

Chapter One

Nathan Chisholm watched through the smudged window of the Philadelphia commuter train as the landscape and unattractive brick apartment buildings sped by. He scanned the scenery for the familiar sign where he'd get out, even though the conductor always called the stop. Early evening clouds huddled in the sky in gray streaks as he joined the slow-moving throng through the station and out onto the street of his familiar suburb.

After a necessary stop at the grocery store with other exhausted shoppers, he arrived at his townhouse. Before he could unlock the door, the phone in his pocket rang. His arms were full, so he couldn't grab it. Maybe it was his best friend, Ben, who lived in Brenner Falls, the town where Nathan had grown up. He let it go to voicemail while he unpacked the plastic bags of food and preheated the oven.

He hadn't had time to do a single errand the previous weekend, thanks to overtime. Though he shunned the breaded chicken nuggets, cook-and-serve buffalo wings, and frozen pizza other harried employees ate, he *had* succumbed to frozen mac and cheese. He never thought his dietary habits would deteriorate so much, but over the previous five months, he'd indulged in that and worse. Even ordering takeout was no longer a rare event.

Back in the early days of his marketing job in Philadelphia, his first real job out of college, he'd committed to cooking for himself to unwind after work and stay healthy. He enjoyed trying new recipes and assuring the nutrition of what he ate. He used to invite friends and cook for them too. The same friends he hadn't seen in months. One of many activities he no longer had time for. What had his life become?

His schedule would lighten up in a week or two. At least that's what his manager, Jeremy, said regularly. Relief was in sight, with the completion of the advertising campaign for their biggest client. After that would be maintenance, which was its own load, but more predictable. Less crushing.

He headed to the bedroom and slipped on some sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt he found on the floor. The room was a mess, another violation of his personal standard. Never leave the bed unmade. His mother had drilled that habit into him, and it made up part of his daily code. Until recently. His mom had given him a multitude of good habits, which were more useful to him than the material excesses she'd been unable to provide as a single mom. Those years of living on a tight budget, doing without, and putting on blinders to what other kids could buy or do. Seemed so far away now. He could buy what he needed and most of what he wanted. He'd worked hard and changed his life, leaving the cloud of fatherless shame behind.

He'd call his mom after dinner but would first check to see who'd called. The darkened screen of his phone brightened. His mom had been the caller but hadn't left a message. Unusual. Anxiety sprang up inside him. He tapped her number.

"Hey, Mom. It's me. Just got home. I was going to call you tonight."

"Nathan. . ."

Not *hi sweetheart*, as she usually responded. Instead, her voice broke, and she began to cry. Nathan sank onto the couch. “What is it, Mom? What happened?”

“It’s your Uncle Andy. He took a bad turn last week and went downhill so fast. I was going to call you sooner, but thought he’d rally. I’m sorry I didn’t call.” A sob caught in her throat.

“Is he okay?” A lead weight fell inside Nathan’s stomach as he steeled himself for her response. Uncle Andy had been struggling for nearly two years with heart disease. The previous year, he’d cut back the hours he spent at Seasons, the dinner theater he owned, and had made a few other changes in his lifestyle. Despite his efforts, the disease continued to pursue him.

“No, he. . . he died this morning.”

An invisible fist grabbed Nathan’s throat and tears stung his eyes. “Died?” He’d heard her wrong, must have. “No, no!” Not Uncle Andy, who’d been like a father to him as he grew up. He struggled to breathe. A stab of guilt followed. He’d made trips home less often during the craziness of the last few months at work.

The last time he’d visited Brenner Falls, Uncle Andy had been pale and fatigued. He’d put on more weight and coughed frequently, but assured Nathan he was doing better and would beat the disease. He’d taken Nathan to lunch at Seasons as if he missed it. Nathan preferred going somewhere else but had indulged the older man. He’d called him a week earlier and Andy seemed to be holding on. But one never knew since Andy often minimized his suffering. “Oh, there are worse things,” he would say, then turn the conversation to the other person.

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I’m so—” A sob sliced off the word in his throat. He and his mother cried softly for a moment.

“He was scheduled for hospice care, but never made it. He died at home.” She stopped and blew her nose. “He slept a lot in the end, so I don’t think he suffered too much.”

Nathan swiped his wrist across his eyes. He stood to grab a napkin from the table where the box of macaroni still sat. “I’m glad he didn’t suffer. I just wish I’d been able to talk to him or to see him one last time.”

How could Nathan have missed the gravity of Uncle Andy’s condition, the signs of the end? He might have known if he hadn’t been enslaved to his deadlines, wrapped up completely in his own world. A world which had sparkled at the beginning, but quickly became a golden cage. Nathan’s beloved Uncle Andy slipped away while Nathan was busy pushing marketing deadlines. How pointless it all seemed when he’d lost the one who taught him how to be a man.

They’d almost lost him twice before in the last two years. Andy hadn’t complained. He merely said the Lord had given him more time.

“His service will be next Saturday. You can make it, can’t you?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll take an extra day or so. They owe me that with the amount of overtime I’m working.”

“Good. I need to see my boy.” Her voice wavered. “I need you, Nathan.”

He needed to see her too. Suddenly, the longing to see his mother, to remind himself that he still had family, still had love and connection, crushed him from the inside. The pale walls of his townhouse only reminded him how alone he felt in that sterile place where he slept but did little else.

Fresh tears moistened his cheeks. “I’ll be there, Mom. Don’t worry. I should have been there for him before he was gone. I wish I had.” Oh, how he wished he’d been there to hold Andy’s hand as he slipped into eternity, to thank him for his love, for everything he’d done all Nathan’s life. He would certainly be there for him now.

Though it was too late.



Leah Albright slipped her arms into her cotton cardigan and slung her purse over one shoulder. Another long work week was at last finished, which flicked her drowsiness aside. Not that the weekend was an adventure waiting to happen. It was simply better than being at Smith-Fellows Insurance Company.

After arranging loose papers and to-do projects on her desk, she pushed in her chair and smiled at her colleague, Jenny, at the next desk. “See you Monday.”

Petite Jenny peered over her round, dark-rimmed glasses. “You always look a little happier when you say goodbye on Friday than on any other day. I’m very astute. I notice these things.” She let out a hearty giggle.

“You are *very* perceptive, Jenny. You should have been a detective.”

“Ah, but the money’s better here. Now you *know* I’m lying. I’ll be right behind you after I finish this one thing. Do something *fun* tonight, Leah.” Her voice became emphatic.

“Hmm. Wonder what *that* would look like. Something fun.” Leah cocked her head in exaggerated pondering. “Dear Jenny, help me understand what you mean.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Oh, Leah. You’re pathetic! A date? Girls’ night out? Streaking through downtown? I don’t know. Be creative.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out. You do something fun too, okay? And don’t stay too late.” Leah patted Jenny’s shoulder as she passed her desk, then headed for the stairs.

Fat chance she’d do something fun. Laundry maybe. Ah, yes. She’d practice her flute. That was fun. Then she’d curl up with a book, Theo purring beside her. The previous evening, while she played a Chopin nocturn on her violin, Theo had closed his eyes, his whiskers twitching, as if mesmerized. Until she hit a bad note. His eyes had shot open, and he’d darted from the room.

She let out a chuckle at the memory as she took the steps two at a time and left the building. Living within walking distance from her job had its benefits. The six-block walk home was a favorite part of her day after sitting for hours, though in winter she bundled up like a mummy and often resorted to driving.

The day had ground on for what seemed like forever. Over the last six or eight months, her restlessness had become chronic. Her position at the company, like a stagnant pool, held little interest, little change, and little hope for either. But she still had a job. *That* was something, wasn’t it? She wasn’t hungry, out of work, or on her last ten dollars.

She turned to Market Street, across from City Hall. On the opposite corner sat Seasons, a historic dinner theater and landmark. Built in the forties, it stood like a proud society woman whose former beauty one could still imagine. A teal and brown Victorian style façade stretched across the front, with vertical spindles along the wrap-around porch. The back of the building squared into a more utilitarian space to accommodate the stage and the dining room.

Throughout the year, Seasons held periodic plays and musicals, whereas the restaurant was open all year. When she was a child, Leah and her family had looked forward to attending the annual Christmas show there. Several times, her dad even played a minor role in the chorus. And he’d been the one who’d painted the murals, one for each season, used as a backdrop for the stage

between events. In high school, she'd had the chance to sing and play instruments for a couple of the events too.

Leah could still envision her family gathered around a table encircled with sparkling holiday décor, so magical to her child's eyes. Seasons had made a deep imprint on her early life, though it could still evoke a wave of nostalgia and pain as she thought of Dad. He'd died just before Christmas ten years earlier. And each Christmas brought an empty ache she tried to chase away with fake cheer.

A humorless chuckle erupted from her throat. Fake cheer was better than none, and usually ended up ushering in a portion of the real thing.

The late summer breeze licked her face and playfully ruffled her hair. She passed Warren Street, where lights still flickered in a row of three to five-story office buildings. Town residents teasingly called Warren Street the *business district*. Though the small town of Brenner Falls was hardly New York, it *was* growing as people discovered the rolling hills and sporting opportunities along a nearby branch of the Susquehanna River.

The new mayor who'd arrived two years earlier had promoted the town with numerous projects, and she saw the fruit of his efforts on every street. New restaurants, shops, and housing appeared. The principal streets and intersections now sported potted plants and flowers. Historic buildings got facelifts. In other words, the town was edging into the twenty-first century.

From the corner of Davis Avenue, she could see Johnson's Grocery Store, whose fluorescent lights spilled on to the sidewalk. Should she stop for groceries, or could she eke out the stale bread and bottled pasta sauce in her fridge for a day or two more? The seductive call of her warm slippers, or the rebuke of her empty fridge? Yesterday *and* the day before that, she'd opted for making do. Her stomach grumbled, so with a sigh, she changed her path and headed toward the store. This shouldn't take long.

Gathering the items on her short list was as quick as she'd predicted, but the line at the cash register was not. She smiled at a few people she knew. Her neighbor, Cathy. Mr. Robertson from church. While she waited, she pulled her phone from her bag to see what she'd missed during the final pressured hours of work.

Leah frowned. Four missed calls from Garrett, her only brother, three years her senior. The one who never called. Ever. But he'd called four times that day.

Unlikely that he'd called to say hello and he missed her. That would never happen. Their mother had moved to Delaware a few years earlier to live near her sister, Aunt Lindsay. If something were wrong with Mom, Leah would know it since she kept in touch regularly. And Garrett didn't.

As much as she craved getting into her slippers and sweats first thing after arriving home, she'd give him a call first. Hopefully, nothing was wrong. After that, she'd scrape together some dinner from the meager provisions she'd just purchased, and call her best friend Abbie, who lived a few doors down. *Then* she'd finally curl up in the armchair with Theo and sink into the novel she'd gotten from the library a few days earlier.

Leah picked up the pace as the house came into view. She could already feel the slippers cradling her feet, though Garrett's calls were still nagging at her. They weren't close, but he was her brother. She fumbled in her purse to grab her phone.

As she approached the rambling 1980s ranch house where she'd grown up, she spied someone sitting on the porch in one of the Adirondack chairs. The streetlamp hadn't yet turned on and

shadows filled the space around the front door. Tension skipped down her spine as she squinted to see who it was. Couldn't be someone delivering a package. She hadn't ordered anything.

When she was about thirty feet from the covered porch, she recognized the intruder by his slouch and the thatch of unruly hair hanging in his eyes.

"Garrett! What are you doing here?"

He pulled himself up, his lanky frame topping her height by a foot. "Hello to you too, sis."

"I'm. . . I'm surprised, is all."

"You wouldn't be if you'd answered your phone today. Did you see I called a few times?"

There was an edge to his voice. As if she had deliberately ignored him. Which she might have, had she seen his call sooner. She waved her phone at him. "Yes, I saw your missed calls while I was in the grocery store. I was about to call you back. Did you leave a message? I didn't have time to check. You see, I work *full time*." The rebuke in her voice matched his own. "Did something happen?" *Why are you here?*

"I didn't leave a message. I wanted to talk to you in person."

Her mouth fell open and tension gripped her stomach. "Why, what's wrong? Garrett, tell me."

"Let's go inside first. It's getting cool out here."

Leah fumbled with the lock and pushed open the door. As she entered the darkened entry, Theo rubbed against her ankles and his loud purr rose to her ears. "Hey, buddy. It's good to see you too." She flipped on the lights and plopped her tote bag and purse on the bench of the upright piano against the wall.

She turned to Garrett. "Make yourself comfortable." Sounded strange to her ears, since he'd grown up in that house too. She'd moved back into the family home two years earlier, but lived alone, since Garrett worked in Pittsburgh in a tech firm. She noticed a suitcase sitting near the front door. Uh oh.

She slid out of her coat and sat in an armchair facing him. "What is it, Garrett? I'm sure I would have heard if something happened to Mom."

He shrugged from where he sat on the couch. "Probably so."

"Well, what's up then? Spill it."

The muscles of his tightened jaw seemed to crumble. He propped his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands.

"Garrett!" Leah straightened her shoulders. "What is it? What's wrong?" Her mind scrambled for horrible events, a terminal illness, a death threat, or worse.

He looked at her, misery twisting his face. "I got fired yesterday."

"What? You got fired?" Impossible. Her genius programmer brother, fired? "What in the world happened?"

"Well, um." Garrett took a breath. "Work has been light lately, so in my free time, I work on my own projects. I've been developing a game."

"On work time?" She toed off her shoes and tucked her feet under her.

"Only when I don't have something else to do. Or during lunch and most evenings. It's almost ready for testing."

"That's. . . good, I guess. I mean, that you're creating something like that."

"So, a few times, my manager saw me working on it. I told him I'd finished with my project, but I think he had it in for me. So, he fired me. I think they were looking for a reason to let some of us go. Last week, my buddy Quinn got let go for something minor."

"I didn't think that would ever happen to you." Garrett didn't have the best interpersonal skills, but he could code or develop pretty much anything.

"Maybe I should have asked first if it was okay for me to do it on work time, but they've always been cool about stuff like that. Like I said, they're looking for reasons to scale down."

"You'll find something else. You have a lot of skills." No doubt about that. But is that what brought him back to Brenner Falls from Pittsburgh? He hadn't even visited since last Christmas.

"Did you lose your apartment? Wait, you said it just happened yesterday. Garrett, I'm confused." *Why are you here?*

Garrett frowned. "There's another thing. Ginny broke up with me last week." His voice broke. He stared at the floor.

"Oh, no! Are you okay?"

When he didn't respond, an ache for him rose inside her. "I'm so sorry, Garrett. You guys were together so long. I liked her. Sort of. I thought there might be wedding bells soon."

"No wedding bells. Everything happened at the same time. Feels like too much." His voice had faded to a muffled blur as he turned his head to stare out the side window. "Gin said. . . well, never mind what she said. I had to get away. I wanted to see if you minded if I came for a little while."

"That's why you were calling today?" She gentled her voice.

"Obviously, I didn't wait for an answer. Just drove here this afternoon."

Leah nodded into the silence. "Um, yes, of course you can stay for a little while. It's your home too."

No, no! They had such different lifestyles. But she couldn't say no, not after what had happened. "Do you know. . . do you know for how long?"

"No. I need to clear my head. I'm going to let my apartment go. I'm just month-to-month right now."

Alarm shot through Leah. "You're letting it go? Isn't that extreme? You'll find something quickly. I'm sure of it. You have a lot of skills, Garrett."

That meant an open-ended houseguest. But she *liked* her privacy. Sometimes she even liked her solitude. Along with that, she and her brother had never gotten along.

"I need a break. Being here'll do me good, I'm pretty sure."

"It's just that we've never lived together, um, successfully before."

Garrett shrugged. "We're older now. We'll work it out. Anyway, it's only for a little while. I'll stay out of your hair, don't worry."

Leah swallowed. Her eyes panned her nest, one she'd decorated herself with cheerful reds and yellows, handmade throw pillows, a few unique finds from the flea market, and a shaggy, colorful rug to unify it all. The house her mother had insisted she live in after she moved away.

It was her mother's house, and Leah had no right to refuse to let Garrett stay. That was the other reason she couldn't say no. He was family, even though he didn't always act like it. Most of the time she felt like she had no family at all. She was lonely at times, but it had always been easier to stay at the house by herself. Especially after Michael.

"Of course, you can stay." Only for a bit.

Oh, boy. The moment she feared her life would forever stagnate, that didn't sound half bad.

