

The background of the cover is a stylized illustration of a mountain landscape at sunset. The sky is a gradient of warm colors from orange to purple. In the center, a man and a woman are shown in silhouette, holding hands and looking out over the valley. The landscape features rolling hills, a dense forest of evergreen trees, and a body of water in the foreground that reflects the scene. The title 'Just Between Us' is written in a large, elegant, cursive script in a dark purple color. The text 'A FRANKLIN NOTCH NOVEL' is positioned to the right of the title in a smaller, clean, sans-serif font.

# Just Between Us

A  
FRANKLIN NOTCH  
NOVEL

SARAH EVERLY

*Just Between Us*

**SARAH EVERLY**

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*For long time crushes  
and unshared secrets*

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# CHAPTER 1



## *Nora*

“YOU’RE LATE.” TAMMY SET DOWN HER BOOK AND PEERED AT me over her wire-rim glasses, annoyed. I didn’t exactly blame her, considering I’d kept her fifteen minutes past closing.

“I know. Sorry. Thanks for waiting.” I gently closed the coffee shop door behind me, walking across the battered wooden floors to the dog bed in the corner. “And how’s Mags today?” The gold whippet stood and bounced on the bed when I approached. “I’m glad you’re happy to see me,” I cooed, pulling a dog treat from my pocket. She ate the meat stick in a single bite, prancing around me excitedly. “I wish I could walk you, Mags, but I’m late.”

I stood, rounding the counter to wash my hands in the prep sink.

“You better scoot, Nora, before Gary loses his mind.”

I suppressed a groan. “I’m too late for that. The Chamber of Commerce meeting starts at eight. I’m late if I’m not there half an hour early.”

The clock over the counter read 7:50, which left plenty of time to walk to City Hall by eight— if I didn’t have two boxes of coffee and three dozen pastries weighing me down.

“I could help you carry these over.”

I waved away Tammy’s offer. At seventy, she could barely walk around the block, let alone lug a bunch of pastries up the City Hall stairs. I didn’t quite understand why the woman had adopted a high-energy puppy, but I took advantage of her

decision. Mags and I frequently took walks together, quenching my urge to have a dog of my own.

Like my landlord would ever allow that.

“I can get this on my own,” I lied. “No problem.”

I hefted the two coffee boxes with my bad wrist in a hurry, only to bite back a yelp of pain. I set the boxes down, picking them up again with my other hand. Tammy eyed my wrist curiously as I held out my hand, letting her place the handle over my palm.

I lifted it carefully, training my face not to crumple. “Sorry again, Tammy. Thanks for waiting!”

Tammy followed me to the door, propping it open so I could slip out onto Main Street.

After an unseasonably warm August, September had begun with a cold snap that left the ground covered in frost and me scrambling to dig my winter clothes out of storage. My fingers still ached, despite the gloves, probably swollen and turning slightly more blue with each step I took. I set my sights on City Hall, pushing through the pain in my wrist and the tension in my chest that had been building since my doctor’s appointment that afternoon.

*Later. I’d worry about that later.*

I slipped through the back door of City Hall, navigating the two hundred-year-old building to the council chambers.

“You’re late,” Gary hissed when I arrived. He stood by the door with his arms crossed in contempt, clearly waiting for me. “You’re supposed to be here at 7:30. Nothing was set up. Nothing.”

I surveyed the room. A group of local business owners had pulled down the chairs and set up a table at the back of the room for the coffee. The place looked fine to me.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “My appointment ran late.”

He glared, wrenching the boxes of coffee out of my hand. “I allowed you to schedule that appointment because you assured me you’d be done in time for this meeting.”

“I know, but—”

“No buts, no excuses. I could have your job filled tomorrow.”

My throat clenched as I choked down a sob. I nodded, biting my tongue. Thankfully, Mr. Barton, my best friend’s dad and a local plumber, wandered over at the perfect time. He shot me an apologetic smile as he distracted Gary with a smile and a handshake.

I glanced at the exit, relieved that Cal hadn’t wandered in. Both of my brothers harbored an overprotective streak a mile wide, and Gary hadn’t exactly made a good first impression. He’d bossed me around at the first meeting, talking down to me as if I were a petulant child. Obviously, Cal was infuriated, and I didn’t need this to add fuel to the fire.

Regardless, he had a point: I was lucky to have the job. The tiny mountain community of Franklin Notch had no actual source of commerce. The town’s largest employer was a custom cabinetry shop, and half the town commuted at least thirty minutes away.

I could do that, but I only had a high school diploma, so my job prospects were limited. Besides, the gas money would eat into the extra dollar an hour I might make, and I couldn’t stand driving in the snow.

“You okay, Nora?” Lexi Williams, a local tattoo artist, wrapped her arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze.

“Fine,” I said, plastering a smile on my face and wiping out any thoughts of rage quitting out of my mind—as if I could afford that.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her brow furrowed.

I hadn’t had time to stop by my apartment after my doctor’s appointment, and could have used a few minutes to collect myself in front of the mirror. I needed to mop up the sweat coating my face, reapply the makeup I’d wiped off, and change out of the clothes I’d been twisting with worry.

“Yeah, Gary is just...being Gary.” I waved a hand and forced a smile.

“Well, with an asshole boss like that, I bet you have a lot of long days,” Lexi murmured.

She had a point. Gary had gone through a dozen assistants before me, which in a former mill town with limited employers, meant he didn’t pay well or he was an ass. In Gary’s defense, he paid really well. He had to.

“He’s just cranky. I showed up late,” I said with a shrug.

“He’s not King of the Chamber of Commerce. He’s a board member. You don’t need to do jack for these meetings. Hell, you don’t even need to show up.” Lexi’s voice crested as she laid out the same laundry list of grievances I’d burned through dozens of times before. “Not that we don’t love having you.”

“Well, he pays my bills,” I said, lowering my voice to barely a whisper and shooting a worried look in Gary’s direction. He had the undivided attention of Bill, owner of Bob’s Cars: a convenience store, bar, and gas station bundled into one.

Lexi followed my eyes, her azure blue hair shining in the fluorescent light of the chambers. “He’s still an ass.”

“He is,” I agreed with a laugh. “I should set up the snack table.”

I pulled myself away from Lexi, relieved to find that Cal still hadn’t shown. Gary annoyed my brother more than he annoyed Lexi, which was a feat in itself.

I rummaged through the row of cabinets on the back wall of the large room, digging out a platter for the pastries and the pair of tongs I’d stashed months before. I found them easily enough and returned to the table as Gary called the meeting to order.

My eyes slid over the room. Cal hadn’t shown, but it was another empty chair that caught my attention.

Andy wasn’t here.

I frowned, shaking off the hit of disappointment at his absence.

The county Chamber of Commerce meeting swapped sites every month between the two biggest cities: Pierce and Franklin Notch. Pierce had more commerce by far—multiple restaurants, bars, and hotels soaked up all the tourists. Gary had fought for the meeting to come to Franklin Notch in the name of parity. Now, every other month, the bulk of the business owners traveled thirty minutes to Franklin Notch as punishment.

Andy had only missed one meeting since I'd taken the job as Gary's assistant two years ago. Considering Andy Stewart ran a thriving chain of gyms, set to expand nationwide, he probably gained nothing from the meetings. He showed up, anyway.

Except for tonight.

Gary banged his gavel on the wooden tabletop and launched the meeting. I sat in the back, poised with a pen and paper to take the minutes.

I had no real reason to be disappointed in Andy's absence. We hardly ever said more than a few words to each other. But I liked his smile, and I liked the way he always had a question for me: *How's work? Did Cal fix your car? How was your trip to Boston with Thea? Did you watch that movie we talked about last month?*

Andy had a million things going on in his life, with two more gyms opening in the next few months and a boatload of investors watching his every move, but he always had a few minutes for me. His presence was one of the few bright spots on these late nights.

Of course, it made sense that Andy would attend fewer and fewer meetings as the new gyms opened. He'd probably even disappear altogether once the openings were a success and his business went nationwide. Then, he'd move far away from Franklin Notch and I'd never see him again.

I pushed away a wave of sadness, one I had no business feeling.

Lexi stood, hands on her hips, geared up to challenge Gary about something—a cue I should take notes. I couldn't get lost in thinking about Andy, or anyone else, for that matter. I had bigger problems than a very friendly and very handsome guy I caught up with once a month.

I had surgery to pay for, an autoimmune disease that threatened to bankrupt me, and a dead-end job with a boss who hated me. All the money I'd saved to return to school would now get funneled into hospital bills.

Gary didn't provide health insurance, let alone sick days. And I certainly couldn't go to my brothers and ask them to bail me out. Again.

Paying for one failed attempt at nursing school had been embarrassing. Living on my brother's land, in the cabin he'd built for our adopted mom, had been humiliating. I'd only just gained some independence; I'd finally found a job that would pay for a small apartment downtown with enough left over to build a small savings account.

A very small amount—one that had been nearly wiped out by seeing the specialist for a single appointment. I couldn't even fathom how I'd pay for the actual surgery.

I blew out a breath and focused on the meeting. There would be plenty of time to figure out how to get myself out of this mess when I got home.

If Gary didn't keep me here until midnight, of course.

## CHAPTER 2

*Andy*

I HUNG UP THE PHONE WITH A SMILE.

“Everything good?” Nolan asked, leaning against the door to my office.

“Never better. Manchester is ahead of schedule and under budget. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Brad so excited.”

My best friend shot me a wry smile. “Does that mean I’m getting transferred sooner rather than later?”

I suppressed a groan. Once Nolan left, what would keep me here, in the middle-of-nowhere New Hampshire? Only one thing.

“I would start packing,” I said, standing from the maple desk and pushing my arms overhead in a stretch. “Unless I can convince you to hang around Pierce?”

He shook his head. “Not a chance. In fact, with all the traveling you’re doing, why not come with me? It’s a hell of a lot closer to the airport, and there might actually be some nightlife.”

I frowned. Brad Sexton, my mentor, had argued the same, along with half the angel investors who’d dumped money and resources into rolling out my line of gyms across New England, and, with any luck, across the country by the end of next year.

Living in the White Mountains, hours away from the airport and civilization in general, worked great for remote



jobs. However, it was not so great for building a rapidly expanding company.

I'd balked against that notion. I claimed I didn't want to leave my family home—the enormous mansion my mom left me when she'd taken off to Connecticut after my dad died. Of course, the steep gabled roof cost a fortune to repair, the seven bedrooms mainly sat unused, and my housekeeper, a woman who'd been cleaning the house for decades, developed cataracts five years ago. I spent most weekends dusting the nooks and crannies of the ancient home, rather than going out and having fun. Not that I had much time for fun.

The house was just a convenient excuse.

“I'm guessing by your silence, that the plan is to rot away in Franklin Notch until you ask Nora out. And judging by how long you've been working up the nerve, that means forever.”

I winced at Nolan's pointed assessment. “Tonight. It's happening tonight.”

He rolled his eyes and pushed himself off the doorframe. “Really? Because you've been saying that for six months and haven't done anything.”

“There hasn't been a good time.”

Nolan raised an eyebrow.

“Fine. There has. I just don't want to blow my shot.”

He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Seriously? I mean, how many years has it been, man? Rip off the Band-Aid. If she turns you down, so be it. You can't waste the rest of your life waiting to ask this girl out.”

He had a point, not one I enjoyed hearing, but a point nonetheless.

It had only been a year since her brother stopped hating me. Sure, we weren't best friends, by any means, and we never would be. But a once-heated rivalry had cooled into begrudging respect. Following up by immediately asking out his little sister seemed like a bad idea.

“Tonight,” I conceded. “No more excuses.”

Nolan grinned, checking his watch. “Well, then you better go, Romeo. The Chamber of Commerce meeting started fifteen minutes ago.”



I made it to Franklin Notch in fifteen minutes, driving a little too fast through the winding back roads and over potholes. I parked in front of City Hall and hustled inside, taking a breath to collect myself outside the door before slipping into the meeting room.

Gary Archer held court over the three-dozen people attending the Greater Franklin Notch Chamber of Commerce meeting. I scanned the room for Nora, finding her in the back row, hunched over a notepad and furiously taking notes as Gary prattled on about tax holidays or some nonsense.

She wore black pants and a plain white t-shirt under a cream cardigan; the sleeves enveloped her hands, so she had to stop writing to push them back every few minutes. She crossed one leg over the other, a pair of hot pink flats the only hint of color in her outfit.

My mouth hitched up in a grin. I watched her brow furrow as she wrote, her big, soft brown eyes glancing up at Gary every few seconds. She caught my eye, cheeks burning pink, before ducking her head again.

I pulled my attention away from her to the front row, where Dave Barton and Lexi Williams had left an open seat between them. Instead of taking the empty chair, I walked to the back of the room and slid in beside Nora.

“Hey,” I whispered.

She stopped writing long enough to shoot me a shy smile. “Hey. I thought you weren’t coming tonight.”

Her voice sounded tight. I studied her face, noting the puffy circles under her eyes. My jaw clenched and my gaze slid to Gary, guessing him to be the source of her distress. The

guy was a certifiable asshole; I took a particular delight in taking him down a peg or two any chance I got.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I said, settling into my seat.

The heady scent of honeysuckle that clung to Nora kept my ire at bay. Her eyebrows knitted as she strained to hear Bill Ogden’s low, rumbly voice over the ancient baseboard heaters. The tip of her tongue poked out as she scribbled onto the clipboard balanced on her lap. She leaned forward and listed toward me, the fabric of her sweater resting on my arm.

“Sorry,” she muttered, her eyes flitting to her sweater and then up at me. Her cheeks went red as she leaned away. Disappointment flooded me.

“It’s fine.”

The meeting took another twenty minutes to wrap up; twenty grueling minutes that had my stomach in knots and my palms sweaty. As Gary banged his ridiculous oak gavel on the folding table, ending the meeting, Nora bounced up and darted away before I could stop her.

Understandable. Technically, she was still on the clock.

“You decided to grace us with your presence?” Lexi asked, hands on her hips and eyebrow raised.

“Wouldn’t miss it. Best business advice I get some months,” I said with a grin.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why you bother. Unless you plan on sharing some of that sweet investment capital with the rest of us.”

I shook my head. “Afraid not.”

She shrugged. “How about a tattoo, then?”

“That might be something I’m interested in.”

Lexi and I chatted while the other business owners crowded the snack table, double-fisting pastries and coffee, their attention on Nora. Despite Gary’s general unpleasantness, he’d made the right choice in hiring her. She had a way of

drawing people to her, effortlessly guiding the conversation as the evening wore on.

It'd been what had drawn me to her all those years ago, when we first met. After chasing a ball out of bounds during a rivalry high school basketball game, I'd tumbled into her and knocked both of us to the ground. Seconds later, her brothers pulled me off her, and her youngest brother, Cal, punched me in the face.

The entire interaction took seconds. I hadn't even registered who she was. She found me after the game. She snuck out of the gym, checking my black eye and apologizing so sincerely that I fell under her spell completely and stayed under it for the next ten years.

I walked Lexi to the door, wishing her a good night and returning to find that City Hall had emptied of everyone except Gary.

"Andy, just the man I wanted to talk to." Gary walked across the room and smacked me on the shoulder. "I was in Manchester this past week and saw your new gym. Beautiful work."

"Thanks. I actually came back to se—"

"Now, imagine my disappointment when I found out you aren't hiring local contractors."

I barely suppressed a grimace. "Well, they are local—to Manchester."

"You know what I mean." Gary shook his head, his gray hair molded to his skull, refusing to budge. "I mean *local*. Franklin Notch. Pierce. I take jobs as far away as the coast, and you'll need a reliable contractor for all these new gyms you're opening."

"I appreciate that, but we've chosen a group that specializes in fitness centers."

"You think I can't handle fitness centers? Don't you remember who retrofitted your first property?"

At the time, Gary had been the only contractor I could afford. Over the years, I'd learned much more about layout and flow, renovating the gym until very little remained from the first remodel.

"I'll keep that in mind, Gary." I gave him a reassuring pat on the arm and angled back toward the door, poised to escape while I could.

Nora had left while I'd been talking to Lexi, which meant another month before I could ask her out.

Great.

I walked down the darkened corridor to the front entrance, pausing as a strange sound echoed down the hall: a muffled cry. I turned, searching for the source of the sound. I followed it back the way I came.

A second sob sounded from a nearby hallway that led to the city employees' offices. I walked past Parks and Rec, Sanitation, and Police Chief until I reached the end of the hall and the sign for the City Administration Assistant.

A faint light shone from under the slightly ajar door. I knocked on the wood frame with my knuckles. "Hello?"

"Hey, just a minute and I'll get out of here," Nora said, sniffing slightly.

I pushed open the door.

She sat on a plain wooden chair in front of the desk, eyes red and face puffy. Her eyes went wide as she turned in her seat and quickly wiped her tears with the sleeve of her sweater.

"Andy." She shook her head, plastering a forced smile on her face. "I thought you'd left."

"I was just heading out. Is everything okay?" I asked hesitantly, unsure whether I should turn around or step into the office.

"I'm fine. Just a long day." Tears clung to her eyes. My stomach wrenched at the sight.

“You want to talk about it?” I asked, gesturing to the other seat.

She shook her head. “It’s late. I’m sure you’re exhausted. I’m just going to pull myself together and—”

“I don’t mind.” I stepped into the office, pushing the door back to ajar behind me so Gary wouldn’t barge his way in, and sat beside her. “What’s going on?”

Nora’s lips pursed and her eyes watered as they bounced from the ceiling to the door. “I... um... I just got fired.”

I craned my head back toward the chambers in disbelief. He hadn’t mentioned anything—hadn’t even seemed phased.

“Gary just fired you? He made you finish the meeting until...” I checked my watch. “Nine o’clock and fired you? That’s ridiculous.”

I gripped the arm of the chair, pushing myself up to go back and ream Gary out, but Nora’s eyes widened.

“Please, don’t,” she begged. “It’s fine. I didn’t even like the job.” Her gaze moved to the ceiling. A single tear fell down her cheek. “Why today?”

The despair in her tone hit me in the gut. I threw caution to the wind and covered her hand with mine, sinking into my chair and rubbing my thumb over her knuckles. “What happened today?”

She exhaled, loud and deep. Her gaze skittered down to my hand on hers, but she didn’t pull away. “I just found out I need to have surgery. It’s not important. And it’s not like Gary offered healthcare.” She bit her bottom lip to stop it from quivering. “You’re going to think it’s ridiculous. I’m what? Four years younger than you, and you have a chain of gyms and a giant house, and I’ve got, no, I *had* an apartment.”

“I don’t think it’s ridiculous.” I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, already searching for some solution that would make her feel better. “What about the gym? I could use another front desk person.”

She smiled. “That’s sweet. I wasn’t trying to hit you up for a job, though.”

“No, but I’m offering.”

Her forehead furrowed as her eyes went to the ceiling again. Mulling it over, I saw the downsides: the twenty-minute commute, the same salary Gary offered, and no upward trajectory.

Also, a downside for me: I couldn’t ask Nora out if she was my employee.

“Thank you, Andy. I appreciate that, truly.” She slid her hand away from mine with a smile and stood, picking up her purse from the floor with a barely perceptible wince. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea, though.”

“I want to help,” I said even as relief flooded me.

“I just don’t think there is any way for you to help me.” She sighed heavily. “I’ll figure it out.”

As she stood by the door and waited for me to join her, my mind raced for a solution. Her smile reminded me of the Chamber of Commerce meeting. She stood at the center of the room, drawing everyone into her orbit and charming them all, including me.

“I have an idea.” I stood, striking on the answer and letting it tumble out. “Marry me.”

## CHAPTER 3



## *Nora*

I SUCKED IN A BREATH, FALLING ONTO MY BACK FOOT AND hitting the oak door behind me. “What?”

“Marry me,” Andy repeated the words with the same level of calm and confidence he used to offer me a job less than a minute before.

I shook my head. “That’s crazy.”

“You’re right, it’s crazy.” He gestured to the chair, sitting back down. “Hear me out.”

I stepped away from the door, sitting on the edge of the uncomfortable wooden chair. Andy raked a hand through his blonde hair and gave me a lopsided smile that would have made my stomach flip, even without the spontaneous marriage proposal.

He leaned forward; the faint scent of orange and cedar lapped over me. I almost leaned closer. Almost. “We can help each other. You have a problem.”

“Multiple problems,” I corrected him.

“Right.” He grinned. “You need a job and a surgery and maybe a place to crash?”

I winced. The no-nonsense assessment of my current predicament churned my stomach. “Yeah.”

“Well, I have problems, too.”

I laughed—a loud, unladylike snort that startled us both. “I’m sorry. That was rude. I just... it’s not like you’re in

danger of being evicted, Andy.”

He chuckled, the edge of his lips tilting up. “No. Not that. But I am swamped. I’ve been traveling nonstop for the past six months, going to business meetings and social occasions. And, no offense to the Chamber of Commerce, but I’m not talking about locals who own a single motel. I’m talking about entrepreneurs who own private jets and multi-million dollar businesses.”

“It sounds like you need a personal assistant.”

“Maybe, but do you know what goes on when everyone else brings a spouse to these things?” He dipped his head low, leaning closer, as if sharing a secret.

I shook my head. Other than Gary lugging me to Pierce for Chamber of Commerce meetings, I’d never had a job that required business travel.

“I either spend the entire night getting hit on, or I get roped into late-night visits to strip clubs and bars, where I get to find out firsthand how sleazy some guys are.”

Reflexively, I wrinkled my nose.

“Exactly. Besides, you are amazing at small talk. I’ve watched you for years, charming the business owners at these meetings. You’re great at listening and making people feel included. I suck at that. I’m good with the people I know, but spouses? New investors? I struggle.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” I said. My hand shot out, patting his knee comfortingly, only to pull it back just as fast. Why was I trying to comfort Andy? Why was I even considering his insane plan?

“It is. We could help each other, Nora. Just think about it. I’ll put you on my insurance so you can get your surgery. My house is enormous. You could have any three bedrooms, and you only need to tag along for a few trips and sit in on some dinners.”

He didn’t struggle to connect with other people. Not by a long shot. Andy had an uncanny ability to make me feel like the center of the planet. While I didn’t know why he would lie

about needing my help, I certainly couldn't accept his proposal.

"I have plans, Andy. I want to go back to school."

"Perfect. We'll get you signed up for classes." His lopsided grin transformed into a full-fledged smile that I fought not to return.

I shouldn't even be having this conversation, but I couldn't stop myself from asking more questions.

"Marriage is a lifetime commitment. We can't just get married because it's convenient."

"Of course, we can," he scoffed. "People do it all the time. Four years. That'll get you through school and whatever happens with my expansion will be underway, or not."

Four years. I bit my lip and shook my head. "You can't do that. What if you meet someone? What if you fall in love?"

"I haven't met anyone while I've built this business, and I definitely won't have time once it expands."

"What if I meet someone?" I asked, confused by the flinch on Andy's face that he quickly covered.

He paused, finally taking a breath. "Then, I guess we'd separate."

I turned that over in my head. With surgery and school and tagging along on Andy's meetings, I wouldn't have time to meet someone new. Not that I'd met anyone of note since I'd graduated high school. After a short fling during my first failed attempt at college and a brief relationship with a local real estate agent that ended amicably, I felt like I wasn't meant for dating.

"No," I said, more so to myself than Andy. "It'd never work. Cal and Len would never buy it."

My brothers had been sniffing out my lies since I was a kid—not that I was ever a great liar. Growing up, I was more likely to crumble into a ball of tears than follow through on any type of deception. Anytime I'd done anything wrong, I'd gone straight to Len or Bunny.

Besides, Cal and Andy had a long and not-so-friendly history. Cal would never believe I'd been sneaking around with Andy under his nose.

Andy's ocean blue eyes sparkled. "I could convince them we've been seeing each other."

Heat threaded his words, and a bloom of warmth spread across my chest.

"For how long? Why didn't we tell them earlier?"

"You were scared," Andy said with a shrug. "And I didn't want to fight with Cal anymore. We've been seeing each other since the last Highland Games. That night at Bob's Cars."

"That night at Bob's Cars" had been hard to forget. My best friend confessed she was in love with my brother, and I'd ended the night at a table alone with Andy. We talked and drank until my vision blurred and my head turned foggy. I barely remembered him driving me back to my apartment. I only remembered the bitter disappointment when he walked me safely to my doorstep without so much as a hint of wanting to come inside.

Andy was just that kind of guy. A nice guy. A stand-up guy. The type of guy who'd offer anything, including marriage, to help someone out.

"I'm serious, Nora. This would work for both of us. But, you're also right. Your brothers would need to be convinced. Bunny, too. Do you think we could convince them we're in love?" He dipped his head, leaning closer.

The room suddenly seemed too small, too confining. The baseboard heaters turned the tiny office into a sauna. I wrapped two fingers around the hem of my sweater.

"Maybe?"

"I think we could," he said. His voice was barely above a whisper; it made the hair on my hairs stand up and my chest tight.

Think we could do what? Distracted by his eyes trained on mine and his lips less than a foot away, I lost the thread of our

conversation and could only think about whether he'd lean closer.

"What do you say?"

I tore my eyes away, shaking my head as if coming out of a trance. "I don't know."

"So, not a no?"

No would be the practical answer.

No, I won't marry a guy who may as well be a stranger. I shouldn't marry a guy my brother hated, and my family didn't even know, who I'd not-so-casually been checking out for the last two years. If it were any other day, I would have said no. But I'd barely grappled with being fired and the worsening prognosis of an autoimmune disease that I didn't know could morph into needing surgery.

"Not a no," I answered slowly.

Andy's lips tipped up. "Well, that's a start. We should head out before we get locked in."

He stood and held open the door, following me out of the building into the chilly night air. I pushed my hands into my sweater, glad for the short walk to my apartment since Andy seemed set on seeing me home, and my hands would turn blue at this temperature.

"I appreciate the offer, you know." The words burbled out of me, piercing the silence that enveloped the quiet of downtown.

"Then, say yes." His eyes twinkled in the light of a streetlamp, his voice soft.

"I think you might regret this in the morning." I put words to the fear niggling at the back of my head.

I had plenty of reasons to say no to this half-cocked plan, but I couldn't quiet the small voice telling me to say yes—that Andy's insane proposal was the answer to my problems.

The *actual* answer to my problems involved sitting down with Len, Cal, and Bunny. Unfortunately, I already knew the

outcome of that conversation: I'd move back in with Bunny, and Len would pay my bills. My family would bail me out. Again.

We stopped in front of my apartment. Andy pressed his palm against the door frame, frowning. "You really think I'll regret this in the morning?"

"It's late, and we're both tired," I said carefully, convincing myself as much as him. "In the morning, we might see this situation very differently."

He shook his head. "I don't think so, but if you need the night to think about it, sure."

His confidence shook my resolve. He hadn't asked me to *do* anything besides a few dinners and meetings. I'd have a place to live, health insurance, and time for school. He'd solve all my problems, and I'd provide practically nothing in return.

Andy himself posed a problem. I'd always found him handsome. Who wouldn't? A star athlete who towered over all the other boys in high school and became a fitness trainer. He had a square jaw, startlingly blue eyes and a body made for the beach, a feat considering Franklin Notch had snow on the ground half the year. A fake marriage seemed daunting enough, but with a guy like Andy? Impossible.

He shot me a wry smile. "Hand me your phone."

I pulled my phone out of my sweater. His fingers brushed mine as he took it, lingering a second longer than necessary before pulling the phone away.

"You don't keep this locked?"

"I've never found a reason to," I admitted sheepishly.

He messed with the screen for a minute until his phone beeped and he handed mine back. "There. Now, you have my number, so you can sleep on the offer."

Still warm from his hands, I pocketed the phone. He'd rethink his proposal in the morning. I'd wake up with a text saying "Sorry, but you were right," and we'd both move on with our lives.

“We’ll sleep on it, then,” I said, pushing open the lobby door. “No hard feelings if you change your mind.”

Before I could slip by, his hand caught my elbow and he dipped his head, catching me with crystal blue eyes, dark and serious. “My answer will be the same tomorrow. I promise.”

He froze, his lips a few inches from mine and the smell of cedar engulfing me. My heart thudded in my chest. I licked my lips absently, wondering how his mouth would feel against mine.

He released my elbow with a friendly smile and strolled away.

## CHAPTER 4



## *Nora*

IT WAS THREE A.M BY THE TIME I FINALLY STOPPED TOSSING and turning and fell into a fitful sleep filled with nightmares about lost jobs and a life spent isolated on a mountaintop with my family. I woke up to light streaming through my window and my alarm clock reading past ten.

I groaned, pushing myself up. My wrist ached and my head pounded. Unsurprising.

Maybe yesterday was a dream. Or a nightmare.

I sat in bed, staring at the wall and contemplating the events of the day before. My doctor's appointment ran long. I needed surgery. I was late to the meeting. I lost my job. Andy asked me to marry him.

The last part was the hardest to believe. But one look at my phone and I couldn't deny that Andy's offer had happened.

ANDY

I had a full night's rest and I'm still game if you are. If you're in, let's talk specifics over dinner.

He'd sent the text at seven.

At least he slept well.

I groaned, throwing myself back against my pillows and covering my eyes with my arm. I spun through who could give me advice.

Bunny? She'd been married seven times and was as close to a mother as I had, which meant I couldn't exactly spring a fake marriage onto her lap. Even if I could, she would blab to Len or Cal in a heartbeat.

There was my best friend, Becca, but not only did she live in Virginia, she was in a relationship with Cal. If I told her, the news would filter back to Cal.

Thea. My eyes opened and I sat up. Thea was perfect. The closest thing I had to a big sister, she loved gossip but also could keep a secret. I checked the time again. She'd be at her shop just a few buildings down from my apartment.

I stood, changing into jeans and a t-shirt. I ran a brush through my hair and scrounged through my drawers until I found enough money to ply her for advice with coffee and pastries—a dual purpose stop because maybe Tammy knew someone in town looking for an employee.

I raced outside, gathering my coffee with no potential job prospects, and walked straight to Thea's shop at the far end of Main Street.

While the leaves hadn't yet changed colors, the prospect of leaf peepers hung in the air. The downtown shops had put out darling little signs hoping to woo tourists with a cute saying and the promise of handcrafted trinkets to bring home.

Thea's shop was no exception. She had painted red and orange trees on the giant windowpanes and posed various antiques on the other side. Someone had even swept the sidewalk clean and painted the entrance red. Thea, probably. Her only employee, Mrs. Evans, had to be at least seventy and barely shuffled out from behind the register most days. She'd even repaired the tiny bell above the door; it dinged jauntily as I entered.

Mrs. Evans jolted in her chair behind the cash register, her eyes furiously blinking away sleep. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Evans," I said with a wave. "I'm just here to see Thea."

“Thea?” She squinted, searching her chest for her reading glasses and pulling them onto her nose. “She’s in her office, dear.”

“Thanks,” I said, slipping around the counter and into the back room.

I pushed open the door to Thea’s workshop and stepped into possibly my favorite place in Franklin Notch.

Unlike the overstuffed antique shop Thea kept in memory of her grandmother, her workshop was a direct reflection of Thea herself: retro and chic. She’d cobbled it together for years, searching endlessly for the perfect red plush couch and the exact shade and weight for the curtains. A tiny hexagonal box stood in front of three angled mirrors—where Thea created gorgeous clothing.

She sat behind the round Jacobean desk we’d unearthed in a store by the beach, cat-eye glasses on her nose and a frown on her lips. She looked up as I entered, her frown melting into a smile.

“Hey, Nora. What are you doing here?”

I held up the coffee. “Thought I’d stop by and say hi.”

“That’s so sweet, but shouldn’t you be at work?” Her smile faltered.

“I got fired. Last night, actually.” I padded across the plush white carpet and handed her a latte, sitting opposite her in the emerald green leather chair.

She stood, hurrying around the desk as fast as her tight skirt would allow and wrapping her arms around me. “Oh, Nora, I’m so sorry.” She let me go long enough to drag a chair beside me. “Do you need a job? Mrs. Evans is going on vacation next week. I was going to work the front desk, but I could hire you instead.”

“That’d be great.” I took a sip of my coffee and sucked in a breath. “That’s actually why I’m here. You’re not the first person to offer me a job.”

She raised an eyebrow, taking a sip of her drink. “I’m not? Well, with tourist season about to ramp up, I guess everyone’s looking for extra hands.”

“It’s not *that* kind of job.”

“What kind of job is it? Because I don’t think Len will like it if you sign up for OnlyFans.”

I gasped. “No. Not that either.”

At least OnlyFans was honest. Andy’s proposal was much more complicated than uploading pictures onto the Internet.

“Well, you have my attention. Spill it.” Thea wriggled to the edge of her seat, her eyes locked on mine.

I stuttered for the right words. “Well, it was Andy...”

Her nose wrinkled, disappointment flooding her face. “If this is a job at his gym, then I’m not as excited. That’s not exactly hot gossip.”

“No, not his gym.” I winced, opting to drop the news like ripping off a Band-Aid. “He asked me to marry him.”

Her eyes widened and she sat back in her seat. The latte in her hand shook. Not wanting to risk it falling and staining the carpet, I scooped it out of her hand and set it on the table.

Thea sucked in a breath. “He asked to marry you? When? How? What?”

“Not an actual marriage,” I said, laying a placating hand on hers. “He said he could use someone to pretend to be his wife—someone to attend meetings and weekend retreats with him. He’s not great around new investors, or their spouses, for that matter. I’d be doing the same job I did for Gary, just as his wife rather than his assistant.”

That had been the excuse he’d made up the night before, anyway. Hearing it out of my mouth, it didn’t sound nearly as convincing.

“And what’s he doing for you?”

I pursed my lips together. “School, medical costs, housing.”

She gasped, her hand flying up to her mouth. Embarrassment surged through me. Ridiculous. I'd been absurd to consider this arrangement for even a moment.

"I didn't say yes," I added quickly.

"Why not? Are there other conditions?" She lowered her voice. "Does he want sex stuff, Nora?"

I shook my head. "No. He wouldn't ask for anything like that."

"Well, boo," she pouted. "That would have been perfect. Still, that's not a bad deal." She grabbed her latte, taking a sip. "He's clearly getting the better end of this deal, but I don't think that should stop you."

I bit back a laugh. "*He's* getting the better end of the deal? Did you hear me? He's going to take care of my health insurance. I'd live in that gorgeous old house. And he'll pay for me to go to school."

"He'd have *you*. And if he's looking to schmooze with some investor business-y people, there's no one better to have in his corner. Smart man."

"But it's wild, right? I can't marry someone I barely know."

"Well, first off, you do know Andy. You've known him for years. Second, most marriages throughout human history have been between people who barely knew each other. And third, Andy is devastatingly handsome."

"Devastatingly handsome?" I raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you don't want to marry him?"

Thea rolled her eyes. "No, I just know how to appreciate an attractive man when I see one. He's hot. Remember back in high school when we played Pierce? He was the only one worth looking at."

"Him being devastatingly handsome doesn't really help in this situation," I mumbled into my coffee.

"Good point. You should negotiate some banging into this arrangement. For both of your sakes."

“Be serious.”

“I *am* being serious. Not about the banging part, but the arrangement sounds fair to me.”

“He’s going to be spending thousands of dollars on me, and I’m...what? Providing conversation?”

“Well, no offense to your possible fiancé, he could use the help. The guy is brilliant but he’s not exactly Mr. Personable. And you? Well, you’re Nora. To know you is to love you, and Gary took advantage of that for way too long. Think of Andy’s offer as the pay increase you deserve.”

“That’s sweet.”

Had I come to Thea because part of me knew she’d tell me to go along with Andy’s crazy plan?

Becca would have said no, immediately and without hesitation. And Bunny, well, Bunny was a loose cannon. She’d been married enough times to know the value of a well-timed proposal. If I hadn’t been so sure she’d tell my brothers, I might have gone to her.

But I walked into Thea’s workshop. Maybe I came here knowing she’d tell me to call Andy and tell him yes. And now, I’d whittled down my reasons for saying no to a single roadblock.

“What about my brothers? If they don’t immediately pick up that I’m lying, they’ll flip if they find out.”

Thea rolled her eyes. “You give them too much credit, Nor. They’re your brothers, but they’re also men. They’re oblivious.”

“You think they’ll just accept that Andy and I have been seeing each other behind their back for the past year?”

She shrugged. “Probably. When was the last time either of them asked you about your love life?”

“Never,” I answered without hesitation. She had a point. Len hardly asked me any questions, period, and Cal and I kept our conversations to television shows and teasing.

“Exactly,” Thea smiled. “If they press you, just say they never asked, so you never offered any information. And Cal doesn’t have a leg to stand on, hooking up with Becca behind everyone’s back? Just tell him he set the example. I’ll vouch for you. If they start poking around your backstory, I’ll say I knew this entire time.”

She tossed her empty latte cup into the trash with a pleased smile.

“You just love knowing something they don’t,” I laughed. Thea’s confidence eased some of the tension in my chest.

“Absolutely. So, are you going to do it?”

I pulled my phone from my purse and opened Andy’s last message.

“I guess I’ll let you know after dinner.”



I spotted Andy’s black Porsche the moment it pulled onto Main Street. A shot of adrenaline iced my veins and I tamped it back down.

I had nothing to hide and, honestly, if I went through with this, his presence would be extra proof we were dating.

After talking with Thea, I made a giant list of pros and cons, then proceeded to lay on my bed and stare at the ceiling. For hours, my mind raced. None of it brought me any closer to an answer. At this point, I half-hoped Andy would pick me up and tell me he changed his mind, so I didn’t need to decide.

But when Andy emerged from the driver’s side, dressed in a suit with a colorful bouquet in his hand, I abandoned that lifesaver.

“You look nice,” I said.

I meant it. Andy always looked polished, even when he wore a tracksuit or a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. But in an actual suit, he shone. He wore my favorite suit tonight: a light blue jacket with a white button-up underneath and a dark blue pair

of pants. The combination made his eyes glow. My stomach tumbled as I accepted the flowers.

“Thanks. You look pretty gorgeous yourself.”

My cheeks burned. Liar. While he wore a designer suit, I had on a simple gray dress I picked up at a thrift store. I’d cut my hair short enough in the summer not to need to fuss with a fancy updo, clipping the sides back instead, and only using a small amount of makeup. I wasn’t sure how much would be considered overkill for a meeting about a marriage of convenience.

Rather than focus on clothes, I turned my attention to the flowers instead—purple freesias with white gardenias. I inhaled. “Thank you for the flowers and the compliment.”

He grinned and opened the passenger door for me. I slid into the sports car, setting the flowers on my lap as he rounded the car and slid into the driver’s seat.

“So, I thought in the spirit of discretion, we’d have dinner in Pierce.”

“This car isn’t exactly discreet,” I argued. “But that’s probably a good idea.”

Franklin Notch had a single restaurant: a small family-owned diner where everyone in town ate, especially on a Friday night. If Andy and I showed up together, Cal would get word before we sat down.

Pierce was only a twenty-minute drive from Franklin Notch, but the differences between the two towns were stark. Pierce had positioned itself as a tourist site well before the mills closed down decades earlier. Restaurants, bars, and kitschy shops dotted the oak-lined streets—each buzzing with year-round activities. Franklin Notch only attracted crowds when the cozy motels in Pierce were fully booked.

And unlike the single diner in Franklin Notch, Pierce had a variety of places to eat. Andy pulled up in front of the Commons, letting a valet park the car.

A former log mill, the interior of the Commons had been completely gutted, leaving exposed brick and giant oak beams



overhead. Black and white pictures dotted the entryway, showing the site's construction and how the building had looked in its former iteration. I paused at the photograph of a wave of logs floating down the river, dwarfing the immense building beside it while Andy spoke to the hostess.

"You want to see something else exciting?" Andy asked, sidling up beside me.

I nodded. He cupped my elbow, drawing me over to a plate-glass window on the floor. I peeked down at the river rushing below.

"That's both amazing and terrifying," I said as I stepped back from the glass floor.

"Stewart?" A hostess dressed in black interrupted us, holding two menus. "Right this way."

She weaved through the busy restaurant, setting the menus on a table in the back corner. "Enjoy your meal."

I flipped through the menu, blanching at the listed prices. Andy had said he'd pay, and unless I ordered water and a garden salad, I'd have to take him up on that offer.

"The prime rib is fantastic," he said, absently thumbing through the menu before setting it aside. "I was going to order wine. What do you like?"

I shrugged. "Boxed?"

He laughed. "I don't *think* they carry boxed wine here. Do you like red or white?"

"Red."

"Perfect."

My pulse raced while we waited for the server. The time to decide on Andy's offer drew closer with every breath, and I dreaded the question. When he finally arrived, Andy ordered a bottle of wine, two appetizers and the entrees before we were left alone.

"So..." I tugged at the corner of the white linen napkin in front of me, stalling for time.

Andy didn't look anxious at all. He seemed to be perfectly in his element: cool, collected, not a bead of sweat on him. He reached beside him and pulled out a black folder he'd carried in from the car, setting it down in front of me.

"What's this?" I asked, running a finger down the side.

"A business proposal."

I raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"You were right." He tented his fingers over his bread plate. "My offer last night was half-baked, and I didn't do a good job of laying out the terms and conditions. So, I spent last night working out my proposal. A proper proposal."

"A proper sort of marriage proposal?" I stifled a laugh.

He grinned. "A non-traditional marriage proposal. We'll save the down-on-one-knee proposal for an audience. Now, look it over. Tell me what you think."

## CHAPTER 5

*Andy*

MY HEART LODGED ITSELF FIRMLY IN MY THROAT AS NORA opened the folder.

I'd gone home the night before convinced that, not only had I completely blown my chances with Nora, but I'd also proven I was out of my mind—and that still might be true. Who in their right mind blurted out a spontaneous marriage proposal? Still, I fell asleep imagining how perfect the arrangement would be.

I hadn't lied when I told Nora a spouse would make my life easier. I had entire groups of angel investors, business partners, and a mentor who didn't want to just hand me the money and leave me alone.

They wanted to eat with me, vacation with me, and become friends, piggybacking off each other's success. For the most part, I didn't mind all the wining and dining. But having a spouse gave me an air of dependability and stability. I could beg off the frat bros who wanted to conduct meetings at strip clubs and VIP lounges. I could rely on Nora to charm my partners and their spouses.

My mentor had been hounding me to settle down for years. He insisted that having a family made him laser-focused, and it'd do the same for me. Of course, he'd gotten his first investment two years into dating his wife. I hadn't had more than a third date in years.

“So, the proposal is on the left and all the supplemental material is on the right,” I said as Nora tentatively opened the

folder. “The first page of the proposal is terms, timelines, followed by a calendar—all negotiable, of course.”

I slipped into business mode and my nervousness ebbed away as she flipped through the pages.

“You planned out the entire marriage? All four years?”

The tinge of awe in her voice urged me on.

“We could extend or retract that time frame. I’ve included clauses for early termination further in the proposal, but four years would get you through nursing school.”

She pulled out the course catalog I’d tucked into the supplemental folder. Her eyes widened, and her hands shook as she set it on the table beside her.

“The fall semester is already underway, but that’s great because I have a few business trips that might need your attendance. Besides, I talked to admissions, and they said a spring start wouldn’t stop you from graduating in four years. I didn’t have your academic records, but you can take some fast-track online prerequisite classes before the holidays if you want to get ahead.”

I couldn’t stop rambling, even as Nora stayed silent. Thankfully, the server returned with a bottle of wine and a basket of bread. I slathered a slice of bread with butter and chewed through the entire basket while she read. By the time the server returned with appetizers, Nora had finished reading the last page of the proposal.

“I kept something from you.”

I froze, unable to read her expression. “You kept something from me?”

Visions of a boyfriend, a girlfriend, or a friend with benefits ran through my mind. I quieted those thoughts with a deep sip of wine.

She bit her bottom lip. “When I said I needed healthcare, I actually need surgery.”

The flood of relief receded just as fast as it came. “Surgery?”

“I have an autoimmune thing. It’s not a big deal. Most of the time. But it affects my joints, and my wrist has been hurting for a while.” Her words faded as her cheeks grew red. “I knew I was supposed to keep up with my prescriptions, but they’re expensive and I was doing really well for a while.”

Of course she couldn’t afford her prescriptions. She could barely afford her apartment on the meager salary Gary offered. Anger and frustration coursed through me at the thought of her suffering through any amount of pain and having to decide between her health and a place to live.

“So, we need to get you to a doctor?”

“It’s really expensive,” she whispered, resting her hand on the folder. “Too expensive for the proposal.”

She wasn’t saying no. Quite the opposite, actually.

“It’s not,” I assured her quickly. “Not at all. I’ll make some calls tomorrow, find a surgeon and whatever specialist you need.”

Hell, I’d send a message to my assistant tonight. Hopefully I’d have her back on her medicine before we even signed the marriage certificate.

She inhaled, her chest rising and her body straightening. “Okay,” she breathed, her brown eyes resting on the folder.

“Okay?”

“Okay, let’s do it.”

“Really?”

“Are you changing your mind?” she asked, shocked eyes locking with mine.

“No.” I shook my head. “No, not at all, but I just thought you’d want to negotiate more.”

“What’s there to negotiate? This is very...” She flipped the stack of pages, shaking her head. “Thorough. And generous. I didn’t expect an allowance.”

“So, there’s nothing you want to add?”

The edge of her lip hitched up. “I’m sure I’ll come up with something, but it’s not like we’re signing this, right?”

“No,” I admitted. “In fact, it’s probably better if I toss that.”

“It’d really screw up our marriage if anyone saw the business proposal.” Her eyes lit up, and she scooped up her wine glass, sipping it delicately. “I want to keep it for now, though. Just to read it over again.”

“Sure, it’s yours.”

She drained her glass. I refilled it, gesturing for the waiter to bring us a second bottle.

“So, what do you think about the wedding date?” I asked. “We could move it up if you need the surgery quicker.”

Nora frowned. “No, it’s not urgent, but...”

She trailed off, rotating her wrist and wincing at the pain.

“But it hurts?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s perfect,” I said, wincing as soon as the words were out of my mouth. “Well, not perfect, obviously, but it’ll explain why we’re in such a rush.”

She placed the course catalog back in its pocket and flipped to the third bookmarked section of the proposal. “So, we get married next month?”

“Right.” I leaned across the table, pointing out the highlighted dates just a week away. “If you could come to this event as my fiancé, that’d be great, but afterward, I have some downtime. We could schedule your surgery there, so I’d be around to help you.”

I sat back in my seat self-consciously as her cheeks turned pink.

“You don’t need to do that. The surgery isn’t a big deal, and I don’t want to put you out.”

I shrugged. “You’ll be in my house and I’ll be around. It’s not putting me out at all. We’re in this together, Nora.”

She gave me a guarded smile—the smile of someone not entirely convinced we *were* in this together. And I supposed she was right. As much as I wanted to be in this with her, right now, this relationship had more to do with convenience. For one of us, anyway.

“So, when do we announce our engagement?” I asked, tearing my eyes away from Nora and fixing them on the calendar.

“To my family? Next Sunday, at family dinner. Bunny and Millie will be there.” She didn’t look entirely convinced, twisting the corner of her napkin again.

“You think that’s a good idea? Telling them all together?”

She bit her bottom lip. “I think so. Cal and Len will know I’m lying if it’s just us, and Millie and Bunny will be so excited, my brothers won’t have a chance to ask questions.”

“Smart. Okay, next Sunday it is.”

With the decision made, Nora loosened up as we ate, peppering me with questions about the trips on the calendar, who’d be there and what they were like. She’d nail being my soft-spoken but engaging wife, and I’d try not to let it bother me that our relationship was a farce.

Because being married to Nora gave me time.



By the time we drove back onto Main Street, all the businesses had closed for the night and the streets sat empty. I pulled into an open parking spot.

“I’ll walk you to your door,” I said, interrupting Nora’s attempt to wave goodbye and flee.

“You don’t have to—”

“I want to. Besides, it’ll just take a second.”



Nora clutched the flowers and the folder in her left hand, standing on the sidewalk and waiting for me to round the car.

“You’re going to have to get used to being seen with me,” I joked.

“Well, in that case, we probably should have timed coming back to town earlier, so we would run into someone.”

“Next time.”

“Nora? Is that you?” A high-pitched whimper followed the question.

I turned around to find an older lady hustling down the street, led by a small whippet standing on two legs in an attempt to reach Nora first.

“Hey, Tammy.” Nora waved.

“Who’s that with you? Did you go on a date?” Tammy shuffled down the street.

Nora’s chest bloomed red and she ducked her head. “This is Andy Stewart.”

The whimpering dog reached us first. It launched itself into Nora’s knees, licking her outstretched fingers and wrapping the leash around her knees.

Nora laughed as she leaned down to pet the dog. “Andy, meet Tammy and Mags.”

Tammy eyed me warily. “Pleasure. So, what are you all doing up so late?”

I’d largely stayed isolated from the small town gossip of Franklin Notch. Despite growing up in the town, my parents sent me to Pierce for school, and my mom fled back to Connecticut any chance she got; once my father passed, she was gone for good.

With my business keeping me busy in Pierce and beyond, I kept the local politics at a distance, but marrying Nora would undoubtedly change that. My family name might be a historical footnote, but Nora’s family was woven deep into the fabric of the community.

“Dinner,” Nora choked out the word, the splotch of red on her chest rising up her neck.

I wrapped an arm around Nora’s waist. “Just walking her to her door.”

I shot Tammy my best smile, one that was both reassuring and imbued with confidence.

Tammy’s eyes narrowed, working from my hand around Nora’s waist to me and back to Nora. She hummed deeply, her jaw twitching. “Well, have a pleasant night then.”

After a moment spent untangling Mags from Nora, Tammy moseyed down Main Street. She paused at the next storefront, admiring the display that’d probably been there for months.

“You should probably walk me inside,” Nora whispered as I dropped my arm from her waist.

I nodded and followed her into the tiny lobby up to her second-story apartment. At her door, I glanced back at the plate glass door. “Do you think she’s going to turn around?”

“Yes,” Nora laughed. “She’s probably waiting to spread the news that I brought a man back to my apartment until she knows whether you’re staying the night.”

I cut my eyes to the door, and sure enough, Mags pranced at the base.

“Well, spending the night seems like overkill, but maybe we should plant the seed we’re in a relationship.” I squared up to Nora as she fished her keys out of her purse.

She pulled them out, a bemused smile on her face. “Plant the seed?”

“Give them something to gossip about since we’ll be engaged next weekend.” I lowered my voice, aware that I’d have taken any excuse to kiss Nora. This just happened to be the perfect opportunity.

“Do you think we should?” Her eyes flitted down the stairs.

“Up to you,” I feigned nonchalance, even as my pulse quickened and the narrow corridor into her apartment closed around us.

She pursed her lips. “We will have to kiss, right?”

I shrugged. “It’ll look a little weird if we don’t.”

“Okay,” she whispered, more to herself. “Okay.” She nodded, her honey brown eyes shining up at me.

I took a half-step closer, running my fingers down her arm, and wrapped my other hand around her waist, pulling her flush against me. She sucked in a breath.

I’d dreamed about kissing Nora since the minute we met. Hell, I’d spent entire Chamber of Commerce meetings completely distracted by the thought, and I didn’t want to waste this opportunity. I didn’t want to rush it, either. I tilted my head down, brushing the tip of my nose against hers.

“Do you think she’s watching?” I murmured before brushing my lips over her cheek.

Nora practically hummed in my arms, pressing her palm against my chest. She nodded.

“Do you think we can convince her?”

Nora nodded again, softening against me. Her lips tipped up, searching for mine. I swiped my thumb over them before cradling her head in one hand and dipping my lips to meet hers. She tasted like red wine and chocolate cake, and I wanted nothing more than to slip my tongue into her mouth and taste more of her.

I tamped down that desire, settling instead on sinking into her plush lips, moving my hand from her jaw back and wrapping her inky black hair around my fingers. With a nip at her bottom lip, I reluctantly pulled myself away, satisfied that Tammy had gotten a show, even if I would have preferred to linger longer.

Judging by Nora’s still-closed eyes, I wasn’t the only one who wanted more. The thought sent chills down my spine.

“Goodnight, Nora,” I whispered.

Her eyes popped open, red staining her cheeks.  
“Goodnight, Andy.”

## CHAPTER 6

## *Nora*

ANDY

Spoke to my insurance company. Make an appointment with the surgeon now and I'll get you on my policy the day we're married.

BUNNY

Tammy's running her mouth, claiming you were making out with the Stewart boy last night. Call me.

THEA

Based on Bunny barging into my shop this morning, I'm guessing you said yes?

THE KISS ON MY DOORSTEP HAD WORKED BETTER THAN EITHER of us could have imagined, which would have been great news if that kiss hadn't rattled me as much as the rest of the town.

After shakily making my way into my apartment, I'd had Becca's number keyed into my phone before I could stop myself. I couldn't exactly call my best friend and gush about what an amazing date I'd just been on because I hadn't been on a date. I'd been on a business dinner.

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks when I woke up to a wall of texts not-so-subtly asking for confirmation of what Tammy had witnessed. The questions left me sick to my stomach. I turned off my phone without reading them all.

Somehow, in the daze of a well-put-together business plan and a dinner with a man who made my nerves flutter and my heart skip a beat, I'd lost sight of that fact.

I didn't dare turn my phone back on, and since I lived on Main Street, just stepping outside might expose me to someone I knew. Someone who had already heard the rumors. Someone who had a million questions I wasn't prepared to answer.

I donned an oversized hoodie and a pair of jeans, exiting my apartment on the opposite side of Main Street, into a parking lot facing a small row of businesses. The limited foot traffic on this side of the building gave me a fighting chance at going unnoticed. I slipped past Lexi and Cornbread chatting on the porch of the tattoo shop and into the back entrance of Thea's shop, where the excess knick-knacks and newest rolls of fabric lived until they'd been inventoried and stored.

I skittered along the shop's outside wall, staying out of sight of Mrs. Evans and anyone else browsing inside. Quietly, I made my way to the door of Thea's workshop and knocked softly.

"Yes?" Thea called as I pushed the door open. Her mouth split into a wide smile, eyes sparkling as I entered. "Nora, what are you doing here? Don't you have a wedding to plan?"

I groaned, entering the room and lying on the red velvet couch beside a three-sided mirror, dramatically throwing a hand over my eyes. "What did I just do?"

Thea stood from her desk, her black kitten heels clicking dully across the thin white carpet. She sat beside me, rubbing my leg. "I'm guessing the dinner went well? Tammy has been telling anyone who'll listen about you and Andy getting hot and heavy at your door."

I groaned again.

"Hey, don't get too upset. She also said he left not long after your make-out sesh."

I pulled my arm off my face and frowned at Thea. "He had a business proposal."

Her grin didn't waver, and her eyebrow quirked up. "Romantic."

"It wasn't *not* romantic." I shoved my hand into the pocket at my stomach and pulled out the stack of folded papers out, handing it off.

Thea unfolded them and stood, walking to her desk to grab her glasses. She set the papers on the desk, tilting her head as she flipped through them.

"He did all this?" she asked as she reached the last page.

I nodded. "He even spoke to an admissions counselor."

I pushed myself off the couch and rounded the desk to stand next to Thea, looking over her shoulder at the calendar he'd prepared. Thea ran her hand over the highlighted portion.

"New York, Las Vegas, is that Paris? You're going to be a world traveler, Nor."

"I only have to join him for the trips highlighted in yellow," I said. "Since I might be in school next semester."

"Why would you opt out of these? It's not like Andy is traveling in coach and staying at shitty motels. You're going to be flying in style. Business class, at least."

After the deluge of texts that morning, Thea's enthusiasm didn't rub off on me like it had before. The only dates I focused on were each Sunday Andy wouldn't be traveling, and we'd be obligated to go to Len's cabin on the mountain for family dinner.

"I can't do this," I admitted, sucking in a breath. "I need to call him and back out."

I fumbled for my phone, pulling it out with shaky fingers. I winced as it restarted, all the texts and missed calls cluttering my screen. Thea plucked it from my hand.

"Calm down," she said. She took my elbow and walked me back to the couch. She sat me down as my vision narrowed and the edges went black. "You're panicking."



Her words sounded hollow and far away. Of course I was panicking. How could I not? I'd told a virtual stranger I'd marry him and, if I went through with it, I'd have to lie to my family for years.

*Years.*

"I need to call Len. I made a mistake. I'll just let him bail me out again. What was I thinking?"

Thea rubbed my back, her fingers warm as she kneaded my spine. "You were thinking this was a mutually beneficial arrangement, and you were sick of having your well-intentioned but dick-ish older brother treat you like a child."

I grabbed my phone from her lap. "True. Very true, but I can't do this. I can't keep it up for a week, let alone four years."

"Fine," Thea conceded. "But call Andy first."

Right, Andy.

He'd be disappointed. Based on the sheer amount of work he'd done, he arguably wanted this arrangement more than me, and I couldn't just ghost him when half the town knew we'd made out on my doorstep the night before.

I opened his last text message and pressed the call button. He answered on the second ring.

"Hey, I was just about to try you again." His voice echoed, like I'd caught him in the car. "Guess you heard."

"Heard?" I repeated. "About Tammy blabbing all over town? Yeah."

"No, from your brothers."

"No? Why would I?"

"I didn't want to step out of line, but I ran into Cal and made an executive decision."

"What do you mean 'executive decision?'"

Thea perked up, back straight and eyes wide.

“Well,” Andy’s voice faltered, the momentary pause stretching out for what felt like an eternity. “Cal cornered me at the store, asking about last night.”

I groaned. “You couldn’t lie low until Sunday?”

“I didn’t know I had to.”

“You live in Franklin Notch. You should *know* this stuff.”

I immediately regretted the mild reprimand. Of course Andy didn’t know any of this. He went to school in Pierce, and worked in Pierce. His family wasn’t so much a part of the community as they were a pillar of the community. People like the Stewarts didn’t hang out with townies.

“What happened?” I rubbed my forehead, closing my eyes.

“He was pretty pissed, to be honest, but I talked him down.”

“How’d you talk him down?” I asked. My heart galloped in my chest; it still felt like I couldn’t catch my breath.

“I said I wanted to talk to him and Len, just us guys.”

I winced, sucking in a breath and doubling over. “Please tell me you just talked about us going to dinner.”

The long silence that followed confirmed that he had not just talked about dinner. I glanced at Thea, panicked.

“I sent you a text and then called, but you didn’t answer and it was too late to back out. I had to tell them something.”

“What’d you tell them?”

“I told them I proposed and asked for their blessing.”

“No,” I said with a sharp inhale.

“What?”

“Why did you do that?” The walls closed in around me, even as I acknowledged I had gotten myself into the mess.

“What was my alternative?”

“Dive behind the produce when you spotted Cal?” I offered weakly.

“Maybe I should have spent the night at your house,” Andy laughed.

“Had I known you couldn’t be trusted walking around town, I would have kept you in my apartment until Sunday.”

“Next time.”

And there would be a next time. The dawning realization that I couldn’t walk this back quite as easily as I hoped quickened my breath.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow, then? Three? Bunny wants us to come a little early.”

“You talked to Bunny too?” I groaned.

“She saw my car in the driveway. That one wasn’t my fault.” Andy’s voice stayed lighthearted, joking even. His straightforward manner tamed the panic that threatened to overtake me as I pivoted for the millionth time that week.

“You shouldn’t have been up there. Not without me, anyway. But...” I pursed my lips. “What did they say?”

I cringed at how needy I sounded, and although I’d be calling all of them that night, I wanted to hear Andy’s version of their conversation.

“Cal swore a bunch. Len did too, but he also said he’d murder me if I hurt you, and Bunny cried. Happy crying, but a lot of crying.”

I held back tears. “Did she?”

“She was thrilled. Not Cal, though, or Len. They might hurt me.”

Andy’s voice didn’t hold any of the same tension as mine, which weirdly ebbed away my own anxiety. I leaned into the back of the couch, taking a long breath. “It was a brave move, seeing them on your own.”

“Well, I figured you’d protect me, being your fiancé and all.”

I swallowed the lump blocking my throat.

*Your fiancé.*

Andy had unwittingly taken away any shot I had at backing out.

“Speaking of lying low, you probably should avoid Millie and Bunny until tomorrow. They want to see the ring.”

Reflexively, I touched my left ring finger. “Right. I can probably dig something up. I’m at Thea’s. Maybe there’s something here I can use for an engagement ring.”

“No,” Andy interrupted me. “I’ve got one. I was going to come by with it tonight, but I had something come up at the site in Manchester. I’ll give it to you tomorrow when I pick you up for dinner.”

Of course he had a ring. The guy had a fifteen-page business proposal, a course catalog, and a color-coded calendar. He’d braved traveling up Len’s mountain to ask for my brother’s blessing. A ring was a logical extension of that level of planning.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

I hung up. An awkward mix of emotions, including a strange excitement and a gut-wrenching nervousness, left me frowning at the phone.

“So, I’m guessing the fake marriage isn’t called off?”

I closed my eyes with a groan. “Want to be our witness?”

## CHAPTER 7

*Andy*

I PULLED INTO A PARKING SPACE IN FRONT OF NORA'S apartment. With the news of our engagement sweeping Franklin Notch, I didn't see any point in sneaking around. In fact, it would probably be better for us to be seen around town together.

I hadn't expected to run into Cal, and I certainly hadn't anticipated him having any clue what happened with Nora the night before. But the moment he locked eyes with me in the grocery store, his face crumpled into a glare, and I knew I had underestimated Franklin Notch's rumor mill.

I'd walked out of Len's mountainside home on my own instead of being carried on a stretcher, thanks to Bunny and Millie. Considering the circumstances, I counted that as a win. Especially since no one had time to question how Nora and I had gone from virtual strangers to engaged.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I paused halfway up as Nora walked out of her apartment. She wore a forest green, oversized sweater over a pair of black leggings that clung to her body and, from my vantage on the stairs, gave me a view of the soft curve of her ass. Probably not what I should have been observing, given our business arrangement, but I couldn't help myself.

"Hey," I greeted her, eliciting a yelp of surprise before she turned.

"Hey, you didn't tell me you were here." She slotted the key into the upper lock with her right hand, grimacing slightly

before using the other hand to turn the key.

“Is it the right wrist?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She shrugged, her lips twisting into a frown. She pushed back a lock of black hair behind her ear. “It’s not that bad.”

“Bad enough for surgery.”

“Good point,” she admitted.

I followed her down the stairs and around back to the parking lot. The normal foot traffic on Main Street slowed to a crawl on Sundays. With the coffee shop only open a few hours in the morning and the diner and bar closed, most people spent the day at home.

“Did you get bombarded last night?” I asked when we pulled out of the parking lot.

I’d quickly realized that my plan, while more than adequate for the weeks and months ahead, hadn’t addressed the information we’d need in these first few days. With a marriage proposal came questions; I’d stumbled through yesterday, trying to say as little as possible.

Of course, I’d benefited from being a stranger to the family.

Nora, not so much.

The panic in her voice when I’d told her I met with her brothers had been obvious. I’d spent the entire day in Manchester worried about her, feeling like I’d abandoned her.

Nora’s knee bounced against the car door and her eyes scanned the car’s interior, flitting from the sun visor to the gearshift to the window and back again. “I camped out at Thea’s house for the night, so I didn’t have to see anyone. What exactly did Bunny say to you?”

I kept my voice steady and assured, even though I’d worried more about Bunny’s reaction than Nora’s brothers. “She had a lot of questions. Questions I couldn’t answer. Thankfully, Cal came outside to tear into me some more, so I didn’t have to answer most of them.”

Nora pursed her lips. “Like what?”

“How long we’ve been dating. How I proposed. Where we’d been meeting. How we kept it a secret for so long.” I listed them easily, skipping the more personal questions she asked, like when we planned to have kids.

“What did you tell her?”

“I kept my answers to what we’d already agreed on: we started seeing each other after the Highland Games. I proposed at the Commons. We mostly met in Pierce or further afield.”

“You didn’t mention the surgery?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t have a chance before Cal interrupted us.”

“What did you tell my brothers?” she asked, her voice growing more frantic the further away from town we drove.

“I told them I’d asked you to marry me, but I wanted their blessing; I got ahead of myself and realized we should have told them sooner but we’re in love and things just escalated.”

Nora practically vibrated in the passenger seat. She sucked in a deep breath, holding it in for an impossibly long time before simply nodding. I pulled off the main highway and onto the dirt road Len called a driveway. Parking the car, I turned to face Nora.

“Hey.” I reached across the car and set my palm on her arm. “Take a breath. Calm down.”

“I *am* calm,” she snapped, her body tensing.

I withdrew my hand. “Right. Sorry. Just, we need to go in there like a couple. Like two people who are excited to be engaged. Two people who actually *like* each other.”

She deflated against the side of the car. “I do like you, Andy.”

Despite being the bare minimum requirement of pulling this sham marriage off, I couldn’t help but smile. At least she liked me.

“You trust me?”



She sighed, a hint of a grin pulling at her lip. “I wouldn’t do this otherwise.”

“Good.” I risked reaching my hand out again. This time, Nora peeled herself off the side of the car and listed toward me. I wrapped an arm around her. She relaxed her head onto my shoulder, breathing in and out softly.

“This’ll be the hardest part,” I promised her, hoping I was right. “We’ll do it together. You and me.”

“You and me,” she repeated, taking a deep breath and picking her head up again. “Let’s get it over with.”

“Wait.” I fumbled in my pocket, finding the blue velvet box I’d pulled out of my safe earlier that morning. I’d sat on the floor, watching the light hit the ring that’d been in my family for the last three generations—a ring I’d wanted to place on Nora’s finger under completely different circumstances.

“Is that the ring?” Nora asked, taking the box.

She opened it and sucked in a breath.

“I’ll buy you something new, if you want. If that’s not your style.” I reached for the ring, a sudden surge of regret taking hold.

She pulled the box away. “No. I love it. It’s gorgeous. Where did you get this?”

“It’s a family heirloom. Although, my mom got a second engagement ring after wearing this one for a year. She didn’t like the emerald.”

Nora drew her finger over the center stone and down the diamonds flanking it. “Why?”

I shrugged. “She wanted a bigger diamond. She didn’t like the stone; she called it a trash gem.” Her eyes bugged, and I laughed. “Trust me, you’ll understand when you meet her, but let’s not worry about that now.”

While the news of our engagement had made its way around Franklin Notch, that information hadn’t trickled down to my mom yet, and hopefully wouldn’t anytime soon. My dad

had been our family's link to the community and Mom left that all behind the moment she moved to Connecticut. I'd have to tell her, but I didn't see any point in rushing that phone call.

I plucked the ring from the box and took Nora's left hand. Her breath shuddered as I ran my thumb over her knuckles and, for a heartbeat, I imagined my touch was the reason. I slipped the ring onto her finger, the band easily sliding over her knuckles with room to spare, and when I let go, the emerald dropped loosely onto her palm.

"We'll get it resized tomorrow," I said, feeling ridiculous for assuming the ring would fit.

She shifted the stones back in place, smiling at the sparkling gems. "It's so pretty, Andy. I promise I'll be careful with it."

My chest warmed at the sincerity in her voice. My mom wouldn't care either way, but I liked that she cared as much as I did about the heirloom.

"Oh, I think I have bandage tape!" She said, pulling her hand away from mine. She withdrew a roll of tan tape from her purse and pulled off the ring, wrapping a piece around the bottom of the band until it fit firmly over her finger. "Perfect."

"We'll bring it to the jeweler's tomorrow," I said with a laugh, pushing back the strange tightening around my chest at the word "we." "Are you ready?"

Nora nodded. I put the car back in drive and navigated up the rest of the steep driveway to Len's house.

Bunny had summoned us before dinner to talk privately, but Cal's truck was parked in the driveway. Bunny stood on Len's porch, her fingers wrapped around the banister as she waited for us to arrive.

I parked my car beside Cal's and stepped out. Despite her age, Bunny nearly skipped off the porch, yanking open Nora's car door and wrapping her in a hug as soon as her feet touched the ground.

"Why didn't you tell me? Warn me, at least?" Happy tears rolled down Bunny's face, smearing her orange-tinted makeup.

Nora pulled away, smiling so brightly that, for a moment, she even fooled me. “I’m getting married, and I want you to be the first to congratulate me.”

“Marriage is something to rush to?” Bunny responded, a pat response that didn’t fit the conversation but made them both melt into each other. “Congratulations.” I rounded the car, and Bunny pulled me into a shockingly fierce hug. “Both of you. Now, why am I just hearing about this?”

“We were planning on telling everyone today,” Nora said.

“Unfortunately, Tammy beat us to it and spread the word,” I added.

“I should be furious at you for keeping this a secret, but how can I stay mad at my baby and the man she loves?”

I allowed myself to melt into the hug and bask in the excitement exuding off Bunny, knowing it wouldn’t last after we walked inside. Bunny pulled away much too soon, eager to see Nora’s ring, and I glanced back at the porch, finding Cal standing in the doorway glaring at me.

I gave him a placating smile he didn’t return so I rummaged a six-pack of beer I’d bought as a peace treaty out of the back seat. Too little, but with only a day to prepare, I hadn’t had time to spring for something big. Mustering my courage, I left behind the safe haven of Bunny and walked onto the porch.

“Andy,” Cal greeted me coolly.

“Hey, Cal. Thought this might go better if we all had a drink.” The joke fell flat as Cal grabbed the six-pack out of my hand.

“This isn’t going to go well,” he muttered, stalking into the house.

Guessing I wouldn’t get an invitation, I took a deep breath and followed him in, hoping Len had softened overnight.

“Andy!” Millie said from the kitchen, setting down her chef’s knife to greet me at the door with a hug. “I’m so glad you came! Where’s Nora?”

I motioned to the driveway. “With Bunny.”

Her eyes flitted outside. “Oh well, she’ll be in soon, I’m sure. You don’t have any food allergies, right? Cal said you didn’t.”

“I said I didn’t *care* if he had food allergies.” Cal set the six-pack on the kitchen island, withdrawing a bottle and popping the top open on the counter.

“Seriously, Cal?” Millie gave him a good-natured smack on the arm before returning her attention to me. “That’s the thing about this family. They’re all a little prickly at first. Except for Nora, of course.”

“Well, don’t worry. I don’t have any allergies.”

“Shame,” Cal grumbled. “That would have made things easier.”

Millie rolled her eyes, distracted from Cal’s petulance as Nora walked in. “Oh, I want to see the ring!”

Len slipped into the room while Bunny and Millie oohed and aahed over the ring. With everyone here, Millie slid dinner into the oven early, which shortened the time we needed to field questions. Explaining how we’d managed to hide an entire relationship for over a year, without anyone in Franklin Notch suspecting a thing, turned out to be a harder sell than I expected.

Thankfully, we cobbled together a passable story and before long, Millie announced dinner was ready, directing us to the table. Bunny sat Nora and me at the center of the table. Despite how appetizing the food looked, as soon as Millie passed around the first dish, it was clear we wouldn’t be left alone to enjoy it.

“So, not to get ahead of myself, but I started a guest list and made a few calls to the different venues.” Bunny unfurled a stack of papers, setting them at the center of the table with a pleased smile. Nora brushed my shoulder with hers, an amused smile on her lips. At least Bunny and I had something in common. “Since you always said you’d want a spring wedding, I thought I’d get a jump on calling places. After

seven weddings, I know a thing or two about planning,” Bunny said, shooting me a sly wink.

Nora lowered her fork. “We’re actually not having a spring wedding,” she said with a grimace.

“Oh, did you want a winter? Fall?”

Nora shook her head. “Um, we actually aren’t doing any of that. We’re going to the courthouse next week.”

A shocked silence enveloped the table, myself included.

“That’s fucking insane,” Len said, glowering from the head of the table at Nora, then me.

Millie set a hand over his, giving his knuckles an absent-minded squeeze. “What he means is: that’s awful fast, considering we just found out you’re dating.”

Len turned his palm up and glanced at Millie. “You really think I should soften this?”

“Since Andy’s going to be part of your family, yeah, I think you should soften on this,” Millie said pragmatically.

“That’s fine,” Bunny said, her voice at the precipice of tears. “That’s completely fine. We can arrange a wedding in a week.”

“We’re just going to elope. Nothing fancy,” Nora added softly.

I reached under the table, squeezing her hand.

“We can wait,” I muttered.

Nora shook her head. “No. Next week, Wednesday.” She didn’t have to add, “so we can get this over with.” Her tone implied it so completely that I scanned the table, gauging her family’s reaction. Other than a worried look between Millie and Bunny, there was nothing.

“Well, we’re invited, right?” Millie asked, her eyes swinging between Bunny and Nora nervously.

“We’d love for all of you to come, of course,” I interjected quickly before Nora torpedoed that, too. I turned toward

Bunny. “And we would appreciate any help you can give us.”

Bunny settled, but Nora stayed tense. I squeezed her hand, rubbing my thumb down the side of her hand.

“Something’s not right,” Cal said, his gaze trained on Nora.

She froze, mouth open and body tense. A deer in the headlights. I racked my brain for an excuse for the sudden nuptials.

“Nora needs surgery.” The words raced out of my mouth before I could stop them. Nora’s hand clenched around mine, nearly dragging me out of my seat. “We’re pushing up the wedding to get her on my insurance.”

Len pitched forward, face stern. “I can pay for your surgery, Nora.”

“You don’t need to,” I interjected. “I’d already proposed, and there’s no reason to wait.”

I said a silent thanks to Millie as she interjected. “What surgery, exactly? Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine.” Nora released her death grip on my hand, suddenly spurred to life. “It’s nothing, just my wrist, but if I don’t get it treated...”

“Right,” Len said tersely, eyes skirting to Cal.

He shrugged. “I told you to keep her on your insurance.”

“I’m right here.” Nora scowled at her brothers, her voice suddenly as sharp as knives. I watched her in surprise. “This is exactly why I didn’t tell you about Andy, or the surgery. Because I knew you’d treat me like I wasn’t here. This wedding is happening, just like the surgery. Show up or don’t.” In an unexpected flood of fury, Nora stood from her seat. “Thanks for dinner, Millie. We have a wedding to plan.”

I scrambled to stand as she pushed her seat back, aiming herself toward the door.

“Hold up. Everybody.” Bunny set her palm on the table, her voice so imposing that I instinctively sank back into my

chair. “This has gone far enough. Cal, Len, apologize to your sister.”

They glanced at each other, silently daring the other to buck against Bunny’s edict.

“Sorry, Nora,” Len ground out.

“Yeah. Same,” Cal said.

“As for you, Nora, we’re going to this wedding. You want to get married tomorrow? We’re there. At midnight? We’re showing up. On a boat in the middle of the ocean? We’re standing right beside you. Now, granted, this was a little sudden and we’re all still,” she paused, pursing her bright pink lips. “Adjusting. But if you love Andy, then we’ll love Andy. All of us.”

She shot a pointed look at Cal, who shrugged. “Fine.”

“Now, what can we do?”

## CHAPTER 8



## *Nora*

I STOPPED FUSSING WITH MY HAIR AT THE SOUND OF A KNOCK on my door.

“Good morning,” Andy greeted me with a coffee and a smile as I opened the front door to my apartment.

I gave him a lopsided grin in return. I’d half-expected him to call off the marriage after dinner at Len’s. But the fact that he dutifully showed up on my doorstep the day after was proof he planned to stay in this fake marriage for the long haul.

Or, at least, for the next four years.

“You didn’t need to pick up coffee,” I said, gratefully taking the offered cup and stepping aside so he could come in. “Sorry, I took Mags for a walk and lost track of time. Just give me three minutes.”

I left Andy in my living room and raced into my bedroom to finish my hair. Not that I could do much with the short locks, but if I didn’t at least try to tame them with a dryer brush, I’d spend the day looking like a wet poodle.

“Take your time. You have all your paperwork, right?”

I finished my hair and brushed by Andy on my way to the kitchen. Bunny had packaged my birth certificate, passport, and social security card in a manila folder with my name on it. I held it up. “Yep.”

“Good.” Andy shot me a sideways grin that went straight to my belly. “And the ring?”

I touched it with my thumb. I hadn't taken it off since he'd given it to me. Part of me didn't trust myself not to accidentally lose it. The other part liked it too much to take it off.

I held up my hand. "That, too."

His mouth twitched and his eyes lightened before he scrubbed a hand through his hair. "You ready?"

I nodded, gathering my things and following him out the door.

While Bunny had mended the fences she could the night before, the car ride back to my apartment had been in awkward silence. Maybe the reality of what we'd agreed to was finally sinking in, but I'd slept fitfully, wondering whether he'd change his mind.

But Andy stayed reliable, as always. If the sudden public interest in our engagement bothered him, he didn't let it show. Maybe he didn't mind the attention, or perhaps he truly was unbothered by the way our plan had rapidly spiraled out of control and away from the business proposal that started it all.

"Do you want to walk down to City Hall?" he asked, offering me his hand at the bottom of the stairs.

For appearances' sake. Probably.

I nodded, taking his hand.

"I said I wouldn't believe it unless I saw it with my own eyes! And sure enough, you're here!" Jess's excited squeal raised a few eyebrows from the other clerks in City Hall, but she ignored them. She stood, rounding her desk and wrapping me in a hug. "How did you keep this a secret?"

She eyed Andy up and down in blatant appreciation. I pushed away a jab of possessiveness as a one-off feeling; it was likely the result of being watched like an animal in a cage for the past two days.

"Well, I know why," Jess answered her own question with a wink in Andy's direction. "How's Cal taking it?"

"He's coming around," Andy said genially.

“Bunny told him to get it together. Besides, he’s got a full plate between the garage and traveling to Virginia to see Becca. He can’t stay mad at me for long,” I said, hoping it was true.

Andy wrapped an arm around my waist, and Jess melted at the sight of us. I rested my head on his shoulder. This could work. This would work. The town wanted to believe we were together, and I could fake it. For a while, at least. Until a new morsel of gossip made its way through the tiny mountain town and steered everyone’s attention somewhere new.

“We’re actually here to get the marriage certificate,” I said, holding up the manila folder.

“Of course. I’m just rambling, and you two want to get this license. Are you getting married today?”

“We can do that?” I asked, turning to Andy questioningly.

He shook his head. “Absolutely not. Bunny would kill us.”

“Is Bunny planning the wedding?” Jess ribbed me. “I bet it’ll be quite the celebration. When should I expect an invitation?”

“Are you free Wednesday?” I asked, smiling at Andy.

Her face paled. “This Wednesday? Wow, Nora, we better get this license issued. You must be swamped.”

Jess hurried us through the paperwork, notarizing and copying forms before whisking us back to the entrance with a promise to officiate if we needed. I thanked her and hustled Andy out of City Hall, hoping we could make it back to his car without another delay.

“This town is too small,” I muttered.

“Is this a new discovery?”

I rolled my eyes, my lips easing into a smile. “No, but I’m not usually the center of attention.”

“That’s not true,” he said gently, dipping his head in a greeting as Mr. Linden shuffled past us.

“You think this is normal for me?” I bristled slightly.

Andy held up his hands. “No, but of course you’re the center of attention around here. People flock to you, like moths to a flame.”

“I’m just a sideshow.” I winced at my assessment.

“That’s also not true.” Andy’s hand found its way to my elbow, pulling me under the awning of the coffee shop. He ducked his head, so I had to look him in the eyes. My breath caught as he traced his hand down my arm and held my hand. “This town is crazy about you, just like I—”

The door to the coffee shop slammed into Andy, the small bell above the door tinkling as it smacked the small of his back.

“Sorry. I didn’t see you standing there,” Tammy said. “I’m glad you are, though. Nora, can you take Mags for a quick walk?”

“Moths to a flame,” he murmured under his breath.



I didn’t remember much about my life before Bunny. I was barely out of diapers when my mom fled town and had only just graduated from third grade when my dad went to jail. The only memory I carried was a smell.

Stale cigarettes.

I’d never taken up smoking. The scent brought back a rush of bad feelings that I could never quite attach to a memory. But, on the morning of my wedding, for the first time in my life, I wished I had a cigarette.

With seven marriages under her belt, I shouldn’t have doubted Bunny’s ability to whip up something special. Sure, it wasn’t in Las Vegas (wedding number four) or on top of Mount Pierce (wedding number seven). She hadn’t secured a sixteen-piece jazz band (wedding number two) or lined the aisle with calla lilies in the dead of winter (wedding number one). However, in only a few days, she had slapped together a wedding worth remembering.

And I felt absolutely sick about it.

“They’re going to know,” I said, twisting the delicate lace on the dress Thea had made me.

A simple sheath dress with an open back and details so intricate I was certain Thea had spent the entire week sewing it for me.

*For me.*

“There are too many people,” I said, looking out over the square, counting the guests to my wedding. At least fifty. “I can’t keep this up.”

Thea stood from the small, dingy loveseat in my apartment living room. My *former* apartment. Despite Andy insisting he’d pay out the lease, Bunny jollied the rental manager into cutting it short instead. I had until the end of the week to clear out the apartment and, so far, I had packed... nothing.

Thea brushed the lace out of my hand and rubbed my exposed back. “It’s going to be fine. You’re going on some fancy business getaway this week and you’ve got surgery next week. Freak out about those things. This? This is just a party.”

Outside, people I’d known since birth milled about, decorating the gazebo in the middle of the green and moving tables and chairs. I could make out Bunny’s bleached blonde hair under the gazebo, directing a gaggle of guests dressed in their Wednesday best muscling chairs out of the bar. Tammy carried cupcakes and treats from the coffee shop. Even Becca had flown up last minute, determined to see me wed.

“They all think it’s real,” I muttered.

“Of course it’s real, Nor. You’re signing paperwork.”

“Oh, no.” My heartbeat raced as Becca looked up at my apartment with a wave and a questioning look.

*Do you need me?*

I pulled away from the window. “Why don’t you get out there? Before someone else comes up. Just say... I don’t know. Tell them I need a couple of minutes to myself.”

With my makeup and hair done, I had nothing to do but panic about the car crash happening right outside my window — a disaster I set into motion.

Thea frowned. “Okay, if that’s what you want.”

I didn’t want that. I didn’t want any of this, but I’d made it happen. I nodded to Thea. She slipped out of the apartment, leaving me alone.

I yanked the curtains shut and paced the tiny living room, my stomach churning, until a knock interrupted my panicking.

“It’s me,” Andy called from the other side of the door. “Thea said you might want to see me.”

I closed my eyes, annoyed at Thea for not giving me the time I needed to myself, but unwilling to be rude to the man who’d be my husband in less than an hour. “Come in.”

Andy entered my apartment in a suit and tie, blonde hair slicked back, and a pale pink boutonniere on his lapel. Handsome. Devastating, even. No wonder he wanted someone to play his wife. He must have been fighting off women at business meetings each and every time.

“You okay?” he asked as he shut the door behind him. When he turned, his eyes widened and his gaze fell from my face, down my dress, and back up again. “You look phenomenal.”

I bit back a self-conscious laugh. “Well, good, because it’s my wedding day.”

“Lucky guy.”

Tears sprung into my eyes. Andy’s face fell. He covered the distance between us, his eyes searching mine before wrapping his arms around me. As he pulled me into his suit, wool obscured my vision and his musky scent of cedar and orange enveloped me. He placed a hand on my back as I melted against him, his arms holding me still.

My eyes welled, but the tears didn’t fall. A sense of calm rushed through me as Andy tightened his grip.

“We’re in this together. From now on. I promise I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you don’t regret this marriage.”

*For the next four years.*

I pulled back to look up at him. His steely blue eyes burned with an intensity that left me breathless. For a moment, I wished I was walking down the aisle to him under completely different circumstances.

“Are you in this with me, Nora?” he asked, his voice low and serious. His breath warmed my face. He stood so close I could lift onto the balls of my feet and kiss him.

“I’m in this with you,” I promised. “I just hope you won’t regret it.”

He shook his head, a grin pulling at his lips. “Never.”

## CHAPTER 9



## *Andy*

NOLAN STOOD IN FRONT OF THE GATHERED CROWD, A BEER IN one hand and a microphone in another. “I only had one question when Andy told me he was getting married this week and if I’d be his best man: who are you marrying?”

The joke drew an equal mix of laughter and apprehensive whispers. I stayed on alert, fully prepared to kick the microphone loose from the speaker if he went too far off script.

My conversation with Nolan hadn’t exactly gone to plan. Rather than excited, Nolan was completely baffled by how I’d gone from asking Nora on a date to proposing marriage.

Between work and preparing for the wedding, I’d had little time to explain the situation to him in detail, but he showed up at the wedding anyway and was doing his best to navigate the situation. He had complimented Nora, ingratiated himself with her friends, and even asked Bunny for a dance.

“I remember when Nora and Andy met for the first time, and I know more than a few of you remember it too. The annual Pierce-Franklin Notch rivalry basketball game. Nora cheered on the sidelines and Andy played center. Mid-way through the third quarter, Andy followed the ball off the court and ran straight into Nora.”

A wave of laughter gathered as everyone who’d been at the game remembered what happened next.

“Andy tackled Nora and, before either of them could make sense of what happened, her brothers dragged Andy off her.

Cal, as I recall, you took a swing at him and got ejected from the game.”

Cal lifted a beer glass. His girlfriend, Becca, rolled her eyes at the satisfied look on his face.

“After that, Andy was smitten. Sure, Cal and Len wouldn’t let him get within a mile radius of their little sister, but he held onto that crush for years afterward.”

Nora straightened beside me, leaning close. “Is that true?”

I brushed the question off with a non-committal shrug but didn’t miss the way she smiled and blushed at the admission.

“And, apparently, the first chance he had at making good on that crush, he swooped in. So, to my best friend, I wish you a lifetime of happiness. And Nora, congratulations. What Andy lacks in looks, he more than makes up for in loyalty.”

The dull sound of plastic utensils clacking against solo cups spurred us to kiss. Not that I minded. I had taken every opportunity today to have Nora in my arms since I wouldn’t have many opportunities in the coming weeks. She turned to me, placing the hand wearing my ring against my chest and licking her lips in anticipation.

I bent my head, capturing her lips with mine as I cupped her face. I kissed her a second too long, long enough to get some catcalls from the increasingly rowdy crowd gathered on a Wednesday, eating too much sugar and drinking too much booze. All donations and offerings from a town that loved Nora as if she were their own. Because she was. A perfect daughter who walked their dogs, showed up to their parties, visited when they were sick, and always remembered their names. Too good for anyone, let alone me.

But she wasn’t just theirs anymore. She was mine. Not as much as I was hers, but we’d kissed as man and wife in front of the town and signed our names, stamped by a notary. From now until I lost her, Nora McDonaghue was my wife.

I pulled away from the kiss, even as she wrapped her fingers around my tie and laid her head on my chest. After I’d

left her apartment, her best friend swooped in with a bottle of champagne, and the flood of drinks hadn't stopped.

I begged off the heavy drinking, blaming work in the morning. It hadn't seemed to stop anyone else.

"So, where are you two headed for the honeymoon?" Becca poured Nora another flute of champagne and topped mine off.

Despite her cheerful demeanor, she shared the same guarded look as Cal. Her best friend hadn't mentioned dating me for over a year, let alone told her about a proposal. Even suspecting something was amiss, Becca plastered a smile on her face and supported her friend.

Nora relaxed against my chest. I looped an arm around her waist. "No honeymoon. We've got business to do." Her voice slurred and dropped into a faux seriousness.

"I've got some meetings in New York next week, but we're going to travel down there for the weekend, see a few shows," I said.

"Shitty honeymoon," Cal murmured.

Becca's eyes widened. She tightened her grip on Cal's arm in reprimand, keeping her eyes on us. "That sounds nice."

"It'll be great. I'm going to be extra charming," Nora said. She gave me an exaggerated wink that could be written off as drunk flirting.

"Hopefully in the summer, when Nora finishes the school semester, we can have a proper honeymoon."

"Really? You'd honeymoon with me?"

I rubbed her arm with my thumb. "Absolutely."

"Well." Bunny stood from the head of the table, raising her voice and quieting the rest of the party. "I think it's about time we wish these newlyweds goodnight."

"Really? It's so early," Nora said, her breath hot against my chest. She reached for her flute of champagne.

I moved the glass out of her reach. “It’s been a big day, and I’m sure everyone has places to be in the morning.”

“Not me,” she said with a grin.

“No, not tomorrow. But you’ll probably want to rest before we leave on Friday.”

“Right. Friday.”

Bunny issued commands like a drill sergeant, directing guests to return chairs and cover casseroles before she turned to us. Or, more accurately, with Nora only seconds from sleep, me.

“Now, I’m sure there Nora has moved some of her things to your house already, but just in case, Thea and I threw together an overnight bag.” Bunny set a red duffle bag in front of me and crossed her arms. “You’re good to drive, right?”

“This is my second glass,” I said, lifting the still-full flute.

“Good man. I’ll be by with breakfast in the morning. I’ll leave it on the porch, of course. Don’t want to wake you two up early.”

Bunny would be disappointed if she knew Nora was spending the night in my guest room rather than in my bed. Hell, I was disappointed, but I’d made this deal knowing Nora and I would live intimately close without ever actually being intimate.

“Thanks, Bunny. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.”

The older woman wrapped me in a cloud of Chanel No. 5 and hair spray, her bony arms gripping me tight. “Welcome to the family.”

I tightened my jaw, nodding to avoid any of the complicated emotions that had torn through me during the ceremony. Thankfully, the wedding seating had been as informal as the wedding itself. Other than Nolan and a few acquaintances and employees from the gym, the crowd had overwhelmingly shown up for Nora.

I’d called my mother two days before, but she’d been in France. Or maybe it was Italy. Somewhere with a time change

that made getting her to answer nearly impossible. And when she had bothered to call me back, at nearly three in the morning, her reaction to my impending marriage had been underwhelming.

She'd sighed loudly and only asked one question. "The murderer's daughter?"

I'd hung up the phone not long after, relieved she couldn't attend.

After watching nearly a hundred people show up at a moment's notice, showering Nora with gifts and love and well wishes, I found myself wishing this marriage was the real thing.

"Where are we going?" Nora's brow furrowed as I tucked her into my car, now painted with the words "Just Married" on the back and a cavalcade of tin cans tied to the bumper.

"My place."

We hadn't exactly discussed where she'd spend the night after the wedding. Considering she lived just off Main Street, she couldn't wish me goodnight on the square and take off for her apartment. Everyone would see. Besides, I wanted her at my house.

She smoothed out her lace dress, the fitted fabric gaping ever-so-slightly at the chest. I struggled to keep my eyes on her face. "Oh, I've never been to your place before."

We drove toward my neighborhood: a small cluster of houses in a rare piece of flat earth in the mountains, far enough away from the peaks not to be bathed in constant shadow.

"I always wondered what these houses look like on the inside," Nora murmured as she looked out the window. "Once, we got Becca's mom to your neighborhood for Halloween. The candy was terrible. So many raisins."

I snorted. "Yeah, not exactly full-size candy bar territory."

"Why is that?" she asked, shifting in her seat to face me. "It's such a nice neighborhood. It's not like anyone here is searching their couch cushions for Halloween candy money."

“That’s a really good question,” I said with a shrug. “My guess? They don’t want kids traipsing over their perfectly manicured lawns.”

Nora huffed in her seat, eyes closing. “Well, not us. We’re going to be full size candy bar people. And sodas. Maybe even a toy.”

I laughed. “Is that a fact?”

She nodded sleepily.

I pulled into my driveway, the floodlight bathing it in light. She winced, covering her eyes with her hand, and blindly groped for the door handle. “I’ll help you out,” I said, bounding out of the car, grabbing her bag from the backseat on my way.

Nora hadn’t figured out the handle by the time I made it around. I pulled the door open, offering her my hand. She stumbled on the driveway, her white heels catching on a seam in the concrete. I wrapped an arm around her waist, helping her to the door.

“You aren’t going to carry me over the threshold?” she asked as I threw open the front door.

I raised an eyebrow, disentangling my arm from her to throw the duffel bag into the house. “Sure.”

Not waiting for her to ask twice, I scooped her into my arms. She squealed before wrapping her arms around my shoulders, locking her eyes on mine as I carried her into the house.

“I like the entryway,” she whispered.

“Do you want a tour of the rest of the house?”

The delicate lace of her dress pressed against my arms as her body sank closer, her ass settling against my stomach, her body light.

She nodded, brown eyes soft. “Yeah.” Her fingers tickled the nape of my neck, coaxing me closer. “You might want to put me down first.”

Disappointment cooled the heat running through me. I wanted to keep her in my arms and march her straight to my bed. I wanted to lay her down on my sheets and peel off the thin white dress that had been driving me nuts all night—its careful cutouts teasing hints of skin.

“Right,” I breathed, setting her down gently.

Her heels clicked as she smoothed out her dress, holding herself just a little straighter than before. I led her through the kitchen, living room, and study, winding my way slowly upstairs.

“It’s a big house.” Her eyes grew wide as we made our way through the rooms, each filled with tasteful decorations and art my mom had purchased over the course of my childhood.

“I haven’t really done anything with it since my mom moved out.”

She’d only taken a handful of items with her, stating she’d rather restart her life in Connecticut with a clean slate. A clean slate, except for a closet full of designer clothing, a framed Jackson Pollack, and her five horses.

“Well, she certainly had a style.” Nora ran a finger over the base of a bust in the foyer—Claudius or some other ancient Roman. The barely concealed amusement in her voice was no doubt a result of the alcohol.

“You can redecorate however you want.”

“It’s not really my place.”

“It’s your house.”

She raised an eyebrow, her eyes cutting to mine as if reminding me that, despite the suit and wedding dress and carrying her into her new home, we were little more than roommates.

“Let me show you your bedroom,” I said, clearing my throat. “We should get some sleep.”

Upstairs looked similar to everything she’d already seen, the walls papered with thick, textured designs out of an issue

of Architectural Digest and art peppering the walls. I opened the door to the master bedroom.

“This is your room.”

Something about taking my parent’s bedroom seemed wrong, even after my mom moved out. So, I kept my childhood room and updated it for an adult. But, with Nora moving in and most of the other rooms in varying states of disuse, I replaced the bed and moved the other furniture into various bedrooms around the house. She could move in her own pieces or pick through the other rooms.

Her eyes widened and she looked between me and the room. “Seriously?”

I shrugged. “I figured you’d have some furniture to move in. This bedroom had the most space.”

She stepped inside the white carpeted room, taking a turn in the center and letting out a high-pitched laugh. “It’s the size of the trailer I grew up in.” She clamped her hand over her mouth. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

I laughed. “It’s fine. It’s an enormous room. The closet is even bigger.”

I nodded toward the door on the far wall. She opened it. “Holy... I’m going to need more clothes.”

“Well, there’s a credit card on the side table. Go crazy. Whatever you need.”

She eyed the table but made no move to take the credit card. Pulling her eyes away, she glanced at the door. “Where do you sleep?”

“At the end of the hall, three doors down on the left.”

She nodded with a frown.

“Alright, well, I’ll let you get settled in.” I placed the duffel bag by the door. “Goodnight, Nora.”

“Goodnight, Andy.”



## CHAPTER 10

## *Nora*

I OPENED MY EYES TO FIND MYSELF BENEATH AN ORNATE ceiling in a room that wasn't mine. My head ached as I replayed the day before, trying to figure out whose room this was and why I was there.

The wedding.

I rolled onto my side and spotted a metal card on the side table; a credit card with a name on it.

Nora Stewart.

My name.

I pushed myself up, eager for water and a tour of the house without my beer goggles on. At least I'd been sober enough to take off my wedding dress, which hung alone in the immense walk-in closet. After that, I'd changed into...

Nothing.

I slept in my strapless bra and a thin pair of body-contouring panties.

Clearly, I couldn't go gallivanting around Andy's house in my underwear.

I stood, resigned to make a walk of shame in my wedding gown back to the kitchen—wherever that was—when I spotted the red duffel bag by the door.

Andy! Or Bunny, or Thea, or maybe even Becca, but regardless, it was full of clothes. I grabbed the bag off the

floor, rifling through the lacy lingerie and tiny pieces of micro-clothing. The further I dug, the more my heart sank.

Andy definitely hadn't packed this bag.

Thea's tag adorned most of the clothing, and I recognized the name of Bunny's favorite shop on some others. All the pieces in the bag were meant for an actual newlywed, not someone who needed hotel breakfast attire to face their fake husband downstairs.

Thankfully, I found a robe hidden at the bottom and pulled it on. It wasn't exactly the sweats and oversized shirt I preferred to wearing the morning, but still acceptably modest.

I walked down the stairs, following the smell of freshly brewed coffee and the sound of soft jazz music into the kitchen. Andy stood by the sink, his eyes fixed on the window into the backyard, the morning sun filtering in and hitting his face. I sucked in a breath.

Devastatingly handsome. That's what Thea had called him, and I agreed.

He wore a loose-fitting pair of sweats that hung low on his hips and a skin-tight shirt that outlined every muscle on his toned body. A faint hint of blonde scruff peppered his chiseled jawline overnight, softening his face. I could almost imagine waking up next to him: dreamy azure blue eyes and tousled hair.

How did he not have a girlfriend?

I'd never outright asked the question. Andy had always been polite and kind, but unattainable. I envisioned him with a startlingly beautiful woman who spoke seven languages, had a corner office, and went to lunch with her equally stunning and accomplished friends. He didn't date women who made minimum wage and lived in apartments with leaky sinks and past-due collections notices—women like me.

I shook any thought of Andy's love life, or lack thereof, out of my head and cleared my throat.

"You're up early," Andy said, turning from the window. He smiled, eyes dropping to my robe before his cheeks went

pink.

I followed his gaze, finding that the modest robe in the darkened bedroom turned sheer in the bright kitchen. Fantastic. I sighed deeply, pulling it tighter.

He cleared his throat. “Bunny came by with breakfast.” He nodded toward the breakfast nook in the corner of the room as he turned to the coffee maker. “How do you like your coffee?”

“Do you have any creamer?” I asked. He frowned, and I waved a hand. “Sugar is fine.”

I wedged myself into the corner of the nook. At least I’d kept my undergarments on. Andy could lend me a shirt and pants to get back to my apartment for some proper clothes.

“How are you feeling?” He placed a cup of coffee and a glass of water in front of me.

“A little rough,” I admitted. “How badly did I make a fool of myself yesterday?”

He shook his head, sliding in opposite me. “Not even a little. Besides, even if you were hammered, which you weren’t, the hot topic of conversation was one of Bunny’s friends making out with the bartender.”

I shook off any residual embarrassment, my eyes widening. “Wait, are you talking about Cornbread? And which friend?”

“The guy with the tattoos is named Cornbread? I don’t know the woman. Red hair, my age, maybe a little older.”

“Jenny? Jenny made out with Cornbread?”

“I guess?” he answered, unsure.

I sipped my coffee, cocking my head. “How have you managed to live in Franklin Notch for so long without knowing anybody?”

He shrugged. “I lived in Franklin Notch, but I never really *lived* here, if that makes sense.”

It did. His parents might have had a Franklin Notch address, but their country club and Mason’s lodge membership

were in Pierce. The richest family in Franklin Notch chose to spend their time and money in Pierce, a town that capitalized on the fleeing mills rather than following them into bankruptcy.

“Right. Well, sadly, your wife is a townie.” Andy tensed and the smile on my lips faltered. “Not what you signed up for?”

“No.” He shook his head, “That’s not it. I just...”

“Don’t want me calling myself your wife? I guess it’s weird when it’s just the two of us.” I opened the pastry box, picked out a cinnamon roll, and placed it in front of me. The morning had already proved awkward enough. I hadn’t meant to make it worse.

“That wasn—”

Embarrassment prickled at me, and I cut him off. “Do you want some of this? Where do you keep your plates? I should get a knife, too. I probably shouldn’t dredge up all that alcohol with something sugary, but I’m not about to head out looking like this.” I gestured down at the sheer robe, immediately wishing I hadn’t. “Which reminds me, can I borrow some clothes so I can pack for our trip? I can’t wear anything in the bag Bunny packed.”

“Sure,” he said. “I’d love half if you’re offering. Knives are under the coffee maker. Plates are to the right of the sink.”

I pulled out plates and utensils, sitting across from Andy without meeting his eyes. “What should I pack? I’m afraid I don’t own anything super fancy.”

He waved a hand. “You’ll be fine. A nice dress for the meeting this evening. Brad’s wife usually arranges some activities for the spouses, a spa trip, shopping, and a tour, but it’s up to you whether you want to go. There’s a cocktail hour on Sunday night, but otherwise, it’ll mostly be boring meetings. You can just explore.”

A soft wave of disappointment rose in my stomach; I pushed it back. “I should be able to manage that.”

“If you want to do some shopping while we’re there, you’re welcome to.”

“I saw the credit card. Thanks.” I didn’t add that I had zero intention of using it. “Sorry you’re stuck working, but I’m excited. The only time I’ve been to New York City was back in high school. Bunny surprised me with a ticket to the senior trip. It was so much fun.”

Bunny had been on a fixed income before we’d come into her life, and it wasn’t like my parents paid her child support. She somehow kept three growing kids fed and clothed, but barely. I suspected more than a few people had helped her pay for the class trip, though no one ever admitted to it.

“You’ve only been once? How?” Andy asked with a level of awe that reminded me we’d had two very different childhoods.

I shrugged. “Len promised to take us to see one of his exhibits, but ended up bringing us to some studio in Boston instead.”

Andy’s brow furrowed. He locked his eyes on his coffee in thought before meeting mine again. “Well, then, we have to make this special.”

I bit back a laugh. “You have work.”

“Just the first night, and during the day. I can beg off some of the late night stuff. In fact, that’s the exact reason I asked you to marry me.”

I shook my head, fiddling with the sleeve of my robe. “I’ll be fine.”

He shook his head. “Absolutely not. What have you always wanted to do in New York?”

My unimaginative list of things to do in New York dwindled down to a single site with Christmas months away: The Empire State Building. I’d daydreamed about visiting the most romantic place in New York. Well, the most romantic place according to me, Bunny, and the movie *An Affair to Remember*. My daydream always involved a man like Andy, but one who loved me. Who I loved back. With my head in a

spiral and my nerves already frayed from my fake wedding, I clammed up.

“Broadway? Did you watch a show on Broadway?”

“You think Franklin Notch High could afford a Broadway show?”

“Maybe a matinee?” he asked, the corner of his lips upturned, his blue eyes sparkling.

I bet Andy had watched dozens of Broadway shows over the years. Probably in a box seat, ordering drinks and snacks at intermission without bothering to glance at the price.

“Well, I hate to disappoint you, but no. We took the Staten Island ferry to see the Statue of Liberty and mostly went on museum tours. Probably subsidized museum tours.” I played with the cinnamon roll, chopping it into small bites.

He steeped his fingers over his coffee. “So, a Broadway show, at least. How about the Empire State Building? Did you go there?”

I froze, eyes wide. “No. I’ve always wanted to go. It’s the closest thing to heaven in the city.” Andy stared at me blankly. I closed my eyes, wincing at the missed reference. “*An Affair to Remember*?” He shook his head. “It’s my favorite movie. Bunny and I watch it every year for my birthday.”

“We’ll need to watch it, then.”

The edge of my lips quirked up in an. “I’m not sure you’d like it. It’s old and sort of cheesy.”

“I can’t imagine that’s the case.”

I searched his eyes for some hint of teasing, but found none. Andy’s frank earnestness must be why he’d done so well over the years. Sure, the family connections and money helped a lot, but more than anything, he had a way of making his words true. He said he’d like the movie, and I implicitly believed him.

He finished his coffee and stood. “I’ll get you something to wear into town. I’ve got a few last-minute things to wrap up before we leave, but could you be ready to leave by one?”

I nodded, holding my coffee mug and watching him stride out of the kitchen, thinking how perfectly he fit into this life, and how out of place I felt in comparison.



# CHAPTER 11

*Andy*

WE STOOD OUTSIDE THE STEAKHOUSE AS A TAXI RUMBLED BY the crowded sidewalk. Nora smoothed her hand over the pleats on her dress, a black number that evoked memories of Audrey Hepburn, without the oversized sunglasses and pearls. She pursed her lips, her eyes flitting absently around the backdrop of skyscrapers. She reached out to touch my forearm.

“Remind me again, Brad Sexton is your mentor, and his wife is...” She closed her eyes, chewing on her bottom lip as she thought. “Angela. Then there’s the investors: Justin, who’s single but will bring a date we’ll never meet again. Kerry, who’s married to Jack, and Adam and his partner, Shannon.”

I held back a laugh. “Exactly, but considering it’s your first time meeting them, none of them expect you to have a full dossier.”

Rather than a relaxing trip to the city, Nora had peppered me with questions about the people she’d be meeting. I’d struggled to recall spouse’s names, let alone how they met and where they vacationed. Nora had finally lapsed into silence, my phone in her hand as she scrolled through their social media accounts. Still, her inquisitive questions reminded me exactly why I needed Nora, not just wanted her.

“As I recall, part of our deal was that I help you with the investors. I want to make a good first impression.” She opened her purse, reapplying the pale pink lipstick she wore and rechecking her hair in the mirror.

“They’ll love you,” I said, a smile tugging at my lips.

How could they not? I was certainly smitten with her.

The traffic into the city had been heavier than expected, and we had the driver drop us off without stopping at the hotel. Any other week, I would have texted Brad, blown off the meal, and met him in the morning, but Nora had been adamant that we attend. We were dressed for dinner, anyway. Why not go?

And logically, that made sense. Only, after the wedding and the car ride, I'd been married to Nora for less than two days and had barely spent any time with her.

She straightened her back and offered her hand. "Alright, ready to play newlyweds?"

"More than ready," I answered. I interlaced our fingers gently, careful not to wrench her wrist.

She placed her opposite hand on my arm, walking close enough so her dress brushed my pant legs. I gave Brad's name at the hostess stand and followed the woman to the back of the restaurant. We walked past the crowded tables made of oak and the open concept kitchen, where chefs in white hats and aprons stood in a brigade firing all manner of meats. The hostess slipped through an opening in the wood paneled walls and into a hidden room at the back of the restaurant.

The walls muffled the gentle hum of classical music in the dining room. Hunting trophies decorated one side of the room, while the other held wine racks that stretched from the floor to the vaulted ceilings, a pane of glass separating the seated diners from the bottles.

"Andrew, I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it." Brad stood, a smile on his face. He was dressed impeccably, his suit custom-made in Italy. Unlike other investors holding ten-digit bank accounts, Brad had a natural charisma and effortless charm that captivated others. Sitting at the head of the table, holding court over a bevy of angel investors who craved what he'd already attained, no one could deny that he was in charge. He was always the person holding the reins.

Why he'd chosen to mentor me, I'd never really understood. Despite my perceived wealth in Franklin Notch, outside of the tiny mountain town, my name amounted to nothing.

But Brad claimed to see something in me. Himself.

I didn't believe him, but I was grateful for his mistake.

"You brought a date." Brad lifted an eyebrow.

In the five years we'd known each other, I hadn't brought so much as a friend to our meetings. I'd considered calling and inviting him to the wedding, but dismissed the idea just as quickly, unable to picture Brad in Franklin Notch.

Nora squeezed my hand before releasing it, stepping forward. "So nice to finally meet you. I'm Nora."

She held out her hand. Before Brad could shake it, his wife, Angela, took Nora's left hand.

"Is that a ring?"

Nora blushed, letting Angela turn her palm so my emerald ring sparkled in the low lights.

"I'd like to introduce you all to Nora Stewart, my wife," I said, the words tinged with pride I didn't deserve, but made its way into my voice anyway.

Brad's eyes narrowed, searching mine curiously before his face bloomed into a smile. "Well, congratulations."

He ordered a bottle of champagne that probably cost more than the car service I took to get to the city and sat Nora and me at the center of the table.

"Andrew, how long have you been keeping her from us?" Angela asked, her bleached blonde eyebrows raised as she ran a manicured finger over the rim of her wine glass.

Brad's second wife, Angela, couldn't have been more than a few years older than me. But, as the daughter of a shipping magnate and a beauty queen, she possessed a self-confidence built through years of finishing school, boarding school, and an Ivy League education, that put me on edge.

“I’m afraid that’s my fault,” Nora interjected before I had a chance. “We’d been dating for over a year, and I’ve been hesitant to tag along, just being the girlfriend and all.”

Angela raised an eyebrow. “But now you’re his wife? That’s awful sudden.”

Brad laughed—a boisterous, full laugh that dissipated the lingering tension. He leaned across the corner of the table and rubbed his wife’s shoulder. “Now, darling, you had a ring on your finger after six months. It sounds to me like Andrew and Nora took their time.”

Angela released Nora’s hand with a wondering look. “Well, I’m just surprised we haven’t heard any sooner. From you or Payton.”

I stilled at the mention of Brad’s daughter. While I could get away with not calling Brad about the sudden marriage, I definitely should have warned Payton.

Angela shrugged. “Well, I suppose she’ll find out Monday. She’s coming to the city for the spa day I’ve arranged. Nora, I’ll text my assistant to add you to the reservation. Andrew, you know I plan these excursions months out. Shame on you for not making sure I included your lovely wife.”

She pulled her phone out of a tiny clutch, tapping a message.

“That’s so kind of you, but I don’t want to put you out,” Nora said.

Angela waved a hand. “Not a problem at all. We’re a close-knit little group always eager to welcome someone new, especially a spouse.”

Angela arched an eyebrow at Justin and his latest date, a gorgeous brunette with doe-eyes and a low-cut dress. His type, to a T, and I felt a pang of sympathy for the woman as she took a sip of her cocktail, ignoring the remark.

“Well, I’m thrilled to get to know you all. Andy has spoken so warmly about these meetings.” Nora accepted a glass of champagne from the server, taking a small sip before setting it down.

By the time the appetizers were cleared, Nora had thoroughly charmed the entire table. She'd coaxed Angela into telling everyone about her whirlwind romance with Brad, gushed over Adam and Shannon's baby girl, learned all about Kerry and Jack's cave diving obsession, and learned Justin's date's name: Tiffany, a part-time fitness model and full-time veterinary tech.

Through entrees, she led a discussion about honeymoon destinations and favorite places to live. And by dessert, well... everyone actually had dessert for once, too entranced by the woman at my side to worry about heading back to their hotel early.

As we left the restaurant, ignoring Angela and Terry's pleas to join them for another drink, I wrapped an arm around Nora and spontaneously kissed the top of her head.

"That was amazing," I gushed, inhaling the faint scent of honeysuckle and wishing I'd found more reasons to touch her during dinner.

"I had a really good time," she admitted modestly.

Too modestly. I had a fair bit of experience watching Justin's dates attempt to infiltrate the good graces of Brad and Angela. She'd aced the test, where dozens had failed before her.

"Besides," she said with a shrug. "That's what you wanted me here for. I just treated it like a Chamber of Commerce meeting. Can I tell you the truth?" She cast a furtive glance back at the restaurant. "I could barely eat. I was so nervous. I've been a mess all day."

A pang of guilt for not noticing that she'd been too distracted to eat hit me, and I rushed to wash it away. "Do you want to stop somewhere else? We can order room service?"

She shook her head. "I packed a few granola bars in my bag. I'll be fine."

Rather than fight her about food, I opened the car door and ushered her inside. The driver took us the few blocks to an upscale hotel that Brad suggested on my first visit to the city.

I'd booked it every time after that. After a while, the staff got to know me, and I learned all the nearby haunts, making the hotel feel more like home than my family house in Franklin Notch.

A valet opened the black sedan door. I slipped out, offering Nora my hand. She took it, her fingers warm, holding on tightly as we walked into the lobby.

"Well, this is certainly nicer than the motel we stayed out at high school," she mused, a hint of a smile on her face as her head swiveled, taking in the painted ceiling and the art installation in the center of the atrium.

"Did you all stay in Manhattan during your trip?" I asked.

She shook her head. "New Jersey. New York was too expensive, so we took the bus into the city every day."

"Well, no bus required here. We're only a few minutes from Central Park, and you can walk virtually anywhere you want from this hotel."

"Mr. Stewart, welcome back," Betty greeted me with a warm smile, her eyes moving to Nora. "Congratulations on your marriage! Mr. Sexton's assistant called, and I've upgraded you to the penthouse suite."

"Thank you, Bet." I took the keys and guided Nora into the elevator.

"Penthouse suite, huh?" she whispered as I scanned my hotel card for access to the top floor.

"I usually stay in a suite. Nothing fancy."

"Other than this hotel, in general."

"Well, on the plus side, they probably left a gift basket with something better than a granola bar," I said as the elevator doors slid open.

Nora gasped, her hand covering her mouth as she entered the suite.

Hell, the room even took my breath away. Perched on the top floor of the hotel, the floor-to-ceiling windows provided an

unobstructed view of downtown Manhattan and its sparkling white lights shimmering in the moonlight.

“It’s amazing,” Nora said, beelining for the basket of fruit, cheese, and wine on the coffee table.

I bit back a laugh. “Really? That’s amazing?”

“You’re underestimating how hungry I am. That steakhouse was nice, but I barely had time to take a bite between questions.” She removed a bow from the basket and ripped off the cellophane, handing me the bottle of champagne and pulling out a sleeve of crackers and a wedge of cheese.

I popped the top and poured two flutes. Nora shoved a cracker in her mouth, grabbed a ludicrously large wedge of cheese in one hand and champagne in the other, and stood surveying the room. She kicked off her shoes by the couch and strolled along the perimeter of the room, skirting past the windows and into the bedroom.

“Andy, come look at this!”

I followed her into the bathroom. She stood over a bathtub; champagne flute balanced on the edge, cheese in her mouth, and a mass of tiny bottles in her hands.

“Look at this bath! It’s huge!” she mumbled around the cheese.

“Should I leave you alone with this?” I leaned against the doorway, watching her in amusement.

“I’m just warning you where I’ll be hanging out while you’re in meetings. Me and this tub are going to be real good friends.”

I sucked in a breath, not sure I could focus on my meetings knowing Nora was lounging naked in a bath.

“I’ll take the couch,” she said, setting down the bottles and picking up her champagne, emptying the flute.

“Excuse me?”

“The couch. If you don’t mind, I’d like to hang my clothes in the closet, but don’t worry about waking me. I sleep pretty



hard.” She walked back through the bedroom and into the living room, sitting on the couch to pour another glass and pick through the remaining food.

“You’re not sleeping on the couch.”

“It’s nicer than my couch at home, and I’ve slept on that plenty of times.” She shot me a playful smile that made my stomach flip.

“I’ll take the couch. I’m getting up early most mornings, anyway.”

She shook her head. “You paid for this hotel room. I’m not taking the bed.”

“Technically, Brad paid for this hotel room, and he did it because we got married, so the bed is yours.”

Nora eyed me with a hint of defiance. Then, she shrugged. “Fine. Suit yourself.”

## CHAPTER 12

## *Nora*

SUNLIGHT STREAMED THROUGH THE GIANT WINDOW FACING the river. I pulled the downy comforter over my shoulders, luxuriating in the plush bed, still half-believing the weekend had been a dream.

I could have spent the entire weekend in the tub and been a happy woman. Actually, I could have spent my whole life in that tub. Andy called the front desk and ordered a tray of bath bombs, salts, and delicately scented soaps for me. Thinking we had nothing better to do, I spent an entire morning bathing before he knocked politely at the door, asking if I was ready to go.

Go where? Everywhere. For three days, we'd watched three Broadway shows, eaten at half a dozen restaurants, and seen all the sites we could cram in before Andy's business trip started in earnest. Everywhere except the Empire State Building.

Andy had offered to take me the second day, and I'd declined, arguing that the weather was too cold for the observation deck. I just couldn't bear visiting the place I associated with real love with my fake husband—one I learned I liked more every day.

I reluctantly pushed myself out of bed, running a hand through my hair and peeking through the twin pocket doors into the living room area. Andy finished dressing on the other side of the door, pulling a tie over his head and adjusting it in the mirror. I bit back a smile while I watched him. His blonde hair was still mussed from sleep, his broad shoulders filling

the tailored suit. Not for the first time on this trip, I wondered what being his girlfriend would be like. His wife. Not just pretend.

“You’re up early.” Andy caught me staring at him in the mirror. I pushed back the embarrassment of being caught and opened the doors.

I shuffled to the chair opposite the couch and sat, pulling my slippers up. “Just wanted to say hi before you left.”

“You want me to call for some breakfast?”

I shook my head. “Don’t bother. I’m not hungry. I might just wander around for a bit, find some coffee.”

Andy nodded, fixing his tie and turning to face me. “You aren’t doing the spa thing today?”

“Here? I’ll be paying you back forever if I take spa trips.” I hedged the words with a laugh.

He dropped his hands from his tie, his forehead creasing. “Pay me back?”

“Yeah.” I waved a hand, feigning nonchalance. “Once I’m through school, obviously, I’m going to pay you back.”

I focused on anything but Andy: the orange accents on the wall, the tiny golden legs on the coffee table, the indent on the couch where Andy had slept.

“You’re not paying me back,” he answered tersely.

“Of course I am.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal.” He pulled on his jacket and sighed. “I’ve got to go. We’ll discuss this later, but the spa is a business expense. It’s part of the deal, so go. Please.”

I corkscrewed my lips. I hadn’t touched the credit card on the side table back in Franklin Notch and I’d reduced expenses where I could, but Andy didn’t live a frugal lifestyle.

Worse, he had a point. He’d asked me on this trip to charm his investors and their spouses. I couldn’t exactly do that from our hotel room.

“Fine. Only because you asked.”

“Thank you.” He crossed the room and brushed his lips over the top of my head, sending a flush of heat through me. “Have fun. I’ll send up breakfast on my way out.”

He strode out of the room before I could argue. I pushed myself out of the chair, shaking off the warmth in my chest.



“Nora, I’m so glad you could join us!” Angela greeted me with a kiss on each cheek, her manicured hands brushing my shoulders. She wore a gauzy white dress and fuchsia heels, making me feel dowdy in my gray linen pants, white shirt, and flip-flops.

I greeted Tiffany, Jack, and Shannon and followed Angela into the spa. Thankfully, the hotel suite had prepared me for the luxury that Andy and his colleagues expected. My only experience in spas prior to this trip had been a salt cave with a twenty-dollar entry free that hadn’t exactly screamed *luxury*.

We settled into massage chairs, beginning the day with manicures and pedicures. While this didn’t feel like part of the deal Andy and I had struck, but I made an effort to be as charming as possible with a compress over my eyes and during a leg massage that made me want to melt into the leather chair.

“Sorry I’m late!” An unfamiliar voice jolted me from the nap I’d nearly slipped into. “Missed my layover in Detroit and almost had to book a private plane just to get here.”

I moved the compress and took in the woman in front of me. She looked a year or two older than me, with rich brown hair, expensive clothes, and plush soft lips that toed the line of being natural or the result of fillers. Her eyes met mine, and she smiled invitingly.

“Oh, you must be Jason’s date. I’m Payton, Brad’s daughter.” She held out a hand.

“Oops, nope, I’m Jason’s date. Tiffany! Nice to meet you!” Tiffany shook off the nail stylist, offering a half-painted hand.

Payton took it, carefully avoiding the wet nail polish with her eyes trained on me. “Then, you are?”

“Nora,” I said with a cautious smile. “I’m Andy, uh, Andrew’s wife.”

She frowned, tilting her head before her eyes flitted to her stepmother.

“They got married this week. Wednesday, in fact,” Angela confirmed.

Payton nodded, but her eyes remained guarded. “Well, congratulations. I had no idea.” She said the words as if she should have heard about me. I wondered what her relationship with Andy was. “So, how long have you been dating?”

I smiled, shifting my eyes down to the soapy pool of water at my feet. “A little over a year.”

“Wow. Andrew hadn’t mentioned...” Her face fought against a deepening frown.

He hadn’t mentioned Payton either, but I’d gotten the distinct impression during dinner the first night that he should have. I’d gently probed him for more information about his mentor’s daughter, but he clammed up, changing the subject. Maybe she was just a friend. Or more likely, an ex.

No, Andy would have told me that, especially if it interfered with the idea that we were a couple.

A close colleague. As simple as that. One who maybe thought he would have mentioned their relationship and found herself shocked, realizing they weren’t that close.

“There’s some history between our families. When we started seeing each other, I told Andy I wanted to stay quiet, since I thought the relationship was more casual. But...” I shrugged.

“Andy?” she said his name experimentally. “Interesting.”

“Well, Nora here is an absolute doll,” Angela interjected cheerfully. “You’ll get along famously once you get to know each other. My stepdaughter works in IT. Her company is going public in just a few months, so I’m sure if Andrew tried to contact her, she simply found herself too busy.”

Payton’s nose twitched. Andy hadn’t called her, and that fact ate at her.

“It was all a bit of a whirlwind. Andy’s mother didn’t even make it to the ceremony, being in Italy and all,” I said sympathetically.

She gave me a wan smile, sitting in the chair on the other side of Angela. “I imagine it must have been.” She shook her head, placing the earlier warm smile back in place. “Tell me about the wedding. I’m sure it was lovely.”

By the time we separated for massages, I felt confident I’d simply taken Payton off guard, and that was it. Sure, she wasn’t as friendly as her stepmother, but she was polite. Besides, after a full day of facials, manicures, pedicures, oxygen, light therapy, and a ninety-minute massage that left my body some combination of relaxed and sore, I didn’t have the mental bandwidth to question Payton and Andy’s relationship any further.

“Whenever you’re ready, you can get dressed and meet me outside.” The masseuse whispered, shutting off the gentle bells playing on a speaker before she left the room.

I peeled myself off the table, wrapping the white sheet around my body, and stood on wobbly legs. I needed a nap.

I tugged on my clothes and signed a bill that cost more than my rent, assigning the charge to the room. I still didn’t feel entirely settled with Andy paying for what amounted to a mini-vacation inside an already sumptuous escape from Franklin Notch.

With a bottle of water in one hand and the demand that I stay hydrated, I strolled back up to my room. Housekeeping had tidied Andy’s couch and cleared the dishes from breakfast,

leaving the room sparkling once more. I kicked off my flip-flops and walked into the bedroom, ready to collapse.

Only to find that Andy had already collapsed into my bed.

I hedged at the entrance to the bedroom. His meetings must have wrapped up early. He'd removed his blue jacket and tie and dragged the throw blanket he'd been using on the couch into the bed, pulling it tight over his shoulders. He had unbuttoned the top of his white button-down shirt, revealing a faint smatter of blonde hair.

I *could* nap on the couch. I didn't need a blanket, and it wasn't as though I had much time before dinner. But even as I turned to head back toward the couch, I didn't *want* to sleep there.

Technically, Andy was in my bed, and there was plenty of room for two.

I tiptoed around the foot of the bed and crawled in, gently pulling up the covers and sliding in beside him. Even an arm's length away, I could smell his subtle cologne and feel the heat radiating off his body. I pushed back the urge to shimmy closer, forcing my eyes closed and letting Andy's gentle breathing lull me to sleep.



## CHAPTER 13

## *Andy*

HONEYSUCKLE TICKLED MY NOSE. I BURROWED CLOSER TO THE source of the scent. In my sleep-addled brain, I drifted between reality and dreams, pretending the smell of Nora that clung to the pillows was actually her, warm and soft beside me.

Only once I had her hair in my mouth did I realize I wasn't dreaming. I opened my eyes and found Nora very much in bed with me, curled beneath the covers, her eyes closed and body slowly rising and lowering in deep sleep.

I eased my wrist out from under the blanket, checking the time and finding that I had another half hour before I had to meet Brad for dinner. Plenty of time to lie here a while longer. Or, it would have been, had the phone in my pocket not been buzzing.

With more than a little regret, I slipped out of bed and padded into the living room, closing the bedroom door softly behind me.

Payton.

"Hey," I answered softly, glancing back at the closed door.

"Hey, Andy," she drawled out my name like a taunt.

I took a deep breath. "Welcome back to New York."

"And what a welcome it's turning out to be." Something like amusement soaked her every word, and I couldn't suppress a smile. "Andrew, I'm afraid to tell you this, but

there's a woman wandering around the city claiming to be your wife."

I grimaced, already having anticipated the reason for the call. "I tried to call you last night to give you a heads up."

"I got stuck in Detroit. My phone died, and I thought you were excited to see me, not that you planned to bring a plus one. And a wife at that."

Payton and I hit it off the moment we met. She reminded me of her father: charismatic and kind with natural humor. It certainly didn't hurt that, besides her stepmom, she was the closest person to my age in Brad's orbit.

"She said you started dating a year ago. Is that true?"

I slid open the balcony door, cringing at the question. That question had been the exact reason I hadn't called Payton. As cowardly as it was, I hoped she wouldn't even show up, giving me more time to grapple with how I wanted to answer it.

"Not exactly," I said, hoping the answer would be enough.

"Hm."

Not even close.

I sucked in a breath and weighed my options. I could lie to her and affirm that Nora and I had been dating for a year, months before Payton and I had kissed. Or I could tell her the truth and hope she wouldn't tell her father about my fake marriage. I glanced back, past the closed door and into the hotel room.

"Nora and I haven't been dating for a year." I stumbled over how to explain the situation I'd created with Nora. The woman I'd been in love with for decades. The only woman I couldn't get within earshot of without her brother threatening to kill me. "We married for other reasons."

"Other reasons? Not love?"

Love on my part, but certainly not hers.

"We've known each other for a very long time." I parsed through why we married, taking myself out of the equation.

“She was in a bind. The simplest solution was for us to get married.”

“Geez, Andrew, she’s pregnant?”

I sputtered. “God, no. It’s a marriage between friends. That’s all.”

Not that the thought of Nora pregnant didn’t hit a visceral part of me, but I certainly didn’t want anyone thinking we’d had a shotgun marriage.

“So, there’s nothing between you two?”

“Nothing.” I gritted the words, wishing they weren’t true.

“You’re just friends?”

“As I said, we have a lot of history.” I shrugged, hoping the nonchalance seeped through my voice. “You’re not going to tell your dad, are you?”

Payton laughed through the line, her voice breezy and carefree. “No. Of course not. Whatever weird friend marriage you’ve gotten yourself into isn’t my concern. In fact, I can definitely see the benefits of your arrangement.”

I wished I had her confidence. So far, I’d spent most of my nights rock hard and barely sleeping. Not exactly a great combination when my focus should have been on meetings.

“Well, congratulations, then. Will I see you for dinner tomorrow? Maybe a drink afterward?”

My shoulders relaxed as Payton’s tone relaxed back into normalcy. “I’ll see you for dinner. No promise about drinks. Nora isn’t exactly a night owl.”

“Well, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if you stayed out late without her.”

“We’ll see,” I answered noncommittally. “Talk to you tomorrow.”

I hung up, unsure if I’d navigated that conversation well. Ideally, I wouldn’t have to tell anyone about our arrangement, but Payton had crossed from a business associate into something akin to a friend a while ago.

Of course, our kiss last winter had blurred that previously clear line of friendship. I blamed the kiss on too many drinks and pure boredom. It felt more like an experiment—a failed one, of course. I didn't want to damage my relationship with her father and, as much as I liked Payton, those feelings were strictly platonic. She'd accepted my reasoning with a shrug, and we never discussed it again.

I opened the sliding glass door and, hearing nothing from the bedroom, decided I could slide back into bed with Nora without her being the wiser.

“Hey, you snuck out,” Nora greeted me, brown eyes foggy with sleep and her black hair covering her face. She ran a hand through it, pushing it back onto the pillow.

“Sorry about that. I thought you were at the spa all day,” I said, stepping toward the side of the bed.

“It's fine. I should have slept on the couch, but this bed is so comfortable.”

“You're telling me,” I said with a wry smile. Even in a suite that cost thousands of dollars a night, the couch proved a terrible place to sleep. The fancy piping dug into my arms and the cushions were lumpy from years of use.

“We could just share. The bed, I mean. I don't mind.” Nora made the offer tentatively. “There's plenty of room.”

I tamped down an overeagerness that would have scared her away, metering my voice. “I don't want to put you out.”

“You wouldn't,” she said with an air of finality that put the conversion to bed. She pulled the covers up over her shoulders. “Are you leaving?”

I wavered, standing awkwardly over the bed when I'd rather be in it. “Not yet.”

She patted the space next to her. “Lay down for a bit, then. Who were you talking to?”

“Payton.” I sat down on the edge of the bed, drawing up a leg to face her.

She burrowed her face into her pillow with a content sigh. “She seemed nice.”

“She is,” I said, searching for a way to pivot the conversation away from Payton while the clock ticked down. “Where are you all going to dinner?”

“I’m not sure. Some sushi place.”

“Raw. It’s Angela’s favorite. Do you like sushi?”

“I like sake,” Nora grinned.

“So, you’ll come back too tipsy to want to go out? I was thinking of a horse ride through Central Park. It’s not Christmas, but it’s chilly enough to pretend.”

Her eyes widened. “I will stay perfectly sober if I get a ride through the park.”

“Done,” I promised.



ANDY

I’m done with dinner. Want me to pick you up at the restaurant?

I tapped my phone, re-reading the message I sent fifteen minutes ago from our empty hotel room.

Brad and I ate dinner over development plans for a gym in the city. When I looked up, the clock neared nine. Normally well past when the spouses finished dinner and stumbled back, but I hadn’t gotten a message from Nora.

My phone lit up. I nearly knocked it on the ground, eager to read the text.

NORA

I’d love that. I might have gone a little overboard on the sake.

Or at least that was my interpretation of the text, littered with misspellings, numbers, and spaces.

On my way.

The restaurant was only a few blocks away from the hotel. I waved off the receptionist's offer to call a cab, walking the short distance instead. With Nora nowhere to be found at the entrance, I went inside, spotting her sitting in the center of the table, laughing, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks pink. A wave of lust soaked through my body that I quickly pushed away.

I walked up to the table with a greeting and watched as everyone's eyes swiveled toward Nora expectantly. Well, Nora and I.

Right, newlyweds.

I wrapped an arm over her chest, and she tilted her head back against me—like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Hey,” she said, her words slurred and her eyes glassy.

“Hey.” I brushed a kiss to her forehead and squeezed her tight.

“I remember when Brad looked at me like that,” Angela said with a dramatic sigh. “Guess I’ll have to wait for my second husband to feel that way again.”

A round of laughter shook the table. The conversation resumed, but my focus stayed on Nora. “You want to hang out a while longer or go on a carriage ride?”

She shot me a shy smile and whispered, “Carriage ride.”

“Sorry to steal her away, but we’ve got a date with a horse. You all have a good night!”

I ignored the good-natured jeers as I led Nora outside. She took a deep breath of the night air before tightening her jacket around her chest. “Which way to the park?”

She stayed by my side on the walk, her body grazing and knocking into mine, probably because of the sake, but maybe because she wanted to be near me. I put a steadying hand on her elbow as we approached the park and passed a few carriages until Nora picked a horse she liked.

I offered her my hand to climb into the carriage. She flinched as she put weight on it.

“Your wrist?” I asked, climbing in beside her.

“The cold makes it worse. Don’t worry about it.”

“I *am* worried about it.”

“Well, I’ve got the surgery scheduled for next week, and then a speedy recovery, and I’ll be back to normal,” she sighed, eyes clearing as they surveyed the park. “Besides, I’m used to it.”

“Used to it?” I echoed, hating the thought of being used to something that seemed incredibly painful.

She shrugged. “It’s inevitable. My other wrist will give out soon, and then my knees or hips. I’m on medications to slow the autoimmune side effects, but nothing stops it, just pushes it off for a while longer.”

“So, we send you to better specialists. I’ll talk to Brad in the morning and find you the best doctor on the East Coast.”

Nora smiled. “That’s sweet, but you don’t have to do that. I’m so thankful for just the surgery, and hopefully, I can keep my body together for the next four years, at least. Now, let’s just enjoy the ride.”

She wasn’t entirely wrong. I couldn’t heal Nora. Hell, I couldn’t even ask her out. But until we divorced, I could keep her safe and healthy.



## CHAPTER 14

## *Nora*

I PRESSED THE PHONE AGAINST MY EAR, SIGHING AS I surveyed the half-empty closet in my bedroom. Adding my clothes made it seem more bare, somehow—as if nothing I owned was good enough for the house.

“Are you worried?” Becca asked, her voice staticky on the other end of the line. The sound of grunting men and the wet slap of footballs being spiked to the ground echoed in the background.

“No,” I lied. “Maybe. Yes.”

Our trip to the city felt like a lifetime ago, and I’d spent the last few days amassing a pile of supplies for my recovery. I’d stuck strictly to medical supplies; friends and neighbors had been dropping off casseroles all week. Thankfully, Andy kept his kitchen bare because we’d already stuffed the freezer full.

“What time are you leaving? It’s probably not too late to hide in one of Andy’s fifteen bedrooms and skip the surgery altogether.”

I bit back a laugh. “Real mature. In an hour. I want to leave early in case we hit traffic.”

Or a slow-driving leaf peeper, more likely.

“Are you calling so I can distract you until it’s time to leave?” she asked. I could hear the smile in her voice.

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“I can do that. How about we start with how your sudden marriage is going? Do you want to tell me how I missed my

best friend dating her brother's enemy for the past year?"

I pursed my lips. I expected the question. Heck, I expected her to push for more information the minute I told her about the engagement. But if she suspected I hadn't actually been dating Andy for a year, she didn't dare say as much.

"Marriage is great," I answered honestly. "A little weird at first, but nice. Andy's a good guy."

She huffed. "You're not going to tell me anything else, are you?"

I wanted to tell her. I was dying to tell her. But telling Becca would open up a can of worms I wasn't prepared to dive into, especially not right before surgery.

"When you come home for off-season, I'll tell you everything. For now, just be happy for me."

"As long as you're happy," she relented. "Have your husband text me when you're in recovery. Give him a reason to get on my good side."

I grimaced. "Absolutely," I lied. Again. An annoying habit I'd have to get used to. "Love you, Bec."

"Love you, good luck!"

I hung up, a knot in my stomach. I couldn't tell Becca I hadn't even asked Andy to drive me to the hospital. That was something actual husbands did. Not fake husbands.

"Hey, need any help?" Andy asked, knocking lightly on the door frame.

I startled, turning away from the closet with a smile.

Returning home after the honeymoon was a wake-up call about our life together. I found my days filled with pre-op appointments and moving while Andy came back to an avalanche of problems with the two new gyms. Most mornings, he was gone before I woke up and didn't come home until late in the evening.

I tried not to be disappointed, but I couldn't help wishing we'd stayed in the city just a little longer.

I mentally inventoried the bandages and straps, bands, and weights. “Nope, I don’t need help. It’s just outpatient surgery, so I don’t even need an overnight bag. I should be out of your hair in about...” I checked my phone. “Thirty minutes?”

He frowned. “Out of my hair?”

He’d traded his suits in for gym clothes once we’d come home, but today he wore a black shirt that melded to his chest and a faded pair of jeans.

“Right,” I said slowly, tilting my head. “You’ve got work.”

“You’re having surgery. I’m not going to work today. I’m driving you.”

My stomach fluttered. I tempered the feeling. A doting husband *would* take his wife for surgery. This was all part of the deal.

“Thea had the day off. She’ll take me.”

I’d wanted to ask Bunny or my brothers, but Cal and Len hadn’t warmed to the idea of my sudden marriage, and I didn’t want to fan their anger by explaining why I wanted them to take me instead of Andy. Because, before this moment, he hadn’t mentioned wanting to take me and I certainly hadn’t asked.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It’s not a big deal. You’re busy, and Thea said she doesn’t mind. She’ll probably be here when you get home. I’m not supposed to be alone until the drugs wear off.”

Andy pushed himself off the door and walked into the room. He ran a finger over the small wooden desk I’d moved in from my apartment, then squared up less than an arm’s length away from me.

“I’m coming with you, Nora. Obviously, it’s fine if you want Thea there too, but I’m going,” he said, his voice firm.

The tinge of disappointment in his words made me wonder if I should have asked him first.

I nodded weakly. “Okay, if you insist.”

“I do,” he said, the disappointment gone. “I’ll let you finish getting ready. Meet you downstairs.”

He left, leaving my stomach churning and my mind muddled. There had been moments in New York where I’d almost convinced myself he liked me. Then, we’d returned to Franklin Notch and been little more than roommates. I’d assumed everything in New York had been for show, but maybe I’d been wrong.

I dialed Thea’s number. “Hey, Thea.”

“I just picked up the phone to call you. What time do I need to pick you up?”

“About that. Andy said he’d take me. You’re welcome to come too, of course.”

“Andy’s taking you?” Thea asked, her tone playful. “Did you ask him?”

“I did not,” I admitted.

“He likes you,” she said triumphantly. “I knew it. Straight-laced Andy is playing caveman, demanding to take care of you.”

“That’s not what happened.”

Although, wasn’t it? Sure, he hadn’t banged his chest and lifted me over his shoulder, but surprisingly, I didn’t hate that visual.

“Really? Well, sounds like he’s got it handled. I’ll let him play doctor with you.”

“I’m getting surgery, Thea, not kissing under the jungle gym,” I chastised her.

“Why not both? Well, good luck. Send me a text letting me know you made it out okay.”

I hung up, my cheeks red. I gathered the prescriptions I’d need post-surgery, carrying them downstairs to find Andy sitting on the couch, phone in hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked, setting the prescriptions on the side table.

“Reading up on what I’m supposed to do post-surgery,” he answered.

The edge of my lip hitched up. “I’m pretty sure the doctor will tell me what to do.”

“I want to ask good questions,” he muttered.

Of course, he did. Andy didn’t like to show up anywhere on his back foot. If he hadn’t already, he’d probably be reading non-stop about the surgery, the post-surgery, and the recovery until the nurses wheeled me out of the operating room. Guilt tickled the back of my neck for not giving him the option of coming with me to the earlier appointments.

“I’m sure you’ll have plenty of questions by the time it’s done, but we should go.”

He set down the phone, looking at me with his sharp blue eyes. “You think I’m going to be able to concentrate on anything while you’re having surgery?”

I laughed nervously. “It’s just outpatient surgery.”

“But, it’s you.” He stared at me dead-on, daring me to counter his argument. I couldn’t. After a beat, he stood. “Let’s go.”

I’d scheduled my surgery for the early afternoon. My stomach rumbled with hunger, and my nerves frayed more and more the closer we got to the hospital. The critical access hospital that provided the bulk of the care for the tiny cities and towns in the White Mountains couldn’t attract a full-time orthopedic surgeon, so I’d been referred to a hospital nearly an hour away.

I fiddled with the radio in Andy’s SUV, thankful he hadn’t opted to take the sports car. I already felt nervous being in Andy’s presence under the influence of post-operative drugs. I didn’t want him to witness me crawling into the passenger seat of the tiny car.

“Why didn’t you ask me to bring you?”

I dropped my hand from the car radio, leaving static crackling in the background, surprised he’d even asked. “I

didn't want to bother you."

It was an honest enough answer. I already doubted the equity of our deal. I didn't want to burden him more with doctor's visits and health concerns, which were exhausting enough for me to deal with.

"You're not a bother. And if you were, I'd tell you." He kept his eyes on the road, an indent forming on his cheek as he chewed the words. "So, give me the option, okay?"

"Okay. I can do that."

"Good. Now, honestly, how are you feeling?"

I swallowed a lie. "Terrified? I don't really like hospitals, or doctors, for that matter."

"You don't?" He raised an eyebrow, as if he couldn't fathom the idea that someone didn't like doctors.

"My parents weren't great about taking us to the doctor growing up. For Cal and Len, that was kind of fine. They were both healthy. Or, at least, not always sick."

"But not you?" he asked, skirting his eyes away from the road and onto mine.

I shook my head. "Anytime the temperature dropped, I'd turn blue. Not just a little blue. Blueberry blue. It didn't hurt, but it looked kind of terrifying. Len swore I was dying once, and called the ambulance and the police. I was fine, but my parents weren't there and we got carted off for a while." I bit my bottom lip. "Anyway, after that, they had to bring me to the doctor as part of the protective services thing. Like, the state required them to get me treatment. That would have been fine, except we were all a little freaked out. Mom and Dad were afraid I'd get taken away, and all that stress made me stressed." Sighing, I released all the built-up anxiety at just saying the words. "Anyway, they diagnosed me, and then the caseworker went away, and I didn't go to appointments anymore."

Andy's stare turned hard, his eyes glittering. "But you were still hurt?"

“Sometimes. But it was more painful for everyone if I made them take me to the hospital, so I stopped asking. Until Bunny took us in.”

I risked turning to face him. Despite his stony demeanor, a question formed on his lips. “When was that?”

“Too late to make a difference,” I said with a shrug.



## CHAPTER 15

## *Andy*

WHAT FELT LIKE THE FIFTIETH EPISODE OF SOME HOUSE SHOW blared on the TV in the tiny waiting room. I paced the room again, blocking the television and annoying the only other person waiting.

“Pacing won’t make the surgeon work any faster,” the elderly lady said calmly, her wrinkled fingers knitting a sock while her eyes remained glued to the TV screen.

I grunted, sitting on the corner of a chair and angling my head to get a clear view of the locked door leading to post-operative recovery. Pulling out my phone, I ignored the slew of emails and phone calls from the gym and pocketed it again. I pulled out Nora’s phone instead, opening dozens of well-wishes from friends and family.

There were a lot. I tapped out of a quick group text to Cal, Len, Bunny, Thea, and Becca, letting them know I was still waiting, and then assessed the rest of the texts. Tammy, the woman from the coffee shop, sent no less than four texts, while Gary, Nora’s ex-employer, only sent two that sounded like they were pulled from an online search of ‘get well wishes.’

“Mr. Stewart?” The wooden doors swung open and the surgeon called my name, stopping me from sending Gary a stream of expletives in response.

I sat up, fear clutching my chest. “Is Nora okay?”

The surgeon chuckled; the white mask over her face muffled the noise. She pulled it down. “Fine. Wonderful, even.”

By all accounts, the surgery was a success. She's resting comfortably in the back. Would you like to see her?"

I nodded, following her down the hallway.

She walked us into a large open circular space with cloth curtains dividing the outer ring of the room into pods. The reassuring steady beep of the instruments competed with the four nurses gathered around a desk at the center of the room. The surgeon beckoned me toward a closed curtain, slipping inside.

Nora lay on a bed, tucked under a stack of stark white blankets, looking impossibly small and fragile. Her right hand sat propped up on top of them all, the bandages covering most of her hand and halfway up her forearm.

"She did great. She's probably still a little loopy, but that should wear off by late this evening. Right now, she's not feeling any pain, but in the next couple of hours, you will want to start her on the pain meds, at least for the first day or two."

"When should I be able to talk to her?" I asked, my attention on Nora.

"She's awake, just tired." She stepped to the side of the bed and squeezed Nora's shoulder. "Mrs. Stewart? Nora? Your husband is here."

Her eyes fluttered open, brown eyes foggy and far away. "My husband? I don't have one of those."

Rather than distress, the surgeon only chuckled. "Don't worry. I'm sure that's just the anesthesia. It knocks some patients on their butt."

I nodded, sitting in the chair beside Nora on the side of her good arm. "Hey, Nora. It's Andy."

She turned her head at the sound of my voice, a light smile crossing her lips. "Oh, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to take you home," I said, returning my attention to the surgeon. "How long should that be?"

"Another hour, maybe two. A nurse will be by in a bit to get her vitals and ensure the anesthesia is wearing off like it

should. After that, you'll be good to go."

I pulled out my phone, opening my notes, and the surgeon answered the bevy of other questions I'd come up with while researching Nora's surgery. After answering them all, she slipped away, promising to follow up with Nora next week. I sat in the chair by the head of her bed, watching her chest rise and fall to the steady hum of the heart monitor.

"How are you feeling?" I asked when her eyes fluttered open.

"Weird. Like I'm swimming." Her words slurred together and her voice sounded far away.

I hummed. "Well, everyone will be really happy you're out of surgery. I've gotten about a million texts asking about you." With that in mind, I quickly texted Bunny, letting everyone know Nora was fine. "I'll be shocked if we don't have a crowd of people on our front porch when we get home to help you recover."

She frowned, shaking her head. "I just want to sleep."

"Sleep all you want," I reassured her, leaning over and rubbing my thumb along her forehead.

"Don't let anyone else come over. I don't want them to see me like this."

"You look great."

Nora hiccuped. "Liar."

The nurse came by an hour later and cleared Nora for discharge. Despite her protestations, an older man loaded her into a wheelchair and pushed her to the entrance while I pulled the car around. I'd packed the front seat with drinks and snacks, but she promptly curled up against the door and fell back asleep.

"Hey, Nora." I rubbed her forearm when we arrived back at the house. Rather than park in the detached garage, I pulled right in front of the brick path to the front door. "We're home. I'm going to come around and help you out."

She murmured unintelligibly, but rolled off the door and onto the seat, her eyes still closed. I rounded the car, opened the passenger door carefully and helped her out of the vehicle.

“I don’t live here,” she protested weakly, her head drooping against my chest.

I tightened my grip around her waist, taking most of the weight off her feet. “Yes, you do.”

Her head lolled up at me, her body resisting the walk up the stairs. “Oh yeah. You carried me up these stairs before.”

I grinned. “Not the stairs. The threshold. You want me to carry you up the stairs?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said, looping her other arm around me.

“You’re not exactly subtle, Nora,” I whispered into her ear as I climbed the steps, balancing her with one arm while I opened the front door.

I deposited her on the couch, tucking her under a blanket and setting the remote beside her before heading into the kitchen for snacks and drinks. When I returned, she had her eyes open, but hadn’t moved from where I’d set her.

“What do you want to watch?” I asked, sinking into the opposite end of the couch.

“Cars?”

“The movie, or?”

“Bikes?” she said groggily.

“How about a food show? Something easy to follow?” I turned on the TV and cued up a reality baking show, one with calming music and friendly contestants.

“You’re so far away,” she muttered, pulling the blanket around her shoulders. “Why are you so far away?” She extended a hand, patting the space between us. “I need help, Andy, drinking.” Twisting her head toward the coffee table, she opened her mouth, nowhere near the pile of drinks just an arm’s length away.

“Okay,” I relented, scooting over to the cushion beside her, picking a bottle of flavored water off the coffee table and holding it up to her mouth. She sipped at the drink, drawing up her legs and nestling into the crook of my arm.

“This is nice,” she whispered between sips. “But you know what would make it better?”

I shook my head. “Bikes?”

“The Price is Right,” she said, tilting her head back to look at me. “Do you remember that show?”

How could I not remember the mainstay of my childhood sick days? “Yeah, absolutely. I think it’s still on the air.”

She hummed and nuzzled her face into my neck, her soft breath making the hairs on my neck raise and my cock hard. Not exactly where my mind should be while she was still loopy from the anesthesia, but with Nora, I couldn’t help myself. “The show reminds me of my mom. Len says I was too little, but I remember her laying with me on the couch and it was playing with that dog guy.”

“Bob Barker.”

“Right, Bob Barker. I had a fever. Or threw up—or both. I can’t remember, but Mom laid on the couch with me, and someone won, and she rubbed my head until I fell asleep. She smelled like vanilla. Like a cake.” She closed her eyes, sighing heavily against my chest. “It felt nice. Like maybe we were a normal family. Like maybe, that time, she’d stay.”

Her breath went steady as the bakers on-screen struggled to make a Boston cream pie. I picked up the blanket that had fallen off her shoulders, pulling it up again and setting my hand on her head, kneading her scalp with my fingertips.

“Just like that,” she sighed, her shoulders relaxing and her bandaged wrist resting on my lap. I worked my fingers through her hair, back and forth. “You make it hard to stay fake married to you.”

I stilled, wondering if I’d misheard her.

I hadn’t.

The words had a wistfulness to them—wanting. Or maybe that was the drugs. Or perhaps I made it up. I waited for her to say something else, but her steady breath assured me she'd fallen asleep.

The baking show continued playing on the television; a dozen bakers dwindling down to eight, and then four, and finally a winner was crowned after completing a twenty-layer cake with fondant, caramelized decoration, and a gingerbread on top for good measure.

“Nora.” I shook her gently.

She moaned, rubbing her face against my chest before stilling. Her eyes popped open, traveling up my chest, a confused look on her face. “What time is it?”

“Just past ten. We should get to bed.”

She blinked slowly before lifting her bandaged arm. “I guess the surgery went okay.”

“It went great. You were a real trooper. Wait here for a minute, though. I’m going to get you one of your pills before I take you upstairs. The surgeon warned me that, once the anesthesia wore off, you’d be in a lot of pain.”

She sat up, rolling her neck and running her fingers through her hair while I found the bottle of pills in the kitchen. She took it, drinking nearly the entire bottle of water in the process.

“You think you can stand up?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m just a little woozy.”

I helped her up. When she stumbled over the leg of the coffee table, I wrapped an arm around her waist, steadying her as we walked up the stairs to her room.

She hadn’t done much with the nearly empty room. She definitely hadn’t touched the credit card and, besides a desk and dresser she’d brought from her apartment, hadn’t even unpacked. I kept telling myself she’d only been in my home for less than a week, but I couldn’t suppress a strange stab of

regret that she hadn't settled in—as if she wasn't ready to make this her home.

I walked her to the bed, and she frowned.

“What is it?”

“Would you mind hanging around for a bit? While I'm getting ready for bed?” She ground out the words reluctantly, as if she were asking too much of me.

I didn't hesitate. “Absolutely.”

I sat on the bed while she brushed her teeth, closing the door behind her while she changed into pajamas. As she emerged from the bathroom, I stood and helped her onto the bed. Her right wrist shook slightly, the bandages tight over her arm. She wore matching pink pajamas, the top button down and the bottoms long. The queen size bed enveloped her as she sunk into the plush mattress.

“Do you need anything?” I asked, scanning the bedside table where I'd set a glass of water, her phone, and her pills. “I could grab your slippers. I think I saw them downstairs. Or something else to drink? Did you want some tea before you go to sleep?”

She shook her head. “No. I don't want to inconvenience you any more than I already have.”

“It's not an inconvenience, Nora. Anything you need.”

She frowned, eyes darting to the open door. “Can I ask you a weird question?” I nodded. “Were you rubbing my head earlier?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I was, actually. You asked me to, said your mom used to do it when you were sick.”

“Once, she did it once,” she corrected me.

Unlike earlier, she sounded lucid, her words clear and bright. I didn't wait for her to ask. “Did you want me to do it again? Just to help you fall asleep?”

She pursed her lips, weighing whether she should say yes. “If you don't mind.”



I shook my head and walked to the opposite side of the bed, laying beside her. The mattress sagged, pulling us together in the center. I wrapped an arm over the pillows, waiting for her to relax into my side.

She didn't melt into me. Not right away. The anesthesia was gone, and her defenses were back in place.

"Relax, Nora," I coaxed her, sinking my fingertips into her hair and working tiny circles down the base of her neck.

She set her palm on my chest, her knee pressing into my thigh. I repressed the urge to bury my face in her hair and pull her closer. For now, this had to be enough.

## CHAPTER 16

## *Nora*

“THERE IS A FIRE IN THE KITCHEN,” THE AI-GENERATED VOICE called, following the announcement with a merry chime.

“I know! I’m taking care of it,” I yelled, opening the oven to a plume of black smoke. Waving the smoke away with my bandaged arm, I searched the countertop for an oven mitt with my good hand.

“The alarm will sound. The alarm is loud.”

“Really?” I glared at the tiny screen threatening me from the kitchen counter.

I donned an oven mitt and pulled the cast iron pan out. Except, I barely cleared the rack before the weight became too much. In a split-second decision, I avoided propping the screaming hot pan on my forearm and let it fall to the ground. Hot potato pieces flew in my face as the cast iron smacked the oven door and the alarm blared.

“Back up!” Andy flew in from seemingly nowhere, pulling a fire extinguisher off the wall, wrapping an arm around my waist, and pushing me behind him.

“It’s fine! It’s not a fire.” I stopped him just before he pulled the pin on the extinguisher. “I think I spilled something on the bottom of the oven. I’m so sorry.”

His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the mess in front of him. Thankfully, the cast iron hadn’t cracked the oven door, but I’d ruined the dish. I suppressed a groan as he turned, a worried expression marring his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine,” I assured him, running a finger through my hair and pulling out a chunk of potato. “I tried to pick that pan up with my good arm. It was a little too heavy for me.”

“Sit down. I’ll clean this up.” Andy loosened his tie and set the fire extinguisher on the countertop.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I made this mess.” Tears threatened the corner of my eyes, and my voice shook. “I’ll clean it up.”

I rushed to the closet and smacked my wrist into the wall with a yelp. The tears spilled down my face as I pulled the broom out, wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand. Andy appeared behind me, his hand softly gripping my elbow.

“Relax.”

“I’ve got to clean this up and find something else for dinner, so we can make it to Bob’s tonight. We can’t blow that off another week.” The words spilled out of my mouth, my voice wavering on the precipice of panic. I tried to move around Andy, but he put his other hand on the broom, peeling it away.

“We can salvage this. It’s just the potatoes. And if we can’t, I’ll run out for a pizza.”

I attempted to evade his grasp, my focus on the mess on the kitchen floor, the smoke escaping from the oven, and the clean laundry basket on the couch.

Andy kept his gaze locked on mine. “Deep breath, Nora.”

I relented. “Fine. One deep breath.” I closed my eyes, inhaling with him and fighting back a smile. “Do you think this is helping?”

“It’s calming me down. I thought you were trying to burn down the kitchen,” he said, cracking his eyes open with a smile. “Although, if this is some ploy to get out of going to Bob’s tonight, can we come up with a less destructive excuse next time?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not that. I want to see everyone. I just thought that I’d recover faster. It’s frustrating.”

In the three weeks since my surgery, I'd done all my daily exercises and gone to therapy, but the surgery zapped my mobility and strength. I could barely dress myself, let alone easily cook a meal.

“Then, take a step back.”

“What does that even mean, Andy?” I sighed, exasperated and tired. Unused to unemployment, I ricocheted around the house all day, searching out projects and finding most impossible in my current state.

“It means you don't need to do all this. The laundry, cooking, cleaning. Hell, I have a housekeeper, and I kept up with the day-to-day mess just fine before you moved in.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. He'd barely inhabited the place. It was more of an empty showroom than a home. “I appreciate what you're doing, but it's unnecessary. We're in this together, remember?” He squeezed my elbow with an inviting smile. “Besides, you'll be busy with schoolwork in the next couple of weeks, and we'll split the chores. Fifty-fifty. Until then, just make getting better your full-time job.”

I worried my bottom lip. “Actually, about school.” He grinned expectantly, making me wish I didn't need to finish the sentence. “I'm not going to sign up for next semester. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't even remember how to study.”

“We'll get tutors.”

“I failed before.”

He shrugged. “You won't this time.”

“What if I'm just wasting your money like I wasted Len's?” The question tumbled out before I could rein it in.

The application sat on my dresser untouched since Andy placed it there, and whenever I moved to fill it out, I was overwhelmed by visions of my last failed attempt.

“I'll just find a job. Cal said my car is all fixed, so I can pay him back and save money until we...”

I cut myself off before I could finish the sentence, but judging by the frown on his face, Andy understood the rest. *Until we divorce.*

“So, you don’t want to be a nurse?”

“I do. It’s just, if I fail, I don’t think I can handle the disappointment.” Or, more accurately, *his* disappointment. “Besides, this will work out just as well. I can start saving money while I live here, enough to avoid getting evicted from my next apartment.”

The joke landed with a wet thud, the furrow on Andy’s forehead growing deeper. “Is that really what you want?”

Of course not. I didn’t want another minimum wage job working for a jerk like Gary.

“Not really,” I admitted. “But I tried going to school before and failed.”

The furrow smoothed. “When?”

“Five years ago.”

“Okay. So, would you agree things are a little different now? Maybe you didn’t do well fresh out of high school. I hate to break it to you, but lots of people nearly failed out of college. Myself included.”

“I’m not joking, Andy.”

“I’m serious. I failed two of my classes freshman year and had to stay an extra year just to catch up.” He shrugged, then picked up the cast iron pan from the floor. “It’ll take as long as it takes. If you think being a full-time student is too much, just sign up for a few classes. But don’t give up entirely.”

I sighed, closing my eyes and tilting my head back before righting myself. “Fine. Fine. I’ll fill out the paperwork tomorrow. But that means I probably won’t be making dinner every night.”

He laughed, an intensely sexy laugh that made my stomach twist into knots. “I think I’ll live. In fact, I’ll cook tomorrow. You haven’t given me a chance to prove that I’m not awful in the kitchen.”

“Not awful?” I echoed. “That doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence.”

“Well, prepare to be pleasantly surprised.” He swept up the last of the potatoes. “Now, let me slice this pork loin, and I’ll make to-go sandwiches while you change. Unless this Survival and Social Club thing is so low-key, you’ll be fine showing up covered in potato seasoning and oil.”

I looked down. Sure enough, I’d coated myself in a mess of potato spices. “Fine, you handle dinner. I’ll get changed.”



We pulled into the parking lot of Bob’s Cars. For the first time since Thea had suggested a weekly meet-up at the convenience store years ago, I didn’t have a familiar zip of excitement. It had been entirely replaced by a nervous energy that consumed me.

“You okay?” Andy asked as he shut off the car. He’d kept one eye on me the entire drive. I didn’t blame him. I could barely sit still, my nerves shot and my body anxious.

“Yeah, we just haven’t had to...” After the trip to New York, the term “pretend” no longer fit our relationship, and I stumbled over describing how we needed to act in public. “You know, in a while.”

He shrugged, unbothered. “We convinced everyone in New York.”

“But they didn’t *know* us. We could have acted like strangers, and maybe they would have just assumed we weren’t a cuddly couple.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t we a cuddly couple?”

Cheeks red, I averted my eyes. “We aren’t really a couple, though, are we?”

The question served as the ice-cold bath I’d intended it to be. Andy straightened and cleared his throat. “I guess not.”

I pushed forward. “What were you like with your exes? We could just do that.”

“Well, we’re not hanging out with my friends tonight. We’re hanging out with yours, so maybe you should answer that question.”

He had a point.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Not overly affectionate. Not cuddly. Formal, even.”

“Formal?” he laughed. “Are newlyweds normally formal with each other?”

I blew out a breath. I certainly didn’t want to be. If anything, I wanted to revert to that touchy-feely relationship we’d pretended to have in New York. I wanted to have his arms around me and his lips on me. I wanted to curl into him, search out his hand, and sit too close.

That was New York us. Franklin Notch us didn’t do things like that.

“Yes. Formal. Polite. Minimal touching,” I decided reluctantly.

That type of relationship would look right. It’d track with the handful of former boyfriends I’d had.

The ghost of a frown crossed Andy’s face but cleared just as fast. “Alright. Let’s get to it, then. I’m channeling 1950s husband. I love Lucy. Brady Bunch. Leave it to Beaver.”

Somehow, this enthusiasm for the plan didn’t stop the fluttering in my stomach. I pushed my nerves aside and exited the car.

Bob’s Cars hummed with activity, locals filling the six folding tables by the twenty-tap bar and spilling into the aisles. On a normal night, I’d grab a bag of chips or trail mix, but, with my stomach in tatters, a drink sounded more appealing.

“There they are!” Thea called from the bar, her firetruck red lips blooming into a smile as a dozen heads turned toward us.



Andy ran his hand down my back, setting his palm on my hip and guiding me toward the bar.

“I thought we said polite?” I murmured, glancing back at him.

“I am being polite,” he said with a grin before tightening his grip on my hip and pulling me back, kissing the side of my forehead.

“Aw!” Thea gushed as we reached the bar. “You’re both too adorable.” An edge of teasing laced her voice, even as her eyes wandered down to Andy’s hands on me. “How’s newlywed life?”

“Never better,” Andy said without waiting for me to respond. “What do you want to drink? I’ll let you catch up with Thea and say hi to everyone. Give Cal a chance to calm down before I approach him.”

I rattled off a beer and ignored Thea’s giggles as Andy squeezed my hip before letting go.

“Well, aren’t you two cozy?”

My cheeks burned, thinking about how cozy we’d become. Three weeks didn’t seem long, but we’d settled into a familiar pattern that may have involved more touching than a standard fake marriage.

“How’s your wrist?”

I twisted it, running my thumb along the healed incision. “Good. Not healing as fast as I wanted, and I’m a little afraid I’ve lost some mobility, but the physical therapist said I’m on track, and the doctors are happy.”

“Good. And your brothers?”

Len visited me twice in the intervening weeks, once with Millie and once alone. The second time, he dropped off a piece of art for my bedroom, which he said looked “depressing,” a tremendous insult from someone who kept his house museum-bare.

Cal, on the other hand, only called. He hadn’t bothered to visit.

“They’re adjusting. Len is ambivalent. Slightly annoyed, but I think that’s because he feels like I jumped some invisible line by getting married before he proposed to Millie.”

“And Cal?” Thea stopped us short of the table, out of earshot.

I shrugged. “Avoiding me. Still annoyed. And I think he knows something’s up.”

“Well, Andy is doing everything in his power to sell this marriage, isn’t he?”

I glanced back at the bar. Andy chatted with the bartender and, when he caught me staring, he shot me a wink. I pulled my eyes away, unsuccessful at keeping a smile off my face.

“Oh, Nora.” Thea pursed her lips knowingly. “You’re in trouble.”

## CHAPTER 17

*Andy*

BY THE SECOND DRINK, THE TENSION IN MY SHOULDERS EASED and I could take an even breath. Sure, Nora filled every silence with nervous chatter, exacerbated each time I risked touching her and Cal continued to shoot daggers in my direction, but the rest of the group had accepted our marriage with little fanfare and welcomed me into the fold.

Progress.

“So, you took Nora on a business trip honeymoon?” Thea asked mischievously, smoothing out the pleats on her red dress and crossing one black-heeled leg over the other.

“That wasn’t the honeymoon,” I answered, startlingly Nora.

Thea raised a sculpted eyebrow. “So, when will the honeymoon happen then?”

Nora set her hand on my knee, distracting me from a response. “I’m starting school, so once classes are over for the summer, right?”

“Or you could just go now,” Thea prodded.

“I’m still recovering,” Nora said at the same time I answered, “I’m actually traveling for the next couple of weeks.”

Nora stilled. “What?”

“I’m going to Texas and then California, and I think Chicago. It’s on our calendar.”

She fumbled for her phone, pulling it out and opening the app. Her brow furrowed, confusion clouding her brown eyes. “Three... no, four weeks?”

“I thought you knew,” I said under my breath.

Nora tittered nervously. “I didn’t check the calendar. I thought we had more time.”

I rubbed her shoulder. “It’ll be fine. It’s just a few weeks.”

“Yeah,” she said reluctantly, lowering her voice. “I just thought you’d be gone for a weekend, not weeks at a time. Like New York.”

I winced. “I don’t have a choice, Nora.”

“Right.” She shrugged and followed the tense movement with a forced smile. “I should have checked.”

We had one more drink before everyone started heading home for the night. I stepped outside with Nora, helping her into the car and driving home. To our home.

Nora stayed quiet on the ride, and I let the silence eat at me until we made our way inside and upstairs. I stood at her bedroom door, palm on the doorframe. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Another forced smile. This one was accompanied by a glint of tears in her eyes. Great.

“Did you want to talk about it?” I asked.

She nodded, beckoning me in. I sat at the foot of her bed while she rummaged in her dresser for pajamas. She pulled out a pair, setting them on her hip. “I just didn’t know you’d be gone for so long.”

“Yeah,” I drawled, my chest tight. “This trip is a long one. I might be able to come home in the middle, for a weekend, maybe. Or you can fly out to see me.”

She shook her head, padding into the bathroom and partially closing the door so she could change. I suppressed a groan at, arguably, the worst part of our evening ritual.

“I can’t. Since you insisted going to college isn’t a waste of money, I took a few half-semester classes. Just to get my

feet wet,” she called from the other side of the door.

“It’s not a waste of money. You’re going to do great.” I smoothed my hands over my pants, palms sweaty and struggling to keep my eyes anywhere but on the bathroom door.

“But who’ll make sure I study?” she teased.

The tension in my shoulders abated. “I’m sure you’ll have plenty of volunteers.”

She poked her head out, toothbrush in her hand and brown eyes bright. “But I want you.”

She retreated back into the bathroom, and I laid back on the bed with a groan. Maybe the trip would be a good thing. My obsession with Nora had only amplified since we’d married. Little offhand comments like that only made my obsession worse.

I pushed myself back to sitting just as she emerged from the bathroom, face washed clean and cheeks pink. A smile spread across her lips as she took me in, her head listing onto the door frame.

“Can we sleep in your room tonight?”



I’d never been a morning person. Sure, I forced myself up because, for whatever reason, a career in the fitness industry presumed being a morning person. So, I pulled myself out of bed for six A.M. yoga sessions at conferences and ran with the rising sun, but deep down, I just wanted to burrow under the covers and sleep well past ten.

Then, I’d started spending every night in bed with Nora.

The first night had been innocent enough. Still loopy from surgery, she’d invited me to lie down and I’d fallen asleep beside her. The next night, she turned down the anything except ibuprofen and I offered to rub her head to help her fall asleep. She agreed.

A few nights later, her pain had been so far down the scale that she hadn't even asked for an aspirin, she'd simply thrown back the covers on my side of the bed, and I crawled in. We didn't speak about it after that. I couldn't be sure of Nora's excuse, but I worried the fragile deal we'd made would crumble the minute I talked about the way our arrangement had morphed.

Suddenly, I became a morning person. Because every night, we started on opposite sides of the bed, but by the morning, I woke up curled around her; Nora's soft breath on my shoulder, her fingers burrowed into the fabric of my shirt, and her leg thrown over mine, pinning me to the bed.

I wasn't completely innocent either. My arms would be wound tight around her waist, my palm worked under her shirt and pressed to the small of her bare back. I'd trained myself to stay still when I woke up, careful not to move. Because if I did, Nora would inevitably open her eyes, pop out of bed, and pretend she had no clue how we'd ended up in each other's arms. In seconds, she'd mutter something about breakfast and dart out the door.

This morning, I opened my eyes half an hour before the alarm sounded. She had her injured arm on my chest and her leg slung over my thighs. The top button of her pajamas had come undone overnight, pink lace peeking out beneath the cotton fabric. I held in a groan, my morning wood nearly unbearable. But she'd wake up the minute I shifted to relieve some of the pressure.

"So, what day do you leave?"

She was already awake.

"Next Monday," I rasped, my body going still as I waited for her to bolt.

Only she didn't. She stayed in my arms, sinking into my chest, her fingers twisting around the hem of my shirt.

"And it's four weeks?"

"I can probably come home for a weekend."

Her fingers clenched and then released. She sat up.

“I’ll make coffee before you go.”

She left the room, closing the door behind her. I released the groan that had been caught in my chest, throwing an arm over my eyes. My mind split between immediately climbing into the shower to rub one out or calling Brad and canceling the next four weeks of meetings. Neither option was ideal, given the circumstances.

I pulled my phone off the bedside charger and flipped through the meetings, looking for gaps and finding none. I searched the community college class schedule and found no relief there, either. Short of tanking one of our obligations, I would have to make peace with Nora spending nearly a month alone.

Or maybe not.

I sat up, showering and changing into a white shirt and a pair of shorts. I jogged downstairs with a plan.

My plan was knocked out of importance the moment I spotted Nora in the kitchen. She had her hair up in a spiky ponytail, and the aroma of freshly ground coffee hung in the air. She stood in front of an open cabinet, reaching for a mug on the top shelf, her shirt raised to expose bare skin and her shorts grazing the bottom of her ass.

The hard-on I’d successfully abated with a cold shower came back. Great. I averted my eyes and slid into the breakfast nook before drawing her attention to the fact I’d walked into the room.

“Don’t worry about my breakfast this morning. I’ve got an early meeting with Nolan.”

She nodded, setting the cup back on the shelf and pulling out a travel mug instead. “I made some overnight oats if you want to take those with you.”

“That sounds great.”

“I made lunch, too.”

I grinned as she poured my coffee. “You didn’t need to do that.”



“I want to,” she said as she set the coffee in front of me and returned to the kitchen, digging out a lunch box and loading breakfast and lunch inside.

My cock under some semblance of control, I stood and grabbed the bag from the counter, coffee in my other hand. “You know, I was thinking, while I’m gone, maybe you’d like some company?”

She arched an eyebrow at me. “Company? I’m sure Bunny wouldn’t mind staying in town with me for a bit. If you don’t mind, that is.”

I shook my head, and she followed me to the door. “Of course, I don’t mind, if you’d like her here, but that wasn’t exactly what I was thinking.” Nora held my things while I put on a coat and opened the door. “I was thinking more like a dog.”

Her eyes widened.

Okay, maybe I’d misjudged her interest in dogs.

“Or not. A cat? Or no pets at all?”

She followed me onto the porch, unflinching as her bare feet touched the cold boards. “I can have a dog?”

I nodded, my chest tightening as a smile spread over her lips.

“I can have a dog?” She repeated.

“It’s a big house, and the backyard is fenced. The only reason I don’t have a dog is because I travel all the time.” I listed the excuses that had rattled around my head for years now.

“I can have a dog,” she whispered. The soft smile turned slightly maniacal before she launched herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs clamped around my waist.

I dropped my lunch, cradling her ass with my free hand and moving the coffee away as she kissed my cheek.

“You’re sure?”

I laughed. “We can go look at dogs tonight, if you want.”

She nodded, kissing my cheek again. I should have come up with this plan a week ago, a month ago, the first time I saw Nora melting over the coffee lady’s yappy puppy.

“Can we please? What kind of dog? A big dog? A puppy?”

“Any dog you want. Whatever makes you happy.”

She rested her forehead on mine, arms tightening around my neck. “I’m going to look up dogs at the shelter today. Now. Thank you.”

Before I could respond, Nora kissed my cheek again, her lips brushing to the corner of my mouth. Then, she kissed me in earnest. She softly nipped my lower lip into her mouth as her legs clenched against my waist.

I dropped the coffee, the metal container loudly banging on the wooden deck. I ran my hand up the back of her neck, working loose her hair and running my fingers through it.

Then, just as fast as she’d jumped into my arms, she pulled away, her face burning red as I set her down.

“For the neighbors,” she said, stooping to pick up my lunch box.

“Right. Keeping up appearances,” I agreed, even as my heart lurched. I grabbed the travel mug and surveyed the empty street.

“I’ll see you tonight?” she asked, exchanging my lunch with the mug.

“I’ll come home before the shelter closes.”

## CHAPTER 18

## *Nora*

I CURLED UP ON THE PLUSH RED CHAISE LOUNGE BY THE BAY window, pressing “submit” on my college application just as Andy pulled into the driveway. I promised myself, not for the first time that day, I’d keep that enthusiasm and my hands to myself.

“Guess what I just did,” I greeted him as he opened the front door, turning my laptop screen to face him.

He hung up his coat, dropped his empty lunch bag on the small table by the door, and crossed the room. His blue eyes lit up as he read the automated reply to my completed application. “That’s great! I’m so proud of you.”

My body warmed. Sure, I hadn’t started a business or opened a chain of gyms, but Andy had the same earnest enthusiasm as if I had.

“I think you deserve a puppy for all that hard work.”

A grin broke out on my face and I closed the window with my college application to pull up half a dozen dogs I’d picked out at the shelter. “What kind of dog are we getting? I’ve got some puppies, some older adults, and an adorable chihuahua.” He cleared his grimace quickly, but I closed that tab just the same. “Okay, no teapot dogs.”

“Nothing yappy,” he said, before hedging the request. “Unless that’s what you want.”

I shrugged. “I’m easy.”

I regretted my words almost instantly. Part of the reason I'd kept myself busy all morning, unpacking boxes, applying to college, cleaning the kitchen, and making a week's worth of lunches, was to keep my mind off our kiss that morning. I'd been excited. Too excited. And the kiss had been...well, certainly not a mistake.

A misstep. One that been on the horizon ever since I'd invited Andy into my bed.

Having him there had been a line I hadn't meant to breach, but once we'd done it once, I hadn't stopped. Couldn't stop? Of course, I *could* stop. I didn't want to.

I blamed how he rubbed my head before I fell asleep. I had a Pavlovian response to his fingertips making circles on my scalp, leaving me sleepy, calm, and entirely at his mercy. It was a blatant violation of the deal we made, but completely innocent.

Until I launched myself at him like a rabid howler monkey on the porch that morning.

"Well." His lips cocked up in a grin. "We should probably get to the shelter before it closes."

I followed him outside, eyeing the pristine sports car as he unlocked the doors.

"You sure you want a dog in this car?"

He shrugged. "Unless you plan on adopting a mastiff, we'll have plenty of room."

"That seems like the type of dog you'd want. Something big and outdoorsy," I mused as I slid into the passenger seat. "Or maybe a peppy golden retriever, or a rugged pit."

"Maybe." He shrugged. "But what about you? I bet you want a couch potato who loves pets and loafing. A cocker spaniel, or one of those mixed breeds with a name like cockapoo or chiweenie."

"A what?"

"Don't feign ignorance. You've been trawling the pugaranian site for weeks."

I laughed. “Yeah, I’ve been waiting for you to offer me a puppy that costs more than my apartment.” I rolled my eyes. “But honestly, you’re sure I can have a dog? I don’t want to mess up your house.”

“*Our* house,” he corrected. “And I’m sure. This is perfect. I’ll feel better, security-wise, and you’ll have company while I’m out of town. Win-win.”

We pulled up to the shelter—or rather, the local vet’s office that took in stray dogs and unexpected litters. Everyone once in a while, a bus from the overrun shelters down south pulled in and dumped a load of dogs, mostly hunting dogs. But based on their social media feed, the vet only had a limited selection of local strays.

“Ready to find our new best friend?” I asked excitedly.

Andy grinned. “As long as you don’t make me take home a shitzpoo.”

“No promises.”

We greeted the receptionist, who ferried us past the practice rooms and into the back of the building. “Are you looking for young one? Because we’ve only got seniors and young adults right now. No puppies.”

I checked Andy’s face for any disappointment.

He shrugged. “I didn’t particularly want to spend the last few days I have at home teaching a puppy to pee outside.”

“Excellent point,” I conceded.

“Well,” the receptionist said, motioning to the various kennels. “They’re all friendly enough. Check them out, but just take one out at a time. If you decide to take one home, come back and see me.”

She retreated to her desk and I looped my arm around Andy’s, pulling him down the line of cages. We passed an older German shepherd, a cute corgi, and a black retriever mix. We made our way to the final cage, and I stopped in my tracks, sucking in a breath and looking at Andy expectantly.

“Seriously?” His eyes widened, taking in the dog and then me. “That one?”

“He’s adorable.” I tugged Andy’s arm as the dog craned his face toward us, tongue lolling out of his mouth.

“He was staring at the wall. That can’t be normal.” His voice held a tinge of reserve, one I felt confident I could overcome.

“He’s just lonely. Let’s take him out and say hi.”

I unlatched the kennel while Andy ran his forefinger down the information sheet that hung on the wall beside his kennel. “He doesn’t even have a name. They just left it blank.”

I tutted at the dog, opening the door and putting my hand on the ground. The shaggy brown boy eyed me. Well, eyed with his one good eye, anyway. The other wandered off toward the ceiling. Then, he trotted to greet me. Once he was within reach, I brushed my fingers over his coat and he immediately collapsed, turning onto his stomach.

“He likes me!” I exclaimed, looking up at Andy.

He softened, his frown turning into a reluctant smile as he crouched beside me. “Hi, Blank.”

“Don’t call him that,” I scolded with a laugh. “He needs a real name. Something that fits him.”

“So, this dog is coming home with us?”

Even though he had offered to let *me* have a dog, I wanted Andy to fall in love with him, too. “Let’s sit with him for a few minutes to see if we all get along.”

Andy shook his head, dropping onto the cement floor with me. The dog wiggled on its back, wedging himself between us as his tongue lapped at our thighs.

“He’s cute,” Andy conceded as he ran a palm down the dog’s stomach. “And he’s a good size, probably an excellent runner. That paper said he’s two years old, so he’s not getting any bigger.”

“What do you think?” I asked, doing my best to suppress an ear-to-ear grin.

“I think we found our dog.”



Armed with an obscene amount of pet accessories and a large pizza, Andy, our newest addition to the family, and I pulled into the driveway after seven. While Andy unloaded the car, I attempted to get the dog to go to the bathroom. Finally, we all collapsed in the living room, eating pizza while the dog fawned over each of his new toys one by one.

“You’ve already spoiled him,” I told Andy as the dog dropped a ball for a stuffed banana.

“I wasn’t sure which toy Blank would like best. Is he a ball dog or a stuffed banana dog? We couldn’t know for sure.”

I picked up a second slice of pizza. “We need to find him a name. I’m not calling my dog ‘Blank.’”

“Fair. How about Diesel?”

I groaned. “Does that dog look like a Diesel?”

As if sensing us talking about him, the dog looked up from his banana, tongue flopping out of his mouth and one eye on the ceiling.

“No,” Andy laughed. “Not a Diesel.”

The dog sniffed around the toys, losing interest in the pile as he realized he had a whole house to explore.

“Loopy?” Andy asked.

“That’s so mean.” The dog ambled into the kitchen. “Should I follow him?”

He shrugged. “He just went pee, right? He’s probably fine. Rod?”

“Rod?”



“Like Rod Stewart. Isn’t that dog you walk named Maggie?”

“That’s a reach.”

“Trashcan.”

My eyes widened and I dropped the pizza away from my mouth. “Seriously, Andy, that’s a terrible name.”

“No,” he said, pointing behind me. “He’s in the trash can.”

I turned to watch the dog wander by the kitchen entrance, the trash can cover stuck over his head. He slammed into the wall, turning 180 degrees and crashing into another. Laughter coursed through me as Andy crossed the room. Sweeping the dog up in one arm, Andy removed the lid from his head, and the dog rewarded him with a messy lick across the face.

Tears rolled down my face as my laughter went from heaving to silence.

Andy plopped onto the floor beside me, placing our dog on my lap. “Definitely a Trashcan.”

Exhausted from his run-in, the dog set his head on my lap and closed his eyes, his extended tongue soaking the leg of my jeans. Andy pet his head.

“I’m not naming him Trashcan,” I said.

Andy ruffled his hair. “You’ll always be Trashcan to me, little guy.”

He dropped his hand onto my knee, the living room quiet except for the sound of our dog softly snoring.

“Do you really have to go?” I asked, not bothering to mask my disappointment.

He nodded, his face falling. “Afraid so. Want to make a weekend trip out to California to see me?”

“And leave him behind?” I said, nodding down at the mop of fur on my lap.

“He could come, too.”

“Or you could come home?”

“I can try.”

I pursed my lips, refusing to ask again. I sounded desperate and had no business stopping Andy from leaving town. Heck, it was part of our deal. Still, I'd grown used to being around him. He felt warm and comfortable, and only now that he was leaving did I realize how much I'd miss having him in the house.

“But,” he said, the edge of his lips tilting up. “I will miss you.”

His grip tightened on my knee, and my stomach flipped.

“I'll miss you too,” I said.

My mind flashed back to the kiss on the porch, the feeling of Andy's arms around me, his palm on my ass and his lips crashing into mine. Chills ran down my spine as I let my eyes fall to his mouth, watching his smile fade and his breath catch.

With so little time left before he left town, I abandoned the carefully constructed rules I had set for myself when I agreed to marry him. I leaned closer, daring him to kiss me.

He sucked in a breath, his eyes darting from my lips to my eyes and back again—asking permission without saying a word. I tilted my head up, leaning closer until I could feel the warmth of his skin.

He kissed me then, lifting his hand off my knee and cradling my face. His lips, warm and soft, coaxed me closer. His tongue skirted the bottom of my lips, then delved inside.

I sucked in a shuttered breath as warmth seeped through my body.

“Careful,” I warned, pulling away and glancing at the dog asleep on my lap. “We should probably crate him.”

Andy nodded, scooping up the dog and walking him over to the crate in the corner of the room. He placed the dog inside, closing the door. I covered the crate with a sheet, hoping he wouldn't chew through come morning.

Andy wound his fingers through my hair as I stood, pulling me in for another kiss. “My bedroom or yours?”

## CHAPTER 19

## *Nora*

“YOURS,” I ANSWERED WITHOUT HESITATION, HEDGING MY excitement with a gulp. “I’m just going to stop by my room quickly.”

Andy nipped my bottom lip before brushing another kiss over my mouth and releasing me. I climbed the steps on wobbly legs, cheeks red with the knowledge that he stood at the bottom watching my every step.

I wanted Andy, desperately.

A nagging voice in the back of my head warned me sleeping with Andy was a terrible idea. I should listen to that voice. Instead, the kiss on the porch convinced me I couldn’t spend another night dreaming of him and waking up with a desperate throbbing between my legs.

I’d stashed the overnight bag Bunny and Thea had packed in the corner of my closet, not bothering to unpack the frilly contents. At the time, I’d been convinced I was about to enter a four-year dry spell and didn’t want the pieces taunting me from the underwear drawer.

Sending a silent thank you into the universe, I rifled through the bag, setting the three sets of lingerie on the bed for comparison. I couldn’t decide who was to blame for the white set, which was little more than a piece of lace and some thread, but that would stay in my closet for now. I ran my hand over the light blue two-piece set, but eliminated it from contention when I spotted the ruffled butt. The last set was

perfect: a pale pink crop top with red hearts and a matching short set.

I pulled off my clothes and changed into the outfit. The top hugged my torso, skirting the bottom of my rib cage and leaving plenty of exposed skin without overemphasizing my small chest. The shorts were ridiculously short, only barely covering my ass. The outfit suggested sex, but it wasn't explicit, so on the off chance I sauntered into Andy's room and he had no interest in sleeping with me, at least I'd have some plausible deniability.

I gathered my nerve and walked down the hallway as confidently as I could manage, pausing briefly to pull the shorts out of my ass before I knocked the open door. I feigned nonchalance as I leaned against the frame, an indifference that quickly crumbled at the sight of Andy standing in his bedroom, wearing only a pair of shorts.

My voice caught in my throat as my eyes traveled down his Adam's apple, over his broad shoulders and well-defined abs. The shorts hung low on his waist, a soft v carved into his hips, an arrow to all the dirty thoughts I'd racked up over the last few weeks.

"Hey," he said, voice low and throaty. He gave me an appreciative once-over. My face heated as I padded into the room.

My nerves got the best of me. Operating on muscle memory, I walked to my side of the bed, pushing back the covers and climbing in, as if this were a completely normal night—as if I'd donned the modest pajama set I picked up at a thrift shop ages ago for a chaste sleepover.

I glanced over at Andy, his eyes still locked on me, but the lust on his face faded slightly. He rounded the bed, taking his time to pull back the sheets and lay beside me.

"We don't have to do anything if you changed your mind," he whispered, running his fingers through my hair. The touch sent chills through me.

"You think I'm changing my mind?" I asked.

He grinned. “You practically jumped under the covers. I didn’t even get time to appreciate those new pajamas.”

My cheeks burned. I hesitantly lowered the sheet off my chest and down my waist. “A wedding gift from Thea.”

“We sent a thank-you card, right?” He brushed his thumb down my waist.

I choked back a laugh. “This is the tame one, too.”

His azure eyes burned brightly as he grazed over the fabric of my shorts. I sucked in a breath as he ran the tips of his fingers along the hem to my inner thigh.

He probed at the flimsy fabric, pushing my legs apart, his eyes locked on mine. “Do you want this? Me touching you like this?”

My entire body flamed, a mixture of being turned on and embarrassed simultaneously. Sex had largely been a quiet affair with my previous partners, happening under the cover of dark. One ex had even referred to me as a ‘church mouse.’ Not exactly high praise.

“Yes,” I choked out.

“Do you want me to keep going?”

I nodded.

“Where?” The edge of his lip tilted up, encouraging and prodding me at the same time.

“Higher.” The word escaped my lips garbled—an unintelligible mess.

The pressure of his cock on my leg sent a thrill down my spine.

“Good,” he murmured, his eyes flitting down as his hand moved up my thigh, past the hem of my shorts, his knuckles brushing against my damp slit.

Despite my hips wanting to buck up to meet his touch, I stayed pinned to the bed.

“You’re not wearing any underwear.”

With his eyes off my face, the grip on my throat loosened, allowing me to form full thoughts. “I don’t wear them to bed.”

He groaned, closing his eyes and tilting his head back. “I’m glad I didn’t know that before tonight.”

I relaxed a little, the admission making me feel slightly more in control. “Why’s that?”

His eyes opened, blinding blue searing mine. “I already woke up hard every morning we shared a bed. Knowing you were naked under those sweatpants and shirt would have been impossible to bear.”

“And yet, somehow, you made it,” I teased, tamping down the smug satisfaction that I had any effect on him at all.

“I have no plans on making it through another night,” he murmured, brushing his lips down my neck as his thumb sank into me, touching my clit.

I kept my hips on the bed only through sheer force of will, a low moan escaping. Andy’s lips tilted in a pleased smile as he repeated the movement. I didn’t resist this time, letting my body arch up to meet him. I sucked in a shuttered breath as he withdrew his hand, pulling my shorts off and throwing them on the floor.

“No bra either?” he asked, his eyes lazily working their way up my legs, past my bare torso, and skimming the only piece of clothing that remained. I shook my head, and he sunk his head close to mine. “You might be the death of me.”

As if to prove him right, I ran a hand along the tight muscles on his stomach, my fingertips sinking under the fitted waistband of his pants, down past the soft nest of curls. I wrapped my palm around his hard length, watching his eyes flutter.

“I take that back. You’ll definitely be the death of me,” he said, voice low and tight.

My body pulsed, legs squeezing together. My chest felt so tight I could barely breathe. I gripped him, slowly working down his length and back up again. Andy squeezed his eyes

closed and tilted his head forward. Without letting go, I sat up, kissing and stroking him softly.

“I want you in me,” I said, the words barely a whisper but more than I’d ever said to any man before.

At the request, his eyes opened, locking with mine. “Yeah. Let me just...” He closed his eyes again. “Shit. I hate to ask, but can you stop that for a minute?”

I grinned, letting him go and pulling my hand out of his pants. He moved lightning fast, nearly toppling me over to rummage around the bedside table, retrieving a condom from inside. In a second, he had his pants off, condom in place, and before I could lie back on the bed, his arms around me, pulling me onto his lap.

I wiggled against him, body screaming for release as he wrapped a hand around my waist, the other sliding beneath my shirt and cupping my breast. My head fell back, my hips rocking against him as he replaced his hand with his lips. His tongue swirled over my pebbled nipple and sent tiny tendrils of pleasure through me.

The grip on my back tightened. I raised my hips, sinking onto him, a mixture of relief and rapture coursing through me. Andy released a breath against my chest. His mouth moved onto mine as he rocked beneath me, each gentle wave of movement bringing me closer to a release that had been brewing in me since the day he proposed.

His lips caressed mine as the hand pressed against my hip wound its way up my side, his fingers entwined in my hair. My soft moans grew louder as I matched the movement of his hips, our bodies pressed against each other. I burrowed my head into Andy’s shoulder as he thrust one last time, his body rigid, and my vision tunneled as I pitched over the edge of pleasure, leaving me blank and breathless.



## CHAPTER 20

## *Nora*

I WOKE UP THE FOLLOWING DAY IN BED. ALONE.

The cold air hit my body as I sat up and pulled the sheets around my naked body. I'd never been the type to sleep naked, but last night had drained all the energy out of me until I'd collapsed in bed, too exhausted to care.

I rooted around the mattress, searching for my clothes but coming up empty. A note sat on the side table.

*Took Trashcan out for a run. Be back  
around 9 with breakfast.*

*XOXO, Andy*

I grinned, joy gripping my chest as I sunk back into the bed. Sleeping with Andy was fine, right? I'd certainly enjoyed myself and Andy, for his part, seemed into it. Even though he was leaving on Monday, a sense of calm washed over me.

My phone buzzed on the side table, and I grabbed it.

“Good morning, Thea.”

“And what a morning it is,” she replied. “I just saw Andy running through Main Street with a derpy-looking dog, and you sound like sex. What is going on at your house?”

My cheeks heated. “Well, we adopted a dog and...” A ridiculous grin broke out on my face. Thea was the only

person in the world who would understand the significance of me having sex with my husband. “We slept together.”

“Really?” she squealed on the other end of the line. “I’m not saying that proposing marriage was the right way to go about a relationship, but go him. Go you! So, this marriage is the real deal now?”

“No,” I answered reflexively. “Maybe. I’m not sure. We didn’t talk about the details while we were...”

“Boning?”

“Gross.”

“Making love?” She drawled. I had the same visceral reaction as before.

“Not that either.”

“Banging?”

“That’ll work.”

“I’m happy for you. He’s a great guy, and I certainly didn’t want to be involved when you broke it to your family that you married him for his insurance.”

The words tempered my post-sex euphoria.

“Too soon?” Thea asked.

“I just hadn’t thought about what sleeping with him actually meant.”

“That you’re an attractive married couple?”

“What happens if this fake marriage turns into a real marriage?”

“I don’t see how that’s a problem.”

“Len and Cal would never forgive me if they ever found out. And what’s the alternative? We lie for the rest of our lives?” I winced. “No. I’m not thinking about that. We just slept together. I don’t even know what means.”

“That he likes you?”

I scoffed. “Obviously. But he’s leaving for a month and, until last night, this was a strictly platonic arrangement.”

“So, how about you just... ask him?”

Thea made it sound like the easiest thing in the world, and if I didn’t care about his response, it would have been.

But I liked Andy. Really liked him. And I’d leveraged the next four years of my life on maintaining a platonic relationship with him.

“I could, but what if he says it’s just a one-time thing?”

“Then, it’s a one-time thing. Was it good?”

“Phenomenal.”

“Well,” Thea sighed. “That’s certainly a problem.”

The sound of the front door opening, followed by dog nails tapping against hardwood traveled upstairs.

“Shit, Andy’s back, and I need to put clothes on.”

“Were you talking to me naked? Still in bed?”

I gasped. “I’m not dignifying that question with a response.”

“Nora, you vixen. We’ll catch up later.”

I hung up the phone and slipped out of bed. With no clothes to be found, I pulled one of Andy’s shirts over my head and made a break for my bedroom. Much too slowly, though, because Andy called me to a stop as I passed the steps.

“Good morning.”

“Hey,” I greeted him, neck tensing as I gave a lame wave, my feet still pointing to my bedroom.

“Come down. I have breakfast.” He held up a bag and two coffees as the dog lunged for me, his legs skittering across the floor even as his leash held him tight against Andy.

With one last look toward my bedroom and the bra and underwear I should wear, I padded downstairs to join them in the kitchen.

“How’d you sleep?” Andy set down the coffee and pulled two breakfast sandwiches out of the bag. When I slid past him, he gripped my hip and pulled me in for a kiss.

“Good,” I said, flustered and breathless. I sat, fiddling with the lid of my coffee as Andy squeezed in beside me.

He placed his arm over the back of the bench, his fingertips grazing my arm and leaving goosebumps in their wake. “How’s your wrist feeling?”

“Fine.” As if to prove it to myself, I held it up, bending it back and forth. “I don’t have another physical therapy appointment until next week, but it’s getting stronger.”

He kissed the side of my head, sending my mind spinning, before taking his arm off my shoulder and opening his breakfast sandwich. “Is this the last week? If it’s still bothering you, even a little, book some more appointments.”

“I’ve got an appointment with my surgeon on Tuesday. I’ll see what she says.”

“I can go with—” He stopped short, cheeks flushing. “You’ll have to let me know what she says.”

“I will,” I promised before sipping my coffee. Extra Creamer and two sugars. Exactly how I liked it. “So, what are you up to today?”

He tossed a piece of bacon onto the floor, and our dog happily scarfed it down in a single bite. “I’ve got some admin things to do at the gym before I leave town, so I’m making a trip to Pierce. And then sometime this weekend, I’ve got to run down to Manchester to check in on the new gym’s progress.”

“Oh,” I said, picking at my sandwich, oddly disappointed. Not that we’d spent our weekends together before. Besides family dinner on Sunday, I mostly stayed around Franklin Notch, catching up with friends or taking Mags for walks. Meanwhile, Andy made weekend trips to the gym and worked in his office.

“Did you and Trashcan want to come with me?”

“Yes,” I said, jumping at the chance to spend more time with him. “But that dog’s name is not Trashcan.”

“It fits him. Isn’t that right, Trashcan?” To make his point, Andy threw a bit of English muffin on the floor only to have the dog Hoover it up instantly. “Besides, your classes start next week and you need books. We can pick them up at the campus bookstore while we’re in Pierce.”

I pursed my lips. Buying books had been on my to-do list, but I had planned on ordering used copies online. If I let Andy take me to the bookstore, he’d buy new, plunking down his credit card before I could say no. Still, my pride could take the hit if I got to spend some more time with him. “Okay.”

“Great!” he said, casually eating the last of his breakfast and finishing the food with a slug of coffee. “I need a shower. How about we head out around ten?”

I nodded as he wadded up his wrapper and stood from the table. He gave me a tilted grin before running up the stairs, Trashcan following along behind him.



“Please tell me these are wrapped in gold or something.” I turned over the wrapped book, the three-digit price tag on the back giving me something akin to the vapors. “I thought community college was supposed to be cheap.”

Andy laughed, pulling Trashcan away from a pile of sweaters. He had charmed the bored-looking young woman manning the counter into letting us bring the dog inside, claiming it was too hot inside the car to leave him, despite the fact the weather hadn’t broken fifty degrees in days.

“I think I spent a grand on books my first semester. We’re only looking at...” He shuffled the stack of books in his hand, mentally tallying up the damage. “Four hundred. Five with all the other supplies.”

“I’m not buying other supplies here,” I said under my breath, my eyes shooting at the employee who seemed more

interested in a copy of *Basic Calculus* than us. “They’re so expensive.”

He shrugged. “Let’s buy everything now and make it easy on you. You’ll be busy with school and Trashcan. Do you really want to make a special shopping trip for highlighters and notebooks?”

He had a point. The only grocery store in Franklin Notch pulled down their school display in early September, and the closest superstore was an hour away.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “But I’m only buying things I can’t raid from your office.”

He smiled, wrapping his arm around me and kissing my forehead. “Whatever makes you happy.”

He made me happy, but I certainly wasn’t going to admit that.

I’d wanted to talk about the night before dozens of times on the drive to Pierce, but chickened out. What could I say?

*Hey, thanks for the sex. So, are we together?*

With Andy leaving for a month, it probably meant we’d just diffused some built-up sexual tension in time to go back to our original agreement. I was too much of a coward to hear that directly from his mouth, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Alright, that’s the last book. *History of Ancient Greece*. Sounds like a real page-turner. Now, let’s check out the school supplies.” Andy corralled me toward the wall of highlighters, pens, and notebooks and excitedly grabbed stacks of supplies based on the over-inflated list sent by my professors.

I put half of them back, dragging him to the counter before he saddled me with half a dozen yearly planners. “You’re not going to college, Andy, and I don’t need half this stuff.”

He set the stack on the counter. “But you might. And since I don’t trust you to buy use my credit card while I’m gone, I’m making sure you’re stocked up. Let me spoil you a little, Nora.”

He ribbed my side, and I relented with a grin.

“I hope when I get married, my husband wants to spoil me too,” the employee said with a soft smile as she scanned the books.

“Oh, he’s not my—”

Andy interjected before I could finish my sentence. “Newlyweds. She keeps forgetting we made it legal.”

He placed his hand over mine, squeezing it.

“Cute!” she gushed, bagging the books and supplies up. “Well, welcome to college! Maybe I’ll see you around.”

I waved goodbye, embarrassed at my mistake. I chanced a glance over at Andy and he gave me a sad smile.

“Still takes me off guard too,” he admitted. “Saying we’re married.”

“I can’t believe it’s already been a month.”

“Well, considering we never dated and were only engaged for a week and a half, it’s still new. Besides, it’s easier to remember when it matters: my investors, your family. No offense to her, but does it matter if she knows?”

My stomach tightened as I bit back the question that had been gnawing at me all morning because he’d laid it out so easily. As long as we kept up appearances, nothing else mattered. And whatever happened between us, well, that was tangential.

“No,” I agreed. “Not at all.”



## CHAPTER 21

*Andy*

“THIS IS A ONE-TIME THING. FOR NORA,” GLORIA GRUMBLED as one of her younger employees muscled a table outside onto the sidewalk. “I don’t even know if it’s legal to have a table out here, but the weather’s nice enough.”

I’d hoped to sneak Trashcan into a table in the back, but Gloria, the ancient owner of the finest establishment in Franklin Notch, quickly put an end to that idea. Instead, Nora talked her into pulling a table outside so we could keep Trashcan with us and soak up the unexpected sunshine as New England hurdled toward winter.

“Hell, maybe I can petition the town council to allow outdoor seating. Sure could use a few extra tables in the summer and the fall,” Gloria said, setting down a paper menu at each seat and a bundle of utensils.

I gave her my best, most earnest smile, and shucked off my jacket, placing it around Nora’s shoulders. “I appreciate it. We just adopted him, and he’s got a bit of attachment anxiety.”

“I’ll get the thing a bowl of water.” Gloria waved her hand dismissively and shuffled back inside the diner.

“I think she likes you,” Nora said, a gleam in her eye.

“No, she likes you. She was ready to kick me out.”

Nora had gone through her course syllabuses while I worked my way through the stack of papers left at work. We returned to Franklin Notch by early evening, exhausted. Despite Nora offering to make dinner, I drove us straight to the diner instead.

Gloria returned with drinks and a bowl of water for Trashcan, who happily lapped it up before laying across Nora's feet for a nap.

"You think he's going to remember me when I come back?"

She laughed. "Probably. He's going to be disappointed when he finds out I don't go for runs."

"Don't worry. He wasn't exactly a runner. He sprinted for the first few minutes and then wanted to sniff everything."

"Think he'll get along with Mags?"

I shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Trashcan's ability to get along with the local dogs was the last thing on my mind. All day, my mind had been firmly stuck on the memory of Nora in my arms, the feeling of her body beneath mine, and the sound of her soft whimpers as she came. Trashcan might as well not have existed.

But Nora didn't have that same focus. She hadn't exactly shied away from my touch, but she hadn't been eager to reciprocate either. This left me in a strange limbo, wavering between friendship and relationship.

"What's good here?" I asked, eliciting a shocked, bubbly laugh.

"Please tell me you've eaten at the diner before."

I had not. I spent most of my time in Pierce, opting to grab dinner there since the restaurants stayed open later. Besides, my mom had stayed far away from the diner, equating its rundown facade with inedible food, however wrong that might be.

"I don't want to answer that. How about you just make me a recommendation instead?"

Nora rolled her eyes, skimming the menu. "Are you splurging because we're eating out or staying on your normal diet?"

"Splurging. I don't come here often."

She grinned. “Okay. Then the bacon cheeseburger. It’s amazing, probably because it’s mostly fat. And get it with the steak fries. They’re bought prepared, but Gloria uses this insanely good seasoning, something with thyme. I’ve never had anything like them, and they’re always super crunchy with the perfect amount of salt.”

I set down the menu without a second glance. “Alright, how do I want my burger?”

“Medium rare. She’ll overcook it.”

“What are you having?”

“Well, I always eat here, so I’m not splurging. Grilled chicken sandwich, half fries, and a side salad.”

“And for Trashcan?”

“He’ll share my fries, and maybe, if you’re feeling generous, he’ll get a bite of cheeseburger.”

“You’ve got it all figured out.”

The smile faded slightly from her brown eyes. “Not entirely. But I’m trying.”

Gloria returned, taking our order and complaining more about the dog, even as she dipped to pet him.

Nora’s phone buzzed in her pocket. She took it out, immediately frowning at the screen.

“Everything okay?”

She held the phone in my direction. “Word travels fast around here. Again.”

CAL

A dog too? What the hell is going on with you, Nora?

“I don’t think I’m Cal’s favorite sister right now,” she said, a wan smile on her face.

“Anything I can do?” I asked.

I knew marrying Nora risked pissing off her brother. Hell, how could it not? The man hated me for decades, but I'd thought he loved his sister more than he hated me.

I'd been wrong.

"I'm not sure you can."

I took a deep breath. I had two days before I left, and I planned to spend every moment I could with Nora, but just this once, I acknowledged that she'd be better off if I didn't.

I should have made things right with Cal earlier. Len might have been the grumpy one, but at least he begrudgingly accepted Nora's choice to marry me. Cal had barely acknowledged my existence and, if I had to guess, Nora had taken the brunt of Cal's annoyance. I owed it to her to make things as close to normal as I could before I left town.

"Let's eat and I'll drop you off at home. I want to go have a talk with Cal."

She grimaced. "That doesn't sound like a good idea. Why don't I come with you?"

I shook my head. "If he wants to swing at me, he won't if you're around. It's bothering you that he's unhappy. Unfortunately for my face, I think he'll be more amenable getting over our marriage if I go see him alone."

"You want to risk flying to Las Vegas with a black eye?"

"I'll blame it on an overzealous slot jockey. It'll be fine," I joked.

Besides, Cal probably wouldn't hit me in the face. He'd go for the stomach. I wouldn't tell Nora that, though.

"Well, at least let me tag along to Bob's. If you show up with some beer, that might distract him enough not to hit you immediately. You could try to charm him first."

"Like I charmed Gloria?"

Nora laughed, and I shook off residual nerves while eating a surprisingly good cheeseburger. By the time we finished dinner, the sky had grown dark and the weather chilly, so I

hurried Nora and Trashcan home before aiming my car toward Cal's house.

I drove past the cast iron pig that adorned the entrance and pulled into a parking space, setting my eyes on the second floor, where Cal lived above his car garage. Blue light flickered in the windows. He was home. Where else would he be? His girlfriend lived in Virginia, his shop had enough business to require a second mechanic, and he still worked late.

Taking a deep breath, I gripped the growler in the passenger seat and pushed myself out of the car. I took the stairs to his apartment two at a time and paused at the door, reminding myself why I had given up a night with Nora. With a deep breath, I knocked.

Cal wrenched open the door and assessed me with a look of disgust, his meaty hand clenching on the door, threatening to shut it in my face. "What the hell are you doing here?"

I held up the growler. "A peace offering. Stephanie said she just tapped this today. It's a high-gravity stout. She thought you'd love it."

He frowned, his fingers unclenching as he stood aside. "Fine."

I walked into the apartment, admiring the granite countertop and crown molding covering the walls. "You've spruced the place up."

"How would you know?" Cal growled, stalking past me to the freezer, where he retrieved one ice cold glass and then the cabinet for a second, room temperature glass. Mine, no doubt.

"I looked at this place when before it came on the market."

"You wanted to start a gym in Franklin Notch?"

I shrugged. "I knew the couple that lived here. They thought I might be interested in the property."

"I didn't take you for a slumlord." He opened the growler, pouring us both a pint and pushing the warm mug in my direction as he sat down at the dining room table.

Probably as much of an invitation as I'd get.

I took it and sat opposite him. "I don't have property in my portfolio. Yet."

"Well, at least, financially, you can take care of Nora." He ground out the compliment like it physically hurt him. His jaw grew tight and his face hardened. "She sent you here?"

I shook my head. "She told me not to come. She's afraid you're going to knock me out."

That got a smile. He laughed under his breath. "And you came anyway?"

"I felt like I had an obligation," I said with a shrug. "I'll be out of town for the next month."

"Aren't you important?" he muttered, softening the words with his drink.

"I am," I said smugly, breaking through Cal's annoyance and getting an exaggerated eye roll in response. "But I want to make sure everything's fine between you and Nora before I go. That I haven't caused too many problems."

Cal sat back in his seat with a frown. "You think I'd blow off my sister just because she married an asshole like you?"

"No," I answered carefully. "But you know Nora."

"I certainly know her better than you," Cal cut in.

"Then you know she doesn't realize you're just avoiding me. She thinks you're avoiding her."

He exhaled, his massive body heaving with the effort as his lips twisted. "I guess that explains why I fixed her car a week ago and she hasn't come by to pick it up."

"She thinks you're mad at her."

"I'm not mad at her." He softened, barely perceptible, but enough.

"Regardless of how we got here, I love Nora." I pushed past the nagging feeling at the back of my head that I should be telling this to Nora, not her brother. "And she loves you."

So, this marriage won't work unless we can get along. I'm not asking you to be my friend. Hell, I'm not even asking you to like me. I'm just asking you not to scare your sister off because you don't want to be around me."

"So, you just want me to be civil?" He shook his head.

"At the very least."

Cal groaned, downing the last of his beer and pouring himself another.

"Besides, what's the worst that could happen? I think I've done as much damage as I can in this family," I asked with a shrug.

"You divorce Nora and marry Bunny?" Cal said with a grin.

"I'll do my best not to cross that line."

"You're really gone for a month?"

"That should give Nora plenty of time to warm you up to the idea of this marriage."

"You're a real shit husband."

I shrugged. "Don't I know it? But she's starting classes next week, so it's not like she can tag along. Besides, she'd be bored out of her mind."

"At least you got her a dog."

"Yeah, swing by and meet him. He's a strange little thing, but Nora fell in love." I shrugged.

Cal laughed. "That's the exact reason Len would never let her get a dog. He said she'd fall for the first sad sack she stumbled on. I guess that's why she married you."

I took the insult for the olive branch he intended it as. Hell, at least he was joking with me.

"You want another glass?" he asked, holding up the half-full growler.

"As long as you don't mind me sticking around a bit longer."



“Nora will be beside herself if you come back without a black eye *and* after a couple of drinks.” He offset his relaxed shoulders and ambivalent shrug.

“Then I guess I’ll stay. What should we talk about?”

“Well, Nora’s off limits, clearly. You know anything about cars?”

I didn’t, but I prepared myself to learn for Nora’s sake.

## CHAPTER 22

## *Andy*

I SNUCK INTO THE SILENT HOUSE. I TIPTOED INTO THE LIVING room, relaxing when I didn't find Trashcan's cage in the corner of the room. Confused by the sudden disappearance of the dog, I wandered upstairs, pulling myself away from the direction of Nora's room and toward my own, only to find her in my bed.

She sat up as I opened the door, eyes bleary. "You didn't come home last night."

"I didn't," I answered over Trashcan whining from his crate, which was now tucked up against my bed. I rubbed my palm against the side of my head, a sudden stab of pain piercing my skull from his whimpers.

"Got any bruises?"

She turned on the bedside light as Trashcan barked. I groaned, walking across the room to let him free. He trotted happily around my ankles, jumping for my hand and no doubt expecting a morning run, which was not happening.

"No bruises. We finished the beer and then Cal brought out a couple of whiskies from his private collection."

Cal quickly discovered that I knew nothing about cars besides how to drive them. A discussion about the Highland Games were a nonstarter, thanks to our rivalry, which left us both fumbling for a shared interest.

We found it in hard liquor.

Nora grimaced. “Well, I’m relieved you’re still alive. I was beginning to worry.”

I’d texted Nora, promising to return in an hour. Then another said it’d be two hours. Finally, I admitted I was too drunk to drive home, but Cal had offered me the couch, which received a single word reply: Okay.

“Everything’s fine. Better than fine. I smoothed things over with Cal. He fixed your car. You should swing by and pick it up. I’d offer to drive you up there today, but my stomach could barely take the trip home.”

She stood, a warm smile on her face, and cupped my face in her hands. “Thank you.” Her thumb ran down my cheek as she stood on her toes and brushed her lips over mine, making the night before worth the effort. “Why don’t you go shower and change into something comfortable to rehab on the couch for the day. I’ll make you breakfast?”

I could smell the alcohol seeping out of my pores on the drive home and didn’t blame Nora for suggesting a shower.

“Something greasy?”

“Disgustingly so. Something to sop up all the alcohol.” She gave me a playful grin.

“And we’re just hanging out today?”

She hesitated, plunging my stomach until the reservation cleared from her eyes with a nod. “Absolutely.”

I exhaled, my shoulders slumping as I walked to the bathroom. A quick look in the mirror confirmed what I already feared. I looked like shit: mussed hair, dark circles under my eyes, rumpled clothes. I hadn’t exactly come home at my best, but I had convinced Nora to spend the day with me, albeit on the couch.

I showered quickly, changing into a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. When I returned downstairs, I looked somewhat closer to a functional adult.

Nora sat on the couch; Trashcan tucked into her side and a blanket over both of them. A massive fried breakfast sandwich

sat on the coffee table. My mouth watered just looking at it.

I sat down in the center of the couch. She leaned toward me, bumping my shoulder playfully. “Hey, thanks again.”

An eruption of words clogged my throat: that I’d do anything to make her happy, that I would have taken a hit if it meant fixing her relationship with her brother, that I loved her. I choked them all back with a nod.

“What are we watching?” I asked, scooping up the sandwich and taking a huge bite. Runny yolk dripped out the side and both sides of the bun were toasted with butter. Heavenly.

“I’m not starting a new TV series with you since you’re abandoning me.”

“Fair,” I conceded. “How about a movie?”

I finished my breakfast while Nora flipped through the various options on-screen.

“What should we watch?”

“What’s that movie you love?” I asked, setting the empty plate onto the coffee table and relaxing back onto the couch.

“*An Affair to Remember?*” She straightened, brown eyes wide as she stared at me. A slow grin spread across her lips.

“Yes, that one.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask me to watch it,” she said with a level of glee that made me laugh.

“You could have asked.”

“No,” she said, navigating to the movie. “You have to *want* to see it. Or else you might not like it and, I’m sorry, but I can’t be with someone who doesn’t adore this movie.”

My ears perked at how she didn’t say “can’t be married,” she said, “can’t be with.” She caught the slip too, ducking her head as she found the movie.

“Now I’m worried I oversold it,” she admitted, holding the remote aloft but not pressing play.

“I’ll love it,” I insisted.

Her mouth twisted. “What if you don’t?”

“How could I not?” I asked, omitting the second sentence from my thought. *Because I love you.*

“Do you even like old movies?”

I laughed. “Weren’t you just excited that I wanted to watch this? I don’t know why you’re backtracking.”

She set the remote aside. “Because I made it important that you love it. And if you don’t love it, I’ll be heartbroken.”

Heartbroken. I hung onto that word, letting it warm my chest. “Heartbroken, huh?”

Plotches of red moved up her neck and onto her cheeks. “I’d be very upset if you didn’t like it.”

She amended the comment too late. I leaned toward her, dipping my head and kissing her forehead. “You said heartbroken.”

“I was being dramatic,” she murmured, tilting her head up, bottom lip disappearing into her mouth.

I shook my head. “You’re not the dramatic type, Nora.”

“No, but maybe I’d be a little heartbroken.”

I wanted to watch the movie. I even kept my eyes open through the cruise ship and into Italy. But little by little, tucked into the couch next to Nora, Trashcan wedged between us, my eyes grew heavy and each blink lasted just a little longer than the last.

I woke in Nora’s lap, her fingers running through my hair.

“How long have I been out?” I asked, noting a different movie playing than the one I fell asleep to.

“Three hours. I pushed you off me to take the puppy out. When I came back, you attached yourself to my side. Like an octopus.” She tickled my ear, her voice teasing. “You didn’t get enough sleep at Cal’s?”

“I crashed on the couch while he was still taking shots,” I groaned. “At least I know what to bring him back from my trip.” My stomach churned as I pushed myself up. “Which reminds me, I’ve still got to pack. What was I thinking last night?”

“You were thinking you desperately wanted to make friends with your—my brother.” My heart twisted as she stopped herself from saying, “brother-in-law.”

“I fell asleep in Italy. Can we pick up where we left off when I get home?”

“Did you like the movie at all?” She asked nervously.

I kissed her, lingering as she melted against me. “Very much. I can’t wait to see the end.”

“When you get back home?”

“When I get back home.”



I stood in another nondescript hotel room in Austin, Texas. Pushing open the curtains, I took in the city skyline, hazy with heat despite being well into fall. I missed home. I missed Trashcan. Most of all, I missed Nora.

The clock on the bedside table turned over from 5:59 to 6:00. I grabbed my phone, pulled up her number from my favorites, and pressed the phone to my ear.

“Prompt as always,” Nora teased as she picked up the phone. Trashcan’s nails clattered over the sound of sizzling.

“Making dinner?”

“I got home a little late today. I stayed after class to start a study group.”

I grinned. “First week of classes and you’re starting a study group? You’re already a better student than I ever was.”

“I need a study group. I’m probably already behind.”

“You’re doing great,” I reassured her. “How’s Trashcan coping with your new schedule?”

“He’s fine. Tammy is taking him for a walk in the morning while I’m gone.”

“You haven’t come up with a better name yet?” I teased.

“I’m still mulling it over. Maybe Ferdinand?”

“That dog is not a Ferdinand,” I laughed.

“I guess not.”

“He is a little bit of a Trashcan, though.” I walked away from the window and opened the hotel brochure, flipping to the room service menu.

“It’s not happening. I won’t allow my dog to be called Trashcan,” she said emphatically.

I didn’t believe her.

“What are your plans this weekend?”

“Dinner with Thea and Millie tonight, drinks with Cal on Saturday, and then dinner at Len’s on Sunday.”

“Jam-packed,” I mused.

“I’m about to burn dinner. I should go,” Nora sighed heavily. “I—” She stopped herself short. “We miss you. The dog and I.”

“I miss you too. Have a good night.”

I pushed back a stab of disappointment and hung up sooner than I would have liked. Other than a quick text before bed, I wouldn’t hear from her again until tomorrow, which should have been comforting but left me feeling empty. Did I want Nora sitting around missing me as much as I missed her?

Not possible. At least she had some distraction. Every minute I wasn’t in meetings, I thought of her. I dreamed of her. I missed her.

I shut the room service menu, my appetite gone, and laid on the bed. I hadn’t traveled to Austin before and, judging by



the heat, I didn't have the energy to wander around looking for a good place to eat nearby.

Instead, I waded through my overstuffed email inbox, which had grown to over five hundred unread emails overnight. I searched for the starred emails, leaving the rest for my assistant. One labeled "Cancelled Meeting" caught my eye and I opened it.

*Andy,*

*James Schaffer has requested we reschedule your meeting because of a family emergency. Would you rather stay in Austin or fly to Chicago early?*

*Zach*

I read over the email again and then opened my calendar. Two days. Rescheduling my meeting with James left two days free. I wrote a quick reply:

*Neither.*

## CHAPTER 23

## *Nora*

“I’M NOT SURE I’M UP FOR GOING TO A BAR TONIGHT,” I whined.

Going back to school had fried my brain and I missed Andy way more than I cared to admit. My ability to be a good sport nose-dived as soon as Cal walked in.

“Just a drink. Maybe two. Or four. A couple, at least,” he said good-naturedly as I followed him along on his exploration of the house. “Jesus, I wish you’d married Andy earlier. You could have saved Len the hassle of building a whole damn house for Bunny.”

“Who’s even going to be there on a Tuesday? Nobody, that’s who.”

Cal shrugged. “What’s wrong with going out for a drink with your brother?” He stopped in the middle of the foyer to stare down a white bust. “Why?” he asked, pointing to it.

“Andy’s mom was a fan of classical Greek sculpture, I guess. Maybe. He said I could redecorate anything I wanted, but I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Here. Right here.” He pointed emphatically to the bust.

I laughed. “What if it’s worth something?”

“You want me to hock it?”

I laughed. “No. It’s easier to redecorate when it’s all junk from a thrift store. I don’t know what’s expensive here and what isn’t.”

“I think it’s all pricey. Have you considered selling the place and starting fresh?”

“No,” I said too quickly.

Not that I hadn’t considered it—in my wildest daydreams. The ones where Andy asked me to rip up the business proposal and marry him again, for real. Of course, those daydreams skipped the obvious roadblock continuing to lie to everyone about how our relationship started. But the daydreams proved to be pleasant enough diversions between classes.

Cal raised an eyebrow. “Well, in that case, start with the stuff that doesn’t have a resale value, like that awful wallpaper in the kitchen. But for now, drinks.”

I groaned. “Fine. One drink. I’m not staying out all night. I’m exhausted.”

“Get changed quick, and I’ll let you haggle me down to three.”

“I have to get changed too?” I whined.

Other than a few snarky comments about some questionably short dresses, he never said anything about my clothes. I glanced down at my ensemble, more practical than anything: blue jeans and a black top.

“I look fine. Besides, it’s not like I’m going out to meet anyone.”

“I’m not either,” he said with a laugh. “But you’ve got a stain that I hope is dog food on your ass, and if you brushed your hair this morning, you did a piss-poor job. I thought you might not want to go out looking like Andy kicked you to the curb.”

I twisted around, and, sure enough, I had a stain of brown on my back pocket: dog food or mud.

Not-Trashcan had gone nearly feral after being left at home for most of the day. He insisted I sit on the floor next to him while he ate. At least I wasn’t the one around here who missed Andy.

“Fine. Maybe I’ve been a little distracted lately.”

“Too distracted for personal hygiene?”

“I had three classes today and this puppy. I’m a little swamped, but you’ve made a good point. Keep him distracted,” I said, pointing at the dog prancing around my feet. “I’ll be back down in ten.”

“Ten? That’s gonna cost you four drinks,” Cal called after me.

“Fine!” I yelled back. “Five minutes.”

I slammed the bedroom door behind me, groaning loudly despite being out of earshot. I stripped off the stained pants and my shirt, rifling through what remained of my clean clothes. Despite having a washer and dryer in the basement, I’d blown off laundry to study. A mistake, I realized, as I opened an empty drawer where my pants should have been.

I moved over to the closet, flipping through the few dresses I owned, choosing on a long-sleeve olive sweater dress I hadn’t worn since last winter. I toyed with wrestling on a pair of leggings but dismissed it as taking too much time. It’s not like we’d be sitting outside, anyway.



“Are you sure you don’t just want to go to Bob’s?” I asked as we pulled into a parking spot downtown. “Stephanie’s probably working tonight, and it’ll be quiet.”

Cal shook his head. “I’ve got a craving for wings that only the bar can fill.”

I wrinkled my nose. The bar wasn’t exactly known for its tasty cuisine. Occasionally, when Cornbread manned the kitchen, something edible came out, but most of the time, the bar served droopy French fries soaked in old grease and frost-bitten meat.

I followed my brother, pulling my jacket tight around my body and speed-walking into the bar. Cal held the door open, and I slipped inside the familiar building, wishing for better weather. Patrons stood shoulder to shoulder in the tiny interior,

filling the handful of barstools and booths. Cornbread and Patty worked behind the bar, unbothered by the small crowd and working at a glacial pace.

“I’ll snag us some drinks. Think you can find us somewhere to sit?” Cal yelled into my ear.

I nodded, surveying the bar for someone I knew well enough to bum a seat off of. A bunch of the workers from the cabinetry shop sat at a table in the corner. I made my way in that direction, correctly guessing they had only stopped for a drink after work and, with their empty glasses, they’d be heading home.

“A whole booth?” Cal returned, setting a mixed drink in front of me.

“Patty, right?”

“You think I’d let Cornbread make you a drink? I don’t want to carry you home.”

I took a sip, relieved not to taste straight tequila, one of Cornbread’s tricks for making sure no one ordered anything besides than a beer from him.

“So, we’re not meeting anyone?” I asked, searching the bar.

Cal’s lips curled up mischievously. “No one.”

I twirled the straw in my glass, annoyed. “Thea? Ben? Millie?”

He shook his head. “Can’t I just get a drink with my little sister?”

“Not usually. No,” I said, not bothering to tamp down my annoyance. I didn’t want to be in an overly crowded bar; I wanted to be home on the couch. “Or you want to go to Bob’s.”

“Bob’s closes at nine.”

I checked my watch. 8:45. “Fine,” I relented. “Two drinks, right?”

He chuckled. “Maybe. I’m not sure yet.”

“I shouldn’t have let you drive.”

“You shouldn’t have, but now you’re trapped here, so no sense dwelling on it. Drink up.”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously, Cal? I’m tired.”

“I promise not to keep you out past midnight,” he said, swallowing the last of his beer and standing. “You want another?”

I raised my still-full glass. “No thanks. Go get drink number two.”

Cal strolled off, leaving me alone. I fidgeted in my seat, still not entirely sure why Cal had been so insistent on staying out late. Usually, we’d grab a quick beer at Bob’s and then hang out at his garage until ten. While we stopped by the bar occasionally, we always had a good reason: drinks with friends, people coming back to town, tourist season. We didn’t go on random Tuesday nights.

A hand placed a second fruity drink next to mine, a cherry on top.

“I said I didn’t—” I looked up and didn’t find Cal, but Andy.

My eyes widened and my jaw dropped as I convinced myself I hadn’t conjured him out of thin air.

“Surprise,” he said, his voice barely carrying over the sound of the music playing on the jukebox behind the booth.

I launched out of my seat, nearly upturning the table in my wake as I threw my arms around him. He caught me, wrapping his hands around my waist.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, pulling away just far enough to confirm that he was really here.

“An appointment got cancelled, so I moved a few things around—”

I cut him off with a kiss, my lips capturing his with no thought of who else could see us or what they would think. He tightened his grip, pulling me flush against him.

“Come on, Nor,” Cal’s voice broke our reunion. I reluctantly pulled away. “I get it. You married the guy. No need to make out in front of me.” He gave me a lopsided smile, finishing the beer in his hand. “Alright, my work is done. You two have a good night.”

“Cal knew you were coming?” I asked.

Andy nodded. “My flight kept getting delayed, and I wanted to surprise you. I thought if I walked into the house after dark, there would be a very real chance you and Trashcan might attack before I could explain myself.”

“So you called Cal?”

He shrugged. “I told you we smoothed things over.”

“You weren’t lying,” I sighed, elated that Andy had unexpectedly come back home. I took him in: soft blue eyes, slightly mussed blonde hair, cheeks red from the chill outdoors. The feelings rumbling underneath the reunion strayed so far outside the bounds of like and into the realm of love that I could barely breathe. “Do you want a drink? You must be exhausted.”

I pulled him down into the booth, only then noticing the two drinks on the table, two vastly different colors. The syrupy red of Andy’s drink made me grimace. “Actually, did Cornbread make that?”

Andy nodded.

“Never mind. Let’s go home.”



## CHAPTER 24

*Andy*

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’RE HOME,” NORA REPEATED. SHE balanced her head on the seat belt and turned to me with a smile that made the missed connections and canceled flights worth the trip. “You should have warned me.”

“But then I wouldn’t surprise you.”

Of course, I anticipated surprising her much earlier in the day. I had an entire plan: burgers and fries from the diner for lunch, an extra patty for Trashcan tucked inside, ice cream, and flowers. I pivoted to dinner after a snowstorm in Detroit canceled my first flight. Then, I ditched the diner altogether when I caught a flight to Baltimore and the connection to Manchester got delayed. By the time I landed, the airport shops had long ago closed and even flowers were off the table.

“And Cal happily joined this plan?” she asked.

“He’s a pushover.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I saw you handing off that bottle in the parking lot before we left. Let me guess: whiskey, something old and expensive.”

“Damn. I told him I would drop it off tomorrow. He couldn’t wait. I think he would have done it without a bribe, though.”

“Maybe,” she said, her sly smile proof she didn’t believe me. “So, how long are you home?”

Not long enough.

“I fly back tomorrow.”

She picked at the hem of her dress, drawing the fabric above her bare knee. The frown on her face made my heart ache. “So little time.”

“I meant to be here earlier.”

“Weather,” she shrugged.

“It’s a bad time of year to fly into New England. I’d stay longer if I could.”

Smoothing out her dress and her frown, she exhaled. “Well, I’m glad you’re here, for however long you can stay. Besides, just one more week and you’ll be back, right?”

I held back a smile at the excitement in her voice. “Yep. You’ll have to come to Manchester with me for the gym opening, but then it’s just you, me, and Trashcan until Christmas.”

She raised an eyebrow at our dog’s name but didn’t counter, which almost felt like acceptance.

I pulled into the driveway, hopping out to help Nora up the stairs and inside. I kept my eyes off the clock, not wanting to count down the hours until I would be back at the airport, navigating the East Coast for a clear path to Chicago.

Nora released Trashcan from his crate. He pranced to me, butt wagging wildly and tongue hanging out of his mouth as he ineffectually tried to jump up to lick me.

“Hey, Trashcan, my man. Did you miss me?” I squatted down, accepting the wild licks and frantic tail smacking.

“He’s lost without you,” Nora said, grinning.

“What about you? Are lost without me?” I asked, enthusiasm and exhaustion mixing, letting questions I wouldn’t normally ask slip free.

Her eyes flitted to the ceiling before returning to meet mine. “Lonely, and maybe a little lost.”

“Me too.”

Nora sighed, poorly attempting to cover the smile threatening to envelop her face. “Are you tired?”

I shook my head, standing. “Not really. I slept on the flight.”

“Me neither,” she said with a shrug. “A movie?”

“Want to give *An Affair to Remember* another go?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’ve got some wine in the fridge. You want a glass?”

“Sure.”

Nora provided the wine while I started the movie. Trashcan dragged a bone into the living room, gnawing it loudly as Nora curled up beside me.

“Want to start at the beginning?” she asked, taking a sip and balancing the glass on her knee. The scent of honeysuckle overpowered the floral wine. I rested my chin on the top of her head, her knees tucked up on my lap.

“We have all night.” I resisted a tinge of sadness at the admission.

One night. Not nearly long enough.

“But only tonight,” she sighed. She tilted her head up, soft brown eyes locked on mine, beckoning me closer.

I didn’t wait for any more of an invitation. I pressed my lips against hers, wrapping my arm around her shoulder and pulling her close, overwhelmed by how right it felt to have her beside me.

Her body dissolved into mine, her lips soft and inviting. Her hands searched for purchase against my chest. She sighed, the low, throaty exhale making my body react. My heartbeat quickened, dick stirring, skin growing hot.

She crawled onto my lap. Just like that, I forgot everything else: the delayed flights, the few hours until I had to leave again, and the movie we couldn’t finish. Her fingers grazed along the waistband of my jeans, fingertips pressed against my abdomen as she pulled at the button. She leaned forward, kissing my neck.

“We’re not watching this movie, are we?”

Nora pulled away, looking so guilty I held back a laugh. “Not tonight.”

She snaked a leg over mine, straddling me. Her dress pooled between us. I bunched the fabric up, slipped my hand underneath, and brushed my palm against her ass.

Her cheeks bloomed pink as I rounded her thigh and pressed my palm against her mound, running a finger down the damp fabric. She closed her eyes, letting out a low moan before leaning forward and kissing me. Her tongue swirled around my mouth as I pushed aside the fabric and delved inside her.

She broke the kiss, her slim fingers gripping the waist of my pants, unzipping them as best she could between us. I raised my hips, pushing my pants and my boxers onto my thighs, my dick tent poling out from under the restraints. Nora gripped her hand around it, softly stroking me.

I bit my cheek, resisting the urge to come in her hand like we were high schoolers fooling around in one of our parent’s basements. But Nora had that effect on me. She set everything upside down and off-kilter. She got under my skin so deeply that I’d spend more time on flights than home just to be with her.

I spread her, sinking my fingers into her damp center. She softly moaned, her head dropping forward so her forehead rested against mine. Her strokes matched mine, slow at first but growing faster and more untethered by the second. My brain turned murky, and Nora was the only thought penetrating the fog. The soft scent of honeysuckle surrounding her, her breathy pants, her damp skin against my hand.

“Can we...” Her request faltered, but her hips pressed toward my cock, our hands entangling in the fabric of her dress.

“Condoms, upstairs.” She kept steadily stroking me, preventing any attempt to form a coherent thought and instead reducing me to naming objects like a caveman.

“I’m on birth control.” Her lips brushed my cheek. “If that’s ok—”

I cut off her words with a kiss. “Absolutely.”

I wrapped my arms around her, laying her back on the couch. After dropping my clothes into a heap on the ground, I braced an arm on the back of the couch as I lowered on top of her. Her dark hair created a cloud over her head, her big brown eyes wide and her cheeks red. I could barely comprehend how I’d convinced her to be a part of my life, let alone managed to get her in my bed.

“You’re so beautiful,” I said, a smile tugging at my lips as she squirmed underneath me.

“You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not just saying that.” I kissed her.

She wrapped a leg around my waist, her hand drawing circles on my back.

“You’re amazing,” I said, kissing her cheek. “And kind.” My lips traveled to her collarbone. “And smart.” I brushed a kiss across her shoulder. “And the best thing I ever did was marry you.”

Her body tensed and she buzzed with excitement, her grip tightening around me briefly before letting me go.

“I love you, Nora.”

I didn’t dare look up. The words slipped out easily, as if I couldn’t contain them a second longer.

Without a word, Nora ran her hands through my hair. She pulled me closer with her leg. I sank into her inch by inch until our bodies lay flush. Her teeth nipped my ear before she kissed down my cheek, working her way closer to my face until she pulled away, nose brushing mine, a shy smile on her face.

“You love me?” she asked.

I held my body painfully still, arms burning, dick hard and brain moving a million miles a minute. “I love you. I have since the moment I first saw you.”

“Even though Cal punched you?”

“Please don’t talk about Cal right now.”

She bit her bottom lip, eyes flitting to the side. “No one’s ever told me they loved me before.”

“Good. I want to be the only one.”

Her palm touched my cheek and she pulled me closer, brushing her lips over mine. She didn’t say the words back, but I didn’t need her to. I just needed to say them. I needed her to know how I felt about her and our marriage.

She squirmed against me, urging me to move. I couldn’t resist another second. I rolled my hips, thrusting in and out as her body rose to meet me. Still bracing the back of the couch, I ran my other hand up her leg, stroking her, urging her to come beneath me.

Her breath came fast, a faint sheen of sweat breaking out on her forehead as the panting mewls turned more urgent. Pleasure surged through me and I tamped it back down.

I slid my thumb over her clit, rounding the tiny bud in tight circles until her body tensed beneath me, her grip tightened on my waist and, finally, her body went slack. With a final thrust, I came, collapsing on top of Nora. I buried my face into her shoulder, relaxing as she ran her hands down my back, massaging me with her fingernails.

“I really missed you,” she whispered, kissing the hair above my ear and squeezing me tight.

I pushed myself up, trying and failing, not to get turned on again at the sight of Nora underneath me, skin delightfully pink and a satisfied smile on her face. “I missed you, too.”

She closed her eyes, fighting back a yawn before opening them again. “Want to go upstairs? Take a little nap?”

“A nap? It’s nearly midnight.”

“We only have one night.”

## CHAPTER 25



*Andy*

I RELAXED IN CHICAGO, A CITY I SPENT ENOUGH TIME IN TO have a favorite restaurant, a preferred hotel, and a few people I could share a meal with. I didn't enjoy bouncing around random cities, even when I'd first worked to get my business off the ground. The constant glad-handing and conversations left me exhausted and out of my element.

Leaving Nora behind made it that much worse.

The quick trip home hadn't stanchd my homesickness; it only amplified it.

My days no longer revolved around the next meeting, but my next phone call home. I spent the entire day distracted, stopping myself from sending her dozens of messages, checking in on her and Trashcan, asking what she was up to, and what she was thinking.

Sundays were the worst. She spent most of the day at her brother's house, making dinner with his girlfriend and chatting with her family. Once she snagged an invitation for Trashcan, she didn't even have a good reason to come home early.

So, with no phone call to look forward to, I turned to Chicago. Surely, I could find something to keep me busy until the morning. A bar. A show. A restaurant. I came up empty.

A knock echoed from the door.

I frowned, an utterly irrational part of my brain hoping I'd open it and find Nora. Maybe she'd flown out to meet me. Maybe she'd missed me just as much as I missed her. It was

improbable, since she had a class in the morning, but I still hoped.

I checked the peephole, disappointed and relieved when I saw Payton on the other side. I pulled it open.

“What are you doing here?”

She wrapped me in a hug. I returned the embrace. “Dad told me you were in town, and I know you’re a creature of habit.”

She let me go and breezed into the room, heels tapping on the thinly padded wooden floor. She set her designer purse on the coffee table and sat on the couch, crossing one leg over the other and resting an elbow on her knee.

I followed in her wake, sitting on the opposite side of the couch. Payton never traveled without a dozen places to visit and see. At least she solved the problem of my boredom.

“Have you raided the mini bar yet?” She stood again, pulling open the tiny bar and rifling through the contents. She moved every bottle in the process, charging them all to my room without a second thought. “God, the selection here is shit. You’d think they’d know you better by now. You want a terrible gin and soda or an awful whiskey?”

“Gin and tonic sounds good.”

She opened a soda can, swiped two tumblers off the top of the fridge, and mixed a drink.

“What do you have going on tonight?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Nothing, yet. I’m actually glad you dropped by. I was bored out of my mind.”

“That cute wifey isn’t here to keep you company?” She handed me the crystal glass and slowly scanned the empty hotel room.

“She in college, actually. Nursing school. She’s in the middle of a semester and can’t follow me around.”

A slight crease formed between Payton’s eyebrows. “She’s not taking advantage of this whole fake trophy wife thing.”

I bristled slightly. “It’s not like that.”

“Don’t get upset.” Payton ran a finger over the contents of the still-open mini fridge and retrieved a diet soda and the whiskey. “She seems great and, obviously, I didn’t give her enough credit. She’s making the most of this arrangement and good for her. I’m so short-sighted, I would have just soaked up all the trips.”

“Short-sighted? Liar.” I grinned. “You could have easily taken the nepo baby route; instead, you got an actual job.”

She shrugged. “A decision I made when I was young and dumb. I should have just called myself a DJ and hit up party spots for a decade.”

“It’s not too late.”

“That ship has, unfortunately, sailed. Dad officially set a meeting about bringing me back into the family business.”

“And you’re going to take him up on it?”

“I’m open to negotiations. It’s not like Angela’s going to step up and steal my birthright.”

I laughed at that. Payton and her stepmother got on well enough, but the two-year age gap made them more friends than mother and daughter. Besides, Angela had her eyes set on Brad retiring to the Mediterranean. “She’ll take as much cash as she can, of course, but she’s not interested in the business. Who can blame her?”

“Smart lady.”

“Not as smart as yours.” Payton sipped her drink, setting the glass on her leg. “So, you never told me. How did all that come about?”

I hesitated. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t told anyone. Nolan had sussed out something strange had happened between us, and I filled in the gaps. But Payton only knew about us in broad strokes. I mangled out a shortened version, one free of my long-standing crush on Nora and my current all-consuming love for her.

She pursed her lips, finishing up her drink and standing. “Well, sounds very practical for you both. I should have thought of it first.”

I rolled my eyes. “Like you need a partner in crime. You hold your own just fine.”

“I thought you did too,” she mused. “Or maybe there’s some other reason you’re not telling me.”

“I’m an open book,” I assured her.

Her lips turned up. “Well, I’m starving. Dinner and then find some trouble?”

“Sounds good.”



After an overpriced and underwhelming fifteen-course tasting menu at a place with more chances for photo ops than tables, Payton declared the restaurant lame and insisted on taking me somewhere worth seeing—which meant bars.

Lots of bars.

We stumbled into a bourbon bar with an extensive mixed drink menu and a clientele of men in designer business suits and women in cocktail dresses.

“You’ll love this place,” Payton assured me, slipping the host who sat us a concealed bill with a smile. “They’ve got an enormous selection of imports.”

I picked up the menu, scanning the list and settling on a Japanese whiskey. “One last drink, and then I’m out. I’ve got an eight A.M.”

Sitting down only reinforced that I’d had a little too much to drink; I lost track of time about three bars ago. I pulled out my phone and Nora’s name appeared on the screen. Two missed calls and a text from a few minutes ago.

NORA

I'm heading to bed. I'm exhausted. Hope you're having fun in Chicago.

Payton frowned, her eyes on the screen. "I thought you said it's a fake marriage?"

"We keep tabs on one another." I downplayed the text.

Considering my past with Payton, I didn't feel comfortable sharing that Nora and I had slept together, or how desperately I fully planned on turning our fake marriage real.

"Strange." Her nose twitched and her eyes slid away from the phone.

Sorry I missed you earlier. Anything important?

I waited for Nora's reply while Payton flagged down the server for another round before I could stop her.

NORA

I just wanted to chat, but I guess I'll catch you tomorrow?

Absolutely. Get some sleep.

I frowned at the phone, eyes darting to the door, wondering if I could trust a clearly inebriated Payton for a few minutes while I took the call outside. I decided against it.

"We'll take the check, too," I told the server when he returned with another round.

"When did you stop being fun?" Payton asked as she fished the cherry out of her empty old-fashioned and placed the glass in the server's hand.

"I have an early morning. What time do you have to be up?" I teased.

"I've got lunch."

“Exactly.” I took a sip from my glass, closing my eyes and letting the liquid warm my throat while I mentally calculated precisely how much sleep I’d get. After dropping Payton off at her apartment across town, I’d be lucky to be in bed by midnight.

Suddenly in a hurry, Payton swigged down the drink with a 1000-megawatt smile. “We should take a picture! I haven’t updated my Insta all day!”

“Sure. Why not?” I said. A picture would certainly hurry Payton out the door anyway.

I had a bevy of social media accounts I barely kept up, passing most of that responsibility onto my assistant. Payton, on the other hand, loved perfecting her public image. She had hundreds of thousands of followers—some bought, most cultivated—who followed her into boardrooms and onto private islands. I’d been in more than a few of her photos. She joked the pictures were “free exposure,” but she enjoyed being seen with up-and-comers as much as they enjoyed being seen with her.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me over to a light installation made for picture-perfect social media posts, complete with a list of suggested hashtags displayed in the corner. Payton threw an arm around my shoulders, pushing her chest flush against mine and angling the camera up.

“One second, let me fix my hair,” she said, pushing back a lock of hair before unbuttoning the top button of her shirt and parting the fabric. “Perfect,” she cooed and pressed her lips into a kissy face. She shot a flurry of photos before pulling the phone back to her face and finding the right one to upload. “One more.”

She held the phone out again, pressing her lips to my cheek as the camera took picture after picture. Her hand slipped around my waist, sliding up my chest until I covered her fingers with mine, stilling them and pulling away slightly. On the screen, her smile faltered as she resisted and, after I continued to push back, stopped.

“Finish your drink while I look at these. You’re taking me home, right?” Her voice wavered. Drunk or unsure, I couldn’t tell.

“Yeah, of course,” I said, shaking off the weird tension building in my chest.

I threw back the last of the bourbon, sliding my phone out of my pocket and checking for another text from Nora. At this time of night, she was probably fast asleep and certainly not waiting by the phone for me.

“You ready?” I asked Payton.

She tapped out a message on the screen, calling her driver to pick us up. “Yep. Let’s go.”

We wrestled our way back outside the packed bar, sliding into the nondescript black SUV aimed directly at Payton’s apartment. She gave me an expectant smile as we pulled up to the building.

“You’re going to walk me up, right?”

I hesitated. Something had shifted back at the bar and rubbed me the wrong way, but I couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

“Sure. I’m not staying for a nightcap, and if you’ve got friends over, I’m not staying to network, either.”

Her gray eyes widened innocently. “First, that house party was a prime networking opportunity. Second, I *may* have an open bottle of Pappy Van Winkle, but I’d never share it with you. Third, when are you finally leaving New Hampshire to join the rest of the world?”

Despite my good intentions, I wavered at the temptation of Pappy Van Winkle. “For now, I have zero intentions of moving out of New Hampshire, and maybe one drink.”

She shot me a smile that was equal parts smug and playful. “For the time being. I can work with that.”

She waved at the front desk attendant as she led me to the elevator, mashing the topmost button. The elevator doors slid open to reveal a breathtaking view of the Chicago skyline and a newly identical replica of her penthouse in New York.

“Did you hire the same designer?” I teased.

“Why mess with success? The people at *Architectural Digest* loved it.” She set her purse on a table by the door and slipped off her heels, padding into the kitchen. She stood on her toes to retrieve the six-thousand dollar bottle of whiskey from above the microwave, as casually as if she’d picked it up at a cheap liquor store. “I’m glad you came up.”

She pulled a wooden box out of the freezer. Some fancy artisanal ice made from a Fjord in Norway and stamped with a Viking symbol for prosperity or something equivalent. I took a pair of tumblers from the cabinet and set them on the counter next to her.

“Yeah, well, someone’s got to make sure you don’t bust your ass in the lobby and end up in a gossip column.”

She clinked a single massive square cube into each tumbler, nearly filling the glass before splashing too much whiskey on top, overfilling her glass with easily a hundred dollars worth of liquid. I sighed, taking away the bottle before she emptied it on the floor.

She picked up her glass, sipping the excess off the top and nodding toward the living room. I followed her, sitting on the end of the couch. She crowded in beside me, her knees brushing my thigh.

“What’s up, Payton?”

She gave me a flirtatious wink. “I know what you’re doing, Andrew. I’ve got your number.”

“Do you?” I asked, baffled. Maybe I should have stopped drinking a bar earlier.

Her hand touched my knee. “I just wish I’d thought of it sooner.”

I sipped the whiskey, eyeing her hand. “I’m not following at all.”

She leaned in close. Her lips brushed my shirt collar, and her breath was hot on my neck. “Remember back in December?”



How could I forget?

Brad's holiday party reminded me more of a frat party than a Christmas celebration. He'd rented out a super yacht off the coast of Miami and offered gambling, drinks, and probably a fair bit of drugs. In the early hours of the morning, Payton and I kissed. Just a single kiss, pulling apart when some CEO shuffled onto the deck to piss off the side, leaving us both in hysterics and breaking whatever temporary spell we'd been under.

"We said that was a mistake."

Or, in hindsight, I'd said the kiss was a mistake. Payton agreed.

"Now you have a wife at home. A wife who doesn't expect you to be with her. It's perfect. We can see where this goes under the radar. My dad will never know." She smiled at me, running a fingertip down my cheek. "Give me a shot, Andrew."

## CHAPTER 26

## *Nora*

THE PROFESSOR WROTE A LONG STRING OF NUMBERS ON THE board; a list of problems due in two days which I wrote into my planner with a groan. Hopefully, someone in my study group could make sense of the math that had just sailed over my head for the past hour. Or maybe I should have taken pre-pre-calculus instead.

At his dismissal, I packed my things and checked in with my classmates, ensuring I wasn't the only one left clueless by the class. With an hour until my next class, I went to a local coffee shop, ordering a drip. A better student would have worked on their homework, but I was not a better student. Instead, I pulled out my phone and enjoyed my drink while scrolling through Instagram, catching up on Thea's newest fashion show in Boston and Millie and Len's latest hike.

I scrolled past Becca's pre-game pictures in Dallas and stopped on a couple. I squinted my eyes, making sense of the familiar face in an entirely unfamiliar scene. Andy, I realized with a jolt, at some bar in Chicago. My chest clenched. He stood in front of a neon pink light with the words "Sip, Relax, and..." something. Andy and the brunette clinging to his side obscured the rest of the sign.

I turned my attention to her, taking a moment to slot her into place. I hadn't seen the woman in a month, but a woman like Payton Sexton was impossible to forget. She had a powerhouse presence, even in a dumb, cliché Instagram post at a swanky bar. She oozed charisma and, even as I recoiled at

her wrapped around my husband, I couldn't blame the thousands of commenters gushing over the shot, over her.

How had this shown up in my feed?

Right, I followed all Andy's colleagues in some ill-conceived notion to get to know them better and look engaged.

Of course, Payton hadn't followed me back. Why would she? She followed a dozen pseudo-celebrities, all of whom followed her back, and nobody else.

I took a deep breath and set down the phone, the picture mocking me. While Andy globe trotted with sophisticated, sexy women with fancy blowouts, impeccably manicured nails, and fire engine red lipstick, I attended community college, had a dog named Trashcan, and went to bed alone.

I sipped my coffee, tapping the screen so it wouldn't fade to black before picking up the phone again. I opened Andy's last string of text messages, not finding so much as a word regarding Payton.

Sure, he said drinks, but drinks covered all manner of things: a quick nightcap at the hotel bar, a late-night discussion with co-workers. Not a midnight rendezvous with stylish women in Instagram-worthy bars.

I took a screenshot of the post and sent it to the only person who would give me a thoughtful, rational explanation. Thea. I made sure to add a line of exclamation points for context.

THEA

Dinner tonight? Diner? Don't freak out until we talk this over.

Okay.

I'd already started freaking out. My stomach hurt and I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants.

THEA

Seriously, don't freak out.

I checked the time. The hour in between my classes evaporated. I sucked down the rest of my coffee, dumping my phone and notes into my backpack to hurry across campus. My mind churned the entire way, reviewing what little I knew about Payton.

She liked Andy. Or at least, I thought she liked him.

I'd only gotten friendship vibes from Andy, but I'd remembered Payton's face when we'd been introduced: faint shock coupled with a hint of betrayal. I'd registered the look immediately and remembered being thrown off by it.

Payton seemed like the type who dated foreign men with dubious royal ties and ivy-league frat bros destined for Fortune 500 board rooms. Maybe I had underestimated Andy by not placing him among those men, but Andy came from Franklin Notch, not Nantucket.

Maybe I'd misjudged the entire situation.



Thea pulled us through the crowded restaurant, avoiding prolonged conversations with well-meaning neighbors. She humored Gloria into giving us the table next to the kitchen, generally reserved for the front of house staff to fold napkins and rest between customers. Sensing the importance of the meeting, Gloria gave us the table without complaint.

With each passing hour that I didn't receive a text from Andy, I slipped further and further down the rabbit hole of "of course Andy didn't love me, he was just horny." I'd poured over Payton's timeline, searching for clues of what I'd clearly missed on our first introduction. Of course, I did that while blowing off my very real homework. Even though I wasn't proud of it, I compiled an impressive, if slightly problematic,

digital dossier of my findings. As soon as Gloria slipped away, I slid my phone across the table to Thea.

“I took screenshots of everything,” I said, shifting in my seat and unfurling the utensils to set my napkin on my lap.

Thea raised an eyebrow, her eyes gleaming with an equal mix of amusement and terror. “You okay, Nor?”

“I might be spiraling,” I admitted.

The more I delved into Payton’s life, the more I realized how perfectly she and Andy aligned. Yeah, maybe Andy’s family was “second beach house” rich and not “owns a skyscraper” rich, but they traveled in the same circles, had many of the same hobbies, and even vacationed to the same stupid islands, though not together. I’d checked that out thoroughly, of course.

Thea brushed her finger across my phone, her smile getting tighter by the second. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as she went through them all, going back to double-check a few before clicking the side of the phone and forcing the screen black.

“So, what do you think?”

She pursed her lips together and set her hands on the table, palms up. She waited until I put my hands on hers before saying anything. “Nora, my love,” she said, her voice low and soaked in concern. “That right there,” she gestured to the phone, “is insane. You’re driving yourself up the wall and I’m not sure why.”

Despite going to Thea precisely for her to explain away the picture, I tensed, attempting to pull my hands loose. “Did you even look at the picture? They were at a bar at past midnight and she’s all over him.”

“She’s sitting close to him,” Thea corrected, holding me firmly. “Besides, she looks hammered.”

I frowned, Thea’s vise-like grip preventing me from reaching and overanalyzing the picture for the millionth time. “She looks perfect.”

“Her eyes are glassy, that adorable dress is stained, and she’s got hives on her neck. This girl, while very gorgeous, is trashed.”

She squeezed my hand before setting me free to re-examine the picture. I pulled it up, looking at it again with fresh eyes.

“Her eyes are a *little* glassy,” I conceded. She also had a slight flush on her neck, and the ruffle on her dress had a stain that looked suspiciously like wine. “But what about Andy?”

“Not sober, certainly not drunk either. He’s being friendly, though.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, real friendly.”

“Woah, did something catty just come out of your mouth? This really got under your skin, didn’t it?”

I didn’t want to admit how far the picture had gotten under my skin. For the last month, I’d been ping-ponging between emotional extremes. Andy confessing that he loved me should have calmed me down. Instead, it’d done the opposite.

I waited for the other shoe to drop. For something to catapult me out of the happy little world we’d built on a lie, for some form of comeuppance.

“He didn’t tell me. Didn’t even mention Payton was in town.”

“Does he normally tell you who he’s hanging out with?”

I recoiled at Thea’s perfectly logical point. “You’d think he would have mentioned it, since I know her.”

“So? How do you know there wasn’t a group of them there?”

I pointed to the phone. “She’s meticulous about tagging people, even at business dinners. It’s Andy. Only Andy.”

“Maybe she showed up last minute?”

“Or maybe he’s,” I lowered my voice, glancing around the crowded restaurant. “*Sleeping* with both of us.”

“Did you discuss monogamy?”

“Why would we? This marriage was supposed to be a sham. We specifically didn’t discuss monogamy. We briefly discussed dating other people.”

At the time, I’d been fine with Andy pursuing a relationship. Not anymore.

“So progressive,” she laughed. “I stand by my earlier statement that maybe you should talk to him. I know, big ask, but considering he’s seen you naked, I think it’s the right move.”

“What makes life so difficult?” I groaned using my best Deborah Kerr impression.

Thea grinned anyway. “People, usually. But in this case, mostly you.”

The phone between us lit up, Andy’s name on the screen. Thea nudged it in my direction.

“Take it outside. I’ll order dinner.”

My chest fluttered. “So, just tell him what I saw?”

“He’s a good guy. Whatever that picture is, I think it’s more innocent than you’re giving him credit for.”

I frowned, grabbing the phone and standing. “Hey,” I said, forcing levity into my voice as I stood and wound out of the restaurant. “Give me a minute. I’m at the diner and it’s packed. Fish night, you know?”

Andy laughed, his voice deep and rich in a way that made me oddly homesick. “I’m sorry for missing fish night. I grabbed lunch from a vending machine between meetings and now I’m too lazy to go back out.”

“They probably have fish on the room service menu,” I teased. The anxiety about the pictures faded into the background as we fell into a comfortable conversation.

“Sounds dicey. I’m just going to raid the minibar and go to bed.”



“Since you were out late last night?” I hesitated, wondering if I shouldn’t just tell him I’d seen the picture.

“Yeah. I didn’t get back to the room until two.”

I held my breath, waiting for him to say the words.

“I went out with Payton.”

The confession loosened the grip around my chest.

“Dumb. I should know better than to get sucked into going on a social media run with Payton. She’s relentless and also told me to say hi. She was disappointed you weren’t with me.”

I exhaled, glad I’d decompressed with Thea rather than stewing under the mistaken idea that Andy had been cheating on me. Well, maybe not cheating, since we’d never actually discussed what we’d turned our fake marriage into, but I’d remedy that as soon as he was back in town.

“I’m sorry I missed her, too. What’s a social media run? I didn’t realize you two were meeting in Chicago.”

“She does these long nights out to stock up on pictures to post throughout the week. I don’t get it, but Payton says it makes her life look more fun than it actually is. And, yeah, I didn’t know she’d be here either. She just showed up at my door. Her dad must have mentioned I was in town. But, hey, guess what I did today?”

I grinned, glad to turn the conversation away from Payton and Chicago. “Let me guess: you ordered a steak?”

“Nope, I booked my flight home. Well, technically, my assistant did, but just the same. Five more days.”

I smiled, relaxing even as the cold winter wind whipped my face as I paced outside the diner. “You, me, and Trashcan. Together again.”

“So,” Andy said, a smile in his voice. “He’s a Trashcan?”

“He’s a Trashcan.”

“I love you, Nora.” His voice barely lifted above a whisper. The same thrill that ran down my back when he told

me the first time raced through me. “I’ll let you get back to dinner.”

## CHAPTER 27

## *Nora*

SIX LONG DAYS LATER, I WOKE UP TO WARM LIPS ON MY forehead.

“I’m taking Trashcan for a run,” Andy whispered. “Want me to stop for coffee on the way back?”

I nodded, brushing back the hair tangled over my face. I took a moment to appreciate how unbelievably good Andy looked first thing in the morning: his bright blue eyes, his shirt just a tad too tight across his chest, and his hair brushed back. I would have pulled him back into bed if I hadn’t been so exhausted from the night before. But in a heartbeat, he was off with the dog, and I stayed cozied up with my dreams, none of them quite as good as reality.

I pulled myself out of bed a short time later, wandering around the house to find something to occupy me while I waited for him to return. I’d cleaned for Andy’s arrival, but he must have done the dishes before he left because I didn’t find any remnants of our late-night meal besides two tumblers on the coffee table. Putting those in the empty dishwasher, I paused in front of my textbooks on the dining room table. I shook my head, not wanting to ruin my day with studying, even if I had the time.

Andy’s suitcase still sat by the door and, lacking anything else to keep me busy, I picked up the bag and carried it upstairs to the bedroom. Placing it on the bed, I unzipped the bag, marveling at his system. All the clean clothes in a labeled bag, all the dirty clothes on the separate side, also labeled. I set aside his toiletry bag and clean clothes, then took the bag of

dirty clothes over to the three-section hamper I found in one of the five unused bedrooms.

Despite the clear labeling on the hamper for whites, darks, and reds, I shoved all my colors in the dark section and used the section designated reds for clothes that needed dry cleaning. Up until I moved in with Andy, I'd been throwing my dry clean only clothes in the washer on the gentle setting and hoping for the best. But, apparently, some people sent clothing to a dry cleaner, and Andy was one of those people. I shoved his dress socks into the darks and his slacks and shirts into reds.

As I turned to leave, something caught my eye.

I pulled a shirt back out of the hamper, holding it up by the shoulders and taking in the stain on the collar. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. An oval stain in a vibrant red was smudged on the rim of the collar. Someone's bottom lip. Not mine, certainly. On the rare occasions I wore makeup, I stuck to light corals and muted pinks—never vivid red.

I turned the shirt over, finding another smudge on the bottom hem, and closed my eyes. My stomach dropped as I fumbled for my phone, pulling up Payton's picture.

Bright red lips.

Sure, it was impossible to tell if the color was an exact match, but based on the embroidery on the upper pocket, it was the same shirt Andy wore that night. And just past midnight, that shirt was still clean.

The door banged open downstairs, startling me. I stuffed the shirt into the hamper, as if I had been the one to bring home a piece of clothing with some other girl's lipstick all over it. I closed the cover just as Andy bounded into the room, coffee in hand and Trashcan in tow.

“Hey, I thought you might still be sleeping?”

I forced a smile, hoping he'd ignore my flushed face as just waking up rather than...what? Putting away his clothes and finding suspicious makeup stains all over them?

“Nope. I’m up. Just starting a load of laundry. I grabbed your bag.” I strangled the sentence out, searching his face for any dawning horror, but saw...nothing.

“Thanks.” He set the coffee on the dresser and kissed my cheek. “I’m going to hop in the shower real quick. Meet you downstairs?”

I nodded dumbly. He sifted through his dresser for a change of clothes and padded into the bathroom, nonplussed.

As soon as the door to the bathroom closed, I pulled out the shirt, taking a few quick pictures and sending them to Thea.

THEA

Don’t rub in what you and Andy got up to last night.

I grabbed the coffee and one hand typed a response as I walked down to the kitchen.

You think I wore that lipstick? That was all over Andy’s clothes.

I sighed, waiting for Thea to talk me down and provide some rational reason Andy came home from a business trip covered in lipstick stains. Maybe Payton ran out of tissues. Maybe he got sidelined by a group of amorous old ladies. Maybe he had a secret lipstick fetish he was scared to tell me about.

THEA

What did Andy say?

You think I should ask him? He had zero reaction to finding out I had emptied his suitcase. And look at the color!

I followed up the pictures of the shirt with Payton’s Instagram picture and waited, knuckles turning white against the kitchen counter while Thea typed a reply and deleted it.

THEA

Let me think on it.

I winced, blowing out a breath and picking up the coffee before setting it down again, too anxious to take a sip. I couldn't make out the sound of the shower running and guessed I only had a few minutes before Andy reemerged, and I'd have to do something. Say something. But what?

I still wanted a logical explanation, but not even Thea could come up with one on the fly. It felt like rocks were in my stomach, dragging me down and filling me with dread.

I jumped as Andy appeared in the kitchen, freshly showered, with a smile on his face. "Want to split a cinnamon roll?"

He nodded toward the box of pastries on the counter.

"Sure," I said, my stomach in knots. "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded, padding across the room and opening the pastry box, pulling out a cinnamon roll and slicing it in half.

I slid into the seat across from him, gripping a napkin and wringing it between my fingers. "So, about the love thing."

"The love thing? Are you talking about me saying I love you?"

I smiled despite myself, my heart pitter-pattering and my body shivering at his words. "Yeah, that."

"I meant it. Still do. I love you, Nora."

I sighed, biting back the knee-jerk reaction to tell him I loved him too. I needed to hear the truth first. "But you've been with other people, right?"

He raised an eyebrow, a cinnamon roll stalled halfway to his mouth. "Um, did I do something to make you think I'd never slept with anyone before?"

"No," I backtracked. "Of course not. I just meant after we got married. Were you sleeping with or dating someone else?"

He set his fork down on the plate, a bite of cinnamon roll still on the tines. “No. Were you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “But it would be fine if you did. I wouldn’t be mad. I just want to know.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“Nothing? Even just a date or a kiss or something?” I pressed.

He reached across the table, his hand covering mine. “There hasn’t been anyone.”

I searched his eyes, looking for some hint that he was lying, because he had to be lying. The late-night Instagram picture, the lipstick-stained shirt. Hell, not even Thea could come up with a reasonable explanation for why those clues didn’t point directly to him, if not sleeping with Payton, at least making out with her. Wouldn’t that be just as bad?

But I didn’t think he was lying.

“Okay,” I said. “Good.”

The tension fell from his face and he squeezed my hand. “Good. Now, please don’t make me eat this entire roll by myself.”

“Okay.” The knots in my stomach abated just enough to take a few bites. “What are your plans for this morning?”

“I’m going to run to Pierce for a bit. Not more than an hour. I’ve got to drop off my suit at the dry cleaner and check in on the gym. You want to come?” He retrieved my coffee and placed it in front of me, tipping my head up for a kiss, his lips sugary sweet.

“I do, but I need to go to Bunny’s before dinner. I’ve got a few boxes I’ve been meaning to clear out now that I have the space.”

“You want me to help?”

I shook my head. “I think Bunny’s itching to go through them with me. It’s nothing, just a bunch of old pictures and mementos. She’s been awfully sentimental since the wedding.”



“Okay, I’ll meet you there when I’m finished?”

I nodded.

“What are we doing tonight?” The barely concealed grin on his face told me exactly what he wanted to do tonight.

I wanted the same.

“Night in?”



“So, you didn’t ask about the lipstick?” Thea asked over the phone as I navigated the back roads up to Len and Bunny’s compound.

“He loves me, Thea.” I turned the declaration against Thea with subpar results.

“Great, but you haven’t answered my question.”

“He said he wasn’t with anyone else while we’ve been married.”

“So, the lipstick was, what exactly?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Payton got too close when they were taking the picture.”

“Yeah, that happens to me all the time. I’m constantly kissing guys’ necks during picture-taking opportunities.”

“Weren’t you advocating for me to be reasonable before?”

“Yeah,” Thea agreed. “Back when it was just a picture.” She exhaled loudly. “Okay. You’re right. He said he hasn’t been with anybody and, ignoring the lipstick for a minute, he hasn’t lied to you before. Maybe it’s smoke with no fire. I just don’t want you to get hurt, and throwing around the L-word... it’s just a little much, isn’t it? Like maybe he’s over-compensating?”

“You didn’t hear him, Thea. He means it.”

The silence over the phone dragged on for too long—long enough to plant a seed of doubt in my mind. She had a point.

He'd dropped the declaration on me not even two months into our marriage, but after what we went through to get there?

I loved him. I'd loved him since I woke up from the post-operative anesthesia, and he'd been sitting there, watching some terrible cooking show while he massaged my head. But Thea's apprehension made me doubt.

No, I couldn't put all the blame on Thea. *I* had doubts.

"I don't doubt he means it. Who wouldn't love you? No one in their right mind. Just, maybe don't slip into a new relationship fog just yet," she hedged.

"I'll ask him. Tonight. No big deal."

As much as I didn't want to say the words, I had to. I had to know for sure.

"Good. Good," she repeated, more for herself. "Just call me either way, okay?"

"Thanks."

## CHAPTER 28

## *Andy*

I STEPPED INTO THE LAUNDROMAT, CHECKING MY PHONE FOR the time. 4:30. With another half hour to Franklin Notch, plus twenty minutes to drive to Len's, I would definitely be late.

“Andy,” Mr. Harris tipped his glasses down. “You’re just in time. I was about to close up.”

I smiled, pushing aside the slight thrum of frustration for letting myself get lost in the spreadsheets and new hires while I’d been at the gym when I’d promised Nora I’d meet her at her brother’s house at five.

“Glad I made it. How have you been?”

“Fine,” the elderly man shuffled to the rack of plastic-coated clothing, flipping through the pieces until he found mine. “Just fine. I heard congratulations are in order. Nora McDonaghue, as I live and breathe. I didn’t think I’d ever see a marriage between the Stewarts and the McDonaghues.”

“No one else did either,” I admitted.

“How’d your mother enjoy the wedding?”

“Fine,” I lied.

If I told the truth, Mr. Harris would tell Mrs. Harris, who’d tell the country club crowd, and slowly, word would filter back to my mom, which would culminate in a terse phone call where she’d accuse me of humiliating her in front of people she’d never see again. Besides, after our last phone call, I’d come to enjoy her silence while she vacationed in Europe.

“How is she, anyway? She should have stopped by the country club. It’s like she just disappeared after your father died.” Mr. Harris inelegantly prodded for more information.

I shrugged. “The wedding was a bit of a whirlwind. I wouldn’t take it personally.”

“Well, as a piece of marital advice, you don’t want to let lipstick stains set into white clothing.”

I tilted my head. “Excuse me?”

“Lipstick. It’s been marinating there for a while. I had to send the shirt through twice just to salvage it. There’s still some damage on the cover stitch. I couldn’t get that out, but you’ll have it tucked in, so you shouldn’t notice. Want me to point it out?”

I nodded, and he pushed back the plastic as he laid the shirt onto the counter. My body turned icy at the realization of where that stain came from. And worse, who might have seen it.

“I cleaned the stain on the collar. Thankfully, you’ve been keeping that starched. Here though.” He pointed to a red stain. “It’s ground into the thread. I tried manual abrasion, but no helping it.”

“How?” My voice faltered. “How noticeable was it?”

Mr. Harris cocked his head, bushy gray eyebrows furrowed. “I caught it straight away. Maybe your wife—” I grimaced at the word “wife,” and Mr. Harris paled. “Lady, then.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room. Now, two of us knew that wasn’t Nora’s lipstick. Maybe even three.

“Well, I’ll tell Nora to take it easy on my whites. Thanks again for fitting me in at the last minute. Have a good night.”

I pulled the plastic back over the shirt and hustled out of the business, dropping far too much cash on the counter in my race to escape.

*Damn it.* I swore, my breathing ragged and my skin tacky. She didn’t know, right? Of course not. She would have said

something.

The conversation at breakfast came back to me all at once. Nora's insistence that I tell the truth. Had I been dating anyone? I hadn't, of course, but then what did the lipstick look like? I threw the clothing into the backseat of my car, not bothering to hang the dry cleaning bags in my race to Len's place up on the mountain.

Traffic in the White Mountains never amounted to much. With the first solid freeze the night before, I made slow work on my trip into Franklin Notch. I took the extra time to workshop an explanation, each more pathetic than the last.

*"Hey Nora, my good friend, a rich socialite, threw herself at me, thinking that this fake marriage provided cover for us to date. Funny, right?"*

*"I kissed someone after we married. Or rather, she kissed me."*

No. Nora would ask why I hadn't mentioned the kiss when she'd specifically asked about former relationships. I had no excuse for that either.

I still couldn't wrap my head around Payton's confession. Sure, we'd kissed, but the one-off kiss that had been an accident to me had been a taste of something more for her. When Payton found out about the marriage, she thought I'd done it for her. For us.

Of course, that was the drunken version of what Payton thought. One she'd tearfully recited on a couch at three in the morning, expensive makeup staying firmly in place even though her face grew puffy and eyes bloodshot. Even though I'd done nothing to encourage her, I couldn't quell the guilt that I hadn't been clearer when we first kissed.

*"Sometimes you just fall for someone and start doing crazy shit."*

Didn't I know?

I took an old, seldom-used dirt road to bypass the more popular tourist routes up the mountain and pulled up to Len's

only twenty minutes late. Slightly late, rather than egregiously and disrespectfully late.

I shot one last look at the dry cleaning and pushed out of the car, hoping I could get Nora far enough away from her family to explain why I hadn't told her earlier.

"About time." Cal opened the door for me with a grin. "We were beginning to think you took off."

I gave him a forced smile. "No. Just lost track of time at work. Sorry about that."

I walked over to Nora sitting on the couch beside Bunny and kissed her forehead. "Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Not happening," Len interrupted, the frown on his face not the typical Len-frown, but a more annoyed one. Sort of terrifying, actually. "Millie's had dinner ready for," he dramatically checked his watch. "Twenty minutes now. We're eating."

"Sorry, Millie," I apologized.

She waved me off before the words were even out of my mouth. "Not a problem. Len just had an early lunch and is hangry. We can wait a few minutes."

"Absolutely not," Len growled. "Talk after dinner."

I took my seat between Nora and Bunny. Len sat at the head of the table, with Millie and Cal on the opposite side. Millie served a delicious focaccia and marinara sauce over noodles and meatballs. The conversation at the table moved to Cal's latest trip to Virginia and onto Len's newest exhibit, this one in London.

"His agent even said the gallery would fly us out," Millie said, brown eyes wide and sparkling excitedly.

"Yeah, if I agree to attend an exhibition with some VIPs." Len spat out the offer as if they'd asked for his right arm.

"For three hours." Millie picked up her wineglass and took a sip. "Three hours, and we'd get a free trip to Europe!"

“Three hours too long. I’m telling you, Mil, I’m happy to fly you to London to see the dumb exhibit. I just don’t want to be showcased.”

She wiped the frown off her face with a sly smile. “If you pay, do we even need to go to the exhibit?”

Len rolled his eyes. “Oh, I see how it is.”

“I’ve already seen it all. Sure, it was in a crappy warehouse, not a huge, fancy art gallery,” she laughed.

Millie advocated for letting the gallery pay until our plates sat empty and the last of the wine was gone. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, checking the time.

8:30. Another half hour before we’d leave, and I could talk to Nora unencumbered.

I set the phone beside my plate as Cal and Len cleared the dishes.

“So, Andy, are you home for good?” Bunny asked.

I nodded. “I’ve got to make some trips to the two new gyms, but yeah, I shouldn’t have to leave the state for a while.”

“Good. It’s not good for a marriage to spend too much time apart,” she said pointedly.

“Listen to her, Andy,” Cal chimed in. “She’s had seven of them.”

I looked over at Nora, giving her a grin. Between us, my phone buzzed on the table as it chimed.

PAYTON

Can we not tell Nora?

I reached for the phone with a start, hoping to slip it into my pocket before Nora read the text, but her startled gasp revealed she already had.

“Is that what you wanted to talk about?” she asked under her breath.



“No,” I stammered. “Well, yes, but can we do this outside?”

Tears brimmed in her brown eyes and her chin quivered. The atmosphere shifted in the room with only those three sentences. Len and Cal shared a look that spelled trouble for me if Nora believed I was sleeping with other women.

Payton’s text certainly hadn’t helped.

Not that I could blame Payton. She’d been a wreck as soon as the alcohol wore off and the embarrassment seeped in. Her torrent of apologetic texts hadn’t stopped, even after I reassured her everything was fine. One of those texts slipped through to Nora, who looked like I’d just admitted to murdering Trashcan.

Nora nodded, and I ignored the confused looks around the table as we stood.

“Be back in a second,” I said, plastering a fake smile and hoping that was true.

We walked outside, the early winter chill biting enough that I grabbed Nora’s jacket.

“Give me a minute to explain,” I said, the tightness in my chest taking over my entire body as a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Please.” Her voice wavered. “Please explain to me how someone else’s lipstick ended up on your shirt and why you’re getting extremely suspicious text messages after I specifically asked you whether you’d seen anyone else.”

“It’s a misunderstanding.” I bumbled around, searching for the right words, but came up short.

She wiped the tear off her cheek with the sleeve of her coat, biting her bottom lip for a breath before exhaling loudly. “What did you say to me the day we married?”

“That we were in this together.”

“But we aren’t, are we? We’ve been lying to everyone since we got together, including each other.”

I closed my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Please, let me just start from the beginning.”

She pursed her lips with a curt nod.

“Payton and I kissed a year ago. We were both drunk, and afterward, we both said it was a mistake. Or, I thought it was a mistake. Payton didn’t see it that way. She thought my relationship with her father was standing in the way of us being together and you were a work-around.”

“Was I?” she asked, the gasp of shock piercing my chest.

“Of course not.” I reached for her, but she pulled back. “In Chicago, we went out as friends. She got a little too friendly; I told her I wanted to be with you.”

“And the lipstick?”

I shrugged. “We took some pictures together, maybe then. She kissed my cheek. And then I helped her back to her apartment.”

“You were at her apartment?”

“Briefly. I wanted to make sure she got home safe.” I winced. “And we had a drink.”

Her plush pink lips turned into a thin, grim smile.

“Trust me,” I said, my voice just a little too pleading. I could see her slipping away from me. The flicker of doubt in her eyes grew to a full flame, and I panicked, retreading the conversation to pull her back. “I love you.”

“You lied to me. And according to that text, you weren’t even going to tell me.”

“I was when I found the right time.”

She closed her eyes, letting out a soft snort. “I need time to think. I’m not mad, just...”

“Disappointed?”

“No. Sad. Go back inside. I’m going to call Thea and see if I can stay at her place tonight.”

“You don’t have to—”

She cut me off with a slight shake of her head. “I do. I need to think, and we need to keep up appearances.”

“We could go back home and talk—just the two of us. We can hash this out. Hell, you can call Payton.”

“No. Absolutely not.” Nora shook her head. “I just need some time.”

Unfortunately, time wasn’t something I had in excess. The gym in Manchester opened in less than a week, and I had a million things to do to prepare.

Nora seemed to know that too. She sighed heavily. “Why don’t you just stay in Manchester this week?”

My pulse quickened at the thought of a week before we could resolve this. “You don’t want that. I don’t want that.”

“I don’t know what I want, Andy,” she snapped, voice rising sharply before dropping again. “I thought we wanted the same things.”

“We do,” I stammered. “I do.”

Her gaze stayed stony, body rigid. Unmoved.

“Okay. I’ll book a hotel in Manchester for the week, if that’s what you want,” I said slowly, hoping she’d ask me to stay. She didn’t. “Can I call at least? Check on you?”

For an agonizingly long moment, she considered the offer, and I began to worry she would say no. My mind spiraled. What if she moved out of my house before I came back? What if she walked out of my life forever?

“Of course.” Her eyes shimmered as they raised skyward. “Now, go inside before they start asking questions. I’ll be right in.”

## CHAPTER 29

## *Nora*

ANDY'S BABY BLUE EYES SEARCHED MINE BEFORE HE SIGHED and turned to walk back to Len's. I fought tears as I pulled out my phone, fingers shaking while I searched for Thea's number.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Can I stay at your place tonight?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"Of course, you can. Do you need me to pick you up?"

"No. No, don't do that. I've got my car, and I've got to get through the rest of dinner, but I can't stay at Andy's tonight."

"Alright, are you sure you don't need me right now? Because I'll drive up there and kick his ass."

I laughed, wiping away a tear and steadying my voice. "Don't do that. I just need some space to think. I'll see you soon."

I hung up the phone and collected myself before returning to the house. The table had been cleared, and the dishes washed without me. I sat beside Andy on the couch, feigning relaxation, even when every muscle in my body wanted to get away from him. I made terrible decisions around Andy. I couldn't trust myself, even with my family around.

"Well, that's nine," Len said unceremoniously. "Next week?"

"I'm thinking chicken and dumplings," Millie said, perching on the edge of Len's recliner and draping an arm over

his shoulders. “Maybe a berry cobbler for dessert. With the weather getting cold, I can only think about comfort food.”

“Sounds delicious,” Andy said. “I hope I’ll be back for it.”

“You won’t be here?” Millie frowned, her eyes moving to me questioningly. “I thought Nora said you’d both be back on Sunday.”

“She’ll be back. We’ll see how the opening goes.”

We said our goodbyes shortly after Cal walked Bunny to her house across the driveway. I hugged Millie and said goodnight to Len before bundling up and walking into the driveway with Andy.

He didn’t say a word as he followed me to my car, opening the door and resting on the frame. I lingered beside him, my resolution to spend the night at Thea’s wavering.

“How’s your wrist?” he asked, nodding to my gloved hand.

Sore and tight and probably turning blue.

“Fine. Thanks for asking.”

The edge of his lips tilted up as his eyes met mine, a spark of electricity shooting through my body and making me regret calling Thea for just a moment. “Don’t lie to me, Nora.”

I stiffened. “We lie to everyone else, why not each other? I should go.”

I sat in the driver’s seat with a mixture of relief and disappointment when he softly closed the door. He gave me a wave as I started the car. I didn’t look back as I drove out of the driveway and back into town.

A bottle of wine and a good cry would put me back on the right path, whatever that path might be.



“Do you want to talk about it now?” Thea asked, arching an eyebrow and setting a cup of coffee in front of me.

I groaned, the perky yellow gingham-covered table against the pale green kitchen mocking my lousy mood. Thea sat across from me, her hair still in curlers, wearing a long pink robe with a white fringe.

“We can,” I said, eyes sliding over to the clock.

9:00 A.M. Too late to catch Andy. He texted me at seven, letting me know he would be leaving for Manchester by 8:30. I wished him a safe trip, stopping myself from doing something insane—like saying I loved him and wanted him to stay.

“Did he cheat on you?” Thea plopped two sugar cubes into her coffee, slowly stirring them with a gold demitasse spoon and probably plotting Andy’s murder.

“No.” I snorted. “He said he didn’t, and I think he’s telling the truth, but what do I know?”

“That sounds ominous, Nor.”

Picking up the delicate, glass coffee mug, I took a sip, injecting myself with enough caffeine to gather my thoughts. “He should have told me sooner about Payton, but I don’t think anything happened between them. But I don’t *know*. I can’t know.”

Lies. We’d built our relationship on so many lies that I couldn’t figure out the truth anymore.

“Of course you can.”

“That’s the problem. I can’t.” I sucked in a breath, arranging the thoughts that had been whirling in my head all night. “I can’t know anything because we’ve been lying to everyone this entire time. We built this entire relationship on a lie, so how can we trust anything we say to each other?”

I fidgeted uncomfortably in my chair, eyes bouncing around the room for some purchase to anchor my thoughts. Thea leaned across the table, holding her palm out until I took it. She squeezed my fingers, and I shut my eyes, willing myself not to cry again.

“I love him, Thea. Like, really love him.” I sighed.

“That’s great! Wonderful! Congratulations! Why did you sleep at my house?”

I opened my eyes. “Because it won’t work. It can’t. We built this entire relationship on lies because we’d have an out in four years. But what now?”

“You stay married.”

“Great,” I said, the anxiety clutching my chest like a vise. “What do we tell people? The made-up story of how we fell in love? Do I tell Bunny that? Cal? Len?”

She shrugged. “Why not? They might not understand, but they’ll accept it.”

“What about Andy? Is he supposed to go to his investors and tell them he lied? His mentor?”

“He could.”

Her tentative optimism only filled me with more anxiety. I’d spent the entire night lying in bed, wondering that same thing.

“Then what? I’ve ruined his entire life and destroyed the only reason he wanted this marriage in the first place.”

She pursed her lips, fiddling with the handle of the coffee mug. “Did you ever consider that’s not the reason he wanted the marriage in the first place?”

“Of course I have,” I scoffed. “You think I hadn’t considered that he just pitied me?”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Thea said softly. “Don’t you think at least he should be involved in the decision?”

I turned my head away from her earnest stare and shook my head. “He’s given me everything: a home, a chance at a career, a dog. I can’t thank him by torpedoing his entire life or even giving him the opportunity to destroy his entire life. I can’t do that to him.”

“Okay,” she said, leaning across the table and rubbing my forearm. “If that’s what you think is best, I’m with you. One hundred percent.”



The tears flooded my eyes all over again. Before a single one could drop, Thea had her arms around me, running her fingers through my hair.



Trashcan yipped from his crate. I hurried inside, eager to let him out. Andy had left the house as immaculate as if he'd never stepped inside. I opened the back door, and Trashcan frolicked out into the yard. I shut the door behind him.

Andy left a neat pile of mail on the counter. I thumbed through it, setting aside the junk mail when a blue piece of paper with Andy's handwriting beside the coffee maker caught my eye. I set down the mail, hesitating to pick up the note.

*Nora,*

*I love you. I'll do anything to fix this.*

*Andy*

I closed my eyes, chest squeezing tight and my fingers searching for my phone before I stopped myself. I folded the note into quarters, holding it over the trash for a spiteful moment before tucking it into my pocket.

## CHAPTER 30

## *Andy*

I RAN ON A TREADMILL IN AN EMPTY GYM, SWEAT FALLING OFF my forehead and soaking through my shirt. I increased the incline, legs aching. A hard rock song blared through my earphones, an eighties glam band my father listened to when I was a kid. The memory of sitting next to him in the car temporarily offloaded Nora from my brain, but not for long.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I checked my watch for the caller.

Nora.

I slowed the treadmill to a stop, reducing the incline until it sat flat on the ground.

“Hey,” I said, answering the phone with a strangled and almost squeaky voice.

“Hey,” Nora answered, her voice low and sultry. She wasn’t trying to be sultry, but she was just the same. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I pressed my fist against my side and extended my other arm over my head. “I’m fine. Just testing out the equipment.”

More accurately, I couldn’t stand sitting in the empty office for another minute. During the day, I had new employees and trainers to keep me busy. After turning down an after-work drink, I had only my thoughts and more work than I could accomplish in the next few days to keep my mind occupied. So, I ignored all responsibilities and attempted to clear my mind with a workout.

“You could have let me go to voicemail.”

I would rather have severed my leg than let her go to voicemail again. She’d conveniently called at just the wrong time every day that week. I’d skeptically wondered if she wasn’t checking my calendar to make sure I *was* in a meeting before calling.

Tonight, she’d risked calling after seven. I didn’t quite know what to make of that. Maybe she wanted me to answer. Maybe she finally wanted to talk.

“I think you’ve been dodging my calls,” I said, metering my breath.

“You caught me.”

“I was hoping you wanted to talk,” I admitted, my heart sinking.

“I’m just keeping to my promise and checking in.”

I sighed, the ache in my side worsening. “You aren’t ready to talk?”

“Please don’t ask me that. Not yet.”

The pleading in her voice begged me not to press her but after days of minimal contact, I couldn’t help myself.

“I can’t wait, Nora. I’m dying here. I miss you. I want to fix this.” I stepped off the treadmill, stalking back to the empty office.

“I want to fix this, too.”

A weight lifted off me at the first hint that she had softened. “Great. What do I need to do? I’ll do it.”

“I’m not sure.”

Not a promising start, but I didn’t have any better ideas. Too late to tell Nora the truth first, I found myself stuck on what she’d said to me in the driveway at Len’s house.

How could we trust each other when we’d built our marriage on a lie?

“I need more time.”

I inhaled, steadying my thudding heart. “Okay. If that’s what you need, I can do it, but can you at least pick up my calls?”

“We don’t have to talk about us?”

“No. We’ll just talk about our day. About Trashcan. How is the little fleabag?”

“He misses you. He’s been bringing me his leash, begging me for a run.”

Good dog. At least he was on my side. “So, you’re taking up running?”

“Not a chance. I’m too busy with school. And, honestly, I don’t want to.”

“Fair point,” I laughed, glad for some small semblance of normality between us and enjoying it before I ruined the mood. “So, I hate to ask, but are you still traveling down for the grand opening? I know I said I wouldn’t ask about us, but if you’re not planning on coming, I should probably prime everyone. Make up an excuse.”

The long pause didn’t give me much confidence in the ‘yes’ I desperately wanted.

But I’d already booked a suite for the night, and some small part of me hoped a night away from home would give us time to work through the awkwardness between us.

“I have to, right?”

I winced. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“That was part of our deal. You highlighted this trip. It was one you wanted me to go on.”

“Yeah, it was,” I conceded. “But I’m not going to force you to come, Nor. Just if you can. If you want.”

She exhaled loudly. “It was so much easier to lie when there was nothing between us.”

My stomach twisted. “I know.”

“Can I sleep on it?”

I raked a hand through my hair. “Sure. Absolutely. Not a problem.”

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sure, talk to you later.”

I hung up the phone, staring at the gym I’d spent so much time building, an empire I hoped to start. For the first time, it felt empty.



The maître d’ escorted me through the restaurant, deftly winding us around the servers with their giant trays of food and the closely packed tables surrounded by men in suits and women in cocktail gowns. Brad sat at the back, in a booth meant for eight but reserved just for us.

“Andrew, good to see you.” Brad stood, extending a hand.

“Nice to see you, too.” I shook his hand and slid into the booth opposite him. “How’s it going?”

He shrugged. “Same old. Angela’s trying to get me to step back, while Payton’s chomping at the bit to take over. I heard you two met up in Chicago.”

I gave him a quick nod, opening the menu before I tipped my hand about that night. “Yeah, she dragged me out to some trendy bar.”

Brad laughed indulgently. “She makes me glad I stopped at one kid. Absolutely unstoppable. She swung by New York last weekend and dragged Angela and me to a half-dozen new hotspots. Well, she dragged me. Angela was happy to leave the house.”

I relaxed with confirmation that Payton had seen her father.

“Angela used to drag me to every bar and club in New York back when we first started dating. I couldn’t keep up then either.”

I grinned. “I imagine that wasn’t easy.”

When I’d first met Brad, he’d just married Angela, so I’d never met him with Payton’s mother. But Brad and Angela had a relaxed energy that made it easy to forget the twenty-year age gap. Until I went out with Angela and Payton without Brad, that was.

He laughed. “She’s a wild one at heart. We dated for six months before my doctor told me I needed to break up with her or convince her to slow down. Otherwise, I’d be dead by the end of the year. And there was no way I was breaking up with that woman.”

“So, seeing as you aren’t dead, how’d you convince her to slow down?”

He sipped his drink, leaning in close and dropping his voice. “Well, the thing was, I had to do something first. I had to stop lying to her. Sure, she suggested every club and bar and kept me out until three, four, sometimes even seven in the morning, but I told her I loved it. In actuality, I just loved her.”

I sat back on the bench, my mind turning over his confession.

“See, that’s the thing about marriage.” Brad reclined with a shrug. “You need to be brutally honest with them to pull through. Marriages don’t last if you can’t do that. Trust me. I have a failed one under my belt.”

I washed the thought down with the whiskey a waiter had placed in front of me. “So, you think your first marriage failed because you weren’t honest enough?”

While Brad had chosen to be my mentor, he’d never talked much about his personal life. I got some insight from Payton and Angela, but the years before them were fuzzy. Other than being born in Chicago and the existence of an ex-wife, he hadn’t offered much more information about his past.

He picked up the wine glass before him, swirling around the liquid while pondering my question. “*We* weren’t honest enough. Payton’s mom and I, we were young. Too young, probably. We didn’t know who we were, and we both

constructed the people we thought we should be. She wanted to be the wife of a CEO; I wanted a partner. We were interchangeable. We were playing parts.”

“Playing parts?”

“We were acting like the people we wanted to be, not the people we were. Payton’s mom and I never had a chance. We had too much going against us from the start, but my second? That could have worked if we hadn’t built the relationship on a foundation of half-truths. I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” he laughed. “Sweet woman like Nora; doesn’t seem like she has a dishonest bone in her body.”

I nearly choked on my drink, coughing violently and reaching for a glass of water.

“You okay?” Brad raised a gray eyebrow, shifting his attention to calling a server to bring more water.

“Fine,” I lied before catching myself. “Actually, I’m not.”



## CHAPTER 31

## *Nora*

MY PALMS STUCK TO THE STEERING WHEEL. I SHIFTED IN THE driver's seat, pulling my dress down from around my waist and checking the fabric for wrinkles.

Tons.

My nerves were already frayed over seeing Andy for the first time since our disastrous dinner last Sunday. Now, I'd turned up to this fancy dinner looking like a rumpled mess.

He'd offered to set up an early check-in at the hotel, but between classes and getting Trashcan to Thea's for the night, I'd let time run out, dragging my feet the entire way to Manchester. I regretted not changing in the bathroom at a nearby rest stop.

I pulled into the restaurant parking lot. While nothing like New York City, the city had a few fancy restaurants, and this one made the list. The stately brick building in the budding downtown district had valets in front as pricey sports cars pulled up with statuesque-looking couples.

I parked in the back, saving twenty dollars and giving myself a few minutes to fix what I could with my outfit. I climbed out and used the driver's side window as a mirror. Rumpled didn't describe how badly the satin turquoise dress had wrinkled on the two-hour car ride, but I couldn't do anything about it now. I swiped on a layer of coral pink lipstick and gave my reflection a big, fake smile that tugged at my eyes unnaturally. My smile collapsed into a frown.

I don't want to do this.

I sent the text to Thea, poking her to give me even more reassurance than she had in Franklin Notch that morning.

THEA

You're gorgeous. Go make Andy regret everything.

I groaned. After a week of soul-searching, I found only one option: go back to our original agreement. As much as I hated it, I couldn't think of another way to make the next four years work. Unfortunately, I doubted Andy had come to the same conclusion after our separation.

Only that first part is helpful.

THEA

Go charm the hell out of those people, Andy included. You're a vision.

Feeling slightly better, I used my damp hands to pat out some wrinkles on the dress and walked inside.

My eyes took a minute to adjust to the dim lighting. Candles dotted each table and a soft jazz band played in the corner of the room, seemingly a staple for these restaurants. A man in a white tux stepped out from behind a wooden podium, asking for the name of my party and guiding me through the jam-packed interior.

"Nora, you made it." Brad stood as I reached the table, drawing the attention of the rest of the party, Andy included.

I was late. Probably more than a little, judging by the appetizers and drinks already at the table. I officially stopped looking at the clock when I hit a rolling roadblock just past Pierce, two tour buses driving side-by-side down the interstate from Canada.

"Sorry, traffic." I offered the flimsy excuse and ignored the surprised look on Angela's face as she hugged me.

“I didn’t even know there was traffic in New Hampshire.” She air-kissed me on both cheeks, her hands hovering above my shoulders. “So good to see you again.”

“You, too,” I murmured, steadying myself to meet Andy’s eyes.

She let me go much too soon. Andy stood up from the other side of the table, sliding in beside me as soon as Angela released me. He brushed his palm down my back, and I resisted the overwhelming urge to lean into him. Apparently, my body hadn’t gotten the memo that this relationship had to end.

“I was worried you weren’t going to show,” he whispered into my ear, pulling me into a hug.

I let myself melt against him for a breath, curling my fingers around the lapels of his jacket and inhaling the faint scent of cedar.

“This was part of our agreement,” I murmured back, steadying my voice.

His lips brushed over my forehead, squeezing me tight before letting go. “I’m still glad you’re here.”

My nerves tingled and a faint wisp of lust stirred in my stomach. It was definitely not the reaction I should have, but one I couldn’t seem to tamp down. I sat, glancing at the rest of the people gathered around the table. Justin had come with a new date, and Adam and Shannon sat at the far end of the table. I worked my way back to Brad before my gaze landed on Payton, directly across the table from me.

Great.

“I’m glad you could make it. Andrew mentioned you can’t stay the entire weekend?”

How had I not immediately noticed Payton? She practically glowed, her hair blown out and makeup airbrushed on. She wore a red designer dress that showed off just enough skin to be alluring without slipping into “late night at a club” territory. Even if she and Andy hadn’t slept together, they could have. Should have, even. Had Andy not been wearing a

wedding ring and not told me he loved me, I would have guessed that they had.

“I’m a little behind on schoolwork,” I said, faking a smile that I hoped read, “I know you tried to steal my fake husband, but I’m going to be nice to you, anyway.” “I’m here for the ribbon cutting, and then I need to head home.”

She frowned, a line between her eyebrows marring her flawless skin. “You should stay, at least until Sunday. Show me around a little. Maybe we could go out for drinks.”

My eyes widened, shocked at the audacity. “Drinks? Seriously?”

At least she had the shame to look a little chagrined. Her cheeks turned deep pink, which honestly just improved her look, annoying me even more.

She leaned forward. “I’d like to talk to you. Just the two of us.”

I glanced over at Andy. He focused on Brad, but his ears perked in our direction. I caught his eyes for a moment before he straightened, turning toward Brad.

“Oh no,” I said through clenched teeth and a forced smile. “It looks like the server took the drink menu. Want to join me at the bar?”

I had no intention of spending another night in Concord just to talk to Payton. I didn’t particularly want to spend the night, but the mountain roads back to Franklin Notch weren’t exactly hospitable in the daytime, let alone in the dark. Besides, my night vision bordered on horrendous.

Her lips bloomed in a pleased smile as she bounced out of her seat. “Great.”

I stood, touching Andy’s shoulder before I left, letting him know I’d be back. Probably unnecessary, considering he’d been listening to our conversation, but I wanted to keep up the appearance we were doting newlyweds.

Payton and I squeezed our way to the small bar ensconced in the corner with a handful of stools, which, considering the

dress code, would have been an uncomfortable way to eat fifty-dollar entrees, anyway.

I waved down the bartender and ordered a glass of wine before turning to Payton. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

“I need to apologize.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected, but I hadn’t expected her to apologize. People like Payton didn’t apologize, not outright, anyway. They made excuses, they blamed, they felt bad about the situation, not what they did.

“An apology?” I stuttered.

“I was an ass and I threw myself at your husband. I have a lot of excuses for why I thought that was okay, but it wasn’t. He promptly explained as much. I’m so sorry.”

My strange possessiveness over Andy tamped down my knee-jerk reaction to forgive her immediately. Instead of channeling that possessiveness into telling her to leave me alone, I decided to get some answers instead.

“What exactly happened?”

Her eyes grew wide as she tilted her head. “He didn’t tell you?”

“He did. I want to know if you have the same story he does.”

She inhaled deeply, her chest rising as her face turned pale. “Are you sure you want all of it? Because I’ve got to admit, I’m pretty embarrassed.”

I shrugged. “If you really want to apologize, I need to hear your version of events.”

I didn’t have any real expectations of what she’d say. I assumed Andy’s version of events would be close to the truth, though maybe not all. But Payton corroborated everything he’d said, down to the lipstick stains.

At least he hadn’t lied.

“And the text?” I asked. “*Can we not tell Nora?*”

She knocked back the rest of the glass of wine at her elbow and took a deep breath. “Despite my recent actions, Andrew’s special to me. He’s a good friend and I don’t have many of those. I don’t want to lose him.”

“Then, why not tell me?”

She narrowed her eyes, tilting her head. “Is that not obvious? Because he loves you. Because if you told him to stop hanging out with me, he’d do it without thinking twice.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“I didn’t want to chance it,” she said with a shrug. “Besides, even when I first met you, I hoped we’d be friends.”

“So you tried to kiss my husband?”

Her lips twisted and her gaze flitted back to the table. Other than Andy watching us from across the room, none of them noticed our conversation.

“Your fake husband? Or at least, that’s how Andy initially explained it to me. Of course, I had my sights set on him and didn’t read the subtext.”

“He told you?” I asked, shocked. “What subtext?”

“That he was in love with you.” She flagged down the bartender for another two glasses. “In hindsight, it was painfully obvious. I’ve been accused of having tunnel vision in the past. But that’s beside the point. Forgive me?”

For the first time, she didn’t look like some untouchable superwoman in a Gucci power suit. She looked like one of my friends, someone who hung out in sweatpants and occasionally got really messy when it came to love. My shoulders slumped a little. I nodded.

“Of course. We should head back over,” I said, gesturing toward the table. I picked up my glass and stopped, turning to face her. “Thanks for apologizing. I appreciate it.”



I knocked on the door of the single hotel room. Considering Brad had something akin to a penthouse upstairs and the other investors had suites, I didn't blame Andy for only booking a single room. Still, I wasn't looking forward to having a much-needed conversation with him and then sleeping in the same room.

"Hey." He answered the door looking relaxed, his suit jacket off, the top of his shirt unbuttoned, and his sleeves rolled up.

How did he always manage to look so good? In comparison, I looked like a mess. I'd spilled a bite of chocolate torte onto my dress, which went nicely with the wrinkles. My hair had fallen out of the low twist I'd pinned it into sometime after they cleared the entrees.

But Andy didn't look at me like I'd just hopped off a dump truck. His blue eyes tumbled down my body and back up appreciatively. He moved to wrap an arm around me before stopping himself, standing awkwardly close in the small entryway.

"Thanks for coming tonight," he said, giving me a terse smile and some space.

"Like I said, it's part of our arrangement." I strode into the room, picking my head up and calming my breath, owning the space like Brad, Payton, or even Andy would—turning this discussion into a business meeting. "Would you like to talk?"

Andy raised an eyebrow, cautiously inching closer as I sat on a leather chair, avoiding the couch. "Sure. Do you want something to drink?"

I shook my head. Besides two glasses of wine for confidence, I'd turned down any more drinks. I needed to be clear-headed tonight and I worried alcohol might lower my defenses, sending me tumbling back into the relationship I'd almost had with Andy.

He sat across from me, the coffee table acting as a buffer between us.



“We have to go back to our original agreement,” I said, the words rushing out in a single breath.

He sat back in surprise, frowning. “*Have to?*”

I shrugged, his eyes laser-focused on mine becoming too much. I forced myself to look away with a shrug. “Or divorce.”

“I don’t want that,” Andy said quickly.

“Then, I don’t see another choice.”

He pursed his lips and leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his knees. “What do you want, Nora? Like, best case scenario?”

A lump formed in my throat. “Best case scenario? That’s impossible. I want to deal with realities.”

“No. I don’t want to start with negotiations. I want to start with what you want.” His lips tilted up in an encouraging grin.

“I want to be with you. I love you.” The words slipped out, mangled and broken. I bit my bottom lip from letting any more tumble out after them. I shouldn’t have even said that.

His back straightened and, for the first time that night, he didn’t have a slick reply at the ready. “Good,” he said, voice unsteady, even though that confession was the furthest thing from *good*. “Good. I feel the same way.”

He said the words with a finality, sitting back as if we’d just finished the conversation.

I blew out a frustrated breath. “Great, so we both want the impossible.”

“It’s not impossible, Nora.”

“It’s impossible for me. I told you. I can’t keep lying.”

“What if that wasn’t a barrier?”

I pushed myself out of my seat, my nerves frayed and my body flitting with energy that wanted to be directed at yelling at Andy. He was only making this worse; I wanted to scream.

“You have a time machine? Because if you do, by all means, let’s go back and start over. We can fall in love for real, and get married. But it seems to me we’re well past that.”

He took that in for a second, his eyes turning soft and a slight grin breaking out before he wiped it away again. “Are you afraid of telling your family?”

The question startled me. I cocked my head. “You think that’s it? Don’t get me wrong, Cal would be pissed. But no, I’m not afraid of telling my family. Or my friends. I’m afraid of what will happen to you. What will happen with your mentor and your investors? What will happen when they find out you’ve lied to them?”

He nodded, annoyingly calm. “Okay.”

“Okay? Okay, we’ll go back to our original deal?”

“Until we can time travel, anyway.” Andy stood with a sigh. “I guess that means I’m back on the couch.”

## CHAPTER 32

Andy

I WOKE UP IN AN OTHERWISE EMPTY BED, THE SCENT OF NORA clinging to the sheet she'd slept in before fleeing back to Franklin Notch. She claimed Trashcan needed her, and my original intent to beg her to stay left with her confession.

Nora loved me.

She loved me.

Nora McDonaghue... or Stewart, rather, *my wife*, loved me.

With that knowledge, I could make everything else right.

I bounced out of bed, ignoring the faint crick in my neck from a night on the couch, and packed my bag to meet Brad for breakfast before I drove back.

“Did everyone else leave already?” I asked, surveying the mostly empty table.

Brad waved a fork in greeting at me, digging into an omelet at the rundown diner he'd asked to meet me. “Some people can't go more than a day outside the city.”

I laughed. “I'm pretty sure Manchester is a city.”

“Angela insisted that only cities with a Bulgari are truly civilized.”

“Sad day for New Hampshire,” I said, sitting in the booth opposite him. “What time are you flying out?”

“Driving, actually, down to Boston.” He set down his fork and pushed back his blue sleeve, checking his Rolex. “Car

should be here any minute. Are you staying in Manchester for a bit?"

Shaking my head, I accepted a cup of coffee from a server. "I'm going home. I want to sleep in my bed. Don't worry; I'll be back bright and early on Monday."

"I don't doubt it. Going back to Nora?" He raised a curious eyebrow.

"Nope. Going to talk to her mom and then to her brothers. If I survive that, I'll go see her."

Brad laughed, the deep sound resonating through the restaurant. "Well, good luck. I hope I see you both again soon."

He stood, peeling two hundred-dollar bills out of his wallet and throwing them at the center of the table. With a nod, he left me to finish breakfast on my own.

I drank two cups of coffee, waiting until ten to pull out my phone and text Bunny.

Mind if I stop by before dinner? I'd like to talk.

I set the phone on the table, watching the church and brunch crowd mingle on the streets until my phone vibrated.

BUNNY

Of course. I'd love to chat with my favorite son-in-law. How about we meet at one?

Sounds great.

I didn't know Bunny well well; we'd only had a few brief interactions during family dinner and a couple of times around town before I married Nora. Her reputation preceded her, though. Bunny was a lifelong townie known for having a revolving door of husbands until she took in the McDonaghue kids after their mom disappeared and their dad went away for murder.

In an instant, Bunny stopped spending every night at the local bar. She joined PTA meetings and travel basketball teams. No longer just a friendly face around town, she damn near became a pillar of the community. No one saw it coming.

Of course, that didn't tell me much. I knew, better than anyone, that the rumors and reputations floating around town told less than half the truth, and sometimes none at all. But Bunny loved the McDonaghues, and the feeling was mutual, even from Len, the grumpy hermit who built her a house.

Which is why I had to start with her.

I finished my breakfast, got in my car, and made the two-hour journey back to Franklin Notch, beelining straight for Bunny's house. Bunny sat in a rocking chair on her front porch overlooking the driveway. Her house sat opposite Len's. Instinctively, I searched for any sign of him being home.

"They won't be back for a couple hours," Bunny called, holding a garden gnome as she walked down the stairs to greet me. She pulled me into a surprisingly firm hug, her peroxide blonde hair brushing my chin, the gnome poking my ribcage. "Here, give me this."

She pushed the gnome into my hands.

I raised an eyebrow. "What? Why?"

"Len says I can't have any more. Apparently, they're cluttering up the lawn. Not that he has any visitors, and lord knows Millie doesn't care, but since you clearly want something from me, I thought you might return the favor. Give me this gnome."

I turned the gnome over in my hand, taking in the ruddy red cheeks and the small painted sunflower in its hand, and laughed. "Okay. Bunny, I brought you a gift."

Her eyes lit up and she pressed a hand to her chest. "Well, aren't you the sweetest? Coming up here to give an old woman a gift?"

"You're not an old woman, Bunny."

She smacked my chest with her palm. “Don’t ruin such a gracious gesture by lying. Come in and tell me why you’re up here all by your lonesome.”

I followed her into her house, a perfect carbon copy of Len’s place across the driveway. Well, an almost-perfect copy. The sheer number of knickknacks coating the walls, floors, and shelves was impressive. I nearly stumbled over a small bevy of garden gnomes staged by the door.

“Can I make you some tea?” she asked, deftly avoiding the stack of library books by the living room sofa and moving around the kitchen island, which was covered in animal-shaped salt and pepper shakers.

“That’d be nice, thanks.”

She made a pot, and I helped her carry a vintage tea set into the living room. She cleared a stone statue of the Man in the Mountain off the center of her coffee table so I could set the tray down. I waited with a lump in my throat while she poured us both a cup.

“So, Andy,” Bunny said, settling into her overstuffed yellow chair, letting it envelop her. “What can I do for you?”

I sipped the tea, letting the chamomile calm my stomach, however briefly. I set the delicate tea cup back onto the coffee table.

“I need to confess something.”

She laughed, setting down her tea and leaning forward. “Oh, a confession? I imagined you were here for something but didn’t think it’d be juicy.”

My neck tensed. I sucked in a breath.

“Well, go on. Spill it,” Bunny prompted. “I’m not getting any younger.”

“I love Nora. I want you to know that.”

“I’ve been in love enough times to know the look. I didn’t doubt that,” she said cautiously, her enthusiasm for my confession sobering.

I didn't blame her and, as much as I wanted to tear off the Band-Aid, I had difficulty saying the words.

"I've loved her for a long time, but the story we told you all about dating since last year? We lied. Nora married me because she lost her job and needed surgery. I needed her, too. Having a wife made me look more stable in front of the investors, like someone reliable."

Bunny blinked rapidly, tilting her head as if she hadn't heard me correctly. "You better start from the beginning."



I laid the entire relationship out to her. Other than leaving out the parts where we slept with each other, I walked her through the proposal, the marriage, and every lie we told along the way. I told her about Payton, the kiss last winter, and Brad. When I exhausted everything, up to the last night we'd spent together in Concord, I sat back, body and mind spent.

Bunny sighed, her gaze far away as she picked up her teacup, took a sip, and set it back down again. "Appears the tea's gone cold."

She stood, hustling into the kitchen to start another pot. I turned in my seat to watch her, my mental exhaustion giving way to worry. Worry that Bunny wouldn't help me. Or worse, that Bunny would be upset with Nora.

Carrying a fresh pot, she returned to the living room, filling our glasses. She sat primly in her seat, perched on the edge with her knees angled toward me.

She picked up the cup in both hands and grinned. "So, you need me to handle Len and Cal?"

"I can't ask you to do that," I said. Sure, having Bunny deal with Nora's brothers would have been easier, but I had steeled myself to take whatever blows came from telling them the truth. "Maybe just come with me and make sure they don't kill me?"



“Of course not.” She waved a hand. “Those two? They’re pushovers, especially when it comes to Nora. I’ll have them onboard in no time. Don’t worry about them.”

I admired her confidence even if I didn’t share it. “I’m not sure it’ll be that easy.”

“Trust me,” she said flatly. “You focus on Nora. I’ll take care of the rest. When are you doing this?”

“Is this weekend too soon? I don’t want to rush but—”

“Sweetie, your entire relationship has been a rush. I see no reason to stop now.” She gave me a warm smile, standing to pull me into another all-encompassing hug that made the tightness in my chest loosen. She pushed me back to arm’s length, surveying me before nodding. “I’ll wait until tomorrow to tell the boys. Give you a head start if my part goes sideways.”

She shot me an exaggerated wink, as if her word wasn’t as good as the law in their family. Still, I didn’t mind the consideration, especially if Nora didn’t agree to my plan. I turned to go, pulling my keys out of my pocket and pausing at the door.

“Hey, before I leave, want me to stash these in my car?” I asked, nodding toward a pile of gnomes at the door. “I can give them back to you over the next couple of weeks. You know, as gifts.”

Her grin lit up the room. “You’d do that?”

“I might even add a few extra to the pile.” I winked before slipping out the door.

## CHAPTER 33

## *Nora*

“THIS SEEMS LIKE OVERKILL,” I SAID, PEERING OUT OF THE small window onto the Pierce airfield, an airport I hadn’t even known existed until five days ago when Andy sprung one more business trip on me.

With the holidays fast approaching and my first half-semester of college successfully completed, I had no reason to say no.

“Fun, isn’t it? I’ve only flown on Brad’s jet twice, but he offered it up for this trip, considering how last minute it is.”

I had never even been on a plane until a couple months ago. Now, I was one of two passengers aboard a small jet with twice as many crew. “Feels surreal, like I should take pictures and post them with humble brag captions on social media.”

Andy laughed, sitting in the seat across from me. One of the attendants brought us drinks and disappeared into the back for departure after a brief safety announcement that felt more like a chat. Within minutes of settling into the plane, the pilot had us off the ground and on our way to New York City for the weekend.

I kept my eyes on the window rather than across the aisle. I’d been oddly disappointed when Andy hadn’t pushed me any harder when I’d asked to go back to our original agreement. He’d returned home seemingly unperturbed last Sunday, happily joining me for dinner at Len’s before sleeping in his room that night.

Of course, he slept in his room. I hated myself for getting used to his bed, the faint smell of cedar, and the ridiculously massive amount of space to starfish into. My bed seemed lumpy and lonely in comparison. Lots of things seemed lonely these days.

The jets fired, and I focused on the runway rather than lusting after my husband.

“This is safe, right?” I asked. “Are you sure I needed to come?”

I didn’t mean to sound skeptical, but it came out that way. I was on edge and I couldn’t entirely place why. Andy had stayed utterly unruffled as our relationship backslid into friendship, but everyone else in my life seemed unnaturally on edge. Bunny practically thrummed, making me wonder whether she had an eighth marriage up her sleeve. Cal had been cautiously circling me, keeping our conversations strictly focused on my schoolwork and health, never straying to Andy, despite their newfound friendship. I grabbed lunch with Millie and Thea, and they both acted like they shared some secret I wasn’t in on. And Len... well, actually, Len hadn’t changed a bit.

“Could I have come alone? Probably, but you’re out of school, and you loved our last trip to New York,” Andy said, hitching the edge of his lips up as his blue eyes slanted my way. “Besides, winter is cold for those without warm memories. I thought we should make some more.”

I froze, eyes widening even as he butchered the line. “You watched *An Affair to Remember*?”

“Someone very special to me said it’s their favorite movie.”

A lump formed in my throat. I turned back to the window, not sure what to say that wouldn’t end up with me in a crying heap, telling Andy I’d changed my mind.

After a mercifully short flight, we landed in a small airfield outside the city and were quickly ushered into a waiting black SUV to ferry us to Manhattan. I’d collected myself somewhat

and re-pledged not to turn this trip into something romantic. I didn't think I could tell Andy no a second time, and I couldn't survive another heartbreak.

"What's on my schedule for today?" I asked, keeping my voice light. "Dinner with Brad?"

"Ah, dinner later," he said vaguely. "But nothing this afternoon."

"Oh, well, that's no big deal. I'll take a nap, maybe wander around the hotel for a bit," I said, trying not to sound peeved that Andy not only had sprung this trip on me last minute but didn't even need me until later that night.

"No," he said, shaking his head as the car pulled onto Manhattan Bridge, the skyline in the distance. "I meant *we* don't have anything to do. I thought we'd go sightseeing. Take in some things we missed on our first trip."

I softened, thinking back to that first weekend with Andy and how wonderful each day was. "What were you thinking?"

"Can I surprise you?"

His words dripped with promise, and the fluttering in my stomach warned me I shouldn't have come back here with Andy. I should have told him I was busy. I should have stayed at home.

But now that I was here, I couldn't say no.



By the end of the day, my feet hurt and my resolve was in tatters. Our first trip to New York had been magical, but this time Andy had constructed a full day of things I hadn't even known I'd been dying to see. We ate lunch by Central Park before wandering through the Metropolitan Museum of Art and even swung by a small art house where I got to see my big brother's exhibit in person.

The sun set over the skyscrapers and the hint of cold in the air turned frigid.

“We should probably head back,” I said regretfully, already dreading the morning when Andy would have a million meetings and I’d be alone.

“One more stop,” he said, tugging my hand away from the hotel. “It’s not a long walk.”

We walked down the street, turning a corner and finding the Empire State Building directly in front of us. A gasp caught in my throat. I craned my neck, looking up at the building and longing to go up it.

“Should we go to the top?” Andy asked.

I nodded, unable to speak.

For the first time that day, I let him take my hand and lead me across the street. We lined up at the entrance, Andy slipping two tickets out of his pocket and presenting them to the attendants who let us through the turnstile into the elevator.

The elevator doors slid closed with the two of us and the attendant inside. It zipped up to the 86th floor so fast I couldn’t tell whether the heaviness in my chest was from the elevation or from Andy’s hand on mine, clasping me tight.

I swayed on my feet, letting my head graze his shoulder and pausing, inhaling cedar and lemon and wishing we’d come here under different circumstances.

What if I hadn’t lost my job that night? What if I had just gone to Len and asked him for the money for the surgery? Maybe then, I’d be right here, with Andy, but really *with* him. Maybe we’d be dating. Maybe this would have been a romantic trip for two and not a convenient arrangement for us both.

Or he never would have asked me out at all. I certainly wouldn’t have asked him. Maybe, if none of this had happened, we’d still have the same relationship as before: friendly acquaintances.

Somehow, that thought made me even sadder.

Tears sprung from my eyes. I refused to pull my hand away from Andy’s to wipe them. When the doors opened, he

pulled me into the interior atrium. A few people milled around, waiting to descend back to the ground.

My breath caught in my throat as my eyes settled on the city skyline through the giant windows.

“You okay?” Andy asked, worriedly searching my face.

I shrugged, loosening his grip on my hand now that tears spilled down my cheeks. “Sorry, it’s just the closest thing to heaven in this city.”

“I didn’t want to make you cry.” He placed his palm on my shoulder, his other hand wiping the tears off my cheek that now flowed in earnest.

“You didn’t make me cry,” I said, not sure if I meant it.

Two weeks ago, I would have told him why I was crying. I would have told him I’d always imagined coming to the most romantic place I could imagine with the man I loved. Not under these circumstances.

“It’s fine. It’s just been a long day.”

He pulled me close, wrapping his arm around me and enveloping me in a hug. His hand cradled the back of my head, his thumb brushing up and down my neck. The welling in my chest turned into an ache.

As much as I wanted to be, I couldn’t be with Andy. I couldn’t spend the rest of my life lying to my family. I couldn’t let him ruin everything he’d worked for.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he murmured into my hair. “I thought this would make you happy.”

“I *am* happy. I’m glad you’re here with me. I just wish it was different.”

“Me too.” He kissed the top of my head. “Me too. Which is exactly why I bought you here.”

“To torment both of us?” I asked, a sob lodging in my throat.

“No. Of course not.” His eyes cut toward the door. The sun set over the skyline, sinking the city into darkness for a

moment before red and green lights lit up, bathing the observation deck in light. “Come with me.”

I followed him out of the atrium. The wind whipped around the deck. I pulled my coat close, my eyes adjusting to being outdoors again.

“This way.” Andy squeezed my hand comfortingly before leading me around the corner.

A small group stood in one corner, looking out over the city. A sapphire-blue wool coat caught my attention, one I’d grown so accustomed to after she bought it from a thrift store when she first moved to Franklin Notch. Millie.

I stopped stock still, studying the other figures. Len, Bunny, Cal, Thea, Becca. And three more beside them: Nolan, Brad, and Payton.

“What’s going on?”

“Not everyone gets to propose to the woman of their dreams twice. I didn’t want to screw it up, so I got some help this time.”

The tears came back. My breath caught in my throat. I pulled my eyes away from my friends and family as Andy dropped to one knee. He fumbled in his pocket, pulling out a velvet black box and flipping it open.

He didn’t pull out the family heirloom he’d given me the first time. Instead, nestled inside the box, was Bunny’s ring. The simple square-cut diamond, not even a quarter of a carat, was given to her by her second husband. Her true love, as she liked to say. My favorite from her trove of rings.

“How’d you—?”

“I gave it to him with my blessing. You always loved that one,” Bunny interjected, bundled up in enough clothing to make it through the tundra. “Now, go on. It’s freezing up here.”

“Nora McDonaghue,” he said.

“Stewart,” I interrupted, a smile on my face and tears running down my cheeks.



“Right. Nora Stewart, will you marry me again?”

I choked back a yes. “But what about the investors?”

“I’ll handle them. Consider it my wedding gift to you both,” Brad called over the wind.

Payton tapped him with a gloved hand. “Your first wedding gift. We’ve got something planned for your second.”

My eyes bounced from Andy to the crowd surrounding us. Millie clung to Len, the smile on her face infecting even him. Cal met my gaze, nodding in encouragement. I bit my bottom lip, turning my gaze back to Andy.

“You really want to marry me?”

“More than anything.”

The reasons I had for staying away from Andy, for not pursuing a real relationship, melted away with the realization that everyone knew the truth: his mentor, my family, our friends.

“Yes,” I whispered.

Andy’s baby blue eyes clouded as I launched into his arms. He enveloped me, bracing us from falling to the cold concrete, the barriers shielding us from the whipping evening wind as I kissed him.

*Andy*

## EPILOGUE

“WHY ARE YOU CALLING ME, ANDY?” BRAD ASKED, HIS TONE firm, bordering on cross.

“Only to let you know we landed safely,” I said. “Nolan is in charge. He’s at the gym in Manchester and has strict instructions not to bother me.”

“Good. How was the flight?”

“Uneventful. I should warn you, though, you’re spoiling us with the jet.”

Brad laughed. “Well, I don’t think it’s outside of the realm of possibility that you’ll have one of your own one day.”

Strangely, confessing to my mentor that my marriage had been a sham only strengthened our relationship. He shifted his focus from my burgeoning gym empire to grooming Madison and me for bigger and better deals. Thankfully, Payton and Nora had moved their relationship onto firmer footing, even bordering on friendship.

“Maybe. Still, thanks for the wedding gift.”

“Considering I didn’t get you one the first time, it’s the least I could do. Enjoy yourself, and tell Nora I said hi.”

I hung up the phone, placing it in the tiny lock box in our hotel room and shutting it away for the next week. Then, I set off in search of Nora.

I didn’t have to wander far. She’d moved from the living room area of our overwater hut and onto the pier. A white umbrella shaded her from the tropical sun, along with a pair of

sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat that collapsed onto her shoulders. I smiled, my eyes gliding down her face, which was currently buried in a book, onto the bright yellow bikini and back again.

“What are you reading?” I asked, perching on the end of her lounge chair and running a hand up her leg, warm from the sun.

She set the book on her lap with a smirk as my fingers moved up her thigh, teasing at the knot holding her bottoms in place. “Bunny threw a bunch of books in my suitcase before we left. They’re all a *little* spicy.”

“Spicy?” I asked, taking the book out of her lap and opening it. “I like the sound of that.”

“You want to borrow this one when I’m done?” she teased.

“Maybe.” I leaned forward, kissing her. “Or you could just describe said spiciness. Show me whatever’s making you blush so nicely.”

She laughed, eyes darting furtively around the empty pier. “The sun is making me blush. I know it’s hard to imagine, being Cal’s sister and all, but I don’t exactly tan. I burn.”

I groaned, dropping my hand onto the lounge. “You had to bring your brother up, didn’t you?”

“I’m stopping you from trying to seduce me in the middle of a pier. What if Emmanuel saw us?” Her lips formed a perfect O. I leaned forward, kissing her with a laugh.

“The butler? I think he’s specifically paid *not* to see us in situations like that.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “You don’t think he’s walked in on people? Sweet Emmanuel?”

“He’s twenty, not ten, and I’m positive accidentally walking in while a married couple is having sex ranks pretty low on the messed up things he’s seen.”

She grimaced, eyes darting for the cabin, as if Emmanuel might materialize out of thin air.

“I’ve killed the mood, haven’t I?” I asked, squeezing her knee and pushing myself back up to standing. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Water would be great,” she said, placing the book on top of the stack beside her and pulling a textbook out of the stack on the ground. “I should probably study for a bit before we go snorkeling.”

“You could have taken the semester off. It’s not as though you’re on a time crunch anymore,” I teased, proud of her for keeping up with her studies, even on a tropical island half the world away from her college.

“I could, but then I’d graduate a full year later. Half these classes are only offered in the fall or the spring, and I want to make sure I’m done before Brad pushes you to move to New York.”

“You think that’ll happen?”

Nora raised an eyebrow. “I know so.”

“What would you say to that?”

“I’m not moving full-time, but we could negotiate living part of the year somewhere else. Maybe winter in the city, get us away from the mountains when the snow’s bad. Not forever, but we have a couple of years.”

I grinned. “A couple of years before what?”

Her face flushed deep red and she ducked behind her hat. “Before we add to our family.”

“I’m not getting another dog,” I teased, coaxing the confession out of her.

“You know full well I wasn’t talking about a dog. Trashcan would never forgive us,” she said fiercely before softening. “Besides, what would we name a second dog?”

“Garbage truck? Compactor? Recycling Center?”

She sighed dramatically. “Maybe it’s a little premature to talk about kids with you.”

“I’m much better at baby names: Pacifier, Diaper Face, Milk Drinker.”

“Alright, kids are off the table indefinitely.”

“Don’t joke about that, Nora,” I said, taking the textbook out of her hand and setting it back on the pile as I leaned closer. “I promise I’ll let you take the lead when it comes to naming our kids. Something like Ferdinand.”

She wrinkled her nose as I brushed my nose over hers. “Not Ferdinand either.”

“What if it suits him?”

“What if it’s a girl?”

“Depends on whether she looks like a Ferdinand or not, I suppose,” I whispered, my lips against hers.

“You’re impossible.”

“Yet you married me. Twice.”

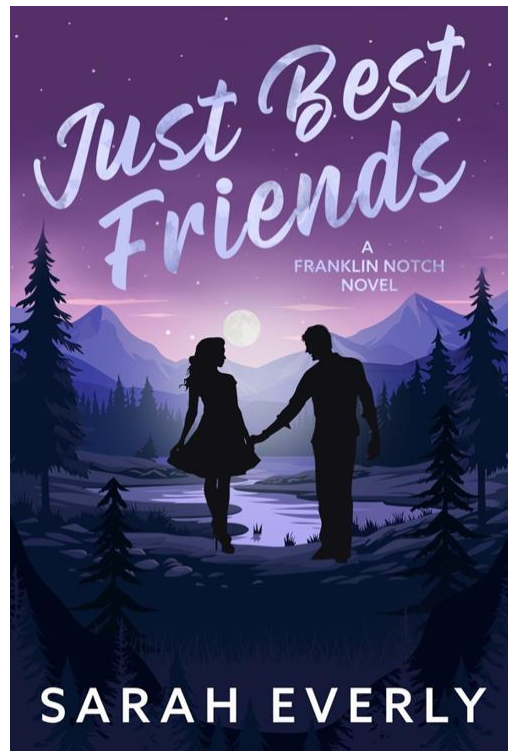
She set her hand against my chest. “I’m not a quick learner.”

“And I love that about you. You wouldn’t have accepted my proposal if you passed college the first time.”

“And if you’d just asked me out first, we would have only married once.”

“Honestly, Nora,” I said. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

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## *A Note From Sarah Everly*

Thanks for reading *Just Between Us*! I hope you enjoyed Nora and Andy's story. If you did, consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#), [BookBub](#), [GoodReads](#), or any other review site. It would mean the world to me!

If you'd like the latest news and the dates for my next release, you can join my [newsletter](#)! As a thank you for joining, I'll send you the link for a free novella, also set in Franklin Notch, *Barely Civil*.

Talk to you soon!

Sarah

