Vendetta For My Valentine

by Linkara

Summary

Nora and Nick Valentine meet before the war, fall in love, get married and have a son named Shaun. After being frozen in the vault the family is woken briefly when both Nick and Shaun are kidnapped. Nick then wakes up alone in a junk yard, in a synth body, and not in the decontamination chamber he entered a minute ago with his son.
The fact that he’d managed to go a full hour without ducking out of the courtroom for a cigarette should’ve been, in retrospect, the first clue that his life was about to be turned upside down. But at the time he’d been too busy brazenly staring at her stocking-clad legs to notice.

If it had been any other day in court Nick Valentine would be the very picture of a hopeless nicotine addict being forced to sit still in a strictly no-smoking locale. He’d be twirling a pen through his fingers, bouncing his heels and regaling poor Donny (his long-suffering partner since arriving in Boston) with the same tired spiel about the far greater dangers of smoking in hospitals, which weren’t subject to the same anti-smoking measures as the fine courthouses of Massachusetts.

But it wasn’t just another day. It was the day he’d first laid eyes on her.

Everything else that happened that day became a mere backdrop. Which he supposed, at a later date, must make him a shitty cop. Because for all the hours he’d poured into catching the slimy weasel facing the judge today all he could focus on was the pretty dame tasked with making sure he actually ended up in prison.

His out of character stillness in the throes of nicotine withdrawal prompted Donny, sitting to his right, to drive his heel into Nicks’ toes, eliciting a hiss and a murderous ocean-blue glare from the raven-haired detective.

“Don’t you dare!” Donny whispered as loudly as he was able in a packed courtroom. “You’re on the witness list, Nicky! And she’s the district attorney! If you get caught tryin’ anything the whole damn case gets thrown out!”

If I get caught, he wanted to retort sarcastically, as if he’d even consider it in the first place, but one look at Donny’s furrowed ginger brow told Nick that, yes, even his partner assumed that he looked at all women like a starving man would look at a buffet. He didn’t know how these crass rumors about him had even started. Nick had to make a conscious effort not to thump his head on the bench in front of him in frustration.

He settled for following the young lawyers’ graceful hands with his gaze as she thumbed through a novel-sized stack of papers. When she was done with that task she idly brushed a strand of chocolate-brown hair behind her ear, giving Nick his first glimpse of her face, impeded by the angle she was standing at in relation to him, but nonetheless causing his heart to lurch curiously behind his ribs.

Okay, maybe there were a few women he looked at in that way. He was a grown man with eyes, wasn’t he?

Nick would reflect later with no small amount of annoyance that he hadn’t heard a single thing said by anyone once the proceedings were underway, he’d been too busy drinking in the sound of her voice, not the words, just the confident and slightly sultry tones they were wrapped in, conjuring lurid fantasies to go along with them and feeling like a creep when he couldn’t push them out of his head.

As absorbed as he was by his own imagination; when the gavel came down sharply, indicating the end of the days’ arguments, Nick jumped noticeably in his seat, blinking as if being awoken from a trance. Donny also seemed stunned, and a little awed.
“What is it?” Nick queried, knowing that Donny would likely give him shit later for not paying attention, but he was willing to sacrifice a bit of pride for the sake of the full picture.

“It’s over” Donny replied simply. “Just a sentencing hearing next week and that’s it. They didn’t even call you up”

What?

“How? Did he cut a deal?” He’d seen this coming. Eddie Winters’ underlings were infamous for selling out their fellow crooks for less time, or even zero time behind bars, but never Winter himself. Everyone in that particular crime ring was zealous in the belief that they’d rather eat the barrel of a shotgun than sell out the head honcho, it was a tad bizarre in Nicks’ opinion.

But even so … those deals took months to hammer out, and a lot more than one measly court appearance.

What just happened?

“I dunno” Donny murmured, almost to himself. “He just plead guilty to everythin’, we gotta come back for the sentencing but that’s all”

Nicks’ attention darted back to their brand new district attorney; packing away folders into a leather satchel with a nonchalant expression, acting as if she hadn’t just knocked his world off its’ axis.

Nick Valentine didn’t know much about the finer details of the law, a lot of it was beyond what he needed to know for his job, but he knew lawyers…

And this sort of thing just didn’t happen in cases like this. Lawyers, in his vast experience, couldn’t give a flying fuck about a speedy resolution, they lived for their own unique brand of battle fought with fancy words and legal loopholes. Sure, they all started out as idealistic do-gooders, mostly… but the cut-throat, power hungry nature of the world of law, not to mention the inadequacies of the justice system at large, wore them down eventually.

This lead Nick to two polarizing theories; she was either as crooked as they came, using shady backroom deals to further her own ends … or she was just that good.

And he was inclined to believe the latter … despite normally being firmly entrenched south of the line separating optimism and pessimism.

In retrospect, that should’ve been his second clue.

Nick didn’t move to leave until the pretty brunette was halfway to the door, heels clicking rhythmically against the polished wood floor. He donned his signature coat and fedora as he left his partner scowling in the dust behind him, following the woman far too closely for a detective supposedly skilled at tailing others unaware.

If asked at that moment Nick wouldn’t have been able to come up with a single reason as to why he’d practically jogged after her through the crowded halls of the courthouse. And he certainly didn’t have one when she finally stopped at the top of the concrete stairs leading outdoors, looked innocently over her shoulder and said…

“You’re awfully obvious when you follow someone, Mister Valentine. How on earth are you even a detective?”

The amused smile that punctuated her sentence was downright charming.
“You know who I am then?”

You’re an idiot, Nick. He answered himself in his own head as the object of his stupor cocked a perfectly plucked brow at him.

“Yes. You were supposed to be one of my star witnesses”, she stated obviously. That round, adorable smile grew slightly wider and she laughed softly at what he assumed was an embarrassed expression taking over his mug.

“How’d you do it?” Nick blurted out. “That guy’s as slippery as they come, and he just gave himself up”

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth before she answered, causing a jolt of irrational envy to lance through him at the sight.

“It’s silly…” she began carefully. “But with every new case I get I like to really get to know everyone involved, even the people I’m prosecuting. Did you know that Martin Hobson is originally from Florida?”

Who? Of course, the schmuck who’d just plead guilty. He’d completely forgotten that ‘Hobbs’ was just a nickname he’d been using while working under Winter.

“He has a mother and a younger sister there that he hasn’t seen in years,” she continued. “When he left home there was a bit of drama, but after everything that’s happened to him since joining up with Eddie Winters’ crew… he’s really been missing them”. She gave Nick an indecipherable look. “It wasn’t that difficult to find them and arrange a few calls between Martin and his family, they miss him as well. After that it was simply a matter of making sure that, if he confesses, he goes to a prison in Florida … with visitation rights … about half an hour away from where his family lives”

Her expression as she finished her explanation would have been devious, but the effect was ruined by the fact she was clearly an angel of redemption sent from the highest plateau of Heaven. What other explanation could there possibly be for an undeserving scumbag like Hobbs receiving such kindness and mercy? From his prosecutor no less!

Her devious grin turned downwards into an apologetic frown as she took a half-step closer to him, close enough now that Nick could see the slight blush dusting her smooth, slightly rounded cheeks.

“Anyway… I’m sorry that I dragged you out here for nothing in the end”

And it wasn’t just an empty platitude, she was genuinely sorry.

“Don’t go beating yourself up over it” Nick tipped his fedora forward slightly, belatedly trying to salvage a modicum of his own patented charm. “If the end result is one of Winters’ thugs off the streets, and out of the state to boot, then I might be inclined to forgive you for taking an hour or two out of my day”

The smile returned, bringing a beautiful warm glow to the rest of her flawless face, which she tilted slightly… almost as if she was admiring him right back.

“You may be inclined, but how do I secure that forgiveness?”

Nicks’ newly repaired composure crumbled again for another two seconds, penetrating eyes of deep chocolate-brown nearly identical to her hair, meeting his from beneath a veil of painted black lashes. It was the first time a woman had ever offered him such a bold lead-in on a silver platter … and what kind of a cad would he be if he left her hanging?
“I suppose since you took roughly two hours of my time…” Nick intoned slowly, as if he were still mulling over his words. “Then it’s only fair that I get two of yours as compensation”

Her smile turned slightly wolfish before she responded.

“I might just have a couple to spare this evening, between seven and nine?”

Another curious lurch behind his ribs…

“And where might I find you between those hours?” At this point he didn’t care where she’d be that evening, he’d drag himself there across broken glass if it came down to it.

Nevertheless he was pleased when she named a bar a few blocks from the station, that he was aware of via accounts from fellow officers who took their girls there in an effort to look a bit more sophisticated. It was a little more upmarket than he was used to but that was just dandy with him, smaller chance of being interrupted by someone from work.

And if this beautiful woman was choosing to spend time with him? Then Nick Valentine didn’t want any interruptions.

He vaguely recalled agreeing to her choice of venue and accepting one of her business cards, her home telephone number hastily scrawled beneath her job title, just in case he had to cancel, she’d said. Like hell.

Then she was gone, faster than should’ve been possible in footwear as tall as hers, citing that she was late to catch a train. Huh… he figured she’d have a car.

Nick then mentally slapped himself; he’d been so preoccupied with not looking like a drooling idiot that he’d done the stupidest thing imaginable, he’d forgotten to ask her name.

Thank God for business cards…

Nora Fitzsimons.

On his way back inside to find Donny he unconsciously ran his thumb along the edge of the tiny card in his pocket.

And it wasn’t until half an hour later, when he draped his coat over the back of his chair at the precinct, that he realized it had been almost a full three hours since he’d last had a cigarette.
At seven o’clock Nick Valentine stubbed out the last of his cigarette with the toe of his shoe, gathered his carefully practiced charisma around him like a second coat and walked through the front door of the bar Nora had chosen.

He hadn’t seen her enter in the half hour he’d stood outside chain-smoking and letting his fingers go numb, so he figured she was the type of woman to run late rather than early. Which was fair, lawyers had a time consuming job after all.

Except as he scanned the crowd for an empty seat he spotted her. A drink at her elbow and a notepad in front of her on the bar that she seemed to be making corrections to as the other patrons crowded the space by her shoulders in an effort to better relay their drink orders.

So she ran early, earlier than him. That was a first.

“Haven’t they given you a desk where you can do all that vital paperwork for the justice system?” He chuckled next to her ear, causing her to jump slightly and turn to him with a sheepish curve of her lips, as if she’d been caught doing something embarrassing. “Things must really be grim if office furniture is being rationed now”

“I can’t drink at my desk” she raised her glass in a mock toast as if to prove her point. “You have to be a little higher up on the totem poll to get away with that at my workplace”

“Mine too” Nick responded. “The chief has a fully stocked bar at the bottom of his filing cabinet, complete with olives and tiny umbrellas”

She laughed at that, light and carefree and washing over him like a balm, soothing the tension he’d accumulated during the day. In the back of his mind he made it his mission to tease that sound out of her again before the night was over.

With the ice broken and Nora’s notes packed away Nick lead her to an empty table away from the bar and its’ jostling customers.

By eight o’clock Nick had succeeded in his mission to make the enchanting Miss Nora Fitzsimons laugh again, several times over in fact … he just hadn’t anticipated that it would be at his own expense.

Nick had been a resident and dedicated public servant of Boston for roughly a year now, and in that time he’d built up a reputation amongst his fellow police officers, or rather they’d built him a reputation.

He supposed it was a unique form of friendly ribbing, or a way of making him feel welcome, perhaps? It seemed no matter what Nick accomplished the retelling of the act would steadily be blown up to comical and ridiculous proportions as the stories made their way through the gossip circles … and apparently his gossip circles overlapped with Nora’s.

He’d just finished deflating a whopper involving twelve armed thugs, a cabaret performer and a
trained attack dog to its’ bare and far less exciting truth when she brought up the inevitable…

“So exactly how many of the cities single women haven’t found themselves in your bed? Besides me, of course”

Her tone and expression were both teasing, just like with the other stories, but there was a hint of something else under there. She seemed far more eager to hear this answer more than any of the others, but what did that mean for the rapport they were steadily building? Nick didn’t have a fucking clue, so as he’d done for all the other tall-tales he defaulted to the far less interesting facts of the matter.

“I haven’t lived here long, but I reckon even if I was a born native I wouldn’t have had the time to get through that many dames. A guy would have to be more machine than man” He punctuated his answer with a throaty laugh, hopefully masking how awkward he felt. He offered a silent prayer to a God he’d never paid much heed to that she’d drop it now.

No such luck…

“So, how many?”

He turned his head, unconsciously attempting to hide in the collar of his coat and raised his index finger, as if saying it out loud would cause him to spontaneously combust from sheer embarrassment.

Damn it, he didn’t even know why he was embarrassed. A single woman in the one year following his abrupt transplant from Chicago to Boston was perfectly acceptable, wasn’t it? It was certainly a lot better than what the rumors made him out to be; some legendary Casanova who apparently never slept.

That was it.

Nick didn’t want her to be charmed by those laughable legends. She was definitely sharp enough to see through them at face value, but what if she was still disappointed by what he’d so far revealed? He didn’t want her to be attracted to a larger-than-life caricature of Nick Valentine, but at the same time he worried that the truth was too underwhelming for such a unique, beautiful creature.

He must have been vacationing in his own head for a little too long because Nora brushed her fingers across the back of his hand, sending delicious sparks of electricity skittering up his arm. She was looking at him with the same apologetic frown he’d seen earlier on the top of the courthouse stairs.

“Sorry… I didn’t mean to make things awkward” She worried her lower lip with her teeth, and Nick couldn’t help staring. “I like all the stories I’ve heard about you. But they make you seem so… I dunno. Unapproachable?”

He didn’t know what to say to that. He didn’t know what to think of that. Except that he was pretty damn sure that no other woman had ever thought of him as unapproachable before. It made his heart lurch in that strange, unfamiliar way again.

“No, it’s not that” Nick said quickly, nervously carding his fingers through his hair. “It’s just… I was raised Catholic, and I guess some of the dogma must’ve stuck because whenever someone brings up, relations… and the like, I get a little jumbled up. Ridiculous, eh?”

He cast his eyes down, half mortified and half guilt-wracked. It wasn’t a lie, but it was a piss-poor substitute for what he really wanted to say; that she was the most wonderfully unapproachable woman he’d ever encountered, but he’d chased her through those courtroom halls anyway because she seemed to have some sort of gravity-themed superpower that drew him in like a moth to a flame.
It was a bit heavy-handed for a first date. Was this a date? Christ, what was wrong with him?

Nora grinned and leaned towards him, bringing a hand towards the side of her mouth conspiratorially. “Me too” she whispered. “But I was a very bad Catholic. The nuns at my school swore I was sent by the lord as a test of their patience”

He chuckled at the thought of this angelic woman giving a group of poor nuns a hard time as a youth … and tried his hardest not to dwell on the low and utterly sinful tone she’d used when she described herself as ‘a very bad Catholic’.

When nine o’ clock rolled around Nick was dismayed to see Nora fidgeting in her seat and trying to hide a glance at her small silver wristwatch.

They’d been having a wonderful time thus far. After a few early stumbles their conversation had become easy and exuberant as they discovered all that they had in common, exchanging stories and jokes as if they’d known each other all their lives … and Nick keenly regretted that he’d never crossed paths with her much earlier in life.

Had the connection been one-sided on his part?

Nick looked down at his own gold watch; confirming that it was, unfortunately, nine on the dot. Time to let her go.

“Well… you’ve given me back my two hours” He couldn’t completely keep the disappointment out of his tone. “Did you need a ride home?” He couldn’t completely keep the hope out of his tone either.

“No!” She barked suddenly, eyes wide, then she quickly composed herself before continuing. “I mean- a ride would be great but… I don’t have to be anywhere and- I mean I sort of do, but…”

She glanced down shyly, twisting her fingers together on the surface of the table before admitting in a tiny voice, as if she was ashamed to voice it:

“There’s a special hour-long broadcast of The Silver Shroud tonight”

Nicks’ jaw dropped slightly.

He’d completely forgotten about the broadcast. The hour-long special that he’d waited all damned week for!

They shared the same guilty pleasure. What were the odds?

“My car has a radio” His mouth supplied before his brain could properly catch up with the situation.

Nora gave him an ear-to-ear grin as she simultaneously scrambled to her feet and threw her satchel over her shoulder.

They gained a few curious looks from the other bar patrons as Nick practically dragged her by the hand out the door and down the street to where he’d parked his early model Corvega.
At ten o’clock Nick was no longer paying attention to the plight of the Silver Shroud as he agonized over whether the Mistress of Mystery had betrayed him or not … his thoughts were occupied by the woman sitting next to him.

Even in the harsh glow of a nearby construction lamp, with powdered sugar stuck to her cheek, she was absolutely stunning.

Once clear of the bar they’d jumped into his car and tuned to the appropriate station just in time to catch the announcement that their beloved radio serial had been pushed back to nine-thirty in favor of a special news broadcast, about what he hadn’t heard, Nick was already mentally planning what he was going to do with those precious thirty minutes.

After stopping at an all night Slocum’s Joe for a box of jelly donuts, two takeout cups of decaf and a few wise-acre remarks from Nora about what a tragic cliche he was, Nick took a shortcut out of the crowded avenues of the city and came to a stop in a temporary car park set up on the outskirts of a large construction site, another future Vault location, if he remembered correctly.

It was far from the most romantic of venues, but the area was completely deserted at this time of night, and far enough away from the dense urban sprawl that the sound of the radio wouldn’t have to compete with the din of traffic and pedestrians.

Nora was far from the first woman he’d found attractive, but she was definitely the first who only seemed to become more beautiful the more he learned about her. Almost as if the facets of her personality reflected the radiant light of her soul from within.

Good grief, this girl was turning him to mush. She was definitely the first to accomplish that.

He’d gotten the bare bones of her life story back in the bar...

She’d been raised in a single parent household after the death of her mother and infant brother. Reeling from the loss she became a difficult child to handle, prompting her exodus to a Catholic all-girls boarding school, a decision she’d reacted to about as gracefully as a cat would react to a cold bath.

She’d glossed over the more scandalous details of her rebellious youth, but Nick got the distinct impression that it had come to a head quite dramatically, prompting a swift attitude adjustment and long nights of study in order to get into law school, like her father had always wanted for her.

After graduation she went on to became a model college student and daughter, spending her Friday nights reviewing her assignments with the aid of her name-partner dad … and her weekends shadowing him around his firm, to get a lay of the land, she’d said.

Her intense dedication and complete forfeiture of a social life lead to Nora passing the bar on her first try. She’d then made her father both annoyed and proud at the same time when she turned down a paid position at his firm in favor of an unpaid internship in the district attorneys office … citing that she would not have her career handed to her by daddy dearest, thank you very much.

It was odd to think that the strong, intelligent, determined heroine of that story was sitting next to him right now … staring goggle-eyed at the cars radio display and attempting to stuff half a donut into her mouth in one go, succeeding only at getting more sugar stuck to her cheek.

Nick broke her trance when he accidentally let slip a soft laugh, the image was just too funny, and
utterly adorable.

“What’s so funny?” she asked with mock offense through half chewed pastry. That, for starters, he refrained from saying.

He gave her his most charming smile and a cocked brow. “You have white stuff all over your face, doll” He then fought down a blush at his own poor choice of words.

“Oh goddammit” Nora muttered to herself as she swiped uselessly at her left cheek, spreading it higher up her face instead.

As Nick filed away the absolutely precious scene before him in the archive of his memories his body betrayed him in the worst way possible … he unconsciously licked the thumb of his right hand and proceeded to run it slowly and gently across the white trail left by her ineffective flailing.

It was only when she locked her wide eyes with his that Nick realized what an intimate gesture it was. And he hadn’t dropped his hand yet either, the traitorous appendage seemingly frozen against her delicate face.

Holy hell … he didn’t know skin could get that soft.

He was prepared for disgust, for awkwardness, for her to jerk away, any of those plus a few other equally disastrous scenarios. So Nick was completely floored when Nora slowly turned her head and sucked the tip of his thumb into her mouth, tongue darting out to collect the sugar gathered there, her eyes never once leaving his.

Nick swallowed back a groan that threatened to spill forth in response to the lexicon of images that one tiny act had conjured in his head.

His fantasies were then blissfully blown away, his brain turning to warm fog, as Nora quickly leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, as if she was forcing herself to act before the moment was gone forever.

Instead they worked feverishly to stretch the moment out for as long as possible, and Nick could barely remember to breathe through the sensations of her silky hair tangled around his fingers … her warm hands caressing the back of his neck … and the potent taste of her lips and tongue … strawberry jelly and powdered sugar would forever seem all the sweeter in his mind.

By eleven o’ clock Nora was confident that she’d pitched Nick Valentines sexual neurosis right out of the car window … for now at least. She imagined that after he gave her a ride home and a shy goodbye kiss he’d go right back to mentally torturing himself for allowing himself the pleasure of a woman’s touch … twice … on the first date no less.

Nick was far less adept at hiding his true feelings than he believed he was … it was so fucking cute.

She allowed herself a tiny besotted grin as she relished the warmth of his body curled around hers from behind, it was the only position that could be described as ‘comfortable’ stretched out in the back seat of Nicks car, and it wouldn’t be long before that ceased to be the case … leather seats and sweaty skin were not an ideal match, after all.
Better make the most of it, an evil voice intoned in the back of Nora’s mind, as she reached behind her back to caress the soft skin of his hip. She was pleased when his cock slowly began to harden against her backside again.

“Have dinner with me?” the question came out tired but quickly in a delightful tenor that was uniquely his … and Nora mused that he could read out the warranty for her refrigerator and make it sound exhilarating.

“It’s a bit late. I think all the good places are closed at this hour” she quipped, earning a chuckle that rumbled against her back.

“You know what I mean, sweetheart” her heart did a tiny somersault at the endearment. “I was thinking the evening after the sentencing? That way if you change your mind in the meantime you’ll have an opportunity to tell me to buzz off before I make an idiot out of myself”

Nora closed her questing hand around his now fully erect member and turned her shoulders in order to pin him with an angry glare. This self-depreciation shit was getting old very fast, and in the back of her mind she made it her mission to fix that battered ego of his if it was the last thing she did.

“I would love to have dinner with you, Nick Valentine” she gritted out angrily, her tone clearly confusing the fuck out of the poor man she had in her grip. “But I will not be telling you to buzz off, on that day or any other, because you’re an intelligent, sweet, funny, drop-dead-gorgeous man who likes The Silver Shroud, bought me coffee and donuts, and just gave me two incredible orgasms” Nick’s expression was absolutely hilarious at this point but she’d laugh about it later at home. “I don’t know what happened to make you this insecure, but damn it I’m going to fix it. Starting right now … sit up!” she barked.

He obeyed, of course, a firm grip around a mans most treasured appendage didn’t leave much room for argument after all.

It was awkward in the cramped confines of the car but Nora managed to kiss her way down Nicks chest and take his cock into her mouth in one fluid stroke, humming as it brushed the back of her throat and causing him to hiss through his teeth and gently palm her hair.

“Fuck! Nora…” he moaned as she ran her tongue along his length inside her mouth. She smiled against his short black hairs, it was the first time he’d cursed in front of her.

She held his hips down with firm palms as she set a slow but deliberate rhythm; down slowly, rubbing the tip against the roof of her mouth, running her tongue along the underside of his shaft, then up again, applying extra suction to the sensitive head, then repeating. Nora committed the exact steps to memory as she worked, because after only a few minutes he was beginning to tremble underneath her.

She replaced her mouth with her hand for a moment while she took a look at his face, he’d been awfully quiet since that initial slipped curse. Ah… there’s the reason. Nick was biting down hard on a clenched fist, his other hand still occupied with caressing the back of her head.

“There’s no one around, Nick” Nora breathed against his straining cock. “You can be as loud as you want, no one’s going to hear you” she punctuated the last part with an evil smirk before sucking his tip between her lips and doubling the pressure she’d been using so far.

His entire body spasmed, his grip in her hair tightened and the fist at his mouth flew to grasp the seat leather as he let spill a needy “Fuuuuuck…” Along with a bead of pre-cum.
After that the detective quickly devolved into a babbling, shuddering mess as Nora redoubled her efforts between his legs, she had to use a considerable portion of her strength to keep him from thrusting into the back of her throat.

“Nora! Fuck… stop, I’m gonna- oh God!” he tried to bite out between harsh breaths. She knew, she could feel him pulsating under her tongue. With a final suck of his overstimulated head she was rewarded with a rush of warm, salty fluid coating the inside of her cheeks.

It had been fast, but intense, and she must’ve managed to get her point across. Because she’d barely finished gulping down his release before Nora was dragged unceremoniously up the length of Nicks sweat-slicked body and being kissed as if his next breath depended on it.

When he finally relinquished his claim on her mouth she giggled softly and pressed her forehead to his.

“Happy Valentines Day, detective” she whispered against his lips.

She then felt, rather than saw, the knitting of his brows.

“Huh?” was all he could manage in his exhaustion.

Nora couldn’t stop it, she tried but she failed. She let out a very unladylike snort and burst into peels of laughter, leaning back in his arms in a futile attempt to compose herself.

“Oh my God!” she managed to get out. “A yearly holiday … that you share your name with … and you didn’t even notice it was today? You’re the most unobservant detective I’ve ever seen”

She worried that maybe she’d said too much and busted his ego again, so Nora was relieved when he smiled and started laughing along with her.

At eleven forty seven, as Nora had predicted, Nick Valentine gave her a shy goodbye kiss in front of the door to her apartment block and reluctantly walked back to his car. Whether he’d mentally torture himself later she could only speculate, but she hoped he’d be too tired to do so.

She stumbled through her front door just in time to answer the phone. It was her father, asking if she’d been working late (Nope), if she’d gotten his earlier message (Nope), and if she’d had a proper dinner (Coffee, donuts and cop jizz counted as dinner, right?). God, wouldn’t that be a hilarious way to give him a coronary?

Nora assured him that she was home, safe and properly fed before hanging up the receiver heavily and kicking off her heels, the soles of her feet rejoicing at the freedom. She left a trail of clothes behind her on the way to the bed, she’d pick them up tomorrow when she could muster up a fuck to give.

She drifted off within minutes of hitting the pillow, images of ocean-blue eyes, jet black hair and a charming smile dancing behind her eyelids.
Meanwhile, a short way across the river, Nick climbed the stairs to his modest abode and realized it had been nearly five hours since he’d last had a cigarette. He hadn’t even thought about the lighting up the whole time he was with Nora.

He smirked at the thought; maybe if she stuck around long enough he wouldn’t die of lung cancer after all.
Chapter 3

It was during the tail end of May when Nick Valentine leaned his forehead against the steering wheel of his car and started to seriously consider cashing in a few of those vacation days the chief kept reminding him to use up. Hell, his boss would probably force him to take a few days off once he heard about the days’ events…

Nick, Donny and the rest of the motley task-force working towards bringing down Eddie Winters’ crime ring had finally gotten the green light to move in on one of the main businesses laundering money for them; a seedy gentleman's club in an even seedier part of the city. Why did it never occur to these types of thugs to open an ice cream parlor or a pet store? Just for the sake of originality, if nothing else.

Reports suggested that even during daylight hours there would likely be a contingent of mobsters standing guard over the place, so they’d all been issued bullet-proof vests and sent along with a small, but heavily armed SWAT team. In Nicks’ experience; the more cops sent out on a single assignment, the greater the chance of everything going tits up … and today had unfortunately been no exception.

Half of the officers had gone to the back doors while Nick and Donny secured the front with the rest. The plan had been to synchronize their watches and then kick the doors in at precisely 2:15, hopefully catching the crooks by surprise and surrounding them before they could offer any resistance. It was 2:14 when Donny voiced his concerns.

“Nick, somethin’ ain’t right here”

The fact that he’d called him ‘Nick’ instead of the usual ‘Nicky’ had put him instantly on edge.

“We’re standin’ right at the front door. Notice anythin’ missing?”

*I’m not exactly a regular at places like this!* Nick wanted to snap. “What’s your point?” he asked shortly instead.

“Where’s the bouncer?”

*Shit.*

Then everything went tits up.

He reached for the SWAT leader and called out to him at the same time, but it was too late. The armored squad was kicking in the door and throwing themselves forward into the dark of the club. Nick barely managed to shove Donny into the pavement before the blast came. He instinctively covered his face with his arms, expecting to be hit with shrapnel, debris or even pieces of the SWAT team, but nothing came. The detective replayed the sound of the explosion in his head as he opened his eyes and took in the sight of the intact doorway, confirming that it hadn’t been a bomb, but it was still too damn loud to have been a gun.

It hadn’t been a gun, it had been *twelve* guns … shotguns, to be specific. The same kind they had
back at the station in the event that their police-issue revolvers proved inadequate to break up a bank robbery. Arranged in a neat line along the clubs’ center stage, and rigged to all fire at once if the sensors attached to the doors were tripped.

It probably would’ve been easier to deal with if those guns had been aimed at the advancing police officers, injury or death in the field of duty was expected after all.

Those poor girls though … they had nothing to do with any of it.

The clubs female staff had been gagged and chained up in a row along the stage, the stationary shotguns pointing straight at their chests. None of the twelve girls had survived … at that range they never stood a chance.

The rest of the place was deserted, the cash registers and safe had been emptied, the business ledgers gone, even the liquor had been removed from the bar. As if that wasn’t enough every square inch of the typically filthy establishment had been deep cleaned and polished to a taunting shine, the smell of bleach still lingered faintly in the air. They’d get no evidence here.

Nevertheless, there were still procedures to follow … The forensics unit was radioed in anyway, as were the coroners. A few of the department higher-ups filtered in to witness the fiasco for themselves and administer chewing-outs to everyone involved, the only reason the chief wasn’t there in person was that he’d been called away by the mayors office earlier that morning for a strictly closed-door meeting.

To stay busy, and to stop himself from dwelling on what he could have done differently, Nick took a camera from one of the crime scene technicians and helped out by photographing each girl before they ended up bagged, tagged and stuffed in a cold metal drawer down at the morgue.

It was when he got to Jane Doe #8 that Nick hesitated … then handed the camera back to it’s owner and walked briskly out of the club, slowing only to duck beneath crime scene tape and bark “No comment” at the gaggle of reporters now swarming the footpath outside.

Now Nick was at a crossroads, literally as well as figuratively, the traffic was always deplorable at this hour.

He could turn right, go back to his apartment, crawl into the bottom of a bottle and hopefully fall into a nice dreamless sleep until tomorrow morning. Then wake up and deal with today’s bullshit all over again, but with a debilitating hangover. It had proven to be an effective treatment for his occasional bouts of melancholy in the past.

Or he could turn left, go to an apartment more welcoming than his own, bury his face in Nora’s fragrant hair, kiss her senseless and pour his guts out to her over a shared bottle of whatever hooch she had on standby. She’d been encouraging him lately to share his burdens with her as his assignments steadily grew more taxing, but he’d so far declined her generous offer, it felt selfish to unload his woes onto someone else just to make himself feel a little better, especially her.

Jane Doe #8 though… for a brief and utterly insane moment he could’ve sworn it was Nora.

He’d had to blink vigorously for his vision to correct itself, to confirm that the girl merely had a similar hairstyle and the same delicate nose … but that split-second hallucination still haunted him
hours after the fact.

Nick was then brought rudely out of his fugue by the impatient blasting of a car horn from behind his own vehicle. The traffic had started to move, barely though, so in a fit of pique he stuck his arm out of the window and flipped off the offending motorist. He then mentally plotted his course for when he was finally free of this damn intersection.

Back in the days when she’d had slightly more free time than she found herself blessed with now Nora would often unwind with tales of mystery, murder and the dashing detectives trying to solve them. Now she frowned down at her ancient and battered copy of The Long Goodbye, unable to lose herself in the familiar plot because her brain kept distracting her with fanciful images of another tall, dark and handsome investigator … one with the distinct advantage of being flesh and blood, unlike Philip Marlowe.

She sighed and dropped the novel onto the coffee table in front of her. Another book that she’d never be able to read again without comparing the protagonist to the man she was currently dating. *Curse you, Nick Valentine!* *You beautiful son-of-a-bitch,* she thought wryly.

The comfort of the sofa was abandoned briefly while she got herself a Nuka-Cola from the refrigerator, turning on the television as she re-entered the living area. She thought about getting a glass and mixing the drink with a dash of rum, but she’d promised herself that she was going to stop using liquor to wind down in the evenings. So she drank straight from the bottle and let the hypnotic glow of the idiot-box overtake her.

That had been the plan, but her mind had found a thread to pursue and wasn’t going to let it go easily. Nora mulled over all she’d pieced together about her charming lover in the recent months…

He’d been raised in a poor and densely populated suburb of Chicago by his Italian immigrant mother … his father had been a large, conspicuous question mark that haunted Nick throughout his childhood. Any attempt made to discover anything about the man who sired him only resulted in more questions and arguments with his mom. He’d never said it outright, but Nora got the distinct impression that this ever-present mystery was one of the main reasons he became a detective.

As a boy Nick had preferred the company of books and the occasional superhero comic. Being studious, somewhat foreign and fatherless had earned him the label of ‘punching bag’ rather than ‘playmate’ in the eyes of the neighborhood children. Then again... it might have also been the fact that young Nick Valentine was, in his own words; “an insufferable smart-alec”, who more often than not came home with bruises or a bloodied nose because he couldn’t resist taking the mickey out of the dumber bullies.

Nicks teenage years had been dedicated to helping his mom build and operate a business out of their home … job opportunities for heavily-accented single mothers were virtually non-existent, after all. Oddly, he’d refused to elaborate on the type of enterprise it was, simply chuckling and assuring Nora that she’d never believe him if he told her … she wondered if it was even legal. Wouldn’t *that* be ironic?

Nora’s musings were interrupted by a knocking at the front door. She let out an annoyed huff, stomped to her feet and started rehearsing a suitably sarcastic greeting in her head for the bastard who thought they could sell her something at- *she glanced at her watch* -six-thirty in the damn evening!
The snarky comment was abandoned, however, when she opened the door and found herself face-to-face with the man she’d just been daydreaming about.

“Nick? Did we have plans?” she asked, an alarm bell ringing distantly in her subconscious. He’d never just *shown up* at her apartment before.

“Nah, nothing like that” he replied, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Call me a sap, but I just really wanted to see you”

Nora felt her face flush and her heart turn to goo, at both the sentiment and warm look he was giving her. How could she say no to that? She side-stepped and ushered him inside. Once the door was closed he held up a bag with a familiar logo printed across it’s front and she flushed even redder, this time from embarrassment.

He’d brought Chinese food. Because she never seemed to have any proper food on hand when he was over. One of her many foibles that he loved to tease her about, but still insisted was ‘*part of her charm*’.

“You bring me the sweetest gifts” Nora joked, although in truth she greatly preferred the gift of not having to cook rather than flowers any day of the week.

“Just making sure my gal doesn’t starve to death while she’s saving the world, one plea bargain at a time” He deposited the bag on the coffee table with a fond smile, the one that never failed to make her stomach flutter.

As Nora darted about her modest kitchen fetching cutlery, glasses and the bottle of rum she’d so far avoided she watched Nick out of the corner of her eye as he left his fedora on a hook in the entryway, then shrugged out of his trench coat, then she had to double-take as he was hanging it up.

“Whoa, wait a minute. What’s that?” It was a rhetorical question, Nora knew exactly what it was. She’d just hoped she’d never have to see Nick wear one. It was only now that she realized just how *tired* he looked in the soft light of her home.

Nick looked down at the bullet-proof vest encasing his torso with a grim twist of his lips before starting on its troublesome fastenings.

“It’s the latest fashion down at the station, got ‘em on loan from Fallon’s as part of a daring new exposure campaign. Technically they’re not supposed to go home with the model, but it was so cozy I just couldn’t *resist*” he punctuated the last word with a sharp tug and a rush of air from his lungs, finally undoing the cumbersome armor and slipping it over his head. There was an impressive *thud* as it hit the floor.

“Nick … what happened?” She almost didn’t want to hear the answer. If he was dancing around the issue with jokes, something he *never* did when it came to his job, then it must be absolutely horrible.

It was only for the tiniest fraction of a second; Nick winced, a look of utter *exhaustion* and something akin to *despair* coloring his visage. There and gone so quickly that anyone else watching might have missed it. But Nora caught it, how could she possibly miss it when it was *her Valentine* trying to cover it up?

She was across the room in three strides, wrapping her arms around him tightly and pressing a kiss to his throat. It was only when he relaxed into her embrace and dropped his lips to the crown of her head that Nora could feel exactly how tense he’d been up until that point.
By the time Nick had finished relaying the day’s tragic events the dinner he’d brought over had gone lukewarm. Fortunately they were both hungry enough that the temperature of the food didn’t matter much to their stomachs.

He hadn’t expected to feel like he did right now. It wasn’t the first time he’d opened up about a traumatic day at work, the precinct had a shrink on speed-dial solely for those days. But it was the first time he’d actually felt better afterwards, instead of merely relieved that he’d gotten a bothersome chore out of the way.

Nick couldn’t figure out if it was because he’d gone to share his feelings willingly for once, or if it was because he found Nora’s presence so wondrously cathartic. He suspected it was likely the latter … he’d felt the weight of the incident drain right out of his body when she’d put her arms around him, and he hadn’t said a single word yet.

His brain suddenly supplied a random memory of a biology lesson in high school where they’d been taught about pheromones in animals; something to do with giving off chemicals that attract and calm the opposite sex? He idly wondered if humans had a similar mechanism … it would certainly explain why Nora always seemed to smell so damn good even though she insisted that she never wore perfume.

Nick glanced down at the object of his affection; leaning against his body rather than the backrest of the sofa. Her head pillowed against his shoulder and a thumb tracing tiny circles against his knee, absorbed by the black-and-white of the evening news flickering from the television. He took advantage of her inattention and pressed his nose to the top of her head, indulging himself with a slow inhale and noting something far sweeter than the florals of her shampoo.

“You didn’t tell me that” Nora said suddenly, turning her head to lock her eyes with his. If she was bothered by his borderline perverted behavior she didn’t say anything, maybe she hadn’t noticed?

“Tell you what?” he asked.

“That the shotguns were the same as the ones you guys use” She gestured to the television, which was now displaying a grainy image of the formerly absent police chief, answering questions from behind a podium baring the sigil of the Boston Police Department.

“They weren’t police-issue” Nick clarified. “They were just…”

He trailed off as his brain suddenly provided a more recent memory; passing along the row of shotguns as he photographed each girl. They’d all had their manufacturing numbers removed, as was standard practice when a weapon ended up in the hands of a criminal … but police equipment always came with extra digits.

Nick startled the woman pressed against him by suddenly pulling her across his lap and plundering her mouth until he had no choice but to let her come up for air, giving her a wide and excited smile as he announced;

“I have to go, I need to check something”

Then he was off and practically jogging down the stairs leading out of the apartment block, trying to pull his coat on while juggling his hat and the damn bullet-proof vest he’d forgotten to return. Leaving a bewildered Nora sprawled gracelessly across the sofa.
It was hours after Nick had dashed from her apartment in a tizzy when Nora was awoken by another knocking at her door. She blinked the heavy veil of sleep from her eyes, glanced at the alarm clock on her bedside table and felt blind, indignant rage lance through her as she threw the blankets aside. It was one-thirty in goddamn morning, if the building wasn’t on fucking fire someone was going to die!

Her murderous fantasies were abandoned, however, when she opened the door and found herself face-to-face with Nick Valentine once again, looking far too happy for someone awake at this unholy hour.

Then the memory of their last few minutes together that evening then came bubbling to the surface of Nora’s sleep-addled brain and she found herself returning his infectious grin.

“They were police-issue, weren’t they?” she asked, though the answer was already displayed brighter than a marquee across his face.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when Nick suddenly threw himself forward and wrapped a pair of roaming hands around her, dipping just below the hem of her favorite nightgown and traveling up again to expose the skin of her hips. His lips met the skin under her ear … her neck … her collarbone … leaving a burning trail in their wake that had Nora biting back a moan.

The door was closed with a slam and a line of clothes steadily formed behind them as they eventually found their way back to the bed Nora had been so reluctant to vacate a little while ago.

Nora’s last coherent thought before he eased himself into the slick heat between her thighs, causing the world to melt away around her, was that maybe she should quit her job and go study for a detective’s license instead … if this was the usual outcome of assisting Nick with his cases.
Chapter 4

It was a mid-August evening when Nora leaned across the table at a high-end restaurant in the theater district and finally confiscated the nearly empty pack of cigarettes Nick had been chain smoking from since they’d first sat down. Yes, she’d been the one to initially request a table in the smoking section of the snooty establishment, she figured he could use a familiar indulgence at a time like this, but it was starting to get absurd … and a little difficult to breathe through the smoke.

Nick Valentine gave her an apologetic grimace through a haze of his own making, then started drumming his fingers against the tablecloth in an uneven rhythm, once he’d snuffed out the final butt in an overflowing ashtray.

He’d been doing so well lately too … fuck, he’d practically quit cold turkey already. Then he’d walked into that damn meeting this afternoon and ended up taking a running leap off the wagon once it was over. Now the man she hoped to settle down with one day was probably going to die an early death of lung cancer or emphysema. In a word; Nora was pissed.

When he finally decided to show his face she was going to fucking strangle her father.

Nick tapped his fingers against the table in an effort not to squirm in the stiff dinner jacket he’d pulled out of his closet before driving over to Nora’s place. His trench coat was a tad too casual for a swanky joint like this. It was the type of place where you checked in your hats and heavy coats and got a little ticket for later. He felt bald without his familiar fedora, even though his hair was hanging a little longer than usual. Jesus Christ, he should’ve left work early and gotten a haircut, he probably looked like a hobo in stolen clothes...

His racing mind came to a grinding halt as Nora stilled his twitchy hands with her own slender digits. Rubbing the skin there gently, almost as if she was massaging his pulse back to a calmer tempo.

She was a beautiful angel, plucked straight from his dreams and made flesh, casting her unique brand of healing magic over him … what the hell was she still doing with an idiot like him?

Nick Valentine … former scourge of Chicago’s grimy underbelly … summoned to Boston to bring long-overdue justice upon the head of notorious crime-lord Eddie Winter … shaking in his socks over the prospect of eating dinner with his girlfriend’s father. If there was a God he was definitely laughing at Nick from his cloudy perch in the heavens.

The meeting had been optional, damn it! Why on earth had he actually attended in the end?

Nick had a mountain of paperwork to catch up on, yet here he was perched on one of the battered chairs arranged outside the chief’s office for the poor saps unfortunate enough to be summoned for a tongue-lashing. From what he could glean via gossip and the general tone of the precinct; Nick would not be the one getting a reprimand today … that was being dealt out to the crooked, lower-
level officer pressing false battery charges against him.

He supposed it was morbid curiosity; Nick wanted to actually meet the cop dumb and malicious enough to try and have him suspended (or sacked) over a blatant lie.

It had been when those twelve girls had needlessly died that Nick’s popularity among his peers had taken a nose-dive. Back when he’d determined that each weapon found at the scene of that particular bloodbath had once been property of the Boston Police Department … which meant that someone on the force was working for Winter.

So naturally, the bastards from Internal Affairs were brought in and promptly put everyone, from the file clerks to the chief himself, under a magnifying glass. No one liked Internal Affairs, it didn’t matter how clean or dirty a cop you were, they’d treat you like the worst kind of criminal scum … and everyone blamed Nick for their hovering presence.

They’d so far caught a few officers roughing up suspects… the odd cop sneaking booze or chems out of the evidence lock-up… but nothing yet to suggest a mole in the department.

Nick was brought out of his musings by a gesture from the chief’s secretary, indicating that he could go in.

The chief sat behind his desk, looking thoroughly irritated by the fat, balding patrolman (Officer Druitt, his brain supplied) trying to make his flimsy case against Nick. He was actually sporting an impressive shiner and a bloody bandage across the bridge of his nose, indicating a few stitches underneath. The guy was either extremely dedicated to the lie or someone else thought that he deserved a couple of jabs to the face.

Nick didn’t recognize the third man. He had a bit of a beatnik air to him, with an odd little goatee, even though he looked to be in his mid-fifties to early sixties. Dressed in a turtleneck and a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, he reminded Nick of a college professor that had been arrested recently for selling Daddy-O and Daytripper to his students. A mediator of sorts, maybe?

His boss must have noticed Nick sizing up Mr. Mediator because he cut off the detestable Officer Druitt in favor of introductions.

“Detective Valentine. I figure you know Officer Druitt here already, this is his lawyer, Mister--”

“Ah, so you’re Nicholas Valentine” the interruption was dripping with an oily, false delight that threw Nick off for split second… it just didn’t mesh with the first impression he’d gotten.

“Uh, just Nick is fine” he offered his hand in greeting. The lawyer grasped it far too firmly to be interpreted as friendly, at the same time leaning in close and giving him a shark-like grin. Alarms began blaring in back of Nick’s mind.

Something’s not right here.

“Franklin Fitzsimons--” The detective suddenly found himself pinned with a familiar dark-brown gaze.

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!

“--and I hear you’ve been screwing my daughter”
“Nick, come back to me” Nora crooned softly. He was clearly lost in a bad memory, if the far-away look in his eyes and the ashen shade of his skin was any indicator. She only needed one guess as to which memory it was.

“Don’t you dare think for one minute that he’ll actually go through with any of it” Nora admonished when Nick finally locked his gaze with hers… deep twin oceans that she wouldn’t mind drowning in when this was all over. “It’s all an act. A stupid game that he’s playing with you. If it were any other day he’d laugh an idiot like Druitt right out of the building”

“I don’t care about Druitt” Nick murmured, cradling her hands in his larger mitts and running his thumbs along her wrists as if she were made of fine china. “Even with a hot-shot like your old man at his back the most my boss will do is suspend me. I- I just don’t want him to be sore with you”

Good grief … that’s why she adored this man. Her ridiculous father had practically ambushed him at his place of work, outed their relationship to his co-workers and threatened his career … and he was worried over how it would affect her.

Her dad had been badgering her for months to bring Nick around for an introduction, it was bullshit like this that had her making excuses for them both. It wouldn’t have mattered if she’d arranged a meeting between the two men in her life back when her dad first asked, the outcome would’ve been exactly the same; Franklin Fitzsimons would pull out every stop available to him in order to throw Nick Valentine off balance. Hoping to trip him up in a lie, or uncover a sinister plot to ruin her, or whatever dastardly deeds he imagined all men plotted against his little girl. Nick wasn’t the first guy to be subject to his almost psychotic brand of parental over-protectiveness, but damn it he was going to be the last!

“Sorry I’m late” came the deceptively apologetic tone behind her shoulder. Speak of the devil, and he shall appear, Nora thought to herself. “A meeting ran late, but I see you both found the place alright”

Nick jerked his hands away from Nora’s as her dad finally took his seat … leaving her free to point a chastising finger at him.

“What exactly was your plan if Nick hadn’t shown up to that meeting? Would you have waited by his desk? Or just ambushed him in the car park after his shift?” Nora injected as much venom into her tone as she could manage in the refined atmosphere of the restaurant. It had the desired effect though … her father crumbled instantly under the weight of his darling daughter’s ire.

“Nora, honey, I was just trying--” She shut him up with a wave of her palm and a deep frown before continuing.

“Trying to what exactly? Have Nick fired for failing to ask your permission to court me? You have a whole firm to run. So don’t try and tell me that a small-fry like Druitt would’ve interested you if it hadn’t been Nick Valentine he was angry with. You’re going to drop this pathetic excuse for a case first thing in the morning, and you’re going to apologize to Nick right now! Or so help me, for as long as we’re dating I’ll never speak to you again… and I plan to be with Nick for a very long time”

Nora’s favorite part of the stunned silence following her ultimatum was definitely Nick’s tiny bemused smile, the one she was treated to whenever he discovered a new aspect of his girlfriend to admire. Then again, her dad’s impression of a sickly jellyfish slumped against the table in defeat was pretty memorable too.

“I… I already dropped the case” her father admitted meekly, staring at a cloth napkin he was fiddling
with. “Conflict of interest and all that. Plus I don’t think I could’ve tolerated that Druitt fellow much longer” He then looked to Nick and asked; “What exactly did you do to slight him?”

“Well, I didn’t beat him up...” Nick answered calmly, happily slipping back into his default smooth charm after being out-of-sorts for so long. “I wouldn’t want to risk busting my knuckles on a skull as thick as his”

Her dad laughed at that. He hadn’t apologized yet but this was good too, she wanted them to get along so Nora merely watched them carefully as they conversed. Nick explained how Internal Affairs had been snooping around the precinct of late, how his co-workers blamed him, and how Druitt had been one of the officers caught pilfering smuggled wares from the evidence lock-up.

“So what did he steal? Bootleg liquor?” Her father asked. An innocent enough question, but the answer was anything but. Nora dipped her head in an effort to hide her blush under her fringe, a habit that she’d picked up from Nick and what she’d affectionately dubbed his ‘bashful mode’.

“Uh… no. Not liquor” It sounded like Nick was in the beginnings of ‘bashful mode’ himself, he answered so quietly that Nora almost didn’t hear him. “He was caught with a small crate of… uh, rubbers”

Condoms. The latest and by-far stupidest item to be added to the rationing lists. God forbid that the proud men and women of the United States armed forces be defeated by an epidemic of syphilis or gonorrhea. It certainly brought a new light to the phrase ‘Make love, not war’.

Her traitorous brain suddenly decided it was the perfect time and place to regale her with a downright pornographic memory from a week earlier, when their own personal supply had finally run out…

She was still quivering from the dizzying high of an orgasm when she felt Nick slip his cock from her body. Biting down a whimper she watched with bleary-eyed fascination as he pumped himself into his fist once, twice, then panted heavily as he spilled himself thickly across the expanse of her lower abdomen … the molten look he gave her as he admired his handiwork was enough to gear her up for round two…

Nora mentally slapped herself and squeezed her legs together, hoping to disperse the slight ache there. She was positive that her face was redder than a tomato by now.

Unfortunately her father noticed her discomfort and gleefully launched into the mortifying tale of eight-year-old Nora, having heard from an older child that condoms were a type of “special balloon”, asking her father if she could have some at her next birthday party. Nick’s mirthfully evil expression said it all; “I will never let you live this down for as long as I draw breath”.

The waiter eventually made his way to their table to take their orders as her dear ol’ dad was beginning the epic saga of her boarding school years. His sudden shift in attitude regarding Nick was likely revenge for dressing him down in public. Nora ordered a steak, medium-rare, and the largest amount of whiskey the bartender was allowed to give her in one go … she didn’t feel like being sober anymore.

It was long after the food had been polished off when Nick mused that of all the ways he’d expected the evening to go this definitely wasn’t the outcome he’d been anticipating.
He’d reclaimed his cigarettes from Nora and was sharing the last few in the pack with her father. *Please, call me Frank*, he’d insisted. Gone was the Franklin Fitzsimons of that afternoon, with his cold serial-killer-esque tones. In his place was just Frank, the doting but embarrassing father, hard working attorney and, on the weekends, proud participant in historical re-enactments. It certainly wasn’t the *worst* hobby Nick had ever heard of … the dorkiest maybe.

Neither had he expected to learn so much about his sweetheart in one sitting. Things he’d been wondering about for a while too…

She was a busy and accomplished lawyer, so why did she insist on taking public transport when she could easily afford her own car? Nora insisted it was because of the skyrocketing fuel prices. Frank instead told the story of how it had taken her an extra two years to get her drivers license, because the idea of piloting a ton of metal powered by highly combustible materials scared her so witless that she suffered anxiety attacks during her tests.

She was 5’2 and waif-like in stature, so how on earth was she able to drink broad-shouldered, 6’1 Nick under the table? Practice apparently. According to Frank she’d taken to drinking smuggled-in beer within her first week of boarding school, building up to hard spirits over the years until she could out-drink the most dedicated of Irish alcoholics.

She squirreled her money away and loathed over-spending on anything. Nora claimed that she was just trying to be frugal. Frank then proudly relayed her genius plan in the event that the country was destroyed by nuclear fire…

The money she saved was to eventually be spent on a large yacht, stocked with supplies and, in the event of impending disaster, sailed across the ocean to Bikini Atoll, the site of many nuclear test firings in the past. The logic being that no nation on the planet would think to further bomb an already irradiated hellhole. Nick had to admit it *was* genius … in a backwards sort of way.

He glanced at his girlfriend across the table; Resting her head on her folded hands, a slight redness dusting the top of her cheeks and nose signaling that she was deep in her cups by this point, but still managing to coherently debate the merits of her cunning plan with her pops.

“Honey, it’s a wonderful plan, and I’ll definitely be your first mate if cast-off day ever comes. All I’m saying is that *eventually* your rations are going to run out, and you’ll have to start fishing for your food. So you’re going to have to get over your hate of seafood before then”

Frank was playfully trying to feed his inebriated daughter a piece of cold shrimp leftover from his appetizer, Nora responded by pouting and turning her head like a fussy toddler in a high chair.

“When I have to eat fish then I’ll suck it up and eat it. Beggars can’t be choosers. But for as long as I have other options you can keep your slimy, gross shrimp all to yourself”

She pushed the offending morsel away and rested her head against the table. Nick took it as a sign that she was likely to fall asleep if left to her own devices, so he shook her gently and turned to Frank to say his goodbyes.

“I should probably get her back before she decides to camp out in the middle of the restaurant” he said as he stubbed out his cigarette. “Shall we split the bill?” Frank waved off the suggestion as he finished his own smoke in one long draw.

“Nah, I got it. What’s the point of being so highly paid if I can’t cover the cost of my daughter’s drunken nights out?”
Nick appreciated that he left the obvious unsaid; That it was a very ritzy place Frank had chosen, and that it wasn’t exactly a secret the boys-in-blue were paid peanuts.

He shook Frank’s hand, then made a show of hoisting a tipsy Nora over his shoulder like an unamused sack of potatoes and carried her out to the cloakroom near the entrance.

“He never said he was sorry, y’know” Nora grumbled from her perch as Nick donned his fedora once again.

“Sure he did. He told me all those delightful stories about you. That’s the best apology anyone’s ever given me” Nick chuckled as he handed over another ticket to the valet just outside the restaurant doors. She was adorably peeved now.

“Oh, I can’t wait to meet your mom” she threatened, a tiny slur surfacing in her tone. “I’m gonna get all the dirt from her, and I’m gonna take copies of all the embarrassing baby pictures she probably has of you”

“I’m sure you will” he humored her. *If by some miracle you remember any of this*, Nick refrained from saying. He’d been toying with the idea of inviting her to come with him to Chicago for Christmas, it was still a little early to ask but if she was serious about her revenge then just maybe she’d say yes when he got around to broaching the subject. Plus he now knew that she was in it for the long haul with him, unless he’d taken those final words at the end of her ultimatum the wrong way?...

“Oh, or so help me, for as long as we’re dating I’ll never speak to you again… and I plan to be with Nick for a very long time”

What did she consider a very long time?

Any further pondering on the implications of those words were put on hold as his dinged-up black Corvega was brought around by the valet. He deposited Nora in the front passenger seat, where she promptly fell asleep, and started the journey back to her apartment … a small grin lifting the corners of his mouth as he imagined what ‘a very long time’ might look like.
The sun was just beginning to set on the third of October as Nick Valentine scowled at his reflection in Nora’s bathroom mirror, his fingers fumbling awkwardly with the bow-tie that came with his rented tuxedo.

He’d managed to avoid it last time, but his boss had outright ordered him to show up this year… something about introducing him to the new captain being transferred in to head their little Eddie Winter task-force. Why the meeting had to take place at the annual Boston Police Department charity ball Nick wasn’t sure.

Something to do with politics or appearances he’d wager… a lot of powerful society types were going to be there, maybe even the mayor himself. He supposed it would be entertaining to watch his boisterous and uncouth co-workers try to mingle with the city’s pompous upper crust.

Plus Nora seemed absolutely thrilled to be going, which perplexed Nick to say the least. She’d once been a regular attendee at soirees like this during her college years, as her father’s plus one. But her retelling of that period in her life made it clear that she’d never enjoyed herself at those formal affairs, describing them as tedious, boring, insipid and mind-numbingly boring.

The woman occupying his thoughts made her appearance known in that moment by slapping his ineffective fingers away from the tie he was wrestling with before calmly taking over the task.

She was dolled-up like a movie star ready to walk down the red carpet… wearing an ankle-length, deep crimson dress with sequins dotted sparsely across the fabric. The neckline was modest, but the skirt sported a long cut up the left side, offering a tantalizing vision of one smooth, pale leg. She hadn’t applied her make-up yet, but her shoulder-length hair had been given the roller treatment and was now bouncing against her cheeks in large, shiny curls. Nora smirked up at him as she worked.

“You wear a tie every day, how do you not know how to do this?” she asked.

“I only ever mastered the standard Windsor knot” Nick admitted with a sad grin. “Turns out that properly putting on a tie is one of those things a boy usually learns from his dad… like shaving. Which nearly killed me, by the way”

“Ouch… I think I can imagine” she cringed out of sympathy. “So how many trips to the emergency room did it take before you figured it out?”

“None” he grumbled in feigned offense. “But I did walk around with a lot of bandages stuck to my face before I thought to ask a barber to teach me”

Finishing off the bow with a flourish Nora stepped back to admire the end result with a cocked brow and an impish smile. “Take the night off Sam Spade, I’m going to a black-tie ball with James Bond tonight”

Nick chuckled at her assessment and turned back to the mirror to begin tidying up his hair.

“I thought you hated these shindigs, where’s all this enthusiasm coming from?” he asked.

“I’m going with you, silly. Isn’t that enough reason to be excited?” she answered plainly.

His heart lurched in that curious way it always did when Nora was nearby, after all these months Nick had an inkling as to what was causing it...
“Plus it’s going to be an absolute riot watching the guys you work with try and rub shoulders with some of the more distinguished members of Boston high society” she continued as she started to rub a light powder into her cheeks with the aid of a tiny compact mirror. “Can you imagine Donny trying to win over some prim and proper debutante by chugging champagne and belching out the entirety of ‘Take Me Out To The Ball Game’?

Nick snorted ungracefully at the image… and at the uncanny similarity to his own thoughts. Yep… he was pretty damn sure he loved her.

Done with his hair (as low maintenance as it was) he left Nora to her feminine rituals and went searching for his cuff-links and a pre-party drink. He poured out a finger of whiskey for each of them and waited on the sofa, mentally running through their agreed itinerary for the night;

Go to the ball, meet the new captain, pose for a few pictures, talk to just enough party-goers that they couldn’t be accused of being anti-social, and slip out during the speeches. If all went according to plan they’d be back in time for The Silver Shroud. They’d agreed in advance that Nora could adopt any ridiculous accent she pleased while talking to new acquaintances, in return she wouldn’t, under any circumstances, ask Nick to dance.

His thoughts were silenced as his own personal femme-fatale entered his field of vision, sipping from her own glass of whiskey… freshly applied lipstick leaving a crimson kiss around the rim. Nick had to swallow thickly in order to avoid drooling in front of her … he wondered exactly how angry his boss would be if they didn’t show up after all.

“No way mister, I did not spend all afternoon with my hair in rollers just so we could stay in and have sex” she deadpanned.

Saucy mind-reading minx, Nick thought to himself as he knocked back the last of his drink and stood to leave.

“That’s Alfred Winslow, he’s been trying to merge his firm with my dad’s for years … Over there is Janet Irving, she was a few years ahead of me at school, dumber than a box of rocks, unfortunately … Those two are Jack and Imogene Cabot, complete fruitcakes, but surprisingly easy to talk to…”

Nora had hoped that giving Nick a rundown of all the people he didn’t recognize would relax him somewhat, but it did little to ease the thick tension she could feel paralyzing his body through the arm looped around hers… it was so unlike him, and it had her worried.

She spied a familiar face among the sea of guests; Marie, the young officer that staffed the front desk at Nick’s precinct. Nora had built something of a rapport with her over the past few months whenever she stopped by for work-related visits... or to drag Nick out for a slightly healthier lunch than coffee and stale donuts. Perhaps a familiar face would calm him down?

“Marie!” Nora called out, as she fought down the urge to rudely shove her way through the frustratingly slow-to-move throng between them. “Have you seen the chief yet? Please say yes”

“By the bar” Marie raised an arm and pointed in the direction it could be found. “Where else would he be?”

She gave the woman a thumbs up as thanks as the pair shuffled off in search of their first objective
for the evening. Nick’s taller frame proved invaluable for cutting a path through the crowd, but as the open bar came into view he suddenly froze up, his arm turning to stone around Nora’s.

“Detective Valentine!” the chief called in the same moment she laid her eyes on the portly, older gentleman, he gestured to an unfamiliar blonde man at his side and an incredibly curvy red-head wearing the most *indecent* dress Nora had ever seen at a formal gathering. “This here is Captain Jonathan Widmark, you’ll be reporting directly to him from now on… thank God” the last part was murmured into his champagne flute before he took a long gulp and continued; “And this is his date for the evening, she operates out of the Salem bureau nowadays—”

“Detective Claire Kilkenny” Nick interrupted, with a poorly disguised malice that didn’t suit him at all. “We’ve already had the misfortune of meeting. Salem, eh? A town famous for its’ witches… how appropriate”

The female detective merely laughed at the insult, low and sensual… while looking at Nick like the proverbial cat that caught the canary.

As she watched the exchange it finally clicked in Nora’s head that *this* was what had Nick tied up in knots. She was unsure if she should sit back and enjoy the show or drag him away before things got ugly.

“Such hostility, Mister Valentine” Claire intoned. “And to think… we used to get on so well”

The red-head’s tone and Nick’s almost invisible twinge confirmed everything; this had been the woman in his life before he’d met Nora.

It was two hours after his first meeting with new captain when Nick ran a hand through his hair and glared angrily at a nearby flower arrangement he’d almost toppled during his obsessive pacing, mentally chastising himself and the whole damn series of events leading up to this moment…

When he’d been *stupid* enough to be charmed by a come-hither gaze and a pair of massive breasts…

The months he’d spent ignoring his detective’s instincts, and then the rumors…

When he’d finally confronted her, and she’d just *laughed* and denied nothing. She actually had the nerve to be *proud* of her actions.

Claire Kilkenny had been the detective spear-heading the Boston Police Department’s campaign against Eddie Winter before Nick had been called in from Chicago. She produced a whole library’s worth of evidence over the years against a large portion of Winter’s top men... it all came from “confidential informants” she’d said.

When Nick arrived on the scene he’d tried to form a partnership with Claire, hoping to learn a few of her tricks and maybe the names of her mysterious informants. She hadn’t been interested in a *professional* relationship however… and he’d been all too eager to fall into her bed.

It was two months into their sordid little fling that Nick learned the truth… That there were never any informants. Claire had been sleeping her way through the criminal organization they’d sworn to bring to justice, stealing whatever juicy tidbits she could when her lovers let their guard down.
He’d reported her, and she’d been transferred away… not fired though, she’d brought too much valuable evidence to the table to be cut loose, the fact that she’d prostituted herself for that information didn’t seem to matter one iota to his superiors.

And now Nora knew everything.

Nick had explained everything to her in rushed and hushed tones once they managed to slip away from the chief and the captain… poor sucker that he was to be tangled up with Claire, he should probably warn him when they met again. Nora had said precious little during his tale and even less once it was over. He couldn’t tell if she was angry, or upset, or felt anything at all. So he’d kept a vice-like grip around her arm from then on… with a crazy, paranoid voice telling him over and over in his head that the second he let go of her she’d disappear on him.

It was only when she’d squirmed in that unmistakable way and shot him a pleading look that he’d let her go.

Now he was haunting the archway leading to the ladies bathroom like a damned stalker because that little voice just wouldn’t let up.

He nearly had a heart attack when he felt Nora’s soft hand slip into his… how she could make so little noise in such impractical footwear would forever be a mystery to him. She gave him a restless expression and glanced at a nearby side-entrance.

“I need some air” she murmured. “Care to join me?”

If that wasn’t code for the dreaded “We need to talk” then Nick didn’t know what was. Nevertheless he nodded and allowed her to lead him outdoors and across the street, to a small park bathed in the soft glow of fluorescent streetlamps. As the din of the policeman’s ball got further away he couldn’t help but feel he was walking to the gallows, rather than a wooden picnic table wreathed in shadow.

Nora hoisted herself onto worn surface and lazily kicked her legs back and forth, likely savoring the feeling of being off her tortured feet.

“Well, are you going to tell me what has you so upset?” she asked plainly.

Nick could only stare blankly at her and run through the facts he had on hand…

She’d met Claire, watched her flirt shamelessly with him, been told the entire sleazy story, said almost nothing to him all night… and now she wanted to know what was eating him? Something felt backwards here. When she raised a brow at him in question his words came out slightly strangled;

“I thought you were going to leave me!”

“Nick, I hate to break this to you… but you’re hardly the first man in the long history of the world to be hypnotized by a spectacular pair of tits” she emphasized her statement by grabbing her own chest, miming a crude bouncing motion with a wicked grin.

Nick didn’t know whether to feel infuriated or relieved at her blase attitude, but he felt all the tension he’d accumulated over the last few hours drain from his body all the same… so powerful was the miraculous “Aura of Nora”, as he’d dubbed it. He realized in that moment that he’d done her a disservice over the evening, and he stepped forward, cupping her face and stroking a thumb along her cheek.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart” he murmured, cherishing the silky feel of her skin and the dots of light reflected warmly in her wide brown eyes.
“Nick, really, you don’t have to apologize for something that happened--”

“I’m not” he interrupted. “I spent the last two hours convinced you were going to drop me faster than a moldy apple, I thought the worst of you… when everything I’ve seen of you has been nothing but the best, all wrapped up a single, beautiful human being. How can I think the worst about the woman I love?”

Damn it, this wasn’t how he wanted to tell her, the words had just tumbled out of their own accord. But at the same time he berated himself for taking so long to say it out loud. He loved her. He fucking loved her… hell, he suspected that he’d fallen for her the moment he spied her across that crowded courtroom… when he’d felt his world shift so perfectly off it’s axis.

He didn’t waste a second, he brought his other hand to her face and pressed his lips to hers in a firm but tender kiss. If his words weren’t enough then he could only hope that the depth of his feelings reached her through that tiny point of contact. He’d stretch out this pivotal moment for as long as he was able if it helped his case in any significant way … and if she rejected him then at least he’d have the memory of her soft skin… her taste… her unique fragrance.

Nick then finally registered that he wasn’t being pushed away, on the contrary, Nora had one hand tugging at his lapels and the other buried in the hair at the base of his neck. Their kiss growing more heated with the fuel of extra contact, he could barely remember to breathe through the sensations tearing through his body. As he stepped forward to press himself fully against her she broke away from his mouth just long enough to breathe sweetly against his lips;

“I love you too, Nick”

He could’ve cried in that moment… at the sheer warmth enveloping his chest upon hearing those little whispered words. Words that he’d carry tattooed across the chambers of his heart for the rest of his days.

Instead Nick’s movements became fast and feverish, pushing the straps of her dress down past her breasts, mapping the bare skin he found there with his fingers… his lips… his tongue. Nora matched his pace as if it were a competition and fumbled with the buttons of his jacket, then his dress shirt, before looping her arms underneath the fabric, scratching at his back and sending the most delicious kind of pain skittering up his spine.

She’d shimmied to the very edge of the picnic table by now and he hungrily reclaimed her mouth as he worked the slippery material of her dress up her legs, inch by agonizing inch, and then left it gathered on the surface around her hips. Nora urged him into the soft cradle of her thighs with a push from her heels, and even through the layers of clothing still frustratingly present he could feel how obscenely wet she was… for him. The thought made him moan brokenly against her mouth.

Seemingly of one mind they pulled away from each other in unison. Nick pulling at the flimsy cotton covering her core, while Nora grasped at his belt and the buttons of his trousers. When they were finally free of all obstacles she reached a hand up to cup his stubbled jaw and guided him back to her mouth, simultaneously spurring him forward until the head of his cock brushed against the molten heat of her sex, sending an arc of electricity throughout his body that had him thrusting helplessly against her sodden curls.

Then she reached down and guided him past her slick folds… the entire world collapsing down into that single point where they were as close as they could possibly be to one another. It didn’t matter how many times they’d done it in the past, each time felt like the first time… and it was so fucking beautiful that for a brief moment Nick genuinely believed that he’d found Heaven.
He wanted it to last, to savor the feeling of her sweet cunt wrapped around his shaft so perfectly, but his body had other ideas; setting a fast and deep rhythm that had her lying back fully against the table and mewling into the night sky stretched above them. The image before Nick was like something out of a dirty magazine, and it inspired him to hook his arm under one of Nora’s trembling legs, affording him the angle he needed to plunge deeper and bottom-out against her cervix, tearing a primal cry from her lips that drove him perilously close to his own release.

Maybe it was the way her hair fanned around her head like a halo, or maybe it was the moon illuminating her bare skin, or the fluttering of her walls around him, signaling her impending orgasm, but the words came tumbling out of their own accord once more;

“Nora, I love you” he breathed heavily. “I love you so fucking much” his last words came out labored as she clenched tightly around him, crying out his name while her body undulated beneath him in the throes of an intense climax. He pitched forward and cried out brokenly as one of the longest orgasms of his life tore through his body, hips jerking with each spurt of seed he left inside her.

Nick then collapsed gently on top of her, careful of his weight against her. His mind was void of anything to say in their post-coital haze, so he nuzzled Nora’s collarbone and kissed away the beads of sweat that had gathered there, savoring the feel of her twitching sex and their combined fluids around his softening cock. She began stroking his hair affectionately as she filled the silence for him.

“That was intense… we should get freaky in public more often” she purred into his ear.

His treasured post-coital bliss was suddenly shattered as Nick finally remembered he was in a public park... bare-assed and balls-deep inside the woman he loved, who had her tits hanging out, by the way. He buried his face into the crook of her neck and groaned out of sheer mortification. Nora simply laughed at his display, seemingly unconcerned that they were still within shouting distance of the policeman’s ball they’d abandoned in favor of their outdoor shenanigans.

The couple never returned to the ball… it would have been too hard to explain how Nora’s lipstick had gotten all over Nick’s face, not to mention the collar of his dress shirt, which he was never able to return to the store where he’d rented his tux.

They trudged happily into Nora’s apartment just in time to flick on the radio for the latest episode of The Silver Shroud, cuddling together on the sofa as The Mechanist explained his dastardly plan in dramatic detail. Nick tuned out halfway through the monologue though… deep in thought over the woman curled against his chest... hatching a plan of his own.

A week later Nick patted the pocket of his trench coat … the corners of his mouth lifting slightly as he felt the reassuring weight of the velvet box hidden there … a tiny piece of their shared future.

Meanwhile across town, Nora poured over the latest stack of papers to be dropped on her desk …
completely unaware that, she too, was carrying around a smaller, far more precious piece of their shared future.
Chapter 6

It was the twentieth of December when Nora crumpled the letter she’d discovered on her desk that morning in a tight fist, trying to remember the breathing exercises she’d been taught as a teenager to control her driving-induced anxiety attacks.

This wasn’t just an anxiety attack though… well, it was. But it was primarily sheer, unadulterated rage.

It was less than a week until Christmas, a measly two days until she was due to officially go on vacation until the new year.

After all she’d done for the District Attorney’s Office this was how they fired her?!

She dropped the piece of paper back onto the desk and smoothed it out, reading through it again in the vague hope that she’d misread whole damned thing…

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Dear Nora Fitzsimons,

It is with deep regret that I write to inform you that effective immediately your term of employment at the Boston District Attorney’s Office has been terminated. This decision was reached upon receiving the results of your most recent random urine drug test. (Sample Collection Date: 12/15/2076)

While no evidence of elicit substances presented in the sample provided, high levels of human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG) outlined in the included results confirm the presence of a fetus (Margin Of Error: 0.03%).

In accordance with recent amendments to company policy; the Boston District Attorney’s Office reserves the right to terminate the contract of any female employee who becomes pregnant, as the company can no longer afford to absorb the corresponding heightened costs of health insurance premiums or maternity leave due to the current economic crisis.

You have until the end of the day upon receiving this letter to clean out your desk and/or office and vacate the premises. If you choose not to comply your belongings will be packed up for you and you will be escorted off the premises by our security team.

While the Boston District Attorney’s Office is saddened by your departure, we happily wish to congratulate you on your--

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Nora scrunched up the offending piece of paper once again, she didn’t think she could stomach reading the rest of it. She thought briefly of going down the hall and shoving it down Carol’s smug fucking throat. That bitch-faced whore was the one to request the damned drug test, she just knew
...she’d been in the bathroom two weeks ago when Nora had barged in and thrown up her lunch... God damn it, she’d been putting those bouts of nausea and vomiting down to stress this whole time. She’d been desperate to get everything squared away at work before she left for Chicago with Nick.

Fuck... she had to tell Nick.

Nora had to clasp a hand to her mouth to muffle the sudden sob that shot up her throat, furiously blinking back the accompanying tears. They’d been so blissfully happy lately... they were practically living together now... she was about to visit his childhood home and meet his mother... she should’ve known that something would come along to royally fuck it all up.

Nick was running himself ragged trying to bring down one of the biggest crime lords Boston had ever seen, and he was being paid a pauper’s pittance to do it. How the fuck was she going to tell him that not only was he going to be father, but the mother of his child was now unemployed?

Yes, she had savings. The fund she’d been nurturing in the event that a sudden exodus to Bikini Atoll was required. But with the exorbitant out-of-pocket costs that came with doctor’s visits and hospital trips, astronomical now that she had no employer-provided health cover, she’d be lucky if that money lasted until she went into labor.

Her brain then provided her with a memory from boarding school ... the ultimate piece of evidence that she could never be a fit mother. The tears she’d been holding back finally spilled down her cheeks... she wiped at them uselessly with one hand and unconsciously clutched her still flat belly with the other.

After a few minutes of crying and carefully choreographed breathing exercises Nora’s despair subsided and gave way to anger once again.

She was suddenly far less enraged over the disgusting injustice of being fired for getting pregnant... and more so over what they’d stolen from her. They’d suddenly told her she was having a baby via a stilted and impersonal notice of termination, before she’d even suspected that her symptoms were related to impending motherhood. If she’d found out from a doctor, or from one of those home tests sold at the drug store, she would have had time to brace herself for the results... to ponder the future... to muster up a tiny bit of fucking happiness over the concept...

But they’d blind-sided her. They’d wrapped it up in the ugly and abrupt end of her career. They’d stolen away the joy of discovering her own pregnancy... she could never get that moment back.

On auto-pilot now she surged up from her chair, stuffing the crumpled letter and included test results into her ever-present leather satchel. She stormed straight down the hall, right past Carol’s shit-eating grin, and into her supervisor’s office, demanding a complete and unabridged copy of the current company policy in a tone that invited no argument... even if her supervisor hadn’t been born a spineless wimp. He nearly tripped over his own feet in his haste to locate and hand over the thick volume bound in metal rings.

Nora dropped it into her bag and made a bee-line for the exit, slowing only to punch Carol right in her weaselly face, a slight crunch reverberating throughout her fist hinting at what was bound to be a fantastic fracture... pity she wouldn’t be able to hang around and watch the bruises form... it was scary sometimes how easily Nora could summon-up her violent and sometimes cruel teenage self.

She left the building unimpeded by a security team and headed straight for the nearest train station. The District Attorney’s Office could “absorb the cost” of packing up her belongings and posting them to her.
Just one more day... just one more day... just one more day.

That was Nick Valentine’s inner mantra as he side-stepped his partner and the ridiculous Santa hat he was trying to force onto the detective’s head. The red-headed man’s ungainly stumble indicating that he’d been dipping into the Christmas party refreshments several hours too early… Nick wished he could say that Donny was the only one doing this, but the fact that he seemed to be picking up the slack for half the damned precinct told a different story.

Just one more day and he’d finally be on vacation until the new year.

He hoisted the heavy stack of bulging manila folders a little higher up in his arms and scanned the room for a semi-sober officer to take them down to their proper places in the filing room. After giving up and dropping them on a nearby desk he caught sight of the large wall-mounted clock with the corner of his eye… the meeting for the detectives on the Winter task-force was beginning in three minutes.

By some miracle Nick managed to find the room Captain Widmark had commandeered earlier without running into anyone else who urgently needed his help. It seemed he was the first one to arrive, so he took the opportunity to fish out the battered pack of smokes he kept in his coat pocket, his fingers brushing against a black velvet box as he withdrew them.

He shook a cigarette out of the pack and lit it with a practiced ease that stemmed from years of repetition, drawing in and breathing out a long, thin plume of smoke as he pondered the ring he’d been carrying around since October.

After all this time Nick still didn’t have a clear idea of how he was going to present it to Nora… not to mention pop the all-important question that came with it. He figured if he carried it around with him he’d either be inspired by it’s presence or the perfect opportunity would automatically present itself. The universe had yet to offer him any clear signs however, so for the past week he’d been wracking his brain trying to come up with a romantic scenario he could pull off without too much hassle...

He’d toyed with the idea of waiting until they got to his childhood home in Chicago … it would give Nora and his mother a chance to get to know each other … then once they were getting along he could give her the ring and ask her during the exchange of Christmas gifts.

The drawback to this plan however was if she said no. Not that Nick thought she would, things had only been getting better between them since they’d poured their hearts out to each other in that moonlit park. But on the remote chance that Nora did reject his proposal she’d be stuck in Chicago, with no way to get home until public transport started running again after Boxing Day. He could always drive her back… but he figured if she said no to his offer of marriage then she wouldn’t be too keen on the prospect of a fourteen hour road-trip with him.

He fancied the idea of asking her when they arrived back in Boston for her father’s New Years Eve party. Waiting until the midnight countdown, then while everyone else kissed their chosen partners, he’d instead drop to one knee and present her the ring.

The drawback to that plan however was that it was a New Years Eve party, meaning copious amounts of booze, and Nora definitely wasn’t the kind of woman who passed up an opportunity to
get absolutely shit-faced when the occasion encouraged it. He’d either have to run interference the whole night or propose to a slurring drunk… it certainly wasn’t the romantic declaration of eternal love he wanted to remember when he was old and gray.

Nick stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray someone had left on the long conference table as Captain Jonathan Widmark finally appeared, depositing a tipsy, giggling Donny in one of the available chairs and taking his seat at the head of the room as the rest of the task-force slowly filed in. All of them displaying varying degrees of drunkenness, none as far gone as Donny though. He shared an exasperated look with the captain, the only other completely sober person in the room. Once everyone had collapsed into a chair, and propped themselves up on the table, Widmark cast a withering gaze around the room.

“I feel so privileged to be working with a team that takes their job so seriously” the captain’s sarcasm was drawn out as he fixed each inebriated detective with an icy glare, warming only when he got to Nick sitting at his left. “At least I can count on my lead investigator to stay out of trouble”

Nick would conclude at a later date that the universe both hated his guts and had a truly spectacular sense of timing. Because it was at that exact moment that the door burst open with enough force to slam into wall beside it and make everyone jump in their seats. In the doorway was a furious Nora, red-faced and trembling slightly as she yelled loud enough for the entire building to hear;

“You got me pregnant, Nick Valentine!!! Which just got me fired!!”

________________________

God… fucking… damn it…

That wasn’t how she’d planned on telling him… not that she’d had much of a plan to begin with.

After a brief pit-stop at a nearby pharmacy (and the restroom available to it’s customers) Nora waltzed straight through the police station’s front doors and asked Marie with forced nonchalance as to where she could find Nick. Apparently he was due at a meeting in a few minutes so she’d rushed to try and catch him before it began, only to be stopped in the hallway by an officer she could only vaguely recall meeting once, drunk as a skunk and offering her a swig from a half-empty bottle of brandy.

That had been the straw that broke the camel’s fragile composure. If there was ever a time in her life where she needed a good stiff drink it was now… but she had a tiny, fragile human being nestled in her womb to think about now. It felt like the universe was mocking her.

By the time Nora succeeded in tracking down the man she loved her unfocused anger still had a firm hold over her… and the words had come flying out of her mouth before she could run them through a slightly more logical portion of her brain.

The stunned silence permeating the room was then crudely broken by a high-pitched whistle from Nick’s idiot partner, Donny.

“Way t’go Nicky-Boy! Who’d a’guessed you were such a love machine?!” he slurred loudly, while clapping his hands in front of him like a drunk, freckled seal. This earned him a hard slap across the back of his head from Captain Widmark, who then turned to a pale-faced Nick still frozen in his chair.
Detective Valentine, I think you’re needed elsewhere” he hinted heavily.

Nick then shook his head and blinked twice, as if dispelling a bad dream after waking, before wordlessly standing up and guiding Nora into the hall with a hand on her shoulder.

Nick simultaneously wanted to vomit and hyperventilate in that moment, but he got the impression that neither of those things were an option right now, not helpful ones at least… so he forced himself to his feet and led Nora to the one place in the building where they had a decent chance of a private conversation.

The smaller of the station’s two interrogation chambers was occupied, but Nick recalled that the criminal waiting inside was facing a ridiculously minor charge… he gestured to the door.

“You’re free to go, stay out of trouble from now on” the man just stared blankly, which only irritated him. “You deaf? I said get out! Do you really wanna spend the holidays in here?”

Once the nameless offender had scrambled out of the room Nick locked the door behind him and leaned against it heavily, pleading with his heart to slow down before he went into cardiac arrest. When he finally raised his head to look at Nora her expression had shifted from one of unbridled fury to something he’d never seen in her before; complete and utter terror.

He darted across the room and gathered her tightly in his arms just as Nora lost her grip on the tears pooling in her brown, blood-shot eyes. She sniffled against his chest, and for the first time since they’d started dating Nick was incredibly aware of just how tiny she was compared to him.

“You’re pregnant?” he breathed against the crown of her head… just in case he’d imagined the scene from a few minutes earlier. She nodded into the front of his shirt, the simple affirmation causing his stomach to churn violently once again… though not unpleasantly.

A baby… their baby… It was a beautiful, radiant thought that filled the detective with a warmth he’d never experienced before, and wasn’t sure how to handle… so he settled for pressing a kiss to Nora’s hair as he fought back something that felt suspiciously like tears of joy. Then the rest of what she’d screamed earlier popped into his head.

“Wait, how did it get you fired?” he asked. She stepped out of his embrace and reached into the satchel she used for work, pulling out a crumpled roll of papers and handing them to him.

As Nick unfolded them he realized they were wrapped around a plastic stick with a cap on its end… a home pregnancy test. Sure enough, there was a tell-tale plus symbol on display in a tiny window on its side.

Nora sat on the surface of the metal table dominating the room, something she always did when her feet were sore, while Nick scanned what was apparently a letter from her workplace. She started babbling nervously as he absorbed the printed words.

“I had to be sure, just in case they made a mistake… but they wouldn’t sack me if they weren’t completely sure, right? I’ve been sick a lot lately too, and I missed my period… oh Jesus, I missed my period twice… I- I thought it was just stress from work, the same thing happened during my college exams, so I didn’t suspect… Oh God, Nick… what the hell are we going to do?!”
By this point Nick had finished reading and had to choke down an outraged snarl before answering her;

"Nora, you’re a lawyer… a fantastic lawyer at that. The first thing you’re going to do is take them to court. This can’t possibly be legal” he waved the letter as if to highlight his point. This only made her sob into her hands, and Nick realized the question had been rhetorical.

He moved to stand in front of her and gently ran his hands along her upper arms, though he figured it would do little to comfort her… he’d never seen her so lost before. When she finally removed her palms she looked exhausted, speaking in a flat monotone as she addressed the floor;

“Nick… I can’t have this baby”

His blood turned to ice in his veins and his stomach fell somewhere past the floor.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetheart” Nick tried to console her, his voice barely above a whisper. “I know you’re scared right now, but--”

“Did I ever tell you about Andrea Delaney?” Nora interrupted.

No, she hadn’t… but her father had. Back in that fancy theater-district restaurant when Nick had been treated to stories of Nora’s tumultuous years at boarding school. Andrea and Nora had bullied each other mercilessly from day one, starting with verbal insults and then escalating over the years into violent confrontations that sounded more like prison riots, rather than fights between schoolgirls. It was unclear who started their feud, and it had only ended because Frank finally caved and brought his daughter home.

“What about her?” Nick asked gingerly… he had a bad feeling as to where this was heading.

“When I was seventeen, Andrea and three of her friends cornered me in a stairwell… she had a switch-blade. I don’t remember what I did to make them come after me like that, but I was scared… and angry” Nora paused to take a deep breath. “I tackled Andrea… she fell down the stairs, got knocked out, and I ran and hid in my dorm room”

She pinched the bridge of her nose tightly and screwed her eyes shut, but she powered through her tale with a faltering tone…

“I’d heard the rumors, that’s all I thought they were… rumors! It was an all-girls school… we could’ve filled a library with all the bitchy gossip we spread around. But for once it turned out to be true… Andrea was sneaking out at night and hooking up with a boy that lived nearby… she was pregnant, Nick… I’d heard the rumors but I still tackled her, down a flight of stairs no less! I could’ve pushed down any of those girls and escaped, but I--”

Nora finally broke off into a fit of tears as Nick clutched her to his chest again… maybe if he held her tightly enough he could push that little broken piece of her heart back into place. After a minute or so of crying into his lapels she finally spoke again;

“I killed her baby, Nick”

“You defended yourself” he corrected sharply, drawing back and holding her firmly by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. “There were four of them and one of you, Andrea had a knife! You can’t honestly expect me to believe that in that moment you were thinking about a piece of gossip you heard in the lunch line! You disarmed her and ran away… that’s more than what the vast majority of victims would do in that situation!”
“I don’t deserve this… I don’t deserve a child of my own” she sobbed.

“That’s bullshit, Nora! You deserve this kid, and any others that you have in the future. And they’ll be damn lucky to have a strong, dedicated, fierce, loving dame like you as their mom!”

She smiled a tiny smile at him in that moment, sniffing loudly and wiping at her cheeks as she did so, but it was a balm to his overwrought nerves nonetheless.

“I don’t deserve you either” Nora half-joked. Nick gave her a half-smile in return.

“You deserve far more than this old cop” he said. “A lot more than an idiot who forgets to pull out”

“Yeah… way to go, Quick-Draw McGraw” she deadpanned, apparently out of tears to shed, but still soaked in them. Nick reached into his pocket for his handkerchief to give her… and he was finally blessed with a small spark of inspiration.

Nora felt absolutely disgusting, she was covered in her own tears and snot, but she still felt far better than she had all day… all week even.

Maybe getting fired would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Now that she was out of the District Attorney’s Office and looking back through the lens of hindsight Nora wasn’t sure how much longer she could’ve kept up the pace she’d been working at … even if she hadn’t gotten pregnant.

The concept finally seemed to sink all the way in; she was going to be a mom… she was going to have a tiny, little person with half her DNA and half Nick’s to feed and clothe, to nurture and keep safe… where the fuck did one even start?

“Oh God…” she groaned. “This kid is doomed. My mom died when I was seven, and you never even had a dad to begin with. We have no idea what we’re doing”

Nick seemed unconcerned by any of this, simply shrugging at her with his hands in his pockets.

“Humans have been doing this for thousands of years. If a neanderthal can figure it out then we probably have a chance” he handed her a wadded-up handkerchief. “Now dry your eyes and let’s get out of here before the whole station starts to think we’re bumping uglies in here”

Nora gave him a wry smirk… then a puzzled knit of her brows when she realized how heavy his handkerchief was. She slowly went to pull back a corner of the fabric, hoping fervently that he hadn’t handed her a gruesome piece of evidence by mistake … once had been more than enough for her.

Instead her brain shut down and all the oxygen left her lungs at once as she set her eyes on the black velvet box. She glanced up at Nick, who merely gestured for her to open it.

The ring was tiny, but it was also the most intricate piece of jewelry she’d ever seen … a gold band with a tiny chain of flowers engraved around it’s outside, minuscule diamonds inlaid in the center of each bloom.

“Is… is this what I think it is?” Nora asked with the small amount of breath she’d managed to reclaim.
“I’ve been carrying it around for a few months now” he admitted. “I wanted to wait for the perfect moment… the perfect place. But you just gave me the best gift I ever thought I could receive… I don’t want to wait any longer to start showing you exactly how much I love you… how much I’ll always love you, Nora… will you marry me?”

Her body acted entirely of it’s own accord; she pushed herself off the table to stand in front of Nick and pulled his head down to hers, covering his lips with a searing kiss as the last drop of moisture left her body in the form of one final tear… this one of pure happiness.

When she eventually pulled back the man she loved was giving her a questioning look. For such a brilliant detective he could be so incredibly dense at times.

“Yes, you idiot! Of course I’ll marry you!” she snapped… had the kiss honestly not been enough?

When they finally left the interrogation chamber the hallway was oddly empty. Nick figured he should probably seek out Captain Widmark and get a rundown of the meeting he’d missed. Nora followed her fiance, hoping to apologize to his boss for the scene she’d caused earlier.

They both rounded the corner into the main room where everyone’s work-stations were clustered together… only to be nearly blown away into the hall again by a cacophony of cheers and hollering from what appeared to be the entire precinct. The couple looked up and saw a hanging banner hastily constructed from printer paper and tape, proudly proclaiming; Congrats Nick & Nora! in chunky black letters.

“The hell?!” barked Nick. “I thought those interrogation rooms were soundproof!”

Captain Widmark grinned smugly at his lead investigator.

“They are… but after Internal Affairs caught those officers assaulting suspects the chief had cameras installed… and microphones”

Well… at least they could prove they hadn’t had sex in there.
Chapter 7

It was slightly over twenty-four hours after Nick Valentine’s spur-of-the-moment proposal to Nora when he took a long draw of his cigarette and pondered the amused warning he’d been given by an elderly and somewhat batty physician earlier that morning;

“You’re going to feel like the most useless son-of-a-bitch on the face of the planet… this is perfectly normal… just stay calm and do everything your lady says, no matter how irrational you think it is”

He’d been puzzled, and Nora had been slightly offended, but as he leaned against the front of his car and listened to the pained retching noises coming from his fiance Nick finally understood, at least partially, what her life-long family doctor had been referring to.

Turns out that road-trips and morning sickness were a match made in the fiery pits of Hell.

“This is how I die” came the tired groan. “I’m going to puke up my own intestines and drop dead in a ditch along the I-90… didn’t see that one coming”

He was torn between chuckling at her over-dramatic assessment and abandoning his post in favor of rubbing her back, but neither of these things felt acceptable in that moment. She’d flat-out told him not to crowd her while she was vomiting, as for the laughing… well, he wasn’t suicidal.

Drained… that’s what Nick was. The hours following their engagement had been some of the most hectic in his life…

It was one hour after he’d slipped the ring onto Nora’s finger when she’d suddenly gasped and started working herself into a panicked tizzy. After calming her down Nick had been very gingerly treated to the tale of her enraged departure from the District Attorney’s Office… and how she’d committed assault in front of several witnesses on her way to the door.

The hour after that was spent darting around the precinct Christmas party, cashing in favors owed to him by a few of his co-workers. By the time he’d finished Nick was guaranteed that if any calls came through demanding Nora’s arrest they’d be marked as low priority until he returned from Chicago… the only stipulation being that they leave the very next day.

The hours after that were spent making last-minute preparations for their trip. Nick gassed-up his car and telephoned his mother to let her know of their altered plans … Nora sweet-talked her regular doctor into seeing her first thing in the morning … and the rest of the evening was filled with packing and locking-up their respective apartments. The couple collapsed into each others arms and fell asleep across Nick’s bed almost instantly when they’d completed all that they could that night.

Nick crushed the final dregs of his cigarette under his heel and pulled his coat a little tighter around his shoulders against the December chill as he recalled the early morning doctor’s appointment he’d attended with Nora upon waking.

He’d always suspected that the process of creating new life was a messy business, but the detective had been woefully unprepared for some of the lesser-known facts associated with pregnancy. Frankly, he’d been horrified.

Particularly over the one about her internal organs changing position… he was tempted to bang his head against the next available wall until that little tid-bit dislodged itself from his brain… Nick had assumed that women’s stomachs ballooned outwards in order to avoid gruesome scenarios like that.
Other than run through a laundry list of all the painful, irritating and disgusting things the soon-to-be-parents could expect over the next few months, the seasoned physician had poked and prodded Nora’s bare belly. Assuring them that she was right on track for ten weeks along, before gifting them with a fist-full of brochures containing a lot of dry medical jargon and some anatomy book sketches of what their unborn baby would look like week-to-week.

“Okay, I think I’m done… for now” the last two words out of Nora’s crumpled form were a parody of a radio-play narrator setting up a cliffhanger, causing Nick to grin lovingly … even in the throes of intense nausea she was still a wise-ass.

As he helped his sweetheart back into the passenger’s seat of the car he spied a road-sign detailing what amenities weary travelers could expect to find in the next town over … giving the detective an idea.

Half an hour later Nick Valentine proudly presented Nora with the items he’d purchased from the first gas station they’d come across; several bottles of water, a box of plain saltine crackers… and a bucket, which she proceeded to hug to her chest like a teddy bear, burying her face in it’s depths gratefully.

“This is the best thing you’ve ever given me” her words echoed slightly in the metal vessel. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“I know, doll. I love you too” he replied, running a reassuring hand over her shoulder. “Though I wish I’d known earlier not to drop three months salary on that ring of yours, if this is the reaction I get for buying you a five dollar bucket”

The rest of their road-trip was relatively trouble-free from then on, broken up by only three further pit-stops before arriving in Chicago; The first to empty and wash-out the bucket, the second to grab a late lunch when Nora’s vomiting finally petered out … and the third to empty and wash the bucket again when it cruelly resurfaced.

Nora buried her face into the familiar scent permeating the unfamiliar blankets she found herself wrapped in, sleepily chasing the last remnants of the dream she’d been enjoying. As the image of a dark-haired toddler finally gave her the slip Nora registered two things;

Firstly, that she could smell something sweet and delicious… and secondly, that she was absolutely ravenous.

The idea of food wasn’t tempting enough to prompt an egress from her warm cocoon, but the realization that she was alone in said cocoon did lead to a tentative opening of her eyes.

“Nick?” she ventured, taking in her surroundings… a tendril of worry creeping up her spine when she couldn’t recall how she’d gotten there… not that the room was particularly ominous.

The narrow bed Nora lay in was pressed against the wall to save space, most of which was taken up by rickety looking bookshelves, containing an unorganized mish-mash of paper-backs, hard-backs, comics and a few trinkets that could belong to either a young boy or a male teenager. A series of faded posters decorated the wall above an aged dresser, depicting the Silver Shroud, the Unstoppables and even one of Grognak the Barbarian. There was a school pennant too… and the name displayed across it (St. John Francis High) finally solved the mystery as to where she was;
Nick Valentine’s childhood bedroom.

Nora still couldn’t remember arriving though, she must have fallen asleep in the car… had Nick carried her in here?

She was then awoken completely by the high-pitched creak of the bedroom door opening, revealing a frail woman in her mid-sixties carrying a tray, who smiled at her and spoke in a slightly-faded Italian accent;

“You woke up on your own then? Excellent, poor Nico was starting to fret. I had to send him downstairs to fix my over-locker to stop him hovering… shouldn’t be much longer before he realizes it’s not broken” she chuckled to herself as she deposited her burden on the end table next to Nora’s shoulder.

She wasn’t sure what an over-locker was, but she had an inkling as to the identity of this woman… if the jet-black hair streaked liberally with silver and the dark-blue eyes were any indicator;

“You’re Nick’s mom. Rosaria, right?” God, she hoped that was right… she didn’t want to fuck up their first meeting by getting her name wrong.

The skinny matriarch waved a dismissive hand as she seated herself at the end of the bed.

“Just Rosa will do, I don’t think anyone’s ever called me by my full name” Nora was treated to an indulgent smile before she continued. “You’re still looking a little peaky, so you can go back to sleep if you’d like. But only if you polish off that tray first”

The younger woman then inspected what Rosa had brought her; a large bowl of oatmeal topped with blueberries and what smelled like maple syrup, along with a cup of fragrant tea. She wasted no time in pulling the platter across her lap and taking a large bite of the sweet and creamy concoction, making a face indicative of pure bliss as a fat berry exploded on her tongue.

Rosa chuckled softly at her obvious enjoyment;

“I craved sweet foods all the time when I was pregnant with Nico”

Nora had to consciously slam her throat shut in order to avoid choking on her breakfast, making a very undignified noise in the process. Nick told her?! They’d agreed to wait until they could tell her together, damn it! Rosa seemed to read her mind however and shook her head in response.

“He didn’t tell me. I just noticed that he’d finally given you the ring” Both women glanced down at the band decorating Nora’s left hand. “The last time I spoke with him about it over the telephone he talked about proposing to you when you both arrived here… if you’re wearing it now then I figure he must have found a good reason to jump the gun”

Nora could see quite plainly in that moment where Nick had gotten his intelligence from.

Her fiance made his appearance in the doorway a few moments later, looking put-out after being sent on his fool’s errand, but perking up once he laid eyes on her.

“You’re awake… and eating too” Nick then addressed his mother. “What’re you both gabbing about?”

“I was talking to my future daughter-in-law about the beautiful grandchild you’ve decided to give me” He froze up at her triumphant statement. “You’ve never been able to hide anything from me, Nicholas Ottavio Valentine. Don’t think you can start now just because I’m getting older”
Nora simply sniggered around the spoon in her mouth at the rare and utterly adorable look of defeat gracing the visage of her future husband.

It was their second day visiting Chicago when Nick Valentine pinched the bridge of his nose and thought to himself for the hundredth time about what a spectacularly terrible idea this had been. He’d been worried that Nora and his mother wouldn’t get along, when in fact he should’ve been concerned about the opposite happening… they were getting along a little too well for his liking.

The two women in his life were currently huddled side-by-side on the sofa and pouring over an old photo album that Nora had discovered gathering dust on a bookshelf. Once she realized it was full of black-and-white baby pictures she’d roped his mother into a running commentary of every embarrassing moment throughout Nick’s upbringing… breaking up each story with morsels of maternal wisdom;

“Once you have a few of your own you’ll find that all babies fall into one of two categories” Rosa explained. “Babies that can’t stop crying, and babies that can’t stop vomiting… as you can see, Nico was the second kind”

He peered over the shoulder of his giggling wife-to-be and, sure enough, there was a photograph of himself as an infant… spit-up dribbling generously down his chin as he simultaneously tried to shove a chubby fist into his mouth.

“I thought parents were supposed to worry when their kids can’t stop puking” Nick grumbled, wondering if his mom had at least brought him to a doctor after thoroughly documenting each revolting spectacle. Rosa simply barked out a laugh.

“You weren’t a sickly child, Nico, you were a curious one. The minute you learned to crawl was the same minute you started shoving anything and everything into your mouth… loose change, dust, insects, cat food, cat hair… the cat herself. It was when you didn’t throw it back up again that I worried”

Nick paled, blushed and fought down a sudden overwhelming urge to brush his teeth all at the same time as the telephone rang downstairs from his mother’s work-space. She gave Nora an affectionate pat on the knee before rising to answer it. His sweetheart closed the album and gave him a grin that was absolutely wicked.

“Looks like the inquisitive streak that makes you such a great detective showed up early in life… not to mention the penchant for putting things in your mouth that others would find distasteful”

A very inappropriate flash of desire shot through his belly at her tone… she certainly wasn’t referring to his nicotine addiction. Speaking of which…

“I’m just, uh, going…” he trailed off, slightly flustered, as he gestured down the hall. It had been snowing since early that morning, so Nick dug-out an ashtray and started cracking the window in his bedroom whenever he needed a cigarette, it was better than getting frostbite. After finally getting the difficult pane open and lighting up he heard his door open, close and then the soft click of it’s lock.

Nick stubbed out the cigarette and returned it to it’s packet; he’d promised himself that he wouldn’t smoke around Nora while she was pregnant.
“So… I heard from your mom earlier that in high school you were on the wrestling team?” she archered a teasing brow at him and spoke in a sultry tone that normally had him begging for her touch… instead he automatically went on the defense;

“Extracurricular sports were compulsory at my school, and I was late on sign-up day” he scowled at the awkward memories that automatically surfaced. “All the good teams were full, so I was stuck grappling and pinning down a group of other boys for a whole year. At least the skills came in handy when I had to start wrestling perps into jail cells’’

“I’ll bet that’s not the only way they could come in handy” she was fiddling with the top button of her cardigan. “Perhaps you could teach me a few moves?”

Damn, she wasn’t letting up, was she?

“Nora, we’re in my mother’s house” he warned.

“In your locked bedroom” she retorted, taking a step towards him. “Where I’m sure you brought your fair share of girls as a teenager”

“Yeah, to study… with the door open, you crazy dame” though truthfully Nick was flattered whenever she assumed he’d been born suave.

“Well now that’s just tragic” she breathed sensually, placing a hand on his thundering chest. “Sounds like we’ll need to correct that”

Oh God, the seam of his pants was pressing painfully against his sensitive cock now… and she was so damned close… and beautiful… and smelled amazing… and she had a fair point; Nick had never used this room for anything more than solo endeavors as a youth, as much as his teenage self might have wished otherwise… it was tragic now that he thought about it.

He rolled his eyes skyward in surrender before muttering to the world in general; “Fuck it’’

Nick Valentine then grabbed Nora by her upper arms, twisting her towards the bed before executing a gentler version of a single leg take-down that had her gasping in delighted surprise as she hit the mattress. He dragged her towards the edge, kneeled on the floor between her parted legs and reached under her skirt to relieve her of her woolen stockings and underwear…

If he couldn’t smoke around his pregnant fiance then he was just going to have to find something else to keep his mouth busy, he thought to himself evilly as he kissed a path along a silky thigh.

On their third day in the windy city Nora looked around Rosa’s work-space and couldn’t help but feel slightly disappointed.

From the way Nick had clammed-up and avoided talking about the home business he’d helped his mother establish she’d assumed that it was probably illegal.

A pawn shop that fenced stolen goods… an unlicensed speak-easy… a brothel… any of those would have been exciting. The truth was anything but.

Rosa Valentine was a seamstress… she made school uniforms, dresses, curtains, re-upholstered old
furniture and did repairs and alterations… it was all rather anti-climactic to the young lawyer.

After getting the full story from Rosa it seemed that Nick’s reluctance to talk about the subject stemmed solely from a desire to preserve his male ego… before he’d enrolled in the police academy the Valentine’s enterprise offered an extra service; decorative embroidery, of which the great detective was apparently a prodigy.

It certainly explained those talented fingers of his.

Nora shifted minutely as she dispelled the dirty thought, earning a sharp pinch from Rosa who had a tape measure pressed against the length of her leg.

“Hold still, or we’ll never be done here” she mumbled, pins hanging from one side of her mouth.

The younger woman went rigid in response.

Rosa had stubbornly insisted that since it was traditionally the bride’s family that paid for the wedding then she’d instead contribute to the affair by making Nora’s dress. She’d refused at first… the décor of the house suggested that their respective senses of style would likely clash. But after laying eyes on the old woman’s portfolio and current projects she’d enthusiastically conceded defeat on the matter.

It seemed premature to be standing statue-still on top of an upturned crate though, and she voiced her concerns when she was eventually allowed to talk again;

“Rosa, we haven’t even thought about a date yet… and regardless of when we have the ceremony, by the time it rolls around all these measurements you’re taking will be wrong”

Nora referred, of course, to the fact that over the next six months or so she was going to blow up to the size of a small blimp. There was always the option of waiting until after their child was born, but an oddly old-fashioned part of her brain found the idea unappealing. Plus it wouldn’t solve the dress dilemma… if all those jokes about unshiftable baby-weight were true.

“Don’t doubt my genius” the seamstress called from a nearby storage closet. “I just need to jot down the basics, like height, arm-length and shoulder-width, and I can make an extra large dress that gets properly fitted in the days before you walk down the aisle”

Rosa returned with several heavy looking rolls of varying white fabric under each arm, leaving Nora wondering how on earth she mustered up the strength to lift them with that stick-figure frame of hers.

The old woman gave her a devilish smirk.

“Besides… you’re certainly not the first couple I’ve dealt with who shared DNA one too many times before sharing a last name”

Nora snorted at her future mother-in-law, conceding defeat for the second time that day.

Rosa was showing Nora a selection of delicate laces spread across a large table when Nick Valentine made the mistake of joining them in the work-space.

He got halfway across the room before his mother grabbed a nearby yardstick… he tried to dart out again, but on top of superhuman strength Rosa Valentine also seemed to be blessed with the speed and reflexes of a mountain lion. The frail old woman reached her son in seconds flat, grabbed him by his collar and proceeded to belt him repeatedly across the backside with the length of wood, yelling at him as she dragged him to the door and continued to mete out her harsh punishment;

“Do you want your marriage to fail, you stupid man?! It’s bad luck to see the bride’s dress before the
wedding! Even children know that! Don’t you dare ruin this with your aimless wandering!”

The bride in question could only stare, gob-smacked and frozen in place, as they rounded the corner into the hall, their argument and the sound of wood smacking against her fiance echoing back into the room as surely as if they were right in front of her;

“Ow! Jesus Christ, Ma! That’s an old wives tale!—"

Smack!

“And that’s only if she’s wearing it!—"

Smack!

“And it isn’t even a dress yet!”

“And you’re the expert on these matters how?!” Smack!

“I’m engaged! That’s further than you ever got!”

That was definitely not the correct answer, if the volume of the next smack and the proceeding clatter of wood on hallway tiles was any indicator… did Rosa just break that yardstick across her own child?

When the elder Valentine finally freed Nora from the task of picking out fabrics, threads and lace half an hour later she sought out the Valentine she was marrying. He was sprawled across his childhood bed, reading a battered paperback and nursing a cup of coffee, with a casual indifference belying the fact that he’d just had his ass handed to him by a senior citizen. She knocked softly on the door-frame to get his attention before teasing him mercilessly;

“You know, when you find yourself stuck in a hole, the first thing you’re supposed to do is stop digging… didn’t your mother ever teach you that?” He returned her mischievous smile before answering;

“I guess not… because I’m thirty-three years old and she’s still trying to beat the sass out of me”

After Nora managed to stifle her laughter she curled up against Nick on the bed, who turned to the front of his book and started to read aloud from the beginning in that wonderfully unique voice of his.

Their fourth day in Chicago fell on Christmas Eve, finally marking the end of their hold-out against the icy cold of the outside world… Rosa had made it painfully clear to the couple that nothing short of the rapture itself would prevent them from attending an absurdly late-night mass at the local church near Nick Valentine’s old high school.

The shivering detective highly doubted that her insistence had anything to do with concern for their immortal souls, however… as his mother dragged a weary Nora between groups of parishioners, introducing her to everyone and proudly showing off her future daughter-in-law.

By the time they were pressed against each other in an attempt to share body heat on an ancient wooden pew, his sweetheart was resting her eyes and pillowed against his shoulder, mumbling
tiredly against his scarf;

“What kind of god demands a sermon at eleven o’clock at night? Not a loving one, that’s for sure”

“I think the fault lies with the virgin mom” he explained. “If she’d clamped-down and crossed her legs for a bit longer then Jesus would’ve been born during daylight hours” He received a playful punch to the elbow.

“I hope you don’t honestly think that labor works like that” Nora grumbled. “And where’s the evidence that our lord and savior was a night-time delivery?”

He looked down at her with amused incredulity… she really hadn’t paid attention at all during her own years trapped in the Catholic education system.

“It’s in the scripture; the three wise-guys were led to the newly-born demigod by the light of a shining star… and since folks back then hadn’t cottoned-on to the idea that our own yellow sun is also a star, that leaves only one logical conclusion…”

“That we have to sit here and freeze our tits off in the dead of night, all because Jesus couldn’t find the common courtesy to be born at a more reasonable hour?”

Nick snorted at the deadpan tone he’d grown to love so much and put an arm around her shoulders, trying to rub some warmth into the sleeve of her coat… the extra bit of comfort quickly pushed her over the edge into a peaceful sleep, and he basked in the sound of her rhythmic breathing at his side. He was tempted to doze off himself, but if he let himself sleep too deeply he was bound to start snoring, and his mother, seated to his right, was unlikely to forgive such blasphemy from him… Nora was apparently an exception.

Instead he found himself strangely enchanted by a pre-sermon re-enactment of Christ’s birth, performed by the local Sunday school children, in costumes constructed from old bed-sheets against painted cardboard backdrops. Nick wondered at the logic behind letting such tiny kids stay up so late, on such a freezing cold night to boot… but as he took in their bumbling enthusiasm for the task they’d been assigned he could begin to understand.

When Nora awoke it was to the realization that she was being carried through the front door of Rosa Valentine’s house again… her face still nuzzled against Nick’s scarf. Her embarrassment hitting her with the force of a freight train;

“Oh, God damn it” she moaned into the warm wool. “I swear… I was only trying to rest my eyes”

“A likely excuse” he chuckled, nudging the door closed behind him with his foot. She gave him a wry but loving smile as he set her down on the hall rug.

“You’re going to be aces at this fatherhood thing” she observed… her words seemed to cause a light-bulb to go off in the head of her fiance and he palmed her shoulder before guiding her into the living room.

Nick ducked in front of the Christmas tree they’d decorated as a family a few days earlier, retrieving a palm-sized parcel she hadn’t noticed while depositing her own contributions under it’s branches. He handed it to her while staring intently at his own feet.
“It’s after midnight, so I figure it’ll be alright if you open it now” he mumbled sheepishly with his hands in his pockets. “It’s just something I whipped up… for the kid”

Something he made? Nora’s curiosity quadrupled as she tore at the festive wrapping… trying to recall when he could’ve found the time with all the chores his mother had him doing over the course of their visit.

The young woman had to fight back a small wave of tears that took her by surprise upon unfolding the soft white fabric…

It was a baby’s romper… onesie… whatever they were called, she’d know for sure once she had a drawer full of them and an infant to dress. The ensemble was plain white, but the stitching around the neck, arms and legs was bright red… matching the icon embroidered on the breast of the garment perfectly… a tiny heart outline with an arrow piercing it’s middle.

A valentine… for their own little Valentine.

“Hey now, I know my skills have gone a bit rusty but I didn’t think it was that bad” The tears had escaped her eyelids, causing a modicum of concern to grace the visage of her dashing detective.

Nora reassured Nick with a blinding smile, a crushing hug and a consuming kiss… it was absolutely perfect… and she idly wondered if their baby could feel the warmth of the embrace from it’s place nestled between them.
Chapter 8

It was the fifteenth of January when Nora shifted in a chair that was incredibly unforgiving on her tail-bone and leafed through the policy handbook she’d stolen on her way out of the District Attorney’s Office almost a month ago. The other women waiting in the stark-white reception area of the clinic shot her judgmental looks over the tops of their magazines… it was probably due the fact while the other patients were sitting with their husbands or boyfriends, Nora was flanked by two men; one was her father, and the other looked old enough to be her father.

The young lawyer simply ignored them, she had bigger things to worry about than whether or not a group of strangers thought she was in a three-way relationship with two older gentlemen… though a small part of her was curious at the reactions she might have gotten if Nick had been able to come as well.

“Honey, you’ve been through that thing a few dozen times by now” Franklin Fitzsimons observed from her right. “We’ve got the foundation for the case, now you’re just obsessing”

“We don’t know anything about this doctor” she gritted out in response. “He could be a total idiot who can’t count past ten without taking his shoes and socks off”

“If he’s been through med school then that doesn’t seem likely” Frank gave her shoulder a squeeze, prompting his daughter to put away the book, let out a deep breath and bring a hand to her rounded stomach.

In just shy of a month her belly had gone from flat as a board to curved enough that people could tell she was pregnant, and not just struggling to lose extra weight gained over the holidays… though Nora suspected at least half of her bump could indeed be blamed on Rosa Valentine’s divine home-cooking. The abrupt growth spurt from her baby still seemed bizarre however, and she made a mental note to ask this new doctor about it after getting what she came for.

What she came for was a letter… from a court-selected obstetrician… signed by the issuing doctor, her lawyer (who was also her dad) and a witness from the District Attorney’s Office (dozing to her left)… stating beyond a shadow of a doubt that her child was conceived before her former employer’s changed their policy regarding the hiring and firing of pregnant women.

Such was the loop-hole Nora had found buried in the fine print during one of her many readings through the pilfered handbook… only the women who got knocked-up after the changes went into effect could be sacked without grounds for recourse.

The District Attorney’s Office signed their new policy into effect on the seventeenth of October. The policeman’s ball she’d attended with Nick, and subsequently abandoned in favor of unprotected, baby-making sex atop a picnic table, had been on the third of the same month… exactly two weeks before the amendment.

It was still going to be challenge to prove the exact date… two weeks wasn’t a hell of a long buffer period. Not to mention the fact that their chosen form of contraception had been the pull-out method, which wasn’t exactly lauded for it’s effectiveness in preventing pregnancy. She couldn’t say for certain that she hadn’t conceived at a later date… the park incident just seemed the most likely culprit.

Nora’s obsessive, roundabout thinking was halted as a bald man in a white doctor’s coat called her into his office. She shuffled in quickly, her father and the witness who’s name she kept forgetting
trailing behind her… trying her hardest not to dwell on what would happen if this appointment went less than favorably.

Nick Valentine ran his fingers along the buttons of the large holotape player he’d been directed to upon discovering the two tiny yellow rectangles left for him by Captain Widmark. Leaving a note would’ve been far easier, but Widmark was the type of guy who went ga-ga over the idea of a high-tech future, so holotapes had won out over paper.

He finally located a button that, upon pressing, caused a little door to pop open on the top of the device, he deposited the first tape inside and sat back as the captain’s voice filled the small room;

“Hello team, Captain Widmark here. Operation Winter’s End starts now… with you. Together, we will knock Eddie Winter off his throne and dump his sorry ass in a 2000-volt easy chair. It should come as a surprise to no one that our operations in Boston have been, in a word, compromised. Winter has eyes everywhere… even in the BPD. So, our brothers across the river in Cambridge have been kind enough to let us use the Cambridge Police Department as our base of operations. Let’s get to work. Good hunting”.

Nick frowned to himself as the message came to an end with a small click. It had been a surprise, to him at least, to learn that there were moles in the department. After the team from Internal Affairs wrapped up their investigation they’d been very clear in stating that they hadn’t found any leaks… perhaps it’d been misdirection on their part? Get the word around that the bureau was safe and any spies would be lulled into a false sense of security.

Whatever the reason… it was out of his hands now, the detective thought to himself as he slipped the second holotape into the player. This one was addressed to Nick personally, as opposed to the first tape, which had been passed around between the members of the task-force. Once again the captain’s voice issued forth from the machine;

“Detective Valentine, Captain Widmark here. I’d just like to re-iterate how excited I am that you agreed to the position of lead investigator on our little operation. Commissioner Turner has already regaled me with the tales of your adventures in Chicago. As you know, Edward L. “Eddie” Winter has been a pox on this beautiful city for nearly two decades. Extortion, murder, racketeering, kidnapping… name a crime, he’s committed it. The epitome of the cold-blooded, brilliant, slippery crime boss. Fortunately for us, over the years, Winter has also developed the most self-destructive of character traits… supreme arrogance. It’s come to our attention that recently Winter stopped coding his correspondences and began communicating entirely via un-encrypted holotape. Each one supposedly addressed to the subject in question and very clearly signed off by Winter himself. He’s obviously mocking the authorities. He knows we’re monitoring him. He doesn’t care. Winter thinks he’s untouchable. He’s wrong. This is when the game changes. Those holotapes are the key to building a case against Eddie Winter, and they’re what this task-force will focus on. His crimes, his words. Total self-incrimination. Get those holotapes, and we get Winter”

Nick barely registered the soft click signaling the end of the recorded message as he absorbed the implications within…

Had Winter’s ego really grown so bloated that it out-weighed any shred of common sense? The idea that this seasoned psychopath was outright confessing his crimes on holotape seemed a little too good to be true… it niggled unpleasantly at his detective’s intuition.
But on the other hand, he’d already seen the evidence that the crime lord’s arrogance was hitting dangerous proportions… that stunt with the rigged shotguns in the gentleman’s club stood out like a sore-thumb in his memory. There was also the very recent incident of one of his top lackeys, Arthur Black, stabbing a waiter to death in the middle of a crowded restaurant while dining with Winter himself. Perhaps it wasn’t too far-fetched for Eddie to also be careless with something as mundane as his everyday communications.

Plus, Widmark wasn’t an idiot, as far as Nick could tell… if there was a chance that these miraculous tapes were utter bullshit he certainly wouldn’t dedicate an entire covert operation towards finding them. Leading the detective to conclude that he likely already had one or more in his possession… probably being kept in a secret, secure location. He wouldn’t ask the captain about it though, it was risky to share that kind of information, even between the head of the operation and it’s lead investigator.

Speaking of secure locations, he still had a job that needed completing by the end of the day… clean out his desk, hoof it over to the Cambridge Police Department, get assigned a new work-station and wait for further instructions. Nick retrieved the second holotape from the machine and stowed both messages in the pocket of his coat… stretching the kinks out of his back before leaving the room and heading first towards his locker.

Nora sat at the kitchen table in the apartment she’d recently begun sharing with her fiance, shoving half a Fancy Lads brand snack cake into her mouth and scowling at the smug grin of her father sitting next to her… he was always so damn insufferable when he perceived himself as victorious, it was one of the reasons she hadn’t gone to work at his firm after passing the bar.

“C’mon, you’re going to have to admit it eventually” Frank chuckled, his daughter’s thunderous expression doing nothing to quell his amusement. “I was right, you were wrong, and you worked yourself up over nothing in the end” he punctuated his point by waving a sheet of paper back and forth in front of her face… a letter baring three signatures at the bottom.

“He still didn’t give a proper date” she argued with a full mouth. “He just called my regular doctor a senile old moron, and basically said I was too fat to have gotten pregnant when I thought I did. That doctor was a dick!” Nora was aware that she was saying all of this while reaching for another wrapped treat, but she was too peeved to care about the blatant irony. Frank pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“Would you have preferred it if Doctor Dick had said you were less pregnant than you assumed?” he asked. “The case would’ve been lost before it’s even begun. With this document under our belts the District Attorney’s Office will have no choice but to start throwing settlement offers our way… and you’re worried about your waist-line?”

Nora put her forehead on the surface of the table and freed a tired breath… it wasn’t her waist-line, she’d never been that vain… it was the chaotic maelstrom her life had become since returning from Chicago… and now the revelations of today’s examination had been added to it;

Her pregnancy was, at the very least, a full month further along than she’d predicted… based on the size of her belly. Doctor Dick had wrapped a tape-measure around her middle, made her stand on a set of scales and then lie down as he man-handled her stomach before revealing the horrifying reason she hadn’t started showing much earlier…
Diastasis Recti… a fancy medical term for what was essentially Nora’s abdominal muscles *splitting down the middle* under the strain applied by her growing uterus. Her six-pack had been holding in her growing baby like a fleshy corset until it just *couldn’t* anymore, leading to the eventual dissection and sudden growth that had utterly baffled her… now she was simply trying to wrap her head around the idea that such a major trauma hadn’t sent her to the hospital in screaming agony.

Everything just seemed to be happening at once… she’d discovered her pregnancy, gotten engaged, lost her job, resolved to sue her former employers for unfair dismissal and moved into a new apartment all in the space of a month.

Plus there was the added strain of knowing that at any given moment she was likely to be arrested for fracturing Carol’s face on her way out of the District Attorney’s Office… Nick came home from work each day assuring her that no warrants had come in with her name on them, but it did nothing to ease her anxiety… in fact, it had the *opposite* effect; she felt as if the Sword of Damocles was hovering above her head.

It felt like she was running out of time to get her life in order… how the fuck was she supposed to be a decent wife and mother if she couldn’t get this absolute cluster-fuck squared away before she went into labor?

Her father had shifted forward in his seat and was now rubbing soothing circles into the small of Nora’s back, her face still planted against the wood of the table. She blinked back a few stray tears and swallowed around a lump in her throat.

“Just say the word, Honey” he cooed next to her ear. “I can pull some strings with my buddies in the historical society… you could get hitched at the Old North Church on Valentine’s Day. How’s that sound?”

She smiled at the thought… apart from the obvious synchronicity between the day ear-marked for lovers and her future surname, it would also fall on the one-year anniversary of their first meeting… and their first date. Had it really only been a year? It felt like a lifetime ago that Nick Valentine had bought her coffee and donuts, before forgoing a special broadcast of the Silver Shroud in favor of exploring each other’s bodies for the first time.

“It sounds perfect” she admitted with a tiny sigh, turning her head to face her dad and press her cheek against the surface propping her up. “But it’s less than a month away. I’ve always wanted a small ceremony… but it’s still not enough time to plan a wedding”

Frank simply raised an eyebrow and gave her a dark expression, as if she’d just insulted him and issued a challenge in the same breath.

“What’s the point of being so highly respected among the upper-crust of Boston society if I can’t commandeer a major historical landmark, on a popular holiday no less, for my little girl’s big day?” he asked, with the same deadpan tone his child had inherited. “Besides, if I’m paying for it all, shouldn’t I get a say in how everything goes down?”

Nora snorted at that… if Franklin Fitzsimons, the ultimate history nut, had total say over how a wedding at the *Old North Church* was going to play out she could expect to see everyone wearing tricorn hats and frock coats… and instead of walking down the aisle, she’d be walking the entire damn Freedom Trail before getting to the alter.

“I’ll talk to Nick about it” she replied. It was as good as saying yes, her dashing detective was happy to elope at the registry office as long as it was with Nora… though she suspected that Rosa Valentine would never forgive them if they tied the knot outside of God’s own house. “But if I see a single
revolution era outfit you will never be allowed to meet your grandchild” she threatened, only half-jokingly.

“I wouldn’t dream of it” he laughed, before lacing his fingers together on the table and fixing his daughter with a probing gaze. “Though there is something I’d like to ask of you in return…”

When Nick Valentine arrived home it was to the sight of his pregnant fiance and her father chatting at the kitchen table… which looked as if a dumpster had exploded on top of it. Every square inch of the surface was littered with papers, manila folders, empty soda bottles and roughly three boxes worth of plastic wrapping from those Fancy Lads snack cakes Nora had taken a shine to over the past week… at this rate their kid was going to be born overweight and diabetic, he mused grimly.

“Look’s like someone had a productive day” he observed aloud, hanging up his trench coat and hat on a wall hook before moving to join them. “Did you ask about…” he trailed off and waved a hand in front of his stomach, the gesture causing Nora’s eyebrows to knit together and a tiny cringe to appear on her face.

“Yeah… sit down. This is going to be disgusting” she pulled a chair out for him as he scoffed inwardly. Jesus Christ… he was a cop! He’d been in shoot-outs and visited grisly crime scenes on a regular basis. Why did she assume that he wasn’t prepared to hear the less savory details of her pregnancy?…

… He definitely hadn’t been prepared for the colorful explanation he’d received twenty minutes earlier, damn her spot-on assumptions… Nick Valentine was still fighting down the desire to get roaring drunk in hopes of erasing his memory as the account of the days events shifted, from Nora and Frank’s plan for an accelerated wedding, to the reason his kitchen looked like a junk yard; his future wife had finally caved and agreed to a position in her father’s firm, Fitzsimons & Stone… she was working her way through the mountain of paperwork required to make it official.

“Work hard at it and one day it’ll be Fitzsimons, Stone & Valentine!” Frank was crowing enthusiastically as Nora scribbled away at a dotted line… and an idea formed in Nick’s head.

“Sweetheart, if you’re going to fast-track our nuptials… there’s something I’d like to ask for in return…” he began carefully. The scratching of her pen stopped and both lawyers gave him their rapt attention. Damn it all, he really didn’t want to do this… but the thought of her overworking herself to the point of illness and anxiety (as she was prone to do) caused him to lose sleep at night. “When the District Attorney’s Office sees that letter, and they offer you a decent settlement, I want you to take it”

Nick had discovered over the recent months that telling a pair of lawyers to accept a settlement offer was akin to telling a marine corps unit to lie down and let the enemy troops march right over them… it was loser talk and it was completely unacceptable. He had to start explaining fast when their expressions turned identically murderous;

“Nora, doll… I’m all for the idea of making them pay for how they gave you the boot. But if you take this to court I’m worried it’s going to stir-up any bad blood leftover between you and a certain co-worker who’s face you broke… I walk into the precinct every day thinking that I’m gonna get the
order to haul you in, but it never comes… I don’t know what happened to make Carol drop it all, but if you sue them what do you think the odds are that she’ll reconsider?”

It was a low blow, the detective was painfully aware of that… but if he’d told her the truth; That he was worried about the health of his pregnant wife-to-be it would have started an argument about unnecessary coddling on his part, and she’d go ahead with the case just to try and prove him wrong. It wasn’t a lie, per se… he was genuinely concerned over the idea that Nora could be charged with assault, but it was far from the main issue that was bugging him.

His white lie seemed to have the desired effect however… she chewed on her bottom lip and frowned deeply as she mentally weighed her options, before finally sighing and admitting in a tiny grumble;

“Fine… I’ll drop it. I guess if I’ve already got another job then the money isn’t as important anymore. But I want my severance pay at the very least, they sure as shit owe me that!” she snapped to the world in general. Frank put a determined hand on her shoulder.

“Just let me do all the talking. I’ll get you double your severance pay and a years worth of lost wages, you have my word” he declared, with all the conviction of a comic-book superhero overlooking a crime-infested city from atop a skyscraper.

Nick leaned back in his chair and chuckled at the idea of Franklin Fitzsimons in a cowl and cape … and then over the idea that given enough time, if Nora became a name-partner, his surname would essentially be emblazoned across the front of a business somewhere.

It was a novel thought indeed.
It was the afternoon of February the thirteenth when Nora stared into the bedroom closet she shared with her fiance, mentally cursing the man she was marrying tomorrow. Sure enough… his trademark trench coat was hanging neatly from the railing, his fedora gracing the shelf above it, which meant only one thing; Detective Nick Valentine had gone on a stake-out.

Of all the ways to bail on a party this seemed the most ridiculous… especially after she’d finally extracted his whereabouts from the witless officer who’d foisted the task off onto him; he was posted in the red light district.

Only her dashing detective would take a dangerous assignment in the seediest part of town in order to avoid his own bachelor party. Which wasn’t to say that Nora didn’t understand his reluctance… if Donny had indeed planned the whole shebang, as he so proudly claimed, then the chances of Nick showing up for their wedding tarred, feathered and missing his eyebrows were pretty high.

It was still worlds better than the chances he now had of being stabbed to death in a urine-soaked alley for looking too long at the wrong tweaked-out junkie. Not to mention the fact that Nick had the uncanny ability to look like a cop even when clad in plain clothes… was it the way he carried himself, or maybe his mannerisms? Either way, it ensured that wherever he went people were always careful of their words around him.

But in the part of the city he was holed-up in? It’d just get him straight-out murdered on sight.

Her ire was interrupted briefly by a tiny flutter from the lower right side of her swollen abdomen, and she pressed a hand to the area… chasing the feather-light motions of her unborn baby. She’d been able to feel movement under her skin for the better part of a fortnight now, but it still wasn’t strong enough for the child’s father to feel it… and unless he’d found an ingenious new way of blending in with a bunch of chem-dealers, hookers and drunkards he never--

With a playful twist of her lips an idea sprung fully-formed into Nora’s head… and she proceeded to grab Nick’s coat from it’s hanger, spreading it out on the bed, before adjourning to the vanity in the corner of the room.

The sun was just beginning to set on the narrow alleyway, where Nick Valentine had parked his car for the duration of the stake-out, when the detective had a serendipitous thought;

If he hadn’t chickened-out and run away from his own stag party, given enough time, Donny likely would’ve ended up dragging him through the exact same neighborhood over the course of the evening… maybe even into the same bar he was currently keeping watch over, under the guise of a down-on-his-luck schmuck getting drunk in the relative privacy of his vehicle.

At least he hoped that’s what it looked like… he’d scattered enough empty beer bottles across his dashboard to support the illusion… but he’d never been any good at dressing up (or down, in this case) to play a role. In the end Nick had settled for an unshaven and disheveled take on his regular attire… sans hat and coat, of course. Hopefully it would be enough.

He nudged the bulky camera hidden near his feet, reassuring himself that it was nearby and ready for
when this Johnny Montrano guy eventually made his appearance. Nick had spent so long chasing Eddie Winter and his goons that he often forgot there were other crime families operating in Boston… his target for the evening was apparently a big-shot among the city’s Italian mobsters.

The only description of the crook he’d received upon accepting the last minute assignment was that Montrano was “a fat yutz” with an incredibly heavy emphasis on the ‘fat’ part. As for the man he was meeting? There was absolutely zero information on that front… he’d just have to wait and see who Mr. Yutz interacted with and take a bunch of photographs.

The detective glanced upwards at the slowly darkening sky and frowned… hopefully they’d show up before the sun was gone completely. If it got too dim then he’d have to resort to screwing the flash-bulb back into the camera, and regardless of how effectively he’d camouflaged himself his cover would be blown the second he took his first shot… sudden bright flashes of light seldom led to a favorable conclusion when it came to stake-outs.

Nick’s thoughts were interrupted by a rapping at the passenger side of his car, causing him to nearly jump out of his skin, had his cover been blown already?!

It took a half-second for him to recognize that the woman leaning forward and peering at him through the open window was, in fact, his fiance… wearing more make-up then he’d ever seen her apply and--

“Nora! What the-- is that my coat?” he managed through the knot of astonishment in his throat. Her response was proceeded by a cheeky grin;

“Sorry for borrowing it without asking” she purred in a sensual tone that set off a cacophony of alarms in Nick’s head. “I can take it off, if you’d like”

He could only stare goggle-eyed as she popped the first few buttons free of their holes, revealing a familiar lacy black bra underneath… her generous breasts straining precariously against the too-small cups.

By the time her nimble fingers reached the fastenings near her naval Nick’s brain had flipped back and forth between incredulous fury and a suffocating lust several times over;

What the ever-loving fuck was she thinking?! Waltzing into the roughest part of the city, clad in nothing but a trench coat and her best lingerie, carrying their child no less! Who on earth had told her where to find him in the first place? Clearly rules and protocol meant nothing anymore to his co-workers.

But… oh God… she was so beautiful.

Over the past few weeks Nora’s hormones had plateaued, morphing her from a delicate angel into a luminous goddess of sex and fertility… All soft curves and flushed skin and shiny hair. Everything about her was fuller… riper… and so much hotter, in a very literal sense. Every time their skin met he was startled at how every inch of her seemed to burn to the touch, like she was running a constant fever.

Which made it all the more painfully frustrating that Nick hadn’t made love to her at all during those several weeks. Along with her mouth-watering transformation came an almost constant fatigue plaguing his pregnant sweetheart. Growing a baby took a lot of energy, it seemed… and he wouldn’t force his attentions on her when she clearly needed all the rest she could get.

He’d instead resorted to fantasizing about the molten heat of her sex wrapped tightly around his
length each morning in the shower… turning up the temperature of the water to emulate the warmth of her body as he furiously milked himself against the wall tiles.

Nick honestly didn’t have a fucking clue how he was going to last for more than a few minutes when they consummated their marriage tomorrow.

He snapped out of his stupor as she reached the final button, and gestured frantically for her to stop and just get in the damn car already… he knew exactly what the rest of her ensemble looked like and he didn’t fancy the idea of sharing the tantalizing vision with half of Boston.

The detective tried to focus on his anger as she lowered herself into the passenger seat of the vehicle, the idea that she could be so reckless and irresponsible! But his mind-reading little minx obliterated any semblance of higher thinking by leaning in and running her teeth gently around the shell of his ear… causing blood to rush to his cock so fast that for a few seconds Nick felt light-headed. His soon-to-be wife knew his every erogenous zone in the same way a cartographer knew their own maps… and it wasn’t always a good thing.

“You promised me that you were going to have fun tonight, Detective Valentine” she whispered low in his ear… her warm breath against his cheek only adding more fuel to the fire in his veins. “Instead I had to hear from your best-man that you ran away and went on a stake-out”

“I just--” his words were replaced with pitiful whine as Nora gripped the tent that’d sprung up in the front of his trousers. Apparently talking was off the table for him… not that he could manage coherent sentences anymore.

“No excuses” she continued. “You’re going to enjoy your last night of single life, Nick… and if it has to happen while you’re on the clock, well… then that’s just your own silly fault, now isn’t it? Go ahead and do your job and I’ll do mine”

Any argument he might have presented in that moment was forgotten as the woman he loved kissed her way slowly down his neck, while her clever fingers went to work freeing his straining member from the prison of his clothes.

*Damn it*, he needed to stay focused on the assignment, and he tried his hardest to keep his eyes on the street in front of him as Nora took him in hand… *fuck*, even her palms were hotter than usual. Nick’s efforts amounted to absolute naught however when she pressed a kiss to his leaking tip… before taking the full length of his cock into the sweet heat of her mouth in one fluid stroke. He looked down and gently brushed back her hair… branding the image of her painted lips wrapped around him into his memory.

This was clearly a new form of torture she’d concocted in order to punish him… being forced to keep a straight face and his eyes ahead while a beautiful creature that embodied pure sex ran her teeth and tongue along his most sensitive areas.

After liberally coating his length with saliva Nora set a languid pace… stroking her lips up and down his shaft… using *just* enough pressure to send delicious waves of pleasure rocking through his body and a white-hot tension to start building slowly in the pit of his belly. A reserved effort that ensured he wouldn’t be reaching his climax anytime soon, evidently this was going to be a long punishment… and he couldn’t find a single fuck to give.

It could’ve been a few minutes or a few hours that he sat there, alternating between scanning the street and reverently running his fingers through his sweetheart’s silky brown locks, breathing out words of encouragement and adoration as she massaged him with her mouth.
God… he hadn’t realized how much he’d been missing this… the sweet intimacy of having her so close… *her touch.* Nick knew in that moment that his own hands would never be enough anymore now that Nora had so firmly entwined herself around every facet of his being.

Then the haze of their spell was suddenly banished by movement out of the corner of his eye…

One of the fattest men the detective had ever witnessed outside of a circus side-show strolled past his car… their eyes meeting for a mortifying half-second before the stranger whipped his head around with a light blush, multiple chins jiggling from the sudden motion, and crossed the street to loiter outside the bar Nick had been tasked with observing.

*Johnny Montrano.*

“He’s here!” he managed to bite out between strokes of his fiance’s tongue, tapping her urgently on the shoulder.

For all of the reckless impulsiveness that brought her to the red light district in the first place Nora instantly recognized the importance of the moment; quickly removing herself from his cock and remaining low, sprawled across both his lap and the passenger seat. She then reached for the camera stowed between his feet and passed it upwards into his hands.

*Fuck…* he loved this dame.

Nick made sure that Montrano wasn’t looking their way as he took his first photograph, silently thanking all known deities that it was still light enough to snap pictures without the aid of a flashbulb. It was when fatty’s contact finally made his appearance that the detective noticed how smoothly this whole operation was playing out, and why…

After that initial glance between Montrano and himself the criminal seemed to be making a distinct effort to *not* look in their direction again… almost like he was trying to give them privacy. Was this some sort of unspoken rule among crooks he’d been previously unaware of?… Don’t ogle the working girl and her client while they’re getting busy?

The realization hit him like a wayward ton of bricks and he stared at the woman in his lap…

The make-up… the fancy underwear… the coat covering it all… she’d dressed herself up like a *prostitute.* That’s how she’d made it to his car without being harassed, Nora had essentially disguised herself as one of the local hookers… who were well known to be under the protection of some pretty violent handlers, or even carry weapons themselves.

Then she’d jumped into the passenger seat and started sucking him off, adding to the illusion and using it to protect *him* as well… anyone looking in through the windows would see just another lonely john getting his money’s worth.

He was marrying a genius… a wicked and unbelievably sexy genius.

The exchange Nick had been tasked with capturing was over in only a few minutes, which saw Montrano and the nameless associate swapping a series of lumpy envelopes before going their separate ways… Johnny into the bar and his contact down the street from the direction he’d arrived. He exhausted the roll of film and deposited the device back between his feet before sitting back and glaring the crazy broad he was engaged to.

“You really thought this out, didn’t you?” he grumbled at the woman in his lap with a petulant frown. “Figured whatever disguise I whipped up wouldn’t cut it and decided to *become* the disguise, am I right?”
Nora simply nuzzled her cheek against his knee with a fake expression of innocence… before startling him by darting her hand up to firmly grasp his cock, still slick from her earlier treatment. Any hardness that he’d lost while watching the criminals conversing came stampeding back with only a few delectable strokes… and the sensation of her mouth near his ear once again.

“Don’t pretend that you didn’t enjoy it, or that you didn’t get what you came for” she admonished half an inch from his face, teasing a hiss from between Nick’s teeth as she wrapped a fist around his swollen tip. “There’s only one thing left for you to do before this evening can be considered perfect”

“And what would that be?” he asked, though he already knew the answer… he just wanted to hear the words leave her lips.

She nipped at his ear and set a blistering pace with her hand that had him moaning, cursing and bucking his hips in response to the sharp, beautiful sensations crashing through his nervous system with the force of a wrecking ball.

Maybe it was the way she was molded against his side with her warm breath fanning across his cheek… or the way she ran her thumb over his slit and spread stray drops of pre-cum across the over-stimulated head of his cock… or the fact that he’d become so fucking pent up over the past few weeks… but a minute and a half later, when her whispered answer finally came, so did Nick;

“Come for me… let it all out”

What else could he do but obey?

He turned his head and captured her lips with his, suppressing his cries by wrapping his tongue around Nora’s with a desperation he couldn’t recall ever experiencing before… thick spurts of cum spilling down her nimble fingers.

Nick only pulled away when he realized he wasn’t getting enough oxygen through his nose alone, instead kissing his way from the corner of her mouth to the crook of her neck, where he reveled in her heady fragrance as the aftershocks of his orgasm tickled through his stomach.

After indulging him for a few minutes she pulled away briefly to retrieve a paper napkin from the glove compartment, they had a tendency to accumulate in his car with all the take-out the detective ate during work hours. She wiped his seed from her hand with a bemused smile before returning to his side, running her fingers through his sweat-damp hair and her nails lightly along his scalp.

“Pent up much?” she chuckled softly. “You’ve really been holding out on me lately… it’s-- it’s not the extra weight, is it?”

A small hair-line crack skittered across the surface of his heart at Nora’s hesitant tone… nothing could ever be further from the truth.

Nick snaked a hand under the trench coat she was wearing to press a hand against the curve of her belly possessively… his other hand stroking softly against a rosy cheek as he fixed her with a devout gaze.

“You’ve never been more beautiful than you are right now” he intoned deeply. “I want you all the time… but you’ve been so tired lately, I didn’t wanna bug you”

“I’m not always tired” she argued with an adorable frown. “I may be in the family way but I still have needs… and I expect you to take care of them after our wedding tomorrow”

He was about to cheekily suggest that they jump in the back seat and take care of those needs right
now, but his lewd train of thought was derailed by soft tapping against the palm still pressed flat against the swell of her stomach. The couple simultaneously looked down at the area before exchanging identical looks of awe.

“Is that?…” he asked in a reverent whisper.

“Yes! You can feel that?” she answered, her smile was blinding. “That’s our baby. Look’s like junior finally thought to put some weight behind those kicks”

Nora wove her fingers through Nicks and proceeded to guide his hand across the tight skin of her abdomen, chasing the fluttering, feather-light sensations as a team until their unborn child seemed to grow tired of the game and went to sleep again in the warm cradle of it’s mother’s womb.

By the time Nick Valentine dropped the camera back at the precinct and gave a short, heavily abridged account of the evening to the assigning officer, Nora’s fatigue had taken a hold of her once more. So he drove her back to their shared home for a short nap and hopefully a wardrobe change upon awakening before her dad arrived to pick her up.

It was decided that Nora would stay in her father’s house with Nick’s mother that evening so the two women could properly prepare for the ceremony in the morning.

Meanwhile Nick would have their apartment to himself to get ready for the big day… Franklin Fitzsimons would be arriving in the morning to offer any assistance he might need and, of course, threaten him with grievous bodily harm if he got cold feet or ever thought about hurting his daughter or grandchild… as was tradition among fathers everywhere, it would seem.

After eventually seeing Nora off with a kiss and a promise to meet her at the alter tomorrow Nick found himself alone and inexplicably exhausted… whether it was the stress of the last minute stake-out, or the fact that he’d been relieved of several weeks worth of sexual tension, he could only speculate.

Despite feeling as if his limbs and eyelids were made of lead the tranquil void of sleep lingered just out of the detectives reach. The bed just seemed so empty without his other half… and far too big.

After a frustrating fifteen minutes of tossing and turning Nick had a strange idea… he left the comfort of the blankets and retrieved his signature trench coat from the closet, bringing the collar to his nose… sure enough, the garment was still permeated with the sweet scent of Nora.

He fell asleep within minutes of draping the coat across his body like a woolen throw… slightly embarrassed at how hopelessly addicted he’d become to the woman he loved.

*It’s just a one time thing*, he told himself as he drifted off… *It’s not like we’ll be sleeping apart anymore after tomorrow.*
Chapter 10

The mid-morning light of Valentine’s Day reflected sharply off of Nora’s engagement ring as she brought a hand up to inspect her carefully curled hair once more… re-assuring herself that enough gels and sprays had been utilized to guarantee that the whole thing wouldn’t come apart once the thin veil was draped over her face.

“Stop fidgeting! Geez… you look like a million bucks” Marie, her lone bridesmaid admonished, leaning in so that her reflection joined Nora’s in the full-length mirror of her pink-upon-pink childhood bedroom. “Vera Keyes, eat your heart out”

The bride scoffed lightly as she ran her palm over the silk-draped swell of her belly.

“I doubt Vera Keyes would be seen dead walking down the aisle with her stomach proceeding her” Nora pointed out. Marie simply shrugged and brushed non-existent lint off the bodice of her own baby-blue gown.

“You never know… celebrities are always getting into some scandal or another. Give it a few months and I guarantee you that at least one famous actress finds herself the star of a shotgun wedding” She gave the bride a half smile. “Think of how trendy you’ll be when that happens”

Nora snorted at the idea before returning her attention to the mirror in front of her…

For all of the years she’d spent mostly immune to the sin of vanity, as she looked upon her own transformed image, she couldn’t help but imagine that this is what fairy-tale princesses must look like on their wedding days.

Actually, no-- scratch that… those princesses tended to wear enormous, poofy meringues of dresses when they got married, didn’t they? With bulbous sleeves and trains so long that a small team of servants was required to carry the superfluous fabric behind the starry-eyed bride.

Yep… Marie was right. Aside from the baby-belly, this woman staring back at her from the silvery surface looked like a freaking movie-star.

Her gown was fairly reserved in design, and had it been a color other than white it might have passed for formal evening attire on any other occasion. The lace, elbow-length sleeves and silk of her bodice were form-fitting above Nora’s swollen middle, below that the fabric of her skirt was loose, flowing and sported the faint glimmer of tactically applied sequins, before ending sensibly at her ankles… there would be no tripping on excess dress if she had anything to say about it.

She’d awoken far earlier than she would’ve preferred on a day supposedly “all about her” and allowed Rosa Valentine to make a fuss… putting her hair in rollers before making some final, obsessive adjustments to the wedding gown she’d created from scratch. Nora now sported a perfect re-creation of the large, bouncy curls her fiance had been so enamored with on the night of the policeman’s ball. She’d applied her make-up sparingly, uncomfortable with the thought of it accidentally smudging the veil.

“Nervous?” Marie inquired, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly. “It’s okay to have butterflies, it’s a big day after-all”

Rather than butterflies the bride experienced a phenomena that felt more like grasshoppers skipping across her belly… these were the movements of the baby steadily growing stronger and more active beneath her skin.
Memories of the night before promptly surfaced along with the sensations; when Nick had felt the kicking of their child for the first time… his sheer delight and awe over such a small milestone. Any subconscious, niggling doubts she might’ve had up until that point had been completely obliterated in the face of his unabashed love for her… for their fledgling family.

“Nope… never” Nora answered autonomously, a tiny smile lifting the corners of her mouth at the knowledge that she’d likely never have second thoughts about her decision to marry Nick.

Fantasies of the couple’s near future were interrupted at that moment by a knock at the door, followed by the appearance of Nora’s soon-to-be mother-in-law, looking every inch the proud parent.

“The car’s here, ready to go?” she inquired with slight trepidation, as if the question might trigger a sudden attack of cold-feet and cause her to flee. The bride could only roll her eyes and grab her bouquet with as much enthusiasm as she could display without damaging the precisely arranged flowers.

“Absolutely” Nora answered brightly.

A silver flask was thrust under Nick Valentine’s nose by his best man after hearing that the bride’s transport had arrived, heedless of the fact that they were standing at the church’s alter in full view of the wedding guests, as well as the priest. He pushed the foul-smelling swill aside and shot an apologetic look to the nearby minister for Donny being his usual, inappropriate self.

“C’mon Nicky, last chance to settle those nerves… I ain’t being held responsible if you freak out in the middle of the vows” the ginger man grumbled at his side. The groom responded with an icy glare.

“As if I would” he gritted out. “And I’m not kissing Nora with something that tastes like a motor oil cocktail on my lips”.

No, the glass of bourbon he’d poured himself in secret back at the apartment had calmed his nerves quite nicely, not that he’d had many to begin with… those had all been forcibly banished within the first few weeks of the engagement.

Nora had a talent for picking up on any shred of distress Nick happened to have… or maybe he was just more transparent than he fancied himself to be. Either way, she’d cajole his thoughts out into the open and expertly shoot down any doubts or worries he expressed.

Since slipping that ring onto her finger his fears had all boiled down to just the one, worded slightly differently each time they talked about it; Had she only agreed to marry him because she was pregnant?

Each time he asked Nora would narrow her eyes and either pinch him, flick him across the nose or (if they were in bed at the time) give him a love bite… it often felt as if his pessimism was being beaten out of him bit by bit. She’d then launch into a short-list of the things that made him a catch which she couldn’t imagine giving up.

The detective was still skeptical over how his snoring could be considered a plus. After running through all the normal things a dame would find attractive in a man she’d started listing the more
esoteric character traits of his… she was clearly dredging by that point, who the hell enjoyed sharing their bed with someone who sounded like a lumber mill while they slept?

Any further musings banked-up in Nick’s brain were suddenly swallowed by the church’s pipe organ coming to life in order to herald the welcoming of the bridal party… whose horrible idea had it been to go with that metal monstrosity? Likely his bride’s theatrical father. Someone was bound to walk away deaf from this service. He stifled the urge to clasp his hands over his ears as he craned his neck to try and catch a glimpse of Nora in the entryway.

Never had he more keenly wished he was a poet in that moment… he needed more words to affix to the vision of Nora taking measured steps towards him on the arm of her father.

Stunning… radiant… completely and utterly, jaw-droppingly beautiful…

His meager collection of adjectives was forgotten though when she got closer and he finally got a good look at her face beneath the sheer veil… he couldn’t properly describe it, but it made his blood run cold and his heart break apart and fall into his shoes. It wasn’t the smile he’d seen in the countless bridal magazines that had littered their coffee table over the past week.

She looked nervous… hesitant… doubtful.

Fuck… had something happened between now and last night to make her change her mind? Or was it different now that they were being ogled by extended family and fair-weather friends? He’d take Nora straight to city hall and elope with her there if that was the case, guests be damned… most of them were only here for the reception afterwards.

Was it something he’d done?… Jesus fucking Christ… he had to get her alone somehow and talk to her… He wouldn’t -couldn’t!- do this unless she was completely sure!

She joined him at the alter, fidgeting nervously with her bouquet and shifting minutely from foot to foot. Her father gave her an affectionate pat on the wrist as he moved to take his seat, seemingly blind to his daughter's distress, *the airy bastard!* The din of the ancient pipe organ was suddenly lifted for a few blessed seconds of silence, before being replaced by a long, high-pitched wail from the seated guests… it appeared Nora’s cousin’s infant daughter was of the same opinion regarding the music.

The entire congregation paused as the parents struggled to pacify the baby, and Nick saw his chance while the rest of the room was distracted… he leaned forward and spoke quietly enough that only his bride could hear him;

“Nora… are you sure this is what you want?” he tried to keep his voice straight. “You can’t fool me, you looked like you were walking your last mile down there. Please… just tell me what I did wrong”

She stared at him blankly for a few miserable seconds which felt like a handful of eternities to the distressed detective… then the familiar narrowing of her eyes appeared, followed immediately by the sting of a lacquered fingernail striking him across the nose. He’d never been happier to be on the receiving end of Nora’s ire before.

“Honestly Nick… I thought you’d gotten over this already” she responded with a huff and a poke to his chest. “I’m *sure* about this wedding, damn it! I want this, I want *you*… and if you don’t drill that concept into your thick skull this second you’re going to be facing a pretty wretched rest of our lives, because that’s how long I plan to be with you!”

She continued to glare up at him with the tip of her nail digging into his torso as the words sunk in
for the hapless groom… along with the realization that she was absolutely gorgeous when she was frustrated like this.

“As for what you did wrong” she continued, much quieter this time… and he noticed a light blush shining through the thin layer of make-up across her cheeks. “The baby you put inside me shifted when the music started… it’s poking me in the bladder”

Nick couldn’t help himself, a bubble of laughter escaped and he had to clamp a hand over his mouth to muffle any further emissions before Nora murdered him in front of their friends and family right on the alter of the esteemed Old North Church. It wasn’t that he found her discomfort funny… okay, it was a little bit funny… his chuckles seemed to stem from sheer relief more than anything.

“Would you like to use the facilities before we begin?” The priest inquired softly at their side, startling Nick somewhat, he’d completely forgotten about the stout man-of-the-cloth waiting patiently to begin to proceedings.

“I can hold it” Nora waved off the offer with a tight smile. “Just try to talk fast”

The couple had rejected the idea of composing and reciting their own vows because neither felt comfortable baring so much of themselves in front of a small crowd, but they’d never been more pleased with that decision until now.

The priest gave a slightly rushed rendition of the standard, cookie-cutter service given to thousands upon thousands of pairs before them… speaking of bindings and devotion and the world-surmounting strength of a shared love blessed by God… or something along those lines. In truth, Nick barely heard more than a few consecutive words at a time, he was caught up basking in the image of Nora in her finery… and trying to keep a lid on the sparks of elation threatening to overwhelm him at the thought that this was all finally coming to fruition. Nora had to shoot him a pointed look to snap him back to reality when it was time for the vows.

“Nicholas Ottavio Valentine, do you take Nora to be your wife? Do you promise to be faithful to her in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and to honor her all the days of your life?”

“I do” Nick answered… and it felt like the most natural and obvious thing in the world to pass his lips. He then realized that while he’d been off with the fairies Donny had managed to push a golden wedding band into the palm of his hand without alerting him somehow. He ran his fingers reverently along his bride’s slender digits as the new piece of jewelry clinked into place alongside her engagement band, the act triggering a smile on each of their faces. The minister then turned to Nora.

“Nora Edith Fitzsimons, do you take Nicholas to be your husband? Do you promise to be faithful to him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and to honor him all the days of your life?”

“You’re damn right I do” she answered smoothly, teasing a small murmur of laughter from the guests as she slipped a matching gold band onto his own finger, running her eyes over Nick’s form with an expression that he recognized immediately as carnal interest… cheeky, audacious little hellcat.

“May the blessings of life, the joy of love, the peace of truth, and the wisdom and strength of Spirit be your constant companion, now and always, as husband and wife” the priest recited, before turning to Nick with a nod and a half smile. “You may now kiss the bride”

Nick managed to gently lift and brush back her veil with imperceptibly trembling hands… the barest of caresses brushing against her cheeks, before sealing their union and finally claiming the lips of his
It was three hours into the reception when the newly-minted Nora Valentine stood up from the sanctuary of their table to rescue her new husband from the rest of the Eddie Winter task-force, who were steadily getting drunker and louder as the party wore on… perhaps the open bar had been a bad idea.

Nick was currently trapped in a firm over-the-shoulder embrace from Detective Williamson while a melancholy, recently divorced Detective Forbes slapped him on the back and regaled him with slurred marital advice, the rest of crew circling them and nodding along in agreement like a display of formally dressed bobble-heads.

She pushed into the tight ring of cops just as a tid-bit about leaving dirty socks lying around devolved into a depressing snapshot of Forbes’s failed marriage and grasped Nick by both of his hands, preparing to yank him free if necessary.

“Yes, some of the neighbors are starting to complain about the noise” she lied casually. “You don’t want them calling the police, do you?”

Yep, they were well and truly under the table by now… because not a single one seemed to remember that they were the police, and immediately apologized before going their separate ways into the party. Nora noted with a cringe that one of them was making a beeline towards a cluster of colorful azalea bushes against the fence, presumably to puke up his guts… her dad wasn’t going to appreciate that at all.

Perhaps hosting the reception in her father’s beautiful, prize-winning garden had also been a bad idea.

“It’s a scary thought, isn’t it?” Nick quipped. “That those are the men working to keep our streets crime-free”

She giggled and held his hands a little tighter, running a thumb over her husband’s new wedding ring and secretly marveling over the idea for the umpteenth time that day… he was her husband.

“They have you baby-sitting them, so I think the citizens of Boston can rest easy” Nora added warmly, earning herself a quick kiss on the forehead and a lopsided smile from her intrepid investigator that sent a tingling warmth radiating through her chest… she’d definitely snagged the best of the batch.

“I’ll give them until after the gift exchange and then order them to go home and sleep it off” Captain Widmark informed them as he sidled up to the pair and shared a knowing look with Nora… reminding her of the initial reason she’d chosen the privacy of a walled-off garden over renting out a function hall for the celebration; her wedding present to Nick couldn’t be brought into a public venue.

When she’d mischievously shared that tiny clue with her then-fiance during the planning phase he’d returned her impish grin and said the exact same thing about her own gift, which had left her with no small amount of curiosity niggling at the back of her brain over the weeks… it was definitely time to
put that particular mystery to bed.

“Well… they probably won’t be able to walk properly in about twenty minutes” Nora mused aloud.

“Might as well do it now”

Widmark completely failed to hide his excitement as he turned to announce the exchange of presents between the bride and groom to the rest of the guests. Nick said nothing as he escorted her back to their table with an arm around her, but she could almost hear the wheels turning in his head.

It was while Nora was handing over a carefully wrapped package with silver ribbon twined around it’s middle when her father slammed the back door to the house open and emerged with an expression of barely contained psychotic rage plastered across his face… and a white powder which she assumed was flour smeared across nearly every visible inch of his suit. He then addressed her husband through clenched teeth, a muscle near the corner of his eye twitching cartoonishly;

“Nick, for the love of all that’s good in this world, get that twice-damned thing out of my kitchen before he demolishes the entire room and I send you the bill!”

The last light of Valentine’s Day was finally bleeding from the sky when Nick unlocked the front door of their apartment and was almost bowled over by Nora’s present as he barreled past into the entryway. He merely grinned at the pup’s infectious enthusiasm and silently thanked the gods that his fragile, pregnant wife had objected to being carried over the threshold.

Setting aside the adolescent German Shepherd’s destruction of Frank’s kitchen, he was pretty confident that Nora loved her slobbering, disobedient gift, if the cooing noises she was making over the grinning fur-ball were any indicator.

He’d been absolutely stumped over what to give his bride at first… what on God’s green earth could he possibly get her that came even slightly close to what she was giving him? Her love… her hand in marriage… a child. No amount of fine china or crystal wine glasses were going to cut it.

It was during a slow day of paperwork and softly banging his head against the grain of his desk at the station when he’d overheard a snippet of idle conversation that caused everything to fall into place;

Nora liked dogs… she’d had one as a child and confessed that it had been her dearest friend during those formative years… she’d most likely want the same experience for their own offspring… their apartment building had just recently begun to allow pets… the Cambridge precinct acted as the training site for the city’s K-9 units… many of the dogs regularly failed to make the grade and were given away to interested families.

After that it was simply a matter of talking to the trainer in charge and three weeks later he was given a choice between three eager-to-please pups. Pre-named, for training purposes; Abbot, Ellery and Bogart.

Nick had, very obviously, picked Bogart. Not just because of the name, he kept telling himself, but struggled to find another characteristic that had set the dog apart from his siblings during the choosing.

His arm brushed against his own token from Nora as he shucked off his suit jacket and slung it over
the back of the sofa. Nick had never described a gun as luxurious before, but the custom-made .38 caliber revolver, with it’s mother-of-pearl grip and silver embellishments, complete with hand-made leather holster, was exactly that… absolute luxury.

Not to mention highly customizable, which he unfortunately wouldn’t be doing any of… Nora and Widmark had both gone to a lot of trouble to ensure that his gift was properly registered, certified and ready for him to carry on duty. Any tinkering with the piece would nullify the small pile of documents they’d painstakingly filled out and submitted to the higher-ups.

Nick pulled the firearm from it’s holster and gave it yet another look over… brushing his thumb over the familiar outline of a heart pierced with an arrow that had been engraved into the grip. He suspected that Nora was trying to turn the little doodle into some sort of family signature, she’d had it printed on the wedding invitations as well… and on the card tucked into the gun’s gift box, right beneath the words “Cupid’s Hand-Cannon”.

All the best weapons have names… something that Franklin Fitzsimons had told him once while proudly showing off his extensive collection of Revolution and Civil War Era weaponry… ever the history nut.

He paused in his admiration of the brand new revolver and switched to admiring his brand new wife instead, who had lowered herself onto the carpet in favor of giving Bogart a thorough belly-scratch.

Her dress was steadily being covered with dog hair… her curls were long gone after an afternoon of mingling and dancing… and the first thing she’d done after leaving the party was steal his handkerchief in an effort to remove the majority of her make-up.

All-in-all, Nora was exactly as stunning as she always was in the eyes of the love-sick detective.

The subject of his attention seemed to feel his gaze warming her back and turned to look up at him from beneath her lashes.

“Could you, um… help me off the floor, please?” She queried in a small voice… this marked the first time she’d asked for his assistance with something so physically mundane, but he suspected it would become a common occurrence as she got closer to her due date. He held out both hands and managed to lever her off the floor without incident… then tugged her a little bit further so that she fell flush against his chest and into his arms with a tiny squeak of surprise.

Her head immediately pressed into it’s usual place against Nick’s collarbone and underneath his chin, and the detective allowed himself a slow, deep inhale… filling his lungs with her sweet scent and letting the tension embedded throughout the fibers of his flesh dissolve away in the wake of Nora’s close proximity.

Was he a jerk for admitting that he hadn’t really enjoyed his own wedding? He was over the goddamn moon, of course, to finally be hitched to his lady-love… but the ceremony and after-party had felt far too much like they were putting on a show for the guests. Anything other than the chasteest of kisses and embraces would undoubtedly be turned into fodder for the gossip mills… did that sort of thing still apply to them now that they were dutifully married?

Regardless, his entire team from work had been there, and they never failed to joyously rip into him over any hint of perceived deviance from their straight-laced lead investigator. Nick wasn’t so thin-skinned as to say it hurt him, but it was extremely annoying, not to mention distracting.

“I missed you” came the murmur against his skin.
“We’ve been together the whole day” he noted against her hair. Her response was to hold him a little tighter and run a fingernail down the length of his spine.

“You know what I mean” Nora sighed.

He did… he really, really did.

Nick was idly mimicking his sweetheart’s soft ministrations when he noticed that the zip of her dress was paused halfway down her back, indicating that it was either stuck or out of her reach. He gave it an experimental tug and confirmed the latter, before drawing it down slowly… brushing the tips of his fingers deliberately along the skin exposed and drawing a low moan of contentment from his bride.

It was an innocent enough gesture among committed couples… but that wonderful sound wrapped itself snugly around his core, making it seem anything but.

“I haven’t forgotten last night, you know” Nora mumbled against his chest.

Nick searched his memories of the night before… slightly fuzzy after the mind-altering orgasm she’d given him in the dubious privacy of the car, but clear enough;

He’d admitted to avoiding sex with her out of concern for her growing fatigue… and she, in turn, had been hurt by his withdrawal… thinking that her extra curves had turned him off, when in fact, it had done the opposite.

_You’re an idiot, Nick… a complete, fucking idiot_, he chastised inside his head… tipping Nora’s face upwards with careful hands and pouring his apology into a long, deep kiss. Several weeks worth of lust came flooding back with a vengeance at the feel of her soft lips moving against his own, but the memories of what he’d done instead of seeking her out caused him to break their seal and rest his forehead against hers.

“I wasn’t lying before” he confessed in breathless whisper. “I really did want you the whole time. I touched myself every day in the shower over the thought of you, did you know that?”

He could feel Nora’s breath hitching against his torso and her eyes took on an unmistakable glaze of arousal. She liked dirty talk, he knew that much, but he’d never been very good at it… preferring to showcase his desire in other, more tactile, ways. He decided to start making more of an effort on that front though, if _this_ was the expression it brought forth… and adopted a low, sensual purr for his next words, ensuring that each syllable rumbled against her chest;

_“Let me make it up to you”_
residence in her thighs… she’d likely have bruises down there tomorrow, and--

Oh holy, ever-loving fuck, he was humming now… or moaning… she couldn’t tell, but the vibrations marched straight up her spine… triggering a series of somersaults in her stomach and sending her heart thudding violently against her ribs. Did he really enjoy eating her out that much?

She glanced down and nearly dissolved into a quivering puddle of need at the visual answer to her question, whimpering pathetically around the bottom lip she’d been biting down on. There was her new husband… eyes clamped shut… nuzzling her short brown hairs with his nose… unconsciously rutting against the bed covers beneath him… and a tell-tale rhythmic bobbing of his Adam's apple as he greedily swallowed the liquid evidence of her pleasure.

A sudden twist of his fingers and Nora was squeezing her eyes shut, bucking against his roaming hands and trying desperately to direct him closer to that secret little patch of nerves deep inside her… but he seemed to detect what she was trying to do, cruelly skirting away from the area at every turn.

“You’re going to kill me…” she practically sobbed. “I’m going to -ah!- die on my wedding n-night… all because -fuck!- my bastard husband won’t l-let me come!”

Nick responded by pausing his rough treatment of her twitching slit, and locked her with a heavy-lidded gaze… smirking up at her with her juices still surrounding his lips… he looked absolutely evil in that moment. How could such a resolute officer of the peace manage to look so completely evil?

“Well… we can’t have that, can we?” Oh hell… his tone was worse. “Not when we’ve got the rest of our lives to perfect these little sessions”

This wasn’t perfect already?!

Before she had a chance to muster another word he lowered his head once again and created a tight seal around her abused little nub with his lips… sucking it into his mouth and giving it hard flicks with the tip of his tongue that had her body jolting with every pass as if she were being electrocuted… keening through every labored exhale and forcing herself to grip the wooden headboard behind her… she didn’t want to actually tear out his hair, after all.

Nick’s fingers returned to their previous engagement, only this time they dove straight for the spot he’d avoided before… rubbing firm little circles against her walls… heat and tension pooling exponentially in her lower belly… just a little more and she’d snap…

She was chanting now, though she had no idea if the words were in her head or passing her lips, not that she gave a fuck;

Just a little more… almost there… fuck…

Then Nora suddenly yelped in surprise as a blinding hot agony lanced through her core… Nick’s hand had slipped… the tips of his fingers driving into her sensitive spot like a goddamn battering ram, bringing tears to her eyes as his nails cut into her inner folds.

And just like that… her perfect impending orgasm was gone.

She looked down at her new husband… fully prepared to kick him in the face for driving her so beautifully up to wall to the heights of the purest ecstasy, only to yank the rug out from under her with that ill-conceived stunt… leaving her cunt thrumming with pain instead of pleasure.

Only for her anger to dissipate as she witnessed Nick glaring daggers over his shoulder at their newest furry family member, sitting at the foot of the bed and giving him a puzzled look.
Her lover tensed and coiled beneath her, reminding Nora of a snake preparing to strike… and then he did… rearing up onto his knees and barking out his frustration;

“Get the hell out, you fur-faced son-of-a-bitch! If I wanted a threesome I’d find someone better looking than you! Go and shove that icy nose up someone else’s ass!”

She couldn’t keep it together at his choice of words… Nora broke into peels of laughter, clutching her rounded stomach in an effort to still the shakes wracking her body.

Her poor detective probably would have had more of a reaction if he’d yelled at the wall instead… Bogart simply yawned, almost defiantly, and jumped onto the bed in order to curl up next to her… leaving Nick with an absolutely priceless expression of incredulity… his mouth hanging open like a stunned mullet. She rolled onto her side and hugged the ridiculous beast… laughing into his fur and trying to blink back a fresh batch of tears.

“That’s impossible” she managed through her amusement, petting the dog vigorously. “No one’s better looking than Bogart”

He cracked the barest of smiles at that and moved to lie down next to her… pressing the length of his body against her back and running a hand soothingly up and down her side… fingers brushing meaningfully against the taut skin of her belly. The spark was completely gone now… but those warm hands simply touching her gently was another kind of heaven.

“Are you alright?” Nick asked, warm breath fluttering against her nape. “He startled me, I didn’t mean to-- did I hurt you?”

She released the dog and took his roaming hand in her own, drawing it upwards to press a reassuring kiss against his knuckles.

“Still stings a bit, but it’s nothing that won’t heal by itself” Nora replied.

He hid his face in the crook of her neck and mumbled something that sounded like an “I’m sorry”. Another kiss… and then she brought his hand down to rest against her middle.

The baby was especially active at the moment, probably due to all of the strenuous physical activity. And after a solid ten minutes of cooling down and holding each other their little one was still beating against the wall of her womb as if it were a set of drums. Nora smiled grimly against the warm chest now substituting as a pillow.

“It’s not even born yet and already we’re bad parents” she mumbled tiredly. “Keeping them up past their bedtime”

“Sorry kiddo” Nick murmured, running a hand over the rounded flesh. “But I love your mom too much to keep my hands off her”

“I love you too” Nora exhaled, holding him tighter and allowing the quiet void of sleep to settle over her… sandwiched between the warmth of her husband and a poor-mannered German Shepherd.
It was the twentieth of April when Detective Nick Valentine sighed heavily into his tepid cup of coffee, in the poorly-lit basement of the Cambridge police department, and begrudgingly admitted to himself that just maybe he was making a big deal out of absolutely nothing.

It was getting harder to pretend that he wasn’t biting off more Operation Winter’s End than he could chew, he’d started making mistakes… just this morning he’d left behind a pile of dossiers concerning the mobster’s hardest working grunts on the kitchen table. Technically those papers weren’t even allowed to leave the station… if anyone else needed them today he was in for a hell of a chewing out from Widmark.

And what was he doing now? Hogging the departments holotape player and obsessively running through their latest piece of evidence over and over and over… Why? Because something was bugging him… The last time a fellow investigator said something like that in front of him Nick had gently suggested that it was time to take that trip to the lake they’d been talking about for the past year.

Despite his inner chastising he reached out and pressed the play button on the machine yet again, after almost three hours of repeating the tape it was due more to muscle memory than any desire to listen to Eddie Winter’s smug, slightly gravelly voice for the thousandth time…

“As Message to Johnny Montrano… Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. You fat, lazy piece of shit. I knew, I KNEW this arrangement was too good to be true. Let’s join forces with the North End! Bury the hatchet, work mutually against a common enemy! Well you put the nail in that coffin, huh boy-o? What did you have to do Johnny? Huh? What was your job? Sit in your car, on the corner. Keep your eyes open. If you see a uniform, you get out, walk down the street, knock on the door, and let the fellas know there’s trouble coming. Easy as pie, right? I coulda got a nine-year-old from the projects to do it. But no. In the interest of Irish/Italian relations, I give the job to you. So what happens? Nothing. Nothing happens. You sit on your fat ass dribbling cannoli cream onto your third chin. You watch. You WATCH the uniform blow months of planning, all in two minutes. Congratulations, Johnny. You got me. You and your pals sure put the screws to old Eddie Winter. You should tell this funny story to your little girl, when you tuck her in at night. In that corner bedroom, upstairs, pink wallpaper, little house on Prince Street. Ha ha… Eddie Winter, signing off”

As the recording ended with a soft click Nick swiped a hand across his face and pressed his thumb and forefinger into the corners of his closed eyes in a futile attempt to banish the headache gradually blooming there. Just as he suspected, the latest play-through yielded nothing more than what was already dictated. And just as he suspected, something undefinable about the message still continued to niggle at the back of his brain, steadily driving him crazy.

He pressed the eject button on the console and conceded that Nora was probably right… he shouldn’t be so surprised, she was always right when it came to things like this.

Today marked the second day he’d spent an inordinate amount of time over-analyzing the holotape in front of him. At the end of the first day he’d returned home and bounced ideas off his shrewd lawyer wife as they carefully assembled a chest of drawers for the nursery together, it’d become something of a family activity… do the chores, furnish the baby’s room and discuss the gritty, grisly details of Boston’s criminal underground. Nora had proven invaluable time-and-time again whenever he was stuck on something, and she seemed to relish the opportunity to mull over his cases… the assignments at her new job weren’t nearly as exciting as what she’d become used to at the district attorney’s office after all.
Her most recent speculation regarding his fixation with the latest Eddie Winter recording was that Nick’s fatherly instincts were beginning to kick in… causing him to empathize with the little Montrano girl, whose dad had been officially reported missing a week earlier. Even if Johnny was a fat, moronic criminal scumbag to the rest of the world his kid must still be going through hell wondering when her daddy was coming home.

Regardless, he clearly wasn’t going to find anything else of use by wearing out a key piece of recorded evidence, no matter how much it made his brain itch. The detective pocketed the yellow rectangle before vacating the basement room in search of a new angle… and maybe a fresh cup of coffee.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, Nora Valentine pressed her fist into the small of her back in an effort to dispel the near-constant ache she suffered from now, and begrudgingly admitted to herself that just maybe she had a tiny bit of “pregnancy brain”… or so her father called it.

Why else, on her day off, would she be standing in an unfamiliar neighborhood located halfway between her apartment and her workplace? Because she’d been trying to be a good wife…

After leafing through the stack of folders that Nick had forgotten to take with him she realized that if they didn’t get back to the precinct before someone else went looking for them then her husband could get into a lot of trouble. So she’d loaded them into her work satchel and headed for the local train station… only for her to zone out and automatically board the train that took her to work instead of the line that went through Cambridge. She’d only noticed her mistake when the trip terminated prematurely at Andrew Station due to an accident at a nearby construction site.

It was thanks to the same accident that she was now forced to seek out a payphone and call for her dad to come and rescue her… both the route home again and the Cambridge line had been halted for the time being, and she hadn’t seen a taxi as of yet… they were starting to become rarer as the price of fuel continued to rise.

Nora huffed to herself in annoyance, shifting her heavy bag from one stiff shoulder to the other as she finally spied a public phone in front of a diner… her father was never going to let her forget this… he’d be regaling his clients ten years from now with the tale of how he’d had to collect his full-grown daughter, with her hormone-addled brain, from a strange neighborhood after weeks of steadfast insistence that she was as sharp as she’d always been.

She thought briefly of calling Nick instead as she picked up the receiver, but in all honesty, she’d rather keep this little mental meltdown a secret from him. Her dad would laugh it up for a few days at the most… but her husband would fret and watch her like a hawk until the baby arrived.

After feeding the machine a few pieces of change, and exchanging pleasantries with her father’s secretary, she found herself biting the insides of her cheeks as Franklin Fitzsimons gleefully mocked her from the other end of the line… it didn’t seem polite (or particularly smart) to snap at the person helping her out of a pickle.

“Okay, I’ll be there soon” he finally agreed after getting the last of his chuckles out. “Get us a table in that diner, I haven’t had lunch yet. Do you think they serve meatball subs?”

Nora glanced over her shoulder and scanned the prominent signage of Joe’s Spuckies sandwich shop
It was almost an hour later, seated in one of the bright red booths of Joe’s Spuckies, when Nora started to mentally revise her policy on getting angry with people she needed help from, her blasted father had absolutely zero boundaries.

Though it was comforting to know she wasn’t the only one who missed working on assignments with actual criminals… the majority of cases that Fitzsimons & Stone dealt with generally boiled down to petty squabbles between rival companies and the occasional rich couple getting a divorce.

“Hah! Look at this” Frank laughed, pointing at a line of text in the folder he was currently perusing. “This guy tried to rob a jewelry store with a bag on his head, right? But he tied it too tight and passed out from suffocation halfway through! The cops had to carry him outta there!”

“Give me that!” Nora snapped, lunging forward to grab the stolen police document, only to fail when her reach was impeded by her baby-belly pressing against the edge of the table.

“Do you really think Winter would recruit idiots like these?” he asked, completely unconcerned with his daughter’s mounting irritation.

“Somehow I don’t think they’re the ones in charge of planning the heists” she hissed through her teeth. “Now give me the goddamn folders! You’re not even supposed to know about those!”

“Neither are you, honey” he retorted with a raised brow.

She deserved that, Nora mused with a frown. It served her right for thinking that her dad would stay out of her bag while she went to the bathroom.

Huffing as she sat back in her seat she began rubbing circles against her stomach in the dim hope that the repetitive motion would aid digestion, calm the baby and maybe put an end to the volley of blows being dealt to her liver.

It was hard to tell if the little one was happy or upset with whatever she ate… usually with the grace and enthusiasm of an overpowered wood-chipper, thanks to her increased appetite. The baby kicked her almost constantly now… when she ate… when she worked… and especially when she tried to sleep. Her child seemed to operate entirely on the occasional three-minute cat nap and a steady supply of Fancy Lads snack cakes…

Huh… maybe that was the problem. Their unborn son or daughter was a sugar fiend of the highest order. If she hadn’t gotten pregnant Nora might have never discovered that it was possible to crave something and hate it at the same time. She made a mental note to ask her doctor about healthier substitutes during her next check-up… then lowered her hopes when she remembered that he’d changed his mind about her due date four times so far.

Her chain of thought was broken by a snort of laughter from her father, who’d moved on to another criminal’s biography, and she shot him a disapproving glare… which failed to quell Frank’s amusement, but succeeded in teasing a smirk and a nod from the gentleman seated in the booth next to theirs…
The gesture seemed oddly familiar.

While her dad continued to leaf through the stack of classified documents Nora wracked her brain trying to remember where she’d seen the mystery diner patron before, stealing glances whenever he looked out of the window or busied himself with his food. A former client from the DA’s office perhaps? No… more recent than that. Though she was certain she’d remember a mustache that hideous.

Before she could tease the answer from the archives of her memory the mystery diner suddenly threw back the last of his drink in one long gulp and slammed a handful of notes and coins on the table… nearly ripping the sleeve of his jacket as he struggled into it on his way to the door.

*Well that was weird,* she thought to herself as she watched him pick up the receiver of the payphone she’d used earlier through the window.

Nora’s heart then shuddered in her chest… astonishment tinted with fear seizing her in a full body bind upon recognizing the two men heading for the entrance of the sandwich shop. She lowered her voice and leaned forward in her seat as far as she was physically capable of with her bulging stomach, addressing her father with a forced air of calm.

“Dad, I need you to pass me the folders… and please don’t turn around”

He looked up at her with an impish grin, assuming that her seriousness was part of a setup for a joke, but searched her face and finally obeyed… sliding his current reading material across the table and asking in a low murmur;

“Why?”

The expectant mother downgraded to a whisper as the bell above the door to the diner rang out;

“Because Eddie Winter just walked in”

“Come with me!” Donny snapped as he seemed to inexplicably materialize next to Nick Valentine’s left shoulder, triggering a startled jump from the lead detective as his concentration was broken.

Apparently his partner expected an instantaneous reaction, because he scowled and lost his patience after a mere two seconds and began dragging the lead detective away from the cluttered case board by the collar of his shirt.

“What the hell?!” Nick snapped, wrenching himself free before the taut fabric could choke him, collecting himself and jogging to catch up with the testy man wearing his work-friend’s face. “You gonna tell me what’s going on or are we playing twenty questions in the car?”

“Williamson just phoned in” Donny explained tersely as they descended the stairs to the motor pool. “He was stakin’ out that little sandwich joint of Winter’s when the head honcho himself shows up… with Arthur fuckin’ Black in tow!”

A small wave of nausea rolled unpleasantly through Nick’s stomach and he palmed the holster hidden beneath his coat… reassuring himself that he *did,* in fact, have a working firearm. Arthur Black was deranged psychopath, a mad dog with barely contained blood-lust and a talent for evading
jail-time… and Eddie Winter held the leash. Nothing good ever happened when the two appeared in public together.

“Has anything happened yet?” he asked, while Donny grabbed a set of keys for the nearest patrol car. “Or is this an extraction run?”

“We’re pickin’ up Williamson, hopefully that’ll be it… but Nick…” the ginger man trailed off and turned to fix him with look of immense sobriety before finishing his sentence… adding further to the apprehension he experienced whenever the informal ‘Nicky’ was substituted with ‘Nick’;

“Nora’s there”

She tried her hardest to keep a straight face and pretend that she wasn’t eavesdropping…

eavesdropping was the last thing Nora Valentine wanted to do in that moment, but what else could she do when two infamously violent mobsters were loitering near the only exit?

After more than five minutes of exchanging light small talk (heavily veiled in dark threats) with a jittery diner employee, the conversation finally shifted just as she was considering a new course of action if the criminals continued to block the door.

“So, uh… what brings you here today, Mister Winter sir?”

“I think you know, kid. Where’s Joey?”

“Oh… he, uh, stepped out a little while ago. Said he’d be back soon though”

“Don’t hold your breath waiting. Fucking typical. Shit hits the fan and Joey pulls a disappearing act. Just give me the keys so I can see how much this accident is gonna set me back”

Nora forced herself into finishing off the cold dregs of her tea with averted eyes as the crime lord finally walked past their booth and towards the back of the sandwich shop, Arthur Black following at his heels faithfully.

After a few seconds Frank rose in order to pay their bill at the front counter, stone-faced and visibly tense beneath his favorite tweed blazer… and she began the arduous task of easing herself free from the booth with her rounded middle impeding her movements.

As she braced herself with one hand against the edge of the table she suddenly found herself pulled into a standing position… a rough hand at her elbow and gravelly voice near her ear;

“Allow me, ma’am” Eddie Winter intoned with practiced charm, and Nora shot back a polite smile which she hoped-beyond-hoped didn’t look too forced as he leaned over and collected her satchel for her.

“Thank you” she replied as he handed over the heavy bag, and tried not to dwell on the tiny accidental slip of her tone… he mustn’t have noticed anything off, because he retreated to the back of the diner without another word, and Nora made a beeline for the door… silently praying that her father was right behind her.

That hadn’t been the case… and she spent what felt like two endless hours nervously shifting her
weight from foot to foot on the pavement outside Joe’s Spuckies waiting for him, despite her silver wrist-watch plainly stating that it had only been two minutes. She wasn’t sure if she could hear actual sirens in the distance or if her brain was merely trying to provide an appropriate soundtrack to go along with her anxiety.

Nora was digging her knuckles into the knot of pain throbbing against the small of her back when Frank eventually reappeared, several shades paler than he’d been earlier. He apologized in a mumble with a hand on her shoulder after reading the raw relief she was likely displaying across her face;

“Sorry… he tried to talk to me. Said he recognized me from somewhere, I couldn’t get away”

“It’s fine” Nora replied with a sigh of relief. “Maybe you went to the same charity function at one point?”

“Yeah, that’s what I told him. I think maybe--”

The rest of her father’s sentence was abruptly cut off by a loud explosion and a shrill ringing in her ears… a blinding, white hot agony lancing through her lower back, choking her and knocking the air from her lungs as her knees buckled beneath her.

She succeeded in staying on her feet for a few more dizzying seconds as she instinctively grasped at the site of the pain… pulling her hand away in confusion when she realized the back of her dress was warm and wet.

The last few things Nora dimly registered before happily allowing a dark spinning abyss to wash over her was the pale face of her father… the feel of his arms struggling to pull her up as her legs failed her… and the far away sound of Nick calling out to her.

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