

A romantic couple in formal wear. The woman, on the left, has her dark hair styled in a high bun and is wearing a strapless, light-colored dress. The man, on the right, is wearing a black tuxedo with a white shirt and a black bow tie. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a light blue, textured wall.

The Other Plan

A Door Peninsula Passions Novel

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
**KATHERINE
HASTINGS**

The Other Plan

Door Peninsula Passions, Volume 3

Katherine Hastings

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THE OTHER PLAN

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THE OTHER PLAN
Door Peninsula Passions
Book Three

The only thing this wedding planner didn't plan on was him.

Being the top wedding planner in Door County prepared me for anything. But when I got hired to plan a week-long wedding celebration for an affluent family, one thing threw me for a loop... the man who broke my heart in college showing up as the best man.

And damn... he looked good.

I hadn't seen Carter since I'd bolted from Hawaii where we'd met on spring break ten years ago. Our whirlwind romance had only lasted a week, but after we'd parted ways, he'd become a permanent resident of my heart. No matter how hard I tried to evict him over the years, my feelings for him refused to budge.

After crashing back into my life, he wanted to win me back. With all his attention focused on me, it would take everything I had not to end up back in his arms.

Just make it through the week and ignore those gorgeous eyes, his tight abs, the knee-quaking smile, and the unrelenting charm wearing me down every step of the way.

I could do this. I could.

At least that was the plan. And in my world, plans always went my way... or at least they did until Carter waltzed back into my life.

THE OTHER PLAN is the third romantic comedy in the Door Peninsula Passions series. While each book can be read as a standalone and features its own love story with a HEA, they feature reoccurring characters on a continued timeline. If you don't want any spoilers about a previous couple, then start at the beginning and enjoy them in order.

CHAPTER ONE



JENNA

“A little higher!” I shouted up to my assistant, Cameron. He rose on his tiptoes, lifting the sparkly white lights farther up onto the branches of the tall oak tree casting shadows over the manicured lawn.

He peered down at me from the ladder and wrinkled his brow. “This is as high as we’re going. Any higher, and you’ll need to alert the airport that I’m in the way of any incoming planes. This is plenty high.”

With a fake pout, I gave him my best puppy dog eyes and gestured with my fingers. “Just a little bit higher?”

His brown eyes narrowed as he huffed. “Higher? Or is it that you just want to check out my ass some more.”

Shrugging, I smiled and gestured to the perfectly round behind inside his trendy blue designer pants. “Well, it’s a nice one. Can you blame me?”

“If I fall, this is workman’s comp. Just remember that.”

“You got this!” I gave him a thumbs-up as he stretched a little taller. His long, lanky arms reached their full extension, and he grunted as he managed to hook the end of the light strand over the limb.

“Got it!” he shouted, but the force of his excitement almost caused him to topple off. Cameron grabbed the top of the ladder for support, then looked down at me with wide eyes while he swiped his stylish brown hair from his forehead. “Whoops.”

“Be careful!” I called up, clutching my chest. “I need you and all your limbs this week. It’s all hands on deck.”

He started down the ladder and glanced over his shoulder. “Maybe you should have thought of that before you asked me to string the freaking twinkle lights up on the moon.”

When he hit the ground, I stepped over and wrapped my arms around him, straining to reach up around his neck. “You know I love you, boo. You didn’t break your neck, and they will look gorgeous. See?”

His gaze followed my pointing finger to the intricate strands of lights. Though they weren’t turned on yet, I could envision them twinkling against the dark sky. When I saw his lips twitch and tighten, I knew he could picture them too. After being my wedding assistant for four years, our visions had merged into one.

Cameron cocked his head, pursing his lips while he surveyed the lights. Finally, he smiled. “Okay. Valid. They are gonna look killer.”

I bumped him with my hip. “I told you it was worth that little extra effort. The Bronson’s are going to *love* it.”

“They better. The budget they have for this wedding could keep you and I marinated in margaritas on a beach in the tropics for at least a decade.”

Snorting, I turned back and jutted my chin at the waterfront mansion towering over the expansive property. “This weekend ‘cabin’ in Door County only gets used a few weeks a year. If you think this place is nice, you should see their other properties around the country. They make this one look like a shack.”

And I’d seen almost every one of those properties. I’d met Aunt Tilly, the matriarch of the Bronson family, at a fundraiser when I was just starting out as a wedding planner eight years ago. We’d hit it off over too many mimosas, and she’d hired me to plan a baby shower. That meeting had started a love affair with this family that had taken me around the globe.

Aunt Tilly loved my planning skills so much she would regularly fly me out to design other events, fundraisers, showers, and family weddings. This would be the fifth wedding I’d coordinated for her. It was always an amazing experience to handle events for her family, not to mention the perks of getting to use some of their vacation houses as a “tip” for my services.

But the large commissions or the paid vacations didn’t make working for the Bronson’s such a huge part of my life. They had become like family to me, and even though Aunt Tilly demanded perfection and extravagance for every event, she also gave me free rein to bring my creative vision to life. And doing as I pleased with an unlimited budget was an event planner’s dream come true.

These extravagant events helped me build a beautiful house in Fish Creek and pay it off before turning thirty last year. Between the Bronson’s several over-the-top events every year and the twenty other Door County weddings I did each season, my small company had become quite profitable. But no matter how busy I got, the Bronson’s events always took priority for me.

“You still need to take me and Louie out to their house in Aspen for skiing. You promised.” He stuck his finger in my face, and I batted it away.

“You’re right. This winter. I promise. I’ll take you both to celebrate your cohabitating. But I’m not playing third wheel while you guys make out all day. You two can get all snuggled up in the hot tub, and I’ll go find a hot ski instructor to play with.” I shimmied my shoulders, causing Cameron’s grin to grow.

Cameron had met Louie at a wedding I’d planned for my clients, Ellie and Liam. The two had hit it off and long-distance dated with Louie in Chicago and Cameron here. But now that things had gotten serious between them, and Louie’s two best friends from Chicago had decided to move up to Door County six months ago, Louie was making the big move too. Cameron was over the moon excited. Despite my happiness for Cameron, he was one of my last single friends. With him settling into a serious relationship, it left me as the last woman standing.

Jenna Parker, party of one. Your table is ready.

“Aw, yeah, girl. I may be a taken man now, but that doesn’t mean I won’t want to help you pick out some mountain hottie.”

He held up his hand, and I slapped it too hard, then cringed from the sting. “Ouch.”

“Yeah. That was a little much.” Sucking the air through his teeth, he shook out his hand.

After the sting subsided, I planted my hands on my hips and surveyed the property. “Okay, we have lights up. The cocktail bar is stocked and ready for my sister to serve tonight. You’ve got cocktail tables on the beach, candle bags are ready to be lit... and you’re in charge of lighting them. Let’s not screw that up this time.” My eyebrow rose with the accusation.

“Once.” He lifted his finger. “*One* time I forgot to light the candle bags at a wedding.”

“Well, let’s not make it twice,” I teased. “You know Aunt Tilly expects perfection.”

“’Tis always better to dazzle than disgust,” he singsonged, reciting her motto.

She used those words whenever you asked her about anything. Wondering what to wear to a party? Was it casual or fancy? She'd remind you that you're better off overdressed than under. Should I plan a casual luncheon or upscale? Dazzle. Always dazzle. And Aunt Tilly lived by that law and would probably keel over dead if any of us saw her without her hair done and her makeup flawlessly applied over her aged skin.

"Dazzle!" I laughed, hoisting up my hands and giving him spirit fingers. "We gonna dazzle!"

Cameron joined me in the spirit fingers for a few moments before we burst out laughing.

"We got this, Jenna. Day one is going to kickstart this wedding week with a bang."

That was the other thing about the Bronson family weddings. It wasn't a wedding *day*. It was always a wedding *week*. Seven days of family activities all leading up to the big event, starting with the welcome reception tonight. This event featured cocktails and heavy hors d'oeuvres for the immediate family and wedding party, as well as any wedding guests who were up in Fish Creek already. We expected about fifty guests tonight, nothing compared to the three-hundred-fifty coming to the big affair that would take place back here at the family beach home.

I gave him a nod of confidence. "We've got this. Why don't you check in with the caterer and make sure they didn't forget the pear, brie, and pecan bites? You know how much Aunt Tilly and Lydia love those."

"They would kill us if we didn't have those. Like, call the cops because we got our throats slit, and we're bleeding out on the beach." Cameron bulged his brown eyes then slid his thumb across his throat. "Dead."

"So, let's make sure we don't die tonight." I gave him a little push toward the catering kitchen set up in a tent behind the house.

"See you soon, boo." He air-kissed me and then strode across the yard on his long legs.

"Okay. Beach bonfire pit is ready," I whispered to myself as I started going through the checklist. "Lights up. Catering done. Bar stocked. Glassware polished. Musicians ready."

"Jenna, dear!" Lydia's voice carried over the lawn and stopped my mental checklist.

I turned to see her coming toward me as she cut through the garden. Aunt Tilly walked beside her, their arms linked together as they waved. Both women wore elegance like they'd been born with it. And they had. Aunt Tilly was actually Grandma Tilly, but she refused to be aged that way, so she required everyone in the family to refer to her as Aunt Tilly. She'd been born into oil money. Her husband, Linus, had come from megabucks himself. And Lydia was their only daughter and the mother to the bride of this week's wedding. Her husband, Alfred, was also an heir, helping the family's fortune only grow with each generation.

A gust of wind wafted across the bay, and both women grabbed onto their oversized hats to keep them from blowing away. Their soft pink dresses, though not matching, complimented each other perfectly and solidified how much they looked like mother and daughter. Aunt Tilly, now in her eighties, had finally embraced her silver hair, but Lydia, in her late fifties, still had hers kept up in a soft blonde that matched her mother's shoulder-length style.

"You two look beautiful!" I called to them as they approached.

"Don't we?" Aunt Tilly smiled as she shook her full hips. "'Tis always better to dazzle than disgust!"

I smiled at her comment and nodded. "Well, you are simply dazzling. Both of you."

"Thank you, Jenna," Lydia said as she arrived, then each woman kissed me on the cheek. "Everything is looking gorgeous. I can envision it after sunset, and it's going to be just perfect with all the lights."

“They will be beautiful. And the candle path to the beach bonfire is going to be amazing as well. Just you wait.”

“Valentina and Eric are going to swoon over this, and they should be here in a few minutes with the wedding party. Everyone rode up from the airport together and settled into their rooms.”

“I hope they enjoyed the welcome gift bags,” I said. “Cameron put them in all the rooms this morning. You really gave them such lovely gifts.”

“We want every person in this wedding to feel special. And tonight will be the ideal welcome dinner to greet them. And the weather tonight is just perfect, isn’t it?” Aunt Tilly waved a hand up at the clear June sky unmarred by even a single cloud.

“Everything is perfect. Do you two need anything?” Another soft gust of wind blew in and pushed a piece of my dark brown hair into my eyes, so I tucked it behind my ear.

Aunt Tilly glanced over her shoulder then leaned in. “I just want to make sure you set aside an extra tray of those pear, brie, and pecan bites for Lydia and me. Last time, the guests ate all of them and we only got one each. *One.*” She huffed.

“You’ve got it. Cameron is checking to make sure the caterers will have them ready, and I’ll make sure you get a separate tray hidden just for the two of you. I’ll hide them in the guest house kitchen. I’ll instruct the servers to sneak them out to you anytime you give them a wink, or you can just sneak in there yourself whenever you want.”

“Ooh!” Aunt Tilly laughed. “It feels so scandalous—our own little secret stash. Like an hors d’oeuvres speakeasy!”

Her tittering laugh caused me to join her. “You are the scandalous Bronson beauties.”

“But have you tried them?” Lydia asked. “They are to die for. And well worth the extra hour of yoga I’m going to have to do tomorrow. A moment on the lips, forever on the hips... unless you have a personal trainer to drag you out of bed and force those calories to take a hike.” She slid a hand over her narrow hips, and her classic pink lips pulled into a smirk.

“I don’t bend like that anymore.” Aunt Tilly shrugged. “They’re going on my hips, and they’re staying there.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “They are well worth every extra calorie.”

Aunt Tilly leaned in. “You’re welcome to have some in the hors d’oeuvres speakeasy. Just don’t tell anyone else.”

“I’m taking you up on that.”

I grinned, and she returned it and slid an arm around my waist.

“When are we going to be having *your* wedding, Jenna? Promise me when it’s time that I get to be part of it.”

Ugh. The question. The one that a single wedding planner gets asked over, and over, and *over*. When is it my turn?

The answer to that question is never.

My dad had run out on my mom when I was a kid, and then I’d gotten cheated on in college and had my heart decimated into a billion pieces. After all that trauma, I’d decided my life was better off planning other people’s weddings than my own. I was a smart girl and learned quickly, and setting myself up for impending heartbreak again just wasn’t something I’d ever be interested in. But instead of that answer, I smiled and gave her the answer I gave every client who asked.

“Someday. I think my husband-to-be is stuck in traffic.”

The two ladies giggled, then gave me that sympathetic smile that always followed my answer. Like being single was some disease I needed to be cured of. But to me, it wasn’t a disease or a curse.

It was a blessing. I was happy single. My life was full without a man in it, and I enjoyed the freedom. Love didn't interest me. Sure, I planned beautiful weddings and told all my couples that they were meant to be, and I *knew* they were going to live happily ever after.

In reality? I knew half of them would end up divorced. The guy would sleep with his secretary when he got bored, or the woman would take up with her tennis instructor.

Was I bitter? Jaded? Maybe.

Okay, yeah. Definitely. But just because I was jaded from a shithead of a father and a college fling that had obliterated my heart, it didn't make it any less true that love usually preceded heartache. And I wasn't willing to climb back on that train.

Ever.

Me and my bulldog, Arnold, were just fine by ourselves. Instead of love being the driving factor in my life, my career took center stage. A career that was flourishing and one that needed my attention right now.

"Are you sure you won't let me set you up with one of our guests? We'll have lots of eligible bachelors here," Aunt Tilly said.

She tried this at every event, and I couldn't begin to count the number of men she'd shoved at me in the most obvious manner possible. But I always used my long list of preparations needed to run the wedding to break me free from every awkward encounter. Despite past history, I still knew at some point this week I'd most certainly be enduring an awkward conversation with a would-be-suitor sicced on me by one of the Bronson ladies.

"Thank you for the offer, Aunt Tilly, but you know I'm just too busy with wedding planning this week to focus on anything else right now. You need me at full power to make sure we dazzle. And speaking of, I'd better go put the finishing touches on everything, ladies. Guests will be here soon."

I gave them each a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried off before they could grill me any more about my non-existent boyfriend. My job was my life, and right now, this welcome party needed all my attention. I couldn't control love, but I could control everything else... starting with that vase of flowers on the cocktail table that wasn't quite centered.

CHAPTER TWO



JENNA

After making sure all the centerpieces were dead center, I recited the checklist in my head as I walked across the lush, green lawn lacking even a single bare spot. I went over every little detail one last time and ensured I had it all done.

Perfect. Everything was in order and ready for the guests to arrive.

“Hey, sis!” Jo called, and I turned to see her walking around the house with her fiancé, Matt, on her arm. Her dark brown hair was twisted up into a formal bun, and her usual ripped jeans and casual attire had been replaced with black pants and a black button-down. Perfect for serving tonight. And knowing Jo, she’d grumbled about the forced attire incessantly while getting ready.

We may have looked like we could be twins with our long dark hair, chocolate eyes, and olive skin, but that’s where the similarities stopped. Jo drove a beat-up Jeep, couldn’t pronounce most designer names, and grumbled if she needed to wear something other than t-shirts and jeans.

Me? I lived for fashion. High heels. Couture purses. Smokey makeup. Expensive sheets. I loved getting dressed up, and stilettos made me feel powerful where they made her want to gag.

But we loved each other despite our vast differences, and I couldn’t be happier to see her here since she’d agreed to bail me out of a potential disaster.

“Hey, guys!” I grinned as I hurried toward them, closing them both in a hug when I reached them. “Thank you *so* much for doing this. Amanda got sick and couldn’t bartend, so you’re seriously saving my ass.”

“No problem. I had the night off, and you know I can whip up a mean cocktail.” Jo pulled out of our hug.

As a full-time bartender at JJ’s La Puerta restaurant, she certainly had more than enough skill to pour wine, champagne, and the three signature cocktails Valentina and Eric had chosen for the night.

“I’m just here for the free drinks.” Matt smiled and waggled his dark eyebrows. “Well, that and I need to get some driftwood from the beach to put the final touches on the wedding altar. I promised Aunt Tilly I’d use some wood from the beach here to really make it authentic.”

“You are seriously the best. I’m so excited to see it,” I said.

Matt had started a business as a handyman and a driftwood furniture designer. With his talents for woodworking and his creative skill, he’d quickly grown the business into a thriving enterprise. I’d started to have him custom-make wedding altars for my clients, and when Aunt Tilly saw some of his work, she’d been over the moon to have him create the altar for Valentina and Eric’s wedding. They’d worked together to come up with a driftwood design that would be draped in flowers and sheer tulle and would look incredible on the beach for the ceremony.

“It’s looking gorgeous,” Jo said, and her eyes sparkled while she stared at Matt. His blue eyes glimmered right back at her, and I had to stop from rolling mine.

They were so unbelievably in love that if I wasn't so happy for them, I'd gag. And I never stopped reminding them that the reason they were together was me. After more than twenty years of friendship and denying their love for one another, I may have let it slip to Matt that Jo had feelings for him and that he should make his move. Sure, Jo wanted to kill me at first for calling them out, but it was time. And even though I knew a lot of relationships ended in heartbreak, there was no doubt Jo and Matt's relationship was meant to last.

That's my superpower.

I could tell which couples would make it and which wouldn't with just a look. After all these years marrying couples off, I could look at a couple and know within seconds if they were destined for happily ever after or divorce court. I almost felt guilty not stopping the ones I knew were doomed, but I knew as well as anyone that they wouldn't listen to me anyway. And what was I supposed to say?

So, you need to cancel your wedding. You two aren't going to work out. You just need to trust me on this.

Yeah. Not going to happen. I'd come off like a raving lunatic and be out of a career in no time flat.

"I'm going to head to the beach and hunt down some driftwood. I'll be back for a cocktail soon, baby." Matt leaned over and gave Jo a soft kiss. She smiled against his lips then pressed her forehead to his.

"All me. Don't ever forget that this is all my doing." I wagged my finger at them as they broke apart. "You're welcome," I teased.

"Thank you, Jenna, for meddling and busting us out even though you should have kept your big trap shut, and you're lucky it didn't blow up in your face," Jo taunted back.

"Superpower, JoJo. It's my superpower."

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Quit taking all the credit, *JennaJenna*. We'd have figured it out eventually."

I snorted. "Yeah. After another twenty-five years. Maybe."

"I'll always be grateful you opened your big mouth." Matt playfully punched my shoulder before giving Jo one last smile and walking toward the beach.

Jo's gaze stayed glued to him until she caught me smirking.

"What?" she defended.

"You are so crazy in love."

"Yep. You should try it."

"Pass." I scoffed. "Hard pass."

Her dark eyebrow rose. "Just saying. You're the one who convinced me to quit distrusting men and go for it with Matt. It may be time to take your own advice. We did make a pact last year not to let dad ruin our chances at happiness. I've held up my end of the bargain and trusted Matt. Now it's your turn."

"We're not having this conversation." I shook my head and pointed to the makeshift bar situated along the tree line. "The only conversation I want to have right now is explaining the signature drinks to you. Just get your ass behind the bar."

"Fine, fine." She raised her hands in submission and headed behind the bar constructed of a rustic old barn door perched on two giant wine barrels. It looked classy and rustic and fit the feel of the party perfectly. The beer, champagne, and white wine chilled in metal buckets set in the grass, and the rest of the ingredients for cocktails were in boxes ready to be unpacked.

“Should be pretty simple,” I said as I walked back with her. “Three wine choices, two champagne choices, two beer choices, and here is a sheet of paper with the recipes for the three signature drinks. You can set up the bar however you’d like. If you run low on anything, just wave me down, and I’ll send someone up to Main Street Market to restock you. Any questions before I go change into my dress?”

She sucked her cheek while she read over the list of drinks then shook her head. “Looks pretty simple. Should be good.”

“Thanks, Jo. Seriously. This is a huge favor. I owe you. Big time.”

“No problem, Jenna. I’m happy to help.”

I turned around to survey things one more time before heading in to change my outfit. It was time to trade in my jersey skirt and tank top for the cocktail gown I’d been waiting to wear for tonight.

Several Bronson family members had already arrived and started gathering at the cocktail tables speckled throughout the lawn. Valentina stood next to Aunt Tilly and her mother, and she looked the perfect part of the blushing bride-to-be, radiant in her white designer cocktail dress with her blonde hair swept into a beautiful, classic updo. There was no doubt that she’d inherited her mother and grandmother’s fashion sense and beauty.

Soon the non-family guests would drift in, and this lawn and the adjoining beach would be filled with laughter and elegantly attired guests. As my gaze swept across the grounds searching for any imperfections or issues before I went inside to change, it slid to a stop when my eyes clapped onto the back of a man talking to the groom.

An impressive looking man.

A *very* impressive looking man.

His charcoal grey suit accentuated his wide shoulders and tapered down to his trim waist. I tipped my head, trying to get a look at the ass I was certain would be remarkable even though the suit coat hid the bulk of it.

“See something you like?” Jo teased, and I whipped my head away.

When I opened my mouth to argue, the knowing look in her eyes made me snap it shut.

Busted.

Instead of defending myself, I shrugged and started laughing. “Can you blame me? That dude looks hot.”

“He’s got a good back view. How’s the front?”

We stood side by side, watching the man talk, both waiting to see if the front matched the promising back.

“Ten bucks says he’s got a face like your bulldog,” Jo taunted.

I swept my eyes up and down his body and nodded. “I’ll take that bet. No way he’s not a total hottie.”

With a single shake, we both crossed our arms and stood waiting.

“Do you know who he is?” Jo asked, and I shook my head.

“Nope. I haven’t met anyone from the groom’s side. Valentina and Eric, the bride and groom, live in New York City, so that’s where most of the wedding party is coming in from. They just flew in today.”

When he turned his head to greet Linus as he approached, I saw his profile, and it looked nothing like my dog, Arnold. As I took in the strong jawline and straight nose, I furrowed my brow and narrowed my eyes. Even though he was a decent distance away, he looked familiar.

Very familiar.

Jo sighed. "Damn it. Profile's good. Not looking like he's going to be a bulldog. I'm probably gonna owe you ten bucks, but we'll wait until we see the full front before I admit defeat. Maybe he's missing all his teeth. Or his eyes are crossed. There's still hope." She paused, then craned her neck to get a better look at my frozen expression. "Why does your face look like that?"

"It can't be," I whispered, the words sticking in my throat as I choked them out.

"Can't be what?" Jo looked over at him then back at me.

My heart drummed inside my chest as I squinted harder to get a better look.

This man's hair was darker and shorter, not brushing his chin in sun-bleached messy beach waves like the man I remembered. The jawline was the same, but even more defined than the one haunting my memories... the one I'd held in my hands while we kissed. But the similarities between the boy I had adored and the man standing across the lawn were uncanny.

Too uncanny.

Jo bumped me with her elbow. "Jenna? What the hell is wrong with you?"

The man's lips pulled up, and my breath hitched when the familiar dimples creased into his cheeks... and the same smile that had turned my whole world upside down.

And left it that way.

"No," I breathed. "It can't be..."

"Can't be what? What the hell is going on? Do you know him?"

I shook my head, even though I should have been nodding. "I, uh, I think that's—"

He turned toward me, and even though his eyes hadn't found me yet, the minute I saw them, it erased any doubts about his identity.

Holy shit.

"It's... it's Carter," I choked out the words, but they sounded more like squeaks than syllables.

He continued turning as he surveyed the property, and then those unmistakable emerald orbs headed straight for me.

"Shit!" I dropped to the grass behind the bar and pressed my back into the wine barrel.

"What the hell, Jenna?" Jo stared down at me, crouched by her feet.

Memories crashed into my mind like movie clips playing in fast forward. His toned, tan body jogging out of the ocean with his surfboard in hand. His smile that caused my stomach to tumble and turn like a tilt-a-whirl. Those vivid green eyes staring into mine just before his lips crushed me with a kiss so deep, I didn't think I'd ever come up for air.

And I hadn't wanted to.

As I pressed my back into the hard wood of the wine barrel, I closed my eyes and whispered on repeat, "It can't be him. It can't be him. It can't be him."

But after taking a deep breath and praying that I had been hallucinating, I peered around the wine barrel for one last look. Instead of a hallucination, I still saw a very beautiful and very real man. And now, the full, clear view of his face confirmed my greatest fear.

It was Carter Sullivan.

The man who'd broken my heart a decade ago.

Jo stared down at me while I ducked behind the wine barrel again. "Okay, you need to use your words because I have no idea what's happening here."

"Don't look at me! Pretend I'm not here! Look away! Look away!"

"What?" Jo furrowed her brow, but I waved a hand quickly at her to look up. Instead of arguing, she fixated her eyes back out into the lawn.

"Just don't look at me, or he'll see me!"

“Who?” she whispered through the corner of her mouth.

“Carter. It’s Carter Sullivan.”

“Who the hell is—” Before she finished the sentence, her head whipped at me, and her eyes tripled in size. Her mouth formed a perfect “o” while she whispered, “Nooooooooo.”

“Don’t look at me!” I snapped, and she lifted her eyes quickly. “And yes. It’s him. It’s definitely him.”

She pulled her lips into a tight, unnatural smile as she talked out of the side of her mouth again. “Carter. *The* Carter. The dickhead you met in Hawaii, and then he slept with your hotel roommate? *That* one?”

My stomach tightened as the painful memory invaded my mind. The memory of opening the door to my hotel room and seeing him in my roommate’s bed. Seeing him *shirtless* with her wrapped up tight in his arms. After meeting him on the beach and spending eight incredible spring break days with him, *that* memory still stuck with me the most.

The memory that stripped me of any desire to *ever* fall for a guy again.

“Yes. That one. Oh my God. What is he doing here?”

Even though I wanted to peek out from behind my wine barrel and look at him one more time, I resisted the urge.

“I want to kill him.” Jo continued holding her strange, frozen smile. “Please tell me I can hop this bar and chop off his lying, cheating head right now. Matt can help. He’s a builder. He’s really good with a saw.”

As much as I appreciated my sister being ready to murder the bastard who’d broken my heart, my desire to just get the hell out of this situation unnoticed overtook my desire for his blood. “Just act natural! Don’t let him see me. Please, please don’t let him see me.”

“That’s going to be hard. You can only sit behind that barrel for so long. And you definitely cannot dazzle from down there.”

Shit. She was right. Not only was this wine barrel a very ineffective hiding place, the only way out of here was into the woods behind the little makeshift bar. But even that wasn’t a clean getaway because it required an out-in-the-open sprint to safety to reach the trees. I could also bolt through the yard to the house, but Carter Sullivan was standing in said yard.

As panic rose inside me and bubbled like a pot on a stove threatening to boil over, I took a deep, stilling breath and tried to simmer it down.

I’m Jenna Parker. I’m a strong, confident woman. I’m a wedding planner who puts out fires for a living. Just because I threw the kindling on this one and he lit the match means nothing. I can handle this.

Handling emergencies with a cool, calm head was my forte. I could not fall apart. Not now. Not ever. This was the time to do what I did best.

Plan.

Escape strategies rolled through my brain, but each one proved impossible to execute. There was no fire alarm to pull, no wall of bodies to blend behind, no darkness to swallow up my escape. Not for at least another hour when the sun set.

Trapped. I was trapped.

“My phone is on the bar by your hand,” I whispered. “I’m going to text Cameron to get his ass over here and distract everyone so I can sneak out. It’s the safest way.”

Jo continued holding her tense posture as she slid her hand across the bar, then casually, she dropped my phone into my lap. As I clicked on Cameron’s contact and started typing my SOS, Jo

kicked me in the leg.

“Ouch!” I grumbled.

“He’s coming. Holy crap. He’s coming over,” she ground out through gritted teeth.

My already pounding heart thumped like a bass drum in a metal band.

“No! What? No!” I shifted back and forth, staring at the woods in front of me and wondering if I could make it. But before I had a chance to run for my life, I heard the same sexy, deep voice that had whispered “I love you” into my ear while we sat on the sand beside the ocean.

“Hey,” he said to Jo, and even though I couldn’t see him, I heard his smile in the tone of his voice. That beautiful, charming smile that creased deep dimples into his cheeks and caused his eyes to sparkle.

The one that still appeared sometimes in my dreams.

“Uh, hey,” Jo answered flatly, and her short, awkward response made me cringe. From a wedding planner standpoint, I would have scolded her for not being friendly to a guest. But this wasn’t just any guest. This was the man who’d broken her sister’s heart and considering Jo had kicked the crap out of people for less, I had to let go of the fact she wasn’t offering service with a smile and just be glad she didn’t smack him.

“So, Eric sent me over to get a cherry Moscow mule. Says it’s the signature Door County drink, and I have to have one.”

He’s smiling wider now. I can envision him.

“Coming right up,” Jo grumbled, then started scooping ice from the metal bucket into a glass as I tried to keep my breathing steady.

“You work a lot of weddings?” he asked.

“Nope.” She poured the cherry juice over the ice.

After a moment of awkward silence, he started up his friendly chatter again. “I’m Carter. I’m Eric’s college roommate and the best man, so if you could make my drinks a little weak tonight, I’d appreciate it. I don’t want to make an ass of myself in front of the family on our first night.”

“No problem.”

Best man? My heart stuttered to a stop with those words. If Carter was the best man, that meant that even if I skated out of here unseen tonight, there would be no avoiding him during the next *six days* of activities I’d planned and needed to supervise.

Panic like I’d never felt coursed through my veins as I contemplated tossing Cameron the reins to this entire affair. I’d have him tell the Bronson’s I’d fallen and cracked my head and would be in a coma in the hospital all week.

But these were the Bronson’s. And if Cameron told them any harm had come to me preventing me from being here, the entire family would race to my bedside. There would be no faking a coma where the Bronson’s were concerned. And hell... Aunt Tilly would probably send for her private surgeons to come check up on the work of my doctors.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Even though Jo continued ignoring him, Carter kept up his friendly chatter. “If I’m being honest, I hate weddings, so I’ll be easing my pain with booze. Just not too much, and no matter what I say, don’t let me start doing tequila shots. Those always end up with a hangover for days and embarrassing stories for life.”

Instead of chuckling at his joke, Jo remained silent and topped off his drink with ginger beer. “Here you go. Enjoy.”

“Thanks so much. I really appreciate it. You know, it’s funny. You look *so* much like this girl I used to know. For a split second, when I first saw you, I thought you were her. It’s uncanny, actually. You could be twins. But she had a little bit of green and a few flecks of gold in her brown eyes.”

He was talking about *me*. I struggled to exhale the breath I held, realizing that after all these years, Carter still remembered me. Honestly, after the way things had ended, I figured he’d probably never given me a second thought. I’d spent years recovering from the heartbreak. Hell, I *still* hadn’t recovered, and I figured he’d long forgotten my name.

But he hadn’t. And he’d even remembered the slight hazel hue to my brown eyes most people never noticed.

“Well, she’s probably better off without you,” Jo quipped, and my eyes widened as I imagined Carter’s doing the same. “Just kidding,” she added with absolutely no conviction.

Carter’s laugh echoed in my ears, and I hated the way it still made my stomach flutter. It was as sexy as the man himself.

“You’re probably right,” he said between laughs.

“Have a nice night.” Jo continued her cool breeze directed at the man who’d damaged her only sister.

“Here. I’m going to tip you upfront for tonight, so I don’t have to keep pulling out my wallet.”

Just a few more moments, and he’d go. I started counting the seconds until I could breathe a sigh of relief.

“Whoops,” I heard him say, and my eyes widened as a twenty-dollar bill fluttered to the grass beside me.

“No! I’ve got it!” Jo shouted, her body pitching backward.

Every muscle in my body tightened, and Carter’s hand appeared beside my thigh. As his head emerged around my wine barrel fortress, his eyes widened when they locked onto mine.

It may have been a decade since I’d stared into those eyes, but it didn’t matter. As I sat there in the grass holding my breath, I felt the same way I had the first time I saw him, but back then, I’d been sitting in the sand instead.

I’d only been twenty-one and off on my first spring break when he’d jogged out of the ocean, the muscles of his toned, tanned body flexing as he’d lifted his surfboard and carried it toward me. My mouth had gone dry while I’d watched him approach like he was moving in slow motion. Then he’d pushed his chin-length wet hair out of his eyes, and they’d locked onto mine. My world had slammed to a stop when our gazes had connected, and somehow, I’d known in that moment that my life would never be the same. And it hadn’t.

I’d never recovered from our romance... and my heartbreak.

Sometimes I wished he’d never walked over, flashing me that smile that weakened my knees while saying hello. With every shiver of regret, I would wish I’d never gone to the beach that day and met him or that he’d kept walking past instead of stopping to introduce himself and starting up a whirlwind romance lasting all eight days of my spring break. Eight incredible days spent in his arms; promises of forever whispered into my ear while we floated together on his surfboard. We were young, but the feelings I’d had for him felt anything but naïve. Maybe it was just the perfect romantic setting in paradise with a gorgeous man who’d said all the right things, but they’d felt real. Powerful. I’d loved him... or at least I thought I had. We’d fallen for each other so fast and hard that I hadn’t even hesitated to say “I love you too” when he’d whispered those words in my ear. But after his betrayal, I’d tried to convince myself all these years that it was just puppy love, it meant nothing, and to just get over it. But no matter how hard I tried, my feelings for him just wouldn’t disappear... and

no one had evoked anything close to them since the last time he'd kissed me, promising to make our last night in Hawaii one to remember.

And it had been. But not in the way I'd hoped.

Instead of meeting him back at my room to go out to a luau, I'd gone there to find him in bed with Janine, the girl I'd been assigned to room with by the spring break tour company. Instead of a romantic last night where we would figure out how to make our long-distance relationship work, I'd raced out of the room and spent it in tears on the beach before flying home the next day and never seeing him again.

And just like that, the floodgates opened. I remembered the way the tears had stung my face while I'd sobbed over him. Recalling the anger and hurt I'd felt in that moment vanquished all the feelings for him that started awakening as his green eyes stared into mine while I sat frozen and exposed behind the bar.

"Jenna?" he gasped, his shocked gaze locking with mine for several long moments. Time stood still as my pulse whooshed through my veins.

I narrowed my eyes and lifted my chin. "Hey, Carter. Long time, no see."

CHAPTER THREE



CARTER

Even though I'd know those eyes I stared into anywhere, I still struggled to believe that Jenna was staring back at me.

Impossible to believe, actually.

I'd walked over for a cocktail and found the woman who'd annihilated my heart hiding behind the bar instead. As my brain started to catch up and process this unexpected discovery, I blinked several times before finding my voice again.

"What are you doing here? And what are you doing down there? Are you hiding?" I fired off questions at the woman who looked even more beautiful than she had the last time I'd seen her ten years ago.

"I'm not hiding." She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. "I was... resting."

I arched an eyebrow. "Resting? On the ground? Behind the bar?"

"I needed some quiet."

She stuck to her nonsensical answer, and I decided it wasn't the most important question I'd asked, so I refocused on the one that surprised me the most.

"Why are you *here*? At the Bronson's?"

She glanced up at the woman who looked just like her, and it didn't take me but a second to realize they must be sisters. I'd almost gone face down on the lawn tripping over my own feet when I'd first glanced over and seen the woman who resembled Jenna so much. It'd felt like seeing a ghost.

The ghost of the woman who still haunted me a decade later.

But when I'd gotten closer, I'd known it wasn't a ghost, and it wasn't Jenna. Close but not quite. I'd noticed the slight differences right away. My elated heart had dropped like a stone chucked into the bay, only to soar again when I'd seen the real Jenna tucked behind the wine barrel.

"I'm the wedding planner," she said matter-of-factly as she rose to her feet.

I stood up with her and watched as she wiped the blades of grass off her navy blue and white striped skirt.

My eyes bulged. "You're the Bronson's wedding planner?"

A cold expression tightened her face as she nodded. "Yep."

"Wow. Small world."

"Yep."

Her stunted responses and her dagger-piercing gaze set me back. I'd thought about what might happen if I ever saw her again, but I'd assumed it'd come with some kind of an apology or an explanation for disappearing on me our last night in Hawaii.

I'd envisioned her racing into my arms and giving me some crazy story as to why she'd kissed me one minute then vanished the next. Her unexpected disappearance had terrified me to the point I'd

been certain something bad had happened to her, and I'd even tried to involve the police. But she hadn't been missing twenty-four hours yet, and then the next day, when I'd gone to her room to check again, the cleaning lady had told me she'd checked out. Her bags were gone, and so was she. I'd been elated she was alive and not kidnapped or dead, then devastated it meant she had chosen to leave me.

Without a word. Without a number. Without a goodbye.

Just disappeared and left me with a shattered heart and unanswered questions.

But no apology softened her gaze today as she blinked at me, only a coldness I'd never thought I'd see in the eyes that had used to light up when they'd connected with mine.

"I can't believe you're here. I never thought I'd see you again," I managed to say.

But instead of responding with the explanation I hoped would follow, she just crossed her arms and leveled me with a glare. "Well, here I am. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have things to take care of. I'm very busy."

She spun on her wedge heel and stomped away. As I stepped after her, the sister moved in front of me, her crossed arms and arched brows warning me not to follow.

What the hell?

"She said she's busy. Your drink is on the bar."

I opened my mouth to argue, but her granite expression caused me to clamp my mouth shut. I may have been almost a foot taller than her and packed about seventy-five pounds of muscle more than her petite frame, but I had no doubt Jenna's feisty sister would kick my ass without much encouragement.

What I didn't know was why.

"I, uh... thanks." I shook my head and stepped back toward the bar, picking up the glass as I walked away. With a backward glance, I watched Jenna hurrying into the house.

"Just leave her alone," the sister said.

"I think there is some misunderstanding." I turned to face her but shrunk beneath her glare.

"There is no misunderstanding. Jenna doesn't want to see you. Just leave my sister alone. It's going to be a long week, and she doesn't need to deal with this. Got it?"

It wasn't often I found myself speechless. I'd made a successful career with my ability to chat with people, and I was always quick with my charming retorts. But one more look into those warning eyes, and I felt every word I wanted to say, every question I wanted to ask, incinerate in her fiery glare.

We stood staring at each other for a few beats before Eric called my name.

The sister smirked and waved me away. "Bye, now. Have a nice night, *Carter*."

Eric called me again, so I shook my head and started toward him. I looked over to the mansion Jenna had disappeared inside and wondered if I'd ever see her again. I wondered if once again she'd poof out of my life as abruptly as she'd poofed into it. It took everything inside me not to tear across the yard, kick open the door and demand an explanation for why she'd left me.

And why she and her sister were treating me like a pariah.

"Carter! Meet my soon-to-be mother-in-law," Eric said, slapping me on the back and pulling me into the circle of elegantly dressed women. "This is Carter, my best man. We met when we got assigned as college roommates and have been best friends ever since."

The elegant, aged woman stuck out her hand and offered it to me. "Pleased to meet you, Carter. Eric has told me very nice things about you."

"Pleased to meet you as well. You're inheriting a great son-in-law. They don't come any better than Eric."

His bright white grin widened as he thanked me with his eyes. I'd heard for months how Valentina's family intimidated him. Eric and I hadn't been raised with millions of dollars and private jets, and this world was as foreign to him as it was to me. Neither of us were hurting for money with our jobs in New York, but we also weren't going to be buying summer villas in Italy anytime soon.

Well, maybe after this week, when he married into the Bronson fortune, he would.

To keep up my promise to make him look good all week long, I tried to quell the confusion and shock seeing Jenna had whipped up in me, and I started charming the pants off the Bronson women now gathering around to hear some stories about Eric.

The good ones. The PG ones. Not the ones that ended with us waking up on a beach in Thailand after that one night our senior year spring break that neither of us remembered.

The sun set while I finished up another story that had Aunt Tilly, Lydia, Valentina, and a few other party guests clutching their stomachs from laughter. I'd never been to Door County before, but the breathtaking sunsets I'd heard about didn't begin to compare to the real thing. A rainbow of vibrant colors stretched over the water and set the sky on fire. I hadn't seen a sunset as beautiful as this since that spring break when I'd sat and watched one in Hawaii with Jenna.

As I stared down by the water, I saw a twenty-something man rushing back and forth along the beach, lighting candles in bags that glowed against the darkening sky. And then Jenna walked up to him, and my heart stopped the same way it had when I'd seen her sitting in the sand all those years ago.

Tonight, she wore a beautiful gold cocktail dress that stopped short of her knees and showed off the legs I'd always admired. Even in the dimming light, she looked radiant with her hair swept up into a formal twist, and those red lips looked just as kissable as they had the first night I'd pressed my own to them.

"Eric," Aunt Tilly said to him as she clutched my bicep and pulled my attention from the beach, "your friend is a marvel. I think he'll keep us entertained all week long. Won't you, Carter?"

I swallowed hard to regain the speech that seeing Jenna again stole from me, then spun back to face Aunt Tilly with a smile spread across my face.

"I am looking forward to an entire week surrounded by all you beautiful Bronson women."

They all swooned at my smile, and it wasn't the first time a woman had melted under my charms. In fact, most women blushed when I smiled at them. And remembering that fact made me turn my attention back to Jenna. She may be ignoring me now, but it was too much of a coincidence we'd both ended up here, and I intended to get those answers I'd been denied all these years.

I deserved to know why she'd left me.

"If you ladies would excuse me, I'm going to go check out the sunset from the beach. Eric has told me about the incredible sunsets from your backyard, and he wasn't exaggerating."

"Please, do enjoy it. There is nothing more soothing than watching a sunset with the lapping of the waves," Lydia said with a smile.

"I'll see you all soon." I shot a look to Eric, who thanked me with his eyes for all the subtle compliments about him I'd worked into my stories.

I looked at my empty drink and then back at the bar, but the sister stood with a man at her side who impaled me with a mirrored glare. I decided that even though I wanted another one of those tasty drinks, I'd better avoid the woman who looked more likely to skewer me than an olive.

A server passed by with a tray of champagne, so I exchanged my empty glass for a flute. With liquid courage leading me on, I strode across the yard to the candlelit path leading me to the beach.

And to Jenna.

She stood next to the fire with flames rising higher as the man tossed more kindling onto it. The warm golden light from the flames illuminated her sun-kissed skin, and I wondered if it still felt as soft as it used to. He tossed another log on the fire, and then his eyes lifted to meet mine. They widened and darted to Jenna, and I saw him whisper something to her that sent her head on a swivel toward me.

“Hey, Jenna,” I said as I approached, but the stiff, unwelcoming postures from them nearly stopped me in the sand.

Jenna’s eyes flashed shock when they locked with mine, then softened into something resembling a pained sadness. I held her gaze for a moment before she dropped her gaze to the ground and spun away.

“I’ll be by the caterers if you need me,” she quickly said to him, then hurried off toward the other path leading back to the estate.

“Jenna!” I called after her and started to speed up, but the tall guy stepped into my path and raked me up and down with a condemnatory gaze. I stopped and looked over his shoulder to see Jenna rushing up the wooden path between the tall beach reeds on either side.

“She’s busy, *Carter*,” he said with a dramatic pause between each word.

His pursed lips and raised eyebrows resembled the same look Jenna’s sister had given me, and I dropped my arms to my sides with a huff.

“I just wanted to ta—”

“Bu-sy,” he reiterated with a raised finger and a dramatic spiral of his neck.

I opened my mouth to say something again, but he crossed his arms, and the penetrating stare caused me to clamp my mouth shut. Without another word, I raised my hands in submission and backed away. “My bad.”

“Mmmhmm,” he added as I turned away.

“What in the actual fuck,” I whispered under my breath while I trudged through the sand. Not only was Jenna treating me like a pariah, but everyone around her was acting like bodyguards needed to keep her safe. From *me*. The guy who should be pissed at *her*.

Feeling more confused than I’d ever been in my life, I walked down to the edge of the water and let the soft lapping of the waves soothe my irritated nerves.

This was going to be a long week.

CHAPTER FOUR



JENNA

I clutched the box of wine to my chest as I walked down the dock at the Fish Creek Marina. My steps slowed as I approached the Bronson's yacht bobbing in the water at the end... the yacht that Carter may already be on.

Chewing on my lip, I let my gaze rove over the large white boat as I searched the bodies gathered on the deck. I recognized lots of faces from the cocktail party last night, but none of them belonged to that man I struggled to believe had appeared back in my life. The one I'd successfully avoided at the party last night with some evasive maneuvering and hiding skills that would have made the Navy SEALs proud. Still reeling from the blow to my sanity after seeing him, I blew out a deep breath while I forced my feet to keep moving toward the ramp.

Just drop off the wine and run. Maybe you won't even see him.

I kept reciting those words over and over as I got closer, hoping there was truth in them. Hoping that maybe he'd skip out on today, and he'd still be back at the house sleeping. The Carter I knew had been a carefree spirit who didn't believe in watches or strict schedules. When I'd met him, he'd ridiculed me endlessly for my controlling and structured ways. He'd tossed my trip itinerary into the trash can and convinced me to spend several days without making a single plan... for the first, and last time, in my life. Today, I could only hope that he'd continued living by his principles that all schedules should be garbage, and even though he was the best man, he'd miss this party completely.

When I reached the wooden ramp, I considered setting the wine at the base and running back to my car to text Aunt Tilly it was waiting for her, but the professional in me refused to do something so crass. They'd paid me a hefty sum to make sure every moving part of this wedding week went off without a hitch, and it was my responsibility to make sure they had all the food and drinks they needed for the afternoon cruise around the bay. And that included the extra case of chardonnay Lydia had asked me to bring. Not to mention I'd originally planned on being on the cruise with them, but my excuse of last-minute preparations would have to suffice for the reason I needed to bolt back to shore as soon as I dropped off this wine.

"Jenna! Hello, darling!" Lydia called, and I looked up to see her waving at me from the deck, her oversized hat and sunglasses swallowing her petite face.

Too late to run now.

I plastered a smile across my face and walked up the ramp onto the boat. "Hi, Lydia. I've got your wine." I hoisted the box a little higher.

"You are a lifesaver. I would hate to run out." She blew me a kiss and gestured toward the cabin. "You can drop it off in the kitchen. The servers will make sure it's chilled."

As I gave her a quick nod, I glanced at the bodies separating me from the cabin. I held my breath as I scanned the faces, blowing it out when I didn't see him.

With a Carter-less path in front of me, I hurried inside and found a server to take the wine from me. Just a quick sprint across the deck, and I could get safely back to land and avoid another awkward encounter with Carter.

“There you are!”

Aunt Tilly’s voice stopped me mid-stride. I kept the internal cringe from trickling up to my face and slapped on a warm smile instead.

“Hello, Aunt Tilly,” I cooed as I spun around to face her. “Such a beautiful day for a cruise.”

Her bright pink lips welcomed me with a huge smile. “It is—a perfect summer day. I’m so glad you could join us. Where’s your drink?” She nodded toward my empty hands.

“Oh, I actually can’t stay today.” I shook my head. “I was just dropping off some extra wine in case the cruise got extended. I have lots of planning to do today back onshore, so I’d best get going. Have a wonderful day!”

I started a quick turn back toward the dock, but her audible pout slowed my steps to safety.

“Jenna,” she whined. “You said you would be joining us today.”

Pursing my lips into a tight smile, I spun back around to face her. Disappointment puckered up her face as she stared at me.

“I know, Aunt Tilly. And I know I said that I would stay and enjoy the day, and as much as I would *love* to, I have wedding plans that have come up and need my attention,” I lied.

With a dramatic eye roll, she waved her hand at me. “Pish-posh. Plans can wait. You’ve been working so hard on this wedding. You deserve a day to relax and enjoy yourself.”

I sucked the air through my teeth and gave her my best “aw shucks” shrug. “And I would if I could, but I really do need to stay on dry land today and work out some last-minute details.”

“You can take a few hours off,” she continued. “I’m sure you have everything well in hand.”

“Really, Aunt Tilly. I need to go—”

“I insist.” Her lips slowly pulled into a self-satisfied smile as her eyebrow lifted with it.

Insist. That was her code for “this argument won’t stop until you agree with me.” I’d been on the receiving end of it before, and I’d seen it in action with enough other people to know that no amount of excuses would get me off this boat.

After a glance around the crowd, I still saw no signs of Carter. Perhaps he really wasn’t going to be joining them today. I pursed my lips together and nodded. “Okay, okay. Anything for you.”

“I always knew you were a smart girl.” She winked and waved a hand toward the server coming by with mimosas. He caught the gesture and beelined straight for us. “All work and no play make Jenna a dull girl. For a few hours, relax and have some fun.”

I plucked a long stem glass from the tray and clinked it against hers. “Thank you, Aunt Tilly. I’ll do my best to relax.”

“You’d better,” she warned with a playful arch of her brow before calling to the crew to depart.

I passed through the mingling guests as I walked along the deck to the stern of the boat, then leaned on the railing. Maybe a few hours enjoying the fresh air and sunshine wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. I’d been looking forward to this all week until the idea of being stuck on a boat with Carter became a possibility. But now that I knew Carter wasn’t on board, I could take a deep breath and relax. I took a sip of my mimosa, and the bubbles tickled the back of my throat while I watched the waves start as the motor kicked into gear and pushed us away from shore.

“It seems you can’t run away this time unless you plan on getting that dress wet,” Carter said, and his voice sent chills rolling down my spine.

I nearly dropped my glass over the rail as I hopped up to standing and spun to face him. “Carter. What are you doing here?”

“I’m the best man. Why wouldn’t I be here?” His lip lifted into that crooked smile that used to make my knees go weak.

Okay... *still* made my knees go weak.

“I, uh... I didn’t see you, so I thought that maybe you’d skipped it or something.”

“So, you were looking for me, huh?” His smirk grew with the accurate accusation.

“No,” I lied, closing my eyes for a beat while I struggled to come up with an answer. “I, uh, I just meant that I didn’t notice you when I was walking around.”

“Because you were looking for me.” His eyes sparkled with the same mirth I’d used to love.

Straightening up taller, I lifted my chin. “I wasn’t looking for you.”

“You were always a terrible liar.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but when I saw the knowing look in his eyes, I looked away back toward the dock.

“You can still make it if you jump now. You’re a strong swimmer. Or at least you used to be.”

“I’m still a strong swimmer,” I answered in a huff while I thoroughly contemplated testing my swimming skills in a dress and heels.

“I was joking, but you really looked like you’re thinking about it.”

I lifted my eyes from the water below and met his playful gaze. His strong jaw tightened as he stifled his smile.

“I’m not going to jump.”

“You sure about that?”

No.

“Yes. I don’t care that you’re here.”

“But you were looking for me anyway.”

My eyes widened as my rage bubbled up. “I *wasn’t* looking for you.”

“I was talking to the captain in the wheelhouse. I wanted to ask some questions about this yacht because it’s my first time on a boat this big. Well, except for a cruise ship. You know, in case you were wondering where I was when you were looking for me.”

Heat scorched my cheeks as I narrowed my eyes. “I was not looking for you. And you’re right. It is a big boat, so it will be easy to avoid each other today. If you’ll excuse me.”

I started away, but his hand slipped around my elbow and gently tugged me to a stop. “You can stop contemplating slipping off the side when I turn around and swimming to shore. I mean, I know you’re pretty damn good at sneaking away undetected, but I’m not going to chase you around the ship. And don’t worry, I won’t even follow you around waiting for an apology.”

“An apology?” I snapped, pulling my arm from his grasp. “And why in the hell would I give *you* an apology.”

“Seriously?” He laughed. “I don’t know... maybe because you just up and disappeared without a word?”

I narrowed my eyes and planted my hands on my hips. “Oh, I think you know why I left.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” He furrowed his brow and tipped his head.

I scoffed. “You know *exactly* why I left.”

“No, Jenna... I don’t.” The playful look in his eyes dissipated as his face softened.

“There you are!” Lydia called, and we both snapped our heads to see her coming toward us. “I was looking for you, Jenna.”

Carter and I exchanged a quick look before both plastering fake smiles on our faces.

"I'm just enjoying the view," I said after clearing my throat. "What can I help you with, Lydia?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," she said as she arrived in front of us. "I just wanted to catch up and thank you again for doing such a magnificent job on everything. Everyone has been raving about the welcome party last night."

I smiled and gave her a quick nod. "It's nothing. Your family's gorgeous home and the beautiful weather did the heavy lifting."

"Nonsense!" She fluttered a hand at me. "You truly are a marvel at what you do. And I see you've met our charming best man, Carter. Isn't he a gem?"

He smiled wide as she batted him on the shoulder.

"Oh, don't embarrass me, Lydia. The only gem around here is you."

"Such a charmer!" she tittered. "It's no wonder someone snatched you up. If I recall, someone mentioned you were engaged? That fiancée of yours is one lucky lady. Where is she? I'd love to meet the girl special enough to snag such a handsome and charming devil."

Fiancée?

The word caused my heart to stutter to a stop, and also my muscle memory because I let go of the glass I held in my hand. As it plunged toward the deck, I gasped and reached for it, but not before Carter captured it in mid-air.

"Oh my!" Lydia fanned her face as Carter stood up and handed me my glass. "That was a close one!"

"Here you go," he said as I took it back in my hands, grateful it was almost empty, so nothing had spilled out.

"Thanks. I just, uh, it slipped."

"What an amazing catch," Lydia said as Carter and I stood staring at one another. "And I mean the glass *and* the man who caught it."

Her joke fell flat between us, my stunned expression kissed by the breeze. Stunned I'd dropped my glass but more stunned by the news of Carter's engagement. It shouldn't be shocking. It'd been ten years since we'd seen each other, and he was still a freakishly attractive and charismatic man. It would be idiotic to think he hadn't met another woman in all these years. But the thought of him waiting for another woman at the end of the aisle—choosing her to be his forever—twisted my stomach up into a knot so tight it physically pained me.

"It's too bad Carter is taken, Jenna. You two would have made a smashing couple."

The brazen statement shook me from my stunned silence, and we both spun to stare at her with mirrored widened eyes.

"Our poor Jenna just can't seem to find a man," she went on while she puckered up her face in a sympathetic smile. "And she's a catch herself! I mean, look at her. Just gorgeous. Smart, funny, talented. Any man would be lucky to have her, and yet... she's still all alone."

That knot in my stomach turned into nausea as my mouth fell open.

She's all alone.

Thanks for making that sound like I'm some pathetic loser, Lydia.

"Isn't she gorgeous, Carter? Can you believe she's still single?"

He turned toward me, and his eyes met mine. "She is gorgeous. And it's shocking someone hasn't snatched her up."

"Do you have any single friends you can introduce her to?" Lydia asked, completely oblivious to the horror freezing my face. It wasn't the first time she'd tried to set me up, but the overbearing

woman had just chosen the worst possible person to be blurting out my aloneness to.

Dear sweet Jesus. If there was a version of hell I hadn't envisioned, this was it. Having the man who'd broken my heart, the one who was now happily engaged to what I envisioned was some tall, gorgeous, leggy blonde, hearing about my dating woes was definitely a new kind of hell. And one I was currently standing in. I could almost feel the fires licking my ankles as they tried to pull me down into the darkness.

Embarrassment and horror rushed through me in waves as Carter opened his mouth to answer. And then the unthinkable happened.

"I have a boyfriend," I spit out. The minute the words came out of my mouth, I wondered who had said them. Had I just outright lied? Made up a boyfriend that didn't exist?

"You do?" Lydia's eyes widened as she opened her mouth in a huge smile.

"Yes. I do."

Carter's face tightened as he looked at me. Was that a flash of jealousy in his eyes?

Lydia gasped. "Why didn't you say anything when we asked? Jenna, you sneaky little thing!"

Why hadn't I said anything? Oh, maybe because he didn't exist. Maybe because up until this moment, I'd never realized how desperate I'd become when presented with the situation of feeling like a loser in front of the man who'd broken my heart. But instead of saying that, I said, "I didn't want to take away attention from the wedding, so I didn't tell you I met someone. You know... I didn't want to, like, thunder steal. And it's serious. Very serious. And he's very handsome and great."

Handsome and great? Very serious? Oh my God, what am I saying?

The flames got hotter, flickering their way toward my lying heart.

"How wonderful! What is his name?" Lydia asked.

My brain stalled out while I searched for an answer to such a basic question. Names for my fake boyfriend started flashing through my mind like lottery numbers rolling across the screen as I stood there staring at Carter.

Mike, Mark, Jim, James. Just pick one!

But I stood with my mouth gaping open while I waited for it to announce the name of the boy I'd never met... the one who didn't exist. Then the friendly face of a man I'd known since childhood flashed into my mind, and I spit it out. "Evan. His name is Evan. He's a paramedic up here. And handsome. Really handsome. And great. Definitely great."

Oh God, Jenna... enough with the handsome and great.

"Well, I wish you'd have told us so we could have invited him to the festivities," Lydia said. "Aunt Tilly will be overjoyed to know you've been hiding such a wonderful secret. I can't wait to tell her. And we'll figure out when we can meet him. Ooh! Maybe he can come to the wedding!"

I shook my head so hard I felt my brain rattle around against my skull. "He can't. He's busy this week. Paramedic-y stuff and such."

"Paramedic-y stuff?" Carter arched a brow.

"Yes. He has paramedic stuff to do. Work. Training. Saving lives. Stuff like that."

"Well, it's a shame we won't meet him," Lydia said. "Next time we're up, for sure. I'm so excited for you! We worry so much you're going to end up alone."

"Yep. Not alone. Nope. Not alone at all. It's just, you know, me and Evan now."

"Hopefully, we'll be hearing wedding bells soon." She wagged her perfectly manicured brows.

"I guess you never know." I shrugged.

"Oh!" Lydia clapped her hands together. "Carter, you should get married up here and have Jenna plan it for you! She's amazing at what she does!"

He choked on the sip of mimosa he'd just taken and nearly spit it out in her face. After a quick exchange of horror between us, we both shook our heads.

"Gee, Lydia. I sure would love to have a wedding here, but actually, Camilla and I called off our engagement a few months ago."

Camilla. So that was the name of the leggy blonde with the perfect smile, the legs up to my ears, and the breasts that were probably natural and twice the size of my mine. At least that was how I envisioned her in my head.

Wait... did he say called off the engagement?

"Oh, dear," Lydia said with a frown. "I feel like such a ninny. I don't know how I didn't put together that you were the poor fellow who was engaged to Camilla before she..." She sucked the air through her teeth. "You know. Valentina probably even told me, but I've been so distracted with wedding plans it must have gone in one ear and out the other. Please accept my apologies for such an awful foot in mouth situation. I don't know all the details, but I know my Valentina was right in kicking her out of the wedding for that sort of behavior. It's uncouth. I just hadn't put together that you were the young man she was supposed to marry. I'm so sorry for everything you went through. So tragic."

"It was for the best," he answered quickly. "All that matters right now is marrying Eric off to that beautiful daughter of yours. If only we could all be so lucky as to find a woman to love as much as Eric loves Valentina."

Lydia's frown lifted into a big, bright smile as she clinked her glass against his—a smile I didn't share as I stared dumbfounded at Carter.

He wasn't engaged anymore, and I had just panicked and made up a fake boyfriend like some middle schooler who came back from summer camp bragging about the boy we all knew they'd never met. In a matter of less than a minute, I'd gone from proud, single woman to lying, pathetic loser. And it turned out, I had done it all for nothing.

Carter was single too.

The boat picked up speed, and the breeze threatened to dislodge Lydia's hat. "I'd best go find my husband and make sure he hasn't gotten into the cigars. Filthy habit." She puckered her face in disgust.

"We'll see you soon," Carter said, and I just smiled and nodded.

As soon as she got out of sight, Carter's attention turned back to me. "So, where were we? Oh, yes. We were at the part where you were going to apologize for abandoning me in Hawaii without a word."

Flashes of his shirtless body wrapped around Janine crashed back into my mind. The horror. The heartbreak. The agony. The returning emotions twisted my stomach into knots as I braced against their assault.

"Well? I'm waiting?" he teased as he leaned against the railing and took a sip from his glass.

All those emotions that had returned merged into one powerful one as I narrowed my eyes.

"I've got your apology right here." Lifting my middle finger, I stuck it up in his face and spun on my heel, storming away.

CHAPTER FIVE



CARTER

After Jenna left me standing alone in shock, I spent the better part of the morning trying to talk to her again. But she had ninja-like stealth moves, and she successfully dodged me each time I got close.

Not being one to give up without a fight and desperate to get the explanation I deserved, I moved in closer to her once again. After ten years of coming up with a thousand explanations as to why she'd left, I wasn't giving up until I found out the real reason... and now I also needed some semblance of an explanation as to how *I* was the bad guy here. But when she saw me making my way toward her again, she impaled me with a glare then slid into a crowd, disappearing into their conversation.

Unbelievable.

All these years, I'd thought there must be some very reasonable explanation for her exit. I'd believed it so much that I'd almost not proposed to Camilla because I'd still held onto a glimmer of hope I'd find the girl of my dreams again. Something inside me had breathed a sigh of relief when we'd called off our engagement. Maybe, just maybe, Jenna was still out there, and we'd reconnect again. We'd be reunited and fall into each other's arms just like we had that week in Hawaii. But that was not at all what happened when she'd reappeared in my life. It turned out the girl I'd fallen head over heels for wasn't at all what I'd thought. In fact, she was a real jerk.

"I'll get the case of wine and bring it to the servers," Jenna said to Aunt Tilly before heading into the cabin.

This was it. My chance to get her alone and demand she explain to me what the hell was going on. I pushed through the crowd and followed her inside and down the steps, catching her alone in the hallway.

"Are you stalking me now?" she asked as she spun to face me.

"I'm not stalking you," I answered. "I just wanted to finish our conversation."

She lifted a dark eyebrow. "I think I was quite clear that our conversation was over, but if you need me to remind you, I have another middle finger I could try. Maybe that one would get the point across that I have nothing else to say to you."

With a chuckle, I shook my head. "You know, I'm not going to lie. When I first saw you yesterday, for a moment, I thought that you'd throw yourself in my arms and tell me why you abandoned me in Hawaii without a word, but I see now that's not going to happen. And yeah... it took me a while to get over it, but I guess if this is the kind of person you are, then it's probably for the best you ditched me."

Her mouth fell open as she struggled to form a sentence. "*Me?* Are you insinuating *I'm* the shitty person in this scenario? Because let me just tell you, Carter..." She stepped forward and stuck her index finger in my face. "The only one who is lucky to have gotten away from that relationship, or whatever the hell it was, was *me*."

“You?” I snorted. “You may be gorgeous, Jenna, and you may have had me fooled back then when I was young and stupid, but I can see from the fact you’re not even going to *attempt* an apology or an explanation, that you aren’t even close to the person I thought you were.”

“And neither were you.”

We stood in a stare-off, and her dark eyes narrowed to match mine.

“What you did was unforgivable,” she finally spat out.

“And what was that? Laughing with you? Kissing you? Falling for you? Please, Jenna, enlighten me as to what I did that was so unforgivable that you walked out of my life without a word.”

The anger in her eyes softened into an unmistakable sadness. With a swallow, she dropped her gaze to the ground. “You... you cheated on me with Janine.”

“What?” I choked out the word. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I saw you!” She looked up from the ground, and the anger returned to her fiery gaze. “I walked in and caught you red-handed!”

“Jenna,” I said, stepping forward, but she stepped back. “I did *not* cheat on you with Janine! Where in the hell did you even get that idea?”

“I saw you, Carter! I went to my room that night to meet you, and when I opened the door, I saw you on her bed with your shirt off, holding her in your arms. I. Saw. You.”

She straightened her shoulders and speared me with invisible daggers.

As she said it, I closed my eyes and let the memory of that night come back to me. When it fully emerged, I softly shook my head. Finally, it all started to make sense. Why she’d left. Her anger. The fact she thought of me as the villain in this story.

A villain I wasn’t.

“Oh, shit. Jenna, I’m so sorry, but you got it all wrong.”

“Wrong? I freaking saw you, Carter! I stood there in that doorway and saw you with my own eyes. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t yell. I couldn’t *breathe*. So, I ran away, and I’m still so glad I did. You had me fooled, Carter. But no one has been able to fool me since.”

“Jenna, I didn’t cheat on you with Janine. I had no idea you showed up that night and walked in, and I can see how bad it probably looked, but I swear to you on my mother’s life that I didn’t do anything wrong.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but I lifted my hand.

“Just let me explain. Please.”

Lifting her eyebrows and pursing her lips, she cocked a hip and exhaled a quick breath. “Fine. Whatever. Explain.”

“I went to your room that night to pick you up. Janine opened the door, and she was *wasted*. I mean, slurring speech, wobbling all over hammered. When I asked where you were, she just started sobbing and tossed herself into my arms. She was so drunk I barely understood a word she was saying, but something about some guy blowing her off, I think.”

“So, you slept with her to make her feel better. What a great guy.” She rolled her eyes.

“*No*. I did not sleep with her. What I did was walk her to her bed and sit her down while I got her a glass of water. When I came back over, I gave her the glass of water, but she proceeded to projectile vomit on me like she was in the freaking *Exorcist*. I pulled off my shirt because I didn’t want the puke to seep through to my skin. Janine was so embarrassed she started sobbing harder, so I sat down and gave her a hug to calm her down and make her feel better. That was it. I was hugging your inebriated roommate and shirtless because my shirt was covered in her puke.”

Her face dropped with my words as she stood stammering at me. “But... no. You cheated on me. I saw you.”

“Think hard, Jenna. Did you see me kissing her? Having sex with her? Anything at all? Or did you see us sitting on the bed hugging?”

She tugged her lip between her teeth as she furrowed her brow.

“Yep. You can see it, can’t you? You can see exactly what I just explained to you. A shirtless man comforting the roommate of the woman he loved.”

“But... but it looked so...” Her voice drifted off as she shook her head. “I swear I thought... so you didn’t? But... oh my God. Then that means that I...” The realization of her mistake devastated her expression as she looked up at me. “I left you for no reason.”

Hearing her say the words didn’t erase the agony I’d experienced finding out that she’d gone, or the sadness I’d felt over the past decade wondering what I’d done wrong, but knowing it had all been a mistake lifted some of the weight of my sorrow.

“You left me for no reason,” I repeated. “It was all a misunderstanding. A terrible, awful misunderstanding. I would *never* have hurt you like that, Jenna. Never.”

“I... I’m so sorry, Carter. I can’t imagine what you thought of me.”

I reached forward and brushed the pad of my thumb across her cheek. Her skin was just as soft as I remembered it, and when she looked up into my eyes, I saw the same look she used to give me right before I kissed her.

And God, did I want to kiss her again. It took every ounce of strength in my body not to yank her against me and crush her lips with ten years’ worth of missed kisses. But she had a boyfriend now, and as much as it killed me to think of her with someone else, I wasn’t the kind of guy who would do that to another man. I’d been that other man, and I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.

With a chuckle, I forced my hand from her face. “I was pretty heartbroken. I’m not gonna lie. I even called the cops and tried to file a missing person report. I was so worried. But it hadn’t been enough time for them to file it, and the next morning I checked your room again, and you were gone.”

“After I saw you with Janine, I took off and ran to the beach. I was too angry and heartbroken to go back to my room that night and confront Janine, so I spent the entire night on the beach in a cabana hut, sobbing. The next morning, I snuck back into my hotel room when I saw Janine leave. I grabbed my bags and took a shuttle to the airport.”

“So, you never talked to her again so she could explain?”

She shook her head. “No. And we were only assigned roommates, so I never saw her again. I think she went to college in Colorado or something.”

“I can’t believe that happened. I had no idea why you just left me, but now it makes so much sense. I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

“It turns out that I’m the one who should be apologizing. I can’t imagine how you felt.”

I chuckled. “I’d like to say it was no big deal and I took it like a man, but in reality, I was devastated.”

“Yeah. Me too. Although, it seems I didn’t have any reason to be.” Jenna rolled her eyes and palmed her face. “Wow. I really screwed everything up. I’m so sorry, Carter. I never would have left you like that had I known.”

A decade’s worth of confusion and pain seeped out of me hearing her say those words.

“Got a time machine in that wedding planner bag of yours? Think we could go back and redo that last night?”

With a small, pained smile, she dropped her shoulders. "I've got pretty much everything except a time machine in there. Maybe we could make a bridge of bobby pins and run back in time. Lord knows I've got enough of those in there."

We laughed together, and it felt good to have the explanation I'd been dying to hear... but the sound of her sweet laughter only inflamed the fire for her that had never quite gone out. I felt it burning brighter as she looked up at me and smiled.

"Jenna, I know that you have a..."

Aunt Tilly's voice echoing down the stairwell interrupted my sentence. "Did you find it, Jenna?"

"Um, almost, Aunt Tilly! Just one sec!" she called over my shoulder. "Sorry, I should get the wine for her."

"Yeah. No. Of course. I'm sorry I slowed you up."

"No," she said on a sigh. "I'm so glad you stalked me down and forced me to listen to your explanation. And I'm so sorry that I took off like that and didn't give you a chance to explain."

"I don't blame you one bit. When I caught my fiancée in bed with another guy, I didn't exactly pull up a chair and really survey the situation to ensure they were doing what it looked like they were doing."

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry to hear that happened, Carter."

"Yeah. It sucked at the time, but it's all for the best," I answered quickly. "Better I found out who she was before I married her."

Jenna nodded. "I marry a lot of people that I know aren't going to make it, and it's always better if you can get out before it's too late."

"Exactly. Now I know."

"Well, I'm sorry that happened to you. And I'm sorry I took off from Hawaii."

"I'm just glad I found you again."

We exchanged a look before Aunt Tilly's voice interrupted once more. "Do you see it?"

Jenna chuckled. "She needs her wine. Stat. Gotta go."

"By all means," I said as I stepped aside.

"Coming, Aunt Tilly!" she called up before grabbing a case of wine and walking past me.

"I'll see you around," I said as I watched her walk up the stairs.

She looked over her shoulder and smiled. "Yeah. I'll see you around."

The way she smiled at me sent my heart hammering against my ribs just like it had the first time I'd seen her on that beach. But it slowed to a painful drone when I realized this time, she already had someone else. It was going to be a painful week being near her without getting to pull her into my arms... the arms where I knew she'd always belong.

CHAPTER SIX



JENNA

“Shut the front door!” Cameron shoved my shoulder, making me tumble backward on my bed.

I sat upright again and sucked the air through my teeth. “Dead serious. It was all a mistake.”

He lifted a finger and closed his eyes, pausing for a moment before he said, “So, it turns out in this movie, you’re the villain. *You’re* the asshole! You abandoned poor, sweet, beautiful Carter in Hawaii and left him alone with a broken heart. I can’t believe it! You’re the asshole!”

“I *am* the asshole!” I buried my face in my hands. “My God, how could I have done that to him? I can’t even imagine how he felt when I just disappeared. And we hadn’t even exchanged our real information. Up until then, we’d just been calling each other’s rooms. No number, no email. Nada. I was just gone.”

Cameron tsked and shook his head. “You’re a terrible person.”

With a chuckle, I tossed a grey pillow at him. “Shut up! I feel bad enough already. But in my defense, it looked *very* compromising the way that I found him that night. In a million trillion years, I never would have thought it was because stupid Janine puked on him and was a drunken, sobbing disaster.” I rolled my eyes. “Okay, the drunken, sobbing disaster I can actually believe because that girl was a mess. I even tried to get the spring break travel company to switch roommates, but I was stuck with her.”

“So, now what happens?” Cameron rolled onto his stomach, propping his chin in his hands. “Now that you learned the real story yesterday, does that mean we get a Jenna and Carter 2.0?” His eyes widened. “Cartnna. No, that sounds stupid. CarJen. No. Dumb. JenCar. Ugh. Never mind. You guys don’t get a cute couple nickname like Brangelina or Bennifer.”

“There isn’t going to be any *us*, Cameron. That ship has sailed.”

“What?” He sat up. “What do you mean? No Carnna?” He paused and let the name resonate, then shook his head. “Ugh. Still no. Just what do you mean? Fate has clearly brought him back into your life, and now you’re going to spit in fate’s face? I don’t think so.”

“Fate or whatever brought him back is just going to have to deal with the fact that there is no way I’m setting myself up for that kind of heartbreak again. No. Way. I barely survived the first fallout from my heartbreak over Carter.”

“Heartbreak that wasn’t actually heartbreak, though. Maybe if you hadn’t been such a dumbass, you’d still be together and even have a matching set of beautiful babies. CarJen babies. Damn it. Still terrible.”

“Would you stop trying to mash our names together? It doesn’t work. Just like he and I don’t work.”

“And why not? He’s gorgeous... I mean, don’t tell Louie, but the first time I saw Carter.” His eyes bulged, and he bit his closed fist. “I mean, damn girl. You seriously going to pass up a ride on that?”

I flopped back in the bed. “You’re terrible. And no. I’m not doing *anything* with Carter. There isn’t any future for either of us. He lives in New York and has some big job or something. I live here in Door County.”

“But one of you could move like Louie moved for me! And look at how happy we are now. You loved him, and he loved you, and now he’s back. You shouldn’t miss this opportunity!”

Rolling my eyes, I answered, “I didn’t *love* him. I mean, I thought I did at the time, and yeah, we said it to each other, but it wasn’t real love. We were just kids. Stupid, optimistic lovesick kids.” I arched an eyebrow. “And you know you really shouldn’t encourage this. If I move to New York with him, then you’re out of a job, right?”

He opened his mouth then snapped it shut. “You’re right. Jenter is a bad idea. Hey! Jenter! Not bad! But yeah... never mind. Ignore me. Stay away from the beautiful boy who may take you away from me. You’re mine and only mine.”

My bulldog, Arnold, waddled into the room and reared up on the bed, begging to be lifted and join the two-person party. Cameron hoisted him up with a grunt. Arnold snorted and snuffed his way over to me and collapsed in my arms.

“Okay, ours. I’ll share you with the dog. But you’re not taking yourself and my Arnold away from me. I forbid it.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Cameron. My life is here, and I have zero desire to give up everything I’ve worked for to move to a crowded, busy city filled with top-notch event planners. Even for someone as gorgeous and incredible as Carter.”

His face moved back into the forefront of my mind, and I saw his bright, white smile gleaming back at me. The dimples in his cheeks. The slight hazel hue surrounding his vibrant green irises. For a moment, I closed my eyes and remembered his kiss and the way my heart fluttered with every touch.

Shit. Don’t go there, Jenna.

That was a different time. We were young kids who knew nothing of life and reality. But now, being older, I knew that allowing those feelings for Carter to return would set me up for another monumental heartbreak. And a real one this time... not one of my own creation.

“What are you going to do all week when you see him? It’s gonna be awkward city.”

“My job,” I said decidedly. “I’m going to do my job. I’ll just ignore any feelings I still have for him and focus on throwing the most incredible wedding week the Bronson’s have ever seen. Nothing has changed.”

“And if he hits on you?” Cameron lifted a curious brow.

I scratched Arnold’s brown and white head. “He won’t.”

“And what makes you so certain?”

I bit my lip and peered up at Cameron with a shy smile. “Because he thinks I have a boyfriend. A serious one.”

Bulging eyes met mine. “What? Hold the freaking phone. You have a faux boyfriend in play?”

Grimacing, I nodded. “I may have panicked when Lydia went on and on and *on* about me being pathetic and single, and after just hearing Carter was engaged, I may have blurted out that I had a serious boyfriend.”

“Wait! He’s engaged?” Cameron shrieked. “Why didn’t you lead with that?”

“No. Broken up. He’s single.”

“This is so confusing. So, he’s single, but he thinks you’re not.”

“Yep.”

“Wow.”

“Yep.”

“So, Carter is single, and you are in a serious relationship with... who is the lucky fellow? Please don’t tell me you told him me. I mean, I’m a good actor, but there is no way I’m tongue kissing you. Sorry, not sorry.”

“Um, I blurted out Evan’s name. You know, my old friend, the paramedic.”

“Oh! Yes, he’s yummy too. So, you picked a real person, huh?”

“I’d just bumped into him the day before at the gas station, so I guess his name just popped into my head. So, if anyone asks, I am in a very serious, committed relationship with Evan. Comprende?”

“Comprende. And may I ask, why not date Evan for real? He’s so cute, single, and he lives here in Door County. Maybe *this* is what fate is trying to do! Get you together with Evan!”

“Would you stop with the fate thing?” I laughed. “Evan is like a brother to me. It would be incestuous to date him. And Carter is out as well. He lives in New York, and there’s just too much baggage between us. It’s just me and Arnold forever.”

Arnold looked up at me and licked my face. He was the main man in my life, and I had no intention of changing that. Arnold was the most committed relationship I’d ever had, and he was the only one I wanted.

“You’re my only guy, shmooshy wushy face,” I cooed as I scratched his wrinkled brindle and white head.

Cameron rolled over and slapped his thighs before standing. “Okay, now that I’m all caught up on the drama, I’d better go downstairs and get the wine tour goodie bags ready like I planned. What time do you leave at?”

“One hour,” I answered back. “All the stuff that goes in them is in my office. There should be twenty-five bags that need to get stuffed then loaded into my car.”

“On it,” he answered as he stood. “Do you want me to drop them at the trolley when I finish and save you the trip?”

I scowled. “No. I have to ride along today, so just put them in my car, and I’ll load them onto the trolley myself. Ugh. I do not want to go.”

He stuck out his lip. “Oh, boohoo. You get to spend your day on a trolley sipping your way down the Door County Wine Trail. You poor, pitiful creature.”

“On the trolley with *Carter*. That’s what I’m not looking forward to.”

“Want me to go instead? I’m all about winery tours. Just say the word, and I’ll take your place.”

I considered it before shaking my head. “I wish I could, but I promised Aunt Tilly I’d be there. You know how upset she’ll be if I don’t show up.”

“And we don’t want to upset Aunt Tilly.”

“Exactly. I’ll be fine. I’ll just stay as far away from Carter as I can all day, and it will be over before I know it. Then just a few more days left, and he’ll be out of my life for good.”

Out of my life for good. The fact he was back in it was shocking, and now the thought that he’d exit it again caused my stomach to tighten. What if I never saw him again?

“Want me to come along with you? I can be your buffer.”

“Want to? I would love to have you. But I thought you and Louie had plans today.”

“Do I want to drink wine all day? Uh, yeah. I’m in! Louie will understand. I’ll just bring him home a couple bottles, and all will be forgiven.”

“Deal!”

He lifted his arms and waggled his hips. “Day drinking! Whoot whoot!”

We exchanged smiles before Cameron hurried out of my room toward my office above my attached garage.

My phone dinged, and I looked down to see Jo's picture.

Jo: How are you? Did you see him yesterday? Sure you don't want me to kick his lying, cheating ass? I will. I got your back, sis.

Me: Um... kinda learned he didn't cheat. Long story, but I'm the asshole. I'll call you tonight and fill you in.

Jo: WTF for real?

Me: Yeah. For real.

Jo: So, does this mean I need to kick your ass then?

Me: LOL... no ass kicking needed. Just answer your damn phone when I call, and I'll tell you the whole crazy story

Jo: Dying to hear this

I set my phone down and walked to my closet to pick out the perfect outfit for wine tasting... wine tasting with Carter Sullivan.

CHAPTER SEVEN



CARTER

One by one, we piled back onto the red trolley we'd spent the better part of the day riding around on. Not wanting to make an ass out of myself in front of Jenna, I'd kept my wine tastings to a minimum. The rest of our party hadn't held back, so I hoped we wouldn't embarrass ourselves too much at the eighth and final winery stop in Fish Creek.

"I want to sit by Cameron!" Ashley, one of the bridesmaids, cooed as she waved him over to her seat. "Get over here, hot stuff!"

"Coming, gorgeous!" Cameron answered back, leaping up from the spot where he'd sat beside Jenna all day.

"Cameron," she whispered harshly as he scampered away. "Get back here!"

Instead of obeying his boss, he collapsed into the seat next to Ashley. They each took a long swig from the wine bottle they'd carried out from the last winery.

As I scanned the seats for an opening, I saw the last open spot remaining... the spot next to Jenna. She saw the intent in my eyes and shuffled nervously in her seat, glancing over to Cameron, who was too marinated with wine to notice her silent plea.

With a cocky smile, I walked down the aisle and slid into the seat beside her. "Looks like this is the last seat. Too bad because you were doing a fantastic job avoiding me all day."

"I wasn't avoiding you," she said quickly, but I saw the lie in her eyes.

I chuckled. "You've been using your assistant like a human shield all day. Hell, you were so good at it that the Packers coach could learn something from you about evasive maneuvering."

She glanced up at me and looked like she wanted to argue but gave up and shook her head with a sigh. "Fine. Busted. I was avoiding you all day."

"You don't say?" I teased.

"This is just so awkward. I'm not sure how to act around you."

"Oh, and this isn't awkward for me? I mean, the girl who broke my heart that I hadn't seen in a decade is now the wedding planner at my best friend's wedding. And she has a boyfriend, so I can't even shamelessly flirt with her."

Her cheeks flushed pink at the last comment, and then she looked away. "I do. Have a boyfriend. He's—"

"Really 'handsome' and 'great.' Yes. I know." I had to force my eyeballs to stay in place and not roll around in my head.

The blush in her cheeks deepened. "I don't really want to talk about Evan if that's okay."

I already regretted bringing him up. The thought of another man kissing the lips that used to be mine sent a primal urge rumbling through me... an urge to pound on my chest, yank her into my arms and reclaim them as my own. Something I couldn't do as much as I wanted to. She was right. Better

we not talk about this “handsome” and “great” boyfriend that got my blood boiling, so I nodded my agreement.

“No more talk about your really handsome and great boyfriend,” I quipped before moving on. “Then tell me more about your life, Jenna. How long have you been in Door County?”

“I grew up here, actually,” she said as the trolley pulled out.

“You did? I didn’t know that. I knew you were from Wisconsin but thought it was Madison.”

She looked out the window at the small vineyard passing by the window. “Yep. My whole life. Then I went off to school at UW-Madison. That’s where I was going when we met.”

“Now *that* I remember,” I said, remembering fondly listening to her stories about going to Badger games and partying on State Street. I almost spit out that I’d tried desperately to find her after she’d disappeared and even had some friends at UW-Madison try to hunt her down for me. But it was a huge school, and without her last name to tell them, my search for a Jenna in a huge school had ended in vain. Not wanting to let her know that I’d gone a bit stalker over her, I kept that little tidbit of truth to myself.

“So, you came back here after school?”

“Yep. After doing some interning and grunt work for other wedding planners, I came back here and started my own company. I mean, Door County is the ultimate romantic destination for weddings, and there actually was only one other planner up here who was so booked up she had to turn people away.”

“Then you saw an opening and took it. Smart girl.”

She grinned proudly. “I did. And my little business grew into something I’m really proud of.”

“And you love what you do?”

The way her eyes lit up answered the question before her words did. “Yes. I can’t imagine doing anything else. I get to help people create their dream weddings in a place that I love more than anything.”

A pang of envy snapped inside my gut. And this time not just toward the man lucky enough to call Jenna his own. I didn’t feel that way about my job at all. I could barely remember a time when I woke up excited to go to work. The last time I’d felt that way was when I’d been a kayak guide the last summer before I’d left college. Every day out in the open air and on the water while getting paid had been like living in a perpetual dream world. I’d never felt passionate about trading commodity futures, but it paid far more extravagant bills than I could have covered on my meager hourly wage taking tourists out paddling around. After growing up without much, I appreciated every dollar bill that made it into my bank account.

Cameron’s deep laugh pulled Jenna’s attention for a moment, then she turned it back to me. “And you? You’re in sales now, I heard? I’m having such a hard time picturing you in a suit working in an office. Although you have changed your looks quite a bit, so I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised.”

I instinctively reached to tuck my hair behind my ear, something I hadn’t done in years since I’d cut my chin-length waves to fit into the business world. But as my fingers brushed nothing but skin, I realized it wasn’t there anymore. It seemed being next to Jenna reminded me of who I was back then, and for a moment, I felt like the same tanned skin surfer in flip-flops who always had sand stuck between his toes. Now, I wore oxfords and rarely got any color in my cheeks since most daylight hours I spent in my office.

“Yeah. I own a company in New York.” I lifted my chin with pride. “I opened the firm a couple years ago, and it’s grown exponentially. I trade commodity futures.”

Her brow scrunched. “Trade what?”

“Futures. It’s like...” I stopped myself before I went into a long spiel about my job. “You know what. Doesn’t matter. It’s boring.” I chuckled. “Just think of it like selling stocks, but different.”

“Yeah. I don’t know anything about all those big city jobs.” She shrugged and laughed. “I have a guy who invests for me, and I couldn’t tell you the first thing about the stock market or futures or whatever you call them.”

“It’s a very profitable career if you know what you’re doing. And lucky for me, I do.” I waggled my brows.

“Wow. Look at you, Mr. Big Shot city guy. Never in a million years would I have thought you’d end up in some fancy New York career.”

The quiet snort she made after the sentence caused me to furrow my brow. “What’s wrong with being in trading in New York? I busted my ass to get where I am. I didn’t grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth, so I’d say it’s a really big accomplishment to be my own boss.”

Her face softened. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t making fun of you. It’s really incredible what you’ve accomplished on your own. It’s just that the Carter I knew, the laid-back, go where the wind blows guy never *ever* would have wanted to work in a big city... much less in an office. If I recall, you aspired to open a surf shop on the beach in California after college.”

I smiled softly and shook my head. “Yeah, I remember that. I guess I have taken a really different path than the guy you met in Hawaii had planned out. Not that he made plans.” I laughed. “Hell, I could barely make a plan for what to do in the next hour back then.”

“Yeah, and I couldn’t do anything without having a detailed plan... hence why I’m a wedding planner.”

“We couldn’t have been more opposite.”

We shared a look and a quiet laugh.

“But we complemented each other, I think,” Jenna said softly. “You helped me loosen up a little, and I helped you get a little more responsible.”

“You may have overcorrected because I’m now the most structured, responsible guy around.”

“That’s bananas.” She blew out a sigh. “I’m pretty much the same ‘ol Jenna, but I do think it’s thanks to you that I was brave enough to start my own company. I could almost hear you in my head. ‘Life is all about taking chances. Big risks. Go big or go home!’ So, I went big, and it paid off. I guess I owe you a thanks for drilling that into my head.”

Go big or go home. It had been my motto in life. I remembered saying it to her the first time I’d taken her out surfing. She’d been so scared of sharks she didn’t want to get in the water. I’d sworn to protect her and finally had coaxed her out onto my board with that very phrase. Man, she wasn’t wrong. Now I would weigh the risks and rewards before making every decision in life, something the Carter she knew had never done. He’d just followed his gut and his passion and had let the cards fall where they may.

“It’s pretty crazy to think how different I pictured my life being. You’re right, though. I never would have thought I’d want a career in futures.”

“So how did that happen? How did you go from opening a surf shop to futures in New York?”

“Eric, actually.” I glanced at my best friend, who sat on the back bench kissing his bride-to-be. “When we graduated college, he got an internship in New York complete with housing. Since I had nothing planned out and nowhere to go—surprise, surprise—” I paused and chuckled, “—he let me come and crash with him. I got a low-level job in a trading company, and it turned out my winning personality and boatloads of charm were just the ticket to work my way up. Then, the opportunity to start my own firm came up, and the rest is history.”

“Well, I’m really happy for you that you’ve found success. It’s well-earned.”

“Yeah, it is. I’m really grateful that I managed to do something other than turn into a beach bum.”

“Well, I kinda liked that beach bum,” she said, then her face dropped a moment after she said it.

The trolley hit a bump, and our party all laughed as their drinks spilled.

“Party foul!” Eric called up to his other groomsmen, Jed, after his plastic wine glass tumbled to the floor.

“Oops!” Jed laughed and looked around.

“Okay, everyone! We’re at the next stop,” Jenna called as she stood up and clutched the metal railing above. “This is Orchard Country Winery and our last stop of the day. The Lautenbach’s are the owners and my friends, so try not to get into too much trouble.”

She swept a playful scolding look across the group of inebriated people.

Eric swirled his finger around the top of his head. “Angels. We’ll be angels.”

As the trolley slowed to a stop, Aunt Tilly rose and clutched the seat for balance. “The Lautenbach’s know us all well. In fact, they are supplying most of the wine for the wedding. Listen to Jenna everyone and be on your best behavior. Let’s not embarrass the Bronson family name.”

Even though Aunt Tilly scolded them to behave, from the glassy look in her eyes, she’d also fallen victim to tasting too many of the wines. She wobbled a bit while she stood, then quickly sat back down.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s go!” Jenna said as she made her way to the front by the driver and ushered everyone along like a tour guide.

One by one, everyone filed off, and I smiled as I passed Jenna when I stepped down the stairs into the gravel parking lot. Aunt Tilly followed behind me, slowly taking the steps as I walked toward the winery.

“Oh!” she shrieked, and I spun around to see her miss the last step. I launched forward to catch her, but I was too far away to stop her fall.

“Aunt Tilly!” Valentina and Jenna shrieked in unison as Aunt Tilly tumbled onto the ground.

“Are you okay?” Jenna rushed down the steps and knelt by her side. “Are you hurt?”

“Mostly my pride, dear,” Aunt Tilly said as she struggled to right herself. But the movement caused her to grimace and touch her neck. “And maybe my neck.”

“Don’t move, Mother!” Lydia dropped to her knees and grabbed her mother’s head. “We need to stabilize your C-spine!”

“My what? Ow. Let go of my head!”

Lydia didn’t let up on her firm grip. “Your C-spine! I watch enough *Grey’s Anatomy* to know the first thing we need to do is stabilize your C-Spine to prevent paralysis. Someone call 9-1-1!”

“I don’t think I broke anything, dear.”

Lydia continued holding her mother’s head tight while Lydia’s husband, Alfred, dialed.

“You still need a checkup. You could have a spinal injury or a head injury. A brain bleed!” Lydia’s eyes bulged. “I saw one episode where someone died after a bump on their head because they had an undiagnosed brain bleed.”

“Aunt Tilly is dying?” Valentina covered her mouth.

“I’m fine, dear,” Aunt Tilly said, but she grimaced again and settled back down. “You know, on second thought, better to be safe than sorry.”

We all gathered around her while we waited for the ambulance to arrive. By the time they got there, she was already protesting that she was fine, and all the fuss was unnecessary.

“I think I just bonked my head a bit and tweaked my neck. But I’m fine, really.”

“Over here!” Lydia called to the paramedics as they hopped out of the ambulance. “She’ll need a full workup and maybe an MRI or a CT Scan. Make sure you rule out a brain bleed. And compartment syndrome! She said her ankle hurt after. Don’t miss out on compartment syndrome!”

“I don’t need an MRI,” Aunt Tilly argued. “And watching TV doesn’t make you a doctor, so just shush. I’m fine.”

“Mom is right!” Valentina said back. “This could be serious, Aunt Tilly. Let the paramedics check you out and decide.”

As they all fussed over Aunt Tilly, a tall, dark-haired paramedic headed our way.

“Jenna! Uh, Jenna? Evan is here!” Cameron said loudly with a slight slur to the words.

“What? Huh?” Jenna said absently as she held her post beside Aunt Tilly. “Okay. Flag him over.”

“Jenna. Your *boyfriend* Evan is here!” Cameron said, his eyes widening as he stared at her. Hard.

Great. Her boyfriend was there to save the day. Now I wished I had drunk as much wine as everyone else because I would need some serious mind-numbing pain relief to endure seeing Jenna with another man.

CHAPTER EIGHT



JENNA

“Your *boyfriend*, Jenna! Boyfriend! Your *boyfriend* is here!” Cameron said as his voice rose with every syllable.

His words finally pulled me from my absent-minded state, and I realized why Cameron was panicking.

My boyfriend. Evan. The paramedic. The very same one now heading my way.

Noooooooo. This can't be happening.

But as I watched Evan getting closer, I knew there was no avoiding this mac truck of mortification barreling straight at me. With any luck, no one else had paid attention to Cameron, and they wouldn't put together that this paramedic Evan was the same paramedic Evan I'd claimed as my faux boyfriend. Perhaps they wouldn't notice the big name tag on his chest with “Evan” embroidered into it.

Maybe?

“Wait, that's your boyfriend?” Aunt Tilly asked as she craned to look back at the man walking her way.

“Don't move your neck like that!” Lydia scolded. “Hold still until they clear your C-spine!”

“I want to see Jenna's boyfriend!” Aunt Tilly demanded.

I glanced at Cameron, but the panicked look in his eyes only caused my terror to rise.

Shit, shit, shit.

With all the Bronson eyes moving toward my clueless friend headed our way, I knew I had but one chance to get up ahead of this disaster. I ran forward to intercept Evan and tossed my arms around his neck.

“Whoa!” He chuckled as he closed his arms around my waist. “It's good to see you too, but I just saw you yesterday, goofball.”

“I'm so sorry,” I whispered in his ear. “I'm so *so* sorry.”

“For what?” he asked. He started to pull out of our embrace, but I tightened my grip.

“I don't have time to explain, but I may or may not have used you as my fake boyfriend to avoid single girl embarrassment. I didn't expect to run into you, but here we are, and everyone here thinks we're together. Please, please, please, *please* play along and just pretend we're a happy couple.”

His body stiffened in my arms before I felt the slight shaking of laughter. “You didn't.”

“I totally did.” I stifled my own horrified laugh. “You can make fun of me all you want later, but right now, pretty please, just play along.”

“I think I should feel honored I got chosen as your fake boyfriend. I mean of all the guys in Door County you could have chosen, I got—”

“Evan!” I whispered under my laugh, “Quit screwing with me and please agree to do this! I’m already dying of embarrassment here!”

“Okay, okay,” he whispered back. “I’ll be your fake boyfriend.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

I released my death grip on his neck and leaned back. His amber eyes lit up with mirth as he stared down at me.

“Hey, girlfriend,” he teased. “So, should I like kiss you or something? I have no idea what the hell I’m supposed to do here.”

“Eww! No!” I puckered. “We’re like brother and sister. That would be—”

“Incestuous. I know. That’s what I’ve always said when people ask me why we haven’t dated.”

“Exactly. No kissing.”

“I’m never going to let you live this down, you know.” His smile widened as he stared down at me.

“Oh, I know.” I rolled my eyes and slid my arm inside his. “Just please don’t bust me out, and you can tease me until we’re too old to remember this.”

“I’ll never be too old to remember this,” he whispered in my ear before walking me toward the group of Bronson’s, watching us with huge smiles.

And one person watching us with a frown.

Carter.

“It’s so lovely to meet the man who has stolen our beloved Jenna’s heart!” Lydia said as she met us. “I can’t wait to hear all about you, but first, we need you to take a look at Aunt Tilly. She took a spill and may have injured her neck or have a concussion. Or worse. A brain bleed. Make sure you rule that out.”

“I’m happy to take a look,” Evan answered.

“So, this is him,” Aunt Tilly smiled as Evan squatted down in front of her. “My oh my, he *is* handsome, Jenna. You weren’t exaggerating.”

Evan glanced up at me, and his crooked, mocking smile made me groan outwardly.

“Well, you must be Aunt Tilly,” Evan said as he started performing his exam. “Jenna speaks very highly of you.”

“Is this happening?” Cameron whispered into my ear. “Is this seriously freaking happening? I’m dying. Dy-ing.”

“This is happening,” I mumbled as I watched Evan charm the pants off Aunt Tilly.

I held my breath through the entire exam, praying for the moment it ended and I could get Evan safely out of here before he blew my cover. But when he gave her a clean bill of health and helped her to her feet, Aunt Tilly pulled him in for one of her famous hugs.

“We are so happy for you and Jenna. You caught yourself one hell of a woman, you know that?”

“Oh, I know that. Jenna is something else.” He taunted me with a smile over her shoulder.

“We are dying to get to know you, so I insist you join us all for dinner tonight at Alexander’s.”

“Alexander’s?” His dark eyebrows rose. “Wow. I haven’t been there in years. That’s a nice place.”

My eyes widened as I caught his playful gaze. I gently shook my head, pleading with him to say no.

“I wish I could but—”

“I won’t take no for an answer. You’re joining us,” Aunt Tilly stated as she wiped the dust off her dress.

“I really wish—”

“You would say no to me after I just had such a scare?”

Damn it. Here we go. No one says no to Aunt Tilly.

“I suppose I could cancel my plans tonight.” Evan looked at me with a cocky smile. “I do love the shrimp tempura there, and I think I’ve earned a nice dinner out with my lovely girlfriend, Jenna.”

Shit, shit, shit.

“Right, Jenna?” he asked with a broad smile.

“Yes, of course. Dinner tonight sounds great,” I said through gritted teeth and a fake smile.

“Wonderful!” Aunt Tilly pressed her hands together. “We’ll see you tonight at Alexander’s. Seven o’clock.”

“Looking forward to it,” Evan said as he stepped over and tossed his arm around my shoulder. “My girlfriend and I can’t wait.”

As I swallowed another inward groan, I slipped my arm around his waist. “Yep. We can’t wait.”

I finally looked over at the one face I’d avoided looking at during this entire debacle. Carter’s carefree smile had been replaced with a scowl, and he looked away when our eyes met. Great. Dinner tonight wouldn’t be awkward at all.

“Hey, lover,” Evan teased as he came up behind me in the parking lot outside Alexander’s. “I don’t know why you wanted to drive separately. I mean, I should at least get to pick you up for our date, girlfriend.”

“I will kill you.” I slapped him on the shoulder and dissolved into laughter. “Seriously! This isn’t funny! Why couldn’t you have just said no to Aunt Tilly’s invitation?”

“And miss a fancy dinner at Alexander’s?” He snorted. “Hell no. I never get out to eat here, and I’m going to enjoy every single bite of food that I *earned* by being your fake boyfriend. Tempura shrimp. Seared ahi tuna. A big fat steak. The lava chocolate cake afterward.” He licked his lips. “Oh, yeah. I’m going nuts. Oh, and a few brandy old-fashioned. You’re buying, of course.”

“Ugh. Okay, fine. But then we need to get our stories straight if we’re really doing this.”

I rattled off the details of our fake relationship before we plastered on smiles and walked hand-in-hand into the upscale restaurant.

I hoped maybe Carter would have skipped out on tonight’s dinner, but the very first face I saw when I walked inside was his handsome mug.

Ugh.

Torture. Tonight was going to be nothing but pure torture. I’d already been in my own personal hell all day, having to be so close to the man I *still* wanted to kiss after all these years. And after a decade of cursing myself for still having feelings for a liar and a cheat, I no longer had that excuse now that I knew the real story. Instead, the man I’d hated all these years was nothing short of perfection. Kind, sweet, funny, charming perfection.

He smiled softly when he saw me.

And sweet baby Jesus, he is still gorgeous.

“Hey, Jenna,” he said as he walked up to us. “And this must be Evan.” Carter’s face tightened with his smile as he extended his hand. “Hey, man. I’m Carter.”

“Hey, Carter. Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands, and I tried not to pass out from the awkward feelings swirling around inside me. My long-lost first heartbreak was shaking the hand of my fake boyfriend. How in the hell did I end up here?

“Are you the only one from the bridal party who made it?” I asked Carter, looking around.

He chuckled. “Yeah. Turns out everyone needed a little downtime after today. I didn’t go too heavy on the wine, so I’m okay, but most of the bridal party is apparently passed out in their rooms. Eric and Valentina made it, of course, and the rest of the family is here.”

Oh, great. So now our dinner had gotten smaller, meaning more attention would end up on me and Evan.

“Jenna! Over here!” Aunt Tilly waved from the bar where she sat next to Linus. Lydia and Alfred sat beside them, with Eric and Valentina on their other side.

I led Evan over for the predinner cocktails they always insisted on and stood by his side while they grilled him for details on our romance. I was shocked at how easily the lies came out of his mouth, and he had everyone oohing and aahing over our non-existent love all the way through dinner.

Everyone but Carter.

His scowl only deepened with every story Evan told, and I had to force my eyes forward so I didn’t stare at him every moment of our dinner. Of course he’d been seated beside me when Aunt Tilly had insisted Evan sit next to her. I had to endure almost two hours of being right up against him while Evan, my fake boyfriend, sat across from me. With my head about to explode, my level of awkwardness had reached its highest point.

As I reached for my glass of wine, my napkin slipped off my lap and fluttered to the floor. I reached down for it, but not before Carter made the grab too. Our heads bumped together as we leaned down, and we came up rubbing our foreheads.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No, my fault,” I answered back.

He handed me the napkin, and his hand brushed against mine when he did. The gentle touch of his skin on mine sent familiar sparks shooting down my spine. Every cell in my body jumped to life and begged for more.

“Hey, do you remember that night in Hawaii when you dropped your coconut, and it rolled under that couple’s table, and when she stood up, she stepped on it and wiped out?”

Carter started laughing, and the memory, as well as his contagious laugh, caused me to shake off my nerves and join him.

“Oh my God, I do!” I laughed harder.

“We had to haul ass out of there so fast, so they didn’t know where that damn coconut came from. You sure do have a knack for dropping stuff.”

We slipped back in time into our own little world for a moment as we sat laughing together at the table. It wasn’t until I looked up and realized everyone was watching us that I choked down the last of my laughter.

“Wait. You two know each other?” Valentina asked.

“Um...” I paused, looking to Carter for direction.

“Uh, yeah, actually. Jenna and I met on spring break back in college one year.”

“What a small world!” Aunt Tilly smiled. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

I stammered as I shrugged. “I guess it just slipped my mind to mention it.”

“Wait a minute,” Eric said as he set his drink down. “Is this *the* Jenna? Jenna Jenna?”

Carter sucked his cheek and gave a quick nod.

Eric sat back in his chair, and his bulging eyes locked with mine. “No. *Way!* Dude! Why didn’t you say something?”

“This week is about you, man. I didn’t want to do or say anything to stress you out.”

“Dude! How could you not say something? This is the girl who crushed you into an unrecognizable pulp!” He quickly looked back at me. “No offense, Jenna.”

“None taken.” I groaned.

“What’s happening?” Lydia asked between sips of wine.

“It’s nothing,” Carter said quickly, but Eric, still a little deep in his cups, sat forward and lifted his hands while he spoke.

“When we were in college, Carter went on spring break without me. I had mono. And he came back talking about this girl he’d fallen for hard, and then she just ghosted him. Literally left without a phone number, email, or even last name! I could barely get him off the couch for a month. Dude! Do you remember when we tried to find her at UW-Madison? I can’t believe this is her!”

“You what?” I swiveled my head toward him. “You tried to find me?”

Carter diverted his gaze and shrugged. “We had a couple friends who went to school there, so we had them try to find you so I could get in touch and find out what happened to you. But we didn’t have a last name, and there were a lot of Jenna’s at that school.”

Ouch. My idiot conclusion-jumping had damaged him even more than I’d damaged myself.

“So, you two were... a couple?” Evan asked, and I could see the delight in his eyes. Another piece of the puzzle snapping into place.

“Briefly,” I said. “It was just over spring break.”

“Yeah,” Eric laughed. “It may have been brief, but damn girl, you did a number on my main man here. Oof.”

Aunt Tilly looked at me with a sad expression. “Jenna, dear. Why on earth did you abandon poor Carter? That doesn’t sound like you at all.”

“It was a misunderstanding. A stupid, terrible misunderstanding and I feel awful about it.”

“Oh, well, that’s good, dear. I would hate to think you hurt poor, sweet Carter on purpose.”

“No. Of course not. I would have never hurt him. I lo—” I stopped myself short of blurting out that I’d loved him and instead finished with, “liked him a lot. I thought he’d done something to hurt me, so I left. Just a misunderstanding we have now sorted out.”

“Yes,” Carter agreed. “It’s all sorted out. So, now that we have that out in the open, what is next for tonight? Or are we heading back to get some sleep?”

Grateful he’d changed the subject, I pressed forward. “Yes. What are you all up to now?”

“Flaming coffees at the Bayside,” Valentina said quickly. “We have to stop for at least one.”

Eric smiled wide and nodded. “That sounds perfect. You all in?”

Carter shrugged. “I go where you go, man.”

“I’m tuckered out. I need my beauty sleep,” Lydia said, and Aunt Tilly, Linus, and Alfred all nodded in agreement.

“You in, Jenna?” Valentina asked.

Desperate to put an end to this evening, I shook my head. “I wish we could, but Evan has an early day tomorrow, and I really should get home and get some rest.”

“Actually,” Evan said with a smile, “my morning freed up. We’d love to go.”

“We would?” I ground out, begging him with my eyes to back down.

“Of course, we would.” He grinned wider. “Bayside’s flaming coffees coming right up. I’ll get your coat, darling.”

“Great,” I said through gritted teeth. “Can’t wait.”

Carter gave me a sideways smile, and I pushed up from the table. Looked like I’d be getting a Bayside coffee after all, with a heaping side of torture.

CHAPTER NINE



JENNA

“Are you trying to die?” I whispered to Evan as we walked out to our cars. “Because I am going to kill you! What the hell are you doing?”

Evan opened my car door but blocked me from getting in with his body. “I’m helping you out, Jenna. That’s what I’m doing.”

“By torturing me? Yeah, big help.”

“Do you remember the summer after you came home from college, and we got wasted at the Blue Ox? The night Kenny fell over the railing and ripped his pants?”

I chuckled over the memory of Kenny dangling upside down before his pants gave out. “Yeah. Why?”

“You got super drunk and then went on and on and *on* about Carter. About the only guy you’d ever love. About how he broke your heart, and all men are assholes, and you’d never ever *ever* fall in love again. Do you remember that?”

Memories of drunken sobbing on Evan’s shoulder came flooding back to me. The nonstop tears, the running nose, the slurred speech as I vowed to never love again. Oh yeah... I remembered single horrifying detail of my epic meltdown.

“I guess a little.”

“Well, today you left out the fact that the guy... *that same guy*... is the reason your dumbass has a fake boyfriend tonight. And from the way it sounds, it wasn’t him who did the heartbreaking back then.”

“It was a misunderstanding!” I defended.

“I know.” Evan slid his hand only my shoulder and squeezed. “But just because it was a misunderstanding then doesn’t mean you need to miss the opportunity again. I saw the way he looks at you... and the way you look at him.”

“You did?”

He laughed. “Uh, yeah. And if I was your real boyfriend, I’d be in a jealous rage right now because you two still have it *bad* for each other. Real bad. So, as your friend, I’m not going to let you tuck tail and run away. We are going down to the Bayside to figure this shit out. You loved him, and now that you know it was a misunderstanding, you need to try again.”

“I didn’t *love* him,” I argued back. “I mean, I felt like I did, but I was just a kid! We barely knew each other. That’s not real love. It can’t be. It was just lust or something.”

“You certainly didn’t seem like a girl who got shattered because of the lust of youth. What you felt for him was real. It had to be because he broke your heart.”

I wanted to argue more against him using the words I’d kept telling myself over the years. *It wasn’t love. It was a fling. Get over it, Jenna.* But deep down, I knew what I’d felt for Carter was

different... deeper. It felt a lot like, well, love.

Since I'd never fully understood my feelings for Carter myself, I had no desire to explain them. I tried to end the conversation. "I can't be with Carter, Evan. It's too late. Let's just drop it."

"It's not too late."

"It is. And he lives in New York. I live here. We both have companies. It won't work."

"So? People long-distance date all the time. You'll figure it out. But you owe it to yourself to try this again... and without screwing it up this time."

With a heavy sigh, I shook my head. "I appreciate the pep talk and the enthusiasm, but it's too late for Carter and me. And even if I wanted to do something with him, he thinks I'm in a relationship already."

"Quit being a chicken shit. Now get your ass in your car, and we're going to the Bayside. And if I don't see you trying to talk to Carter, I swear to God, I'll bust you out."

"Oh, yeah, because I'm supposed to go flirt with him while my *boyfriend* is there." I reached forward and flicked his forehead. "Duh! I'm in a relationship already!"

"Then I'll dump you at the bar."

My eyes bulged. "You will not!"

"Oh, I will." He grinned wide. "It will be perfect. You'll be broken-hearted after losing this sweet piece, and Carter can comfort you."

As he waggled his eyebrows, I reached forward and smacked him in the arm. "You are *not* dumping me at the Bayside! Damn it, Evan!"

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. But then you're dumping me. Oh! You can be like," he raised his voice to mimic mine, "I can't be with you anymore, Evan. Even though you're ridiculously good-looking, smart, funny, and the catch of a lifetime, I'm still in love with Carter."

He feigned with his hand against his forehead, and I threatened to smack him again.

"I don't talk like that, and no one is breaking up with anyone. You and I are in it to win it."

"We'll see."

"Evan," I warned.

He stepped out of the way and gestured for me to get into my car. "I'll see you at the Bayside, *honey*."

With a growl, I climbed into my car and started it. Terrified of what was going to happen, I pulled out my phone and texted Jo.

Me: Emergency. I need you at the Bayside stat.

Jo: Matt and I are having a Family Guy marathon.

Me: Emergency, Jo! Seriously! Get off that damn couch and come help your sister out.

Jo: Fine. But you'll owe me.

Me: Whatever you want. Just HURRY!

Jo: Leaving in 5

Grateful backup was on the way, I sat in my car for a few minutes before driving the mile to the Bayside. Jo and Matt had a fifteen-minute drive, so I took my sweet time getting there. The less time I was alone at the bar, the better.

"Finally!" I said as Jo and Matt walked up to the bar beside me. "How slow were you driving? Grandma on her Lil' Rascal scooter could have gotten here faster than you two."

“Petunia got out and didn’t want to come back in,” Matt said. “Damn cat thinks it’s hilarious to make me chase her around the cabin.”

“At least she’s not still attacking you.” Jo slid into the stool beside me.

Matt laughed and sat next to her. “Valid point.”

“So, what is the emergency?” Jo asked as Brandon, the bartender, came over and gave her a fist bump.

“Hey, Jo! Got the night off from slinging drinks?” he asked as he slid a coaster in front of them.

“Yep. Thought I’d come to make you serve me instead.”

“Happy to do it.” He grinned. “What are we having? Bayside coffees?”

He gestured halfway down the bar to where Eric, Valentina, and Carter sat. Luckily for me, they hadn’t had five stools open together when we’d arrived, so Evan and I had sat apart from them. They watched in awe while the other bartender, Jason, shook nutmeg onto the rising flames of the drinks they had ordered. The spectacle kept the attention of everyone at the bar... including Carter.

“We’ll make it easy on you. Couple of Spotted Cows.”

“My kind of girl,” Brandon said and walked off to get them.

Jo turned to me and propped her chin on her fist. “So, spill. What’s going on.”

I leaned in and brought Jo up to speed on the rest of the story. I’d called her the night before to tell her about my mistake in Hawaii and that Carter wasn’t actually the asshole we’d thought him to be, but I hadn’t told her yet about my faux pas with the fake boyfriend.

When I got done, she blinked her big brown eyes at me. “Evan. You’ve hired Evan like a male escort to play the part of your fake boyfriend?”

“You make it sound so sleazy,” I groaned. “And I didn’t hire him. No money exchanged.”

“Um, it is sleazy. You’re like that creepy guy at the high school reunion who brings a prostitute and pretends he’s like a millionaire or something.”

I buried my face in my hands. “Oh my God! I am that guy! Gross!”

“What’s gross, *sweetie*?” Evan slid up behind me and slung his arm around my shoulder.

Jo and Matt glanced between us, then nearly tumbled off their stools they laughed so hard.

I closed my eyes against the assault. “Shut up. Just shut up.”

“Oh, no,” Jo spit out between hysterics. “I will not shut up. Ever. For the rest of our lives, I’m going to be teasing you about this. For-ev-er!”

“Me too.” Evan laughed and lifted his hand for a high five. Jo smacked it and shook her head.

“I can’t believe she roped you into this. Poor Evan.” Matt chuckled.

“At least I got a kickass dinner at Alexander’s out of it.”

Jo smirked. “So, you *did* pay him. Just with food. But still, payment happened, which means he’s officially an escort, and you’re a disgusting creep.”

“I shouldn’t have called you. Why did I think it was a good idea to call you?” I shook my head and laughed. “Never living this down.”

Jo and Matt exchanged a glance and answered in unison. “Nope. Never.”

“Did you tell them the plan?” Evan asked as he stole a sip from my drink.

“What plan?” Jo asked.

“Yeah? What plan?” I looked up at him.

“Our plan to have a big breakup tonight so you can go get together with Carter.”

“What?” Jo and Matt echoed.

“That is *not* the plan!” I argued back.

Evan just nodded. “It’s the plan.”

“So, you want him back?” Jo asked.

“No!” I struggled to keep my voice down. “I wanted you here to help me *stop* Evan from doing this plan. Talk some sense into him. Kick his ass. Do whatever you need to do to make sure he doesn’t dump me tonight!”

“You want me to beat up your escort?” Jo snickered.

“Jo! Help me! Please, for the love of God, help me explain to Evan that me and Carter are not going to work and to just stick to the plan.”

“Why won’t you work?” Jo asked, her usual playful banter disappearing.

“Um... because he lives like thousands of miles away.”

Jo shrugged. “So? People do long distance all the time.”

“That’s what I said!” Evan chimed.

“Yeah, for a little while, but in the long run, someone has to give up and move. I’m certainly not moving to New York, and there is no way he’s leaving his big, fancy company to live with me in Door County. I wouldn’t want him to give up something he worked so hard for anyway. So, what’s the point? All I’ll be doing is setting myself up for another disastrous heartache when it inevitably goes south.”

Matt blew out a long whistle. “Damn, you make even Jo sound like a positive peach about relationships. I thought she had a bad attitude about it before we met.”

Jo nodded her agreement. “I told you I wasn’t the only messed up Parker girl. Our dad did a number on us. But, Jenna, you’re the one that convinced me to take a chance on Matt. Hell, you even overstepped and busted out my feelings to him at the bar that night. I was pissed as hell at first that you did that, but look how all that turned out.” She lifted her finger to display the beautiful diamond ring he’d put there a few months ago.

“That’s different,” I argued.

“No. It’s not. We both got messed up by Dad walking out and ditching us all for that other chick, but not every guy is Dad. Matt sure isn’t. This guy will have my back until the end of time.”

“Damn straight,” Matt agreed.

“And it sounds like Carter isn’t the ass we thought he was, and if he’s still into you after all this time, that must be a sign.”

“Oh, he’s into her.” Evan snorted. “Big time. Dude was straight up ready to puke when I put my arm around her tonight.”

“He was not.” I rolled my eyes.

Evan grunted. “Uh, yeah, he was. He’s smitten with you, Jenna.”

I glanced down the bar to catch Carter staring at me before he quickly looked away.

“He is? Are you sure?”

“Jenna, I’m a guy, and guys aren’t always the best at picking up on subtle signals, but even I can see how into you he is from like a mile away. I’m telling you this guy hasn’t gotten over you.”

“And it doesn’t look like you’ve gotten over him,” Matt said. “Maybe Evan is right. Break up with each other tonight and go give it a chance. What do you have to lose?”

“My heart. My sanity. My dignity. I could go on.”

“And what if it works out?” Matt said, tossing the words I’d used against him last year right back at me.

I sucked my lip between my teeth as I peeked down the bar at Carter again. Just like last time, he was staring straight at me. This time, instead of looking away, he lifted his Bayside coffee in cheers.

“Ugh. I need to pee. When I get back, we’re going to figure this out. But Evan, you’re my boyfriend, and I forbid you from leaving me. You’re not dumping me. Got it?”

With a huff, he lifted his hands. “Okay, Annie Wilkes. Sheesh.”

I gave him a stern stare before working my way through the crowd to the bathroom. I couldn’t help but take one last peek over at Carter before turning the corner. Just like before, his eyes remained fixed on me.

My stomach flipped when our eyes connected, just like it used to. Maybe they were right. Maybe I did need to pull up my big girl panties and give this a chance. But the memories of how badly it hurt to lose him the first time came crashing back into me, and I shook my head and ducked around the corner.

I was a planner. Organized. Predictable. I wasn’t a risk-taker. I didn’t leap out of planes, bungee jump, ski down the black diamond, or do any other potentially devastating things in my life. And I certainly wasn’t going to take the biggest risk of all... a risk with my heart.

No. No way. I wasn’t going to risk devastation like that again.

CHAPTER TEN



CARTER

Jenna disappeared around the corner, and I groaned at the way my insides ached from being so close to her and not being able to take her in my arms like I used to. And seeing that guy with his arm around her shoulder?

Pure. Fucking. Torture.

And the worst part was, I actually liked the guy. He *was* great. In fact, in any other circumstance, I think he and I would be buds. It was just more salt in the wound her reappearance had torn open. It never healed completely, but it didn't cause me complete agony every minute of every day anymore. Or at least it didn't until she walked back into my life and ripped that sucker wide open again.

Just a few more days. A few more torturous, agonizing days with her before I could hop on a plane and run back to New York. Back to my nice apartment, my friends, and my career. I'd bury myself so deep in work that I'd forget her name before the end of the month. Or at least I'd damn well try.

"I still can't believe you didn't tell me that was *Jenna*," Eric said, pulling me from my spiraling thoughts.

"Yeah. Pretty crazy, huh?"

"You must have been freaking out when you saw her at the party. Why didn't you tell me?"

I took a sip of my Bayside coffee and puckered when the insanely strong liquor hit my tongue. "It was your wedding welcome dinner, man. You had guests to entertain. The last thing you needed was to get dragged into my Jenna drama... again. God knows you went to hell and back with me the last time."

"And I'll go to hell and back with you again. If you need to talk, I'm here."

I smiled at him and patted his shoulder. "I'm supposed to be here for *you*. I'm the best man."

His gaze lifted over my shoulder, and I glanced back to follow it. Jenna's sister stood behind me with Jenna's boyfriend at her side.

"Hi, Carter. I'm Jo. We met at the party."

I smiled at her. "Oh, I remember. I think you wanted to stab my eyes out with your olive skewers."

Jo chuckled and sucked the air through her teeth. "In my defense, at the time, I thought you were the guy who cheated on my sister and broke her heart forever."

"Forever?" I lifted an eyebrow.

Jo glanced over at the hallway Jenna had disappeared into, then quickly sat down in the empty stool beside me. "We don't have much time before she gets back, so I'll be quick. But yes. Forever. Thinking you betrayed her screwed her up royally. She's never gotten over it."

My heart jumped. Not from the thought of her in pain, but from the fact her feelings for me had been as strong as mine were for her. It hadn't all been in my head.

“I’m going to do something I probably shouldn’t do, but I’m doing this for Jenna just like she overstepped and did this for me and my fiancé, Matt.” She glanced over her shoulder at him, and he lifted his hand in a wave. “Jenna isn’t over you. By a long shot.”

My heart jumped even higher at her words, and a smile started on my face but stopped when I looked up at her boyfriend.

“Oh,” I said quietly, trying to hide my enthusiasm for his sake, then wondering why he was still smiling. “Okay. I... I’m sorry, man?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m not her boyfriend.”

My eyebrows shot to my hairline. “What?”

Jo glanced at the hallway again. “Real quick. Jenna panicked about being single and said she had a boyfriend. She doesn’t. When Evan showed up at the winery, she panicked again and convinced him to pretend he was her boyfriend. He’s not. She’s single.”

My eyes got so wide they may have fallen out of my head.

Evan shrugged. “It’s true. She and I are like brother and sister. I was just helping a friend out, but I had no idea you were in the picture. Seems like both of you have some feelings for each other that need to get resolved, and I’m certainly not going to be the guy standing in your way.”

Holy. Shit.

I envisioned the top of my head blowing off from the mindboggling information I’d just received. I wanted to ask more questions, find out more about how Jenna felt about me, but Jo hopped up off her bar stool.

“She’ll be back any second, and I don’t want her to see us talking. So, Cliff’s notes. Sorry I threatened you. You seem like a nice guy. Evan isn’t her boyfriend. She’s single and still into you. She’s also a chicken shit about getting hurt, so you’re going to have to work like hell at convincing her to give this a shot if you’re interested. If you’re not, we never had this conversation, and you can just keep up the ruse that she’s got a boyfriend. And don’t hurt my sister for real this time, or I’ll come for you. Nice to meet you, Carter.”

Jo spun and ran back to her seat beside her fiancé. Evan clapped me on the shoulder and squeezed. “Good luck, man. And hey, she’s a good girl... the best girl, so don’t make me kick your ass if you hurt her again.”

“I didn’t hurt her the first time, remember?” I chuckled.

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. Well, don’t hurt her this time. I’ll find you.” Evan pointed his fingers at his eyes and then at me. “But good luck. I hope it works out.”

He trotted off after Jo and slipped nonchalantly behind her and her fiancé. A few moments later, Jenna walked around the corner, completely oblivious to her blown cover.

I caught her glance before she quickly looked away and snuck back into her seat next to Jo.

“What did she say?” Eric asked, shaking me from my spinning thoughts.

I stammered while I searched for the words.

Jenna. Is. Single.

Even though I normally told Eric everything, this felt like a secret that wasn’t mine to tell. After all, she was his wedding planner, and I didn’t want to risk marring her professional reputation.

“She was just apologizing for being rude to me when we first met. At the time, she’d thought I was the guy who cheated on her sister.”

“Oof. Yeah. I bet she hated your ass.” Eric laughed.

“Oh, yeah. If looks could kill, you wouldn’t have a best man.”

We shared a chuckle while I let my mind slip back to the words that kept clanging around inside my head.

Jenna. Is. Single.

And that meant that I still had a chance.

A set of three stools opened up next to me.

Valentina waved at Jenna. “Jenna! You guys can move over here now!” she called across the bar. “We’re gonna play bar dice!”

Jenna looked apprehensive, but her sister quickly hopped up and dragged her fiancé along behind her. She sat at the farthest stool from me, placing Matt in the middle and leaving the stool beside me open.

Well played, Jo.

“Go ahead and take it.” Evan gestured for Jenna to sit. “I don’t mind standing.”

She chewed on her lip before thanking him and sliding in next to me. Evan winked at me when she wasn’t looking. Now I liked this guy even more, and this time I didn’t hate the fact I did—now that he wasn’t competition for the woman who’d stolen my heart and never really returned it.

“You guys in for a round of dice?” Valentina spun the little brown dice cup around on the bar.

“Oh, hell yeah,” Jo answered quickly, cracking her knuckles.

“Jo’s a bartender,” Matt explained. “She basically plays bar dice for a living.”

“And kicks ass at it!” Brandon said as he blew by with a round of beers for the bachelorettes across the way.

“Oh, I’ve got some competition, huh?” I arched a brow. “You’re on.”

Jo snorted and brushed her nails across the shoulder of the black leather coat she wore. “Bring it, city boy.”

“City boy.” Jenna chuckled. “Now, that’s something I never thought anyone would use to refer to you.”

“What’s wrong with being a city boy? I happen to have a pretty kick-ass life, thank you very much.”

“Nothing.” She shrugged. “It’s just that the guy I knew in college would have said the city would kill his soul.”

“Well, I guess I grew up. Matured.” Now that I knew I had a fighting chance, I jumped on the opportunity to show Jenna how much I’d grown. How capable and stable I’d become. That I wasn’t just a wandering, free-spirited surfer anymore. Now, I was husband material... or at least that’s what Camilla had drilled into me for years.

“That’s still highly debatable,” Eric teased.

Jenna laughed and glanced over at me. “Well, good. I’m glad your maturity is contested. I’d be a little sad if you’d changed into some soulless, power-hungry suit.”

“Ouch,” I responded. “I definitely haven’t turned into that.”

“Also highly debatable,” Eric chimed again.

I opened my mouth to argue, but Valentina slammed the dice cup on the bar and cheered when she rolled a fifty-six in one.

“Beat that, baby!” she taunted her soon-to-be-husband.

“That’s not fair.” Eric grabbed the cup and gave it a shake. When he slammed it down and revealed the dice, he grimaced. “Damn it. Still fifty-six in one to you.”

I shook the cup and failed to best Valentina, then passed it over to Jenna. “You’re up.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. No shots for me.”

Valentina stuck out her lip and pouted, a trick she must have learned from her mom and Aunt Tilly. It seemed the Bronson ladies had a knack for guilting people into doing whatever they wanted. “Please? Just one round?”

“Come on, Jenna. Just one round,” I echoed.

“Yeah, sugar bottom. Go ahead and roll the dice.” Evan reached forward and pinched her cheek—the cheek that darkened to red as he started cooing pet names at her. “You love winning at stuff, babycakes sugar pie. Show them what you’ve got!”

If I hadn’t been looped into the truth moments ago, I’d have tossed my entire dinner back up on the bar watching this interaction between them. But now? Now it was all I could do to hold back the laughter trying to bust out like a herd of stampeding horses.

Damn, I really like this guy.

I jutted my chin at the dice cup in front of her. “Yeah, sugar bottom. Show us what you’ve got.”

I caught the scolding look she shot to Evan before she moved it to me.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you the pet name your boyfriend calls you. What’s the story behind that one? Don’t think I’ve heard sugar bottom before. Tell me, Jenna, what made him call you that?”

“I don’t think you want to hear about Evan and me,” she said softly.

“No, please! I know it was awkward at first, but you’ve got yourself one hell of a guy here, Jenna.” I reached up and pressed a hand to his shoulder. “Come on, I want to know more about you two. How you met, the first time you kissed... oh! Any wedding bells ringing for you soon?”

“Ring-ring!” Evan chimed and waggled his eyebrows at a panicked-looking Jenna. “You never know, right, schmoopiekins?”

She chuckled nervously. “Uh, yeah. Right. You never know.”

Jo looked positively devilish while she failed at hiding her mischievous smile.

For the next hour and a half, I enjoyed taking every pot shot I could at Jenna and her “boyfriend.” Evan fed into every snarky comment I made, and Jenna’s face erupted in a carousel of colors as she slunk lower and lower into her bar stool. It took everything I had in me not to blurt out that I knew Evan wasn’t her boyfriend, but I bit my tongue, waiting for the perfect opportunity to make my move.

After we finished the last round of bar dice, Valentina looked down at her empty drink. “Eric and I are crashing on the yacht tonight, so we don’t have to walk all the way back to the house in the dark. Who wants to come back and join us for a nightcap? We just got a forty-year-old bottle of Macallan as a wedding gift.”

Eric’s eyes widened, and he leaned over and whispered, “It’s like a twenty-thousand-dollar bottle of booze.”

“Holy shit. Count me in.” I glanced over to Jenna. “You guys coming?”

She shook her head and shot a staying look to Evan. “No. We can’t. Evan has to get up early, so it’s time we—”

“Pass up a trip to a yacht to sip on a bottle of whiskey that costs more than my car?” He blew out a puff of air. “Uh, yeah. We’re going, Pookie bear.”

“I really don’t think we should,” she said through gritted teeth. “You have that thing in the morning.”

“Ah, you only live once. Lead the way, Valentina.”

I caught Evan’s wink to me as we all closed out our bar tabs. Jo and Matt wanted to get back to their *Family Guy* marathon, so they bid us goodbye. When they left, Jo reached up and gave me a hug, whispering “good luck” into my ear before releasing me.

With the buzz from their booze adding a little pep to their step, Valentina and Eric led the way out the back door of the Bayside toward the docks just down the little alley street.

I walked beside Jenna and Evan, noting how they didn't hold hands like a couple would—like I wanted to do with her. Instead, she crossed her arms tight across her chest and walked between us as we made our way down the docks to where the yacht rocked on the soft waves.

“Come aboard!” Eric gestured to us to follow him as Valentina went below deck.

We followed him to the lounge area on the stern, and all took our seats. Shortly after we sat, Valentina appeared with a tray full of small, stemmed whiskey glasses.

After we all had our glasses, she sat on Eric's lap and led us in a toast. “To true love!”

My gaze flicked to Jenna, and I caught her look in exchange. We clinked our glasses together and took our sips, spending the next half hour swapping stories under the starry sky while drinking the best damn whiskey I'd ever had.

When our glasses were near empty, our conversation quieted as Valentina and Eric made out like high schoolers. This entire week they'd been all over each other, and it only made it more awkward sitting next to the girl I wished I could be kissing like that.

I cleared my throat, causing them to break apart their sloppy kiss.

Eric laughed as Valentina sucked the air through her teeth.

“Sorry,” she said as she wiped her lips. “We're just really excited about getting married.”

“No need to apologize.” Jenna smiled. “This is one of the most special times in your life. Enjoy every second of it and of each other.”

“We're being terrible hosts,” Eric said. “Let us go get you some more whiskey.”

When he said it, I saw the mischief light up in Valentina's eyes. “Yeah. We'll go get it together. We'll be right back.”

She giggled as she jumped off his lap and pulled him up by his hand. They kissed their way across the deck and disappeared inside the yacht.

After a long moment of silence, I burst out into laughter. “They won't be back for a while. They've been going at it like rabbits all week.”

Evan and Jenna laughed.

“I wondered if they weren't coming back,” Evan said as he finished his last sip of whiskey. “But probably better I stop now and get my ass home.”

“Yeah, me too,” Jenna quickly said and stood up. “I'll come with you.”

“And waste like a thousand dollars of whiskey?” He gestured to her unfinished glass. “I don't think so. Stay and finish your drink. I'll call you in the morning.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he just pulled her in for a hug and kissed her forehead. “Night boopiekins.”

When he pulled away, she clung to his arm for a moment before letting go.

“Nice to meet you, Carter.” He clutched my hand, and we shared a look before he hurried off to the docks.

Jenna and I stood in awkward silence for a few long moments as a cool breeze drifted over the water. It pushed up the soft waves that broke on the sides of the boat. I walked a few feet over to the edge, gazing down into the water to watch them.

“It's beautiful here.” I leaned on the same railing I'd spoken to her at the day of the yacht party.

“Yeah. Door County is pretty spectacular. We have some of the most beautiful views in the world. It's so peaceful here.”

Peaceful. That wasn't something I'd felt in a long time. The city always buzzed with noise and commotion. It felt good to stand here and appreciate the stillness of the world surrounding me. The fresh air. The lapping waves. The night sky.

"There are so many stars." I looked up at the black sky peppered with more stars than I'd seen in a decade.

Jenna walked over, placed her elbows on the railing beside me and gazed up. "When you're in the city, the lights make it impossible to see them. But out here, there isn't anything diffusing the light and blocking the view. They are pretty incredible, aren't they?"

We stood side-by-side staring at the sky, and I remembered a similar time in Hawaii when she and I had laid on the beach and stargazed.

"Do you remember that night in Hawaii when we saw the three shooting stars and made wishes?"

There was a long pause before she answered. "Yeah. I remember."

"That night was incredible."

Flashes of our kisses and our naked bodies together crashed back into my mind. The sound of her breath in my ear whispering, "I love you too."

"Do you know what I wished for?" I turned to look at her.

She moved her gaze to meet mine and shook her head.

"I wished that we would be together forever."

Her eyes flickered with sadness and surprise, but she didn't respond.

I turned to face her and stepped forward. This time she didn't back away. "What did you wish for?"

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

"Tell me. What did you wish for, Jenna?"

Her lips parted as she stared up at me. Finally, she whispered, "I wished for the same thing."

My heart leaped in my chest at her admission. After her abrupt departure, I'd thought that it was only me who'd fallen head over heels, but it turned out she'd felt the same way too.

But now the question was, could she again?

I moved in closer, swallowing up the last of the distance between us. When she opened her eyes, I rubbed my thumb across her soft cheek and stared down into her eyes, igniting with the desire I used to know so well.

My heart hammered in my chest as she started to rise to meet me, our lips moving closer and closer together—back to where they should have been for the last decade.

But just before our lips touched, her eyes snapped open like the spell cast over us suddenly shattered.

"I can't," she whispered as she backed away.

"Why not?" I stepped back toward her. "You're not over me, Jenna, and I'm not over you. Don't lie and pretend like you don't want this kiss as much as I do."

She sucked her lip between her teeth and shook her head. "I... I have a boyfriend. I can't do this, Carter."

With a soft chuckle, I shook my head. "Oh, that's right. You and Evan. That's the only thing stopping you, huh?"

She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. "Exactly. Me and Evan."

"Evan. Your *handsome* and *great* boyfriend." I smirked as I impaled her with a knowing stare.

"Would you stop with the handsome and great already?" She chuckled as she shook her head.

"Well, he is handsome and great."

“Yes, he is.”

“But do you know what he’s not?” I lifted the corner of my lip as I decided to jump off the cliff and see where I landed.

“What?” She furrowed her brow.

“Your boyfriend.”

Those beautiful brown eyes snapped open wide. “What?”

I leaned forward into her space and whispered, “I know.”

The color drained from her face as she stared at me, blinking. “Know... what?” she finally managed to say.

“I know that Evan isn’t your boyfriend.”

More silence. More blinking.

As my smirk deepened, the color returned to her face as a deep crimson.

“Oh my God!” she breathed before spinning and bolting toward the ramp off the yacht.

“Jenna!” I called while I went after her. “Jenna, stop!”

She beelined down the ramp and started down the docks. I quickened my pace to keep up.

“Go away!” she called back while she started to run.

“Would you stop?” I shouted as I closed in on her.

“Go! Away!”

I caught up to her at the edge of the docks and reached forward, snagging her by her arm.

“Let me go, Carter!”

“Would you stop running then?”

“No!” She ripped herself out of my grip and stepped back. “I am dying of embarrassment right now, and I just want to be alone. Don’t follow me!”

She took off again, and I respected her wish and didn’t chase after her. Instead, I stood alone by the shore with my heart in my hand. The inky blackness swallowed her up, just like when she’d left me ten years ago. But this time, I wasn’t going to let her get away again. Tomorrow, I would find a way to win her heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



JENNA

“Get your ass out of the car,” Cameron said from my passenger seat, where we sat parked in front of the White Gull Inn.

“No. Let’s just scratch breakfast and go home to work on the place setting holders. We have over three hundred to make.”

He pursed his lips and folded his arms across his chest. “You are such a chicken shit. Get your ass out of the car, and we’re going inside to have breakfast with the Bronson’s as planned.”

Pulling a face, I pressed my head back against the headrest. “But Carter is in there. And he knows I made up a boyfriend. I’m beyond mortified.”

“Yeah. And he didn’t care, and he almost *kissed you*. ”

“And that’s even worse! Now I can’t stop thinking about kissing him.”

And I couldn’t. Over and over and over, I played the moment of our almost-kiss on repeat in my mind. How badly I had wanted to taste his lips again and feel the weight of his body against mine. It had been all I could do to remember my fake boyfriend and retrieve the senses the look in his eye had stolen from me.

“Quit your whining, and let’s get in there. You’ll be fine.”

“Ugh! How did he even find out?” I narrowed my eyes and looked down at my phone and the list of six attempted calls I’d made to Jo. Six unanswered calls since she was a bartender and worked late, so she never woke up before ten. Or she was up and ignoring me because she was guilty of busting me out. “It had to be Jo. I don’t know how or why she did it, but it *had* to be her!”

“Well, it doesn’t matter how he knows, just *that* he knows. And you know what? It’s a good thing! Now you two can give this whole rekindled romance thing a try.”

I turned the ignition and started the car. “Nope. Gotta go.”

“Damn it, woman!” Cameron reached over and turned off the car, then yanked the keys out. Dangling them in front of my face, he snatched them away when I reached out. “You’ll get these back after breakfast. I’m getting the Cherry-Stuffed French Toast, and nothing is getting in my way. Not even you and your dumb ass. Now, let’s go!”

He opened the door and hopped out of the car, hurrying over to my door and yanking it open.

“Ugh,” I groaned while he pulled me out. “Fine.”

“Quit being a baby. You’ve got a smoking hot, successful guy hot on your heels. There are worse things in life, sister.”

“A guy who can smash me into smithereens if things go badly again.”

“Things only went badly because *you* screwed up ten years ago. So, don’t screw up, and you’ll be fine. Now, chop-chop. I want some French toast.” He tapped my butt and scooted me up the walk to the elegant white building.

When we got inside, the hostess whisked us to the table where the Bronson's and the entire wedding party sat. They saw us coming and greeted us with waves.

"Good morning, dears!" Aunt Tilly said, gesturing to the two seats left open.

Cameron quickly slid into one of the open seats, and I groaned when I saw who that left me to sit beside.

"Good morning, Jenna." Carter rose and pulled out the chair for me.

"Morning," I said quickly and slid into my seat.

Cameron kicked me under the table, and I looked over to catch the twinkle in his eye that put Valentina's huge diamond to shame.

"Did you sleep well?" Carter asked as we all opened our menus.

No! I stayed up all night thinking about how mortified I am that you know I faked a boyfriend and thinking about how badly I wanted to kiss you.

Instead of saying that, I lied. "Yep. Fine."

Carter leaned over and whispered, "Not me. I stayed up all night thinking about kissing you."

I almost spit out the sip of water I'd just taken.

"You okay, Jenna?" Lydia asked as I choked down the sip.

"Yeah. Wrong pipe." I coughed harder.

I glanced over to see the mirth dancing in Carter's eyes.

Ugh. This was going to be a long breakfast.

An hour later, my predictions for the never-ending breakfast had come true. I'd spent the entire time fending off Carter's cocky remarks and trying not to crawl under the table and die. Luckily, no one around us seemed aware of the mortification his playful comments caused me.

Aunt Tilly lay her napkin beside her plate and placed her hand on Linus's shoulder. "This was a delicious meal. I'm so glad you all could make it."

Linus nodded his agreement as he dabbed his mouth with his napkin. "My favorite breakfast in the world. I hope you all enjoyed yours as well."

Everyone at the table nodded enthusiastically.

Lydia sat back in her chair. "Now, you all have a free day today to do whatever you'd like. It's a gorgeous summer day, and it's supposed to be very hot, so may we suggest the beach, or perhaps renting bikes to explore Peninsula State Park. You won't regret it."

"Carter," Eric said, "You should get out and go stand-up paddleboarding. You said you wanted to do that while you were here."

"Yeah. That's a great idea. I used to love water sports, and I haven't done it for years."

"Oh!" Cameron said. "Jenna has always wanted to try that too, haven't you, Jenna?"

I looked up and felt the weight of everyone's eyes as they awaited my answer. "Uh, yeah. I have always wanted to try that."

"You should take Carter to Jake and Cassie's! They live right on Kangaroo Lake and have several paddleboards. Remember Jenna? When we did their wedding there, they showed them to us. I bet they would happily lend them to you," Cameron gushed. "Why don't I give Cassie a call and ask?"

"Oh! What a wonderful idea!" Aunt Tilly said.

Instead of leaning over and shoving Cameron's face down into his plate, now just a puddle of syrup, I sucked my cheek and shrugged. "I do wish I could, but I have so much to do today. We have to put together all the place setting holders, remember? Those cute little things aren't going to make themselves."

"I'll make them all." Cameron beamed. "I don't mind. Louie can help. He loves wedding crafts."

“I couldn’t ask you—”

Lydia clapped her hands together. “Aren’t you just a gem, Cameron! How lucky you are to have such a dedicated assistant.”

Through gritted teeth and a fake smile, I ground out, “Yes, I am.”

“You deserve a day off, dear,” Alfred said. “Lord knows our ladies have worked you right to the bone planning this wedding.”

“Sounds like you’re free to take me paddleboarding.” Carter continued grinning at me while I struggled to find my next excuse. Just when I thought I had it, he pressed his lips into a soft, sympathetic smile. “Really, Jenna. You should take a day off to relax and recover after what happened last night. I’m sure everyone will understand.”

I struggled to swallow. *What happened last night?* What the hell was he talking about? Was he about to tell everyone about our almost-kiss?

“Oh, dear,” Lydia said, the confusion on her face matching everyone around us. “What happened last night?”

I looked at Carter and stared. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s okay, Jenna. I know you don’t want to take the spotlight off the wedding and tell them what happened, but all the Bronson’s love you and would want to support you.”

I had no idea what he was planning, but from the mirth in his eyes, I knew it wasn’t good.

“Carter,” I growled.

“What’s going on?” Aunt Tilly asked. “Is everything okay, Jenna?”

Before I could answer, Carter did. “I’m afraid Jenna and Evan broke up last night,” he said on a sigh.

A round of gasps filled the restaurant—my own included.

“Oh, no!” Valentina’s hands flew to her mouth. “After we went to bed? What happened?”

I struggled to breathe, much less speak. But I didn’t need to because Carter jumped right in again.

“Yes. Right after, in fact.”

“That’s awful! Is there any way you two can work it out?” she asked as she squeezed a shocked-looking Eric’s hand.

Carter gave me no time to answer. “Unfortunately not. It was quite a fight, and it’s over for good. Right, Jenna?”

Even though I didn’t want to, I slowly nodded my head.

“Oh, Jenna. We’re so sorry to hear that,” Eric said, but his voice lacked the same sincerity as Valentina’s, and I saw the look he gave Carter.

Carter answered with the same lack of conviction, “Yes, it’s terribly sad, though it’s for the best. But that does mean our poor Jenna here could use a day to relax and recover. And I think a little quiet time on the water would be just the thing to help heal your broken heart. Isn’t that right, Jenna?”

I couldn’t see my own face to determine what shade of color it must have been. Pink? Red? White? Or from the way I’d stopped breathing, perhaps blue.

“Damn straight,” Cameron jumped in. “When she told me about the breakup this morning, I said just that to her. ‘Take the day off and go do something fun.’ Carter is right. A day on the water with him is just what you need.”

I slid my gaze toward my assistant, the promises of his punishment flickering in my narrowing eyes. Cameron didn’t shrink back though, only reaching out and rubbing my back to seal the effect of sympathy even more. He knew damn well what Carter was up to, and instead of helping me get out of it, he’d gone and tossed me right to the wolves.

And from the look in his eyes as he stared back at me, he enjoyed every second of watching me get devoured.

Aunt Tilly clutched her chest. “Such a tragedy. I know how much you cared for him, but you’re a beautiful, talented woman, and you’ll find just the right man for you when the time is right. Carter and Cameron are right, though. You absolutely can’t work today, you poor dear. I *insist*.”

I’d already been mortified at myself that I’d made up a boyfriend. Now I was even more mortified having my “breakup” announced to the entire Bronson family.

Knowing the words “I insist” from Aunt Tilly ended any and all arguments, I gave up without a fight. “Wow. Um, thanks,” I muttered. “I guess I’ll take the day off.”

“And go do that paddling thing with Carter. Spending the day with him is exactly what you need,” Lydia said, and I saw the slight smirk and the way her eyes darted between Carter and me. I hadn’t even been broken up with my fake boyfriend for ten seconds, and already she was like cupid with a laser sight and a sniper rifle.

“That sounds great,” I said, shoulders sagging.

Carter briefly pressed his hand to my leg, and the simple touch ignited every nerve in my body.

“Great!” he said as he released my thigh. “I have a rental car, so why don’t I come pick you up?”

“I’ll text you her address,” Cameron answered quickly. “Oh! You should do a sunset paddle. Pick her up around three, and by the time you’re done paddling, it will be just the perfect time to catch one of our famous Door County sunsets.”

The look I passed to Cameron could have incinerated him. I had no idea how I’d been so betrayed by everyone I loved in this world, but at this point, I didn’t even try to fight it.

“Sounds great,” I said on a sigh.

Carter’s bright white grin lit up the room. “Fantastic. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

Fantastic. Not the word I would have used to describe spending a romantic afternoon alone on the water with the man I was already struggling to resist.

Son of a bitch.

Twelve more missed calls to Jo, six scathing voicemails, and she still hadn’t answered and confirmed that she’d leaked the truth about my fake relationship.

“I am going to sneak into your bedroom at night and stick dirty cat litter up your nose! I swear to God, Jo! I’ll do it! Call. Me. Back!” I screamed into the phone and hung it up.

My eyes flicked to the oversized clock above my fireplace.

Two-fifty-nine.

In one minute, Carter would roll in to pick me up for what was basically a date. A date I’d been tricked into. A date that wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—end with any kind of romance. There was no way in holy hell I was putting myself out there again. As a smart girl, I learned from my mistakes on the first try. And I’d learned from my love affair with Carter that I didn’t handle heartbreak well, so it was best to just avoid the whole damn situation in the first place. Like a toddler singeing their fingers on a hot stove, I didn’t need to put my hand on the burner twice to decide it was a stupid idea. Nope. One heartbreak was enough for me, and letting myself fall for a guy who lived across the country was like shoving my whole damn head in the oven.

The sound of tires grinding on my gravel driveway alerted Arnold to someone’s arrival. His deep, gruff bark shook the house as he lumbered to the front door. I followed behind him, and when I heard

footsteps coming up my steps, I took a deep breath and opened the door.

Carter stood on my porch wearing board shorts and a tank top that accentuated his bulging biceps. He may be living in the city now, but it looked like he never missed a day at the gym. Even though his hair was shorter, seeing him in his beach clothes sent me tumbling backward in my memory to how he'd looked the same in Hawaii. Pangs of nostalgia twinged in my stomach, but I fought to keep them quiet.

"Hey, Jenna," Carter started, but Arnold launched out of the house, barking and jumping at him. "Holy shit, don't kill me, dude." Carter lifted his hands and froze while Arnold grumbled and snuffed around his feet.

"That's Arnold. He won't hurt you," I assured.

"You sure? That huge underbite really accentuates his teeth. They look awfully sharp." Arnold gruffed and sat back on his meaty haunches. "We cool now, big guy?" he asked as he slowly lowered himself down to Arnold's level. Arnold responded by rearing up and putting his paws on Carter's shoulders, giving him one big, sloppy kiss on the face.

"Aw, good boy, Arnold." Carter ruffled his brindle and white head. Then he looked up at me. "Your dog isn't scared to kiss me. Maybe you should follow suit?"

I scoffed and spun on my heel, disappearing into the house.

"Kidding!" Carter called after me, then followed me inside.

I whipped around and squared up with him. "This is not a date. This is not romance. We are not going to end up kissing. Just two people going out on some paddleboards. Okay?"

Carter raised his hands in submission and answered, "Okay," but I saw the lie in his eyes.

"I mean it, Carter!"

"I won't kiss you."

"Good."

"Unless you want me to."

"Carter!"

He grinned wide and shrugged. "We'll see." Before I could argue back, he walked past me, looking around. "Hey, nice house."

After regaining my cool, I exhaled a breath and answered. "Thanks. I had it built a few years ago."

He walked to the back porch and looked out over the lawn that stretched out to the fields surrounding the house. "How many acres do you have?"

"Twenty."

He spun around, eyes wide. "Twenty? Holy shit. I have a twelve-hundred-square foot apartment in New York, and I thought that was big. Twenty acres?" He blew out a breath. "Man, I can't even imagine having that much space and privacy."

"I wanted lots of room for Arnold to run around." I opened the door and let Arnold out into the yard. He raced around in circles for a few seconds before collapsing into an exhausted heap.

"Doesn't look like he really has the energy to utilize it." Carter laughed.

I joined him and shrugged. "Yeah. He really doesn't do much more than bask in the sun. I installed a doggy door and invisible fence so he can come and go as he pleases, even if I get stuck late at a wedding. And he has an automatic dog food dispenser too."

"And it doesn't look like he's ever missed a meal."

I looked at my roly-poly dog and chuckled. "Yeah. I should probably cut him back."

“At least he looks happy. And I guess who wouldn’t be, getting to live here in this big house with this big yard... with you.”

I caught his sideways smile, but this time chose to ignore it. “Well, we should head out. Be good, Arnold!” I called and closed the door, making sure the doggy flap was unlocked so he could get back in.

I grabbed my purse and headed to the black rental car in my driveway. Carter hurried to the passenger side and opened my door.

“Seriously? You open doors now?”

“What did I tell you? I’m all grown up.”

I rolled my eyes as he closed my door. After hurrying over to the driver’s side, he jumped in and started the car. I gave him directions to Jake and Cassie’s house in Bailey’s Harbor, pointing out all the scenic landmarks along the way. Carter oohed and aahed over the gorgeous landscape we saw along the backroads, stopping to take a picture with a herd of cows that wandered up to the fence along the road. Seeing blips of his carefree, fun personality that I had loved so much started wearing down the armor I’d strapped on before he’d come to pick me up.

“This is it. Turn left here.”

We pulled down the long, gravel driveway that led to Jake and Cassie’s house. Jake was Jo’s best friend since diapers, and he’d met Cassie a couple years ago. I’d planned a beautiful wedding for the two of them last summer right here on their waterfront property. It had been a gorgeous event filled with love and laughter, and I’d been so thrilled to be part of their incredible love story.

“Hey, Jenna!” Cassie waved from the back porch as we climbed out of the car. “Paddleboards are down by the dock. Help yourself, and let me know if you need anything!”

“Thanks, Cassie!” I called back

Jake stepped out behind her, wrapping his arm around her waist and pressing a hand to the baby bump distending her stomach. I smiled as he waved.

My sister’s bestie was going to be a dad. I’d grown up with him running around the house along with Jo and Matt. Seeing him so happy in his new life with Cassie made me grin.

The perfect couple. Just like Jo and Matt, these two had pushed through every obstacle to fight toward their happily ever after. For a moment, I wondered what would happen if I followed their lead—fought for love instead of running away from it. I glanced over at Carter, and his green eyes met mine, coaxing me out of my shell and beckoning me to toss my fears and good sense aside and launch into his arms for a kiss I knew would change my life.

But fear wove that familiar knot through my stomach, and I looked away.

I’d seen what love had done to my mother. She’d never been the same after my father had walked out. And I knew what I’d gone through after the first time I’d fallen for Carter. Maybe women in my family just couldn’t handle heartbreak. And lord knows what would become of Jo if something happened to Matt. Not that he would ever leave her, he loved her more than any words could describe, but those same depths that she loved him would drown her if something ever happened.

But what if it works out?

Pushing aside the soft words hope whispered in my ear, I dug into the resolve that under *no* circumstances would I let my feelings for Carter get the best of me today.

And then we reached the water... and he took off his shirt.

Sweet. Baby. Jesus.

My jaw slackened as I soaked in the sight of every cut line on his muscular body. The way his defined abs flexed as he reached for the paddleboards. How his pecs swelled when he lifted them

away from the wall. And then he turned to look at me, his biceps bulging as he held a board up on each side of him, and I got to see every incredible inch of him unchecked.

“You ready?” he asked.

Ready to paddleboard? Yes. Ready to resist you? No.

CHAPTER TWELVE



CARTER

The sun began to lower in the sky, but the warm rays still drenched my skin as I stood on my board. I closed my eyes to relish this long-lost feeling. How many years had it been since I'd been on a surfboard or paddleboard? Five? Six?

I thought back to the last time I'd been in the water. It had been the summer after I'd met Camilla.
Six.

Six long years since I'd indulged in the thing that used to set my soul on fire. Hell, the way I was feeling right now, was the thing that *still* set my soul on fire. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it until I slid into the water and up onto the board. It felt like no time had passed, and everything I'd known just came crashing back into me. How to move with the board, how to balance and turn, how the water became part of me, and me, part of it. It soothed aches in my soul that I didn't even know that I had.

Kinda like seeing Jenna again did.

"Like this?" she asked.

I looked over at her in her cute black bikini, and for the umpteenth time today, got tongue-tied just looking at her. Ten years may have passed, but she still looked exactly like she had when we'd been in Hawaii, and I'd taught her to surf. Those long, toned legs. Her curvy hips. Full breasts that her bikini did an excellent job accentuating.

Damn. Maybe my plan of going paddleboarding with her had been ill-conceived. Being this close to her and not pulling her into my arms and covering her with kisses was pure torture.

"Yep. Just keep your eyes up and bring your paddle a little closer to your board."

Being a natural athlete, Jenna immediately took to my directions and started pushing her paddle through the water. The long board slid across the glassy surface and brought her closer to me.

"Nailed it!" She grinned as she paddled past.

"You're crushing it." I smiled back.

We'd been out here for a couple hours and had toured every nook and cranny of the beautiful lake. My muscles ached from the rowing, but the good kind of ache that came from a day spent doing the thing I loved. I'd mostly surfed before this, loving the rush of the speed and the danger, but I'd hopped on a paddleboard a handful of times. Now that I was a little older, I didn't mind the slower, more relaxed pace of the paddleboard. Hell, after living life in New York, I would take slow and steady over fast and dirty any day of the week.

A small boat sped by with a water skier dragging behind them. The waves from the wake pushed toward us, and Jenna grimaced as she braced.

"Keep your legs relaxed and move with the board!" I called as I paddled toward her.

"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa!" Her voice drifted off as she wobbled on the moving board.

“Keep your hips loose and move with it!” The first waves reached me, and I moved my body along with the rocking, still pushing myself toward Jenna.

Her wide eyes darted to me just before her mouth opened, and she tumbled backward off her board. With a big *splash*, she disappeared.

“Jenna?” I called as I pulled up next to her board.

I didn’t see her.

Scrunching my brow together, I started searching the water. She shouldn’t be hurt. She’d only tumbled back a few feet, but panic started pounding in my chest when I didn’t see her head pop back up.

“Jenna?” I called again, spinning around to scan the water surrounding me. “Jenna!”

Suddenly my board shook and lifted, and I shouted as I plunged into the cold water. I came up splashing and spitting water, and the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was Jenna’s face grinning at me.

“You should have kept your hips loose. Really moved as one with the board,” she teased.

I pushed my hand into the water and blasted her with a spray that had her choking while I laughed.

“You’re a dick!” She coughed, wiping the water from her eyes.

“Me? You’re the one who just knocked me off my board.” I laughed as I pulled it back to me.

“Well, if you’d just loosen your hips, you wouldn’t have fallen.”

I peered over at her, her wet hair pressed to her face as she treaded to keep her head above water. Those brown eyes goading me on as they sparkled with mirth.

Laughter poured out of me as I climbed back up onto my board, swinging my legs on either side to straddle it. Jenna swam over and pulled herself back up on hers, mimicking my position and sitting beside me. The last of the waves dissipated, and we sat side by side on our boards.

“Sun’s setting.” She pointed up at the sky. The colors had started to deepen to soft reds and oranges.

“You’re so lucky you live here.”

“What? You don’t love New York?”

Shrugging, I leaned back on my hands. “I’ve got everything I set out to have.”

“But you don’t surf anymore? You loved that more than anything.”

“Yeah. Funny thing. I actually did surf when I first moved there. There are a few spots around the city where you can. They are so packed with people it’s hard to catch a wave, and it’s exhausting trying to maneuver around everyone. Not exactly like the big open spaces we had in Hawaii. I still tried, though, because it kept me grounded after days in the city. But then I got my job, and it got harder and harder to get to the beach. Not to mention dragging a surfboard around on public transportation.” I sucked the air through my teeth. “Not fun.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun at all.”

“I still did it, though, because I loved it.”

“So, why’d you stop?”

“My job.”

“Your job forbids surfing?” She arched an eyebrow.

Chuckling, I shook my head. “No. But Camilla told me if I wanted to succeed, I had to stop spending my time at the beach and put in more hours at the office. First one in, last one out. That’s what successful people do. Grown-ups, you know?”

Jenna glanced away and up at the darkening sky. “And she was your fiancée?”

Now wishing I hadn’t brought it up, I answered quickly, “Yeah.”

“How did you two meet?”

“Valentina, actually. She introduced us. They were sorority sisters.” Regretting we’d gotten on the topic of the woman I had no interest in discussing, I quickly shifted the subject. “So, that’s why I stopped surfing. It was time to be a grown-up.”

“That’s too bad. She should have supported you doing the thing you love. No job is worth giving up the things that make life worth living. The passions that make you smile. And this...” She turned and looked at me. “This makes you smile.”

God. She was so right. The Carter who she’d known a decade ago had understood that, but somewhere along the way, I’d lost sight of it. Of him. But sitting out here on my paddleboard with Jenna at my side started to get him whispering in my ear again—whispering that I was being a schmuck.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to remember that when I go back. Maybe I’ll make time for surfing again.”

When I said it, her eyes darted away again.

“Jenna.” I reached over and tugged on her board. Her leg brushed against mine when the fiberglass bumped together.

“What are you doing?”

“Pulling you closer to me.”

“Why?” she said, and her panicked eyes met mine.

“What? Is your handsome and great boyfriend going to get mad I’ve got you so close?” I opened my mouth and lifted a finger. “Oh, wait. That’s right. You don’t have one.”

Deep crimson flooded her cheeks.

“What? You thought we’d make it through the whole day without me teasing you about that? Have you met me?”

“I hoped we could avoid that conversation.” She glanced down at the ripples of water forming around our legs. “Let’s just pretend that never happened.”

“But what fun would that be?”

“Forget it. I’m going in.” She reached over for her paddle, but I grabbed her by the arm.

“Stop. You’re not leaving. The sunset is just getting going.”

“I’m leaving. I’m mortified, and I’m leaving.”

“Jenna,” I soothed as I let go of her arm. “You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

“Oh, right. Easy for you to say. You’re not the one who made up a fake boyfriend.”

“Well, I would hope I didn’t make up a fake boyfriend. I mean, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you, but I still bat for the same team.”

“Carter! This isn’t funny! I’m dying over here. Wait. How did you find out, anyway?” She spun to face me.

“Um. I better not say.”

“It was Jo, wasn’t it?” Her eyes narrowed. “This is payback from me busting her out with Matt.”

“I plead the fifth.”

“I knew it! Ugh! I’m going to kill her.”

“She was just trying to help you.”

“Help me? Busting me out was *not* helping me.”

I reached for her hand, but she pulled it away.

“Don’t.”

“Jenna. You shouldn’t be embarrassed. I don’t think I’ve ever been more excited to have been lied to before. It killed me thinking you had a boyfriend.”

Her eyes softened as she peered up at me. “I didn’t mean to lie. I just felt so stupid knowing you had a fiancée, and Lydia made me sound like a loser. I just blurted it out, and then... well, you know the rest.”

“I get why you did it. If I’d have heard you were engaged first, I probably would have done the same damn thing. But I’m not engaged anymore, and you don’t have a boyfriend.” I paused to let the reality of our new situation sink in. “We’re both single, and after ten years, we somehow found our way back together.”

I leaned closer to her, hovering over the water separating us. This time she didn’t back away.

“Carter, we can’t.”

“Why? Give me one good reason why we shouldn’t see where this goes.”

“Because we’re different people now. We have very different lives.”

“Not good enough. That’s no reason that we shouldn’t give this a try.”

“I can’t, Carter. We just can’t.”

I reached forward again, sliding my hand along her chin. She closed her eyes for a beat and pressed her cheek into my hand.

“Give me one good reason why.”

After a long pause, she closed her eyes. “Because I fell for you once, and it hurt me.”

“But *I* didn’t hurt you. I would *never* hurt you, Jenna.”

“This is hurting me.”

“How? How the hell am I hurting you right now?”

“Because all of this,” she said, waving a hand over me, “lives in New York. If I allow myself to feel for you what I felt for you, I’m just going to end up shattered for a second time. I can’t go through that again.”

“You? *You* got shattered? You left me. I was the one who could barely eat for a month. It took me *years* to get over you. Hell, I don’t think I ever fucking did! Do you know that when I bought the ring to propose to Camilla, the face that popped into my mind was yours?”

She looked up from the place on the water she’d been staring at.

“Jenna, you’ve haunted me for a decade. And now you’re here. Right here. And everything that kept us apart before wasn’t real. I didn’t cheat on you. You didn’t just leave me because you didn’t love me. We loved each other, and we have a second chance.”

“We were too young to love each other, Carter. We were just kids. It was... I don’t know. Lust.”

I scoffed at the searing words. “It was a hell of a lot more than *lust*, and you know it.”

Her face tightened as she closed her eyes for a beat. “Okay. It was more than lust, but...”

“But nothing. What we felt was powerful and real, and I’ve never experienced it again. So that tells me it’s special. I loved you. I did. Maybe I was young, and maybe we didn’t know each other long, but to hell if you’re gonna tell me my feelings for you weren’t real. They were. And I *still* have feelings for you after all these years. That means something, Jenna. We’d be crazy not to take this chance to be together again.”

“We would be crazy *to* take it! Do you really want to go through that again if we don’t work out?”

“And what if we do?”

I waited for her to push back, but instead, she stared into my eyes, sucking her lip between her teeth... the lip I wanted to kiss.

As I bobbed beside the woman I had loved more than life itself, I knew I couldn’t let her get away again. Not this time. “You know what. Time may have passed, and we may be different people now, but there’s one thing that I know hasn’t changed.”

“And what is that?”

“This.” I slipped my hands along her face and leaned over, pressing my lips against hers and reigniting the ember between us that had never gone out. As our lips touched, it burst into a flame that nearly incinerated me from the inside out.

Jenna leaned into me, sinking deeper into my kiss as her lips responded to mine. Ten years may have passed since I’d kissed her, but it felt like time had stood still for a decade. Every feeling I’d ever felt for her burst out and flooded inside me again, just like they had the first time I’d kissed her.

The tether that had bound us once before wound around us, pulling us back together and connecting us in a way that I’d never experienced before or after her.

Slipping my hand behind her head, I deepened our kiss. She moaned into my mouth, sliding her arms around my neck as she leaned against me, returning my passion and matching it with her own—a passion I’d missed more than I knew until I tasted it on my tongue again.

A gust of wind blew across the water and lifted her hair as I held her against me, trying to kiss away the heartbreak that had nearly destroyed us both.

As I softened our kiss, I brushed my lips against hers, then pressed our foreheads together. The lapping of the waves against the boards echoed along with our soft pants as we sat breathing together.

“*That* is what hasn’t changed,” I whispered.

Jenna sat silently while I held my breath, awaiting her response.

A jet ski came flying toward us. Their sudden appearance startled us, and like a spooked wild animal, Jenna jumped out of my embrace.

“Whoa. We shouldn’t have done that.”

I leaned toward her. “Hey, don’t freak out on me now.”

She grabbed her paddle and pushed her board away from me. “Carter. I... I just can’t.”

Without looking back, she climbed onto her feet and dug her paddle into the water. I sat watching her go, the beautiful colors of the sky causing her to become a dark silhouette as she paddled toward shore.

I reached up and touched my lips, closing my eyes for a beat while I let myself remember the taste of her kiss.

A kiss I wanted more of.

And a kiss I knew she wanted again too.

Refusing to give up on this connection between us, I resolved right there to find a way to win her back. Hopping to my feet, I dug my paddle into the water and went after her. I’d let her get away once, and I wasn’t making that mistake again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



JENNA

I rode along quietly in the car, replaying that kiss in my mind.

That amazing, life-altering, incredible kiss.

The one I never should have let happen again.

The very same one I wanted to do again... and again... and again.

Shit!

No. No more kissing Carter. Kissing Carter was like begging to break my own heart. But like a wrecking ball to my carefully constructed walls, his lips and his touch had battered my walls and left cracks I hurried to repair. As thoughts tumbled through my brain, I forced myself not to look at him, hoping by the time we got back to my place, I'd have the time to patch what he'd broken through. Rebuild the walls that had kept me safe from the kind of heartbreak I'd sworn I'd never endure again.

But that kiss...

I replayed it over and over again. It had felt so amazing to feel his lips on mine once again, like hearing my favorite song after a decade of silence. He'd made my soul sing when his lips had pressed into mine—a song only he could coax out of me.

We pulled up to my house, and he put the car in park. Still forcing my eyes ahead, refusing to let him put me under another spell, I cleared my throat.

"Thanks for the lift. See you around."

I reached for my door to jump out but heard the lock click.

"Where are you going so fast?" he asked, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

I flipped the lock and reached for the handle but heard it click again.

"Seriously?" I spun in my seat, then instantly regretted the decision to look at him.

Damn it. Those eyes.

"Are we really going to pretend that kiss didn't just happen?"

Swallowing hard, I nodded. "Yep."

A sly smirk lifted the corner of his lips as he leaned a little closer. "Really? Just like that, you're gonna forget about it?"

"That's the plan."

His gaze drifted to my lips for a moment, causing my body to flush with desire. I cursed the way my own mouth gravitated toward his.

No! No, no, no, no, NO! Stop it, mouth!

"You can't lie to me, Jenna. I felt you respond to my kiss. You've always been a terrible liar."

"It was a momentary lapse of concentration. That's all."

His smile grew. "A momentary lapse of concentration, huh? So, that means you had to concentrate *not* to kiss me."

I opened my mouth to argue but knowing I would get busted in another lie, I snapped it shut, pursing my disobedient lips together.

Carter leaned closer. "How hard are you concentrating now?"

The lump in my throat nearly choked out my breath. "Not at all."

He leaned a little closer. "How about now?"

Closing my eyes, I inhaled a stilling breath.

Don't kiss him. Don't kiss him. Don't kiss him. Do you hear me, lips? No kissing!

But when I opened my eyes, I realized I'd leaned over toward him, my body like a magnet to his, and now his lips hovered just inches from mine.

"And now? Are you concentrating hard now?" he asked with a soft smile.

Knowing my mind and my lips were about to go rogue and being incapable of being this close to him without shoving my tongue in his mouth, I spun around in my seat, flipped the lock, grabbed the handle, and jumped out.

"Really?" I heard him call just before the door slammed shut.

Hurry. Get in the house. Get far, far away from the man with the perfect abs, the most kissable lips, and eyes you could stare into for eternity.

I heard his door open.

"Jenna. Hold up!"

Faster. Move faster, feet!

I begged them to keep going. Just a little farther, and I could seal myself inside the safety of my house.

I hurried up the steps, the sounds of his footsteps right behind me. I reached for my door but felt his hands grip me by the arm.

So close!

"Would you wait," he said with a sigh as he tugged me to a stop.

Closing my eyes, I focused on my breathing, trying to get my stupid pounding heart to slow down and build up the barricades to prepare for the incoming assault.

"I'm tired. I should get in."

"Jenna," he breathed my name as he leaned into me. His warm breath ghosted the back of my neck and sent a shiver rippling down my spine. "Wait. Just talk to me."

Don't turn around. Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

Carter leaned down closer, and I closed my eyes tighter when I felt his fingers brush the hair from off my neck. His lips moved to my ear.

"I'm not letting you run away again. Not this time."

"I'm not running away. I'm going to bed."

He laughed softly, and his breath blew across my ear. I shuddered.

"You're running away. You're scared shitless, and rather than opening yourself up to give us another try, you're trying to go hide under your covers and pretend this isn't happening."

"That's because it's not happening."

"Why? Give me one good reason why it can't happen."

I pressed my forehead into the cool wood of my front door. "I can give you a million reasons why this can't happen, starting with you live in New York."

"We can figure that shit out, Jenna. We're two smart people. But we can't figure a damn thing out if you won't turn your ass around and face me. Work through this with me."

"No."

“Why?”

“Because if I turn around, I’m going to kiss you. And if I kiss you, I’m going to take you to bed. And if I take you to bed, I’m going to let myself fall for you all over again. And if I fall for you all over again, I’m going to get my heart broken. So, no. I’m not turning around.”

“You know you’re not the only one at risk here. I’m not exactly looking forward to getting my heart smashed by you again either. The last time I gave it to you, you basically ripped it out of my chest and tossed it in a woodchipper.”

“That was an accident!” I spun around. The second my eyes collided with his, I instantly regretted my decision to face him.

Shit.

Like he was some gorgeous male Medusa, I froze the minute his eyes locked with mine.

He edged up against me, the heat from his body searing into mine, lighting that fire inside me only he could ignite.

“Maybe it was an accident that you left me, Jenna, but it wasn’t an accident that we found our way back together again. Are you really going to tell me you don’t still feel the same way about me?”

His lips moved closer to mine.

“All you need to do is stop fighting this.”

Closer.

“Stop running.”

Even closer.

His warm breath tickled my lips as he whispered against them, “Kiss me, Jenna.”

I wanted to. God, did I want to. I whimpered as I waited for his lips to press against mine. But they didn’t. Instead, they tortured me, hovering so close that the breeze barely fit between us.

“Kiss me if you want this, Jenna... if you still want me. I’m not going to force this on you. You have a choice. Either kiss me now or walk inside, and I promise I’ll leave you alone.”

I closed my eyes, trying to focus on my breathing instead of the perfect face hovering just an inch away from mine. His breath moved against my skin, and I made the mistake of inhaling the faint remnants of his intoxicating scent. Even a plunge in the lake hadn’t completely eliminated the smell of his earthy, masculine cologne—the same cologne he’d worn when I’d first met him. How I’d loved to curl up inside his arms and breathe him in, burning that scent into my memories. Smelling it again transported me back to the girl who’d fallen for the boy on the beach.

The boy standing before me now as a devastatingly handsome man.

Slowly, my lids fluttered open, and I looked into his eyes. They burned with the same passion I knew was reflected in mine.

Screw it.

I levered up on my toes as I tossed my arms around him and pressed my mouth to his. His waiting lips met my passion as he slid his hands onto the side of my face, pulling me into him, deepening our kiss. His tongue slipped past my lips, and I met its demands as I moaned into his mouth.

He pushed me back up against my door, his body pressing into mine as he pinned me against it. Digging my fingers into his back, I pulled him tight against me.

“Jenna,” he breathed against my lips as he softened his kiss. “I missed you. God, did I miss you.”

“I missed you too,” I whispered. “Now shut up and kiss me again.”

A fire lit up his eyes for a moment before his lips connected with mine again. His powerful, passionate kiss nearly dropped me to my knees. I heard the handle turn and felt the door disappear from my back as he kissed me harder, pushing me into the house.

Arnold jumped up on us with excitement, but Carter continued kissing me, devouring my lips with his own as he moved me through the house toward my bedroom.

“Upstairs. Second door.” I mumbled against his lips.

With a smile that paused our kissing for only a moment, he swept me up into his arms and kissed me senseless while he carried me up to my room. Kicking the door shut behind him, he brought me to the bed, laying me down gently when we got there. His powerful body hovered over mine, and I whimpered when his lips drifted away.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve dreamed about this,” he said as he brushed a hand through my hair. “I can’t believe I found you again.”

“Small world, huh?” I reached up and dragged my fingertips across his jaw.

He closed his eyes and pressed into my touch. “No world is big enough to keep me away from you. We were fated to meet back then, and we were fated to find each other again. I’m just sorry it took so damn long. Ten years is way too long to go without this.”

He lowered himself again, his biceps bulging beneath his weight as he pressed a kiss to my lips.

Then my neck.

Then my bare shoulder.

His fingers moved to the bottom of my tank top, and he pushed it up slowly while his lips drifted south to meet them. When he slid it up over my breasts, I sat up just far enough for him to pull it over my head.

Those same fingers moved to the back of my neck, his lips trailing just inches behind them. I closed my eyes when I felt him working open the ties of my bikini strings. The cool air brushed across my breasts when he slid my top down. My breath hitched when I felt his warm kisses peppering their way down to my breasts.

I moaned when he took me in his mouth, his fingers and lips breaking apart as his hand continued south. It found its way beneath my suit and into the spot I needed him most. I cried out when I felt him inside of me, but he closed my mouth with a kiss.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

I shook my head and moved my hips, encouraging him on.

“Good. Because I don’t want to stop. I’ve missed you, and I want to take my time and revisit every single inch of your body.”

I wrapped my hands around his neck and pulled him into my kiss. I tasted the passion on his tongue while he worked his fingers inside me. My thighs clenched, and I moaned as he hit the tiny bundle of nerves between my legs.

“I missed hearing you make that sound.” He moved his kisses to my neck. “I want to hear you come apart. Give yourself to me like you used to.”

I moaned again, his teeth teasing my nipple before his mouth continued south.

“I loved all the noises you used to make when I’d taste you with my tongue.”

My pulse rose as memories of him touching and kissing every inch of my body crashed back into me. He’d given me pleasure like I’d never known... pleasure I’d never found again.

As he lowered himself between my legs, his warm breath passed over my heated core. When he took me in his mouth, I grabbed the sheets and rocked against him.

“Oh, God,” I breathed.

“Do you still like when I do this?” He teased me with his tongue.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Oh, God. Yes.”

My legs quivered as he worked me with his fingers and his mouth, my body shaking and shuddering as I rose up to the heights only he could take me. Like we were a song only he knew the words to while I knew the melody. Together we made music... music I'd wanted to hear again and again all the time that we'd been apart.

A song sang again as I shattered into a million pieces when I came apart.

I collapsed into a boneless heap, satiated and soft.

"I'm glad I didn't forget what you liked." He kissed his way down my legs to my toes. "I love hearing you come. I want to hear it again and again."

He used his tongue and his touch to explore every inch of me. Over and over, he brought me back up to the pinnacle of pleasure. I didn't think I had anything left in me when he lowered himself over my body.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked again.

I opened my eyes to see his wolfish grin—the pride and mirth swirling around in his stare. He knew exactly what he was doing to me, and it was exactly what he'd done the first time we'd been together. I could almost hear the waves crashing along the beach beside us as memories of our first time together flooded into me.

I'd been so nervous. So excited. So completely lost in the moment.

Just like I was now.

"Yes. I want you to stop," I whispered.

His brow furrowed together in confusion, but I smiled before I flipped him over and landed on top of him.

"Because it's my turn," I said with a smile.

His lips lifted into a grin as passion reignited in his eyes. I leaned down and kissed him, lifting his tank top up his body as I did. I broke our kiss while I pulled it over his head, then sat back and stared down at his shirtless torso. Just the sight of his chiseled physique had me ready to go again.

But I took my time, exploring all the hard planes of his body with my fingers and my tongue as he groaned his pleasure beneath me. When I pulled off his shorts and went to take him in my hand, he caught me by the wrist.

"If you touch me, I'm not gonna last. And I want to be inside you when I come. If that's what you want."

Biting my lip, I smiled.

Did I want this? Oh God, did I want this. I wanted every inch of him inside me.

Now.

I leaned over the top of him and opened my end table drawer. Quickly I pulled out a condom, tearing it open and sliding it down his shaft.

"Does that answer your question?" I said as I moved my hips to line up with him.

A cocky smile lifted his lip, and he reached up and slid his hand behind my head. A powerful pull brought my lips back to his as I sank down his shaft.

We moaned in unison when I took him all the way inside me.

Home.

It felt like home to be with him this way again. Our bodies merged in a way that deepened our unbreakable connection. It was transcendent, and I felt the cracks of my heart healing with each thrust of his hips.

He sat upright, pulling me against him, our sweat-slicked bodies pressing together as I rocked my hips against him.

“I missed you, Jenna,” he breathed against my lips as he cupped my ass and pulled me deeper. “God, did I miss you.”

I panted and closed my eyes, burying myself in his kiss as the heat built in my body, spreading through every inch of my skin. I closed my eyes, digging my nails into his muscular back as I crashed over the edge again.

His grip on my hips tightened as he slowed me to a stop, calling out my name as we clung to each other, shuddering. When his body finally relaxed again, I collapsed forward into his arms.

“Holy shit,” he whispered as he wrapped his arms around me.

“Yeah. Holy shit,” I murmured against his chest. “That was not at all what I’d planned on happening today.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping though.” His laugh shook his chest, and I slapped it.

“You’re terrible.”

“I’m a dude. A dude who really missed doing that with you.”

“Yeah. I missed that too,” I admitted.

“Jenna?” he whispered, then exhaled a breath. “I...”

I heard the truth in the lengthy pause that was suspended between us. The weight of the words he’d said to me in Hawaii that had stuck with me since. I knew what he was about to say... what he wanted to say.

Hearing those words should have been the best vow I’d ever heard like it had been a decade ago, but doom pierced my gut as I started to envision him finishing that sentence. It would unleash those same emotions inside of me. Emotions I *couldn’t* have. I’d succumbed to my carnal desires tonight, but it still didn’t change the fact that this thing between us wasn’t going to last. We were on a runaway train of passion that had no destination other than hitting the end of the track and ending in a fiery explosion. An explosion that was going to hurt... devastate me... wreck me.

Instead of letting him speak, I leaned over and closed his mouth with a kiss.

“Goodnight, Carter.” I curled up against him and closed my eyes when his arms tightened around me. As his breathing slowed down to a soft, rhythmic drone, I climbed out of his arms and stared down at the man sleeping in my bed.

This can’t happen, Jenna. You have to stop.

Like an alcoholic staring at a bottle of whiskey taunting her to drink it, I knew I had to find a way to put a stop to this thing before the upcoming crash didn’t just hurt me... It would destroy me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



CARTER

Unbelievable.

Jenna had ghosted me.

I'd reached over to snuggle her this morning, and instead of my arms wrapping around the beautiful woman I couldn't believe was back in my life, they'd encircled a big, snoring, slobbery furball.

After giving Arnold a few scratches and feeling grateful it wasn't Jenna's morning breath that had been that bad, I got up and went looking for her. Nothing. Nada. No note. No explanation. Just gone.

And I remembered that feeling oh too well, just like it had gutted me when she'd ghosted me in Hawaii. But unlike the time she'd taken off and left me then, this time, I knew she couldn't have gotten far. The Bronson's had a full day of golf at Peninsula State Park planned out for all of us, and if I knew Aunt Tilly, she'd have insisted Jenna attend too.

With a smirk and a little reminder that I wasn't one to give up easily, I petted her dog on the head and said goodbye before jumping in my car to get back to my hotel. After getting showered then dressed in the plaid pants and sweater vest Valentina had given to me, I took a quick look in the mirror.

Pink. She had me wearing pink plaid pants and a pink vest over a white polo. Not exactly the best look on me to go and seduce Jenna again.

With no other choice but to do what the bride wanted, I headed off to Peninsula State Park Golf Course, where we'd all agreed to meet at eleven.

"Over here!" Eric called when he saw me get out of my car. He stood by the golf cart parking lot with the rest of the guys in our golf party. I had to swallow down my guttural groan when I saw they were all wearing the exact same outfit as me.

Seriously, Valentina?

Though I was embarrassed I'd be in a group of guys all matchy-matchy today, I supposed it was better than being the one guy rocking the pink plaid pants like a lone weirdo all day.

"Glad you could make it." Eric gripped my hand when I got to him. "Should be a fun day. The girls are all up in the clubhouse shopping." He rolled his eyes. "They'll be out soon, and we can pair up into teams of four. We were going to do guys against girls teams, but most of the bridesmaids haven't golfed, so we didn't think that'd be fair. Instead, we'll pair off in teams of two, one golfer one non-golfer, and do two carts per hole."

I motioned for him to come closer. "Is Jenna here?"

He nodded, then narrowed his eyes in a curious stare. "Yep."

A smirk tugged up the corner of my mouth. "I'm gonna need a favor then. Make sure she's paired with me."

The same mirth that had sparkled in his eyes a hundred times when we'd been up to no good returned. It was the same look he'd had in college when I'd suggested we ditch out on the last week and road trip to Tijuana. The same look he'd had when I'd proposed streaking through the senior year homecoming game. The same look he'd always get when I knew he had my back no matter what crazy thing I had in mind.

"You got it, brother. Consider it a done deal."

He reached out his hand, and I took it, giving it an exaggerated shake while I placed a palm on his shoulder. "Thanks, man."

He leaned in. "I'm guessing this means things went well yesterday?"

With a soft shrug, I answered, "Yeah. And no. But they're gonna go well tonight if you get me in that cart with her."

He pulled back and grinned. "Then let's get it done."

"Honey!" Valentina called from the pro shop situated just above the golf car parking lot. "Do you want a blue or black Pen Park Golf hat?"

"Whatever you think is best, sweetie," he answered.

"Okay, blue then! I'm gonna get you the matching hoodie and socks too."

I shot him a look and stifled my chuckle.

"Shut up," he joked. "I gave up fighting her buying clothes for me years ago. Some day when you're married, you'll understand."

Someday when I'm married.

It was crazy to think that I'd almost been. It seemed another life I'd lived going home to Camilla every night and planning a future with her... starting a family with her. I'd already been mostly recovered from the breakup before I'd arrived, but one look at Jenna and Camilla's face seemed to have been erased from my memory completely. Like the past ten years hadn't happened, and I'd just had one long blink that had brought me back into Jenna's arms.

The women filed out of the clubhouse wearing matching pink skirts and white polos the same shade as our plaid pants and vests. At least their outfits looked normal and not like the caricatures of golfers like me and the boys.

And then I saw Jenna step out to the side of the group.

Her eyes went wide for a moment when she saw me, then quickly, she looked away, pretending to laugh at something Cameron said.

"We're ready!" Lydia called as they walked down the path toward us. "Jason, the manager, said just take whatever carts we need, and he'll send the beverage cart around several times."

"I love the beverage cart." Eric grinned. "Best part about golfing."

"I hear that," I agreed, excited to have a couple beers and have some fun today... fun tormenting Jenna.

Valentina came up to his side and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "You're gonna love your new stuff. Jason's gonna put it in our car. I also got you some new club covers, a visor, and the cutest little Pen Park Golf shot glasses."

"Thanks, baby." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too." She leaned into him.

It should have been nauseating watching their sugary sweetness, but instead, I just felt happy for them. Eric loved Valentina completely. He'd known he wanted to marry her from the very first night he'd met her at the bar where she'd completely decimated a song on karaoke. The way she'd just owned her horrible voice and rocked it out had him staring at her with some serious heart eyes.

She was the yin to his yang, and unlike Camilla and me, she never tried to change him. She accepted him for exactly who he was, just like he accepted her for exactly who she was. And right now, she was the girl forcing us to wear pink and buying him matching visors. But he rolled with it because he loved her that much, and in a way I'd never been able to love Camilla. I should have known long ago when she'd tried to force me to be someone I wasn't, that she and I were doomed.

I'd never loved her the way that I had loved Jenna.

Jenna glanced at me, then lowered her eyes, her thick lashes stealing them from view.

"Well, I think we should pair up," Eric said, casting me a knowing look.

"Yes," Aunt Tilly said as she ambled up. "How are we pairing off?"

Eric took charge. "Everyone good at golf, raise their hands."

I lifted mine up. My career had forced me to get good at the game so I could schmooze potential clients on the course. It wasn't my cup of tea, and I'd take surfing or paddleboarding over it any day of the week, but I was pretty good.

"And who isn't very good?"

Most of the bridesmaids raised their hands along with a couple groomsmen.

"Okay, I'm gonna pair a golfer with a non-golfer." He lifted his finger and started calling names and putting people together. After he pointed to me, he casually flicked his finger to Jenna as my partner then kept on going. I had to hand it to him, it looked so natural I didn't think even Jenna would know I'd put him up to it.

Her wide eyes lifted and met mine, horror swirling around in her stare. I just raised my hand and wiggled my fingers and smiled at her like the Cheshire cat.

This is going to be fun.

As all the teams started pairing off, I strode over to Jenna. "Well, hey there, Casper. Looks like you're riding with me."

"Casper?"

"Casper, the ghost. Don't you remember him from cartoons?"

Shame crept into her eyes. "Don't call me Casper."

"Why not? You ghosted me this morning, so I think it's pretty fitting. Oh, wait." I pressed my finger to my chin. "Casper was the *friendly* ghost, and I don't think sneaking out of bed and leaving me without a word is considered very friendly."

"I had to get up early to get everything organized for today's outing," she defended, but I saw the lie in her eyes.

"Yeah. Definitely not Casper." I lifted my finger. "You're more like Moaning Myrtle, the ghost from *Harry Potter*. She was pretty bitter and cranky like you." I leaned in. "And it also fits because you were *really* moaning last night."

Her eyes went big as her mouth fell open.

"How's it going?" Cameron asked as he hopped to my side. "Looks like I'm riding with Eric, and the four of us are gonna be a team. Whoot!" He lifted a fist in the air, but Jenna just kept staring at me, stunned.

I held her eye contact as I bumped his fist with mine. "Can't wait, Cameron. Let's ride."

He shimmied in his pink pants and ran over to Eric's cart. Eric gave me a quick nod before turning his attention to Cameron and heading off.

I started off toward an empty golf cart and cast a look over my shoulder at Jenna, who still stood unmoving. "Come on, Myrtle. Let's go. Oh, and I'm driving. I don't want you ditching me on the golf course or something."

My cocky smile induced another wide-eyed stare from her. A few moments later, she walked defeatedly over to the cart and climbed into the passenger seat. I grinned at her and pressed the gas pedal, heading out after Eric. The Bronson's had orchestrated it so that we had the whole course to ourselves, so instead of all waiting to tee off at the first hole, we'd planned a shotgun start where each group teed off at a different hole, eventually working their way through them all. This allowed us to all play simultaneously.

"I'm sorry I snuck out this morning," she finally offered. "I didn't want to wake you, and I really did have stuff to do."

I guided the cart along the bright green grass and down the hill behind Eric. "I believe you that you had stuff to do. I don't believe you that you didn't want to wake me. Your ass got freaked out and ran."

She sucked her lip between her teeth, and I had a little flashback of when I'd sucked it between mine last night.

"I just think... we shouldn't have done that."

"Oh, I see." I clucked my cheek. "You didn't want to sleep with me?"

With a sigh, she shook her head. "It's not that I didn't want to sleep with you. I did. It's just that we *shouldn't*. It only confuses things more. I just had a—"

"A momentary lapse of concentration?" I joked. "Because damn girl, that was one serious lapse in thinking for an hour and a half. If your brain shut down for that long, I think we need to get you an MRI this afternoon."

A soft laugh passed her lips as she palmed her face. "Would you shut up about that? And yeah. That's exactly what it was. I just forgot for an hour that—"

"Hour and a half."

She rolled her eyes. "For an hour and a half, that this thing between us can't happen. It's too complicated, and we have to put a stop to it before it gets any harder."

"I thought you liked it hard." I glanced over and smirked. "Well, at least you did last night."

"Carter!" she scolded, then dissolved into laughter. "You're going to torture me all day, aren't you?"

I pulled the cart up next to Eric's and hopped out. I placed my hands on the roof of the cart and leaned down, leveling her with my mischievous glare. "Yup."

I heard her groan as I stood and walked over to Eric and Cameron.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



JENNA

As I gripped my club and rocked it back and forth in the air to warm up, Carter walked up behind me. My eyes closed for a beat, feeling his body edging closer to mine.

"I like your skirt," he whispered. "You look good in pink."

I turned around to face him, arching an eyebrow as I glanced down at his ridiculous pants. "That makes one of us."

"What? You don't like my pink pants?" He faked hurt and clutched his chest.

"Not the best look on you, if I'm being honest. Pink just really isn't your color."

He crossed his arms over his broad chest. "I'm secure enough in my masculinity to wear pink."

I jutted a finger at his torso. "There's nothing masculine about that vest."

"Yeah?" He glanced down. "Well, it may not be the manliest vest around, but it still looks good when I do this." He tightened his pecs beneath his crossed arms, and they bulged in succession as he flexed them.

My lips parted as the moisture departed my mouth.

So hot.

"See. Masculine." He finished with a face-splitting grin.

Already feeling my resolve slipping while I stared at the pure perfection smiling back at me, I spun back around and went back to working on my swing.

"Looking good, girl!" Cameron called over from where he stood with Eric, getting tips on his stance. "Eric is teaching me how to kick ass at this!"

"Yeah," Eric added. "Carter, you should give Jenna some tips since she's a beginner."

"I'm fine," I quickly spit out, not wanting Carter any closer to me.

"Actually," Carter added, "your stance isn't that great. You should widen it a little when you're going to drive. Just spread your legs a little bit."

I swallowed down the internal groan at the way just a simple phrase sent shivers snaking up my spine.

He came up behind me and slid a hand along my hip, the sensual touch igniting my skin beneath it.

"Loosen your hips." His body pressed up against mine as he rocked me back and forth. He leaned down into my ear and whispered, "Kinda like when you were on top last night."

My pulse climbed like it was training to scale Mount Everest. I closed my eyes, the memory of being with him last night crashing back into my mind.

"We are not discussing that again," I breathed out. "We're going to pretend it didn't happen."

"What? Your huge momentary lapse of concentration? The one that ended in us both naked?"

Memories of his muscular, naked body sliding against mine caused me to lose my breath. I cleared my throat. "Yes. Exactly. That."

"Hmmm." His chest vibrated against my back with the soft sound. "I really liked what happened, so I'm going to pass on pretending it didn't. Now, line the balls of your feet up with your upper spine

and your knees. When you're doing it right, your ass will stick out a little. And it's a nice ass, so don't be shy about it."

My brain screamed at me to leap out of his arms, steal the golf cart and race away, but my body... my stupid body pressed back against him.

"Yep. Just like that," he whispered, his warm breath brushing past my ear.

"Looking good, Jenna!" Eric called over.

I shook myself from the trance Carter had put me under and stood up straight and out of his grip. "Yeah. Thanks. I think I'm good now."

When I turned around and looked at Carter, a knowing look met mine. He had absolutely no doubt that he was driving me wild with desire... and he loved every single second of it.

Bastard.

Digging into my resolve to resist the man that made my knees and my brain dissolve into goo, I marched over to Cameron and Eric. "You guys ready? I think I'm good."

Cameron nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I'm not gonna like win the Masters or anything, but I think I can safely hit the ball and at least get it up off the ground."

"You've got this." Eric clapped him on the back.

The four of us took turns golfing at each hole, and I tried to keep as much distance between Carter and myself as possible. Every time we got in the cart together, though, the close proximity of his body beside mine had my heart fluttering in my chest.

Ugh. Why, oh why, did this man have to have such an effect on me? Why couldn't my brain convince the rest of my body that Carter was a *terrible* idea that would end in complete and total devastation? He lived in New York. I lived in Door County. We both had our own lives and companies that neither of us wanted to leave. We were doomed. Plain and simple.

I looked over and caught those sparkling blues staring back at me. My heart started pumping again and whispered at me to lean over and kiss him. My brain screamed its disapproval and told me to keep my lips to myself. I felt like a devil and an angel waged war on my shoulders, and I hoped that soon the angel would spear the devil trying to convince me to kiss him and send that sucker down to a fiery death.

Carter moistened his lips, and that inadvertently sensual move got the devil a better foothold on my shoulder.

"You really are lucky to live here," he said as he hopped out of the cart.

I climbed out of my side and reached for my clubs. "Yeah. I really am."

"Valentina talked about their family's home in Door County all the time, and she made it sound like some magical place. I'm not gonna lie, I thought she was exaggerating." He turned around and gestured to the beautiful view of the water down below. "Turns out she wasn't."

I followed his gaze out over the rippling blue waves and onto the quaint little picturesque town of Ephraim just on the other side of the water.

"Yeah. I am pretty lucky. I love it here."

"I can see why you do. It's a pretty magical place."

I smiled and took another look at the view below, then started off toward the tee box.

"How's it going?" Cameron whispered in my ear when I took my place beside him off to the side. Carter and Eric stood together in the center, each planning their next shot.

"It's going." I sighed.

"I could cut the sexual tension between you two with a butter knife."

I didn't argue back, instead standing quietly beside him.

“Well? What’s happening? Are you two gonna…” He waggled his eyebrows, and I slapped him on the shoulder.

“Stop.”

“Well, I think you should. I mean, helllooooo look at him. And when’s the last time you got any action? You gotta treat yourself to a little man fun every now and again, Jenna. You don’t want that thing to like, shrivel up or do whatever it does.” He made a sour face and waved a hand at my crotch.

“Eew!” I slapped him again. “That doesn’t happen. Gross.”

“I’m just saying,” he paused and jutted a chin to Carter, “I bet that man could curl your toes.”

Oh, he’d curled my toes alright, I thought while I stared at him.

“I see that look in your eye.” Cameron bumped me with a shoulder. “You want a piece of that man.”

“I don’t,” I lied.

Cameron tipped his head at me, then glanced over at Carter. His mouth formed an “O.” “You did it already, didn’t you, you little harlot!”

“I didn’t!” I argued back, but I’d never been much good at lying.

Cameron’s grin grew as he nodded his head. “When? Last night? Oh my God, while you were paddleboarding?”

“No! Not paddleboarding. After. At my place.”

He squealed, and I motioned for him to shut up.

“If you two already got together, then what’s up with all the tension today?”

“Because it was a mistake, and one I’m not planning on making again.”

“Why not? If you ask me, that’s some grade-A man meat over there. He’s smart, funny, successful, *sexy*.” He bit his fist as he flicked a look back to Carter.

“And he lives in New York.”

Cameron’s lips pressed together as he sighed. “Yeah. That is a bit of a bump you two would need to get over.”

“It’s not a bump. It’s a mountain. And it’s just easier if we put an end to this thing before it gets all complicated and messy. I’m sure I’ll find another guy eventually and one that lives nearby.” I said the words, but in my heart, I didn’t believe them. After a decade, I’d still never come close to meeting anyone that made me feel like Carter.

Carter swung and sent his ball flying down the huge hill to the fairway at the bottom. His muscles bulged as he gripped his club, holding it over his back. Muscles I’d been running my hands over last night.

I groaned.

“Just don’t write it off without really thinking it through.” Cameron slung an arm over my shoulder and guided me over to the center of the tee box. He leaned in and whispered, “I think you two should give it a try.”

I peered up at Carter and caught his intense stare. I felt naked again beneath his gaze, and the devil on my shoulder whispered that it would be fun to get naked with him again in real life. The angel told me to keep my clothes on.

With a groan, I turned my focus back to golf and tried to ignore the man behind me driving me mad with desire.

Everyone cheered as the fireworks popped and exploded over our heads on the beach at the Bronson's mansion. Cameron sat at my side with his arm around his boyfriend, Louie.

"They are doing an amazing job," Cameron said to me. "We really need to hire these guys more often."

"Yeah. They are really good," I agreed.

This was our first time using this new company for fireworks. So far, the impressive show had outperformed the last company we'd used who'd recently closed up shop for retirement. A lot of our couples liked to give their guests this treat during the wedding celebrations, but of course, the Bronson's had the dough for a show tonight as well as on the wedding night. At over ten grand a show, it wasn't something everyone could afford at their weddings, much less twice, but everyone didn't have the Bronson's unlimited resources.

"I love it here," Louie said as he peered around Cameron. His fashionable blonde hair blew a little in the soft breeze. "I'm so glad I moved here."

Cameron kissed his forehead and hugged him tighter. "Me too, baby."

My heart squeezed in my chest seeing the happiness on their faces. It caused me to glance over to Carter, who sat in the sand just a few yards away.

"Maybe he'd move here," Cameron whispered, noticing my stare was no longer on the colors in the sky.

"I'm not asking him to move here. You've heard him. He's really proud of the company he's built. What kind of an asshole would ask him to give that up?"

"What are we talking about?" Louie whispered.

"We're talking about Jenna and Carter hooking up," Cameron whispered back.

Louie's eyes widened as he bit his lip and nodded. "Oh, yeah! Cameron told me all about this. Is that the guy?" He jutted a chin at Carter.

"Yep," I responded.

Louie lifted his eyebrows and blew out a puff of air. "I say go get some, girl. That man has a body meant to be climbed."

Cameron gaped open his mouth and looked at Louie.

Louie shrunk a little, then bounced back with, "I mean, he's not Cameron, obviously, but considering Cameron is mine and doesn't swing your way, Carter is a good consolation prize."

"Good boy." Cameron booped his nose then pulled him in for a kiss.

"He's hot. Yes. He's great. Yes. He's a whole lot of things, but he lives in New York."

"I lived in Chicago, and I moved here for Cameron." Louie shrugged.

"Yeah, but you hated your job there. Carter has this big company he built. It's like mine. His baby. I can't ask him to leave it."

"And you don't want New York, huh?" Louie frowned.

"No. I really don't. I hate big cities. Makes me feel claustrophobic." I waved a hand at the open air around us. "I need space. Sunshine. Fresh air. This."

"I hear you, sister," Louie agreed. "Now that I've lived up here, I don't think I could ever live in Chicago again. The noise, the traffic, the rude people."

"Exactly!" I blew out a puff of air. "I don't want that. So, I'm going to shut this thing down with Carter right now so that one of us isn't stuck giving up their lives. It's just not smart. I'll find someone else."

Louie stuck out his lip but nodded. "I understand. You're probably right. Why start something up that won't be anything but trouble and heartache in the end?"

I tossed my hands up in the air. “Thank you! Exactly! That’s what I’ve been trying to say.”

“I still think you should go for it.” Cameron shrugged.

“Why would I want to torture myself?” I sighed.

“Because—” His gaze drifted to Louie. “Because you look at him the way I look at Louie, and he looks at you the way Louie looks at me. It hurts my heart to think that you could have what we have, and you guys are too chicken shit to try it. I can’t imagine how it would feel wanting Louie and not being able to have him.”

Louie pressed a hand to his chest, and his chin tightened. “Oh, my God.” He reached forward and slid his hands along Cameron’s face, pulling him in for a kiss that made my heart melt. “That is without a doubt the sweetest, most incredible thing anyone has ever said. Ever. In the history of the whole world. I love you, Cameron.”

“I love you too. Always.”

Louie turned his attention to me. “Okay. I changed my mind. I’m on Cameron’s side. Go get that man.”

I glanced over at Carter, and when my eyes met his, my stupid heart pounded against my ribcage like it was a caged animal trapped inside and desperate to get out.

Could we? I wondered as I let thoughts of a life with Carter creep into my mind. The kisses. The laughter. The life we could lead.

But as quickly as they came in, I realized I had no idea where that life would be? Here, with him giving up everything to come to Door County? There, with me in New York after giving up my dream career and a place I never wanted to leave? Or separate, where we’d see each other sporadically flying back and forth?

No. I couldn’t entertain the idea of trying to move forward with Carter. It was too much. Too complicated. Too painful.

I broke our stare and forced my eyes to lift back to the sparkles in the sky.

Stay strong, Jenna. Only a few more days, and he’ll be gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



CARTER

The firework show ended, and everyone strolled off the beach, laughing and talking as they headed back for the cocktail party in the main house. I stayed behind, wanting to get a little more time beside the water.

It was so beautiful here. So tranquil. As the waves lapped along the shore, I closed my eyes and thought about paddling out onto them. The water called to me, and I couldn't believe how much I'd missed it... and how I hadn't even realized I'd missed it until I'd arrived in Door County. It had been such a big part of my life before my move to New York, and in a million years, I'd never thought I'd live in a world where I didn't spend a chunk of my day out on it.

"I'll go get the music started. You just grab the rest of the bottles and head home. I'll make sure everything is good for the night." I heard Cameron say.

"Thanks, Cameron. I'll plan on seeing you tomorrow afternoon at my place."

I turned toward their voices and saw Cameron hand-in-hand with his boyfriend as they started toward the house.

My gaze drifted to where he'd just been standing, and it landed on Jenna. She was bent over, picking up the empty bottles of champagne piled in a neat heap.

"Need some help?" I offered.

She jerked her head up, and her startled eyes met mine. "Jesus. I didn't see you there in the dark."

I walked over and grabbed a few bottles from the ground. "I was just over by the water having a moment. What a beautiful night."

"Yeah. We've been lucky this whole week. And so far, the weather looks clear for the weekend."

"Don't jinx it."

She sucked the air through her teeth. "Yeah. Good point."

I picked up a piece of driftwood from between my feet and held it out. "Knock on wood, just to be safe."

She set down her bottles and chuckled but rapped her knuckles on the twisty dried-up branch.

"You really are amazing at what you do."

"Huh?"

"Planning weddings and stuff. I know all of this looks so effortless from where I'm standing, but I can't even imagine how much thought and work goes into pulling all these events off. There are so many moving parts, and yet you just keep the engine chugging along."

Her eyes creased with the soft smile. "Thanks. It is a lot, but I love doing it."

"Well, it shows. And I can't wait to see what you pull off for the actual wedding."

Her lips pinched together. "I hope it all works out. It's going to be all hands on deck that day. The ceremony will be right there." She gestured to a spot in the sand. "And we have a huge, clear tent that

will be set up on the beach right there.” I followed her point. “It’s going to be so elegant and beautiful, but it’s going to be a lot of work with over three hundred people coming.”

“I can’t imagine you won’t crush it though.”

The tension in her shoulders slipped away. “Thanks. I hope so.”

“Walk with me?” I lifted an elbow.

The tension returned to her body as she glanced at my elbow and stiffened.

“Oh, come on,” I sighed. “I’m not going to molest you. I just want to walk with you on the beach like we used to.”

Her lips twisted as she glanced at the house.

“I know they don’t need you up there tonight. I heard Cameron, so don’t try to pretend you have work to do. Just a walk. A little quiet time on a beautiful night.”

Finally, she exhaled a sigh and stepped forward, slipping her arm through mine.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

A soft shake moved her head, and it dislodged a piece of dark hair from the band holding it in a loose ponytail at her nape.

The sand squished between my bare toes as we started down the beach. Not wanting to spook her, I let the silence travel along with us as we walked.

“Nothing can happen between us, you know,” she finally said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Nothing *more*, you mean?” I teased.

“Carter.” She pulled me to a stop and blew out a breath. “I’m serious. You have to stop pursuing me. This will never work between us. It can’t.”

“Never say never.”

“I’m saying never.”

I clucked the side of my cheek and stepped forward into her space. She didn’t back up, instead closing her eyes and inhaling a deep breath.

“You’re scared. I get that.”

“I’m not scared. I’m smart. Smart enough to know exactly how this thing between us is going to end.”

“Oh, yeah? And how is that, Einstein?”

She opened her eyes, and I saw the embers of pain burning inside them. “With me here in Door County broken-hearted. Devastated. Destroyed. With you in New York just going back to your life and moving forward after we inevitably don’t work out.”

“Wow.” I chuckled. “Boy, you surely do have it all figured out, don’t you?”

“I do,” she said with certainty. “There’s no other way.”

I edged closer to her. “I know you like to plan everything, and clearly, you’re pretty damn good at it, but some things you can’t plan out. Life isn’t some clear, straight, easy path where you follow a map to get to the end. It’s messy and complicated. You get lost sometimes, wandering around in the dark. You lose your way, only to find it again. You take detours and wrong turns. Long ways and shortcuts. But what matters the most is who you’re with while you do.”

I leaned closer to her.

“I don’t know where our final destination is, but what I do know is that I want to find my path with you.”

Her eyes shimmered as she blinked up at me.

“I’ve never gotten over you, Jenna. I’ve thought about you every day for a decade. We may have been young when we met, and we didn’t know each other long, but I know enough to know that you’re

the only one for me.”

Her mouth opened and closed as she searched for the words. Finally, she whispered, “You don’t even know me anymore.”

My smile deepened as I reached forward and brushed the pad of my thumb against her cheek. “Oh, I know you, Jenna. I may have been away from you for a decade, but I still know you. Knowing someone isn’t just about the amount of time you spend with them. It’s about the feeling you get when you’re with them. The way you can’t stand to spend a minute apart. How their laugh lights up your soul. How suddenly you’d do anything for them. And I would, Jenna. I’d do anything for you.”

I saw the powerful mix of emotions collide inside her eyes.

“I’m still crazy about you. Always have been and always will be. So, while you stand there with your big brain trying to formulate a plan, tell it to plan on this. Plan on my feelings for you never changing. Plan on me doing anything and everything to make you happy. Plan on me never being the guy to let you down. Plan on us figuring this thing out together. Plan on that.”

A tear slid down her face as she pressed her cheek into my hand. I slid my fingers beneath her jawline and lowered myself to her lips. A soft breeze blew between us as I hovered there, waiting for her to grant me permission to take what I wanted from her again.

“Okay,” she breathed. “Let’s try.”

I didn’t give her a second to change her mind, instead crushing her lips with the power of my kiss. I wanted to kiss away any remaining doubt that we were meant to be. Kiss away all the years we’d been apart. Kiss her so hard that she would never question my feelings for her again or that we belonged together. Always.

I pulled her against me, relishing the way she moaned into my mouth. The taste of her cherry-flavored Chapstick tickled my tongue as it swept through her mouth. Her arms encircled my neck as she pressed deeper into my kiss, and I bent her backward, suspending her in my arms while I let the emotions she inspired in me free from their cage.

As I softened my assault on her mouth, I pulled her back up to standing. Pressing my forehead to hers, I whispered, “See. We’re worth it. You can’t tell me you don’t feel the connection between us.”

“I’ll never argue it’s there. I’ve known it from the first time I saw you.”

“Me too.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead, then pulled her into my chest. As I stood holding her tight, I glanced up at the dark sky. Instead of just stars and blackness, I saw the most incredible colors swirling through the inky sky.

“No way,” I breathed.

“What?” she pulled back and looked up at me.

“Northern Lights.”

Her gaze drifted up to search where mine had landed, then she pressed her head into my chest. “Oh, I love those. We get them a lot in the summer.”

“Seriously?” I breathed, marveling at the way the greens and blues pulsed and fluttered.

“Yeah. I’ll never get sick of seeing them.”

“Way better than fireworks,” I said. “I’ve always wanted to see them but never have.”

“Yeah. Nature’s fireworks definitely outdo the manmade kind.”

As I stood beside her under the carousel of colors, the soft waves lapping on the shore captured my attention. With a smirk, I stepped out of her embrace.

“I have an idea.”

She furrowed her brow, tilting her head. “What kind of idea?”

I reached down and grabbed the bottom of my t-shirt and yanked it over my head.

“What are you doing?” She quickly looked around us, confirming there was no one nearby on this secluded stretch of beach.

I just grinned and reached for the buttons on my shorts, opening them up and dropping them to my knees along with my boxer briefs.

Her eyes went big as they swept up my naked body.

“We’re going skinny-dipping under the northern lights.”

“We are not,” she argued, looking around again. “Someone might see!”

“No one is anywhere near here. And we went skinny-dipping in Hawaii and didn’t get caught. So, come on. Take off your dress and let’s go.”

She chewed on her lip while she took one last look around, then I saw the mirth light up in her eyes. With one quick sweep, she pulled her blue dress over her head. She held my gaze while she reached behind her back and unclipped her bra. My mouth went dry when she dropped it to the ground, and I got to soak in the sight of her full breasts, her nipples hard in the cool breeze.

She hooked her thumbs in her underwear, a shy smile lifting her lips as she pushed them off. When they dropped to the sand at her feet, my cock twitched at the sight of her standing naked in the moonlight.

There she is.

That woman I’d spent a week with in Hawaii stood before me once again. Suddenly, I was twenty years old, and no time had passed since that night we’d met. The decade we’d spent apart disintegrated as I stared into those same eyes I’d never forgotten. Tonight, they revealed the same passion and desire I’d seen in them before. There was no fear or apprehension now in those chocolate irises as she stood naked before me, the moonlight licking her olive skin.

She looked like the woman I’d fallen head over heels for the moment I’d laid eyes on her.

I reached out my hand, and she stepped forward and took it in hers. With matching smiles, we stood side by side.

“Ready?” I asked as I glanced down at her.

“Ready.”

We took off running into the water, the cold water a shock to my senses as we pushed through it. Jenna’s happy squeals reminded me of the exact same sound she’d made when we’d done this same thing a decade ago. Memories of that night collided in my mind while we dove under the waves.

We popped up sputtering out water, our laughter mingling together as we stood together in the waist-high water.

“Holy shit, it’s cold!” She pushed her wet hair out of her face.

“Yeah,” I agreed, shaking my head to get rid of some of the water. “But we’ll adjust. And…” I paddled toward her and scooped an arm around her back, pressing her into me. “I can think of a few ways to help us warm up.”

Desire ignited in her eyes right before they closed as my kiss moved to her mouth. Her warm fingers wrapped around my back as she folded into me. My hand drifted down the soft curves of her waist, then slid to the front of her body. She moaned when I brushed my thumb across her hard nipple.

“You remember when we had sex in the water?” I whispered, my lips trailing kisses along the soft curves of her neck as I moved down toward her breasts. Memories of our passionate lovemaking in the ocean flooded back into my mind, and my cock throbbed just thinking about repeating one of the best nights of my life.

“Yes,” she breathed, her back arching as I took her in my mouth.

While I worked my tongue in circles around her tightened skin, I traced a lazy path down her body with my other hand, teasing and taunting her until I guided it between her legs.

“Oh, God,” she rushed out as I teased the sweet spot with my fingers.

I moved to her other breast, teasing it with my teeth as I sank a finger inside of her.

Her soft gasp tangled with the sounds of the waves rushing around us. I worked my fingers inside her, using my palm to give attention to the bundle of nerves between her legs. Jenna moaned and writhed, my fingers moving faster with her thrusting against my hand until I felt her body tighten and shudder with her release.

“I missed hearing those noises you make,” I whispered against her skin as I kissed my way back up to her mouth.

“I missed having you cause them.” She grinned a sly grin, and I gasped when I felt her hand wrap around my cock. “And I like hearing the noises you make too.”

I growled as I pushed my lips against hers, the tension in my cock threatening to cause me to combust.

“I don’t suppose you have a condom tucked away somewhere, do you?”

“No,” she whispered as she peppered kisses along my neck while she worked over me. “But I’m on the pill.”

Thoughts of taking her with nothing between us tightened my cock even more. “I got tested after Camilla cheated, and I haven’t been with anyone else.”

“Unless I picked something up from a toilet seat, I haven’t been with anyone else in years.”

Knowing she *had* been with someone since me wasn’t a surprise, but it only ignited the primal need inside me to reclaim her. Make her my own.

I reached down and grabbed her ass and lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist as I angled my body to match hers. Our eyes connected as I pressed myself against her, the warm heat from her core begging me to enter her.

I slid her body down my shaft, groaning along with her, a symphony of pleasure we created as I filled her fully.

“Carter,” she whispered against my lips.

I grabbed her ass tighter, moving her faster as I slid my tongue into her mouth. She gripped my neck tight, moaning as her tongue matched mine while I deepened our kiss.

Sheer bliss coursed through me while I connected with her again and again, our bodies heating as we moved together, the memories of our first time crashing back into me.

Even though she was with me now, touching me, tasting me, I desperately clung to her, never wanting to let her go. I couldn’t lose her again. I wouldn’t. This, with her, *in* her, was where I belonged. Where I’d always belong.

“Carter,” she breathed, then broke our kiss to lean back in my arms.

The moonlight illuminated her breasts as she tossed her head back and lay in the water, letting her arms drift away from her body as she closed her eyes in ecstasy. The sight of her wet breasts exposed and illuminated in the moonlight nearly took me to my knees. I gripped her hips tight as I held her in place against me, every thrust bringing me closer and closer to release.

“Oh, God,” she breathed as she tightened around me.

My own orgasm built to uncontrollable as I leaned back and let the release wash over me as she moaned out her own. When I opened my eyes, I saw the swirls of color still suspending over our heads. Heaving heavy breaths, I dragged my eyes from the incredible sights above us and met her satiated gaze.

The colors above us were beautiful, but nothing was more beautiful than the look in her eyes as she stared back at me.

A moment ago, I hadn't thought it was possible to be any happier, but being here with her, in this way, shattered any happiness I'd ever felt before. I pulled her back against me and crushed her lips with my kiss. I held her body against me... the body I would never, *ever* let go.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



JENNA

I felt the warmth of a body beside me as I started to awaken, and for a hot second, I panicked. Then I remembered who was next to me.

Carter. I was in bed with Carter.

A smile lifted my lips as I snuggled tighter against him. As I lay there with my eyes closed, pieces of the evening started coming back to me. Like a movie playing in fast forward, our night together refilled my mind.

The beach. The kissing. The touching. The *sex*.

Well, so much for my plan to put a stop to this.

But after spending an entire night in his arms, I could barely remember the reasons I'd vowed to stay out of them. We'd stayed up all night, laughing and talking just like we used to. With Carter, I felt like everything just came so naturally. It was hard to explain how you could feel so close to someone so quickly—like you'd known them your whole life. And that was how I felt with him. Our connection had remained strong even through all the years apart.

I blinked open my eyes and found his bright blue ones staring back at me.

"You still snore," Carter whispered, wrapping me up tighter.

I stiffened in his arms, grimacing. "Um. It was Arnold."

Carter chuckled, and it echoed in his chest where my head lay. "Oh, he snores too. It was like a symphony of trombones in here last night."

Heat flushed my face as I buried it against him. "Sorry. It's my deviated septum."

His fingers twirled through my hair. "I liked it. It was soothing. Like a little song that consistently reminded me you were really here, and you hadn't ghosted me."

"You *liked* my snoring?"

"It's cute." He kissed the top of my head. "Arnold though? Jesus. He could bring down the whole house."

Hearing his name caused Arnold to lift his head from the spot he'd crawled into when we'd fallen asleep last night. He grumbled and snuffed, then dragged his overweight body on top of us.

"Oof," Carter grunted when Arnold lay his full weight on his stomach. "You need to eat some veggies, man. Start running or something."

"I know," I sighed. "He's just really good at begging for food, and I'm really bad at telling him no."

"You're really bad at telling me no too." Carter chuckled.

"Ugh. Don't I know it," I admitted on a sigh. "Damn it! I had a plan."

"You? A plan? Never!" he teased.

"Shut up."

“Sorry. Go on. What was this plan of yours?”

“Well, first, it was to pretend I was in a coma and avoid you the whole week.”

“What?” He peeked down at me and laughed. “A coma?”

I shrugged. “I figured it was the only way I could avoid you... and avoid this happening.”

His laugh deepened. “Wow. I don’t know whether to be hurt or proud. You were gonna fake a coma to keep out of my grasp?”

He tightened his grip.

“It crossed my mind.”

“I’d have found you anyway. Nothing, not even a little coma, was going to come between us again.” He kissed the top of my head. “And now that you’re here? Do you wish you’d faked that coma, or are you glad it happened?”

With a sigh, I admitted the truth. “I’m glad it happened. I’m still scared, and I have no idea how this will work, but it was pointless trying to avoid it. You and I seem to be like a couple of magnets. No sense in avoiding the inevitable.”

“M.F.O.E.”

I grinned. “Made for each other. I said that about us a decade ago!”

“I remember. And I’ve never stopped thinking it. We are, you know.”

I smiled as I started to settle into the idea of having Carter in my life, and being the planner I was, I started going over every conceivable option in my head. Would I move there? No. I hated big cities. He moves here? No. He had a thriving company there. That panic started churning up inside of me again, but I squashed it back down. We would just have to rack up a lot of miles until we figured something out.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Liar. I can pretty much see the wheels turning in your mind. You’re planning something. What is it?”

“Just trying to figure out how this is going to work.”

“Ah,” he sighed. “Yeah. That.”

“Yeah. *That* is right.” I sat up and looked at him. “How are we—”

The front door opened and slammed, stopping me mid-sentence. “Jenna?” Jo called. “Where you at?”

My eyes went big. “Shit! It’s my sister!”

Arnold launched off the bed, nearly falling as he hit the ground. His deep, gruff barks shook the house as he bounded down the stairs.

Carter sat up and stretched. “Oh, good. I like her. Now that she’s not trying to kill me, anyway.”

My eyes darted around the room, then I pointed to my closet. “Quick. Hide!”

He furrowed his brow and scoffed. “Why the hell would I hide?”

“Because she’ll see you!”

“So?” With a shrug, he stood up.

My eyes raked his naked body, my heart pounding in my chest as I soaked in the sight of him again.

“Jenna! You up?” Jo called again.

I glanced at Carter as he pulled on his shorts.

“Seriously. We can’t let her see you here.”

He rolled his eyes then disappeared beneath his tank top when he pulled it over his head. “Why would we hide from your sister? Are you ashamed of me or something?” he said, then his head popped back out.

“No. Of course I’m not ashamed. It’s just... it’s a lot to explain, and I don’t—”

“Well, good. I’ll go down and put on the coffee. We can all catch up.”

“What!” I sat up and yanked the covers up with me. “What do you mean you’ll—”

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “See you down there.”

As he walked to the door, he called, “Hey, Jo!”

I jumped out of bed, hopping on my feet as I yanked on my underwear. Racing to the closet, I ripped a robe off the hook, wrapping it around me as I bolted after him.

“Carter!” I called in a whisper as I raced down the stairs. When I reached the bottom, Jo stood with wide eyes, staring at Carter as he marched right up to her.

“Morning, Jo!” He patted her on the shoulder as he passed her by.

Her shocked gaze moved from him to me, and I pulled my lips up into an awkward smile. “Hey, Jo.”

The stunned look on her face faltered and lifted into a huge smile. Shortly after, laughter rolled out of her mouth.

“Shut up!” I covered my face and walked toward her.

“Well, holy shit,” she said between laughs. “And can I just say... I knew it!” She lifted a triumphant fist into the air.

“Yeah. You called it. Thanks for the tip the other night,” Carter said, confirming my suspicions.

Pinching my lips together, I narrowed my eyes. “Oh! I knew it was you! You sneaky son of a...”

I started toward her, but she ran around my kitchen island, laughing. “And I was right! So, ha!”

I moved toward her, but she slipped away behind Carter, laughing as she dodged my grasp.

I planted my hands on my hips. “I can’t believe you did that!”

“Oh, you can’t, can you? You can’t possibly believe that I busted out your feelings to the guy you had feelings for and got you two together?” She put her finger on her chin. “I wonder where I could have gotten that idea. Hmm? I wonder, wonder, wonder.” Her eyes widened as she looked at me. “Oh, yeah! From you! Payback’s a bitch, Jenna!”

Knowing I didn’t have a leg to stand on since I *had* done the exact same thing to her, I slumped my shoulders in defeat. “Okay. We’re even.”

She stuck out her hand in a truce, approaching me slowly. “Shake on it?”

I eyeballed her hand, laughing as I gave up the fight and shook it.

“You two done?” Carter asked as he opened and closed my cabinets.

“Finished,” I said as I moved up behind him, opening the correct cabinet for coffee.

“Ah, there it is!” He pulled out the bag and took a sniff. “Mmm. Smells good.”

“Door County Coffee makes the best stuff. Filters are in the drawer underneath the coffeemaker.”

Carter kissed my cheek as he walked off to my coffee maker across the kitchen. I glanced up to see Jo watching us with sparkles flickering about in her eyes.

“Quit staring,” I demanded. “You’re making me self-conscious.”

“You’ve got a man in your kitchen. A half-naked man. I’m staring,” she responded.

“Why don’t you two go out on the porch and relax. I’ll make breakfast while you fill her in on how you roped such a handsome, smart, sexy man into your kitchen.”

Jo started laughing, jutting a thumb at him. “I like him.”

“I’m impossible not to like,” Carter called over his shoulder as he poured the grounds in the filter.

Laughing at the accurate statement, I shrugged and gestured to my porch. "It's true. Well, shall we?"

Jo nodded. "I cannot *wait* to hear this story."

Carter came over and gave me a kiss, tapping my butt before he went back to the kitchen. "I'll bring coffee out in a minute, baby."

Jo's grin was so wide I worried her face would split.

"Quit looking at me like that." I yanked her by the arm and pulled her out on the porch with me.

As I settled into the wicker rocking chair, Arnold trotted over from where he'd gone potty and climbed into my lap.

"Spill," Jo demanded when she sat in the chair beside me.

I started at the beginning, back on the yacht the last night I'd seen her. By the time I finished, Carter had come out with eggs and bacon, complete with buttered toast.

"Oh, my God. He makes bacon too?" Jo closed her eyes and moaned while she inhaled the tantalizing scents. "Hang onto this one, Jenna."

"You hear that?" he said as he handed me a plate. "Even your sister approves."

"She has to. If this doesn't work out, then I get to blame her since it's all her fault for busting me out."

I arched an eyebrow and gave her an accusatory stare.

With a shrug, she put a piece of bacon in her mouth instead of answering.

Carter walked over and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Listen, I have to go and meet Eric and the boys for a round of golf in an hour, so I've got to get going."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "It's bachelor party day!"

"Yep. Golfing all day and drinks with the boys tonight."

"Yeah. You'd better get home and get ready. Mr. Bronson is not a fan of people who run late."

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips, hovering there for a few long moments while I sighed.

"Is it okay if I come over here after the party tonight?"

"Yeah. Of course. I'll be here. Cameron and I have to finish the final details for the wedding, so we'll be working here and at the Bronson's all day. The tent and tables are getting set up tomorrow afternoon, but I should be home by nine. Just come on by when you're done."

"Good. I'll try to get out of it early. I don't want to miss spending a single second with you if I can help it."

With a sigh, I kissed him again. When he stood back up, Jo stared at us, smiling.

Carter gave her a nod. "Good to see you again, Jo. Enjoy your breakfast, and I hope Jenna is admitting how much she adores me and telling you what a fantastic guy I am."

With a wink, he blew me a kiss as Jo dissolved into laughter.

"Okay. I *really* like this guy," she said as he walked back in the house.

With a heavy sigh, I admitted, "Me too."

We ate our breakfasts, and Carter called goodbye before he left. After his car pulled out of the drive, Jo set down her plate and turned to me.

"Okay. Serious shit now. Is this really happening? What is the plan here?"

Shrugging, I settled back in my chair. "For the first time in my life, I don't have a plan."

"Damn. That is a first."

"All I know is that we're crazy about each other, and we're just going to have to figure out how to make it work."

Jo wrinkled her nose. "Wait a minute. You're not moving to New York, are you? I didn't just screw up and cause my sister to move across the country, right?"

"No. Definitely not moving to New York." I blew out a breath. "I hate cities. You know that."

"Good." Jo smiled. "So, will he move here then?"

Grimacing, I shook my head. "I don't think so. He owns a big company in New York. I can't imagine him wanting to give up his dream and move to Door County."

"So..." She furrowed her brow. "What happens now?"

That panic deep in my gut resurfaced as I let the reality of our situation settle in.

I turned and looked at her. "What happens now is that I have no freaking idea."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



CARTER

“Play it again!” Andrew, one of the groomsmen, yelled to the guy working the jukebox at The Bayside. “Free Bird!”

His slurred words induced a round of cheers from the other ten men in our party... the men who’d consumed more shots of Jägermeister than I ever knew possible. I’d had a few myself, but I’d pumped the brakes when I started to teeter. I had a woman waiting for me tonight, and to hell if I was going to get so hammered, I couldn’t ravish her the way I’d envisioned in my head all day. No one wanted a sloppy drunk crawling into their bed.

“So, you and Jenna, huh?” Eric asked from where he sat at the bar by my side.

Just hearing it out loud made me smile. “Yep. Me and Jenna.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “This is nuts, man. What the hell were the chances of *your* Jenna being my wedding planner Jenna? It’s crazy!”

“Yeah. It is crazy. But here we are. And this time, I’m not letting her get away.”

Eric furrowed his brow. “Yeah. About that. How is this going to work? You’re not ditching me in New York, are you?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Nah. I’m finally making some good money after putting in a hell of a lot of work.”

“So, is she moving to New York then? Aunt Tilly and Valentina know a *ton* of socialites in New York. I bet they could get Jenna hooked up fast!”

“We haven’t had this conversation yet, but I’m hoping so. I mean, there are a lot of events that need planning in New York. And she’s super talented, so obviously, she’d be successful there. I’ve been thinking a lot about it, and I can’t imagine Jenna wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to build an event planning empire in New York. She’d make a serious killing. There’s no better place to plan parties than New York City. She would do amazing things. I know it.”

The thought of Jenna in my world warmed my heart with hope. Everything. I would have everything with her by my side. I knew Jenna was talented and driven, so it wouldn’t take long for her to rise to the top of all the planners in New York. Hell, she’d probably grow so big she’d give my company a run for its money with her yearly revenue. I lit up inside with excitement just thinking about presenting her with the idea. Jenna would initially be concerned with the logistics of the move and starting a new business, of course. After she thought it out, I felt confident she’d be elated at the idea. Despite rushing in to rekindle our connection by asking her to move to be with me, excitement took over and won that internal war. I was too damn excited about the prospect of seeing her every day to focus on the timeline or the pesky little details like rational thinking. We’d spent a decade apart, and it was about damn time we got our happily ever after.

“We’ve got that extra apartment in the city she can stay in for a while if you two don’t want to move in together right away. I mean, I doubt you’d be opposed to waking up next to Jenna every day, so just in case she thinks it’s too fast. But dude... is this happening? Are you really going to end up with the girl you fell for so hard when we were just kids?”

“I think I am.” My smile stretched my face.

“And it’s all because of me and my wedding. You’re welcome.” Eric grinned then tapped his beer against mine.

The front door of the Bayside opened, and the sounds of screaming girls flooded the bar. We all spun to the door, and Eric lit up like a lightbulb when he saw Valentina coming our way with her bridesmaids filing in behind her. The pink, sparkly sashes and penis balloons over their heads made me chuckle.

“Baby!” Valentina called then hurried to Eric.

“What are you doing here?” he asked before kissing her. “I thought you guys had AC Tap, Husby’s, JJ’s, and The Bowl for your party, and the boys got Blue Ox, Pen Pub, the Roadhouse, and The Bayside.”

“We did.” She flopped onto his lap then wrapped her arms around his neck. “But I missed you, so we told our trolley driver to toss out the itinerary Jenna made and bring us here. Is that okay?” Her glassy eyes searched his as she pushed her lip into a full pout. “Or did you want us to go?”

“Hell, no!” Eric tipped her backward and kissed her, causing her to squeal with delight. “I think a joined party is even better! I missed you too.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, her strange bouquet of lollipops clunking him in the back of the head.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing at it.

“Suck for a buck!” She grinned as she came back to sitting. “Want one?”

“I’ll take two.” I remembered how much Jenna loved sweets, and I thought it would be a nice surprise to bring back to her... not to mention watching her suck on a lollipop would make me happy too.

As I reached for my wallet, a hand brushed the back of my neck.

“Hey, Carter,” a familiar voice said, and it caused me to stiffen like a board.

I spun around in my stool to see Camilla staring back at me.

“What the hell are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming,” I managed to utter out my stunned response at seeing her appearing so eager to see me. It wasn’t like I hadn’t run into her since the incident. I just hadn’t expected to see her *here*. Her father owned the office building where I leased space for my company’s suite of offices. He kept an office for his own company on the same floor as mine, and she often dropped by to see him. But after she’d flaunted herself in front of my glass windows a number of times, I’d realized she only visited because she wanted to talk to me. I’d kept it short and professional when she’d poke her head in to say hi, but I’d ended those conversations as quickly as I could.

“I wasn’t,” she said, then slid into the seat behind me. “But I decided at the last minute that I couldn’t miss Valentina’s wedding even if she’s still furious with me for what I did to you. We’ve been planning our weddings since we first met in college, and I know I screwed up, but I just had to try to smooth things over one more time. Make things right. So, I jumped on a plane today, came up here, and tracked her down. One last-ditch attempt to repair the relationships that mean everything to me.”

I looked to Valentina and caught her worried stare. “Is this okay, Carter? You’re the best man, and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.” She flicked her gaze to Camilla. “I mean, I’m still pissed as hell about what she did, but she’s right. She’s one of my best friends, and I can’t imagine not having her at my side on the most important day of my life.”

I’d never asked Valentina to end her relationship with Camilla over what she’d done to me, but as people who valued honesty and morals, both she and Eric had been devastated to find out Camilla could do something like that. After a blowout fight, the two women hadn’t spoken in months, and Camilla had been kicked out of the wedding party, losing her status as Maid of Honor.

“It’s fine, Valentina,” I said, still reeling from the shock of seeing Camilla. “I never asked you to end your friendship or kick her out of the wedding party. This is your wedding, and I think it’s a good thing she’s here for you.”

“Really?” Valentina asked. “I have been missing her so much this week, but I don’t want this to be weird.”

“It won’t,” I answered, quickly turning my attention to Camilla. “It’s fine that you’re here. Really. I’m good if you’re good. All that matters is that our friends have the perfect wedding. You were an important part of Valentina’s life, and it’s right that you should be here for this. Let’s all just put the past in the past and leave it there.”

“I promise I won’t cause any trouble, Carter.” Camilla’s big blue eyes glistened as she stared at me.

“You sure this is cool, man?” Eric shot a penetrating glare at Camilla.

She tucked a piece of her long, blonde hair behind her ear as she shrank from his gaze. I kept the corners of my mouth from tugging upward at his protective gesture. He’d been in my corner from the moment he’d heard the news of her betrayal, and, like any good best friend, he’d been giving her the cold shoulder ever since. Even when I’d told him it wasn’t necessary. But his support and ride-or-die mentality still warmed my heart. Hell, I’d do the same damn thing too, if roles were reversed.

“Yes. It’s seriously fine,” I answered, surprised by the truth in the words. Honestly, since the moment Jenna had crashed back into my life, any residual hurt or anger toward Camilla had just faded away. The woman standing before me—who had once meant so much to me—didn’t matter anymore. Jenna mattered and nothing or no one else. When I looked into the future, I saw Jenna there by my side.

“Thank you, Carter. You really are the best.” Valentina leaned forward and pulled me in for a hug. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Valentina. It’s your day. Yours and Eric’s. Now, you girls go have fun. I hope you don’t mind, but I think I’m gonna call it a night. I’ve got somewhere to be.”

Eric smirked, knowing exactly what I meant. “Yeah. Of course. Totally get it. Go have a good night, man.”

I dropped a twenty on the bar to cover my tab, then got up off my stool.

“Have fun, guys. I’ll see you tomorrow for the rehearsal.” I patted his shoulder and gave Camilla a quick glance before moving around her. “Goodnight, Camilla.”

I got to the front door and pushed it open, taking a big breath of the fresh air that didn’t smell like the perfume cloud I’d just gone through. With my car just around the corner, I started toward it, then stopped when I realized I’d had a couple too many to drive without the risk of a DUI, even though I felt totally fine. Not wanting to miss the wedding sitting in jail, I opened my phone and clicked the Uber app. After a few taps on the screen, a car was on its way.

“Carter.” Camilla’s voice cut through the silence, and I closed my eyes, wishing she’d not followed me out here. Our interaction at the bar had been... pleasant. And that felt good. Rehashing old wounds that should stay buried firmly in the past could only lead to more trouble.

I turned around, and she stood behind me, her blue eyes rimmed with tears.

“Honestly, I’m not interested in talking, Camilla. It’s fine that you’re here. Really, it is, but we’ve said everything we need to say. Just go have fun with Valentina. You’re here for her, not me.”

“I’m here for both.” She stepped toward me, but I moved away.

More pain filled her eyes as she crossed her arms around her waist.

“We have nothing left to say. You made your choice, and I made mine. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d prefer to be left alone.”

It didn’t even pain me to see her. There was no longing on my end, especially now that Jenna was back in my life. I’d been devastated when Camilla had cheated but also relieved. Deep down, I’d always known she wasn’t the right woman for me, but I’d gone so far down the wrong path, I hadn’t seen any way back. Then she’d gone and done what she’d done, opening an emergency exit so I could launch myself out. And it had felt good when I’d done it.

“You can’t ignore me forever, Carter. We were supposed to be married. We deserve a talk. A *real* talk. One where you’re not fuming with rage.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

She shrunk back a little. “*Valid* rage. But we were going to spend the rest of our lives together. We don’t just give up when we hit one bump in the road.”

“One bump in the road?” My eyes widened. “You screwed another dude! That’s not a bump in the road. That’s a fucking mountain. That’s not some little bump we’re going over. And we did talk. You begged for forgiveness. I told you we’re over and to stay out of my life. No further talking required. We can be civil if we happen to run into each other. We’re both adults, but there won’t be any more discussion.”

“Carter, we can’t give up so easily. I know what I did was horrible. Unforgivable. But you have to forgive me anyway. You can’t throw away what we have without trying to fight for us. We’ll go to therapy. Take a vacation. I’ll do anything, *anything*, to win you back. I love you, Carter. I’ll always love you.”

“It’s done, Camilla. For good. We can’t go backward in time, and I can’t honor my values by moving forward with you.”

“Carter. I know I messed up—”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Camilla. It’s over. We are *over*. I don’t know how else to say it so you’ll understand and accept the message.”

She reached for me. “We can’t be over, Carter. I know deep down you still love me.”

The face of the woman I truly loved popped into my mind, and it wasn’t Camilla’s. I finally knew the words I could say that would hopefully end her attempts to reconnect our failed relationship.

“I found someone else, Camilla,” I spit out, and it felt good to say it. “Someone I really care about. Someone who would never, *ever* betray me or what we build together.”

The shocked look on her face should have caused me joy, but deep down, I felt bad I’d hurt her. Not that I should after what she’d done to me, but still... I wasn’t an asshole.

“What?” she breathed. “You met someone else?”

Exhaling a sigh, I lifted a shoulder and dropped it. “I’m not going to talk to you about this, but yeah. I’ve got someone else now. In fact, I should be thanking you for doing what you did to me so that I could find my way back to her. She’s the one for me. Always has been, always will be. So, we’re

over, Camilla, and it's time to accept that. I know that hurts you and that it might be hard to get over. It will take time, but you need to move on with your life and get out of mine."

"So... that's it? We're done? You met someone else, and we're over?"

"Yes," I breathed out a relieved sigh, finally feeling that heavy weight lifting from my shoulders. "I hope you find your own happiness like I've found mine."

She sucked her glossed lip between her teeth and nodded slowly. "Okay. I, uh, I understand. I guess... I guess I'll just see you around the office building."

"Yes. I'll see you when you visit your dad."

"Well," she said, her gaze dropping to the ground. "That was the, uh, the other thing I was going to tell you tonight."

I scrunched my brow.

"Daddy is helping me start my own PR company, and he's giving me an office in his building. I guess we'll be seeing each other around the workplace most days."

I swallowed my internal groan. Great. Just what I needed. It was one thing to see her from a distance every now and again, but it was another thing entirely to see her around the office every day. Even though she seemed to be accepting our relationship was over now, it didn't mean she wouldn't ever try again. Camilla had a knack for not letting go until she got her way, and until her sights moved on to someone else, I knew I was in for a rocky road ahead.

"Oh," I answered. "Well, that's... surprising."

"I hope it won't be too weird seeing me all the time?" Her eyes lifted from the ground, and that little bit of hope I'd thought was gone still fluttered inside them.

"We'll just keep our distance if that's okay with you. You do your thing, and I'll do mine."

"Yeah. Of course. Sure. I'll try to stay out of your way."

The lie settled into her eyes. She may have conceded tonight's battle, but for Camilla, the war waged on.

Not wanting to spend another minute talking to her or thinking about what life would be like dealing with her every day, I heaved a sigh when my Uber pulled up.

"Well, this is me. Have fun with Valentina."

"Yeah. I will. It's good to see you again, Carter. I missed you."

I didn't answer, instead hopping in the car quickly and telling him to step on it to get me to my girl. I couldn't get to Jenna fast enough. The car had barely stopped when I opened the door and jumped out, rushing up her stairs and knocking.

When she opened the door with a smile, wearing a pair of cute flannel pajamas, all the stress and anxiety I'd been drowning in dissipated with one look.

"Hi," she grinned. "How was your ni—"

I didn't let her finish the sentence, instead crushing her mouth with a kiss as I pulled her into my arms and kicked the door shut behind me.

I didn't want to answer her question and tell her how much more complicated my life had just gotten since I'd last seen her. Instead, I buried my frustration in the power of my kiss. She responded to my touch, moaning into my mouth as I pushed her up against the wall. Each swirl of her tongue erased a little more of the stress Camilla brought into my life.

Jenna's soft hands lifting my shirt eradicated any worry I had about what awaited us when this weekend came to an end. One kiss from those lips that I loved, and everything else faded away but me and her. Her and me. Us. Always us. My problems would still be there in the morning, but tonight... tonight, all I cared about was Jenna.

The softness of her skin. The heat in her kiss. The warmth I felt when I buried myself in her body. We didn't even make it up the stairs before I ripped off her shirt and tossed it on the floor. Passion overtook us as I pushed her backward onto the couch and settled between her legs.

"You really missed me, huh," she teased between kisses as I tugged off her pajama pants and underwear.

"I've been missing you for a decade, and now that I have you back, I don't want to be away from you one more minute. It's you and me now, Jenna. Always."

Tonight, I didn't want foreplay. I didn't want slow and sensual like we'd done before. Tonight, I needed to sink inside of her with an urgency that vibrated my skin. She sighed as I took her mouth while I pushed inside of her. Her nails dug into my back as I went hard and deep. There was nothing outside of this room... nothing outside of her body... that could steal the joy I felt reconnecting with her again.

"Yes. Harder," she panted.

I gave her what she wanted, hooking her leg over my shoulder and thrusting so intensely that I worried I may hurt her. But she only dug her nails in harder, pulling me deeper. The exquisite feeling of her skin on mine, her tongue with mine, her body with mine, reminded me that no matter what the future held, it held her, and nothing else mattered. I let all my anxieties drift away while we connected again and again, our passions rising with each movement. When she called my name out on repeat, I shuddered and collapsed on top of her.

"You need to go out with the boys more often if you're gonna come home like that," she joked.

Laughing, I rolled over and pulled her on top of me. "Just wait until I catch my second wind."

She squealed when I kissed her then tossed her over my shoulder. Her laughter echoed through the house as I dragged her up to bed. My newfound problems would have to wait until tomorrow because tonight, all my attention was on her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



JENNA

Every muscle in my body protested but in the best way possible. Every ache came with a memory of how it'd gotten there... and visions of the man who'd been responsible.

Carter had always been passionate, but last night he'd cranked the dial up to an eleven. He'd been insatiable with his need to be with me, and I hadn't complained for even one second about the power of his passion. Just remembering the heat between us last night made me flush.

I stretched my arm over my head to soothe the ache in my back while the coffee percolated in the pot beside me.

"Are you as sore as I am?" Carter asked, and I spun around to see him standing behind me.

One glance down at his shirtless torso and the rock-hard abs, and I was ready to go get some new aches and pains.

"Morning," I sighed, walking over to greet him.

"Good morning, beautiful," he said between kisses.

"Coffee is on and should help ease the hangover I'm assuming you have today."

He grimaced. "I didn't go too crazy, but I definitely have a bit of a headache. The rest of the guys were wasted, though, so I can only imagine how they're feeling today."

"Eric gonna be okay for the wedding rehearsal tonight?" I asked. "I warned him not to go too nuts. No one likes a groom stopping to puke in the rehearsal ceremony."

He chuckled. "He was pretty well behaved. Valentina, on the other hand, was pretty wasted when I saw her."

"You saw them? I thought we had a timeline laid out so the parties wouldn't collide." I panicked for a moment, thinking I'd messed something up, but quickly concluded that unless they'd gone off schedule, the trolley I'd rented both parties should have missed each other by miles.

"You did. Your schedule was just perfect, but Valentina missed Eric, so they took a detour to The Bayside."

I put a hand on my chest. "Oh, good. I was having a heart attack I screwed up."

"You? Screw up?" He arched an eyebrow. "Impossible. Even your plans have plans."

Chuckling, I shrugged. "I can't help it. I like to plan for everything."

"Almost everything." He slid his arms around my waist. "You didn't plan on me."

With a sigh, I leaned back against him as I poured the coffee into the cups. "Isn't that the truth."

His lips peppered kisses along my neck. "And now that I'm here, what's your plan? I know you have one."

Laughing, I shrugged. "Maybe."

"Well, let's hear it. Because I know you well enough to know that you've been working up a plan for us to work in your head."

“Well, I kinda have.” I spun around and handed him the mug. “At least a temporary plan.”

Carter hopped up and sat on my counter. His black boxer briefs didn’t do much to hide any part of his admirable body.

I slid up on the counter beside him. “So, I was thinking. Cassie is my friend, and she owns a company in New York City. She lives here with her husband, Jake, full time and does most of her work from here. But she flies back to New York at least a few times a month. So, I was thinking, maybe we could just catch a ride back and forth with her regularly. She’s got a private jet, and she’s just the nicest person you’ve ever met. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. That could work really well so we can see each other at least a couple times a month.”

His face didn’t light up with the enthusiasm I’d hoped for.

“I mean, I know it’s not a permanent solution, but it could work for a while. And then in the winter, when I don’t have as many weddings, I could come stay for longer times, like a couple weeks at a time even. And in the summer, when I’m busy, you can do the traveling and come stay here with me more.”

“Yeah. That could work,” he said unconvincingly.

“Not a good plan?”

“No. I mean, yes, it is. It’s a great plan for now. But like you said, it’s not a long-term solution. It’s way too much time apart. I can barely stand the thought of being away from you for a night, much less weeks on end.”

“And your job? Can you work remotely like Cassie does? She does ninety percent of her work from her porch in Baileys Harbor. She’s Cassandra Davenport and a pretty big deal. If she can do it, I would hope maybe you could too?”

“Wait, we’re talking about Cassandra Davenport? Like from Davenport Industries?”

I nodded. “Well, now she’s Cassie Alton since she married Jake, but yep. That one.”

“Wow. She’s a big deal in New York. One of the top execs in the city.”

“Exactly!” I said, getting more excited. “And she lives here almost all year round.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I wish that I could do my work remotely like she does, but unfortunately, a lot of my work is hands-on and in-person. I could maybe do some of it over a computer, but not enough to make a full-time move to Door County.”

“Oh,” I said, my dreams of having the same setup as Jake and Cassie getting dashed to pieces. “Well, that sucks. I guess then I need to get back to planning. We’ll figure it out.” I bumped him with my shoulder, surprised by my own certainty after I’d been so panicked about this exact problem.

“Well, I do have an idea if you want to hear it.” He peeked over at me, and his dimples deepened with his soft smile.

“Well, let’s hear it!”

“You move to New York.”

My eyes went big.

“You’re a super talented wedding planner, and with Aunt Tilly and Valentina’s connections, you’ll have a full client roster in a matter of months. You’ll make a killing! Probably triple what you make here, or more. It could be an incredible opportunity to really expand your business and show the whole world what you can do.”

As his face lit up with excitement, my chest tightened with the thought of living in a cold city. I’d been there once for a wedding planning convention. While some people thrived in a busy metropolis, my soul had started to die in the few days I’d visited. The noise, the congestion, the smell, the never-ending vibrations of anxiety radiating off everyone rushing around in a constant state of worry. In

Door County, we moved at our own pace. We slowed down to appreciate a nice view, got stuck at four-way stops waving at the other cars to go before us, and I reveled in the open space and the fresh air. And the people. Kind and thoughtful, everyone you met became like family. None of those things I loved about my life would be waiting for me in New York City. The only thing I would love about New York would be Carter.

Claustrophobia not unlike being stuck in the MRI tube set in. “I don’t think I can move to New York.”

“But you could make so much money there. If you’re worried about where you’ll live and you don’t want to move in with me right away, I totally get that. But Eric says they have an apartment in the city you can stay in as long as you need to. I mean, you’re welcome to live with me, of course, but I don’t want to freak you out with how fast things are moving. I know it’s already a big ask to have you pick up your life and move to New York, but you would be so successful there. I can just see you out there, crushing the competition and stealing all the big clients. And then we can be together every single day.”

The joy radiating off him tied my stomach into knots. I didn’t feel the same way. Not at all.

“You don’t understand how much I hate the city. Not in just an ‘I prefer country living’ kind of way. In a ‘truly horrified anyone can exist in such a dark, crowded, anxiety-ridden space’ kind of way.”

His face slowly fell. “Oh. I... I didn’t realize you hated the city so much.”

“Well, I do. A lot.”

He scrubbed a hand across his chin. “Wow. I guess I feel kinda stupid here. I really thought you’d be jumping for joy at the opportunity to launch a big career in New York. It didn’t even occur to me that this wouldn’t be good news to you. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed.”

My heart clenched at the sadness now filling his eyes. “I’m sorry, Carter, but a big fancy career in New York sounds like hell to me. I don’t care about making a ton of money over quality of life. Yeah, I like nice things, obviously,” I waved a hand around my house. “But I’d choose to eat ramen noodles and live in a box before I’d sell myself out to some job just for the money. Kinda like the guy I once thought you were.” The pained look on his face at my words made me close my eyes for a beat. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. I just meant that the Carter I knew would have died in the city too.”

His tone sharpened. “Not all of us can be as lucky as you and make a great living doing exactly what we love where we want to live.”

I furrowed my brow. “I get that, but it’s not *luck* that got me here. It’s hard work. Sacrifice. Good planning. I could just as easily be working for some asshole still in their company, but I’m not because I took a risk and went out on my own. A planned risk because I researched and figured out there was room for another planner up here. But I didn’t start out with a full client roster. Far from it. In fact, I practically *did* live off ramen noodles for a year while I started building my business. But I knew I wanted to be here, and I knew I loved wedding planning, so I made the sacrifices and put in the work to achieve my goals. So no, it wasn’t luck that got me a life in a place I love, working with people I love, and doing what I love.”

He exhaled a long breath. “I didn’t mean to insinuate that you didn’t work for what you have. Of course, you did. And you’ve built an incredible life. I just meant that for me, doing what I love isn’t going to ever pan out to a career as profitable as the one I have now. I guess in my head, I thought that you’d be thrilled to come to New York and expand your career because you *can* do your job there, and I *can’t* do mine here.”

The reality of those words felt like a punch to the gut. He was right. I *could* plan events in the city and keep my career thriving. And he was also right that I'd probably be fantastic at it and grow a huge business. Carter would have to leave his career completely and start from scratch to move here. Leave absolutely everything behind, and there wasn't a lot of opportunity for selling commodity futures in my little world. My stomach turned as guilt wove through me, calling me selfish for not considering his idea more. What kind of woman made a man give up his dreams and then doesn't even consider adapting hers for his happiness? But then something dawned on me, and it lessened my guilt.

"But you don't even like your job. You said so yourself. I happen to love mine."

"I may not love my career, but it pays a hell of a lot more than renting surfboards like I'd dreamed of doing."

"And is that worth it to you? Money in exchange for your happiness? Your dreams?"

His face dropped as he considered my question. "I guess it's just been drilled in my head for so long that I needed to grow up and make money that I've forgotten any other way to live."

"I know you've worked hard, and I'm not saying that you don't have a great life and a great business, but I just can't see myself leaving everything I've built behind me to move to a huge city. If you told me that it was your *dream*, the thing that set your soul on fire, to do what you're doing in New York, then maybe I'd be more open to considering a move there. But that's not it. You want to be there to make money, and that's not ever something I'll choose over my happiness. I know that I want you. You're now part of the happiness I need in my life, but giving up all of this to join you in New York while you grind away in an office all day is... It's just... It's a lot to process right now. This is a huge decision for both of us."

"Yeah. I get it. It was different when we were broke college kids with nothing but open roads ahead of us. Now we both have lives and businesses tying us down. It's not going to be easy, but we'll figure it out. Okay?"

"Yeah." I smiled, though deep inside, I started to lose the hope I'd been feeling. "We'll figure it out. I mean, we *just* started dating again. We've got a lot of time before we need to consider making drastic moves. Long-distance dating will be just fine for the time being, so let's just take this one day at a time. Nothing needs to be decided right now."

Carter chewed on his lip, and worry lines creased into his suntanned skin.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He peered up at me and exhaled a breath. "I've got something to tell you."

My heart sank at the tone of his voice. I tried not to let my past fears and insecurities get a foothold inside me, but they managed to start clawing their way back to the surface anyway. "Okay. What is it?"

"Um. Camilla showed up last night."

My eyes bulged. "Camilla as in your fiancée?"

"Ex," he said quickly. "*Ex*-fiancée. But yeah."

"Oh." I blew out a breath. "Okay. Well, that was unexpected."

"Yeah. Shocked the hell out of me to see her standing behind me at the bar. But I get why she came. After she cheated on me, Valentina was so furious with her that they had a blowout fight, and Camilla got kicked out of the wedding. But those two were so close before, she decided to come here on a whim and try one more time to win back Valentina's friendship. And it worked. It looks like they're gonna patch things up."

"And... how did that go seeing her again? Did you... have feelings?" I peered over.

This time his eyes bulged. “What? No! God no! Nothing like that.” He threw an arm around my shoulder and pulled me against him. “The only feelings I have, and will *ever* have, are for you. Okay?”

I smiled and nodded against his chest. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Jesus, woman. *Did you have feelings?*” He snorted. “What the hell kind of a question is that?”

“I don’t know?” I defended with a laugh. “You just looked so serious when you said it.”

His chuckling petered off as he pressed a kiss to my head. “Well, it was kind of serious. Camilla also came here to try to win me back. Which is something she’s been trying to do for months now. Of course, I told her it was over, and I met someone else. I think she got it, but....”

“But what?”

“Um... so, to preface this story, I need to give you a little background. I met Camilla out of college when I moved to New York. She’s from an affluent family. Not money like the Bronson’s, but damn near. Her father, Harold Elswood, is an investor. A few years ago, when Camilla was pushing me to really make something out of myself, her father offered to loan me the money to start my company. He gave me a killer deal on the office space in one of his buildings to run it.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing now his ties to Camilla ran deeper than just the ring she’d taken off.

“I accepted, and now I run my business in his office building, and...” I stopped talking and bit the corner of my lip.

Jenna lifted her brows. “And?”

“And... Camilla just informed me last night she’s starting a new business and is going to be sharing office space on my floor.”

“What?” I sat up, spinning to look at him.

Carter slumped his shoulders. “Yeah. Not ideal, but it should be fine. I can handle her. I just thought you should know that Camilla will, unfortunately, be part of my day-to-day life once I return to New York. And you’re probably going to see her today, so I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

My heart pounded in my chest at his words, the jaded, terrified girl whose father cheated on his family and abandoned her rising to the top again.

“So, you’re telling me that you’re about to be working next to the woman you used to be engaged to... a woman hell-bent on getting you back? Across the country from me since that’s where you live, and this is where I live.”

“Well, it sounds way worse when you put it that way. That sounds bad.”

“It *is* bad!” I jumped up and moved to the other side of the kitchen.

“We can figure this out, Jenna. I know that we can.”

I pushed my palms onto the counter as I tried to get the spiraling thoughts of our demise back under control. We were already up against insurmountable odds, and this was just another *huge* obstacle getting dropped in our path.

Carter slipped off the counter and came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me against him. “I know this is a lot to digest. But you just need to trust me that this changes nothing between us. I’ll handle Camilla. She doesn’t give up on things easy, but she will eventually move on, and this will be no big deal.”

I stiffened. “No big deal? This is a *big* deal for someone like me with serious trust issues. I mean, how would you feel if my ex was suddenly back trying to win me over and working side by side with me day in and day out? And you lived across the country, leaving us alone together most days?”

He sighed into my hair. “I would hate it. I don’t know if I could handle that either. Shit. This is just so much for me to process right now.”

“Yeah. I know how you feel,” I said with a sigh.

“We’ll figure this out. We will.”

I nodded, but tears started brimming my eyes as I realized the choices we would soon have to make. His town or mine? His dream or mine? The man of my dreams or the life of my dreams? The weight of the exact reasoning that had terrified me to even allow a sliver of hope to break through in the first place nearly dropped me to my knees.

“I... I need some time to think about things, Carter. This is all... it’s too much.”

“We have time to figure it out, Jenna. We *will* figure it out. We have to. Please don’t toss in the towel before we even give this a fighting chance.”

“Do we though? Do we have a fighting chance? Because it sure as hell seems to me like we don’t. Either I give up the place I love, or you give up the career you’ve worked so hard to build. I don’t see another path. We’re doomed, Carter. And the longer we prolong this thing, the more painful it’s going to be when it ends.”

If that is even possible.

Now that I’d let him tear down the fortress around my heart, I couldn’t imagine it getting any more painful to say goodbye than it would already be. Realizing that I’d jumped headfirst into my own personal hell, no had gotten *dragged* headfirst when he wouldn’t listen to my pleas to leave me alone, caused my sadness and fear to morph into anger.

“This is *exactly* why I didn’t want to start this thing up with you, but you wouldn’t listen! What the hell was I thinking?” I pushed out of his arms and moved to the other side of the kitchen.

“Jenna,” he soothed, “don’t you dare bolt on me now.”

“I’m not bolting, Carter. This isn’t me running. This is me taking some space to try to figure out the logistics of the impossible. It’s me pausing to use common sense instead of following my stupid ass heart that’s leading me straight into the mouth of hell—straight into the same heartbreak I never recovered from the first time we fell apart. I just need... I just need to think.”

“Okay,” he said quietly. “I get that.”

“Just... I have a shit-ton of stuff to do for the rehearsal dinner tonight, and I can’t be distracted by all this. So, just give me some time to do my job and think.”

“If that’s what you need.”

“That’s what I need.”

“Okay.” He moved toward me, but I lifted my hand.

“Don’t. Don’t blind me with your kisses. I need a clear head.”

I couldn’t even look up at him, or I knew I’d see the pain in his eyes.

“I’ll just go then, Jenna. But promise me you aren’t going to throw in the towel on us. We *will* find a way to be together. We have to.”

“I’ll see you at the rehearsal dinner tonight.”

Without another word, he went upstairs to get dressed.

Tears streamed down my face as I sat down and weighed the monumental decision in front of me.

CHAPTER TWENTY



CARTER

People mingled around the Bronson's mansion, all raving about the food. I'd been in such a daze during the rehearsal dinner that I'd barely taken notice of the elegant courses that had been brought out by the servers dressed in black.

Despite being sure the food was as good as they said, I'd been too distracted by Jenna buzzing around in the background to enjoy even a single bite. Once again, she showcased her impressive evasive maneuvering skills as she managed to keep me at least a room away no matter where I went. It seemed we had gone one step forward, ten steps backward. Just this morning, I'd had her in my arms, and now I couldn't even get into the same room with her.

And I couldn't blame her. As much as it pained me to admit the reality of our situation, she was right. Would I really be okay with her working side by side with an ex hell-bent on winning her back while I was trapped across the country?

No. Hell no. I'd be driven mad with thoughts that today would be the day he wore her down, won her back... stole her away from me. Tolerating that was asking too much of anyone, much less someone like Jenna, who guarded her heart like a starving pit bull with a juicy bone. I'd been fortunate enough she'd let her walls drop to let me in not just once but twice. And now that they'd gone flying back up, I didn't know if I'd get lucky enough for a third chance.

"Carter?" Camilla asked.

I groaned and stepped away. "Not now, Camilla."

She came up closer anyway. "I know you said it was over, and I heard you, but I just wanted to make sure that we're okay. I mean, we're going to be seeing each other every day. I don't want it to be awkward. It would break my heart if you... *hated* me."

I spun around and blew out a breath. "I don't know how this is going to work, to be honest. But I don't hate you. It's impossible to hate another person when you have an incredible future stretched out before you. I wish you and your business well, Camilla, but there's nothing more to say."

She sucked her red-painted lip between her teeth and dropped her gaze to the ground. "I'm sorry, Carter. I honestly thought we'd work things out soon, and it would be a great thing to get to work near each other. I guess I really misjudged things." Her shoulders slumped as she took a deep breath, but then she peeked up, and her eyes flickered once again with that hope I'd thought I'd extinguished. "Or maybe this will be a good thing working in close proximity. Maybe it's just what we need to have some kind of relationship again, even if it's just a friendship. You never know. Time can heal all wounds, and I think given a little more time, you may be surprised at how our friendship could grow."

Though I held no ill will for her anymore, I also had no desire to be her friend. There was too much history for us to ever have a healthy friendship. Not to mention the extra stress that relationship would put on Jenna. And the sparkling look in Camilla's eyes as she stared at me didn't give me any

confidence that she'd happily accept a cordial friendship if we ever made it that far. No, she would try to take things to the next level. Give an inch, and she'd go for a mile.

Before I could answer her and let her know that professional courtesy would be the only relationship in our future, I looked up past Camilla and saw Jenna watching the interaction... her face frozen in horror as she stared at my ex's eager facial expression. No doubt she saw the intent in Camilla's gaze too. Not exactly the comfort she needed to feel safe knowing I would be across the country working near my ex.

Shit.

Jenna spun on her heel and bolted away, and I took off after her.

"You okay?" Eric asked as I blew past.

"No," I answered quickly, then remembered it was my job to make his wedding perfect, so I added, "But I'll be fine. I just need a minute."

I made my way through the laughing, chattering guests and out onto the porch overlooking the lake. I slid to a stop when I saw Jenna out there.

"Jenna," I said softly. "I can't imagine that was easy to watch, but you have to believe me. There's no room in my life for her anymore. My heart belongs to you."

A soft breeze blew her dark hair around her shoulders. She looked so beautiful against the moonlight water. I heard her snifle, and my heart squeezed in my chest. She was crying, and I'd caused it.

"Hey," I whispered, stepping up behind her.

Instead of leaning back into my arms like I'd envisioned, she moved farther away. "Don't."

"Jenna."

"I'm sorry, Carter. I'm not strong enough for this. I see the way she looks at you. With her perfect blue eyes on that perfect face under that perfect hair on top of that perfect body." Tears streamed down her face as she shook her head. "I can't do this. I'm too damaged. Too broken. I wish I was a better woman. I wish I had the confidence to know that you'd be working side-by-side with *her* all day, and you'd have no problem knocking off her many, *many* advances, but I can't. She's hell-bent on getting you back, and she doesn't seem like a woman who takes no for an answer."

"I told her no, and I'll keep telling her no. It doesn't matter how hard she tries. I'll never go back to her, Jenna. You have to believe me."

"Even if I could, even if I pushed aside all my fears about cheating and betrayal, we're still stuck right back at square one. You there and me here. I've worked too damn hard to give up my life here to chase after you. And what if I do and you decide you don't want me anymore? Maybe you decide I'm not the girl you think I am. Now what? Now I'm living in a city that I hate, my career here is shot, and I'd be all alone. I just... I can't. And you shouldn't even be asking me to. I'm too scared for any of this."

"We still have so many options to go through. All that matters is that I..." I stopped, closing my eyes as I let the power of my emotions for her rise to the surface. It was too soon to say it, but to hell if it wasn't sitting there on the tip of my tongue, begging me to unleash it into the universe. With a jolt of courage, I finally uttered the words I'd said to her a decade ago... the words I still felt with all of my heart. "I love you, Jenna. I do. I've never stopped. Not for a single day."

Her breath hitched as she spun to face me. Emotions churned inside her eyes as she stared up at me. After a long silence, finally, she said, "You don't love me, though, Carter."

"Jenna... yes, I do. I lo—"

“No. You don’t. You love the idea of me. Of us. Because if you loved *me*, you would know that I hate the city and you would never ask me to live there. You’d know that I’d never choose to make tons of money over having a quality of life that I love. Just like I thought I knew that about *you*. If you love someone, you know these things.” She stopped only long enough to heave in a breath. “But we’re strangers, Carter. Which means I don’t really know you either.”

My next inhale stalled in my lungs. “Yes, you do, Jenna. You know me better than anyone outside of my own family!”

“This guy...” As she waved her hand over me, I dreaded her next words. “This power-hungry suit is not at all who I fell head over heels for all those years ago. What we had back then was just a beautiful week together—two kids with a connection so strong that we thought it was more. But it wasn’t. We were too young to understand love’s true meaning. And now here we are ten years later, and our connection is still so strong that we feel like it’s love again. It’s not. Love is so much more than just this chemistry that we have.”

I reached for her, but she stepped away, and I immediately felt the loss. Felt her slipping out of my grasp. “Jenna, you don’t understand. I wish I could rip my chest wide open and show you what’s inside my heart.”

“I’m sorry, Carter, but I’m not blowing up my life to chase after you into a world where I could never belong. And the man I’d follow to the end of the earth? That man? The one I gave my heart to all those years ago... he wouldn’t be able to survive there either. He was a dreamer. A nature lover. A passionate man who’d never let money lead his way.”

My heart threatened to shred apart at her words. “Jenna, I’m still me. Don’t say we didn’t love each other. I know what I felt was real. What *you* felt was real. I know it. Don’t run away from this.”

“I’m not running, Carter. Not this time.” She lifted her chin and looked into my eyes. “This time, I’m walking away. I’m choosing not to go through this again. The pain. The heartbreak. I just can’t do this, Carter. I’m sorry.”

With one last pained look into my eyes, she spun on her heel and walked away with her head held high.

“Jenna!” I called, but this time, I didn’t chase after her.

Why? She was right. We were doomed, weren’t we?

With agony pushing my shoulders down, I walked out to the beach. Standing alone, I closed my eyes and let the sound of the waves soothe the ache in my soul I knew would never go away. Even as a child, the water was always my salvation. Anytime I’d gotten in trouble or problems had popped up, I’d found the answers on the lake near my house in Colorado. Then, as an adult, when I’d moved by the ocean, I’d found all my answers there. Something about the water helped me find clarity in life, and my mother had always said it was because it washed away all the little things that didn’t matter. It cleared my mind and allowed me to think. What I wouldn’t give to plunge into it right now. Climb on a board and float on top of it, let it help clear my mind so I could see through the wall of shit in my life that seemed a mile high.

I sat down in the sand, pulling my knees to my chest. The waves crashed along the shore as I inhaled and exhaled, trying to calm my spiraling thoughts and make sense of this mess I’d landed in.

I’d worked so hard to build my company in New York, and I was proud of what I’d accomplished, but as I sat and listened to the melody of the lake, it started to work its magic. Closing my eyes and letting the sounds of the water wash away the nonsense, I breathed.

In. Out.

In. Out.

Focus on what matters. Ignore all the bullshit. What do you want, Carter?

Jenna's face materialized in my mind.

I wanted Jenna. There was nothing in this world I wanted more. She had been everything to me since the first day I'd lay eyes on her, and she would be everything to me until my dying breath. She was wrong when she'd said we were just a couple of crazy kids filled with childish notions of love. What I felt for her I'd never felt for anyone again, and I knew it deep inside my soul that our feelings, that our love, was real.

She may not be able to see it with fear clouding her judgment, but I knew that what she felt in her heart was as powerful as what I felt for her. It was love. Plain and simple. But that terrifying truth just had her hurrying to toss up the walls around her heart once again and encase it in an impenetrable fortress that would shield her from ever feeling heartbreak again. Jenna couldn't break down her own walls long enough to let anyone in – even me. Try as she may to keep me out and deny our connection, I knew better, and maybe I could summon enough courage for the both of us. I would do anything to win her back.

Nothing and no one could stand in the way of me spending my life at her side.

Not my company. Not my living situation. Not Camilla.

Nothing.

A huge weight lifted off me as I decided on that fact, but as the important things in my life took center focus, another realization started to creep up into my mind. As I let the power of the water quiet down the unnecessary voices in my head, I also realized that I wanted a different *life*.

It started to dawn on me that it wasn't *my* dream I'd worked and sacrificed into reality. It was Camilla's dream. The money. The car. The nice apartment. The prestige. None of that had mattered to me until I'd let Camilla slide inside my head.

I felt so stupid as I started to process all the decisions I'd made and all the ways I'd been so blind to the life I'd been living. The man Jenna had met on the beach that day—the suntanned surfer without a plan in the world and dreams of a laid-back life by the water—*that* was me. *That* was who I was. And somehow, along the way, I'd completely lost sight of him. Bit by bit, he'd been chipped away so slowly that I hadn't even noticed.

God. How had I missed this? How had I been so brainwashed that I hadn't even noticed it—hadn't even questioned that Jenna would want to jump into a life in the city too? Of course I thought she would be thrilled at the opportunity instead of repulsed by it. I'd been surrounded for so long by people who cared about power and money more than anything else that it seemed unbelievable someone would pass up a chance at a successful career in the city. I'd let my superficial social circle poison my mind and chip away at the part of me that made me *me* until I could barely remember the real Carter. Jenna was right in her belief that the city could steal your soul. It had taken mine... and I'd let it. Slowly and quietly, it had slipped away from me until Jenna came back into my life, and I saw myself clearly.

As I sat beside the water, I felt the man I used to be, the man I knew still lived inside me just waiting to return, scratching beneath the surface, desperate to come up for air.

My mom had been right when she'd told me I was on the wrong path. I'd just brushed it off as her idealistic, whimsical way of life being too far removed from reality to understand how the world really worked. But now? Now I realized she'd been right all along. She lived simply with my father, a man she deeply loved. They didn't have money or prestige. No fancy cars or designer clothes. But what they did have was happiness. My home had been filled with laughter and love. The man she'd

raised didn't really care about those things either, wanting to live a full life with a woman he loved rather than sell his soul for money.

Which is exactly what I've done.

But now, being with Jenna again, remembering that man, had me chuckling at how far from my dreams I'd drifted. Sure, I was living the American dream, just like Camilla had told me, but it wasn't *my* dream.

And no dream would be complete without Jenna by my side.

Like a tidal wave crashing into me, suddenly I realized what I wanted to do. What I *needed* to do. A plan that would mean I could have the life I'd always wanted and do it with Jenna by my side.

Giving a silent thank you to the water I knew had helped clear away the sludge that had blinded me, I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my phone. It was time to do what the old Carter would do. Take a leap. Follow his gut. Go big or go home.

I pushed Harold Elswood's contact.

"Harold? Hey, it's Carter. Listen, we need to talk."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



JENNA

Valentina and Eric moved together on the dance floor, her beautiful white gown sweeping the black and white tiles I'd had installed under the tent on the beach. Thousands of little twinkle lights dangled over their heads, creating a fairytale setting for the newly married couple. The beautiful starry night was unmarred by the crystal-clear ceiling of the tent as the couple swayed below it. It looked like a fairy tale... a fairy tale I'd orchestrated.

Pride swelled inside me that I'd succeeded in giving them their dream wedding. The food had been served, the dances done, the couple married. All that was left was copious amounts of drinking and some late-night dancing. My job here for the night was done, and all that was left on my end was organizing clean-up in the morning. This part of my evening normally involved my first deep breath of the day and indulging in the champagne I'd made sure was perfectly chilled.

"#nailedit," Cameron whispered into my ear as he slipped a glass into my hand.

"Damn. You read my mind." I took a sip, relishing the way the bubbles tickled my lips.

"That's because we're a hell of a team, boo."

"Yeah. We are. I couldn't have done any of this without you." I leaned my head on his shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around me.

"You're amazing, Jenna. I know today wasn't easy for you with everything going on, but you pulled it together like a pro."

'Wasn't easy' was an understatement. I'd had to spend a huge part of my day helping the wedding party prepare... which meant a huge part of my day with Carter. I'd even had to pin his freaking boutonniere on. It had been torture feeling his pecs beneath my fingertips, knowing I'd never touch them again. Never touch *him* again, period. Hell, after he left, I'd probably never see him again.

No, today with Carter was anything but easy. His big, sad puppy dog eyes tracked me everywhere I went. It had almost killed me having to tell him, "No, I'm busy" when he'd asked if we could talk.

But today, it wasn't an excuse. Today, I really was busy. Planning a wedding was hard work, and on the day of the wedding, I needed to be completely undistracted and on game. At any given moment, there were a thousand little fires igniting that I needed to douse. A thousand little fires that I couldn't let any of the guests or the Bronsons see. To the outside world, everything had to look flawless. Perfect.

And I'd done it today. I'd put out every single fire with ease.

Well, every fire but the one still burning for Carter that I didn't think would ever go out.

"He's watching you again," Cameron whispered.

I didn't need to look up to know who he meant.

"Doesn't matter." I took a sip of my champagne.

"He looks really sad."

“Still doesn’t matter,” I lied.

“Like, it looks like someone ran over his dog, peed in his cheerios, shot his best friend, then ran over his dog again, then made him eat the peed-in cereal while they ran over his dog one more time for good measure. I mean *super* sad.”

My heart clenched at the thought of those puppy dog eyes staring at me, but I lifted my chin and forced my eyes not to drift in his direction.

“I’m finishing this champagne, and then I’m heading home. I’m assuming you can handle the rest of the night without me?”

Cameron grumbled. “Yeah. Of course I can. But I don’t think you should go without talking to him.”

“What’s the point?” I argued. “All it’s going to do is make me sadder. Hurt more.”

Cameron pinched his eyebrows together and tipped his head. “Really, though? Is it really possible for you to hurt more? Because from the look on your face, girl, you’re in a special kind of heartbreak hell.”

“Exactly!” I blew out a puff of air. “I *am* in a special kind of heartbreak hell. So, this is why I’m avoiding going over there to make it worse.”

“Jenna.” He took my glass of champagne and set it down on the linen-covered cocktail table beside us. When he took my hands in his, he stiffened his lip in a sympathetic smile. “I want you to be honest with me now.”

“Okay?” I said, unsure where this was going.

“Do you love him?”

I peeked over at Carter, and butterflies took flight inside my stomach. “I don’t know. I mean, it sure *feels* like I love him, but we haven’t known each other long enough for it to be authentic. It’s impossible to fall in love with someone that fast and stay together for real. Isn’t it?”

Cameron tipped his head, narrowing his eyes. “Is it though? Because if you really believe that, then you’re saying that Louie and I aren’t going to make it. Do you not remember the night we met?”

I smiled at the memory of Cameron racing over, gushing that he’d just met the man of his dreams... something he’d never done before after meeting many, *many* men. And he’d been right. They truly were totally and completely in love within days, and my superpower told me that they had that special sauce to make it to happily ever after. They truly were meant to be. “Yeah. I remember.”

“I knew. Louie knew. We just *knew*. It was instant, and it was love. *Real* love. And don’t you go trying to tell me it’s not. Your superpower even confirmed it.”

A new sliver of hope cracked open my heart a little wider. “Of course you and Louie are going to make it. You two are...”

“Made for each other? Soul mates? Destined for happiness? In *love*? Yes, yes, yes, and yes. And so are you and Carter.”

Could I believe him? “I don’t know, Cameron. It’s just so fast. And with Carter living so far away, it really puts so much pressure on things. It’s not like we can just date and see what happens. It’s plane rides and juggling companies and distance, and if we survive all that, then it’s one of us giving up our life and moving. It’s a lot. And it’s especially a lot since we really haven’t had enough time to know if we’re right for each other. What if we struggle like that, and it doesn’t work out in the end?”

He rolled his eyes. “You can love someone without spending years figuring it out. And who says how much time is needed to know you’ve found the right person? Is there some magic number I don’t know about? A lot of our wedding couples date for a decade and divorce a year after their wedding.

I'd think ten years is plenty of time to know for sure, and yet... the big 'D' got them too. And I don't mean Dallas. Time means jack shit."

"True." I shrugged, thinking back on how many couples dated for years, lived together, knew everything about each other, and yet they still blew up and failed soon after the vows. Or even worse, they simply grew apart over time and then gave up.

He met my gaze, and I saw the truth in his words. "More time doesn't guarantee a happy ending. And less time doesn't mean it won't work. Don't tell me we haven't planned weddings for at least a dozen couples who knew instantly and were at 'I love you' in a matter of days. Hell, we married that one couple that had been together less than a month. Remember that? We did that little intimate wedding on the beach with their family. And your superpower said they were gonna make it. *And* we just got the baby notice email six months ago. They are still going strong five years later. It happens, and you know it."

I sucked my cheek. "I mean, yeah. It can happen, but it's rare."

A proud smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "So, you're admitting it's possible to know almost instantly that you've found your person."

I twisted my lips then nodded. "I guess. Yeah. It's possible."

He pressed a finger to his cheek. "So, with your own admission, it's possible that Carter really is the one for you... that your heart or your soul or whatever it is that recognizes the other half knows what it's doing."

Another glance to Carter... more butterflies.

"Okay. Fine. It's possible."

"Hah!" He stuck his finger in my face. "So, admit it. You love him."

It seemed irrational to love a man I barely knew and hadn't seen in a decade, yet the word encompassed all the emotions swirling around me. It explained why I couldn't give my heart away to another all these years. Maybe it hadn't been fear causing me to turn away from every man who'd come after him. Maybe it was because I'd known deep down, I'd already given my heart away.

And I'd never gotten it back. Until now.

I sighed as I opened the cage where I had locked away all the powerful emotions I'd had for Carter and set them free. My soul lifted as I admitted the truth. "Yeah. I do. Of course, I do. All these years, I've been trying to tell myself that what I felt wasn't real... it was an infatuation. But I do, Cameron. I love him."

He clapped his hands. "Yay! I knew it! Okay. So, you love him. Do you think he loves you too?"

I glanced over and looked at Carter, our eyes colliding for the first time in a while, and I instantly regretted it. Pure agony ripped apart my insides when I saw the pained look on his face... the same one I knew was on mine.

"Well? Do you think he loves you?"

"Yeah. I do," I admitted.

"And are you absolutely, positively miserable right now?"

"Yes." I blew out a breath. "That's an understatement."

"Good."

"Good?" I arched a brow. "How is that good?"

"Because then you're already at rock bottom, and you have nowhere to go but up."

Furrowing my brows, I tipped my head. "Huh?"

"What I mean is, there is a man over there that loves you. A man that you love too. And you're already as heartbroken as anyone I've ever seen, so that can't really get any worse. If you leave

tonight and end this, you're *guaranteed* a broken heart. It's already a done deal. You'll spend the rest of your life pining away for the one man you truly love."

He looked at me then leaned down, pressing his forehead to mine.

"*But...* if you go over there and tell him you'll try, maybe, just maybe, things will end well for you two. Maybe you'll work it out and live happily ever after. Why not take a chance at happiness, Jenna? Because the way I see it, right now, you've got a one-hundred-percent chance of hurt and heartbreak. And if you go over there and tell him you'll try, your odds go to at least fifty-fifty."

He looked over at Carter.

"Okay. Ninety-ten. That man looks like he'd do anything to make you happy. And I'm not a betting man, but I'll put my chips on your chances of happiness being *way* better if you give this thing a shot. That guy loves you so freaking much. I know he's not gonna let you down. So, what the hell do you have to lose?"

He lifted his hands like a scale and frowned while he lowered his right hand. "Heartbreak guaranteed over here if you go home." Then, his eyes lit up as he lifted his left. "*Or* possible happily ever after over here if you quit being a chickenshit pansy and go give this thing a try! Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner!"

His words hit harder than I'd prepared for. He was right. At this moment, I didn't think it was possible to hurt more. I was totally and completely miserable. I was hurting myself more trying to avoid hurt than I would if I gave this thing a chance. Was I scared? Oh, yeah. I was absolutely terrified. But Cameron was right. What the hell did I have to lose?

But I might have everything to gain.

"Is that hope I see in your eyes?" Cameron said with a smile.

"Maybe." I peered up with a little smile of my own.

He gasped. "Oh, my God. Did I just do it? Did I just convince you to stop being a dumbass and go get your boy?"

"Maybe." I smiled a little more.

"Yay! Jenter lives again!" He raised a triumphant fist in the air. "Eek! If you get married, you have to make me your best man. Because if this works out—" He leaned in, "—which it *will*, then this is all gonna be because of me. Oh, my God! You'll have to name your firstborn after me! And Cameron is a great gender-neutral name, so you can use it no matter what! Eek!"

Laughing, I shook my head. "Slow down there, Speed Racer. I'm still not even sure how this is going to work out. He still lives in New York."

Cameron rolled his eyes. "You said yourself that we don't have many or *any* events in the winter here. So, you spend your winters in New York with him."

"I hate New York," I grumbled.

"But you won't hate New York with *him*. What else do you do all winter? It's freezing here, so we're just trapped inside for months and months. You binge Netflix, eat way too much junk food, and then you and I have to haul ass to drop the pounds so we can fit into our summer clothes."

"Valid," I agreed. I started to let the idea of winters in New York percolate in my mind. Walking through Central Park together, stopping to get hot dogs on the street, fancy dinners at restaurants, eating food with portions I'd complain were way too small. Little visions of a life with Carter started forming into more realistic thoughts by the second.

"So, you're not missing anything if you spend six months with him there. That leaves six months left. Let's say he comes up for a month every summer, and then the other five months, you just take

turns flying back and forth every other week for a few days. Sure, it's not as much time if you lived in the same town year-round, but it sounds doable, right?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. I guess it does."

"And eventually, you'll have me trained enough that I can handle more weddings without you, so you can spend more time with him in The Big Apple but still live here."

"You would want to do that?" I asked, suddenly feeling a little lighter now that we had what sounded like a feasible plan. I always felt better when I had a plan.

"Uh, yeah! Hello! I'm super ready to pull on my wedding planner shoes and kick off my assistant shoes. I can handle this. Then, you'll be freed up to do some traveling and a little bow-chica-bow-wow with your stud muffin. But you'll still get lots of time back here to replenish your soul after the city sucks it dry."

"You know. This really could work, Cameron! I mean, we still have Camilla to deal with, but I have to just trust that he won't give in to her."

"He won't," Cameron said with certainty. "That bitch is toast. There's no way she's going to wear him down."

Hope fluttered inside my chest as I glanced over at Carter. Fear still bounced around in there as well, but he was worth the risk. *We* were worth the risk.

"Just promise me you won't move away to New York permanently. Capeesh?"

"Capeesh." I stuck out my hand, and he shook it. "I'll never leave you permanently, but you're right. It would be so stupid not to at least try to make this work with Carter. I do love him, Cameron. So much. We deserve a real shot."

"Well, then get your cute butt over there and tell him! Put the poor boy out of his misery already!"

Nerves crackled inside me. "What do I even say? I just told him last night it was over. I don't think I'm ready to walk over there yet. There's still a lot standing in our way between now and happily ever after, and I just need a minute to prepare myself."

"Well, you better prepare fast because he's coming over here." Cameron kissed my cheek, then bowed and backed away. "Hey, Carter," he said just before spinning off and rushing after the waitress with the tempura shrimp.

I inhaled a stilling breath, then turned around to face him. He looked so handsome in his tuxedo that he nearly took my breath away. It fit his broad shoulders perfectly, following his tapered waist and showing off that chest and those abs I knew hid beneath the dark fabric.

"Hey, Jenna. You look really beautiful in that dress."

"Thanks." I glanced down at the gold fabric wrapped around me, then nodded toward his tux. "You look really good tonight too."

"Do you think I could, uh—" He shuffled his feet, and it was strange to see Carter looking anything but confident. "Would you like to dance with me?"

When he extended his hand, I glanced at it. The repercussions of such a simple movement seemed far more serious than just a dance. But one look up into his eyes, and I knew I had to push my fears aside.

I liked to plan. I liked to know with certainty what the end result would be, but I realized that no one could ever have a plan when it came to love. Not really, anyway. Sure, we still had some obstacles in our way, but what couple didn't? Even a couple who lived in the same town and had all the same goals could still face uncertainties along the way. Life happened. Change happened. But all that really mattered at the end of the day was that they loved each other and made a commitment to face those challenges together.

Something I knew Carter and I could do. *Would* do.

He smiled, and I felt the last of my uncertainties drifting away on the notes of the song.

“Yes,” I said, and the simple answer induced the biggest smile I’d ever seen on his face.

When my hand slid into his, those little electric sparks crackled between us, and a shiver traveled down my spine. We walked onto the dancefloor hand-in-hand, and he pulled me up against him. When my body pressed against his, I sighed.

Home. He felt like home. Safe. Protective. Warm. I leaned into those same arms that had held me a decade ago that I’d never stopped craving. The only arms I ever wanted to curl up inside again. I knew right then I’d do anything, go anywhere, as long as it meant I could spend my life in his arms.

“I’m surprised you said yes,” he whispered against my cheek as he moved me in a circle.

“Well, I did some thinking.”

“You? Thinking? Never,” he teased.

“Shut up.”

“Sorry. So, you were saying? You did some thinking, huh? A little planning, perhaps?”

We moved our bodies in time with the song.

“Yes. A little planning.”

“And? What is this other plan you came up with?”

He dipped me, and I gasped when he yanked me back up into his arms. His mirth-filled eyes met mine, and I knew I’d made the right decision.

“Well, first off, I decided that I want to give this a try. I know we’ve got some obstacles in our way, but if we don’t give this a shot, I’m guaranteed to spend the rest of my days in agony missing you. So, instead of overthinking and overplanning, I’m just going to do what you used to tell me to do. Go big or go home. So, I’m going big. I’m done fighting it. I want to be with you.”

He wrapped me tighter in his arms and pressed his chin on top of my head. “Those are, without a doubt, the greatest words I’ve ever heard uttered in my life.”

“Yeah?” I smiled as I pressed my cheek into his chest.

“Yeah. I’m crazy about you, Jenna. You know that, right?”

“I do,” I uttered. “I know. And that’s why I’ve decided we can make this work. I’m going to come to New York every winter and spend it with you. I know I hated it when I was there before, but I only went the one time. I shouldn’t write off that I could be happy there without giving it a real try. I hated it before, but maybe I won’t hate it with you. I don’t think I could hate anywhere with you at my side. I hope you can take a month or so off every summer and spend it with me here. Then the rest of the time, we’ll just rack up a lot of air miles. I hate flying, but I’ll get over it. You’re worth it. We can make long-distance work.”

He spun me around, slowing his steps as he sighed. “Actually, we can’t.”

My feet stuttered to a stop as I pulled back and looked up at him. “What? What do you mean? You don’t think we can make long-distance work?”

That heartbreak I’d been feeling amplified to unbearable levels as I tried to process his words, but finally, his stern face softened into a cocky smile.

“We can’t make long-distance work because we won’t be doing it. I just agreed to sell my company, and I’m moving to Door County.”

“What?” I choked out, the shock stealing away any other words.

He started dancing with me again, and my feet just followed along though I had no idea how they were moving.

“Last night, I sat down by the water and really let myself think. You know how I feel when I’m by the water.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You always say the water gives you clear thoughts. It’s why you love it so much.”

“Exactly,” he answered. “And while I was down there, I came to one horrifyingly clear conclusion.”

“What is that?”

“That I hate my job, I hate New York City, and I’ve been living someone else’s dream while I let my own slip away. My dream isn’t to be some big shot in New York. My dream is to be on the water. It’s small towns, good people, and doing something I love every single day. At no point in my life was making lots of money and getting high up in the business world a dream. In fact, like you pointed out when I first saw you again, at one point, it would have been a nightmare.”

I chuckled and nodded. “Yeah. I’m still struggling to picture you in a suit and going into a big city office every day.”

“Exactly. You can’t picture it because that’s not me. Never has been and never will be. And seeing you living your dream, making it happen, made me realize that my dream doesn’t have to be just a dream. I can find a way to make a career doing what I love, just like you did. So, I called up Harold Elswood, told him I wanted out, and after I explained everything that happened, he agreed. He’ll buy me out of my company. It’s basically turnkey at this point, and he’s going to hire someone to run it, and he’ll still make bank. I will use the money I make in the deal to buy myself a little piece of waterfront property and start up a paddleboarding and kayak rental place in Door County. I can take people out on tours, hire college kids when it’s time to expand, and eventually, I plan to have rental sites all over the county.”

“Carter, that’s incredible!”

He spun me around and dipped me again, this time leaving me dangling backward.

“And it’s all because of you, Jenna. You helped me remember who I am. And because of that, I’m finally going to live the life I’ve always wanted. And I’m going to live it with you.”

He yanked me back up and slid a hand behind my head. But before I let him kiss me, I leaned back a little.

“Are you sure, Carter? This is a *huge* step. I mean, we haven’t been together very long, and I could never forgive myself if you gave up your entire career and—”

“And we didn’t work out?”

I shrunk a little and whispered, “Yeah.”

Carter chuckled and slid his hand along my face. “Nonsense. We’re going to work out. I know you are a planner, and everything happens according to whatever schedule you create, but love doesn’t care about schedules. We may not have known each other long, and this may all be happening fast, but it’s real, Jenna.” His gaze deepened as he stared straight through me. “I loved you then, I love you now, and I love who I am when I’m with you. I don’t need to waste precious time to know that I love you. And whatever schedule you want to create for when you can be certain our love is real, I’ll be here. Loving you. I’ll be loving you at a year, at ten years, at a hundred years... always. And when you finally reach the point where you’re certain this is real, I’ll be smiling at you with a big, fat ‘I told you so.’ We’re going to work, Jenna. I know it. I love you. Always.”

My soul lit up at his words. At their exquisite truth. Our love may have blossomed during a stolen moment in paradise, but that didn’t make it any less real than if we’d spent a decade together figuring it out. Time couldn’t dictate love. The revelation hit me with a jolt. I loved him, body, mind, and soul... and my superpower told me this love of ours was going to last.

"I still love you too, Carter."

His grin nearly split his face. "You've just made me the happiest man in the world."

He dipped me backward and crushed my lips with a kiss that left me wobbling in the knees. When he stood me back up, I melted back into his arms.

"I'm really happy that you said that you love me and want to be with me because I'd have been a pretty sad puppy if I'd have moved up here and you wouldn't see me anymore."

"I— I can't believe you're really moving here. Seriously?"

"Seriously."

My body warmed at the realization that I could have it all... Carter *and* my life here in Door County. It was more than I could have ever imagined, and I wanted to pinch myself to see if it was real.

When he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine again, I sighed and melted into his kiss and his touch, the tingles traveling all over my body and confirming that this wasn't a fantasy.

Carter was mine, and he would be here with me always.

We stood on the dance floor kissing, the bodies moving around us as I sunk deeper into our embrace. It wasn't until I heard a gasp from Aunt Tilly that I finally pulled myself back out into the world surrounding us.

"Oh, my!" Aunt Tilly said.

I turned around to see her standing with Lydia, huge grins lifting their bright pink lips.

Lydia wagged a finger at us. "Now, this I like."

"Yeah, I like it too." I smiled up at Carter.

The look in his eyes would have dropped me to my knees if he wasn't holding me tight against him.

"You want to get out of here?" he asked, brushing a kiss against my cheek.

"I'm exhausted, actually," I admitted. "My feet hurt. My body aches. I just want to lay down."

"You. Me. Your place. Foot massage. Back massage." He lifted a corner of his lip, then leaned down and whispered, "I'll give you a front massage too."

Laughing, I swatted him on the chest but nodded my head. "Yes. Take me home, Carter. Just you and me from now on."

"And Arnold too, of course." He slung an arm around my shoulder.

"Well, of course. He's a package deal with me, you know."

"Good. I like that goofy dog of yours. I think he's warming up to me too."

"He'll love you as much as I do." I stopped and spun around, tossing my arms around his neck.

We walked out hand-in-hand, Valentina giving us a big thumbs up as we waved goodbye, and Eric giving Carter a knowing wink.

"I think everyone approves," Carter said.

I glanced over and saw Camilla's shocked stare. "Well, not everyone."

He stifled a chuckle. "I spent a lot of years worrying about what she, and everyone else, thought. Now I couldn't care less about anyone else's opinions but my own. I'm going to live the life I want with the woman I want, and I don't care one lick if anyone else approves. I've got a woman now who loves me for me, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

I rested my head on his shoulder as he slung his arm around mine. He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, and I sighed as we made our way back to the car.

This was happening. *We* were happening. All the years apart hadn't diminished our feelings at all. With my whole heart exposed and all my walls tumbling down, for the first time in my life, I let go of

all my fears and my plans as I imagined the unlimited possibilities awaiting us in our new life together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



CARTER

“You ready?” Jenna asked as we stood outside the Bronson’s front door. “It’s gonna be insane. We’re going to get grilled like shish kabobs.”

Chuckling, I blew out an exaggerated breath. “Bring on the Bronson interrogations. Let’s do this, baby.”

We pushed open the door and walked in together, holding hands. The sounds of voices laughing and talking guided us toward the brunch happening in the three-season room overlooking the water.

“Jenna!” Lydia called.

“Here we go,” Jenna whispered, then smiled wide as she pulled me over.

“Mother! Jenna is here!” Lydia called to Aunt Tilly. “And she’s with him! Holding hands!”

I laughed as the two women beelined for us like we were a glass of water and they’d been dying of dehydration in the desert.

“Good morning, ladies.” I tightened my grip on Jenna’s hand. “Don’t you two look lovely as always.”

Their tight-lipped grins let some giggles out as they bumped shoulders. “Oh, Jenna! He’s so darn charming, you lucky girl! How on *earth* did you two sneak this past us?”

Jenna shrugged. “It just kinda happened. Apparently, we still had feelings for each other after a decade apart.”

“It’s unbelievable.” Aunt Tilly sighed. “To think if you and I hadn’t met at that brunch years ago, I never would have hired you for a wedding planner, and we never would have had this wedding, and you two never would have seen each other again. It’s like I’m Cupid himself.”

“It is all because of you,” Jenna agreed. “Thank you for helping us find each other again.”

“Yes. Thank you.” I put an arm around Jenna and pulled her against me. “She’s the woman of my dreams, and I am never letting her get away again.”

The two women sighed deeper. They pressed us for details, and we gave them the watered-down PG version of our reunion. When we finished, they stared at us like they had hearts floating around in their eyes.

“This is just so romantic,” Lydia said. “Such a beautiful couple. But I have to ask, how is this going to work with Carter living in New York and you here?”

We glanced at each other.

“Well,” I said, “I’m not going back to New York. I’m moving up here.”

“Oh!” the women mirrored on excited shouts. “That’s incredible! We’ll see you all the time!”

I leaned forward. “You’d better plan on it. You beauties aren’t getting rid of me that easily.”

They tittered as Aunt Tilly tapped me on the shoulder. “Jenna, you are one lucky girl.”

“Yeah. I am.” As she smiled, our electric connection crackled between us. “The luckiest.”

“Well, we won’t keep you lovebirds tied up. I know Valentina and Eric are dying to talk to you. They’re right over there.” Lydia pointed across the room.

“And Jenna, thank you again for another incredible event. You truly are a wonder.” Aunt Tilly pulled her in for a hug. “You’re like family, you know.”

“I know.” Jenna hugged her back. “And I couldn’t be more grateful for it.”

A server came past with a tray of mimosas, and the two women spun around and hurried after.

“Wait! We’ll take two!” Aunt Tilly called as she flagged her down.

“Well, that wasn’t as bad as I expected.” I watched the two women grab their mimosas before giving us one last wave.

“Not bad at all. I thought we’d be stuck for hours rehashing every last detail of our reunion. But I’m sure they’ll want to hear the story over and over again every time we see them so they can tell anyone within earshot that this is all their doing.” Jenna laughed.

“I’m just glad I get to be here with you to do it. Our new life together in Door County.” Sighing, I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I can’t wait until I’m here permanently. If all goes as planned, you’ll be stuck with me by fall.”

“I can’t wait either.”

Eric and Valentina spun around from the side conversation they’d been having with another guest. When they saw me with Jenna, they both smiled and waved us over.

“Hell, yeah,” Eric said when we arrived. “I’m so glad you two worked it out. I knew you would.”

“This is so great to see, you guys,” Valentina agreed. “I know Camilla is my friend, and I hope that doesn’t affect our friendship here together.”

“Of course not,” Jenna answered.

“But I am hella pissed that no one—” she paused and glared over at Eric, “—told me this was going on!”

“Bro code, baby.” Eric shrugged. “Carter didn’t want me spilling the beans.”

“Well, now that we’re married, no more secrets! What you know, I know. Husband and wife vault. That’s the rule.”

He sucked the air through his teeth and looked at Carter. “Sorry. I think Bro Code just went buh-bye.”

Jenna tipped her head. “It’s true though. The husband-and-wife vault is a very important part of the marriage. All the best marriages have complete transparency.”

Eric put a hand on my shoulder. “Are you making a note of this, Carter? Anything you tell me, I have to tell Valentina, so keep that in mind before you open your mouth.”

I furrowed my brow. “Hey, but doesn’t Bro Code supersede husband-and-wife vault? I mean, us guys still gotta have our secrets. A little mystery, ya know?”

Jenna pinched her lips. “Well, that’s a good point.”

Eric nodded. “Okay, then if you call Bro Code, I won’t tell Valentina. You hear that, Valentina? I’m only honoring my friendship.”

She faked an eye roll and then laughed. “Okay, fine. But we’ll be up here a lot spending time with Jenna and Carter, so Jenna and I also get our own... Ho Code.”

“Ho Code?” Jenna and I echoed.

Valentina grimaced then shook her head. “Okay. Not Ho Code. How about Sister Statute.”

“I like that!” Jenna laughed. “The Sister Statute. Now we can have our own little secrets while the boys have theirs.”

They slapped hands, and it warmed me straight to my core that my best friend and his girl were going to be in our lives. They may live in New York, but I knew they'd visit often, and I couldn't wait to spend more time in this beautiful place with all the people I loved.

The place I would now call home.

"We'd better keep mingling," Valentina said after another guest waved at her. "But I'm really happy for you two. You're a beautiful couple."

"Thanks, Valentina. And thank you for letting me plan your wedding. I hope it was everything you wanted and more."

"So much more." She pulled Jenna in for a hug then whispered too loud, "You're next."

Jenna pulled out of the hug, her face red while she peeked up at me.

"See you guys later." I pulled Jenna back under my arm. "Want to go for a walk?"

"Yeah. That sounds nice."

We headed out toward the beach together, and when we got there, we sat down in the sand.

"I can't believe I'm going to get to live a life on the water. On *this* water. It's so beautiful here."

"Yeah. It really is."

"My mom is gonna die when I call and tell her what I've done."

"Good die or bad die?"

"Good die. She's been calling me a sellout for a while now." I chuckled.

"Oh, yeah! I remember you telling me a little about your parents when we first met. They live in Colorado, right? Live off the land kinda people?"

"Yep. Those are my parents. They are all about nature and balance. And mostly, happiness. And now that I have you, my mom can finally stop worrying because I'm going to be the happiest of us all."

"I can't wait to meet them." She leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder.

"You will. And they will love you. Just like I do."

We sat at the side of the shore together, and I tried once again to grasp how quickly my life had changed. Last week, I was climbing the ladder in New York, every minute of my day spent selling, pushing, driving myself to a career I never loved. But now?

Now, I had everything. The woman of my dreams. A place I couldn't wait to call home. A career that would make me smile every day.

Life here with Jenna would be perfect.

I reached over and slid my hand across her cheek. "I love you, Jenna. So much. I can't believe we missed a decade of our lives together, but now that I'm moving here, we won't miss a minute more."

She leaned over and kissed me, and the soft touch of her lips on mine set my soul on fire once again.

"I love you too. Always," she whispered against my lips.

I sank into her kiss, wrapping her up tight in my arms and vowing to never let her go again. All those years ago, when I'd seen that beautiful girl sitting on the beach, I never could have imagined the way that fateful day would change my life. But I'd known the moment I'd kissed her that my world would never be the same... it would be better with her in it. And now, she would be in it every day for the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE



JENNA

One year later...

“Eek!” I shrieked as I teetered on my paddleboard, the huge wave from the speed boat wake nearly knocking me off.

“You good?” Carter called from his board.

“Yeah! We’re good!” I looked down at Arnold. He glanced up at me, and there wasn’t a drop of worry on his gruff face. Instead, it was pulled up into a huge smile as he panted, his life jacket straining against his wide frame.

After steadying my board, I pushed my paddle back into the water and spun in Carter’s direction. When I faced him, it wasn’t the wave almost knocking me off my board. This time it was the sight of my man looking so damn good.

He’d regrown his hair, and his sun-bleached beach waves neared his chin. He pushed a hand through the wet, golden hair, tucking it behind his ears. His shirtless body glistened in the summer sunlight, and the rays amplified every muscular inch of his toned, tanned torso. He looked just like the guy I’d fallen in love with eleven years ago.

And now he was mine. I didn’t think I’d ever stop having my breath stolen away when I saw him.

The past year had been nothing short of magical. Carter had moved in with me and Arnold a month after Valentina and Eric’s wedding. It didn’t even feel rushed or too soon. It just felt natural. Normal. Like we’d always been a couple. Like we’d never missed a day apart from that first time we’d met on that beach. We’d settled into our new routine at home, and a month later, Carter had purchased his first piece of land on the waterfront along with his first fleet of kayaks and boards.

With my local connections spreading the word to send tourists his way, his new business had taken off immediately. So fast, in fact, he’d already found two more pieces of waterfront property we’d be renting to expand into more areas of Door County. Next summer, he’d have ten full-time employees taking tourists out around the shoreline. But he’d still be out there with them because he loved it and it wasn’t work for him.

Every day he told me he’d never been happier. And I believed him because I’d never been happier either. He was living his dream on the water, and every day I got to plan beautiful weddings in the place I loved. We’d taken two months off over the winter and had gone back to where we’d met in Hawaii. We’d loved it so much we’d even started looking at winter rental properties there so when Carter’s business shut down for the winter, and my weddings were over for the season, we could head south for a few months, and he could give paddleboarding and surfing lessons all winter long.

Life was perfect. A better dream than I’d ever have been able to imagine.

“Come over here, baby. There’s something in the water!” Carter called.

“What is it?” I stopped gawking at him and started paddling. “A fish?”

“I don’t think so. Come check it out.”

Curious about his discovery, I dug down into the water and paddled faster. Arnold wiggled beneath me, always excited when we picked up speed. When I got to Carter, he was kneeling on his board, staring at the water below him.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Do you see it?”

“What the hell am I even looking for?”

Then, suddenly I saw a little movement in the water, a shimmery flash that caught my eye.

“Oh! I saw something!”

It moved again, dancing and sparkling in the water as it rose toward the top.

“What is it? A fishing lure? What the hell?”

Confusion pushed my brow together as I tried to make out the object distorted by the ripples of water above it.

“It’s getting closer,” Carter said, excitement in his voice.

“*What* is getting closer? And *how* is it getting closer?” It didn’t look like a fish, but it certainly moved toward the top of the water like it was on a mission.

Arnold peered over the edge, the sparkling object catching his curious gaze. As it lifted to the top, I suddenly made out exactly what was rising to the surface.

“Oh, my God!” I dropped my paddle as I cupped a hand over my mouth.

A beautiful, sparkling diamond ring lifted out of the water, and I finally saw the thin piece of fishing line attached to it... the very same line that led right to Carter’s hand.

My gaze flew from the ring to him, and his charming smile met me as he kneeled facing me on his board.

He glanced at the ring, then back at me. “Oh, my God. A diamond engagement ring! What are the chances of that?”

“Carter,” I breathed.

His playful demeanor softened as he pulled the dangling ring into his hand. When he flipped it upright to present it to me, my heart sped up to racing.

“Jenna Parker, I love you. I have loved you since the first time I saw you, and I’m going to love you until my dying breath. And longer even. If you outlive me, I’ll be haunting you, still loving you from the grave like some lovesick ghost just following you around like a creeper waiting for you to join me in the afterlife where I’ll love you even longer.”

I laughed, shaking my head as he smiled back.

“But in this life, and the next, and the one after that, or whatever the hell awaits us, I’m gonna love you. Always. And I want you by my side for every step of this life and the next. I know you always like to have a plan, so plan on this... plan on me loving you until the end of time. Now please make me the happiest man who’s ever lived and say yes to being my wife. Will you marry me, Jenna?”

Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I hadn’t even noticed them start. I nodded my head fast while spitting out, “Yes. Yes! So much yes!”

“Yes?” He jumped to his feet. “You’ll marry me?”

“Yes!” I shouted so loud the people on the beach turned to look at us.

Carter grinned and leaped from his board to mine, landing with ease but nearly knocking me and Arnold off. He didn’t even wait for the board to stop rocking as he pulled me into his arms and dipped me back into a knee-quaking kiss.

My heart swelled as I kissed the lips of the man I loved, the man I'd always love, and the man who would one day be my husband.

"I love you, Jenna. I'm gonna make you so happy," he whispered against my lips.

"I love you too, Carter. And I always will. I can't wait to marry you."

He kissed me deeply, then pulled back and held my face in his hands. "See. You didn't think we could fall in love in a matter of days, but I always knew our love was real. And now I'm going to say to you what I promised I'd say at this moment."

I furrowed my brow as he grinned.

"I told you so."

I started to laugh, but he closed my mouth with a powerful kiss. The people still watching on the beach erupted into applause as he kissed me so deeply, I didn't think we'd ever come up for air. And I didn't care if we did because everything I'd ever wanted was right here in my arms.

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THE BIG ONE

Some flames refuse to burn out...

Fresh on the heels of yet another relationship fail, I couldn't stop thinking about the summer fling I hadn't seen in a decade.

The one who stole my heart and forgot to give it back.

You know... The Big One.

With heartache and my meddling wingmen egging me on, and a little nudge from my cocktail, I reached out to the boy I couldn't forget.

After we reconnected online, and the years hadn't diminished our chemistry one bit, I did the craziest thing I'd ever done in my well-planned life...

I hopped on a plane to surprise him—in Italy.

Determined to find out if he was my one true love, I ended up on the adventure of a lifetime. After ten years of wondering, it was finally time for an answer...

Had our old flame burned out, or could we rekindle our love?

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