

The Substitute Wife

By

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Chapter I

Roar, you got your ears on? She texted to him.

Nothing.

It was starting to come down like it meant it. The forecast was for frigid temps and upwards of twenty inches of snow for these parts. She'd driven by their place and all the lights were out. That meant he was in the mountains so he'd get even more. He was all alone, in the cabin where they'd spent their most intimate moments, on the anniversary of her death.

That could *not* be a good thing.

Andi sighed. If only he would answer her damned texts so she at least knew he was *alive*.

Well, there was nothing for it. She stopped by Billy's Get Gas and made sure she had a full tank. It was Vermont in winter, and it was already a sure thing that she had brought fresh water with her, had emergency blankets in the glove box, a backpack hanging off one of the back seats with rations and a first aid kit, a small shovel, kitty litter, and a working, charged cell phone before her keister hit the driver's seat during the winter. It was nothing to play with. She had good, studded snow tires, but no four-wheel drive, and the minivan she'd bought because it was good for deliveries wasn't the best in snow. However, she'd grown up driving in the stuff so she figured she'd be okay.

If only she'd been able to get out of work on time instead of ending up being late again, she might have been able to get to his place and stop him from going there in the first place just to wallow in his own misery.

Yeah, right.

Like all of her five foot two, hundred and ten pound status could have stopped all six foot four, two hundred and whatever pounds of him. It would be like a mosquito trying to stop a tsunami. If he wanted to go somewhere, nothing she could do would stop him. Perhaps something she might say would do the trick, but she couldn't lay a finger on him physically.

At least, she knew she better hadn't.

She'd been assiduously avoiding doing exactly that for the past eleven years and she wasn't going to stop now. Having him give her the requisite social hugs was bad enough and something she'd come to dread so much that she only ever allowed him to give her the briefest of side hugs any more, and had almost weaned him from that.

He must've thought she was so standoffish. Or stuck up or had a touch phobia or something, although he never pressed her about it or made any kind of comment, as some men would have. He was much too polite and too nice a guy to do that. She'd had her objections overridden plenty by men who just thought she was being shy or something, but Rory had always been scrupulously adherent to her boundaries.

She wondered if he'd ever asked Liz about her.

Nope. Not going to go there. That path would just lead to more heartache, and she'd already had it by the bucketful, being in love with her best friend's husband for... well, for as long as she could remember. From the moment Liz had introduced him to her when they were sophomores at Groovy UV, the University of Vermont in the closest thing Vermont had to a city, Burlington, and she had met those beautiful green eyes of his, wanting to melt into them as her small hand was engulfed in his, squeezed very gently, pumped twice then let go, Andrea Maurer lost her heart—and parts south of that—to Rory McClean.

But she hid it, and hid it well.

So well that, over the course of the next decade, she and her best friend had had several conversations that started with Liz saying, "You know, Rory still thinks you don't like him very much..."

Since Rory was nothing but disgustingly polite to her, almost to the point of being Victorian about it, she was able to poo-poo it and get Liz, who didn't much want to deal with that mess of a conflict even if it did exist, to drop the subject.

But it always reared its ugly head again, usually after she'd spent any amount of time in his company.

So, for the sake of both of their sanity, she endeavored to spend as little time around him as she could. There were, of course, points at which that couldn't be avoided including holidays or celebrations throughout the year, their annual Christmas party and Liz's birthday party. He always went out of his way to make sure that her birthday was something special, and usually tried to include her friends on the surprise.

Since she was Liz's closest friend, that meant time spent with Rory. It also meant it was time for her to buy new underwear since hers melted just sitting across from him in a public diner where everyone knew them, and there was zero chance of anything untoward happening between them.

Not that she wanted that to happen.

Not that she spent nights thinking about what it must be like to be Liz, to have a big man like that love her in every way. Not just sexually, but then, of course, the sex was usually what she zeroed in on when she was falling asleep.

Liz, who had a distinct tendency to over-share, which was both a blessing and a burden to Andi, had flat out told her that Rory allowed very few nights to go by when he *didn't* make love to her, and that he was some kind of amazing lover that took her places she'd never been—and that was saying something. Liz was much more sexually adventurous than Andi had been anywhere but in her fantasies, and he must've been something to have made such an impression on her.

Her friend's tidbits about her sex life with her husband certainly made an impression on Andi. Andi thought that Liz liked saying things like that to her, because Andi was so much more repressed and shy, and she liked making her blush.

She'd even gone so far as to intimate something that she would have been surprised to know that Andi had already intuited accurately, that Rory was quite dominant, in and out of the bedroom. She, with her limited, fumbling, unsatisfactory experiences with men, had somehow known he'd be like that.

Not a caveman in any way. Although, if that was what his partner wanted, he would certainly be able to rise to the challenge. No, he was a gentle giant, aware of his size and strength, with intelligent eyes and a warm smile. He made Andi feel instantly safe, as if he wouldn't let anything bad happen to her while he was around, which was patently absurd since she wasn't his wife or his obligation in any way.

But the feeling lingered anyway. And he did extend some of the loving protectiveness he always surrounded Liz with to her, without her ever asking. He made sure she stayed over if the roads were bad or driving her home if he thought she had overindulged, making sure that he and Liz dropped her car off for her in the morning before she woke up.

But it never went too far; he never, ever tried to put his foot down with her, especially not the way she came to know—involuntarily voluntarily—he did with Liz.

She remembered, word for word, look for look, every single nuance of the first conversation they'd had not long after the two of them had gotten married about that particular aspect of her best friend's love life with her husband. She also remembered every intimate detail about any of the subsequent conversations that wandered into that very titillating subject, too although Andi very carefully never steered it in that direction, and did her best to be blasé or even a little unhappy that he would be like that with her.

Liz, on the other hand, seemed to love it.

Andi knew she would have, too.

"He spanked me last night," Liz had whispered over the basket of onion strings they were sharing in one of the back booths at Gill's Grille on their usual Thursday night get together.

Andi's eyes had gone round and she'd swallowed hard, hoping Liz didn't notice how she shifted in her seat. "He *what*?" She let just the slightest tinge of dismay tinge her voice.

"He spanked me," she whispered again, leaning even further over the table towards Andi, who also leaned in, and then she noticed that, when Liz sat back down, she did so a bit gingerly.

"Are you okay? Do you need me to call the police?" Okay, that reaction might have been a bit overboard. There was no doubt in Andi's mind and she sure no doubt existed for Liz as well, that despite the obvious distressed condition of her bottom, Rory loved his wife and would never do anything that smacked of abuse nor would he ever harm her in any way shape or form. But, she did think it would be highly improper for her to grab her friend's lapels, shake her and wheeze, "Tell me everything!"

Liz snorted. "No, of course not! We talked about it a lot. He's very old-fashioned, you know? All of those gentlemanly manners of his have to come from somewhere. He's a bit of a throwback, I'll admit, but you know him. He's not got a mean bone in his body. Well, as long as no one messes with anyone he loves."

"What did you do that made him think he could do that?" she asked, still trying to keep a tone of mild outrage while trying not to appear too eager to catch every single word of what her friend was about to say.

"I told him he could. I consented to it before we got married, and he still didn't do anything. So I kind of... goosed him a bit." She gave Andi a big wink.

"Do you have a death wish or what?"

"Please. This is Rory. He would *never* really hurt me."

The conviction with which Liz said those words made Andi's heart squeeze painfully in her chest, and she wondered if she should ask Liz to stop right then and there.

But, although she knew it was just going to be that much more torment, she couldn't bring herself to do that. She wanted to know too much, despite the anguish it caused her soul, knowing that she would never have that with him.

"I deliberately wrote a bad check for something I didn't really need at his father's store."

"Oh. My. God. It's a wonder you're alive!" Rory was the undisputed comptroller in their relationship. They were newlyweds, both working full time at their careers, and they had set a goal of buying a house of their own and moving out of their little apartment within the next five years, and he was very carefully moving them towards having the necessary down payment to achieve that goal. Money was, understandably tight, but he had everything balanced down to the penny, and they each had to stick to bagged lunches and eating at home rather than going out for dinners. As long as they both stuck by the budget, they'd be fine, but any little bump like that—"Jeez, you really gave him a big push, didn't you?"

Liz blushed. "Well, I kept doing smaller things, but he never made a move about them. He'd scold me a bit, but I wanted to see what he'd do."

"Yeah, but at Rafe's store? That took some balls right there!"

"Yeah," her friend had admitted, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. "I might have overdone it a bit, but I'm fine."

Andi gave her a jaundiced eye. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, God, yes," Liz breathed, and Andi sensed that she was about to hear something really juicy. "He was magnificent. Perfect. Strong and firm and resolute, but still loving and mmm—" she lowered her voice even further, "the sex afterwards was unbelievable! I think I'm still contracting and it's been a day and a half!"

It was memories like that that sustained Andi, pretty much, and about which she had a tremendous amount of guilt. It made her feel like a complete perv to fantasize about one's best friend's husband. Oh, she'd had the occasional relationship here and there, but they weren't Roar, as she had taken to calling him. When he was watching sports, especially football, baseball, or

hockey, he had a tendency to bellow at the television when someone did something that didn't meet with his approval.

Andi knew she was pathetic. She knew she was, in essence, living vicariously through Liz, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. No one she met measured up, frankly, and she wasn't one to settle for second best just so she wouldn't be alone. She was fine by herself.

She really was.

Fine.

Worried.

Fretting about him terribly right now, but fine.

She took the turn-off from what was considered to be a main road and began the climb to where she knew she was going to have to park her car for the walk in to the cabin.

His cell beeped and vibrated insistently where it lay on the kitchen table, but he knew who it was and he wasn't in any kind of a mood to answer it. He'd come here, tonight, specifically to be alone. If he was going to have to relive the worst night of his life, he didn't want any witnesses to see just how stinking drunk he was going to need to get just to get through it.

Especially not *her*.

He'd started drinking in the car on the way up. It was something he would have blistered Liz's behind for doing if he'd ever found out, but his was a big four-wheel drive SUV and barring any tourista idiots who thought they knew how to drive in the snow, he'd get there just fine. And, the alcohol would go a long way towards keeping him warm as he made his way to the cabin itself.

As much as he didn't want to, though, he did go take a look at the text itself, chuckling involuntarily at her use of CB lingo, but not amused enough to respond.

No, he was going to spend this weekend, which promised a true nor'easter blizzard, becoming snowed in, and getting and staying good and drunk, sobbing pitifully, missing her horribly, and not much else.

He had to admit that Andi was pluckier than he thought she'd be once Liz was gone. Liz had always said he'd sold her short, but she'd always been a bit hesitant around him, a bit wary. He could see it in her eyes on the rare occasions that he'd caught her looking at him. Rory had wondered out loud to his wife if it was because she had confided to her about the fact that he disciplined her regularly, whenever he saw fit, if that, perhaps had colored Andi's perceptions of him, but then he knew that wasn't right as soon as the words left his mouth. She'd been that way around him long before he and Liz had begun to explore that aspect of their relationship.

And Liz had agreed with him that that wasn't it, but offered a different hypothesis. "Well, she's really small and you're really big. I mean, I'm five eight and you make me feel small. Maybe your size overwhelms her. She's not that way around other men at *all*."

"No?"

"No. She goes out quite frequently."

"Anyone special?" he found himself asking before he could suppress the urge.

Liz had frowned. "I don't think so. I think she likes playing the field. She's never really settled down with anyone that I know of."

Rory hadn't really considered that, since she was so shy and hesitant around him, and he didn't really want to, either. Nor did he want to think about what popped into his mind next. "Is there abuse in her background?" he found himself asking, almost wishing he hadn't.

"Not that I know of."

Rory sighed heavily in relief that surprised him, but he didn't like to think of the idea that someone might have hurt Andi physically.

"Do you want me to talk to her about it?" Liz offered.

But Rory had just pulled her into his arms. "Nah, I think that'll make it worse. We'll leave it alone. I just wish she seemed more comfortable around her. You don't have any sisters, but I know you consider her one. I'd like her to know that, especially since she's single, she can count on me to do stuff for her. Guy stuff, you know? Whatever might need toting or lifting. She always looks like a stiff wind would blow her over."

Liz had teared up at what he'd said, and he had reassured her that he had meant every word.

And he was quite sure that every word had been dutifully reported to the subject of their discussion, too, not that he really minded. What he minded was that it hadn't changed her attitude

towards him at all, nor had she commenced to leaning on him for anything. Hell, he'd practically had to beg her to let him help her move when she'd bought her first small house, even though he knew a raft of men who all had pickups and they got her moved in a morning for free. Well, for the price of pizza and beer on the other end, rather than her having to pay an exorbitant amount to professional movers.

But she had been a rock for him when Liz had gotten sick. She'd stepped right in and taken care of the both of them. She'd tended to Liz as the sister of her heart that she was, not shirking from doing anything that needed doing, and doing her best to gently bully him into taking care of himself. If she couldn't come by and stay, she brought food over for him and came over during her lunch hour just to visit for a few minutes with Liz when she was too sick to get out of bed.

That didn't even begin to cover how much of a help she had been when the vigil was over, and there were decisions to be made—ones Liz hadn't made herself already—about the wake and the funeral and the flowers and so many things he couldn't even begin to deal with.

She had quietly stepped in to do all of it. She'd rung everything by him first before making the final decision, but not letting him delay things by his highly unusual, if understandable, inability to make a decision.

Once all of that falderal was over, though, she hadn't done just what he expected her to do—what the large majority of their friends had done, and stepped away from him. She gave him adequate space and privacy, but not to the extent some of them had, who had pretty much written him off. She checked in on him fairly regularly, hence the text.

He knew that if he had chosen to stay home tonight, she would have suggested that they do something to take his mind off of what day it was, but he just couldn't bear that idea. She'd be there with him, where she really didn't want to be, doing whatever trumped up thing they had thought of that wasn't going to accomplish shit, and he'd be there, where he didn't really want to be, with her—she who was not his wife.

But she whom he had always, secretly, coveted.

Which only made things just that much worse.

There was no doubt in his mind that he adored Liz. She was outgoing and witty and gregarious and everything he wasn't. And she'd always been fearless of him, taking him at his

word, even in their more intimate and unusual aspects of their relationship, that she was completely safe with him at all times, even if it seemed like she might not be.

He wasn't sure what it was about Andi that piqued his interest. Perhaps the prey drive all men had? She was so much smaller than Liz, seemed much more delicate, and always so somehow distrustful of him, from the very beginning.

He wasn't Fred Astaire although he did have a certain 'big man's grace'. But, he wasn't Frankenstein, either. He had been the biggest kid in the class for most of his school career. His father, who was about the same size he'd grown up to be, had always instilled in him the old-fashioned idea that with his size came a certain responsibility to do what he could to help out those who might benefit from his strength and protection, in particular, those of the fairer sex.

But she had been a particularly persistent and singular flaw in his otherwise perfect relationship with Liz. One, because of their friendship, he was forced to come into regular contact with her, and Andi's constant backing away from him made him constantly want to follow her and hold her still and—

Two more texts came in rapidly, interrupting his unexpected and unwanted train of thought, then three more after that.

About to sigh heavily as he picked up the phone to read them, he stopped immediately once he saw them, shoving his phone into his pocket, donning all of his winter gear and heading out into what was rapidly becoming a white-out situation.