

# 1

Noah Carter's paramedic uniform felt like it was made of lead. His black work boots, too. Like gravity had doubled down on him. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe his heart was trying to kill him.

He deserved it.

The rolling green grass of Bloomington's Rose Hill Cemetery came into view. Already Noah could feel the serenity of the place. He parked his old gray pickup in the back lot and cut the engine. It was the second day of November.

The last day of his marriage.

Clouds gathered in the distance. Big storms forecast for Indiana. No surprise. There wasn't a single sunny thing about this chilly afternoon. How could it have come to this? What had gotten so bad that he would walk away from Emily Andrews?

He loved her. He still loved her.

Just not when they were together.

Noah pressed his back muscles into the worn cloth seat and stared out over a sea of tombstones. This was

where he needed to be. Perspective ruled supreme in a cemetery.

Especially this one.

His heart had led him here, to this place of death and defeat. The reason was obvious. For a long time now he could feel his heart turning on him. In the last two years, though it kept him alive, it had become a separate being, pulling away from the rest of his body. So that with every beat he could feel the struggle, the fight. His heart digging its claws into him and dragging him down, pressing against him. Spreading destruction and discouragement like arsenic through his veins.

If his heart was going to kill him, the job was almost done. He was moving across town tomorrow.

Noah climbed out of his truck and zipped up his blue paramedic jacket. *Breathe, Noah. Just breathe.* His shift at the firehouse had been longer today, and on the way out he'd run into the new fire chief, Landon Blake.

Last day of his marriage. He runs into Landon Blake, of all people.

The guy was the poster child for a perfect marriage. He had a slew of kids, including a niece they were raising. But every time Noah saw Landon and his family at a picnic or party, the man looked head over heels in love with his wife.

The chief was a Christian, Noah knew that much. Bible verses hung on the walls of his office. His faith showed in his actions. The man was intentional about his staff, always asking the guys about their home life.

This afternoon was no different.

“You doing well?” Landon had asked him. “Everything okay with the family?”

Why the chief would ask that today, Noah would never know. Unless God, Himself, put the question in the man’s mind. Whatever the reason, Noah wasn’t about to open up there at the station. What could he say? Everyone’s favorite Internet couple was calling it quits?

Noah hadn’t breathed a word about the pending split. He certainly wasn’t going to talk about it with Landon Blake. “All’s well, Chief.” Noah hadn’t even slowed his pace. Just waved at the man and walked right on past.

Conviction tightened its hold on Noah.

*Never mind*, he told himself. *What’s done is done*. Everyone would know soon enough. Emily didn’t look up to him. Didn’t respect him or believe in him. She was jealous of the fans Noah talked to online, and she no longer felt loved. End of story.

He glanced at the swirling clouds over the cemetery. The news would surprise everyone, of course. It would make headlines. Most of their followers would be devastated by the breakup. Especially people who found a reason to stay married because of what they saw in Noah and Emily.

But the person it would’ve hurt most of all would never know.

Sweet Clara.

A cold wind blew across the rows of tombstones and

washed over Noah. He turned up the collar on his jacket and pushed into it. He didn't come here much anymore, but today a visit seemed only right. Because Noah wasn't just leaving Emily and their two kids. He was leaving Clara, too.

Even if she wasn't alive to know it.

Three inches of rain had fallen in the last few days, so the ground was soft as Noah moved into the plotted field. Four rows in, six gravestones over and there it was. Noah stooped down and brushed off the marker.

*Clara Andrews. 1990–2016*

Tears stung at the corners of his eyes. *Dear Clara.* He leaned back on his heels and stared at her name. *You're whole now. Your body is perfect, the way your spirit always was.* Noah breathed deep and turned his gaze to the sky again. "You take good care of her, God." His whisper blended with another gust of wind. "No one ever loved You more."

Clara had been Emily's younger sister. Just as beautiful, but born with cerebral palsy. She walked with braces and crutches and struggled to speak a clear sentence. But she was golden through and through. Everyone loved Clara, but Emily most of all. Their father left home when Emily was ten, and eight years later their mom died when her car got trapped in a flash flood.

After that, Emily raised her sister. Clara was always happy, always well loved because Emily took care of her with a fierce sort of protection. As if her own life depended on it.

It was why Noah had fallen in love with Emily in the first place, there in the cafeteria at Indiana University.

Those were big-time football days for Noah, back when he was a star quarterback for the Hoosiers. His world revolved around his teammates, his NFL dreams and his personal successes. He might never have noticed Emily if it weren't for Clara.

Noah turned his attention back to the tombstone. "This isn't how it was supposed to go, Clara, girl." He sighed. Gravity pulled hard at him again. "You tried to warn me."

She did. A year before the seizure that took her life, Clara had come to him with her iPad. In her own endearing way, she had struggled to ask her question. Just a couple words. "Too . . . much?"

Clara lived with them. She had from the time Noah and Emily married. And that day her words were not a complaint or a criticism. They were simply a question formed from the innocence of her soul.

On the iPad was Noah's Instagram account. @When\_We\_Were\_Young. The account that had blown up when the two of them got engaged. The one that allowed them to buy their house. The one that paid the bills.

Clara had held up the device and looked from the smattering of stunning photos to Noah. Then she'd said the clearest sentence Noah had ever heard her say. Standing a little taller, leaning on her crutches, she spoke straight to him. "Noah . . . Emily . . . needs you."

The implication was clear. Clara believed that her sis-

ter didn't need one more perfect social media post or another thousand people following them, obsessed with their life. Emily needed Noah. At the time he only smiled at Clara and nodded. "Of course she needs me." He didn't blink. "We all need each other!"

Noah felt then the way he still felt today. He had never set out to become Internet famous. None of them had. But from the day he asked Emily to marry him, the world had been drawn to them. A million people on Instagram alone looked forward to every update. What they were doing that day, what they might say to each other, the way they parented their kids, the flowers that lined the walkway to their front door.

Every single detail about their life and love.

From the beginning Noah had been in charge of posting. It was his Facebook page people followed, his Twitter account, his Instagram. He was responsible for keeping the posts inspirational. Engaging. Beautiful.

How many people had Noah and Emily's story helped along the way? How many followers had found their way back to faith and family? Their social media presence was important. The world needed people like them.

Noah gritted his teeth. Emily used to feel the same, thankful for a platform to share Bible verses or encouragement. But sometime after Clara died, Emily changed. Posting about their lives no longer felt fun and meaningful. She didn't care how many likes or retweets they got, or whether their numbers were growing.

As if their story was no longer worth sharing.

Noah took a heavy breath and stood, his eyes still on Clara's grave. Never mind that their social media accounts netted them six figures a year. Or that Noah could work far fewer hours at the fire station on a good month of Internet income.

They *were* making a difference. Which was why Noah wouldn't give it up. Their story was touching hearts and changing lives. Wasn't that the point? Wasn't it worth the effort? Noah still thought so.

Even now.

Not Emily, though. She thought their whole platform had become one big farce. Nothing but smoke and mirrors. That the faces they wore for the public were not the faces they wore around the dining room table.

Or in the bedroom.

Ever since Emily's change of mind, tension grew like weeds where love had once flourished. And there was nothing either of them could do to change the fact. The more Noah tried to convince Emily to smile for the camera, the more closed off she became. She accused him of being more concerned with their mostly female followers than with the life the two of them were really living.

He could still hear her frustrated criticism as far back as two years ago. "We used to post about our happy life. Now we're forcing life for the happy posts."

The temperature was dropping. Noah exhaled. "I don't know, Clara." His words came in a broken whisper. "Maybe I should've listened to you." He still wasn't sure. What was wrong with sharing their love with the world?

And how come Emily was jealous of the fans? Of course he needed to respond to their followers.

Noah could still think of a hundred reasons why their social media presence was a good thing. Emily couldn't think of one.

"But that's just a part of why we're splitting." He moved his toe along the edge of Clara's gravestone. "It's so much worse than that, Clara."

For months now their differences about posting on social media had paled in comparison to something else. These days, Emily no longer thought Noah was real.

"You only need me for one reason," she had told him a week ago. "So that you can stay in the public eye. @When\_We\_Were\_Young." She looked mean. Like she hated him. "Well, Noah, we aren't so young anymore. And this isn't love. It hasn't been for a long time."

He had tried to reason with her, tried to keep his cool. "That's not true, Emily." His voice betrayed his frustration. "Think about where we started. It's still that way with us. At least it could be."

But she wouldn't let up. "It doesn't matter where we started. It matters where we are now." Her eyes were flat. "We're a show. Nothing more."

Noah clenched his jaw. If that were true then maybe they were doing the best thing: taking a bow before things got truly ugly. Before the kids suffered.

The kids. Gravity doubled down.

Aiden was four and Olivia, two. Neither would remember the show, as Emily called it. They would also

never know the joy and security of having both parents under the same roof. Which was maybe also a good thing. Better not to know their parents fighting and scratching and clawing at each other.

Better to see a more beautiful picture of their mommy and daddy after the divorce. When they had separate addresses. Noah squinted toward the distant trees. Kids rebounded. At first they'd notice that Noah wasn't around as much, or that they had to go to a different place to see him.

But time would heal even that. Another gust of wind blew over him. Yes. The kids would be fine. He was convinced. As for their social media, he would take a break, of course. And then he'd start it up again. Focus more on the followers and ways to encourage them. Less about him. Nothing about Emily.

The clouds were darker now, the next storm almost overhead. Time to go home and do the one thing he never thought he'd do. Pack up his bags and leave the girl of his dreams.

Noah stooped down once more and spread his hand over his sister-in-law's name. "I'm sorry, Clara." His eyes welled up again. "If I could have found a way, I would've loved Emily forever." He blinked a few times so he could see. "I'm sorry."

Clara once had a game she liked to play with Noah. She'd limp toward him, her eyes lit up. That big one-in-a-million grin stretched across her pretty face. Then she'd tilt her head. "Forever, right?"

“Forever and ever,” Noah would say.

“Daddies don’t . . . always . . . leave.” She had said it a thousand times since the day Noah and Emily married. They knew their lines by heart, he and Clara.

“Not this daddy.” Noah would put his hand alongside Clara’s cheek. “Not ever.”

It was Clara’s game because deep down she needed reassurance. Needed it every day. Seeing her own father leave had altered her life. Never mind her limited abilities, she understood the loss. And because of that there was one thing she desperately wanted for her beloved sister.

That Noah Carter would never, ever leave.

His heart wrestled within him. *Clara, forgive me.* He ran his fingertips over the granite letters in her name, and as he did he could see her again, the sparkle in her blue eyes, the innocent crooked smile. Clara never believed she had special needs. Never let cerebral palsy stop her from caring about people. She couldn’t do a lot of things, but Clara definitely knew how to love.

She did it so well that back then Noah couldn’t imagine their home or their lives ever being anything but beautiful. Couldn’t imagine love running dry. The way it had now.

Once more he stood, and with a final look at Clara’s grave, he turned his back to the wind and walked toward his truck. He had rented an apartment across town, his new home starting tomorrow. The third day of November. Four days before their eighth anniversary.

So far he had no furniture, which suited him. He’d

sleep on the floor—penance for finding a way to fail Emily. Then when his new reality became something he could live and breathe under, he'd haul himself to a furniture store and get the basics.

All while wishing God had shown them a different way, a way to save their marriage. For Emily to stop snapping at him and for him to find a way to reach her. But that prayer had gone unanswered like so many others in the last year. Noah stared at the stormy sky once more. Clara wouldn't be here beneath the cold wet merciless dirt if God had answered their prayers.

A quick step up into his truck and Noah set out for their house in Clear Creek, where they still lived as a family. Where they were still a they. The four of them, for one more night. After he moved out, Emily and the kids would live there. But *they* wouldn't live there. Never again.

The house was three blocks south of their friends Ryan and Kari Taylor. The Taylors were maybe in their early forties, and every Wednesday night they led a Bible study. A year ago it was something Emily looked forward to every week. Noah tagged along because that was what Emily wanted.

Now the two of them hadn't been to the study in over a month. Once they decided to end things, when they were sure there was no going back, no saving their marriage, they stopped attending. No point hanging out with people committed to staying together.

Yes, Ryan and Kari Taylor were two more people he was about to let down. Two more on a growing list. Kari

was the sister of Ashley Baxter Blake, his fire chief's wife. So in no time everyone at the Bible study and at the firehouse was bound to know what had happened. How @When\_We\_Were\_Young had fallen apart.

Noah kept his eyes on the road. Rain began to pound against his windshield and he could hear words in the rhythm. *You don't have to do it . . . don't have to do it . . . don't have to . . .*

As if all of heaven were crying because this was the very last night Noah Carter would live under the same roof as his family.

Three bolts of lightning shot down around him like so many well-aimed spears. Noah slowed his truck in the deluge and flipped his windshield wipers up a notch. Was God trying to tell him something? Sending lightning to get his attention? However bad this storm, it was nothing compared to the one raging inside him.

At home, Noah pulled into the garage and walked through the back door. He took off his boots and stood there, listening for their voices. Emily and Aiden and Olivia. In another life he would've called out to them, anxious to see their faces. Ready to hug their necks.

But not today.

His family wasn't home. They were spending the evening with Ryan and Kari.

"Anywhere but here," Emily had told him last night. "Watching you pack."

The memory of her broken voice twisted Noah's heart again. He didn't blame her.

A month ago he had been called out to a wicked car crash. Four girls flying down Highway 37 south toward Bloomington. The driver must've gotten a text, because she crossed the centerline and hit a semitruck. Head-on.

Only a handful of times had Noah responded to a call as horrific as that one. The driver died with her phone still in her hand. The girls in the backseat, too. Just the female in the front passenger seat lived long enough to be taken to the hospital.

Noah remembered removing her broken, battered body from the wreckage. As they loaded her into the ambulance he had one thought: the girl was never going to make it. And she didn't. Died halfway to the emergency room. But he would never forget the way her body felt in his arms. Gasping for breath, heart barely beating, death minutes away.

The same way Noah's marriage felt tonight.

No wonder Emily didn't want to watch.

He walked through the kitchen and down the hall toward the bedroom. Emily hadn't slept here for a long time, though Noah had offered. Her spot was in the den now, on the sofa. Better than trying to sleep in their bed, she had told him. With or without him. At least until he moved out. The kids had never noticed, and the arrangement was easier on everyone.

The silence between them was too loud for either of them to get much rest.

When Noah reached their room he grabbed on to the doorframe and stared at the bed, the place where

their love had once been the center of their universe. Some mornings he would wake and watch her sleep, her long, blond hair, the way it fell in waves past her shoulders, her flawless profile and pretty cheekbones.

He'd lie there like that, just watching her, waiting for her to open her pale blue eyes. People said Emily looked like Kate Hudson. Noah thought they were wrong. Emily Andrews was far more beautiful. The most beautiful girl Noah had ever seen.

Once upon a yesterday, he would take her hands in the morning and pray for her, asking God to protect her and bless her day. He exhaled. When was the last time he'd done that? The last time they'd prayed together about anything?

Noah couldn't remember.

*Deep breath. You can do this.* His suitcases were on the floor, empty and ready. He picked up one, then the other and set them on the bed. Sadness pressed in around him again. For a long moment he stared at the comforter, the pillows. He ran his fingers over the familiar softness.

Here was where they had loved and laughed and cuddled their babies on long nights. Noah straightened and blinked a few times. *Now it's just a place to pack my bags.*

Already he had packed up his home office—all except his computer. And a few boxes he had in his closet. The rest of his things were in the garage waiting for him to toss them into the bed of his truck tomorrow. All he had left were his clothes.

Noah walked to his dresser and opened his top drawer. He pulled out two handfuls of socks and tossed them in one of the suitcases. Then he returned for his T-shirts, but as he reached toward the rear of the drawer something sharp pierced his finger. He pulled his hand back and rubbed at a tiny spot of blood.

“What in the world . . .” He pulled the drawer out further.

Only then, as the light hit that spot, did he see what it was. A sinking feeling churned at Noah’s stomach. He stepped back and shook his head. No way. The room began to spin, and Noah grabbed the dresser to steady himself. Really? Now, when he only had hours left in his own home, when all that remained was to pack up the essentials? Now, he would find this?

The pin was part of a boutonniere. The one he had worn on their wedding day.

Noah picked it up and looked at it, studied it. Crazy, because he had searched for this a year ago and couldn’t find it. He had thought it would make a good social media post for their seventh anniversary.

Now it was nothing more than a marker. Like the stone over Clara’s grave. *Here lie the remains of Noah and Emily’s marriage.* Thunder shook the house, but it was nothing compared to the silence. Nothing compared to the flower in his hand.

Dried and crumbled, sharp enough to cut him. And long since dead.

Just like their marriage.