweet.

Susie had taught him that sort of thoughtfulness. Until he'd met and married her, he'd been an oblivious overly wealthy guy who didn't consider things like his pilot's holiday plans. But Susie did, and after she'd died, he'd vowed to carry on that legacy so that Tyler wouldn't grow up to be an oblivious overly wealthy guy like his father.

What would Susie think of Annika? They were two entirely different personalities. He imagined that Susie would probably be fascinated by Annika's strength, her independence, her singular personality. For sure, Susie would like the way Annika had connected with Tyler.

"He needs people who don't treat him like some kind of crown prince," she'd always said.

Brent couldn't imagine the irreverent Annika treating anyone like that, even an actual crown prince. That was one of the first things he'd noticed about her. There was a leveling quality to her gaze—equal meeting equal—that he didn't see very often.

Granted, she hadn't known who he was. But she'd found out since then, obviously, and her tone hadn't changed at all. No one could tease him out of a work cave like she could. No one could call him out on his rich-dude privilege, as she called it, like she could. All it took was a lighthearted text.

Are you speaking rich-dude right now? I'mma need a translator. Does Google speak rich-dude?

Sure, but it doesn't translate to the common folk.

He could dish it right back, always knowing that she'd take it in stride.

I knew it! The matrix is rigged.

The helicopter descended farther toward the eastern shore of the lake, where the summer homes were located. The time he and Tyler had spent at Sans Souci was seared into his memory as if something fateful had happened there.

And something had.

It sure wasn't the bland and forgettable family reunion. He'd mentally tuned out of that because he still got pitying glances from his distant relatives, not to mention endless suggestions for introductions and setups.

No, everything had changed after he'd smelled smoke creeping from the inboard engine cavity of the Sans Souci speedboat.

He peered down at the gray rippled surface of the lake. Right there, in the very center, that's where it had happened.

He and Tyler had driven the boat to the middle of the lake to get as far as possible from the light pollution. They'd been flat on their backs on the bow deck, tracing constellations in the night sky.

When he'd smelled the smoke, he'd scrambled to his feet and climbed down to the open main deck where the fire extinguisher was mounted next to the steering wheel. But it was too late for that. Flames were already filling the cabin, blocking his path—not that one fire extinguisher would do much good anyway.

The next few moments had been sheer terror. Get Tyler back into his life preserver. Curse himself for letting him take it off for the stargazing. Put on his own life jacket, then grab Tyler's hand. "We'll jump together. On three."

He'd jumped, but Tyler had yanked his hand away, too freaked out to follow suit. His glasses were gone, and he couldn't see right, and he was paralyzed on the deck, crying.

That had been the worst part. Treading water, yelling at Tyler to jump, watching those flames leap higher and higher. He had to get Tyler away from the boat. It might blow up at any moment.

Finally, Tyler had jumped and Brent had been able to snag his jacket and

drag him farther away from the boat. There in the center of the lake, they were as far as it was possible to be from any part of the shore. Tyler clung to Brent, who was desperately treading water, trying to not get dragged under.

Thank God for the firefighter who had swum out to help them, and then the woman who had kayaked from the shore to give Tyler a lift. He honestly didn't know if they would have survived otherwise. Jason Mosedale and Kendra Carter. He owed them everything.

Afterwards, Brent had donated half a million dollars to the local volunteer fire department, since Jason had refused it himself.

But before that...he'd met Annika Scarlett.

"Met" wasn't exactly the right word. "Set eyes on"? "Gazed upon while struck speechless"? "Fell for at first sight"? All of the above.

He'd never experienced anything like it. There was a French term, *coup de foudre*. A lightning bolt of instant love. That was what had happened to him. Out of the blue. Love at first sight.

Nothing in his life had prepared him for it. Not his first infatuation with the gardener's daughter. Not his high school girlfriend, nor his college girlfriend. Not his perfectly lovely marriage to Susie. Certainly not any of the lackadaisical dinner dates he'd gone on since Susie's death.

Nope, his reaction to Annika was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. *Love at first sight*. Or maybe it was love at the first sound of her husky voice speaking so gently to his son. Or maybe even the first whiff of her scent. Bananas, of all things. Because of her hand lotion.

Now that he knew her better, he didn't think of it as love at first sight anymore. It was love *at last*. This was it. His last chance, his only chance at love. Annika Scarlett held his entire heart and his entire future in her hands. And she had no idea. He hadn't told her how much she meant to him. A conversation like that had to happen in person. There wasn't any emoji in the world that could express it.

That was why he was going back to Sans Souci. He had it all planned out.

First, he needed Tyler to spend a little more time with Annika before he sprung his proposal on her. Annika probably needed some time with Brent himself as well. She kept joking that seeing each other in person might be one of those crushing disappointments like reading a book everyone raved about, but left you cold.

He knew she was hiding a real worry behind her jokes. That was what Annika did. She was full of bravado, always putting on a front of pure confidence and certainty. She was used to relying on herself, accustomed to being the strong one other people relied on.

That was yet another thing that drew him to her. He was used to people relying on *him*. But she didn't want that. In fact, the thought scared her.

If you only trust yourself, no one will let you down. That's my motto.

Dumb motto, if you asked him. It wasn't even true. *You can let yourself down, can't you?*

You mean like the time I took a bus all the way to Colorado to see my mother, then chickened out and went home?

Exactly. What if someone had gone with you?

Then there would have been two wasted round-trip Greyhound tickets.

There was another obstacle. A big one. Annika wasn't a "romantic" person, or at all sentimental. She was skeptical when it came to love. Would she even believe that he'd fallen in love with her at first sight? She'd probably check him for a fever and make him chicken soup.

He caught sight of the expansive clearing where Sans Souci was located. The Tudor-style house sat on a rise, close enough to the shoreline to offer up a magnificent view. Smoke curled from one of the chimneys. It could have been a postcard. *Winter by the lake*. The helicopter circled the area as Gordo debated the flattest spot to land.

Brent was a problem solver. That was his biggest skill in the business world. But this situation with Annika was different. How could he win over a woman who was so self-reliant, so unromantic? The challenge wasn't getting

her to allow him into her life. He was already in it; that was what a hundred texts a day did. But he wanted more.

If all it took was money, he'd be set. There was a ring tucked inside his luggage. Ethically sourced diamonds, emeralds because they were her birthstone, exquisite custom craftsmanship by a jeweler in the village in Italy where the Scarlett family had come from.

But Annika wasn't likely to be impressed by an impeccable ring. That was why he'd planned a more unconventional type of proposal. All of her favorite things would be involved...Beatles music. Marzipan. Sparklers. Deep-roast coffee with about half a cup of cream.

If she didn't want to "need" him, maybe she could agree that she *wanted* him. That would be plenty. Anything that would lead her to a, "Yes, Brent, I will be your partner in this wild thing called life. I will marry you and be by your side and you will never be lonely again because we are meant to be together, it just took me longer to see it than you with your crazy love-at-first-sight thing. Sure you don't want some soup?"

The helicopter's skids touched down. Only a little snow had fallen so far, leaving pockets of sparkling white scattered in the winter-brown grass. Back in Lake Bittersweet, where a boat fire had woken him up and the sight of Annika Scarlett had turned him upside down.

More than anything, he was afraid he wouldn't have the right skills to win Annika's heart. Without her, his life would be as flat as the frozen ground of the Sans Souci estate.

Under the portico, the front door opened and Soraya, Tyler's nanny, stepped out, shivering in the cold. Gordo had brought Soraya here a day earlier so she and Mallory, the temporary cook, could get the house ready. Her electric-blue extensions were piled on her head and a long scarf kept her neck warm. She gave them an excited wave. Both he and Tyler adored Soraya for her exuberance and unconventional ways.

"Think I'll stay the night," Gordo said over the headphones as the blades

slowed. “Just got word of a storm coming. I’ll sit tight until it passes.”

“Stay as long as you want,” Brent told him. “How bad of a storm?”

“Hard to say, but there’s gonna be snow and lots of it.”

Brent put an arm around Tyler, who was already unbuckling his seat belt. Last summer, Tyler had come alive here in Lake Bittersweet. Would it have the same magic in the winter? “Ready, Ty? What do you want to do first? Sit by the fire? Drink some hot cocoa?”

“I want to build a snow fort,” he said as he stared wistfully out the window. “Will there be enough snow?”

“If this storm update is right, there’ll be enough for a whole army base,” said Gordo. He swung out of the cockpit and opened up the hatch. “We got here just in time.”

As Brent stepped onto the hard ground, he looked up at the sky. It sure did look gray and foreboding. He hoped the storm would hold off until tomorrow, when Annika wouldn’t be taking care of her nephews anymore. If he was going to get snowed in, he’d rather be with Annika than anywhere else in the world.

three

Annika adored her nephews, but she couldn't help wishing they were just a little bit older—old enough so she could skip out for a few minutes and race around the lake for a quick reunion with Brent.

But Bean was only six, and Zack wasn't quite mature enough to keep him out of trouble if no adult was around. He couldn't even keep himself out of trouble. As the snow fell in thick curtains outside the house, Zack had put on his ski goggles and jumped out of a closet to scare Bean, who skidded on a throw rug and plopped onto his butt.

“Zack, that was very uncool. Apologize to your brother.”

“It was just a joke!”

“Is anyone laughing?”

“You are!”

That was because she'd just gotten a text from Brent. *This snowstorm is messing with my game.*

And she'd texted back, *Billionaire cockblocked by storm, news at 11.*

They were both laughing, or at least it felt that way. Even though they were still physically apart from each other, his texts *felt* closer. After all, he was experiencing the same surprise snowstorm she was. Their worlds were approaching each other, almost touching, but not quite.

That light-headed sensation returned, stronger this time. She sucked in

oxygen and ignored it.

“Apologize,” she insisted to Zack, who did so, then crawled back into the blanket fort.

They’d spent the first part of the evening building that fort, then had moved on to *Lilo and Stitch*. Since she often worked nights, she relished the chance to spend an evening with her nephews.

But as the snow kept piling up outside, she was starting to worry. The weather forecaster kept upping the inches that might fall. This happened sometimes around here; a storm system could get stalled out and just park overhead, dumping snow as if trying to rid itself of a burden before moving on.

“Can we go play in it?” Bean asked, joining her at the window. The lights from the living room lit up the thickly falling snow outside. The flakes were as big as creamy flower petals cascading from the sky.

“Not yet, sweetie. It’s dark outside. I might lose you in all that snow.”

Which was just the kind of thing that might happen with the accident-prone Bean.

“Are Mommy and Daddy in the snow?”

“They made it to Minneapolis just fine. They’re probably eating rubber chicken and plastic Brussels sprouts by now.”

“Rubber chicken? Yuck.”

“It’s a thing people say when the chicken isn’t very good.”

The lights flickered. She looked down at Bean, who gazed up at her with wide eyes. Then she ran to grab some candles and a lighter from the utility drawer in the kitchen.

“Zack,” she called. “Come out of that fort and help me get a fire going. If the power goes out we need a backup.”

The propane heater needed power to operate. There was a generator on the back porch that she could start up if an outage went on for a longer time. But that rarely happened; generally the power company was able to get things

back up and running before too long.

On the other hand...so much snow...coming down so fast...how would the repair crews get through the snow if there was a problem? They wouldn't. They'd have to wait for the snow to slow down along with everyone else.

The lights kept on flickering while she and Zack got a fire going in the woodstove. She closed the damper, not wanting to heat the house up too much while the heater was still going. She was already feeling overheated herself, although she noticed a shiver from Bean.

Did he have a cold? Or did she have a fever? She put the back of her hand to her forehead, then decided she didn't have time to self-diagnose right now. They needed to take down the blanket fort.

"We might need these blankets tonight," she told the kids as they deconstructed the elaborate creation. "I remember when we ran out of heating fuel at our house when I was little. Your mom and I slept under a huge pile of blankets that night."

And for several days afterwards, until the Hermit, as they called their father, had gotten more fuel delivered.

"In the castle by the lake?" Bean asked eagerly. "Can you tell us more stories tonight?"

"Of course."

Her head throbbed. God, was she getting a headache now? She wondered if there was any adult Tylenol in the house. There was plenty of the kid stuff, but she and Jenna rarely got sick.

She fired off a quick text to Galen Cooper, her ex-brother-in-law's brother. "Prepping for a long night over here. I could use—" Before she could even finish the text, the cell service cut out. *Failed to deliver.*

She tried Brent next, just in case it was a problem on Galen's end, and got the same message.

Her heart dropped. She wasn't worried so much about her text to Galen—she'd really just been checking in—but now she couldn't communicate with

Brent. For some reason, that left her feeling absurdly anxious. After all this time, he was a fixture in her life, a constant source of joy and connection right in her phone.

She crossed to that old artifact, the land line, which was a wall-mounted relic that no one ever called. The sound of the dial tone made her whoosh out a breath of relief. At least they had a way to communicate in case of emergency.

Whew. It sure was hot in here. She put a hand to her forehead. Sweat. Heat. Why did she feel like she was existing in a swamp?

“Zack, can you make sure that damper’s closed?” she called to him. She was pretty sure she’d closed, it, but now she couldn’t remember. Zack seemed to be very far away. She narrowed her eyes at him. His shock of blond curls was hurting her eyes. What was going on with her vision? Was it the wood smoke?

Another flickering of the lights...or was it her eyes? And then the room plunged into darkness.

“Auntie Annika!” cried Bean. “Where are you?”

She stumbled in the direction of the chair where she’d left the pile of candles. The glow of the woodstove provided some illumination, enough so she could find a fat, squat candle that would burn for a long time. Next, the lighter, which she’d put in her pocket.

Light flared in two places, lighter and wick, but then there were four lights, then sixteen, and she hadn’t even touched another candle.

Something’s wrong. With you.

Her nurse’s training kicked into gear. Something was wrong with her, and she was going to need help. *Put the candle down. Now.*

With a trembling hand, she placed the candle on the chair next to the others. Fire hazard. She blew it out.

“Auntie Annika?” Even Zack’s voice sounded scared. But they could all see a little bit because of the woodstove. It had a glass window so you could

watch the flames safely trapped inside a cast-iron box.

Cell phone. Call for help. No service. Right. *Hell*. The landline. Get back to the landline. But she couldn't move. Something was happening to her body.

Hot. She was so hot. She croaked out a word. "Zack."

He ran over to her, looking more scared than she'd ever seen him. She forced words from her mouth as stars danced at the edge of her vision. Even though her body and vision were failing her, one thought was crystal clear. Brent was her best bet because he had a different cell service provider and he was on the other side of the lake. He might not have service either, but he was the best option right now. Even better than nine-one-one, because they were going to be swamped. Brent had resources. He made things happen. He would do whatever she needed.

In this split-second of crisis, she knew that all the way to her core.

"Phone. Brent, at the top. Call him. Use the landline."

"What?"

The stars closed in, but she pushed them away. *Not yet*. "Call Brent. Get help. Take my phone." Her lips were numb and tingly. Pain lanced through her head.

She went rigid. Spasms gripped her hard. Her neck arched back. Her knees locked. She felt out of control, helpless in her own body.

And then it was as if she was looking down at herself as she crashed to the floor like a tree that had just been chainsawed. A thud. A groan. Was that her? She was starting to black out. Darkness raced toward her. She fought against it with every fiber of her being. She was watching the boys for the night and a storm was hitting. Going unconscious wasn't an option.

With her last bit of energy she forced open her fingers to drop her phone so Zack could take it. And then it was over. She'd done all she could. The world went dark. It was all up to Zack and Brent now.

four

Annika was supposed to be waiting in the car, but it was so pretty outside. Everything was sparkling as if a winter queen had scattered glitter over the entire land. She opened the door and slipped outside, laughing at the soft greeting of snowflakes landing on her cheeks. She loved winter for so many reasons, but most especially because that meant it would be Christmas soon.

Mommy was already Christmas shopping; that was why they'd stopped at the hardware store. Annika was very curious about what kind of Christmas presents you could buy at a hardware store. She really hoped Mommy wasn't shopping for her. All she wanted was books and ski gear, not a dumb hammer or something.

Was that why her mother had insisted that she wait in the car? She hadn't wanted Annika to come along to begin with. But Annika had saved up some money she'd made mowing a neighbor's lawn and she wanted to buy some presents too. So her mom had agreed, so long as she stayed in the car when asked to.

Annika wasn't very good at following rules, especially if they didn't make sense to her. There was no way Mommy was buying her present at the hardware store, so why should she have to wait in a car? As long as she didn't go inside the store, no harm done.

She twirled around in the snow until she got dizzy and fell into a

snowbank. Then she made a snow angel by sweeping her arms and legs out, then back. Then another, and another, until she had a happy family of four snow angels, two parents and two little girls, who she named Angela and Angelica.

The cold was finally starting to creep past her snowsuit. What was taking Mommy so long? She should probably go back inside the car and warm up. But maybe she should check on Mommy first. Sometimes she got kind of forgetful. Sometimes she didn't even get out of bed.

She'd just stay out of Mommy's sight, that was all.

Annika made a game of tiptoeing through the snow, using only other people's footprints until she reached the storefront of Lake Bittersweet Hardware. Red twinkle lights framed the window, blinking on and off, on and off.

Like warning lights. Stay out. Stay out.

But if it was a warning, Annika didn't pay attention to it. She peered over the windowsill and scanned the interior of the store for her mother. Sue Ellen Scarlett wasn't a tall woman. She wore petite sizes, and sometimes even shopped in the girls section. To Annika, her father was a kind of larger-than-life giant, but her mother was more of a fluttering fairy.

Finally she spotted someone who looked like her mother in the plumbing aisle. Same blue wool coat, same snow boots. But it couldn't be Mommy because she was kissing a man. Mommy didn't kiss men, not even her father. But she was kissing this man as if she wanted to eat him up. The man was hugging her so tightly that her feet were coming off the floor.

Feeling as if her insides had caved in, Annika ran back to the car. Not long after, her mother came out, flushed and dreamy.

Annika, who was nothing if not brave, had to ask the question. "Who was that man in the store?"

"Man?" Mommy straightened the wool beret she wore to do errands. Her smile vanished. She looked sick to her stomach, kind of like how Annika felt.

“Oh, you must mean Lance. There was some, um, mistletoe in the shop. Have you ever heard of mistletoe? You’re supposed to kiss under it.”

Annika didn’t know what mistletoe was. She’d never heard the word before. Was it like a missile? Or a missing toe? How could you kiss under a missing toe? Or a missile, for that matter? All she knew was that whatever mistletoe was, it made her stomach hurt.

Annika whimpered on the creamy leather bench seat of the Sikorsky. Across from her, Brent wondered what was she dreaming about, and why it was making her so sad. Was she in pain? She’d been floating in and out of consciousness ever since he and Gordo had flown the helo to her house to pick her up.

Gordo had some medic training from his days as an Army helicopter pilot. The two of them had crouched over Annika, out cold on the floor. He determined that her pulse was erratic but not fatally so.

Feeling her hot forehead, Brent knew she had a fever. “I’ll call the clinic where she works.”

But the harried nurse who finally answered the phone told him he’d be better off taking her somewhere else. “Everyone’s snowed in. I’m the only one here. How’d you even get through? All the cell service is out.”

So far, his phone was still working. “Where can I take her?”

“What are her symptoms?”

He described what Zack and Bean had told him about what they’d witnessed. “She’s feverish, and she seems to have had a seizure.”

“This is Annika, you said? Annika Scarlett?”

“Yes. She’s a nurse there.”

“I know, I’ve been trying to call her. Listen, you’d better take her to Minneapolis if you can manage it. We have a bacterial—” And just like that,

his cell service dropped out too.

Bacterial what? Infection? Outbreak?

Fear spread through him like its own kind of sickness. He had to get help for Annika, real medical help, immediately. She had to be okay. There was no other option.

He also had to make sure her nephews were safe too. He couldn't leave them here on their own. They were crouched on the floor next to Annika, wide-eyed and frightened.

He nodded to Gordo, who'd heard everything the nurse had said. "Do we have enough fuel?"

"Of course. I always make sure I can get back to base."

"We can fit everyone, right? With Annika on the bench seat?"

"Yeah. No problem."

"See if you can rig up a gurney while I talk to the boys."

Gordo nodded and pushed through the front door into the swirling snow outside.

Brent turned his attention to Annika's nephews—Zack, a live wire with a head of blond curls, and Bean, apple-cheeked with a gap-toothed smile that lit up the world. After swearing him to secrecy, Annika had told him that Bean's given name was Barnaby, but he'd chosen Bean at an early age. Jenna was convinced that one day, Bean would love the name Barnaby.

"Zack and Bean, you've both been so brave. You did such a good job calling me and helping your aunt. This storm could be a big one, so I want you both to stay at my house with my son Tyler and his nanny, Soraya. We have heat there, and lots of extra bedrooms, and even a cook. You'll be safe there while I take Annika to a hospital. Understand?"

"Is Auntie Annika going to be okay?" Zack looked so worried that it nearly broke Brent's heart.

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure she is. Count on it. Your parents are spending the night in Minneapolis, right? I'm going to make sure

they have a way to get to you as soon as they get back to town.”

The boys chewed this over for a few moments.

“Can we watch movies there?” asked Zack.

“That’s what the backup generator is for.”

Bean’s turn. “Can we play hide-and-seek?”

“So long as Soraya says it’s okay, it’s okay. She’s in charge.”

He didn’t know Mallory, the temp cook who’d arrived a couple days earlier. But Soraya, he trusted completely.

“Zack, can you find a pen and paper? We should leave a note for your parents for when they get back, just in case the cell service isn’t back.”

“I’ll write it!” Zack jumped to his feet and raced off to a utility drawer in the kitchen.

“Bean, can you find your winter clothes while Zack’s doing that?” From experience, it could take time for a six-year-old to get ready for an outing.

Annika stirred and muttered something. Brent turned his attention to her while Zack wrote the note. As soon as Gordo got back with a length of canvas to use as a stretcher, they all got busy getting themselves onboard the helicopter.

At Sans Souci, he shepherded the boys inside and introduced them to Tyler and Soraya. The adventure of the storm and the new surroundings—along with Soraya’s exuberant confidence—seemed to help the boys’ spirits.

Tyler was excited too, his usual shyness swept away by the storm. Brent knew that Tyler often felt lonely. Hosting two other boys of a similar age was like a dream come true for him. He was such a serious boy, as if he already knew he might one day be part of running a billion-dollar company. Brent wished he could just have fun like any kid, like Zack and Bean.

Then again, who was he to talk? Sometimes fun seemed like a foreign language. Except when he was texting or talking to Annika.

After they were underway again, Annika didn’t wake up until the helicopter was somewhere over the snowy Chippewa National Forest. The

sun was rising through the clouds, sending tendrils of bruise-like purple along the horizon.

Her deep gray eyes blinked as she took in her surroundings—the luxurious leather seats, the metal ribs and joints of the Sikorski’s interior... then him. He was watching her from a seat across from where she was stretched out.

A look of relief spread across her face. “You came.”

“Yeah. Zack called me. We’re taking you to a hospital in Minneapolis.”

She touched the headphones he’d give her for ear protection. “My head hurts. A lot.”

“You have a fever.”

“I had a seizure. I’ve never had one before. It must be some kind of infection I picked up at the clinic. There’s that boy with the headache—”

She was switching automatically into nurse mode. He couldn’t blame her, but he didn’t like the look of stress that came over her face.

“Shhh. Let’s let a specialist check you out. That’s why we’re going all the way to the Twin Cities.”

She didn’t argue, which he figured meant that she really wasn’t feeling well. It took some energy to make herself heard over the drone of the engine. “The boys?”

“They’re all together at Sans Souci. Soraya’s taking care of them. The backup generator’s going, so there’s plenty of power and heat. It’s such a big place that it will take a while for all the rooms to heat up, after being closed since the summer. But they’ll be fine.”

She relaxed back onto the seat. “Then I guess you thought of everything.”

Her tone wasn’t exactly happy; more like woebegone.

“Is that a problem?”

“It’s just...this isn’t how I imagined seeing each other again. My only wish was that it not be a total disaster. So much for that. I was picturing something a little...sexier.” Her straight dark eyebrows drew together and her

full lips pouted. Maybe she didn't find this sexy, but he wouldn't put it that way. Her magnetic attraction was just as powerful as ever, at least to him.

"Didn't you know that I've been longing for a chance to play knight in shining armor? That's sexy, if you ask me."

She screwed up her face. "Is this helicopter your shining armor? Like a transformer?"

"I was thinking of it more as a flying steed. Don't knights have steeds?"

A slight smile curved her lips. They were chapped, he realized, as if she needed water. He had a bottle somewhere. "Are you thirsty?"

She nodded. "Very."

He located his water bottle in the knapsack he'd kept with him. Gordo had unloaded everything else at Sans Souci. But when he handed it to her, he discovered that she was trembling too much to wrangle it herself. Without comment, he unscrewed the top and tilted the bottle against her lips. She drank greedily, although some water spilled down her sweater and onto the floor.

"Sorry," she gasped as she wiped off her mouth. "I don't know why I'm so weak."

He tried to hide the fact that her weakness sent sheer terror through him.

"You're still recovering from a seizure. From what the boys said, it went on for over a minute. That's exhausting. You should probably sleep some more."

She shook her head with a determined look. "No. I already slept through all the exciting stuff. Did you land this helicopter on the front lawn? How much snow was there? Is the storm still going? Was it hard to steer the helicopter in the storm? Who's the pilot?"

He laughed at her flurry of questions, but he also saw the dark circles under her eyes. She was going for bravado, as always. That was her nature. "I promise to tell you all the details, but I really think you should rest now."

"I can't rest. I'm too curious."

“Okay, then. How about this?” He passed a tender hand across her forehead, which still radiated heat. “Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a castle by the lake, and she really needed a ride.”

A blinding smile crossed Annika’s face. She’d told him about the stories she used to make up for her sister. They always began like that. “You remembered. That’s cute.”

“I’m pretty cute.”

“I wouldn’t say cute. I’d say...” She cocked her head and let her gaze travel slowly across his face and chest and arms—every part of him that she could see in their current positions. “Dreamy.”

“Dreamy?” He raised his eyebrows. “Sure about that? Most people think I could play the Beast in your average community theater production.”

“See, that’s a compliment.” She lifted her hand and touched his jawline, where the ever-present black scruff was already coming in. He usually shaved first thing in the morning so as not to frighten the world. “Don’t you know the Beast is the sexiest character of all?”

“Oh yeah? Is that how you tell the story?”

“It would be, except I usually leave out all the romantic parts. I’ve never been that sort of girl. Not since...” Her eyes were drifting shut, despite her efforts to keep them open.

“Not since when?” he asked gently. The answer very much concerned him. He knew she wasn’t a sentimental kind of person. She claimed that traditional romantic gestures left her cold. Early on, he’d wanted to send her tulips every day, but a casual comment about someone “taking the easy way out and ordering flowers” had changed that plan. She spoke often about Jenna being the romantic one, and her being the cynic.

But did her anti-romanticism mean that she couldn’t fall in love? That she didn’t want to fall in love? What was behind it? Was it part of her core nature or something she’d developed along the way?

Her eyes closed all the way, then flickered open again. “Since when

what?”

But she was seriously losing steam now and had lost the thread of their conversation. Her eyes closed, then briefly fluttered open, then closed again. “Story,” she whispered.

Right. He was supposed to be telling the story of the helicopter landing on her front lawn. But there was another story he wanted to tell her—the story that swelled in his heart.

Once upon a time there was a man who had a hole in his heart. He didn't know if anything could fill it.

But he was a problem solver, not a storyteller. He couldn't make the words come out.

Then one summer he finally agreed to a family gathering, which he'd been avoiding ever since his wife died and his heart hollowed out.

Story. She wanted a story while she fell asleep. Say something.

“Zack told me your address, and we got the GPS coordinates from that. Flying through the snow was pretty hair-raising. Gordo's got nerves of steel.”

He checked to see if she was asleep yet. Were her eyelids open in the slimmest of slits? Or was that an illusion? A slight breath of air came from her lips. Was that an attempt to speak, or simply the exhale of a woman who was now deeply asleep? He touched her shoulder and got no reaction.

“Annika,” he prompted.

No answer.

He settled back in his seat. She was asleep. His mouth felt dry, and he knew he was disappointed in himself. Would he ever be able to tell her the story of his heart?

He wondered if she was contagious. She might be, if she'd caught whatever this was from a patient at the clinic. But at this point, it was too late to do anything about that. Even if he did catch it, they were en route to the best place to get treated. They'd go through it together.

He touched his heart, that part of him that had ached with loneliness for

so long. Funny how you could spend all day with board members, employees, investors, community leaders, politicians, servers, staff, etcetera, and the night at home with a beloved son—and yet still feel alone.

Funny how that feeling only went away when a very specific and singular woman stepped into your life wearing scrubs and Keds. When she looked you in the eye with a level gray gaze and you realized that your search was over before you even knew it had begun.

“Don’t leave me, Annika,” he whispered to her. Maybe he was being overdramatic. She just had a fever, maybe some kind of infection. She’d be fine. But since losing Susie, he knew that nothing was guaranteed. “You have no idea how much I need you. Please don’t leave me.”

five

The world was doing very strange things. One minute Annika was a child again, arguing with her mother, yelling even, in a way she'd never done before. The next minute she was floating through the air in a glass bubble with a handsome prince holding her hand.

Sometimes things came into focus and she remembered that Brent was flying her to a hospital because she might have some kind of super-serious infection that the Lake Bittersweet clinic couldn't handle. She remembered a storm. A crisis. Zack and Bean being so scared and brave.

But those moments of clarity kept getting chased away by ghosts. Ghosts who ran away when she tried to talk to them.

Why did you leave? Explain it like I'm eight. Oh right, I was eight. Didn't you love me?

Papa, just give me the car keys, I'll get us to school. Of course I can drive, my friend Rick taught me, where the heck have you been? Why is that painting so much more important than us?

Don't cry, Jenna. We don't need Mommy. We have each other. It's not our fault she left, I think someone else made her love him. That's why I'm never going to fall in love, ever ever ever. I'd never leave you like Mom did. You'll probably leave first. You'll get married, you'll have a family, and I'll be all alone...forever...just me and a bunch of paintings that didn't sell...

Annika came awake, gasping and shaking with chills. She was in a hospital exam room; she recognized the smell immediately. An IV was dripping fluids into her veins and sensors were feeding information into monitors. A quick check told her that her oxygen level was ninety-seven percent—excellent—and her heart rate was elevated.

She put a hand to her forehead, dragging the IV line along with it. Her fever was down. Good, maybe she could think more clearly now instead of arguing with the past.

A tall figure stepped into her field of vision. She saw Brent Caldwell holding two Styrofoam cups of coffee.

She loved coffee almost more than she loved her nephews. “God, you’re a sight for sore eyes,” she told the cup as he handed it to her. “You too,” she added, aiming a cheeky smile at Brent. He looked substantially scruffier than she’d ever seen him.

Not that she’d seen him many times—strictly speaking, this was only their second meeting. Third, if you counted half-delirious on a helicopter.

“Have you noticed that we only see each other during crises?” she asked him as she struggled to sit up higher on the bed, only to find she was still pretty weak.

He put the cups on the tray table and gave her a hand. “You know what they say about crises.”

“I say either they bring people together or they make people hate each other.” She settled her back against the pillows. Now that she was more upright, she felt much better.

With a winning smile, he handed her the coffee. “You can’t hate me when I’m bringing you your favorite thing in the world. Deep roast with lots of cream.”

She took off the lid so the fragrance drifted into her nostrils like life itself. Through the steam, she eyed the thick growth covering his jaw and the shadows under his dark eyes. He looked practically piratical, extremely sexy,

and although she did adore coffee, she thought that maybe it was her second favorite thing in the room at the moment.

“This doesn’t smell like typical hospital coffee.”

“There’s a coffee shop down the street.”

“So you sent someone to get it?” She loved to tease him about his rich-dude ways.

“No, I actually walked over there myself. That’s how much I care about you.” Was that a wink? He’d really loosened up since the first time she’d met him, at the clinic. Although she’d been intrigued—obviously—she’d also thought he was pretty reserved.

“I will attempt to be worthy of that great honor,” she said solemnly. She lifted the cup in a toast, he did the same, and they both sipped their coffee. She sighed in satisfaction as the caffeine entered her system. “I’m glad they let you give me coffee. What’s in my IV? Any drugs?”

“Antibiotics for your blood infection. Hydration, nutrition. Your white blood cell count is normal now, but they want you to finish out the course. However, they’re still not sure what caused you to collapse. So far, you have them stumped.”

Her stomach knotted. The last thing she wanted to be was a medical mystery. That could get her stuck here in this hospital for who knew how long. “How long have I been here? Have *we* been here?”

“Two days.”

“Two *days*?” In her agitation, she sloshed coffee over the rim of the cup. “No no no, that’s not possible. I can’t. The boys...”

“They’re fine. Jenna and Billy are back in Lake Bittersweet. They’re all together. Jenna’s waiting for you to call as soon as you feel up to it.” He kept going, as if he knew that his voice was a kind of lifeline to reality right now. “Tyler and Zack and Bean have really bonded. They’re like a little pack of wolves running around Sans Souci. It’s great for Tyler to have some kids around his own age to play with in Lake Bittersweet. It’s exactly what I

wanted for him. They've been tromping around in the snow. They climbed into the treehouse and dumped all the snow out of it. Zack taught Tyler how to snowshoe."

"There's not much involved in snowshoeing." Her heartbeat was slowly getting back to normal, as was her sense of humor. "It's basically like walking around in the snow with clown shoes on."

"It might be easy for some, but Tyler fell on his first try. Right on top of Bean."

She chuckled. "Why doesn't it surprise me that Bean was right in the middle of that disaster?"

"He was actually thrilled that he wasn't the one who fell. At least that's how Tyler tells it."

Annika took another sip of her coffee. Her lips felt dry and chapped, and the coffee gave her an acidic feeling in her stomach. "I feel bad that you're here instead of with him. This is his Christmas break."

Brent settled one hip onto the bed. She moved her leg to give him space, but kept it close enough so she could still feel his body. Its solid weight gave her comfort.

"He's having the time of his life. Besides, we'll be back in plenty of time for Christmas."

"We?"

"Yeah. We." His deep eyes held hers. "You don't think I'd just leave you, do you? I'm in this until they send you on your way. My pilot Gordo's happy to get some extra time here. He has a cousin who lives in Minneapolis."

All of a sudden she felt like crying. Which was very unlike her, and very unsettling. "That's very nice of you."

Did that sound too stilted? Too formal? She generally wasn't good at gracefully expressing emotion. Even though she felt things deeply, she tended to sound sarcastic, thanks to what she thought of as "resting bitch voice."

“I shouldn’t have dragged you into this. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Dragged?” All of a sudden Brent’s face went dark and almost forbidding. “There isn’t anywhere on this planet I’d rather be right now. If you hadn’t called me, I’d be here anyway.”

His intensity sent a deep thrill through her. She wanted to dissolve in his lap in a puddle of sobs. But that wasn’t her. She didn’t cry, especially with a man she found so wildly attractive.

“If I hadn’t called you, I’d still be in Lake Bittersweet. You’d be sitting here on an empty hospital bed.”

He smiled at her as if he knew she was deflecting from the potential sweetness of the moment. “The point is, I’m here for you. If you were hanging out at, I don’t know, the sewage plant, I’d be there.”

She laughed, since as far as she knew, Lake Bittersweet didn’t have one of those. “Mostly we have our own septic systems.”

“Is it always this hard to get mushy with you?” He held up a hand. “Don’t answer that. I know already.”

Surprising both of them, a half-sob erupted from her. She put a hand over her mouth in shock, but there was no undoing it. He waited, those deep eyes scanning her face, his wide shoulders angled toward her, offering patience, protection, the sharing of burdens.

When she had a grip on herself, she dropped her hand into her lap. He took hold of it, engulfing it in warmth.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I’m all over the place. I...I’m scared. Of...” She waved a hand at the monitors. “Of this.”

Whoa...it was true, but she hadn’t known it until the very moment it came out of her mouth.

“I thought they’d know what was wrong with me by now. It freaks me out that they don’t. If it was something simple like meningitis or some form of epilepsy, they would have figured it out by now.”

He didn’t argue with her, but he didn’t join her in her panic either. “The

doctor said they have quite a few more avenues to explore. They say that you're in excellent health, overall. I know it's scary, but we're in the right place to get answers. I did some research and this hospital has an excellent neurology department."

It occurred to her that he wasn't even a family member. "How did they even let you come in here? I'm still in the ICU, right? Isn't it family only?"

He winced. "I was afraid you'd ask that. They think we're engaged. I also offered to fund a research project into whatever it is they diagnose you with."

Biting her lip to hold back her laughter, she said, "So you used lies and bribery? Rich-dude style?"

"No, worried-dude style."

Sweet, she had to admit. She wasn't mad about any of it, but it was fun to tease him. It made her feel like herself again.

"How did you even sell them on us being engaged? I don't see a ring on this finger." She waved her hand in the air and then froze.

There was a ring on her finger. The most beautiful ring she'd ever seen. Was that a real diamond? And two breathtaking green gems on either side of it? Were those real emeralds? She'd never seen a real emerald before, but she loved green, the color of forests, of healing, of spring, of growth. Where had this ring come from?

"Did you go out to the nearest jewelry store and buy a fake ring? Or did you have one waiting in your back pocket? I'm not sure which is crazier."

He showed no reaction that she could see, other than a slight tightening of his jaw. "Who keeps a ring in their back pocket?" he said lightly. "That would be very uncomfortable."

She lifted her eyebrows, glanced at the ring, blinked because it was so beautiful, then looked back at him. "So you went shopping?"

"I had to show them something to convince them to let me in."

That didn't exactly answer the question, but she let it go. They probably weren't real diamonds anyway, although it sure was beautiful. "I don't

usually wear rings because I'm always putting gloves on and off. I kind of like it. I'd better keep it on, right?"

"Probably best, unless you want them to kick me out." His tentative smile suggested he didn't think that was out of the question.

Impulsively, she put a hand on his leg. "Of course I don't want that. I'm so happy you're here. Thank you so much, Brent. Really, I don't know how this would have gone without you. I don't want to think about it."

She pictured herself sprawled on the living room floor, Bean crying next to her. Staggering outside and falling into a snowbank. Making it to her car and crashing into a tree. Instead this incredible man had managed to whisk her to a hospital and even bring her coffee.

Her heart overflowed in a gush of wonder. She leaned forward and placed her hands on his shoulders. His sweater was so soft, black cashmere maybe, and his muscles underneath so hard. Pulling him toward her, she parted her lips, only to remember at the last second that she didn't know what was wrong with her yet. She could very well be contagious. So she veered to one side of his mouth and planted a kiss next to it, right where dark scruff met exposed skin.

Even that contact sent hot prickles of desire through her.

How sick could she be if she wanted him this desperately?

"I don't want to get you sick," she murmured against his cheek.

"Believe me, if it's contagious, I probably already have it. But the doctors don't think it is. Otherwise you'd be in quarantine."

She laughed. "On that romantic note..."

"On that romantic note," he agreed, and lifted her chin in his hand. With no hesitation, he claimed her mouth in a firm, this-is-happening kiss.

This is happening.

Oh yes, it was. During their months of texting, she'd imagined kissing him. She'd imagined much more than that, wondering what his lean body looked like without clothes and if his confidence carried into the bedroom.

The reality of kissing him blew all of her fantasies out of the water.

She loved how he took charge in such a matter-of-fact way, as if he knew she was still shaky and needed someone to take over. She loved the way he savored her mouth, and the way his tasted. Sweet flesh and bitter coffee. Light and intense at the same time, like a dappled forest stream she could drink from forever.

An “ahem” from the foot of the bed interrupted them. They jumped apart. Annika’s heart hammered as she touched her fingers to her lips. They still tingled with a bright sparkling sensation.

“I see you’re feeling better,” said the doctor drily. A middle-aged Black man with salt-and-pepper hair, he wore a white coat with an ID tag that named him as Dr. Colt from the Neurology Department.

“That’s a good sign, right? Can I go home now?” Annika answered. She felt no embarrassment to be caught kissing Brent. She was too exhilarated for that. Shooting a glance at him, she saw that he was easing himself off the bed, angling his body to shield a large bulge from the doctor.

“It’s better to feel up for a kiss than not,” he agreed, which didn’t totally answer her question. “I will say go easy on the coffee, though. We don’t want an adrenaline overload.”

“If coffee was the problem, I’d be long dead,” she told him.

“Fair enough.”

“Do you have any more news for us?” Brent asked. He’d managed to collect himself and stood, tall and commanding, behind the tray table where no one could see his crotch.

She wanted to laugh, but at the same time, the doctor’s expression was making her nervous.

“We’ve managed to rule a few things out. It’s not epilepsy or a virus. The streptococcus blood infection has cleared. That’s good news.”

“And the bad news?” asked Annika. She’d been a nurse long enough to know that doctors always went with the good news first, because the bad

news had a way of obliterating everything that came after.

“It’s not really bad news, per se. We just still don’t know exactly what’s going on. I’d like you to stay for some more tests. You show signs of exhaustion, so a few days of rest could help a lot. We also need a more extensive family history. Your, um, fiancé here,” he glanced at Brent, “didn’t seem to know much.”

A family history? Her heart sank. While she knew everything about Jenna’s medical history, that was where it ended. Her father wasn’t a talker, or a listener, and if he’d paid any attention to his family’s medical history, she’d eat her coffee cup. As for her mother...no clue.

Sure, she could try to call. She knew Sue Ellen’s most recent phone number, though she could have a different one by now. But the thought made that acid feeling return to her stomach.

“Well, Brent knows about the same amount that I do,” she said brightly. “So we’ll need to go a different direction. Maybe some DNA testing, past lives regression, crystal divining? Those would all be more helpful.”

As if looking for help, Dr. Colt glanced at Brent.

“We’ll talk it over,” Brent murmured, sounding for all the world as if he was actually her fiancé and had any kind of say in this.

“Good. I’ll swing by later. I’ve scheduled an MRI and a CT scan as well. We’ll get those done while we get the crystal set up for divining.”

He flashed a grin and left the room.

Good thing, because Annika felt like throwing fire bombs at someone. Anyone.

She turned on Brent. “What was that?”

“What?”

“*Talk it over?* You think I should call my mother?” She knew it wasn’t Brent’s fault, but she was scared and cornered and tired.

“Hey, I know things are weird with her, but if it helps—”

“It’s my choice. No one else’s.”

He threw up his hands in a “I’m staying out” gesture. Good. She’d made her point, and he’d understood it.

But that didn’t seem to make her feel better. She jabbed a finger in his direction. “If I never talk to my mother again, it’s no one’s business except mine.”

“Agreed.”

“So butt out.”

“I’m out.”

But as soon as he said that, she realized that she didn’t want him out. She wanted him in. She wanted him *with*. With *her*, all the time. She never wanted him to leave. And she was probably driving him away with every ungracious word she said. She wouldn’t blame him if he got up and left right now. What was wrong with her? Why was she seesawing all over the place? She’d never felt these crazy things before. She must be really ill.

And then she did something she hadn’t done since fourth grade, when she’d tripped on the sidewalk and sprawled face first on the concrete...then used the opportunity to cry about her mother.

She burst into tears.

six

As they walked out of the Lake Bittersweet clinic, Tyler was back to his normally quiet but cheerful self. His clothes were mostly dry, as was his nut-brown hair, which really needed a trim, Brent realized. It kept getting in his eyes now that his glasses were gone.

His cousin Ellie was on her way to pick them up, but she'd texted that she was still a few minutes away. Good. That gave Brent a moment to check in with his son.

"Are you hungry?" Brent asked him. "Nothing's open at this hour, but we could swing by the gas station and pick up a midnight snack from the vending machine.

Tyler shook his head. "My stomach is full of water from the lake. I can't fit anything else in."

Brent winced, wondering if he should get the lake water tested for pathogens. Or maybe he'd just bring Tyler back in a couple of days for a follow-up. That would give him a chance to see that nurse again.

"Daddy, did you make a wish when we were looking at the stars?"

"Isn't that just for shooting stars?"

Tyler looked so disappointed that he quickly added, "Probably any wish counts when you're on the lake. What did you wish?"

"That I had a brother."

Brent was grappling with that punch in the gut when Ellie drove up in her rented Lincoln SUV and rolled down her window. “Hop in, swamp things! I brought some dry clothes for you two.” She thrust a tote bag out the window.

Brent’s clothes were still plenty damp, so he accepted the bag. “Tyler’s pretty much dry already, but I wouldn’t mind new clothes. Go ahead, Ty. I’ll duck into the clinic and change in the bathroom. You can tell Ellie everything that happened,” he added to sweeten the deal.

When Tyler was safely ensconced in the front passenger seat and launching into the tale, Brent headed back into the clinic. It was quiet at this time of night—almost midnight. No one was at the reception desk. His immediate sense of disappointment made him realize he’d really wanted to see Annika again.

Why? What was it about her? He couldn’t quite figure it out. He didn’t see her on his way to the bathroom, either. She must be busy in one of the exam rooms.

He didn’t bother to step into the single stall in the bathroom, just locked the door and quickly changed into the soft fleece drawstring pants and loose cotton shirt his cousin had sent. Immediately he felt better. The new clothes were like a signal to his brain—everything’s okay now. Crisis resolved. You’re still alive. Tyler’s still alive.

Tyler could have drowned.

It hit him like a bomb going off in his chest. Tyler could have drowned. He could have lost his only son, six years after losing his wife. He was the head of a privately held company worth two billion dollars, he lived in a luxury penthouse on Lakeshore Drive in Chicago, he had a full-time staff including a nanny, a cook, a driver, and a personal assistant. But none of that meant anything when it came to quirks of fate such as a wrong turn on a freeway or a freak engine fire on a boat.

He could have lost Tyler.

Thank you, God. Thank you. He bent over the sink, gripping the counter

tight with both hands, bowing his head as emotion racked him. He hadn't allowed himself to be affected by the fire, the rescue, or the aftermath until this very moment. He'd been doing what needed to be done, one step at a time. But now it all hit him at once.

He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling some wetness around the edges. God, he'd come so close to losing his son, the person he loved most in this world, the person he was supposed to protect and nurture. The image of Tyler's terrified face as he struggled to jump off the boat kept flashing back to him.

The fluorescent bathroom light blurred around him. A sob wrenched from his chest—just one. He was generally fairly stoic, someone who knew that life could twist you in the wind at any moment. That was how he'd carried on after Susie had died.

Had he cried? He must have, but he didn't remember it. He'd focused on keeping things together, on Tyler, on making sure his young son had all the love and support he needed.

But now...he'd almost lost Tyler and he couldn't stop shaking. He held onto that sink counter for dear life, as if the bathroom was a boat tossing on the waves. A tear dripped onto his hand. Dear God, was he crying?

He closed his eyes again, willing the upsurge of emotion to stop.

Then a hand on his back nearly made him jump out of his skin. He reared up, jerking his eyes open, and saw in the mirror that the nurse Annika stood behind him. Her deep gray eyes, so brilliant under those straight dark eyebrows, met his with a steady calm that made the room stop rocking.

"Where did you..." He looked around, confused.

"I was on the toilet." She gestured toward the partial wall that separated the toilet from the rest of the bathroom. "Not peeing or anything. I sometimes go in there to get away from everyone."

"I...sorry. I didn't know you were there."

"Don't worry, I didn't watch your striptease." A teasing smile pulled at one corner of her mouth. "I was going to tell you I was in here, but then I

thought you might be uncomfortable. So I waited. Then I heard you...are you alright?"

He addressed her reflection in the mirror, as she had his. "Yes. Guess it just all caught up with me."

"I get it. Take your time. The bathroom is yours." She took her hand away from his back. He wished she wouldn't, but it didn't seem appropriate to say so.

But then she met his gaze in the mirror again. He couldn't help but notice that they looked good together. They were both tall, and they both held themselves with a similar kind of poise. Even though he wore a simple long-sleeved shirt and she was in pink scrubs, the two of them together would draw attention in any context.

"I have a minute if you want to talk about it," she offered after a long hesitation. "But I can also get the hell out of your space if you want that."

A smile twitched at his lips. "I don't want that." But he couldn't find more words to express what was inside him. How he'd just peered over a cliff and was still teetering on the edge.

She waited a moment longer, and when he didn't say more, nodded. "Sometimes words don't really cut it, do they?"

He shook his head.

In a gesture that came across as friendly, she squeezed his shoulder. "Just know that you've been through a traumatic experience that will be with you for a while. It can help to talk about it, but only once you're ready. And don't forget, it's okay to cry. It can be a really important way to release tension and emotion."

He became very conscious of the tear that had dropped onto his hand. Had she noticed it? Crying in front of someone else—he didn't want that. Especially not someone he found as riveting and attractive as Annika.

"Not generally a crier," he told her.

"I'm not either. My sister's the crier in our family. I'm more of a suck-it-

up-buttercup type. But working here I've come to see that sometimes tears are the best and only response to a situation. Like when the vending machine runs out of Bugles and I'm stuck with mini pretzels."

How had she known that he was desperate to move the conversation away from his emotional state?

"You mean those little horn-shaped snacks? They still make those?"

"They'd better. Or I'll cry for real."

He smiled. His heart lightened. A flash of something beautiful passed between them—understanding. Connection.

"I lost my wife in an accident. Tonight I nearly lost Tyler."

The words came out of their own accord. He wanted her to know. He didn't want her to leave this bathroom until she understood why he'd been gripping onto the sink like a drowning man.

She waited for more, then gently stroked his back. "Something tells me you would have gone to the ends of the earth to make sure that didn't happen."

He would have. He fucking would have. That thought sent a different kind of energy through him. He was no longer balanced on the edge of that terrifying cliff of possibility. Instead he was planting his feet on the ground and growing tall and strong and determined.

Before he could thank Annika, someone tried to open the door of the bathroom, then knocked.

"Almost done!" Annika called. "Wardrobe malfunction. Can you come back in thirty seconds?"

After footsteps had clicked away down the hall, Annika winked at him. "Go ahead. I won't tell anyone I caught you crying in the bathroom."

He laughed, making the transformation from despair to exhilaration complete. After picking up the tote bag in which he'd stuffed his damp clothes, he paused for one more moment. "I hope we get a chance to do this again someday."

“This, specifically?” With a grin, she glanced around the space. “Crying in the bathroom?”

“Yeah. This. Not bad for a first date.”

“What...that wasn’t...I didn’t—”

She was still spluttering when he winked and slipped out the door. He didn’t care if anyone knew they’d both been in the bathroom, but maybe she did.

When he got back out to the Lincoln, Tyler was asleep in the backseat, looking perfectly fine, and Brent was on cloud nine.

“Fresh clothes make all the difference, don’t they?” said Ellie, smiling back at him as she started up the SUV.

Of course his smile wasn’t about the clothes. It was about the breath of fresh air known as Annika Scarlett.

Brent didn’t try to stop Annika from crying. She’d been right, that time in the bathroom. Sometimes tears were an important way to release tension. Sometimes they were the only way available. He scooted closer to her and rubbed her back as she buried her face in her hands.

Sure, she’d been snapping at him a moment ago. But he didn’t believe she was really angry at him. This was about something else. Fear about what was wrong with her, combined with the aftermath of the trauma of having a seizure in the middle of a storm, mixed with this new bit about her mother.

He knew that Annika and Jenna’s mother had run off with another man, and had kept her distance since then. They’d spoken with her only a few times over the years, and seen her even more rarely. Annika pretended that she’d grown used to her mother’s absence. She even claimed that she understood why she’d left. The Hermit—their eccentric genius father—had made her life impossible. And then he’d scared her away from attempting any

kind of custody claim.

Face it, Annika had texted him once. Not everyone knows how to be a parent. My sister's great at it, but I don't know where she learned.

Maybe from you, he'd texted back. Stepping into the gap.

You mean stepping into the pile of shit left behind? F that. I didn't know anything.

“Damn it,” Annika sobbed. “I can't stop. Make it stop.”

“You don't need to stop. Just let it go.”

He kept his hand on her back, wondering if he should go further. Put his arms around her? That was what he wanted to do, longed to do. But he knew how damn independent she was. Accepting his support might wreck her.

But not this time. She shifted her body down the bed so she could bury her face against his chest instead of into her own hands. He put his arms around her and drank in the presence of this beautiful, fierce, strong woman as she allowed herself to cry. This wasn't his only purpose in life—he had a son to raise, a company to run—but right now it felt like a pretty important one.

“Okay,” she finally said, straightening up in his arms. “I'm good. Sorry. I fucking soaked your sweater. You should probably take it off.”

He could tell from her tone of voice that she was trying to pull herself back from her emotional morass. Just the way he had in the clinic bathroom.

“Trying to get a look at my chest?” he teased, going along with it.

“Heck yeah.” She slid her hands under his sweater, then the t-shirt he wore underneath it. “I mean, I saw it in that photo you sent from the beach. But it was kind of blurry.”

Her touch gave him so much pleasure that he shivered. She started to pull her hands away, but he stopped her by clapping his hand over hers. “Don't stop.”

Her eyes widened as she looked up at him.

He let his deep desire for her show on his face. “I've been dreaming about

this moment for months now. Feeling you touch me. Touching you.”

She drew in a soft breath. “Go ahead then.”

His heart hammered as he moved his hands to her supple back, stroking the length of her spine up to the back of her neck, and the tender skin there. He ran his fingers through her long hair. It was glorious, that hair, a deep wood-grain brown with glimmers of bronze here and there. Thick and satiny in texture, it flowed through his fingers, then fanned out across her shoulders.

She purred a little and tilted her head back. “That feels good,” she murmured. He repeated the action, giving her scalp a little extra massage at the top.

“Does your head still hurt?” he asked.

“Not when you do that. It feels like bliss.”

When she put it that way, he wouldn’t mind doing this forever. Just resign from his company, send someone for Tyler, and spend the rest of his days giving Annika scalp massages.

“It’s my mother,” she finally said. “I got angry at her all over again. I shouldn’t have to go begging for information about my family medical history.”

He made a sympathetic sound and kept on stroking.

“Maybe it’s not exactly anger.” Her murmur was so soft he almost didn’t hear it.

“What then?” Something else must be lurking behind her usual bravado.

When she didn’t say more, he tried a different tangent. “Do you get your hair from her? Your sister’s so blond, and you have this beautiful hazelnut hair.”

“Hazelnut?”

“I don’t know. Walnut? Hickory? Pecan?”

She dissolved into laughter. “You must be hungry.”

“I am, a little. Are you?”

“No, they must be running something through my IV. But if you get some

food for yourself, I'll watch you eat it. And no, by the way," she added, "my mother's blond like Jenna. I remember her as short and wispy, as if she might blow away with the laundry on the line. I'm more like my father. Hair-wise, anyway."

From what he'd heard about Richard Scarlett, that might be one of the few things she had in common with him. Maybe her fiery spirit came from him, but he preferred to believe that was all her.

"Which reminds me," she said. "I should call Jenna. Is my phone around? Is the cell service back up?"

"It is. Everything's back up and running." He got to his feet and dug around in his backpack to find her phone. As he handed it to her, he realized that he probably should get some food. He hadn't eaten yet today, and last night he'd fallen asleep in the guest chair and forgotten to get dinner.

She palmed the phone, but didn't dial anything right away. "Thank you. I feel like I keep saying that, but that's because I'm really, really glad you're here."

Brent nodded, but didn't answer. *It's the only place in the world I want to be*, seemed like overkill.

"Go eat," she urged him. "I'll check in with Jenna and the boys. I can't wait to tell her about my fancy new ring." She waved it in the air with an elaborate wink. Should he tell her those diamonds were the real thing?

No, he'd wait until she knew that his feelings were the real thing. That this thing between them was real.

seven

For Annika, the next few days were a surreal mixture of medical ordeal and exhilarating moments with Brent. One minute she was in an MRI scanner, the next she was laughing with Brent about some story he told her about his early days as a single dad.

“I guess it’s weird to set up a video camera to prove to your kid that there’s no monsters under the bed, but it worked.”

“So the two of you watched a video taken under the bed the next day?”

“Fast-forwarded. But yeah. It was gripping. The big plot twist came when a spider crawled across the floor. We could see it because of the nightlight. Boy, did that blow his world up.”

“Oh no.” Annika dashed a tear of laughter away. “What did you do then?”

“I read him *Charlotte’s Web*. Then I personally oversaw the relocation of Spidey to the balcony. Tyler did worry about him getting too cold out there, so we did some research on what kind of conditions spiders can tolerate. He turned into something of an expert, actually. If you ask him today, he could probably name all the varieties of spiders that live in Chicago.”

“Oh wow. That’s some pretty good parenting there, Caldwell.”

“I’m glad you think so. I was scared shitless the entire time, worried I was traumatizing my kid for life. More than he already was by having only

one parent.”

“Does he remember his mom much?”

Annika was curious about Susie Caldwell, and what their marriage had been like. From what she’d gathered, they’d had a drama-free relationship but hadn’t spent a lot of time together. He was focused on the company and she was raising Tyler. They’d wanted more children, but it hadn’t happened.

“He doesn’t really say. He was barely three when she died, so he probably doesn’t remember much. Sometimes he’ll ask a question about her and I realize that she is on his mind. He wants to remember. We have several photo albums I put together for him. He looks a lot like her, actually. Wavy hair, glasses, shy smile.”

In other words, pretty much the opposite of Annika.

Not for the first time, she wondered what drew him to a small-town nurse in backwoods Minnesota. But she didn’t question it too much. She was who she was, and people either appreciated her or they didn’t. That was up to them.

The neurologist interrupted them at that point. As always, Brent offered to leave her alone, but she shook her head. She knew the importance of having someone else present when doctors delivered confusing news. It was so easy to forget the details, or focus on one piece of information and forget everything else they’d mentioned. Sure, most clinics and hospitals sent a recap of the highlights. But that only went so far.

Brent took her hand as the neurologist settled into the chair next to the bed. “Have you had any luck with that family history?” Dr. Colt asked her.

“Look, I’ve told you everything I know.” She’d passed on all the information she’d gathered when she’d gone to nursing school. Her father wasn’t answering his phone; not unusual. He had a habit of turning the ringer off when he was painting and forgetting to switch it on again.

As for her mother, she’d finally, after much internal struggle, called the last number she had for her. No one had answered, and no voice mail had

picked up. She didn't even know if it was the right number.

“How about extended family? Aunts, grandparents, cousins, that sort of thing?”

“I got hold of my father's sister in Indiana. She said she's never heard of anyone in the family having seizures, and everyone's completely normal in every way except my father. He's a freak of nature. Her words, not mine.”

The doctor nodded wearily. “Keep trying, okay? Any information we can get could be helpful. In the meantime, we're going to move you into another wing.”

“The hopeless case wing?”

Dr. Colt shook his head at her attempt at humor. “The no-longer-an-emergency wing. It's a promotion.”

“But I could have another seizure?”

“We think it's unlikely. Your bloodwork is much better. But without a confirmed diagnosis, I can't guarantee that you won't.”

As he left, she looked to Brent with a sense of growing despair, only to find him grinning at her. “Freak of nature, huh? Looking forward to meeting him.”

“You want to meet my father? The legendary and utterly antisocial Hermit Artist of Lake Bittersweet?”

“Of course. I know just how to win him over.”

“How's that?”

“Two words. Art collector.”

She burst into laughter, because he was completely right about her father's priorities.

It was amazing how Brent knew just how to distract her from feeling miserable.

After two days in the ICU, Annika was more than happy to transfer to a regular room. The nurses took her off the IV and inserted a port in her arm instead. That gave her some independence, which she deeply appreciated. But

they continued to monitor her. Her low blood pressure was their main concern. In the new wing, she was encouraged to leave the bed and get some exercise every day, with the recommendation that someone be with her in case her blood pressure dropped too low.

Which meant Brent. The best part of every day was when Brent took her for a walk through the hospital, or brought her takeout from an amazing Indian restaurant nearby, or her morning coffee. He also went shopping for her and brought back underwear and comfy yoga pants and soft t-shirts and the most soothing angora sweaters she'd ever stroked a hand across.

Brent booked a hotel room close to the hospital, but he came every day. When she slept, which she did a lot, he pulled out his laptop and took care of business.

Whenever she woke up from a nap, her first thought was confusion—where was she again?—then panic—what was wrong with her?—then Brent. She'd look over to the corner of the room he'd taken over and feast her eyes on his lean body bent over his laptop. He wore reading glasses when he worked—dark tortoiseshell frames that looked absurdly sexy on him. Even though he now had a place to shave every morning, that beard shadow started early. And he always smelled so good. Whatever billionaire aftershave he used really worked for her.

After about five days of this, she woke up full of determination. Something had to change. This twilight zone hospital limbo couldn't just go on forever. The doctors and assorted specialists didn't seem any closer to figuring out what was wrong with her. This private room must be costing a fortune. And Christmas was almost here.

There was no way she was going to keep Brent away from Tyler on Christmas. Or even Christmas Eve, or Christmas Eve eve.

“Hey,” she said gently. Brent's head shot up. He closed his laptop and jumped to his feet. He stepped toward the bed and reached for her hand. The warmth of his touch flooded through her, almost as reviving as coffee.

She smiled at him, not trying to hide how grateful she was for his presence, for his existence. This experience had broken through all her layers of sarcasm and snark when it came to Brent. Sure, she could still tease him. But underneath it all, she was just endlessly grateful for him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked

“I’m feeling...I’m feeling like you should go back to Lake Bittersweet.”

He frowned down at her. “Where’s this coming from?”

“It’s coming from common sense. Your son needs you with him. It’s almost Christmas. You’re missing his entire Christmas break.”

“You know how much fun he’s having.”

“Yes.” She’d been getting regular reports from Jenna. The three boys had bonded and were having a blast. So was Jenna, in a very different way. Things were shifting with Billy, her ex-husband. Annika could hear it in her voice. She was happy for them; she’d seen both of them grow during their co-parenting life. And she’d seen how much they cared for each other—they loved each other deeply. If they got back together, she’d put all her chips on it working this time around.

But she’d also picked up some unnerving bits of town gossip regarding Billy. It made her want to get back home as quickly as possible. But she knew that wasn’t necessarily an option.

Brent, however...that was a different story.

“Tyler’s having fun, but the closer it gets to Christmas, the more he’s going to miss you. I couldn’t live with myself if you stayed any longer. I wish I could go too, but at least you should. Look at you, working in an uncomfortable hospital chair and FaceTiming with your kid when you should be...I don’t know. Decorating the tree. Skating. Stringing popcorn.”

He gazed down at her for such a long moment that she worried she’d offended him. “You really think I could enjoy stringing popcorn while you’re all alone in a hospital room?”

“I’m not all alone. There’s an entire medical establishment here to take

care of me.”

She swallowed hard. This was difficult, telling him to leave. She didn't *want* him to. The thought of him walking out the door left her breathless with anxiety.

But she could handle it. She handled most things on her own anyway. Why should this be any different?

“Besides, whether you enjoy it isn't the point. This is about Tyler.”

She felt very clear on that point. Tyler deserved to have his father with him. That had been the plan all along, until she'd suffered this ridiculous seizure.

“I could fly him here. He could stay at the hotel with me. It has a pool. He could practice his swimming.”

Brent rubbed at the back of his neck. She'd gotten to know that gesture; he used it during convos with doctors. It meant he was under stress. Other than that, she never would have known he was stressed. He generally hid his emotions well. But ever since that encounter in the clinic bathroom, she'd known that he *had* them. He had deep emotions. But he only shared them with a select few.

“You just told me what a good time he's having in Lake Bittersweet. You really want to drag him here to hang out in a hospital room with some lady he doesn't really know?”

“He knows you. You made a vivid impression on him.”

“Are you sure that wasn't you that I made an impression on?”

He gave a wry smile. “Not going to deny that.”

To make her point even more clear, she pulled the sparkling ring off her finger and tossed it back to him. “Thank you very much for the pretend ring, but I won't be needing it anymore once you go back to Lake Bittersweet.”

Showing no particular reaction, he tucked the ring into his jeans pocket. Then he held out his hand to her. “Come on. I have a surprise for you.”

“You haven't agreed with me yet.” She curled her fingers to avoid taking

his hand.

“Who says I’m ever going to agree with you?”

“Because I’m right, and you know it, and you’re smart and unselfish.”

He opened his hand, offering it again. “I’ll think about it. Don’t you want your surprise?”

Of course she couldn’t resist a surprise. But she waved off his hand. She didn’t need help getting out of bed. She just needed someone nearby in case her blood pressure dropped. It was nice to feel untethered from the IV, but upsetting that her system was still relying on external support.

They walked slowly down the hospital corridor, exchanging nods and a few words with all the staff members they passed.

“Does it feel like we moved in and we’re getting to know the neighbors?” she whispered as they rounded a corner.

He snorted. “Yeah, but there’s something weird about this neighborhood. There seems to be some kind of dress code. What’s with all the white overcoats?”

“Right? I feel so underdressed.”

“If it’s any comfort, you’d stand out no matter what you were wearing,” he murmured in her ear.

She felt her face flame. Brent had a way of slipping compliments in when she was least expecting them. It always left her speechless.

They reached a little nook where a bench hid behind several large Ficus plants. They’d discovered it a few days ago and always gravitated there because it was so private, while also offering a view of downtown Minneapolis.

She ducked behind the screen of foliage and spotted two plastic flutes filled with fizzy liquid on the small end table, on top of an old copy of *Nutrition* magazine. Was it...champagne?

“You realize I just gave the ring back, right?” she said lightly. “Are we celebrating the end of our fake engagement?”

“Close.”

“You’re being so cryptic. You obviously set this up beforehand. What’s it all about?” She sank down onto the bench and picked up a flute. “Apple cider,” she said after sniffing it.

“Pear, actually,” he said. “I didn’t want to take a chance on actual champagne. But you get the point.”

“Yes...” She licked the rim of the flute. “Wait, what is the point?”

He gestured with his head at the tall tower angled to the east. It was the main part of the hospital, where the emergency room and most of the various departments were located.

She looked at it more closely, but didn’t see anything different from the last time they’d sat here. “Did you buy it?”

He burst out laughing. “Exactly how rich do you think I am?”

“I don’t know. After a certain point it all seems the same. Basically rich enough to do whatever you want.”

“Well, in this case that’s sort of true. Look up.”

She let her gaze travel up the tower to the top, where she could just see the blades of a helicopter peeking over the edge. “Helicopter? Your helicopter?”

“That’s the one. You’re getting your wish.”

Her stomach dropped. He was doing what was right. He was way ahead of her. She’d asked him to leave, and he was already planning exactly that.

But God, it was going to be so hard here without him. So, so hard. And lonely. Before he left, she needed to make sure he knew how much his presence here had meant to her.

She set down the flute and got to her feet. “Come here, you.”

His eyes darkened as she stepped toward him. She wrapped her arms around him and rested her head against his chest. “Thank you.”

“Hmmm.” It was a rumble under her ear more than an answer. His arms looped around her and they stood pressed together. Heat sparked deep inside

her, then slowly spread through the rest of her until her body was humming with it.

“I want you,” she whispered. “Is that a weird thing to say in a hospital?”

“Fuck no.”

His fierce whisper made her laugh. His body heat penetrated through the layers of clothes between them. Against her pelvis, she felt him harden and rise. Delirious excitement rushed through her. She wanted him, and he wanted her. The evidence was right there.

She shifted her hips to brush against his erection, causing him to groan softly. Liquid heat pooled between her legs. How was it possible to be so wild for someone while you were struggling through a medical crisis? Was this her, reaching for life, reaching for light?

“Let’s find an empty room with a lock on it,” she whispered.

“I like the way you think.”

“I’m not joking. I don’t want...” She broke off with a low moan as he thrust his leg between her thighs. She didn’t want him to leave before they’d done something about this desire vibrating between them.

“You don’t want what? This?” His hands were on her ass, moving her against him. The pressure took the breath from her lungs. She wanted him with every cell of her mysteriously compromised body.

“I do want that,” she managed. “Oh God.” She closed her eyes as a wave of sensation hit her. He was finding that certain spot with nothing but his damn thighbone. And he was moving just so, in sync with his hands on her rear, giving her no place to flee from the pleasure.

Were they actually dry-humping behind some random foliage in a hospital? A leaf tickled her face. Yes, apparently that was what they were doing, and she loved it.

“No one can see,” Brent murmured. “It’s just me and you, sweetheart. I want you to let yourself go.”

She bit her lip as more waves of tingling heat swept through her. She’d

gone from zero to sixty so fast. Jesus. Could she really come like this, here in semi-public? Not public. Brent was right. He'd keep her shielded in this out-of-the-way corner. He'd always protect her, no matter where they were. She could trust him. And that wasn't something she could say about many people.

The need for release thundered in her body. So much worry and stress, all building up, screaming for an outlet.

Brent whispered in her ear. "Someday soon it's going to be you and me, naked in a bed together. I'll pin you down and lick my way up and down your body. Your skin, your nipples."

On cue, her nipples went rock hard against him. She moved her chest to seek friction against them, and gasped as a jolt of desire shot directly from there to her lower belly.

"I want...I want..." she murmured desperately.

"I know what you want." He gripped her ass more tightly and slid her up and down against the steely rod of flesh inside his pants. And she came. Not just came, shattered. She hung on to just enough sanity to bury her face against his sweater so she didn't scream out her orgasm to everyone passing through the corridor.

Afterwards, she relaxed against him while her breathing slowly returned to normal. Embarrassing to climax in a hallway while a Ficus was tickling her face. But she didn't care. She'd never regret this moment. She'd needed it, and somehow Brent had known that, and she...well, face it, she kinda loved him for that.

eight

Annika still wasn't getting it. She really thought he was going to leave her at the hospital. In a way, he was a little insulted that she didn't know he'd figure something out.

That was his expertise, after all. He figured out ways to make things work and that was why he was such a damn good CEO.

"Okay, now I have yet another thing to thank you for," she grumbled as she lifted her head. "It's so annoying."

But her flushed cheeks and dreamy gray eyes told a different story. "I have something else in mind by way of a 'thank you,'" he told her.

"Oh believe me, I intend to thank you for real at the first opportunity. We could do it right here—" He grabbed her as she started to kneel down, then lost her balance. That orgasm must have done something to her blood pressure.

"Drink some cider, that'll help your blood sugar. Then let's get you back to your bed," he murmured. She held onto him to stabilize herself, and his heart ached at how good that felt.

With Susie, there had been nothing he could do. She'd died half an hour after they got her to the hospital, and all he could do was hold her hand and talk to her. He'd promised her he'd take care of Tyler, he'd told her how much he loved her. *The hearing is the last thing to go*, they'd told him. So he

kept talking, remembering key moments of their relationship, telling stories that he knew meant something to her. But that was it—that was all he could do.

In a strange way, this time with Annika was helping to heal the part of him that had felt so desperately helpless. In many respects, he was still helpless; he couldn't diagnose her, he couldn't cure her. But he could accompany her along this journey every step of the way. That was almost as important for his wellbeing as for hers.

As she reached for the pear cider, Annika stopped dead and peered at the giant Ficus. "Is that a piece of mistletoe?"

Her indignation made Brent laugh. "It wasn't me, I swear it."

"Was that what I felt against my face when we were...Goddamn it." She shook her head. "The stuff is everywhere. You know what the worst thing is? Now that we just, um, did that, I'm going to have to reconsider my stance on mistletoe."

"As long as you don't expect an orgasm every time you step under it," he teased. "I'll do my best, but it might be awkward depending on where it is."

She laughed and downed her cider. They walked slowly back to her room. He helped her into bed and watched her eyes flutter shut almost as soon as he pulled the covers over her.

"Just so you know, when I'm not suffering from a mystery illness, I'm quite sexually voracious," she said as her eyes closed, a smile curving her lips.

"Bring it on," he told her.

"Brace yourself."

"I'm ready. Tell me when and where."

She answered with a soft snore.

He released all the air in his lungs in one long sigh. One of his wishes had just come true. He'd gotten intimate enough with Annika to bring her to orgasm. It wasn't exactly how he'd pictured it. In his mind, there'd been

more naked skin involved. More bedding. A bed, in fact.

But none of that took away from the gloriousness of the experience. New wish: *let it not be the last time. Let it be the first of many, so many that we barely remember that the first one was next to a Ficus in a hospital.*

A short time later, he looked up from his laptop to see Annika's eyes open, fixed on him with a quizzical expression.

"Wait a second. I just thought of something."

"You're supposed to be sleeping, not thinking."

"The helicopter."

"What about it?"

"The helicopter, the cider that was supposed to be champagne. The orgasm."

He closed his laptop and waited for her to put it all together. She sat up, her eyes bright as dawn.

"Are we going home? Both of us."

"You said that was what you wanted."

"But how?"

"I met with the doctors and outlined a discharge plan they could live with. Didn't I tell you I made your wish come true?"

A brilliant smile spread across her face, followed by a wink that promised all kinds of sexy mischief.

"That's one of my wishes," she said softly. "But not the one I'm thinking of right now."

Visitors were supposed to clear out by ten, but everyone was so used to him by now—and he'd brought the nursing staff multiple rounds of donuts and fruit platters over the past few days—that no one bothered to make sure he was gone. He dipped into the bathroom during the last round of nurse check-

ins.

Annika asked for the light to be turned off and loudly declared to the night-shift nurse that she was wiped out and ready for a good night's sleep.

Inside the bathroom, he waited for her signal, feeling like a teenager sneaking around behind his parents' back. Which he'd never done, since his parents had a hands-off style that required only decent grades and good behavior at family and public events.

After he'd turned thirty, they'd handed over the reins of Caldwell Industries and retired to a life of travel and redecorating. They hadn't even protested when he'd sold off all the divisions relating to hydrocarbons and beefed up the solar and geothermal departments.

He had no complaints about his parents or his childhood, and knew he was incredibly fortunate in almost every way. Supportive parents, a family business that he found interesting, even a sense of purpose around climate change. He'd partnered with Indigenous groups in several of his energy initiatives, even testified before Congress to show how "land back" could benefit everyone. *Forbes* had written a cover article on him, with the title, *The Ethical Entrepreneur*. Not the sexiest nickname, but he found it something to aspire to.

Face it, everything had pretty much gone his way until Susie had died. He'd been floating down a wide, sunny river with no rocks until his boat hit that particular whirlpool. His life had been splintered, and the truth had stared him in the face.

No amount of privilege can shield you from life. In fact, his privileged existence had not prepared him to cope with that disaster. He'd dealt with it...not well, he'd say. He'd withdrawn into work. He'd allowed everyone to think he was fine. He'd cut off the part of himself that *felt* things.

Until that night on Lake Bittersweet. That night had woken him up in so many ways. He wasn't really living, he'd realized as he'd treaded water in the middle of Lake Bittersweet. He'd been...well, treading water. Then he'd met

Annika and everything had changed.

Since that night, he'd allowed himself to think about Susie more, to talk about her with Tyler, to *feel* the fact that she was gone. Something about Annika—her directness, her familiarity with crises, her strength under pressure—inspired him.

“Pssst. Coast’s clear,” she hissed from the hospital bed.

And also her hotness. Don’t forget that. Her vibrant energy made him feel alive and irresistibly aroused. Especially now, when he still felt the vibrations of her body against his as she came.

He slipped out of the bathroom and found her out of the bed, barring the door with a chair. The room had no lock, so that was the best they could do to keep someone from surprising them.

They were both giggling like kids as they climbed onto the hospital bed. “Can anyone see inside?” she whispered.

“It’s dark enough, I think we’re safe. Besides, what’s the worst that could happen? They ban me from the hospital? We’re going home tomorrow anyway.”

“Ooh, I like the way you think. Come on, let’s do this before someone decides I need another pill or something.”

She stripped off her sweater and bra and he wished more than anything that they could turn on a light. The equipment in the room produced enough ambient light that he could see the sheen of her skin and the dark swell of her nipples.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful,” he told her.

“Hmm.” She was busy reaching for him to unbutton his shirt. While she did that, he ran his hands down her arms, savoring her silky skin and firm muscles. She was long and lean and utterly sexy. He waited until she got his shirt off, then cupped her breasts in his hands. He bent to kiss each nipple in turn, feeling the warm nubs of flesh pucker under his lips.

She hissed in a breath and leaned back on her hands to arch her back for

him. *Invitation accepted.* He teased the tips of her breasts with his lips and tongue, her warm, eager flesh swelling against his tongue. Long strokes, tight suckles, the lightest of scrapes with his teeth—a sensual onslaught that had her gasping and twisting for relief.

He wanted to touch all of her, all at once. He wanted her writhing, with nowhere to go except straight into the sun. Kneeling on the bed, he stripped off the rest of her clothes—sweatpants, socks, underwear.

“Yes, yes,” she was murmuring. “God, yes.”

He planted his hands on her inner thighs and pinned her legs apart. He needed to taste her, now. Her pussy was already wet and waiting for him. Feeling almost violently hungry for her, he dragged his tongue across her clit, not too hard, not too soft, just enough to make it clear he meant business.

She shuddered and dug her hands into his hair. “Oh my God.”

Oh yes. That orgasm from earlier had been just a preview. “I’m going to make you come so hard right now.”

“Okay, yes, but you too...I want...I want you...”

She was tugging at his shoulders, his back, anything she could touch. He wanted her too, of course, wanted to ease his bursting cock inside her and surround himself with her warm body. But he wanted her right on the edge first, so he stayed where he was, licking and stroking and teasing the whimpers from her lips.

When she was trembling, shaking the whole bed with her excitement, he pulled away and pushed his pants down his thighs. His erection sprang out, hot and hard, almost unbearably aroused. She touched it lightly, and he gritted his teeth to keep from exploding right then and there.

They’d already discussed the issue of protection. He had a condom ready to go. He fished it out of his pocket now and placed it over the tip of his cock. She helped him unroll it over his engorged shaft. Her touch drove him mad with need. Her hand went everywhere, exploring his balls, his thighs, his tense muscles.

“It’s like a dream,” she murmured. “A hot dream in a dark hospital bed. I’ve thought about this so much, with you.”

“Glad to hear it, because I’ve thought about almost nothing else.”

He hoisted her onto her knees so their fronts pressed together. He settled his hands on her ass and pulled her toward him, nudging her knees apart to make room for his cock. He fingered her entrance, finding it wet and juicy and open.

“Ready?” he asked, just in case her mind was on a different page than her body.

“Heck yes. Not like this though. Someone might see us.”

He’d forgotten where they were, forgotten that the room had a little window and they might be visible through it. “How’s this?”

He lowered her down onto the bed and rolled her onto her side, then spooned her from behind. “You can keep an eye on the door while I do this.” He clamped one hand over her pussy and pressed the heel against her clit. She reacted with a sharp convulsion. His other hand went back to her breasts, gathering both into his hand, tweaking her nipples until she gave a deep guttural moan.

He spent a few moments pulling her back to the edge, then moved one hand to his erection so he could ease it into her. She tilted her ass back to give him the right angle. Thick with arousal, at first his penis felt as if it barely fit inside her, but slowly, sweetly, it did. He filled her up from behind, pressed his hand from the front, wanting to claim her from all sides. So deep inside her, so close to her core, he surrendered to her heat as it took over his senses.

Fingers back on her clit, he pumped inside her juicy channel, as her body moved along with him, riding his cock, seeking the friction of his palm. They came together in a shower of shudders.

It wasn’t just sex. They both knew that. He could feel it in her breathless panting, in the rise and fall of her chest under his hand. They’d just cemented

their bond in the most enrapturing way possible, and there was no going back.

“That was even better than my other wish about going home,” she told him as she rolled over to take him in her arms.

As far as he was concerned, he was home.

nine

Annika should have warned Brent that she loved to talk after sex. All her tiredness disappeared after that moment of pure ecstasy.

“Ohh, do you think maybe you cured me? Should we call the doctors and have them run some post-sex blood tests? Maybe it’ll turn out that all I needed was a good fuck, sorry for the trouble!” she joked.

“I like that.” They’d both put their clothes back on and lay next to each other on the hospital bed, face to face. “The magic-penis theory, I’m all for it. You’ll have to keep me on standby.”

“Your company won’t mind, will they? Hey, gotta skip that board meeting. Annika needs me.” She giggled, feeling so high on life that she might float off the bed.

“That’s one good thing about being the boss.”

“Must be nice. I act like a boss, but I’ve never actually been one. On my last performance review, the clinic supervisor said I had a tendency toward insubordination. On the plus side, I got the most positive patient reviews. I was surprised, since I’m not the smiley, friendly type of nurse.”

“You’re the ‘here’s the problem, we’ll get through it together’ type, right?”

“Yes.” Surprised, she skimmed her finger across his jaw, feeling the stubble already rising. “How’d you know?”

“Annika Scarlett, you’d be surprised by how many things I know about you just from paying attention and putting two and two together.”

Warmth pooled in her heart. It felt so good to be understood, especially by someone as wildly impressive as Brent Caldwell. “It does feel like we know each other, doesn’t it? Do you think that’s all in our imaginations, because we’ve been texting so much?”

“No, I don’t. I think it’s real. We know each other. Ask me anything and I’ll prove it.”

She laughed. “Okay, fine. What’s my biggest fear?”

He winced. “Coming in hot with a tough one.”

“Why is that a tough question?”

“Because it’s tricky. Someone who doesn’t know you might say that you’re fearless. But that’s not true. You’re brave, but not fearless. There’s a difference. Someone who knows you *somewhat* might say that you’re afraid of depending on someone else. And you are.”

“Yes.” Her throat was tight. So far, he was dead-on accurate, and that unnerved her. “So what’s my biggest fear? Don’t say mistletoe because I’ve already dealt with that one.”

He chuckled softly. “I’m going to take credit for that, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

She waited for him to answer her question. Realizing she was holding her breath, she forced herself to relax.

“I want to say it’s something happening to your family. Jenna, the boys. But it’s not quite that. I think your biggest fear has to do with your mother. But I haven’t pinned it down yet.”

Holy heck. How had he put that together? It sounded right, *was* right. That time she took the bus to see Mom, then went home before even setting eyes on her...that was fear. All the times she wanted to call, but couldn’t. Some kind of fear was holding her back, but she hadn’t pinned it down either. There was a black hole there that she didn’t want to look into.

She shook it off.

“Okay, my turn. Let me see if I can guess your biggest fear.”

“Who says I’m afraid of anything?” he teased.

“Everyone’s afraid of something. Clowns. Millepedes. The color orange.”

“The color orange?”

“Don’t get me started.” She nipped him on the chin with a light scrape of her teeth. “Even bigtime hotshot billionaire superstars are afraid of something. Isn’t that why rich guys do that biohacking thing, because they’re afraid of getting old?”

“I wouldn’t know. It’s not like all us billionaires sit around talking about what we’re afraid of.”

“You’d probably be afraid of that, come to think of it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like literal hell. But I’m not afraid to tell you what I’m afraid of, since you’re obviously not even close to guessing it.”

“Not true! I have a guess.” This close to his face, even in the darkness, she could see the deep grooves along his mouth and all the emotion he kept hidden behind that stoic face.

He’d been through a lot, being a single father, no matter how much “help” he had. He was the only person responsible for his grieving child’s wellbeing, after all. That was a heavy charge for anyone. But Brent was someone who shouldered responsibility without thinking twice. He held up his end. He did the right thing. But did he have fun?

“You’re afraid of not truly living,” she said softly. “Of being so buried by duty and responsibility that you forget how to live. Forget that human connection is the most important thing in this world, and what sustains us all. That’s what you’re afraid of.”

By the way he swung his body over hers and crushed her mouth under his, she knew she’d hit the bullseye. He moved over her, slow and passionate, telling her without words how deep his feelings for her went.

Instead of words, he was using other means of communication, and she

understood perfectly. With that kiss on her neck, he told her she was infinitely precious to him. With the way he inhaled the scent of her skin, he informed her that he couldn't get enough of her. And when he kissed her so deeply that her thoughts scattered, he was expressing his wish that their lives would be twined together forever.

If there was anyone in the world she would want to be entwined with, it would be Brent. Certainly no one else would do. Not anymore.

As they lost themselves in that kiss, she thought about that ring she'd given back to him. What if it had meant more than she'd realized? What if those diamonds represented something real...and *were* real?

Either way, if more sex in a hospital bed helped Brent feel fully alive, she was more than happy to do her part.

It took another day to finalize the discharge plan with the doctors overseeing Annika's case. They kept the port in her arm, since Annika herself had plenty of experience working with ports. She committed to checking in at the Lake Bittersweet Urgent Care every other day for monitoring. And they showed Brent how to manage the antibiotic doses and supplemental IV fluids they sent along with them.

"We wouldn't be doing this if you weren't a medical professional," the doctor kept explaining. "We tried to locate a nurse who can do home visits, but there's no one available."

"Well yeah, it's almost Christmas. Don't worry, I've done those visits myself. I can handle it."

They also gave her the numbers of several specialists to see after the holidays were over. Another neurologist, someone who specialized in autoimmune issues, even a psychiatrist.

"They're totally lost," Annika whispered to Brent as the doctor finally

left. “I’m surprised they don’t want me to see a shaman.” She handed him the discharge packet and he slipped it into his bag.

“If you’re ready, I’ll give Gordo a call. He’s on standby, flirting in the cafeteria.”

“I hate to ruin his game.”

“Don’t worry, he’s used to it. He works it in to the conversation, it gives him an excuse to ask for a number.”

Annika shook her head, looking amused. “I remember when you wanted my number. You just asked.”

“Yeah.”

He hovered near her as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

“Was that your usual technique?”

“You could probably call it a lack of technique. It was the first time I ever did that.”

She paused, astonished, stabilizing herself with a hand on his arm. “You’d never asked for anyone’s phone number before?”

“Nope. Usually they volunteer it.” He winked at her. “But you weren’t doing that, so I had to speak up.”

“I mean...it never occurred to me that you would want it. I’m pretty sure I was wearing the scrubs with the faded bloodstain, and I’d forgotten my deodorant that day.”

“You were beautiful. And you smelled like honey.”

She snorted as she slipped her feet into her boots, one at a time. When he’d picked her up in the helicopter, she’d been in her stocking feet, so he’d grabbed the nearest boots he saw. They’d turned out to be Jenna’s, but they fit well enough. The fact that they were Jenna’s did explain their extra fluffiness and bouncy blue tassels. Very much not Annika’s style. She liked things more simple and streamlined.

“That is your coat, right? I didn’t mix it up with Zack’s?” he asked as he handed her the jacket hanging on a chair. With its clean lines and subtle black

nubby texture, it could have belonged to either gender. But as soon as she put it on, he saw it suited her perfectly. Only Annika could make a boxy winter jacket look elegant.

It was due to the way she held herself, with a kind of innate poise and natural dignity. Even when she was still on the shaky side, still worried, still uncertain, she presented herself with pride.

He noticed that she'd lost a little weight during this experience, and that observation twisted his heart until it ached. Annika worked so hard, he knew from all their texting. She worked long hours at the clinic, then cheated herself out of sleep to help take care of her nephews. Was it possible that she'd just overworked herself and that was why she'd had the seizure?

Could he whisk her off to a tropical island and plop her onto a beach until she felt better?

No, she'd never agree to that, especially not with Christmas coming. He'd just have to make sure she gorged herself during every holiday meal. The more Christmas cookies, the merrier.

Of course he'd have to do it surreptitiously, so she didn't even notice that he was paying attention to her meals. Annika was independent, and he appreciated that about her. He never wanted to cross her boundaries and take away her sense of autonomy. He just wanted...to be with her. To be important to her. To be part of her life. That was his wish...it was simple, really. And yet with Annika, there were thorns in the way. Did it make things more complicated or less that those thorns were part of why he loved her?

On their way toward the elevator, they happened to pass the nook where they'd had their secret tryst the other day.

"I see mistletoe," he murmured in her ear. "You know what that means."

They were still laughing as they emerged from the elevator onto the rooftop landing pad where his Sikorsky was waiting. Gordo had positioned it to the side of the big X that marked the center, that could be seen from on high. The medivac helo's still had to operate. He'd simply leased a parking

spot from the hospital at a rate that would probably fund a new wing.

But he didn't mention that to Annika. If she knew how much money he'd poured into this entire experience, she might have another seizure.

They had to wait until another helicopter lifted off, on its way to pick up a new patient. A sharp wind sliced across the rooftop, causing Annika to huddle close to him. He didn't mind the opportunity to keep his arm around her. The view from up here was breathtaking; he felt as if he could reach out and touch the other high-rises.

Then he realized it was the kind of view he was used to. His own office was on the twenty-fifth floor of the Caldwell building in Chicago. From there, he could see Lake Michigan and the constant flow of traffic along Lakeshore Drive. But he didn't really *see* it.

It was only now, with Annika next to him and the bitter winter wind blasting them, that he felt alive enough to *actually see* what was around him. To take it in, wide-eyed and open-hearted.

Did she have any idea what effect she had on him? Was it better if she didn't? She wasn't a romantic sort of person. She'd probably wave off the idea that meeting her had changed him. *Right place, right time. You were ready for a change.* That kind of thing.

Then Gordo beckoned to them and they hurried across the roof and climbed into the helicopter.

"I'm excited that I get to actually see the view this time," Annika said as she put on the ear protection Gordo handed her.

That comment was so close to what Brent had just been thinking that he startled. At moments like that, he wondered if there was such a thing as destiny. Was it just a fluke that his boat had caught fire and sent him to the clinic to meet Annika? Or was it the mysterious workings of the universe making his deepest wish come true?

He reached for Annika's hand as they lifted into the air. Did liftoff always give him that stomach drop, that moment of no-gravity? Or was that because

of Annika?

“Wow,” she said as she watched the hospital rooftop and the rest of downtown Minneapolis slip away beneath them. “My first conscious helicopter ride.”

He smiled, thinking that he could probably say the same thing himself.

“Brent, I’ve been thinking,” she said once the Twin Cities were behind them and they were heading across snowy fields with a few roads curving through them. Clouds flitted past them in friendly winter wisps. “I think Billy and Jenna have something important going on right now, and I don’t want to get in their way. They need some family time together. And you’re the one who’s my IV backup.”

Of course you can stay with me, he wanted to say. But he also wanted to hear her say it.

“So, taking all that into account, and not to be presumptuous or anything, and feel free to say ‘no’ because I don’t want you to feel obligated, but when we get back to Lake Bittersweet, would it be possible for me to stay with you at first? Do you have an extra guest room at Sans Souci?”

“I think there’s about ten extra bedrooms. You can have them all.”

She wrinkled her forehead at him.

“You can have whichever you want,” he amended. “Or none of them.”

She cocked her head at him. “Hmmm...are you saying there’s some mistletoe in your bedroom?” An exaggerated wink went along with that question.

“I’m saying you’re welcome. I was going to suggest it but I thought you might be missing your own home.”

“Yeah...no. I’m not, actually. It’s always felt like Jenna’s house more than mine. Well, it is her house. She always insists it’s *our* house, but everything about it is hers...the furniture, the decor...the children.” She laughed wryly. “It never bothered me before. It doesn’t bother me now, it’s fine, but when I think about going back there, it feels...I’m not sure what the

right word is. Small? Or like it doesn't quite fit me anymore?"

His heart soared because he knew exactly why it didn't fit her anymore. Because her heart and her life were expanding to include him. Just like his was expanding for her.

But that wasn't where her thoughts landed.

"I think I'm going to look for my own place when I'm feeling better," she said. "Sometimes you just grow out of a situation, you know? I think that's what's going on, and why I don't miss my own bed."

She gave a decisive nod as she came to that conclusion.

Disappointment cratered through his stomach. She didn't seem to be including him in her future. He'd thought he was winning her over, based on certain looks she gave him, and the way she smiled when he was around. But maybe he was reading her all wrong. Clearly he wasn't doing a very good job of making her understand how *he* felt. Apparently helicopters and diamond rings and hospital stays weren't enough. He had to try something else. *Like maybe telling her?*

ten

The scene on the snow-covered lawn of Sans Souci was so chaotic that it took a while for Annika to understand it. Apparently a showdown had taken place between Billy and a stalker, and the upshot was that Billy had to get transported for immediate medical attention. There went the helicopter once again.

“I’m going to have to give Gordo a raise,” Brent murmured as they waved it off.

Jenna had more big news for her. Earlier in the day, the Hermit had shown her a painting of their mother that revealed that Sue Ellen Scarlett had also experienced seizures.

“Why didn’t Papa...oh, never mind.” Annika shook off the question before she even finished it. “He’s Papa. He probably forgot until he got inspired to do a painting.”

“We need to find her,” Jenna said. “I haven’t had a chance yet, but I can try to track her down.”

“No, I got it.” Annika thought about that “deepest fears” conversation with Brent. She could certainly try harder to get ahold of their mother; her efforts had been half-hearted at best. “I have to take time off work anyway, so what else am I going to do?”

“Um...spend some time with that gorgeous besotted man back there?”

Annika had already briefed her by phone on where things stood with Brent. Jenna had given herself an annoying number of pats on the back for guessing that something was going on with all her texting.

“He’s going to be busy too. Are you all coming for Christmas? Brent really wants to make it fun for Tyler.”

“We’ll be there. The boys would stage a walkout if we didn’t go. I just hope Billy’s back in time.” Jenna’s forehead crinkled with worry for her husband. Ex-husband. But not really—Annika had always sensed that their bond didn’t depend on the current state of their marital vows.

“He’s strong. We’ll all be pulling for him. And you know...he looked like one happy camper on that gurney.”

Jenna’s face flushed with color. Annika hadn’t seen her sister this happy in years. She deserved to be happy. Not only was she an exceptionally kind person, but she’d worked hard over the past few years to get a handle on her anxiety.

As Jenna’s self-appointed sort-of-parental figure, Annika was extremely proud of her. And she prayed that this time, Billy and Jenna would make it work.

One more thing to add to the winter wishlist.

As she waved goodbye to Jenna and the boys, Annika wondered where this big shift was going to leave her. She’d devoted much of her energy and time to taking care of her nephews. If Billy was around more—or if they all went to Japan for that big baseball contract—what would she do with herself?

Her glance landed on Brent, who was crouched down next to Tyler as the boy recounted the dramatic events of the day.

Don’t go thinking that’s the answer, she scolded herself. That’s absurd. You barely know the man, and Tyler’s only met you once.

Just then, they both looked over at her, as if they’d been talking about her. Tyler skipped across the back terrace toward her, while Brent straightened up, looking after his son in surprise.

Not nearly as surprised as Annika, however, when Tyler threw his arms around her. “Are you still feeling bad?”

“I’m much better, thank you.” Her heart was doing that soft-and-squishy mushy thing she only experienced with young people. Kids were the best, honest to God.

“We were really worried, me and Zack and Bean.”

“You were? I thought you all were having the time of your lives playing hide-and-seek and Exploding Kittens and building snow forts and all that good stuff. I hope you weren’t too worried! I’m pretty tough, you know.”

“Zack says you act tough but sometimes you’re a softy.”

“Oh really? I’m going to have a talk with that one. He shouldn’t be giving away my secrets like that.”

“I told him I already knew because you took care of me after I nearly drowned.”

She hid a smile; the story had clearly gotten a little exaggerated since the last time she’d seen him. “Well, it’s true, sometimes I’m a softy, mostly with people I really like.”

As that sank in, a broad smile came across his face. “You must really like my dad.”

Oops. How had she stumbled into that topic? Especially when the man himself was ambling toward them, head cocked, clearly wildly curious about their conversation.

“Actually, I do. But what makes you say that?”

“Zack says there’s a picture of him on your phone. He saw it when he had to call my dad.”

Annika folded her lips together, knowing that she was turning red as a poppy. Of course Brent heard every word.

“Looks like my talk with Zack is going to be a little longer. He wasn’t supposed to look at my photos.” But she couldn’t get too mad at Zack, since she was the one who’d thrust her phone at him and put him in the position of

saving her ass.

“It’s okay. My dad has pictures of you too.”

Annika glanced up at Brent, pulling her lower lip between her teeth. She’d never sent anything too sexual because of her basic distrust of the internet. But it could be a fine line sometimes. She didn’t even want to think about the shot she’d sent him after she’d gone swimming in her underwear.

He gave her a little shake of his head to tell her not to worry.

For some reason, it worked. That was how much she’d come to trust Brent Caldwell, she realized. All it took was that tiny gesture for her to be reassured that he’d stashed the more private photos somewhere, and there was no cause for her to worry.

“Well then, he must like me, too,” she said, lifting an eyebrow at Brent. Tyler didn’t seem to notice that his father was right behind him. Or maybe he didn’t mind speaking freely in front of him.

“He definitely likes you. That’s why we came to Lake Bittersweet. He tried to say it was for me, but it wasn’t *just* for me.”

She cleared her throat to warn him that his father was right there, listening. Brent stepped forward. “Hang on, didn’t you tell me you wished we could go somewhere with fun snow for Christmas?”

“Fun snow, huh?” Annika smiled in amusement. “Is our Lake Bittersweet snow living up to that description?”

“Pretty much. We made the most awesome snow fort, but then everything happened with Bean and their dad and...” Tyler scowled and shoved his glasses into place, since they kept sliding down his nose. Clearly the events of the day were going to need some processing.

“Listen, Tyler. Annika’s going to stay with us for now so we can keep an eye on her.”

“And so I can help get ready for Christmas,” Annika added. The Caldwells were down a cook, and that big fancy dinner Brent had imagined was going to need some extra hands.

“That’s good.” Tyler spotted Soraya, his nanny, emerging from the front door. Her long blue extensions were caught in a ponytail, and she still looked shaky. She’d been collateral damage in the stalker’s master plan, poor girl. Tyler ran towards her and hugged her so hard she nearly lost her balance.

Brent and Annika followed so Brent could introduce her.

“I finally get to meet the woman everyone’s been talking about,” she said as she looked Annika up and down.

“I always thought I’d be known as Lake Bittersweet’s baddest nurse. Instead I’m the woman who collapsed during a storm.” She made a rueful face. “Thanks for stepping in. The boys sure love you.”

“They sure love *you*. All of ’em.” Soraya shot a mischievously pointed look at Brent. Annika’s face warmed. Was it that obvious that she and Brent had something going on? She became aware that she was standing very close to him. Maybe she ought to step away. But she didn’t. She wanted to be close to him. That was when she felt the safest.

“You look like you need some rest,” Brent told Soraya. “I was thinking we should go grab some pizza. You can come with or I can bring some back for you.”

“Rest.” Soraya yawned. “And then pizza.”

Annika’s mouth watered at the thought of Mariano’s pizza. Lord, she’d missed Lake Bittersweet, missed everything about it. But there was no way she had the energy for a drive into town and all the conversations she’d have to have when people saw her out and about.

“I’m going to stay here too, if you don’t mind.”

“Good idea. Come on, I’ll find a room for you.”

Brent took her by the hand to lead her inside. His manner made it perfectly clear to everyone that she was *with him*. As in, they were together. Whatever that meant.

She was too sleepy right now to work out the implications. How could they be “together?” She lived here, and he didn’t. *We’re really good at*

texting, she thought as Brent guided her to a big guest bedroom tucked into a corner of the ground floor. No stairs. She was grateful for that. Making sure she had her own space; she liked that too. The room had a big four-poster bed with a thick down comforter and windows that looked out on the snowy backyard.

She couldn't wait to get into that bed.

"Fair warning, I'm taking my clothes off," she said over her shoulder as she headed for it.

He closed the door with a click. "If you want me to leave, you'll have to say so."

Laughing, she stripped off the sweater and t-shirt she was wearing, then the fleecy yoga pants that had been tucked into her boots; she'd ditched those at the front door. When she was down to bra and undies, she hesitated.

Fuck it, she decided. Might as well give him a real show. She flung off her bra and tossed it aside, then flashed him as she dove under the covers.

That comforter was just as glorious as she'd imagined, but even better was the look in his eyes when she peeked from under it.

Hot. Determined. Intense. Promising.

She shivered, even though she was perfectly warm now under two inches of down.

"If you bring me some pizza, I'll let you see for yourself how cozy it is in here." She put as much seductive teasing as she could into that offer.

"Cozy, huh? I think we can do better than that."

On that provocative note, he left the guest room.

She snuggled into bed and thought of his body moving inside hers, his dark eyes blazing at her, all the strength he kept locked up pouring out of him.

Brent was all about restraint, she knew. His position in life gave him so much clout and status and power. The big mission of his life was knowing how to use it for good. That was why he kept so much back, why he took his

time before deciding on any course of action, why he thought things through so thoroughly.

That was why he despised sycophants, or people who told him what he wanted to hear. He wanted to know what people really thought. Maybe that was why he liked her, come to think of it. It had never occurred to her to say anything else than what she truly believed.

In a medical context, it would be unethical to do otherwise. You had to tell people the truth about their health, although you could try to cushion it to make it easier to accept.

A truth-teller and a man who despised lies—maybe they were made for each other, after all. Her heart swelled until it nearly burst. He was going to come to her later and they were going to finally experience each other's completely naked and unleashed selves, with no worries about nurses barging in. She'd finally find out what it felt like to be skin-to-skin with Brent, flesh-to-flesh, soul-to-soul.

On that thought, she sank into sleep with a smile on her lips.

A ping on her phone woke her up. Blinking, she took a moment to orient herself to her strange surroundings. Maybe it was Brent trying to find out what pizza toppings she liked. She rolled over and snagged her phone from the pocket of her yoga pants.

A text message from an unfamiliar number flashed on the screen.

This is Sue Ellen, your mother. I got the message that you're looking for me. I might be able to help you. You should come see me right away. I live at the Two Pines Long-Term Care facility in North Dakota.

Oh my God. Oh my God. The words blurred before her as the implications fell into place.

Long-term care facility? That meant Sue Ellen had something debilitating and progressive, something that wasn't going to get better, something that needed continuous care. *Oh my God oh my God.*

And the most terrifying thought of all—did Annika have the same thing

as her mother? Shaking, she set the phone down on the nightstand next to the bed.

She needed to see her mother right away. She needed to learn the truth. Not just for her own information, but for whatever this was with Brent. If she had some kind of degenerative condition, she couldn't get more involved with Brent and his son. That wouldn't be fair to them after they'd lost Susie. She'd have to end this, now, before it went any further.

And if she didn't have the same thing? If she was free to open herself up to Brent in a way she never had, with anyone?

One step at a time. Get the facts. *Face your fears.*

She picked up her phone again and looked up Two Pines online. It was only a three-hour drive. It was still early afternoon. Her car was back at her house, but she could call a cab to go pick it up.

Was it a good idea to drive by herself, considering she'd recently experienced a seizure? For most people, of course not. But she was a trained trauma nurse. There had been warning signs before the last seizure. Her vision had changed in a very distinctive way. If that happened in the car, she'd pull over immediately. And of course, she'd bring all the medical supplies from the hospital with her. She'd keep nine-one-one on speed-dial on her cell phone. Tonight, she'd stay in a hotel; maybe two nights if she was feeling tired.

She could ask Jenna to come with her. Jenna didn't think as much about their mother as Annika did, likely because she'd been so young when Mom had left. Annika had real memories of her, but Jenna didn't. Even so, she'd probably be very interested to see her.

But this wasn't the right time, not with Billy on his way to a hospital and Jenna on her own with the boys.

She couldn't wait, either. It would be much too difficult to fake the Christmas spirit while wondering about a potential genetic condition. Besides, her mother had said to come "right away." Were things happening

so quickly that she might run out of time?

What about Brent?

No. Brent had already done enough for her. She couldn't pull him away from Tyler right now. She could handle this just fine on her own.

eleven

The text from Annika made so little sense that Brent had to read it over several times.

Went to meet with my mother. Be back in a day, 2 at most. I'll be careful, I promise.

The heart emojis she added did nothing to make him feel any better. For some unfathomable reason, she thought it would be a good idea to do this on her own, despite her unresolved medical condition.

All this time he'd thought she'd seen the light—that even if she didn't need him, he was a good person to have around. Couldn't she have trusted him enough to ask if he wanted to come with her?

The whole thing pissed him off to no end.

Balancing three large pizza boxes, he tried her cell, but got no answer. Then he called Jenna.

“No, I haven't seen her,” Jenna told him.

“She mentioned going to meet your mother.”

“Really? I thought she hadn't located her. Where is she?”

Brent's heart sank. He was hoping Jenna would have that information. Now he had no idea where to start. “Is her car there?”

“Hang on, I'm just driving up to the house now.” He heard tires crunching on snow, then Jenna said, “No. I guess she came and picked it up

while I was out.”

Good lord. It was almost dark out. Why couldn't Annika have waited until the next day, when she could drive in daylight? Was she really that anxious to do this alone, without any help from him?

Yes, clearly. The question was, why?

No, the more important question was, where the hell was she and how could he get there as quickly as possible? What if she had a seizure behind the wheel? She probably thought she could pull over in time, but what if it happened faster this time? What if she was trapped next to another car and couldn't pull over?

He had to find her. It might piss her off—very likely would—but he'd have to take that chance. Safety first. *Survival* first.

“Are you still there?” Jenna was still on the phone.

“Yeah. Sorry.” He couldn't keep the emotion out of his voice. And then he thought...why would he? Jenna knew her sister as well as anyone did. If he had his way, they'd be part of each other's lives for a long time. “Sorry,” he said again. “I thought she was starting to trust me.”

“And now you're worried that she doesn't? Listen, Annika is...” Jenna hesitated before continuing. “She's not a simple person, there's always layers she keeps hidden away. She doesn't open up to very many people, but she would lay down her life for anyone that's in that circle. She's incredibly protective.”

“But not of her own self!” he burst out. “Why would she get in her car when she knows it's not safe for her to be driving by herself?”

“I don't know. But I know you're very important to her. I've never seen her be so...open around a man. I know you're probably mad at her, but I hope you don't give up on her.”

“*Give up* on her?” Obviously Jenna didn't know him at all. “That's not going to happen.”

“Good. Because I think for once, Annika does need someone, and it's

you.”

That comment moved him, until he remembered that it was Jenna saying it, and not Annika. It was still an open question whether Annika would ever agree with that.

“Did she say when she’s coming back?” Jenna asked.

“She said a couple of days, but that’s not very specific.”

“If she’s not back by Christmas, she’d better come back with body armor on, that’s all I’m going to say.”

That got a chuckle from him. “Are you all coming out to Sans Souci?”

“We’re planning on it, but if you decide it’s too much…”

“No. It’s not too much. I hope you’ll come. Tyler’s excited about it.”

He had been too, until this latest kick in the stomach.

“Great. And listen, if you need to leave town for any reason, any Annika-related reason, don’t worry, Soraya and I and the boys will take care of things at Sans Souci.”

She meant—if he decided to chase after Annika. In fact, she was possibly telling him to do so, in veiled terms. It was a really sweet offer, and he remembered what Annika had always said about her sister. *A true sweetheart. The kindest person you’ll ever meet. Inspiring.*

But he had a son to tend to at the moment. He and Tyler and the pizza boxes settled into the SUV that came with renting Sans Souci.

“Dad, can we take pizza to Zack and Bean? Can I spend the night there?”

Surprised, he eyed his son as they buckled their seat belts. “I thought we’d hang out together tonight.”

“Yeah, but I feel bad for them because their dad’s in the hospital. I bet they’d like some pizza.”

“I’m sure they would.”

“You know how I said I wanted a brother? Well, they’re sort of like that, but more like friends. You have to be good to your friends.” His earnest tone made a smile spread across Brent’s face.

His son had quite the considerate spirit. He never would have thought of something like that at his age. Did he have extra empathy because he'd gone through a loss of his own?

"That's really thoughtful. Let me call Jenna and ask if it's okay."

Five minutes later, he dropped Tyler off with Jenna and her two sons, who were super-excited by the sight of the pizza boxes. They didn't seem especially worried about their father, but maybe Tyler saw more than he did. The house was a comfortable and spacious two-story home that was clearly the domain of two young boys. Between the games and the toys—old tricycle in the corner, a slinky stashed on top of a lampshade—it was hard to sense Annika's presence here.

Then he noticed a red wool coat hanging on a peg. She'd worn it in a photo she'd sent from the end of the public landing dock at sunset. That photo had been his wallpaper for a while. And weren't those the same Keds she'd worn that night in the clinic?

Suddenly her spirit was everywhere. And he missed her with a deep ache in his soul.

Watching them all pounce on the pizza, he realized that there was nothing stopping him from going after Annika. Tyler was fine here for the night.

"Would you mind if I took you up on your offer?" he asked Jenna in a low voice.

A relieved smile crossed her pretty face. "Of course not. I was hoping you would. I'm worried about Annika too. She just got back, and now she's gone again...I'd feel much better if you went after her. Don't worry about Tyler, we'll take care of him."

"Thank you. I'll bring his things when I swing back through town. I owe Soraya her pizza first."

Back at Sans Souci, anxious to hit the road, he realized he was missing an important step—figuring out where the hell she'd gone. Or at least in what direction. He didn't want to head south when she'd gone north.

“You’re a fucking problem-solver,” he lectured himself as he threw some new clothes into a travel bag. “Figure it out.”

First data point—Annika must have learned where her mother was. Sometime in the past few hours, someone had gotten in touch with her with that information. He had a tech guy on call who could probably hack into her iCloud and find out who. They could possibly even retrieve the text in question.

But that would completely violate her privacy and she might never forgive him for that.

Wherever she was going, it was in driving distance, since she’d taken her car. But it wasn’t in town, because she knew it was going to take at least one overnight. He looked at the map on his phone. If her mother was in Minnesota, Annika probably would have found her before this.

Was she going across state lines? Wisconsin to the east, Iowa to the south, or one of the Dakotas. Not Canada; she would have to have a passport, but she’d told him that she hadn’t traveled out of the country at all.

The Dakotas were the closest to this part of Minnesota. His guess was that she was headed that direction. Both Wisconsin and Iowa would be much longer drives.

Total speculation, he knew that. But it gave him a starting-point.

He pulled out his laptop and sat on the edge of her bed to do some furious concentrated research. He searched both Dakotas for the name Sue Ellen Scarlett, but that gave him nothing. She must be using a different last name, but people didn’t generally change their first names unless they were really trying to hide. He located a marriage notification for Richard Scarlett and Sue Ellen Nance, but searches for that name didn’t produce anything more.

Looking for clues, he ran searches on Richard Scarlett, and found many articles related to his art, but almost no references to his wife. Sue Ellen might as well have been a ghost, which was more or less how Annika described her.

Finally he found something that seemed like a possible lead. An article about voting at retirement homes included a quote from someone named Sue Ellen, no last name given. It didn't even include the name of the facility, but the paper was based in Fargo, North Dakota.

That was all he needed. He made a list of all the retirement homes in the Fargo area, then started making calls. Bingo. A place called Two Pines had a Sue Ellen Woodlake living there. It was a long-term care facility about ten miles east of Fargo, not far from the Minnesota border.

I'm coming for you, Annika, he thought. You can hate me later if you want. But not until I have my say.

Sometime past seven in the evening, Brent found Annika in the parking lot of the Two Pines Long-Term Residential Care Facility. Her head was resting on her forearms, which were folded across the steering wheel. For a heart-stopping moment, he thought she'd passed out. Then he noticed her shoulders shaking and that was almost as terrifying.

He tapped on the window, gently so as not to startle her too much. When she lifted her head, he saw there was very little surprise in her deep gray eyes.

She gestured with her head for him to join her, so he walked around the Subaru and got into the passenger seat. She wasn't even wearing snow gear, he noticed. What if she had passed out? Or broken down?

"I should have known you'd follow me," she said. Her eyes looked puffy, as if she'd been crying. He knew she didn't do that very often, if at all. His alarm deepened.

"Yeah, you should have. Actually, you should have let me come with you. Have you forgotten what the doctors said?"

"No. But you're supposed to be with Tyler now."

"And you're supposed to be smart. What the hell, Annika?"

Her eyes widened; she'd obviously never heard him speak this forcefully. He usually didn't, because when someone in his position did so, it had an outsized effect.

"You're really mad."

Was he mad? Was that the word? "I was scared the entire drive that I might find you on the side of the road, half-frozen."

"You didn't have to be scared! I said I'd be back soon."

"You wanted to be. But what if something had gone wrong?"

"I have a whole box of medical supplies in the backseat. I'm a nurse. I could have handled it. It's not your life's mission to keep me out of trouble. That's my job, not yours. Especially—" She stopped, pressing her lips together, but it was too late.

Her words cut through him like a knife. Were they really so little to each other that he wasn't supposed to worry about her? Had he read everything wrong, misunderstood her feelings? He would do a lot to win her heart, everything except push himself where he wasn't genuinely wanted.

Take the fucking hint.

"Especially what?"

"When you should be with Tyler," she said weakly, as if that wasn't really what she meant. He remembered what Jenna had said. *There's always layers with Annika.*

He couldn't leave. Not until he told her how he felt.

He hauled in a breath. "I need to tell you a story."

"Now?"

He looked around the dark parking lot. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Apparently not. I'm too chickenshit to. Yes, tell me a story. Please. Does it start with 'once upon a time'?"

"It does. Once upon a time there was a man who had a hole for a heart. He didn't know if anything could fill it. He tried with work, and of course his son held a piece of it. He tried by finding his purpose. He transformed his

company so it no longer had a carbon footprint at all. He tried to do good in the world. He won awards. But at the end of the day, he was always alone. Then one summer he finally agreed to a family gathering, which he'd been avoiding ever since his wife died and his heart hollowed out. Predictably, it was a nightmare of fake concern and underhanded jockeying for position."

He checked to see how closely she was listening. Still and quiet, her head was bowed, her hair tucked behind her ear, her face in shadow. Oh yes, she was listening.

"The only relief from the Caldwell version of the Hunger Games was when he and his son fled to the lake to watch the stars on an exceptionally clear night. Out on the water, with the sky spread wide above them, they believed they could see every star in the universe. But they were missing one. They met her later that night. That was when everything changed for the man. His hollow heart caved in like a sandcastle swamped by a tsunami. That was what it felt like when he first saw Annika Scarlett. When I first saw you. That's why I'm here. Why I will always be here for you, with you."

She didn't answer. She seemed to be struggling with herself, her jaw flexing, her throat muscles working.

"If you want me to be," he added softly. "I guess that long story is all to say, I love you. I should have told you before, but I wasn't sure you'd believe me. Love at first sight and all that."

Still no response. God, this was a nightmare. Worst possible outcome. Silence.

He put his hand on the door handle, preparing to leave her alone.

She stopped him by grabbing onto his arm. "Wait. Please."

He sank back onto the seat and saw that something in her face had changed. A mask had dropped and he saw raw fear.

"What's going on?" he asked as gently as he could through the pounding of his heart. Something deeper was at play here.

And she told him.

twelve

As Annika walked through the atrium of Two Pines, past a library and down a corridor lined with landscape photographs, she held onto Brent's hand so hard that she worried about squishing it.

Seriously, how had she imagined she could do this alone? If he hadn't shown up in her car, she might have driven back to Lake Bittersweet the way she'd left on the bus the last time she tried to see her mother.

But his problem-solving skills were second to none. "One thing at a time. Let's find out what she has to tell you. Then we'll go from there," he'd said. "I'm with you on this, if you'll let me."

"But Tyler...Susie...I can't do that..."

"Aren't I a grown man who can make his own choices?" He'd taken her face into his hands and brushed his thumbs across her puffy cheeks. "I'm here. I'm not leaving. Unless you make me," he added. "But please don't."

So here they were, approaching her mother's suite of rooms as if headed to the guillotine.

"One step at a time," Brent murmured next to her. "I'll be here the whole way."

Outside the door of Room 143, she stopped and faced him before knocking on it. "Listen. I don't know what I'm about to learn, and it could obviously change my entire life. Before I do that, I want to apologize for not

including you.”

One corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. “You were right, it’s not my job.”

“But that’s the thing,” she whispered. She used both hands to cradle the hand she’d been holding. This man had been there for her in ways no one else ever had been. “Maybe I...maybe I wish it was your job.”

His eyes flared with emotion. But they didn’t have any time to go further because the door handle was turning. Someone was opening the door. Heart in her throat, she jumped around to face the door again.

Sue Ellen looked even more frail than she remembered. She was small, slender, dressed in a soft blue cardigan with tiny buttons and corduroy trousers.

“Annika,” she said softly. Numb, Annika bent down to give her an awkward hug of greeting.

“Hi.” It felt weird to call her “Mom” when they’d barely seen each other over the past years. Sue Ellen’s gaze moved past her to Brent.

“This is Brent Caldwell. He’s...we’re, that is, we’re together.”

“Hello, Brent.” She shook Brent’s hand. And then she really blew Annika’s mind. “This is my husband, Gary Woodlake.”

She stepped aside to beckon them further into the suite, revealing a balding man in a wheelchair. Half-moon glasses, deep bronze skin, a kind smile.

Wheelchair.

Annika felt light-headed all of a sudden. Did they live here in this facility because of him instead of Sue Ellen?

Her questions must have been written all over her face, because he grinned as he shook her trembling hand. His was shaking too, but not from emotion like hers. “Yes, I’m the one around here with Parkinson’s. We got married a few months ago and Sue Ellen moved in here with me.”

“We were in the same support group for people with neurological issues,”

Sue Ellen said softly. “That’s how we met and fell in love.”

She touched his shoulder and Annika saw so much true affection between them that she couldn’t even be mad that her mother had remarried without sharing the news.

“You’re wondering why I didn’t tell you girls. And you’re also wondering what I have and if it’s genetic.” Sue Ellen beckoned toward the couch, situated with a view out the apartment’s windows, which looked out on a snow-covered courtyard with benches and a birdbath.

Annika sat. So did Brent. She realized that she still hadn’t let go of his hand. Well, he’d followed her all the way here, now he was stuck with her, and her hand.

“I never wanted you girls to worry about me, that’s why I never talked about it. For a long time, I didn’t think I’d live much longer. I kept expecting to be gone. I’d have these fits, these seizures, and they scared me so much. Especially when I dropped Jenna when she was a baby. That terrified me more than I can say.”

Annika nodded, thinking of the painting that Jenna had described. Jenna had sent her a photo of her father’s work—a woman collapsed on the floor, a yellow-haired baby crawling toward her, a broken bowl and spilled liquid—all rendered in vivid colors vibrating with raw emotion.

“After that happened, I saw a doctor in Braddock and he started listing all kinds of terrible things that could be wrong with me. I just ran out of his office. I left soon after that with a man I’d met, but that didn’t last. I had a seizure in front of him and it scared him. I started living from day to day, never believing I’d be on this planet for long. I avoided attachments, I didn’t put down roots anywhere, until now. I kept in touch with you girls, but I didn’t act like a mother. I know that, and I’m sorry. It’s the biggest regret of my life. I love you girls. I still love you. But I didn’t want to hurt you by bringing such uncertainty into your lives. And your father...I couldn’t bear it anymore. The stress of living with him made my episodes worse.”

Annika couldn't help making a face. She knew all about the stress of living with her father, after all, especially after she and Jenna had been left with just him.

But she wasn't here for recriminations. She was here for the truth. "I can imagine," she murmured.

Her mother took a breath and continued. "Obviously, I knew something was wrong with my brain, but I didn't know what. I stumbled into the support group and met Gary, and he convinced me that I should find out for sure. So I did. I saw Gary's specialist and he did some scans. And then we talked." She leaned forward, elbows propped on her knees, and gazed into Annika's eyes. "I was...not treated well as a child. The damage in my brain is because of that. It's nothing hereditary, nothing that I could have passed on to you. If it was, I would have told you girls. I promise."

Annika couldn't catch her breath. Her mother wasn't dying of a genetic condition, and neither was Annika. The apartment suddenly seemed to glow with light. It poured in from the windows, it shone from her mother, from Gary, and especially from Brent.

On the other hand, her poor mother. What a heartbreaking story.

Brent must have known Annika was too overcome to speak, because he stepped in. "Thanks for sharing that. What a painful history."

Sue Ellen nodded, twisting her mouth to one side, as if she still didn't like to talk about it. Who would? thought Annika. Even worse, she'd gone through that journey alone, until finding Gary. Why hadn't she talked to her daughters about it once they were adults who could understand and possibly help?

Oh, the irony of her asking that question after literally driving here on her own with IV bags in the back of her car.

Her mother went on. "It was so painful I blocked it out for a long time. I think that's partly why I had trouble seeing doctors. I would get triggered, and just wanted to flee." She let out a long breath. "Now Annika, my dear,

I've learned a lot since I joined the support group. I've learned that stress and bottled-up emotion can manifest themselves in unpredictable ways. I know that sounds kind of new-agey and maybe even hokey. But it's worth considering."

"It's true that the scans they've done haven't turned up anything. The blood tests haven't either." She glanced over at Brent. "That would be pretty embarrassing if it all turned out to be in my head."

"That's not what she's saying. The seizure wasn't in your head. Your low blood pressure isn't either, or your exhaustion."

"Right." Her mother agreed with a slight smile. "I'm saying that emotions affect the body, and vice versa, of course. You might also have some kind of chemical imbalance, I'm sure they're looking into that."

Annika nodded. "Certain readings were on the low side. But they didn't think it explained everything they were seeing."

Sue Ellen ran her tongue across her lips. "I know I probably have no right to say this, since I haven't been part of your life for many years. But for seven years, I knew you very well. You've always taken on a huge amount of responsibility. You always tried to be the strongest one around. It wouldn't surprise me if you've been forging ahead with everything in your life while paying no attention to your health, either physical or emotional."

Annika's throat closed up. She'd never expected to hear such accurate words about her from her mother. Sue Ellen *did* know her, much more than she'd ever imagined.

"Yes," she finally managed. "That's true."

"Just a few things to think about. I certainly don't have all the answers." Sue Ellen glanced over at her husband, who was smothering a yawn. "Gary's about ready for a nap."

Annika shot to her feet. "Of course. We'll go now."

"Wait. One more thing. The reason I hadn't told you about Gary was that I was hoping to tell you in person. I was...gearing up for that. I wanted to see

you before Christmas. Do you think Jenna...?" She trailed off.

She knew what Sue Ellen was asking. Was Jenna and the rest of her family ready to reunite with her after all this time? What would that look like? When, where, how? "I don't know, to be honest. But I can talk to Jenna about it and see what she thinks."

Sue Ellen nodded, clearly trying to hide her disappointment. "I thought, you know, this time of year and all..."

Annika made a little face. "It can be a tough time of year for some." Then she hurried onwards, not wanting to bring up that long-ago scene in the hardware store, not now. "Anyway, I'm not sentimental like that."

Looking unconvinced, her mother shot a pointed look at her hand. "Is that why you've been holding onto Brent's hand for dear life?"

Annika looked down, and sure enough, they were still linked, her and Brent. He must have sprung to his feet right along with her. "That's...that's different. Listen, we should..." Flustered, she looked to Brent.

"We should get back to Lake Bittersweet. Thank you for being so open." He dropped Annika's hand so he could shake Sue Ellen's, but she rose to her feet and stood on tiptoe to give him a kiss on the cheek. They all exchanged cordial goodbyes; Annika especially treasured Gary's warm smile of farewell.

As they walked back to the facility's foyer, her mind was spinning with everything she'd learned. She still didn't know what had caused her seizure, but she had a feeling Sue Ellen was right. Overwork, shouldering too much responsibility, stress, emotion.

She imagined going through everything that Sue Ellen had faced, all alone, with no family support, and discovered that she held no more anger in her heart. Maybe she herself would have made different choices, since she knew how painful it was to have an absent mother. But she understood, maybe a little, why Sue Ellen had left.

She thought about her younger self, that little girl peering through the

window of the hardware store, and felt her heart crack open. That girl had felt such a need to be on top of things, to shield Jenna, to fill in the gaps left by their parents. She'd wrapped her own heart in a kind of hardware. That shield made of hammered steel had a job—to protect her from her deepest fear.

She knew now what that was, that fear. What if their mother had left because she didn't love them? Didn't love Annika? Didn't find them worth loving, or worth staying for? A valid fear. Maybe it was even true. But Annika didn't want it to keep her from opening up to love. To Brent.

In the atrium, they signed out at the reception desk, and headed for the door. The sitting area in the lobby had been full of residents watching the TV or visiting with guests when they'd arrived. But right now it was empty; it must be dinner time.

She spotted something dangling from an overhead light fixture, and laughed quietly to herself. The stuff found her everywhere. She stopped under the scrap of mistletoe and waited for Brent to glance down at her curiously.

"I think that silly plant is playing our tune," she said, glancing up at the mistletoe.

"Starting to see the light, are you?"

"Let's just say my sentimental side has been severely underestimated, even by myself."

She rose on tiptoe and tilted her body against his. He gripped her shoulders and their lips came together as if magnetically pulled there. The kiss was long and deep and slow, like a wave rolling through the ocean, touching a place so deep inside her she hadn't known it existed. He tasted like the snow outside, like the starlight, like a wish she hadn't known to dream about.

Her heart raced and she felt a little dizzy. Not seizure-dizzy, just light-headed with happiness.

She might not be a sentimental person, but some things had to be said.

Pulling out of the kiss, she held his gaze and let her heart lead the way. “I have to tell you something, Brent Caldwell. I love you.”

Wincing, she realized that the words sounded as casual as if she’d told him she was going to the store to pick up some eggnog.

“Let me try that again. I really love you. Oh Jesus. This is terrible. My resting bitch voice is really not working for me right now. I’m not trying to sound sarcastic. I fucking love you.”

He started to answer, but she put a finger to his lips. “No. It’s still my turn and I’m not going to stop until I get this right. In my whole life, no one has ever stepped up like you have. Usually when I push people away, they go. Not you. I just need you to know how much that means to me. I know I can be difficult. I know I’m used to being completely self-reliant. And I will probably still be like that sometimes, but having you in my life, knowing that you’re there for me, it’s everything.”

She paused, giving him a chance to speak. He gazed down at her with eyes as dark as the depths of Lake Bittersweet. “Sorry, is it my turn now?”

“No. There’s more. I think I needed to see my mother. Face that fear, you know? I told myself I didn’t believe in love, but that’s not true. It never was, but now it really isn’t, because I *do* love you. I have loved you. Somewhere during all that texting, it just happened. Then when I had Zack call you instead of anyone else in the world, I think I knew.”

Her heart was beating so fast she really thought she might faint.

“Annika...” Her name sounded like a prayer on his lips. But he didn’t get a chance to finish.

“Excuse me, you two. Are you trying to give the residents a heart attack?” An orderly pushed a wheelchair past them.

“Sorry.” Mortified, Annika stepped out of Brent’s embrace, and immediately missed his warmth.

“We’re just following the rules,” Brent told the orderly. “That’s what the mistletoe is there for, right?”

“Oh, that piece of foolishness?” The orderly reached up and snatched it off its string. “Betsy keeps hanging it up and I keep taking it down. Health code violation waiting to happen, in my book.”

Annika laughed at hearing her own objections coming out of someone else’s mouth. “I used to think that too.”

“You don’t anymore?”

“I think if you’re in love with someone, you’ll jump at any excuse to kiss them.” Wow, now she was telling total strangers that she loved Brent. What had come over her?

With a grin, Brent put an arm around her and steered her toward the exit door. “Come on, let’s get out of here. I have a few things I need to say, too.”

“But we came here in two separate cars.”

The blustery wind blasted them as they stepped into the parking lot.

“I suppose we could text, but that wouldn’t be safe. I guess we’ll have to stay in the hotel room I booked near here. I figured you’d be wiped out after all this.”

“Well, guess what. You figured wrong. I have plenty of energy left to jump your bones.”

thirteen

Gordo brought Billy home in the helicopter on Christmas Eve. Everyone gathered on the lawn of Sans Souci to welcome him back. Jenna had overseen the creation of the most beautiful “welcome home” banner Brent had ever seen.

She’d painted a little baseball scene in one corner, and an old Sentra in another. He found that mysterious until Annika explained the role Billy’s first car had played in the creation of their family.

The boys had added their touches as well. Hands dipped in finger paint, “I Love You, Daddy’s,” big signatures of their names.

“So he’s going with Barnaby now?” he mused, under his breath to Annika, as the boys arranged themselves to hold up the banner.

“Apparently he considers this an official event that requires the use of his legal name.”

“Got it.” Made sense to him. Why not?

Sunlight danced on the snow and glinted on the Sikorski as it descended toward them. When the blades turned the snow into whirling crystal snow devils, he put his arm around Annika to shield her.

She was feeling much better. For two days now, she hadn’t needed as much rest, and she hadn’t experienced any drops in blood pressure. Maybe he could spring his proposal on her soon. As far as he was concerned, the only

holdup was how busy she was helping get ready for the big Christmas dinner tomorrow.

Had she said she'd never been a boss before? She sure had slipped into the role naturally. With Mallory gone, there was no one to make all the dishes they'd planned. Annika took charge by spending hours in the kitchen and delegating what she couldn't take care of herself. The guest list kept expanding. Now all the Coopers were coming, as were the Gaults and their extended families.

"This is Lake Bittersweet. We do a lot of potlucks. Why not do it that way?" Annika suggested.

"Potluck. I've heard of that, sort of. It means everyone brings something, right? Including me?"

"Can you cook?"

"No. But I can pay cooks." He grinned at her. He'd been doing that a lot lately. Grinning like a fool. His employees would probably faint if they witnessed it.

"Potlucks are about making food with your own two hands and sharing them with love." She sniffed virtuously. "Of course some people pick up veggie trays or premade cakes at the grocery store."

"Ah ha. I'll do that."

"You're providing the location and a lot of liquor. I think you're covered."

Most importantly, he was providing a bandaged-up but perfectly healthy Billy Cooper, by way of his helicopter and pilot.

As soon as he stepped off the helo, Billy swept Jenna into a one-armed hug and lifted her off the ground. Showing off those athletic skills, no doubt; his other arm was still bandaged up. Zack and Bean abandoned the banner and rushed to join them, leaving Tyler struggling to hold it up by himself.

Brent and Annika came to his rescue and grabbed the banner before it collapsed into the snow. They were still trying to get it straightened out when

Billy strode their way, hand in hand with Jenna.

Brent had only seen Billy briefly before this moment, when he'd been stretched out on a gurney. Now he saw that Annika's brother-in-law had a friendly grin to go with his blue eyes and fit baseball-player's physique. Jenna, with her blond flyaway hair and joyful smile, was like a ray of sunshine next to him.

Tyler let go of the banner and ran off to join the other two boys.

"Welcome home, Billy-boy!" said Annika, letting go of her part of the banner and giving her brother-in-law a big hug. Now Brent was the only one holding up a banner, and feeling a little ridiculous. If only his board could see him now.

Jenna grabbed the other end of the banner and rolled it up. "We can put this away, I think Billy gets the point."

"As long as we save it," said Billy. "That's art, right there." He dropped a kiss on Jenna's blond head. She efficiently folded it up and tucked it under her arm.

"I need my sister for a few minutes," she declared, and pulled Annika to the side. Brent wondered if they were still discussing the idea of inviting Sue Ellen and Gary Woodlake to Christmas dinner.

Left without the two women, Billy and Brent exchanged those assessing looks common to men who are strangers, but who realize they're going to be part of each other's lives for a long time.

Billy stuck out his hand to shake Brent's.

"Thanks for the lift, man," he told Brent.

"Happy to help. How's the arm?"

Billy gave a thumb's up. "Not quite ready for Spring Training, but I'll get there."

"Good to hear. And listen, I apologize for everything that went down here. I should have vetted—"

Billy threw up a hand to stop him. "Not your fault at all. Even if it was,

you've made up for it already."

"The helo?"

"No. Annika."

They both glanced over at the Scarlett sisters, who had their heads together. Brent caught the word "stress," and knew that Annika was busy catching Jenna up on her condition. Following up on her mother's suggestion, she'd made an appointment with a nutritional counselor and a therapist who specialized in stress.

"She'll figure this out," Brent told Billy. "And she's already doing better."

"That's not what I mean. I've known Annika for a really long time. I met her the day after I asked Jenna out for the first time. She had lots of questions for me." He chuckled. "I have no idea how I managed to pass her test. I've never seen her as relaxed and happy as she is now. She hasn't even teased me about the fact that it was her boyfriend who got me to the hospital."

Brent didn't mind being called her boyfriend. But the word caught Annika's attention. Her head shot up and she flashed a magnetic smile across the snow. Jenna stood next to her, nearly a head shorter. Two pairs of gray eyes shone at them. Brent had a sudden and beautiful vision of the four of them over the years, at dinners, vacations, holidays, and everything in between.

"Excuse me, did I overhear some random baseball player trying to inappropriately categorize our relationship?"

"Sorry, did I get it wrong?" Billy teased her back. "What should I say? Boy toy? Arm candy? Holiday hookup?"

"As a matter of fact, it's a non-casual long-distance possibly-exclusive emotional and physical connection that defies simple labels."

Brent snorted and shook his head at that word salad. So far, they knew they loved each other, but they hadn't pinned it down beyond that. And the ring was still somewhere, waiting for him to find the right moment.

“What?” Annika cocked her head at him. “Am I way off base? Was it the non-casual part?”

Billy cleared his throat and slung his arm around Jenna’s shoulders. “First of all, two points for the baseball reference. Second, we’re going to get inside. I hear there’s eggnog and a tree.”

Jenna gave them both an impish smile. “We all have so much to celebrate, so don’t take too long figuring out what to call your relationship. Besides, I know exactly what to call it.”

“What?” Annika asked curiously.

“My wish come true,” said Jenna softly. “We were both alone, and now we’re not.”

True sweetheart...yeah, that pretty much described Jenna Scarlett Cooper.

With that, the two of them trudged hand in hand through the snow toward Sans Souci.

“Okay, Caldwell. What’s up?” Annika folded her arms across her chest. She wore a wary look, one that he hadn’t seen from her in a while. “What did I get wrong about our relationship? How would you describe it if not as a non-casual, long-distance, possibly-exclusive emotional and physical connection that defies simple labels”

He ticked off the items on his fingers. “We’re definitely not casual. If it was casual, would I have spent all that time in the hospital with you?”

“No, and I wouldn’t have let you.” Color tinted her cheeks. “So it’s not casual.”

“Of course not. And I sure as hell don’t want to see anyone else. That makes it exclusive.”

“Neither do I.” A wisp of wind picked up the ends of her hair and fanned them behind her. “So, exclusive. Just like I said.”

“It was the long-distance part that got my attention.”

“Chicago to Lake Bittersweet isn’t long-distance?”

“It definitely is. Too long, too distant. That’s why I’ve decided to set up a

home base here in town.” He tucked her flying hair behind her ear. They should get inside before they got frostbite. But he didn’t want to move, not yet.

“Here in town,” she said blankly. “You mean in Lake Bittersweet?”

“Sure, why not? There’s internet. Tyler loves it here. I love it here.” So close to what he really wanted to say to her. So close.

Her expression was still guarded. “What about Tyler’s school?”

“We’ll try the school here for a semester and see how he likes it. I’ll still need to travel to Chicago, and no doubt other places, just like before. But I think Tyler would benefit from the change of pace. He really comes alive here.”

As did he.

So why not say that?

Her gray eyes were on him, waiting for more, knowing there was more. He gave her a quiet smile. “Annika Scarlett, I loved you from the first second I saw you. Right there in the clinic, it hit me like a goddamn truck. I haven’t been the same since, and I mean that literally. I used to have discipline, I used to know exactly what I was doing on any given day. After that night in the clinic, all I can think about is when the next text from Annika is coming. You ruined my concentration.” He cringed, realizing that didn’t sound especially romantic. “Sorry. That came out wrong.”

“No. You’re doing great.” Her voice quavered with emotion. “After we left my mother’s place, I wasn’t sure maybe...”

“What?” He grabbed her by the shoulders and stared down at her, at her luminous face and uncertain expression.

“It’s all so messy. You have a good life. Why would you want to complicate it with my family drama?”

“My life is...it’s nothing without you,” he said simply. “You’re my heart. I love you completely. I have since the very beginning.”

She gave a little sob. “All those months, you never said...”

“I know you’re a skeptic. I didn’t think you’d believe love at first sight could be real. But it was, Annika. And it hasn’t gone away. It’s gotten deeper, stronger. I want...I want to marry you.”

Her eyes widened and, at the same time, teared up. “You do?” Then she drew back. “Oh my god. That ring?”

“I brought it with me from Chicago. I thought it was in my pocket, but now I can’t put my hands on it.”

“You lost a diamond ring?”

“It has emeralds, too.”

She swayed slightly in his arms. “Listen, I don’t need a ring to want to marry you. But if you bought one, you’d damn well better find it. I won’t be responsible for you wasting your money.”

Laughter bubbled up from deep inside his chest. That was so Annika—direct, practical, hilarious. “It’s probably between the seats in the chopper, or maybe in the snow somewhere. It doesn’t matter. It did its job. You just said you want to marry me.”

“I said I don’t need a ring to want to marry you.” She caught his expression, and added, “Just to be accurate. But yes, I want to be with you. I love you. I want to make a life with you. That sounds like marriage to me. But I don’t know how you billionaires do it, so if you’d rather just stay the way we are...”

“I’m Brent Caldwell, the man who loves you. That’s all. And I would love to marry you. I’d marry you tomorrow if I could.”

She took that in, really absorbed it, like a flower drinking in light until her eyes shone. “That’s the second best day, after today,” she said softly. He heard no sarcasm, no snarkiness, just straight-up softness and love in her voice.

He snatched her up in his arms. As they hugged each other impossibly close, he let out the biggest belly laugh he’d ever produced. By far, since he wasn’t generally prone to belly laughs. The sun sparkled on the snow, a

squirrel chirruped in the nearby woods, a breath of wind gusted against them, and he was alive. So alive, and life was good. “God, I love you so much.”

“I love you too, my non-casual, completely exclusive, physically and emotionally bonded...*fiancé*.”

“You really make that sound romantic,” he murmured in her ear. “I think everyone was wrong about you.”

“Shhh. Don’t tell them. I have a reputation to maintain.”

“Oh honey, I intend to completely ruin your reputation...in the best possible way.” Desire rose between them, hot and heavy. Her hips pressed against his, her breasts against his chest, but still it didn’t feel close enough. He crushed her closer against him, then stilled as she made a little sound. “You okay?”

“Yes, um...is that a ring in your pocket or are you extra happy to see me?”

Sure enough, there it was, worked into the fabric at the bottom of his pants pocket. Waiting for it all to be real.

He held it in his palm. “You’re not going to toss it back at me this time, are you?”

“No, I won’t.” Her tender smile just about knocked him off his feet. “But can we also get back to that other thing going on in your pants?”

“Tonight. After the tree is decorated and the eggnog is gone.”

They indulged themselves in a deep kiss that promised all kinds of ecstasy for later that night.

“Hey, I just realized something,” Annika said when they were finally heading inside. “My mistletoe wish did come true. Your trip here wasn’t a total disaster.”

“Such a low bar. Maybe you need to be more ambitious with your wishes.”

“You know, I think I will.”

fourteen

“I have an announcement to make.” Annika stood up from the quilted loveseat where she and Brent had been snuggling.

No one paid any attention to her.

It was Christmas day, and they’d all moved from the dining room into the spacious living room after feasting on honey-roasted ham, baked salmon, pomegranate salad, sweet potato rolls from the Blue Drake, and a cake made from layers of flaky pastry, custard, and apricot puree. Jenna had concocted that creation; it sure paid to have a sister who liked to cook.

“Ahem,” she tried again, clearing her throat. But she didn’t manage to cut through the hum of happy conversation. She scanned the room, which she and Brent, with help from the boys, had decorated with pine boughs and candles protected by glass globes. If another storm hit, they’d be ready.

Snuggled together on one couch, Thomas Cooper and Carly Gault Cooper were busy playing peekaboo with their young one, Teddy. He wore a fuzzy set of moose antlers that had been a gift from his uncle Galen.

Galen was stretched out on his stomach playing a board game with Brenda, the lovely teacher he’d fallen in love with, along with Zack and Tyler. They were all arguing about a move Tyler had just made. The normally shy Tyler was holding his own without an ounce of reserve. Annika knew how much that meant to Brent.

But where was Bean? She quickly found him on another couch playing a tickle-game with Billy. Jenna was draped over her husband's shoulder, threatening to tickle Billy the second Bean wanted help. Bean was gasping with laughter, giddy with the joy of having both parents focused on him.

Nearby, Earl Granger and Bliss Gault were deep in conversation with Conor Gault and Emmaline Curtis while they all watched the Granger twins play on a blanket they'd spread out on the carpet. Bliss, a former model, had gifted everyone a knitted hat for Christmas. Many of the guests were still wearing their hats, including Annika. They were darling.

Annika looked a little closer at Emmaline, a sprite of a girl who she'd known since high school. Was she...pregnant? Just a little bit? Emmaline looked up and caught her eye and winked, then put a finger to her lips.

Gotcha.

Perched on Jason Mosedale's knee, Kendra Carter caught the interaction and grinned at Annika, lifting her glass of eggnog in a toast. Obviously, she knew already. Kendra tended to know things like that, especially because Jason was the fire chief who heard all the gossip.

Brent had insisted on inviting the two of them because after all, without Jason and Kendra, he and Annika would never have met. There were other non-Coopers or Gaults in attendance. For instance, Gina Moretti and Kirk Williams had stopped by on their way home from the Moretti family Christmas celebration.

Gina was chatting with Rick Gonzalez and his date, a cute guy from Braddock who was also Rick's accountant. They were all clustered right next to the tree, and a branch kept getting in Gina's riotous dark curls. Kirk kept laughingly untangling them.

Maybe she should have stuck some secret mistletoe in there.

Amazingly, her father was here too. As a present, Richard Scarlett had brought the painting that had caused Annika to reach out to her mother. Annika wasn't quite sure what to do with it, but she appreciated the gesture.

He was trying, in his own Hermit-like way.

In fact, he sat at the edge of the circle, talking quietly with...Sue Ellen and Gary Woodlake. No wonder they called it the season of miracles.

A conference call between Annika, Jenna and Sue Ellen had brought tears and also comfort, and Jenna had invited them to the big Christmas gathering. Forgiveness was such a healer.

So was reducing the stress in your life. Taking time away from the clinic and allowing herself to fall in love had changed her cortisol levels for the better. Stress management for the win. She had a plan now, one that involved taking care of herself and not keeping things inside. Which was what she was trying to do right now.

She tried one more time. “Ahem, I have an announcement.”

When that didn’t work, Brent handed her his glass of eggnog and a spoon. Problem solver to the rescue. *Tap tap tap.*

That worked. Everyone stopped talking and looked up from whatever they were doing.

“I have an announcement,” she said again. But now that they were all staring at her, her nerve almost failed. She glanced down at Brent, at his deep-set eyes and stubbled chin. No need to worry. She wasn’t alone. Not anymore.

“What’s going on?” Jenna called from across the room. She wore a worried look.

“Nothing bad,” Annika said quickly. Of course her sister was going to worry, even though Annika herself had no doubt she was going to be fine. “I wanted to thank everyone for coming tonight. Brent and I both thank you,” she added, since it was his house, after all.

Brent waved a hand in the air to show he seconded that.

“It’s really wonderful to see everyone together. It’s been a busy time around here. New babies, proposals, marriages, people getting back together, people falling in love every time you turn around. It’s a lot for a love-skeptic

like me.” She whooshed out a breath and fanned herself. “I don’t know if it’s something in the Lake Bittersweet water or what.”

That drew a laugh from the curious guests. Bean was sitting on his mother’s lap now, leaning against her chest while he played with a Rubik’s Cube Brent had given him. How had he known Bean would love that?

Back to the point.

“In my family, Jenna’s always been the sweet one and I’ve been more on the bitter side.”

“You’re not bitter,” Jenna exclaimed.

“Not bitter exactly, but...cynical?” She cocked her head at her sister. “Is that fair?”

“Fair.” With that concession, Jenna waved at her to go on. Billy took a sip of his sparkling cider. Annika’s heart warmed as she watched. How could she be cynical when she’d seen so many people struggle to change their lives, and succeed? When Billy had realized his drinking was destroying his relationship, he’d managed to quit. No easy feat, but he’d done it.

“So I’d like to publicly announce that those days are over. I am now officially as romantic as they come.” She smiled down at Brent, then beckoned him to stand up next to her. He obliged, coming close to her side and holding her hand. “I’m in love with this man, and he’s in love with me, and we’re going to do the thing.”

“The thing?” Billy laughed through a sip of cider.

“Yeah. That thing that all of you are doing so beautifully. That love thing.” She lifted her left hand and let the candlelight reflect off the ring. She heard Jenna gasp, and several people clapped.

“Fantastic news.” Thomas Cooper rose to his feet and lifted his eggnog glass high in the air. “To that love thing.”

“To that love thing,” everyone echoed. Glasses clinked. Eggnog sloshed. Zack rolled his eyes. Tyler pretended to gag.

Ah, kids. She could relate, but just wait ten years. They’d see the light,

just like she had.

And maybe in ten years there'd be more little ones to share in the eye-rolling. Or maybe not. As Brent dropped a kiss on her hair, and she surveyed the glowing faces around her, she knew she had all she needed to be happy. She had the man she loved. People she loved. Work she loved.

She had Lake Bittersweet under its winter blanket of snow. She had the lake itself, the woods, the spring flowers, the summer sun. She even had a secret sprig of mistletoe she planned to spring on Brent later.

Most of all, most importantly, she had an open heart.

What more could a woman wish for on a cold winter's night?

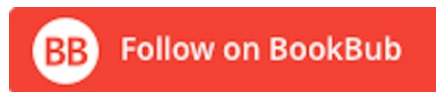
Thank you so much for reading! This holiday novella is a companion to [The Do-Over](#), Jenna and Billy's story. You can find it and all the [Lake Bittersweet novels here](#).

For more contemporary romance set in a small town, explore the completed [Lost Harbor, Alaska series](#) here.

For all up-to-date news about new releases, sales, deals, and life in Alaska, [sign up for Jennifer's newsletter](#). You'll receive a free full-length novel as a welcome gift.

about the author

Jennifer Bernard is a *USA Today* bestselling author of contemporary romance. Her books have been called “an irresistible reading experience” full of “quick wit and sizzling love scenes.” A graduate of Harvard and former news promo producer, she left big city life in Los Angeles for true love in Alaska, where she now lives with her husband and stepdaughters. She still hasn’t adjusted to the cold, so most often she can be found cuddling with her laptop and a cup of tea. No stranger to book success, she also writes erotic novellas under a naughty secret name that she’s happy to share with the curious. You can learn more about Jennifer and her books at JenniferBernard.net. Make sure to sign up for [her newsletter](#) for new releases, fresh exclusive content, sales alerts and giveaways.



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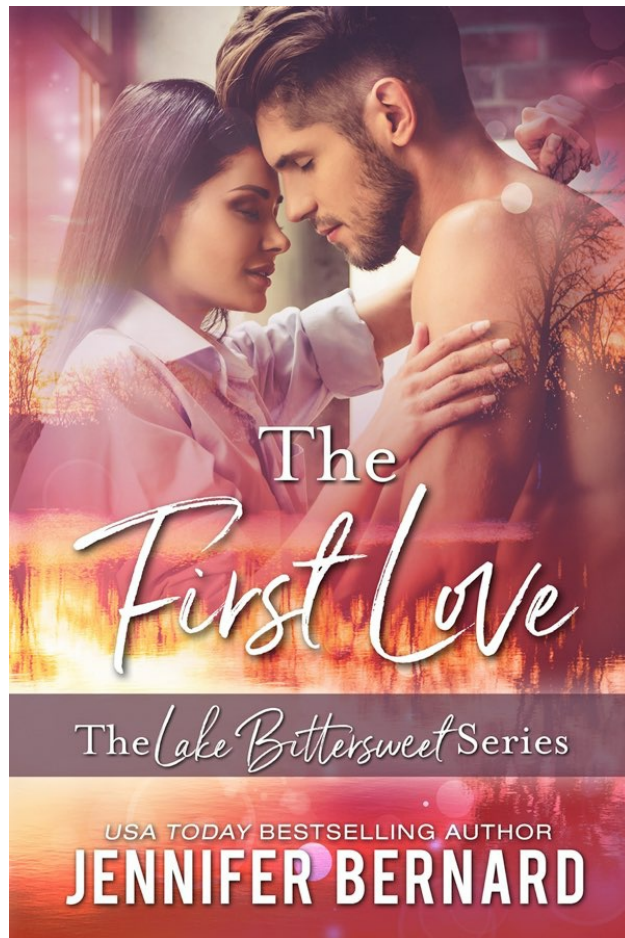
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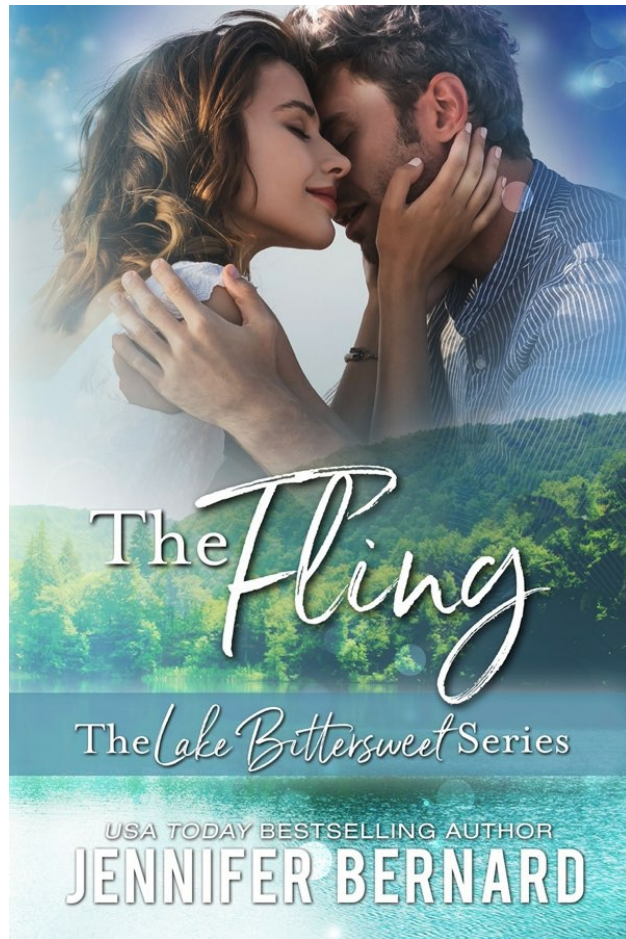


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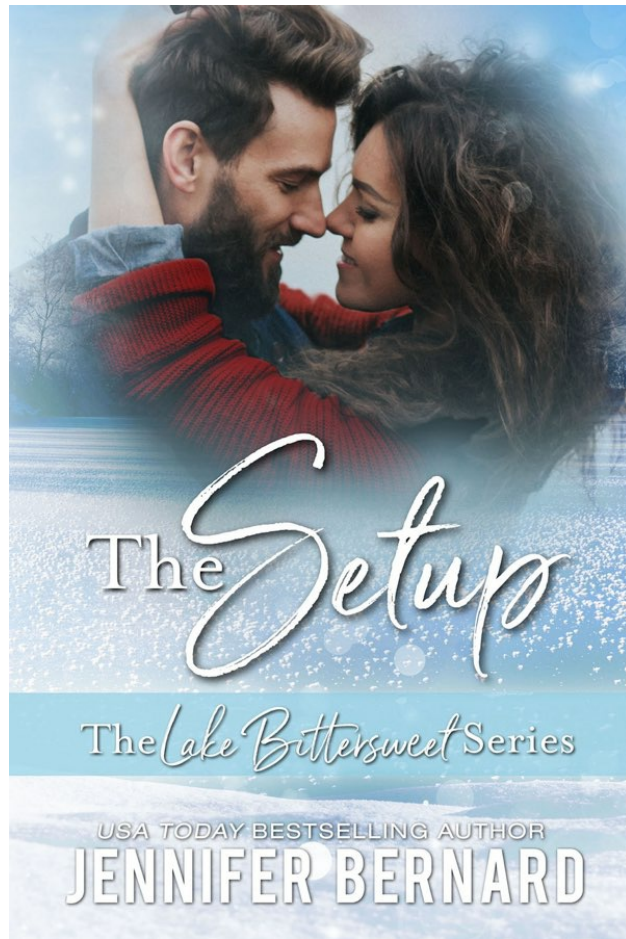
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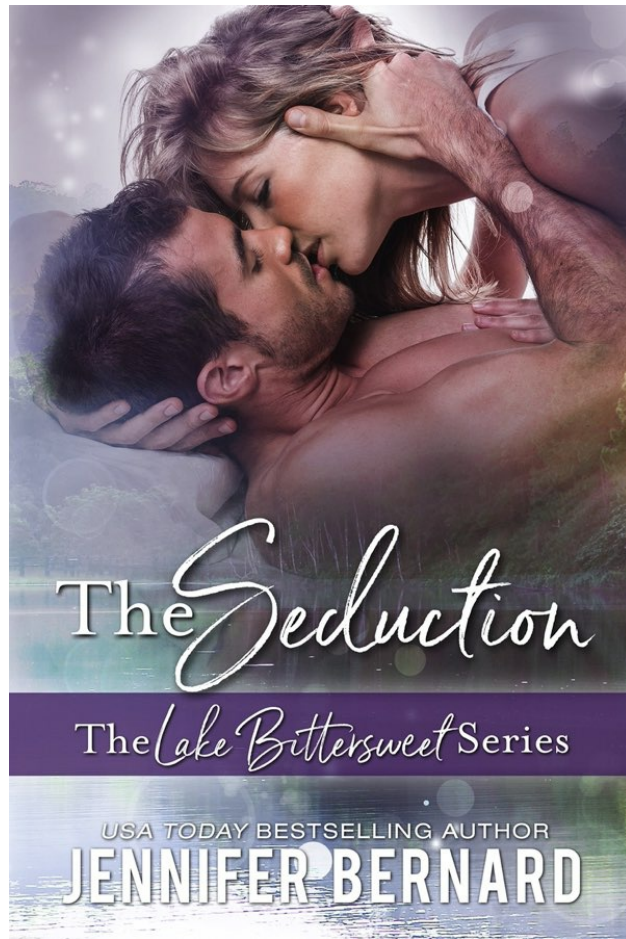
The First Love ~ Book 1



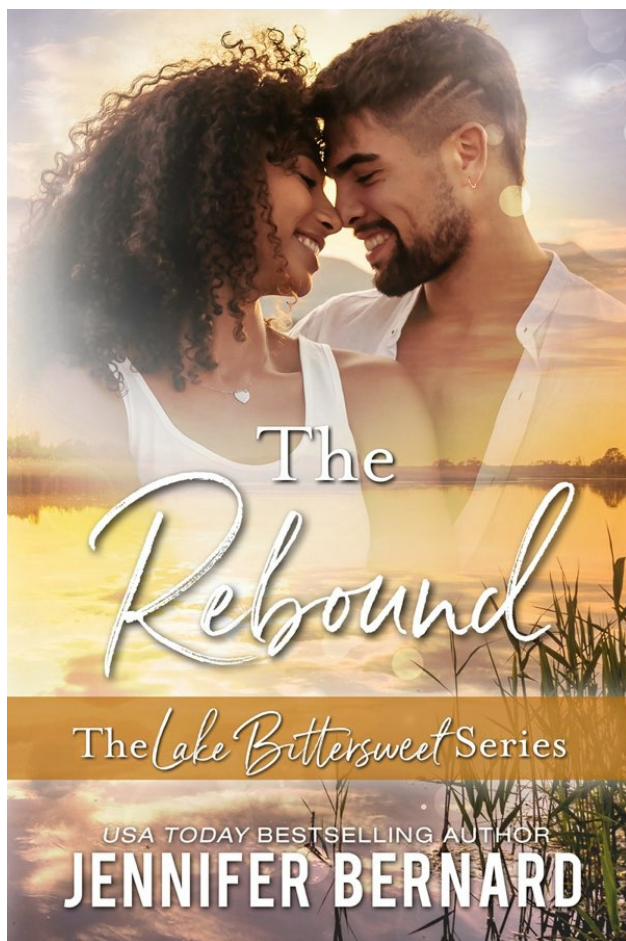
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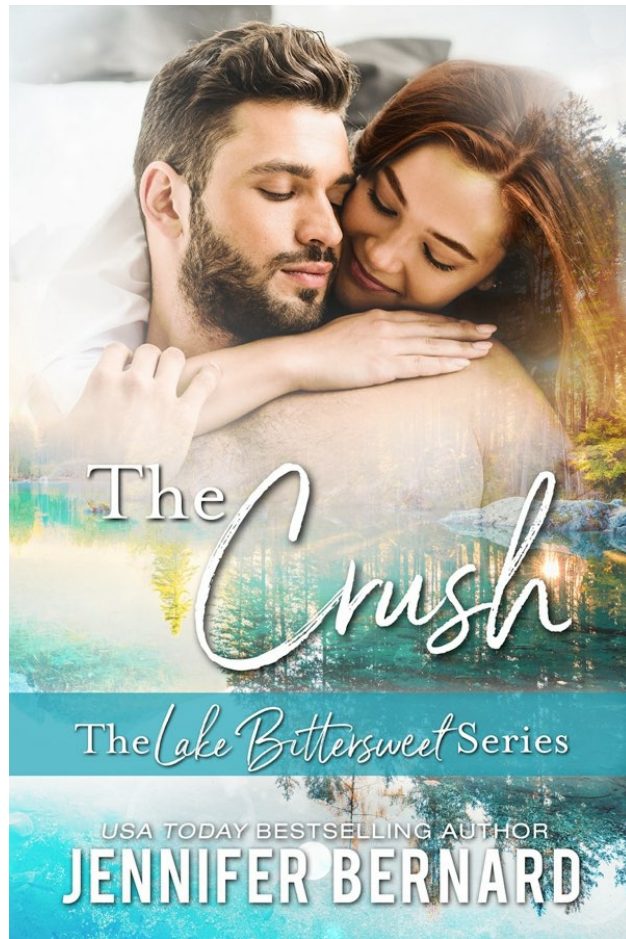
The Setup ~ Book 3



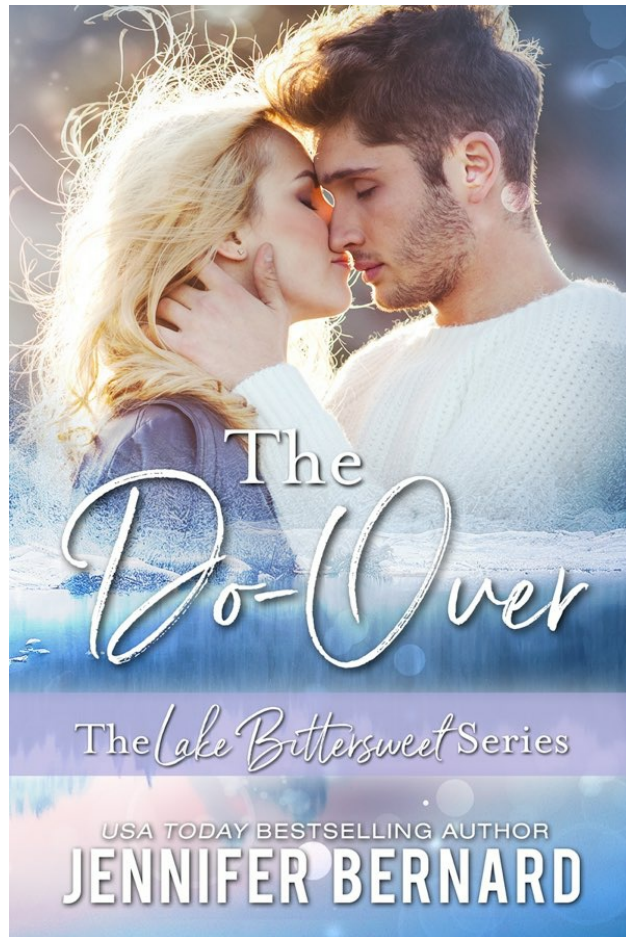
The Seduction ~ Book 4



The Rebound ~ Book 5



The Crush ~ Book 6

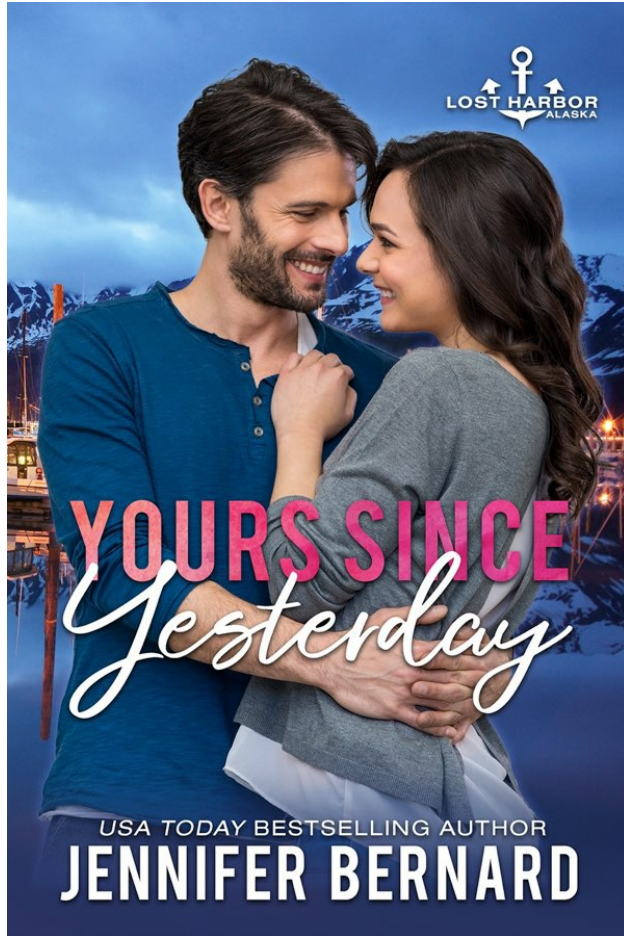


The Do-Over ~ Book 7

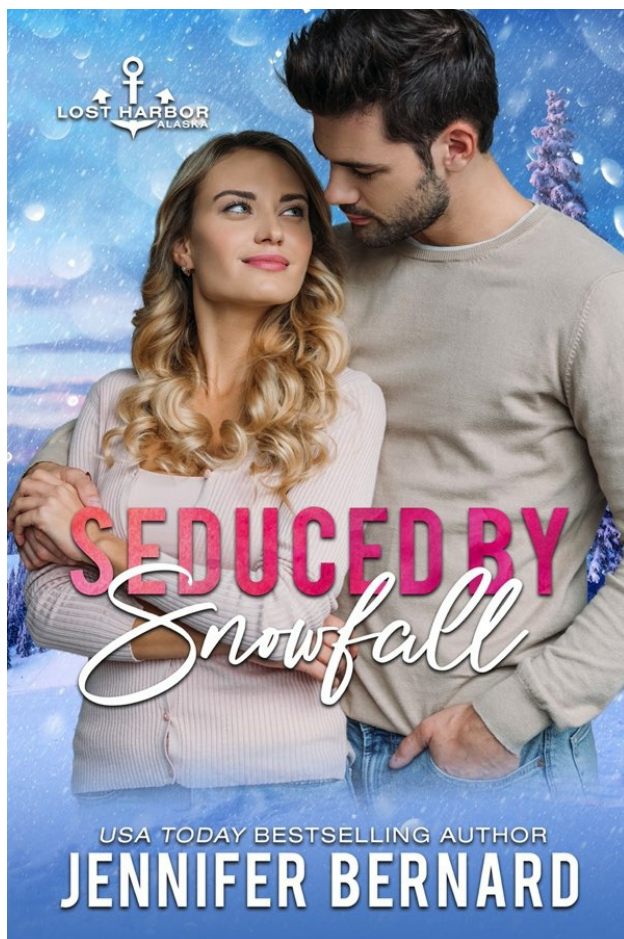
Lost Harbor, Alaska



Mine Until Moonrise ~ Book 1



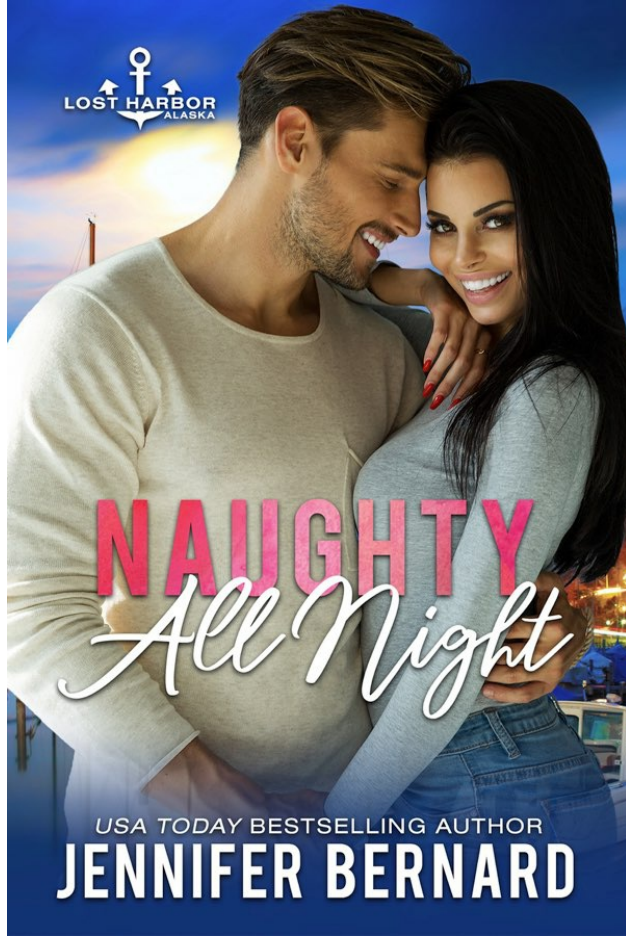
Yours Since Yesterday ~ Book 2



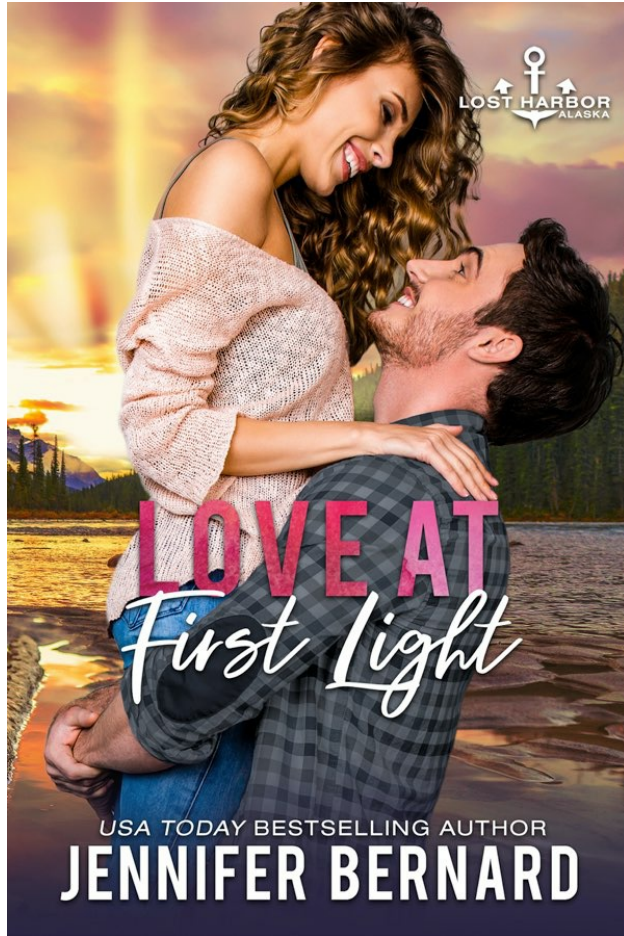
Seduced by Snowfall ~ Book 3



Wicked in Winter ~ Book 4



[Naughty All Night](#) ~ Book 5



Love at First Light ~ Book 6



Head over Heels for the Holidays ~ Book 7



Flirting with Forever ~ Book 8



Mischief after Midnight ~ Book 9



Slow Burn by Starlight ~ Book 10

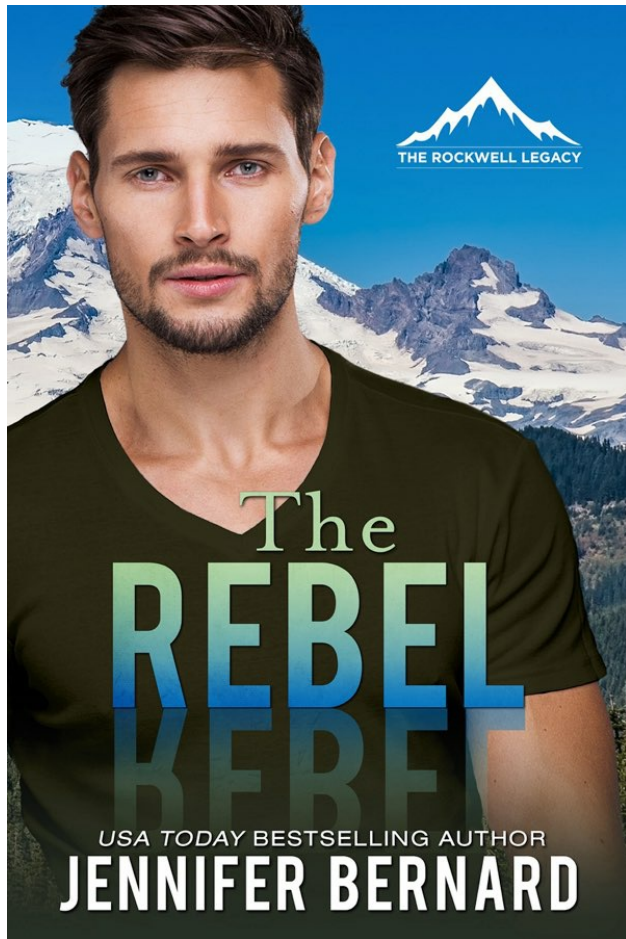


First Kiss before Frost ~ Book 11

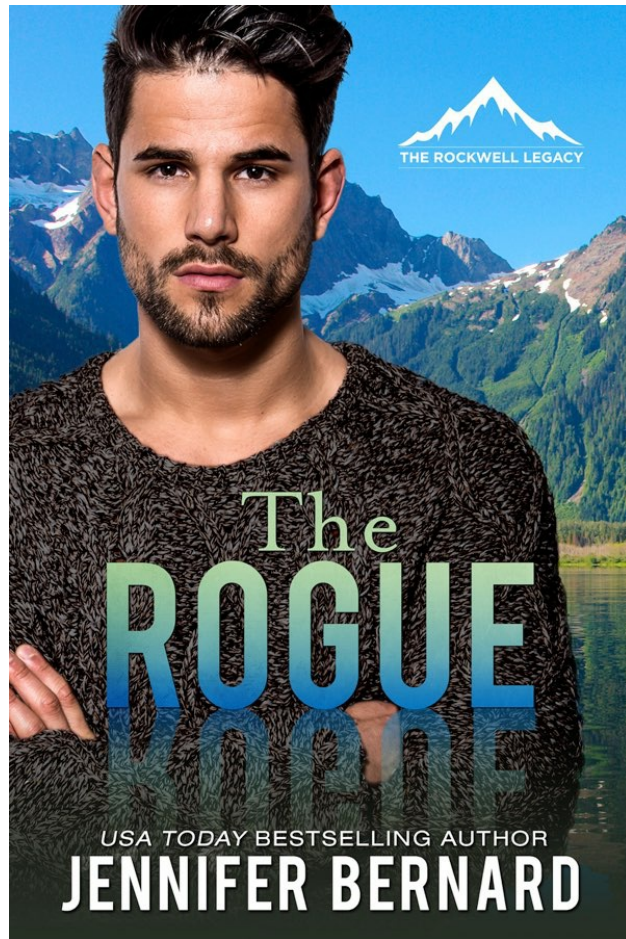


Smitten in Summer ~ Book 12

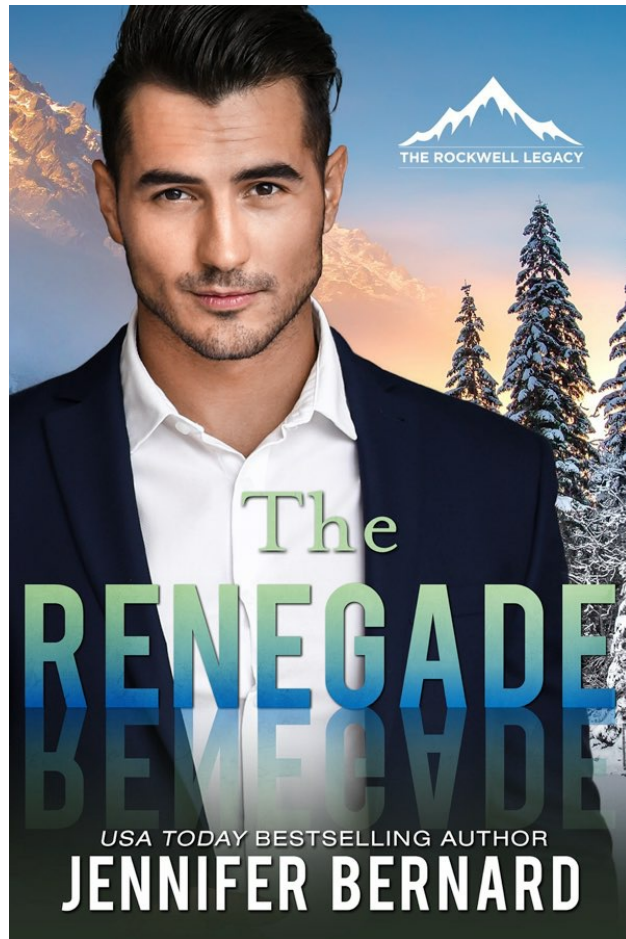
The Rockwell Legacy



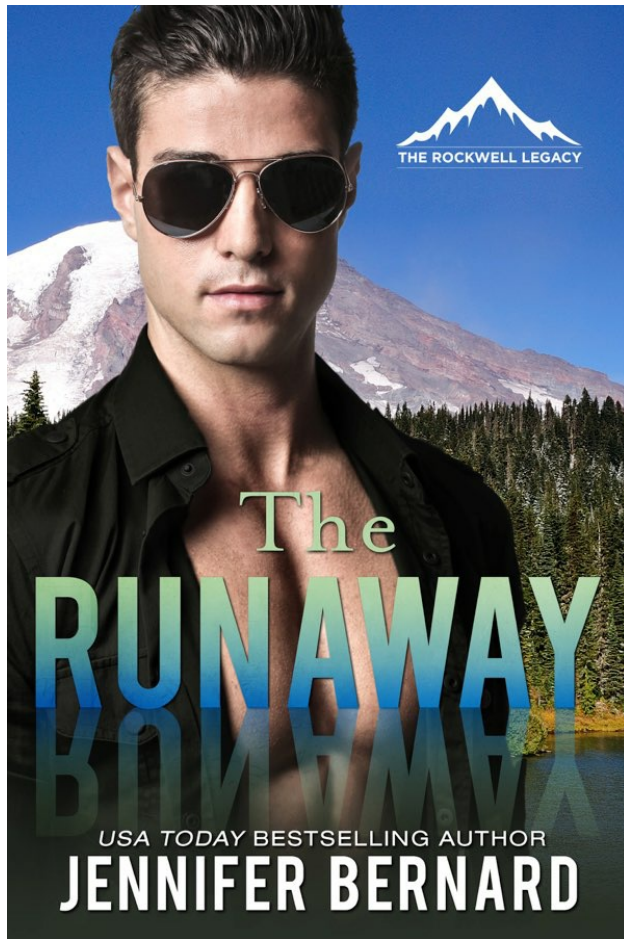
The Rebel ~ Book 1



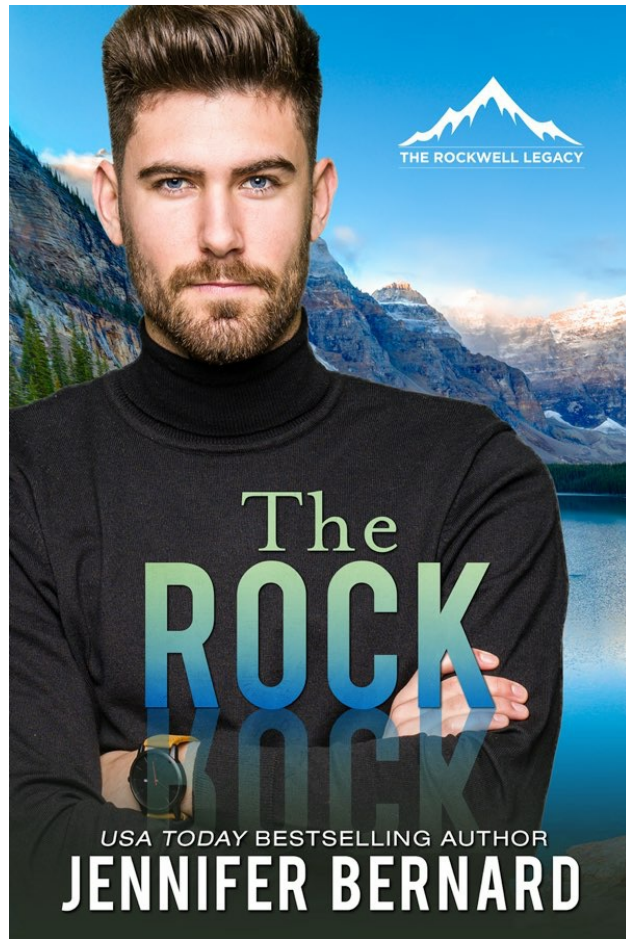
The Rogue ~ Book 2



The Renegade ~ Book 3



The Runaway ~ Book 4



[The Rock](#) ~ Book 5

Jupiter Point ~ The Hotshots

[Set the Night on Fire](#) ~ Book 1

[Burn So Bright](#) ~ Book 2

[Into the Flames](#) ~ Book 3

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Jupiter Point ~ The Knight Brothers

[Hot Pursuit](#) ~ Book 5

[Coming In Hot](#) ~ Book 6

[Hot and Bothered](#) ~ Book 7

[Too Hot to Handle](#) ~ Book 8

[One Hot Night](#) ~ Book 9

[Seeing Stars](#) ~ Series Prequel

[The Bachelor Firemen of San Gabriel Series](#)

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