

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

Some things, once they happen, can't be made to unhappen.

MyTropes / RomanceBots

Gate B7

The thing about Denver International Airport at six in the morning was that it had exactly the right quality of light for pretending things weren't happening.

Pale, low, bounced off too much glass. Everyone in transit. No one quite arrived anywhere yet. The perfect liminal space for two people who had no particular business being on the same flight to stand at the same gate holding coffees they'd bought from the same kiosk and agree, with great politeness, that this was a coincidence.

Kara Merritt set her carry-on down next to the row of seats at Gate B7 and checked her phone out of habit. Seven-twelve. Flight boarded at eight. She'd been up since four-thirty, which meant she was running on approximately three hours of sleep and two cups of coffee and the specific anxiety of a woman whose house had not, in seven years of marriage, ever been left entirely alone for five days.

She'd left Ryan a list. Three pages. He'd kissed her on the forehead and told her he'd be fine.

She had written a fourth page and put it on the kitchen counter.

The Hawaii trip had been her sister's idea—Lexi's idea, to be precise, Lexi who planned things two years in advance and sent color-coded itineraries and had, this time, managed to wrangle not just Kara but Kara's parents, their mother's sister Diane, and Diane's two teenage kids into the same hotel in Maui for the first week of March.

Lexi and the kids had left Monday. Today was Wednesday. The delay had been unavoidable—Kara's youngest had been sick, and then Kara herself had been sick, and Ryan had a work event he couldn't miss, and the plan had always been for Kara to travel independently if needed. She'd booked the later flight. Denver to LAX, connection to Kahului.

What she hadn't known until Sunday night was that Scott had booked the same flight.

Scott Callaway. Her brother-in-law. Lexi's husband of nine years, father of their two daughters, owner of an architectural firm that apparently required his physical presence in Denver until Tuesday evening, which explained why he hadn't gone with the family on Monday.

It did not explain why he was now standing six feet away at Gate B7 with his own coffee, looking at his own phone, apparently trying to decide whether to acknowledge her first or wait to be acknowledged.

She made the decision for both of them.

"Scott."

He looked up. He was forty, had the kind of face that had improved considerably with age—the jaw sharpened up, the boyishness redistributed into something more considered. Brown hair with the first suggestions of grey at the temples. He was wearing jeans and a dark jacket and he had the carry-on she'd bought Lexi for their anniversary last year, which made her smile despite herself.

"Hey." His expression did the thing she'd always found vaguely amusing about Scott—it cycled through approximately four emotional states in less than two seconds. Surprise, then relief, then something that might have been wariness, then the easy, familiar smile he'd had since the first time Lexi brought him home for Christmas.

"You're on this flight," she said.

"I'm on this flight," he confirmed. "Lexi didn't tell you?"

"Did Lexi know?"

"I told her Monday. Maybe she forgot." He crossed to the row of seats and put his bag down two seats away from hers—not next to her, not across the aisle, but within the radius of people who had made a decision to be loosely together. "I booked it before I knew you were on it," he added. "For the record."

"Why for the record?"

"Because—" He stopped. Looked at his coffee. "Because I didn't want you to think I was—following you, or something."

Kara laughed. It came out genuine, which surprised her. "Scott. You're my brother-in-law. Why would you be following me?"

He looked up and smiled. "Right. Why would I be." He sat. "How's Ryan?"

"Good. Probably panicking slightly. I left him a list."

"Lexi leaves me lists too."

"Lexi leaves you color-coded documents with tabs."

"Yes." He said it with the tone of a man who had learned, over nine years, to experience this as affection. "That's accurate."

They sat in the particular comfortable semi-silence of people who know each other well enough to not need filler conversation, and Kara drank her coffee and watched the gate agents set up for boarding, and tried not to think about the fact that she and Scott were now going to spend the next three hours side by side on a plane in the middle seats of a row, which she knew because she'd checked the seat map when she'd booked and noticed his name in 24C and she was in 24D.

She had not mentioned this.

He would find out at boarding.

It would be fine. It was completely fine.

24C and 24D

The seats were, as all middle seats are, a negotiation.

He'd arrived at the row first—she'd stopped at the bathroom—and by the time she got there he'd sorted his jacket into the overhead and was considering the armrest situation with the expression of a thoughtful man who had already decided to give her the window armrest and was waiting to see if she'd take it.

She took it. He didn't comment. She appreciated this.

"You want the window?" he offered.

"I have the window."

"I mean—" He nodded at the empty window seat, where a third passenger had not yet materialized.

"Oh." She looked at it. "No. You can have it if you want."

"I'm fine here."

The seat beside the window stayed empty through boarding. The door closed. Kara and Scott sat in a row with a vacancy between them and the option to spread out, and neither of them moved.

It would have been stranger to move, somehow. Acknowledged something.

The plane taxied. The safety demonstration happened. The woman in front of them reclined approximately six seconds after takeoff, which Scott observed with the particular grimness of a tall man in coach. Kara offered him her airline pillow as a buffer and he took it with the efficiency of someone who had made peace with flying through sheer logistical adaptation.

They leveled off. Coffee service came. They both got coffee, which meant neither of them were sleeping, which meant conversation was an

inevitability.

"So," Kara said.

"So," Scott said.

"How long since you've been to Hawaii?"

"We went for our fifth anniversary. Oahu." He paused. "Lexi wanted to do the road to Hana thing on Maui. We're doing it Thursday, apparently. According to the itinerary she emailed me."

"The forty-seven-stop version?"

"Is there another kind?"

Kara laughed. "She sent me the same one. She's been talking about Hana since 2019."

"She has a folder on her laptop. For Hawaii. Has for years." He said it with pure, comfortable fondness. "Sections. Hotels, activities, restaurants. Historical context."

"She color-coded the historical context."

"She did." He smiled at his tray table. "The kids are thrilled. Harper's been reading up on volcanic rock formations. She's eight."

"She's going to be a geologist."

"Or an event planner. It could go either way." He turned his head to look at Kara. "Your two okay? Ryan's managing?"

"They're fine. He's good with them." She picked at the wrapper on her biscuit. "He's better with them when I'm not there, honestly. He gets looser. More fun. I make him feel like he's doing something wrong even when he's not."

Scott looked at her. "You don't do that."

"I'm a little—" She made a gesture. "Particular."

"Organized," he said.

"Very diplomatic."

"It's not a criticism." He turned forward again. "Lexi's organized. You're organized. You're the ones who make everything actually happen. Ryan and I just—navigate the structures you build and tell you they're wonderful."

"That's a very generous reframing."

"I had years of practice."

She smiled. He smiled. The plane hummed around them. Denver became smaller and then invisible and then a memory, and Kara looked at the cloud cover below and thought about how it was actually quite comfortable, being here. She and Scott had always gotten along in that reliable, pleasantly uncomplicated way of in-laws who genuinely liked each other without the pressure of having to. Lexi was the connector; they were the connected.

Except—

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

He glanced at her. "Sure."

"You remember that Thanksgiving. The one in—was it 2018? Or 2019?"

The change in his expression was very subtle and very telling. "Which part of Thanksgiving?" he said, carefully.

"You know which part."

A long pause. He looked at his coffee.

"I've wondered, over the years," she said, keeping her voice entirely neutral, "whether you were going to bring that up or whether it was just going to live in both our heads forever and never be discussed."

Scott turned to look at her with the expression of a man attempting to calibrate the degree to which this was an accusation versus a conversation. "I honestly thought we'd mutually agreed to never discuss it."

"We never *agreed*. We just—both stopped talking."

"That's a form of agreement."

"Scott." She met his eyes. "I walked out of that shower and you were standing in the hallway and we both froze. For approximately ten years of emotional time, though probably four actual seconds. And then we both pretended it didn't happen for five years. That's not an agreement. That's avoidance."

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "In my defense, the door didn't have a lock."

"In my defense, someone should have knocked."

"I knocked."

"You knocked *once*. And assumed from the silence that it was empty. I had the shower running."

"Yes," he said. "You did." He looked forward. The faintest color in his face. "I'm—"

"I'm not bringing it up to make you feel bad," she said quickly. "I promise. I've just thought about it sometimes. The way you can't quite account for a moment that happened and then got—sealed over." She paused. "It was awkward for a while."

"It was very awkward for a while."

"But then it wasn't."

"No," he said. "Then it wasn't." He looked at her. "I think we did a very good job of—" He made a gesture.

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

"Pretending?"

"I was going to say *contextualizing*."

She laughed, and the last of the strangeness in the air between them loosened. "You're very diplomatic."

"Years of practice," he said again, and his eyes held hers for one beat longer than was strictly necessary, and then he looked at his coffee and she looked at the clouds and the plane hummed on toward Los Angeles.

Los Angeles

LAX was, on the best days, organized chaos.

On the day that NV3—the new respiratory variant that had been burning through the Pacific Northwest for six weeks and had officially crossed into California the previous Thursday—was declared a Class Two Public Health Event, it was not a best day.

They came off the jet bridge into a terminal that had visibly changed in the three hours since their plane left Denver. The gate area was packed with people who clearly weren't going anywhere, and there were public health officials in light blue vests at three points in the concourse, and someone had set up a table with rapid test kits near the women's restroom.

"What's happening?" Kara said.

"Hold on." Scott had his phone out. She watched his face change. "Oh no."

"What?"

He turned the screen. A CDC notification, a city of Los Angeles announcement, a travel advisory. All departing flights grounded pending public health assessment. Effective as of—she checked the time—forty minutes ago.

"Grounded," she said. "All of them?"

"International and domestic." He was reading. "Until further notice. They're saying seventy-two hours minimum, possible extension to seven days depending on—" He exhaled. "Contact tracing. Something about the transmission rate."

Kara stared at him. Then at her phone, where she now had twelve notifications, including three texts from Lexi (*HAVE YOU LANDED? CALL ME IMMEDIATELY*), two from Ryan (*are you okay? flights are in the news*), and one from her mother (*Kara call me, we're already in Hawaii but I'm worried about you and the kids, is Ryan watching the kids, I left a number*

for the pediatrician on your—).

She called Lexi first.

The conversation was brief—Lexi was safe in Maui, the kids were at the pool, she'd seen the news and was trying to find out if there was any route that could get them there sooner, she sounded both worried and already in problem-solving mode, which was so deeply, recognizably Lexi that Kara felt her own chest unclench slightly.

"Scott's with you?" Lexi said.

"He's here. We were on the same flight."

"Good." Lexi said it with the absolute practical ease of a woman who had been organizing group logistics for twenty years. "You're together. That's good. Find a hotel. I'll try to get information about the timing. Don't panic."

"I'm not panicking," Kara said.

She was a little panicking.

She hung up and turned to Scott, who had already pulled up hotel availability on his phone with the efficiency of a man who traveled for work and knew that the window for accommodation in a grounded-flight scenario was approximately twenty minutes before everything sold out.

"It's bad," he said.

"How bad?"

He showed her the screen. Virtually every hotel within a fifteen-mile radius was either sold out or had one room left at prices that made her blink. The Marriott at the airport: \$629, sold out. The Hilton: \$580, one room, already gone while she watched. The La Quinta: \$345, gone. He scrolled and scrolled.

"There." She touched the screen. A motel on Century Boulevard—not glamorous, not any brand she recognized, a place called the Sunset

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

Pacific—with one room available at \$89 a night.

They both looked at the listing.

One room. One queen bed. "Limited amenities." 0.8 miles from the terminal.

"It's the last thing available," Scott said.

Kara thought about sleeping on a terminal floor for potentially seven days.

"Book it," she said.

The Sunset Pacific

The Sunset Pacific was not the worst motel either of them had ever seen.

It was, however, honest in a way that more expensive establishments sometimes weren't. The carpet was clean but aged. The window unit worked. The bathroom had a shower, a toilet, and a soap dish with one bar of motel soap in it, and the towels were white and small and plentiful. The WiFi password was on a laminated card on the desk.

The bed was queen-sized. It was in the center of the room. There was a floor, which was hardwood laminate and would be cold and hard by about three AM.

The second bed that had been in the photos—a twin, tucked against the far wall—had been removed, recently, based on the lighter patch on the carpet where its feet had sat.

"They double-sold it," Scott said.

"Or they removed the twin and are hoping nobody notices."

"Do you want me to complain?"

Kara looked at the room. The bed. The floor. The laminate. The one slim chance of sleeping somewhere that wasn't the airport.

"No," she said. "It's fine."

"I can take the floor."

"The floor's concrete under laminate. You'd be useless by morning."

"I've slept on worse."

"Have you?"

He thought about it. "Yes. Camping with my brothers, 2003. I slept in a car

that had no back seat."

"That's not the same."

"The spirit is the same." He put his bag on the floor against the wall—not claiming anything, not presuming. "Kara. We're adults. It's a big bed. We can—"

"I know," she said. "I know we can. I'm just—" She made a gesture at the room that encompassed all of it—the single bed, the fact that it was Scott, the fact that twenty thousand feet above Colorado two hours ago they'd been discussing the time he'd seen her naked.

"Contextualizing," he said.

"Yes." She looked at him. "Contextualizing."

He nodded, and put his jacket on the chair, and picked up the laminated WiFi card, and sat on the far edge of the bed with his phone. Giving her the room to settle into the situation at her own pace, which was—she noted, setting her own bag down—a very decent thing to do.

She sat on her side.

"Ground rules?" she said.

"Sure."

"You stay on your side."

"Obviously."

"I snore, apparently. Ryan says it's mild. I maintain I do not snore. I want that noted."

"Noted."

"And in the morning—"

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

"I'm a morning person," he said. "But I'll be quiet."

She looked at him sideways. He was already scrolling through what appeared to be flight updates, and his face had settled into the focused neutrality of someone managing a logistical problem, which made her feel approximately sixty percent more comfortable. This was Scott. She'd known him for nine years. He'd been at her hospital when her kids were born. He fixed things. He was reliable. He was also married to her sister.

Everything was fine.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay," he said.

She opened her own phone and started the chain of messages that needed sending—Ryan, her mother, the school—and the room hummed with the quiet busyness of two people adapting.

Night One

Lights-out negotiated itself around ten-thirty.

They'd eaten at a Thai place down the block that Scott had found on his phone, which turned out to be very good—crowded with other stranded travelers, the kitchen overwhelmed but somehow keeping pace, the food arrived in stages and they'd shared without being asked, each pushing dishes toward the other, eating with the ease of people who had shared many family tables.

They'd talked about the architecture firm. About her freelance illustration work, which she'd recently started picking up again after years of setting it aside. About Harper's geological rock obsession and what it might become. About the fact that her youngest Caden had declared last week that he wanted to be a professional napper, and Ryan had told him this was a very achievable goal.

They'd drunk beer—two each, not enough to matter—and paid the bill and walked back through the warm Los Angeles night, and the not-quite-comfortable thing that lived between them had settled into something that felt almost easy.

Almost.

The bed, even queen-sized, was a queen. Which was to say: not enormous. Scott was five-eleven. Kara was five-four. They each took a side and there was a measurable gap in the middle and she lay on her back looking at the ceiling and was acutely aware of the warmth radiating from the other side of the mattress.

She didn't fidget. She was proud of herself for not fidgeting.

The air conditioning clicked on. The room dimmed from the traffic outside—Century Boulevard never fully went dark. Somewhere outside, a car alarm expressed its brief opinion and then fell silent.

You're thirty-five years old and you're lying next to your brother-in-law and

everything is completely normal, she told herself.

She was not thinking about anything.

She was specifically not thinking about the way he'd looked at her across the table at that Thai restaurant when she'd said something that made him laugh—really laugh, not the polite kind—and how the expression had sat on his face for a moment longer than the joke warranted.

She was absolutely not thinking about 2018 and the hallway and the four seconds that had lasted a decade.

She had been in the shower at Lexi and Scott's house—they'd hosted Thanksgiving that year, which happened rarely, usually Kara's parents hosted but her father had a back issue and the house in Boulder was too much to manage. She'd come down from the guest room to shower because the guest bath tile was cold and Lexi had said *use ours, it has the heated floor, I'll be out by ten*.

Lexi had not been out by ten. Lexi had been on the phone with their mother for ninety minutes, which was a thing that happened with Lexi. Kara had eventually stopped waiting and used the en-suite.

The door didn't lock. She'd checked twice—the lock was a simple turn-knob and she'd turned it—but there was something wrong with the latch on that door, which they'd since repaired, which was an interesting piece of information she'd gathered two Christmases later from a home improvement conversation that was entirely unrelated to the incident.

Scott had come upstairs to get a sweater. The master bedroom door was closed. He'd knocked once, heard nothing—she'd been under the water—and opened it, crossed through the bedroom toward the closet, and stopped when he caught movement in his peripheral vision and registered that the bathroom door was partially open because the latch hadn't caught and she was in the shower with the glass door on the far side and the angled morning light coming through the skylight and—

He'd backed up immediately. She'd seen the shadow in her peripheral vision and looked through the glass and it had been one of those moments

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

where time stops working properly. Four seconds. Maybe less.

He'd left. She'd finished. They'd been entirely normal at Thanksgiving dinner in the way that requires enormous, silent, cooperative effort from two people who are very good at being normal.

And she'd thought about it, over the years—not constantly, not obsessively, but in the way certain small mortifications lived in you. Except. Except it hadn't felt—entirely like mortification. It had felt like something else, something she'd never given a precise name, because giving it a name would have required acknowledging it, and she was very good at not acknowledging things.

She lay in the dark motel room and did not acknowledge anything.

Next to her, Scott was very still, which meant he was also awake, and she wondered, in the way you wonder about things in the dark that you won't acknowledge in the day, whether he was thinking about the same thing or something else entirely.

She fell asleep eventually, in the early hours, when exhaustion finally outran everything else.

The Report

In the morning, the news was not good.

Scott had his phone up before seven, already reading, and when she woke to the blue light of the screen she asked and he turned it toward her and the headline was essentially: *Not Today. Maybe Not This Week.*

NV3 had reported clusters in four terminals at LAX, two at Long Beach, and one at Burbank. The CDC was requesting a minimum five-day halt on departing travel. Contact tracing was ongoing. The governor had issued a shelter-in-place guidance for travelers currently in airport transit hotels.

Five days.

Kara lay on her back looking at the ceiling and did the math. Five days in this room. She looked at the ceiling, at the crack in the plaster that made a very approximate map of the Italian coastline. She looked at the side of Scott's face as he read.

"Five days minimum," she said.

"Minimum," he confirmed.

"We're going to miss the first three days of the trip."

"Maybe all of it." He set the phone down. His voice was even—he was good at even. "I'll call the hotel in Maui. See if there's any flexibility on the booking."

"Lexi's going to—"

"I know." He looked at the ceiling. "She's going to handle it. She always handles it."

Kara thought about Lexi in a Maui hotel room, already reorganizing the itinerary around this new information, color-coding the revised schedule, being entirely competent and mildly furious and ultimately fine. She thought

about her kids with Ryan, probably eating cereal for dinner.

"I need to call Ryan," she said.

"I'll go get us coffee," Scott said, already up, already pulling on his jacket. Giving her the room, again. She noted it again.

She called Ryan. He was managing—the kids were fine, her mother had called him three times to check, his mother had called once to ask if she needed anything. He said all the right things and she said them back and it was a good conversation, a normal conversation, and when she hung up she sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her hands for a moment.

Everything was fine.

Scott came back with two coffees and a paper bag of something from the diner next door, and they ate at the small desk by the window and looked at Century Boulevard and talked about logistics.

What the Day Cost Them

The first day was manageable by virtue of novelty.

There were things to do: calls to make, arrangements to confirm, the particular busyness of an unexpected situation that hadn't yet settled into routine. Scott worked at the desk on his laptop—he had a project deadline that accommodated remote work, which was lucky. Kara called her mother, called Ryan again, texted the school to update the absence notification, and eventually opened her own sketchbook and started drawing without entirely intending to.

They went out for dinner again—a different place, a bar-and-grill a block over that was doing a brisk business in stranded traveler solidarity—and she had a glass of wine and he had two beers and they talked for two hours about things that had nothing to do with the situation. His early years in architecture. The summer she'd spent in Florence at twenty-two. Whether Harper's rock obsession could be redirected toward landscape design. Whether Caden's napper ambitions suggested a future in project management.

Back in the room, the night negotiation happened again, slightly more easily. She took the bathroom first, changed into the oversized t-shirt and leggings she was calling pajamas, came out and got into her side. He went in. She read. He came out in a t-shirt and shorts and got into his side without comment.

The light went off.

The traffic sounds settled. The air unit clicked. The night stretched.

It was the couple in the next room who changed things.

Kara heard it first—or she thought she did, a sound that might have been the TV or might have been something else, which then became unmistakably something else. A rhythmic sound, intimate and percussive, clearly audible through the wall that separated their room from room 14.

She said nothing.

She lay entirely still and stared at the ceiling and was very aware that she was not alone.

The sounds continued. The woman in room 14 was not quiet. She was, in fact, progressively less quiet, and at some point it became the kind of noise that is genuinely difficult to be in the same room as unless you're either laughing or participating, and Kara was doing neither.

She was very warm.

She was staring at the map-of-Italy crack in the ceiling and thinking about the fact that she had not had sex in six weeks because Ryan had been stressed and then she'd been sick and then they'd been ships, and there was a very warm, very present person eighteen inches to her left who was, she was nearly certain, also awake and also listening.

"Well," Scott said, from the dark.

She exhaled. "Yes."

"I was going to see if that was the TV."

"It's not the TV."

"No," he said. "It's really not."

A brief, nearly hysterical beat of silence.

"I'm sorry," he said, and she could hear in his voice that he was somewhere between amused and something more complicated.

"Not your fault."

"No, but—" He shifted. She felt the mattress move, slightly. "Are you—"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm very fine."

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

"Okay."

"Completely fine."

"Right."

The couple in room 14 reached some kind of crescendo that was genuinely impressive in its lack of restraint, and then—silence.

Kara's pulse was doing something she was specifically not examining.

"Good night," Scott said.

"Good night," she said.

Neither of them slept for quite a while.

The Shower

The second morning, she woke up to the shower running.

She lay in the warm bed in the motel room and looked at the closed bathroom door and did not think about the fact that Scott Callaway was approximately eight feet away, separated by one hollow-core door.

She thought about coffee instead. About whether the diner next door did eggs. About whether the quarantine would lift today, which it would not—she knew this before she checked, knew it with the certainty of someone who had been watching the news long enough to know that a five-day estimate meant seven and a seven-day estimate meant ten.

The shower stopped. He came out in his jeans and a t-shirt, hair wet, and said, "Your turn, water's still warm."

She went in.

She showered quickly. She was a quick shower person by nature—two kids and seven years of morning schedules that left no room for leisure had made her an efficiency expert. She had the water hot, was in and rinsed and reaching for the shampoo when it happened.

The water went cold.

Not cool. Not lukewarm. Cold, abruptly, completely—the kind of cold that rearranges a person's priorities entirely.

She yelped. She was not proud of this. She yelped and pressed herself against the far corner of the shower and stared at the showerhead with the betrayal of someone who had been ambushed.

She had shampoo in her hair. She had product in. She had not rinsed.

She turned the tap. The water ran cold for fifteen seconds, twenty, thirty. She waited. She was standing in a shower that was not warm in a motel that had apparently one water heater and no buffer system.

She turned it off. Stood dripping. Looked at her half-rinsed hair.

She wrapped herself in the small motel towel—it covered essentials and left a great deal of opinion—and opened the bathroom door.

Scott was at the desk with his laptop. He looked up.

"The hot water ran out," she said.

He looked at her. "All of it?"

"Cold. Completely." She gestured at her hair. "I have shampoo in."

He looked at her hair, which was half-rinsed and had a certain ambitious quality. "I can ask the front desk—"

"It's eight in the morning. They have a hundred stranded travelers. The water heater is what the water heater is." She looked back at the bathroom. "How long was your shower?"

He considered this. "Maybe four minutes?"

"Four minutes used all the hot water."

A pause.

"The hot water heater in this building," he said carefully, "appears to produce approximately four minutes of hot water."

"Which means," she said, equally carefully, "that if we share—"

"We'd have to be quick," he said.

She looked at him. He looked at her. The towel situation was a contributor to the quality of this moment.

"This is—" she started.

"It's practical," he said. "It doesn't have to be anything else."

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

She stood in the doorway of the bathroom with shampoo in her hair and a too-small towel and looked at him, and he looked back at her, and whatever it was that had been building—since the plane, since dinner, since room 14's enthusiastic neighbors—was in the room with them, visible and undeniable and apparently not interested in being managed away.

"Practical," she said.

"Yes," he said, but his voice had changed.

She turned and went back into the bathroom and turned the water on. It was still cold. She stood under it briefly, gasped, and turned to see Scott stepping into the small bathroom and pulling the door almost-closed behind him.

The shower was a stand-up stall with a single curtain. Not large. The kind designed for one person moving efficiently.

"This is absolutely insane," she said.

"Yes," he said. He pulled back the curtain. He was in his jeans, which he'd clearly just re-put-on two minutes ago, and he stripped his shirt with the efficiency of a man committing to a decision before he could reconsider it, and stepped in.

The warm water arrived.

It happened quickly and she understood immediately—the heater fed hot water to the first person in line, which meant if they moved fast—

It was fast. And it was—close. There was not room for two people in this stall to stand at any distance that qualified as comfortable. His shoulder was against her wet hair. She was angled into the spray trying to rinse and his arm came around her shoulder briefly to steady both of them as she slipped slightly on the wet floor—just steadying, practical—but the contact hit her like a current.

She rinsed. He rinsed. She turned to reach the conditioner she'd brought in her kit and they were face to face in four inches of space, water running

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

between them, and whatever arrangement of features he usually maintained to be Scott-the-brother-in-law was not quite managing to hold.

She looked at his face. He looked at hers.

The water ran warm between them and the world outside the curtain was very far away.

"Kara," he said. Low, careful.

"I know," she said.

"We shouldn't—"

"I know," she said again. And didn't move. Looked at his face—the jaw, the wet hair, the expression that he'd apparently stopped trying to control—and said, very quietly, "But we're going to."

The look on his face when she said it—something between surrender and relief—was the most honest thing she'd seen from him in nine years of knowing him.

He kissed her.

It was careful for about two seconds. And then it wasn't.

After

She turned the water off.

They stood in the dripping quiet of the narrow stall and she could hear her own heartbeat.

"Okay," she said.

"Yeah," he said.

She stepped out and wrapped the towel around herself and he did the same and they stood in the small bathroom that was warm now with steam and looked at each other in the fogged mirror.

"We just—"

"Yes," he said.

"That was—"

"Yes."

She looked at her own reflection, which looked back at her with the expression of a woman who had just done something she would not be able to un-do and knew it.

"I feel—" she started.

"I know."

"Do you?"

He met her eyes in the mirror. "I've been thinking about you since that hallway," he said. "Since Thanksgiving 2018. And that's—I know that's a terrible thing to say. I know exactly what it means about me that I've thought about it." He held her gaze. "And I thought I'd managed it. Put it away. And then we were on that plane and you brought it up and you were

laughing about it and I—"

"I wasn't only laughing," she said.

A pause.

"No?" he said.

She turned and looked at him directly. "I brought it up because I needed to say it out loud to someone, and you're the only one I could say it to." She held the towel together at her chest. "I've thought about it too."

He looked at her. Something in his face shifted—the careful, managing quality it usually had dissolving into something much more unguarded.

"This is—" he said.

"Complicated," she finished.

"Yes."

"Lexi."

"Yes."

"Ryan."

"Yes." He looked at his hands on the edge of the sink. "I'm not—I don't know what I'm saying. I'm not saying this is simple or that it's okay or that it doesn't—" He stopped. "I don't know what to do with this."

"Neither do I," she said.

They stood in the mirror's reflection in the steam of the small bathroom and neither of them had an answer. The situation was what it was—a motel room on Century Boulevard, a quarantine that would last days, a kiss in a four-minute shower that had been a long time coming.

She went to the bedroom. She got dressed. She heard him moving in the

bathroom, the sink running, the sounds of someone also getting dressed.

He came out and they sat at opposite ends of the bed in the particular heavy quiet of something that had happened and wasn't going back.

"We don't have to—" he started.

"I know."

"We could just—"

"I know," she said, for the third time.

She looked at her hands. Thought about Ryan at home with the kids. Thought about Lexi on the beach in Maui, re-drawing the itinerary, waiting for them.

Thought about the shower. About his face in those four seconds.

"I don't want to stop," she said.

He looked at her.

"I know it's wrong," she said. "I know all the reasons it's wrong. I can list them. I could probably rank them." She met his eyes. "I still don't want to stop."

He crossed the room and sat next to her and took her hand—not urgently, not the way he'd kissed her, but carefully, the way you hold something you're afraid of dropping—and looked at her with an expression she had absolutely no category for.

"One more day," he said. "And we'll figure it out."

She turned her hand over and held his.

"One more day," she agreed.

What the Second Night Made Clear

The second night was different from the first.

There was no pretense of sleep, no performance of normality. They ate takeout at the desk and talked—really talked, in the way that becomes possible when a door has been opened that cannot be closed—about the things that sat underneath the polished surfaces of their regular lives.

He talked about the firm. About the partner he'd bought out three years ago who had been his mentor and was now barely speaking to him, over a design decision that had turned out to be right and which he'd made knowing it would cost the relationship. About the kind of ambition that he'd never quite felt at liberty to own, because it disrupted things, and he was a person who preferred to build things rather than disrupt them.

She talked about the illustration work. About how she'd spent years putting it down and picking it up and putting it down again, each time telling herself it was a *practical* decision, a *timing* decision, until she'd stopped even looking at her own work with any kind of honesty. About the grant application she'd been filling out for three years and never submitted.

"Submit it," he said.

"It's probably too late for this cycle."

"Then submit it for the next one."

"It might not—"

"Kara." He looked at her with a directness she was becoming addicted to. "You're the most genuinely talented person I've met in a long time. I've seen your work. I've seen the new things you've been doing—Lexi sent me pictures, from the studio you set up in the basement—and you should not be waiting for a grant to take yourself seriously."

She looked at her hands. "When did Lexi send you those?"

"Last fall. She was excited. She's always been excited about your work." A pause. "She talks about you a lot. About how you undersell yourself."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"Which part?"

"That you've been paying attention."

"You say that like it's surprising," he said.

She looked up. He was watching her with the careful, full-presence attention that she'd begun to associate with him specifically—the way he gave things his complete focus when he decided they mattered.

"I've been paying attention since 2018," he said.

The room held that between them.

She got up and crossed to where he was sitting and said nothing at all and put her hands on either side of his face and kissed him, and this time there was nothing tentative about any of it.

The second night lasted considerably longer than the first had.

Day Three

The quarantine extended to seven days.

She read the announcement on her phone at seven in the morning while he slept, and sat with it for a while, doing the math she'd been avoiding.

Seven days from the original grounding. Which meant five more days in this room.

She thought about what Lexi's face would look like if she knew. She thought about Ryan's voice on the phone yesterday, warm and trusting, describing how Caden had spilled an entire bowl of cereal on the dog and they'd laughed for ten minutes.

She thought about Scott's hands and his voice and the way he looked at her like she was something he'd been looking for.

She set the phone down.

She had two lives: the one that would continue after the quarantine lifted, and this one, in this room, which would end when the flights resumed and could not be carried beyond the walls of the Sunset Pacific in any form that made sense.

She understood this. She was thirty-five years old and not naive about consequences. She knew what happened to families when these things came to light. She knew the weight of what she was choosing.

She also knew—and this was the part she hadn't expected—that she didn't feel trapped in this room. That was the thing she kept returning to, with a clarity that unsettled her. The anxiety she'd expected—the suffocating guilt, the immediate recoil—wasn't absent, but it sat alongside something else. Something that felt, treacherously, like relief.

He woke at seven-thirty.

She was at the desk with her sketchbook, having drawn for an hour—the

best hour of focused work she'd had in months. He looked at her from the pillow with the quiet, unperforming expression of someone waking up near a person they're genuinely glad to see.

"Morning," he said.

"The quarantine extended," she said. "Five more days."

He was quiet for a moment. She watched him absorb it—the same math, the same weight. He pushed himself up and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "Are you?"

"No," he said, with equal honesty. "I feel like—" He stopped.

"Tell me."

"I feel like I'm in the middle of doing something I'll have to answer for," he said. "And I can't make myself stop. And the not-stopping feels—" He shook his head. "Not wrong, exactly. Which is the part I can't account for."

She turned her sketchbook around and showed him what she'd been drawing. The view from the window—Century Boulevard, the palm tree that tilted slightly to the left, the gas station across the street—rendered in the sharp, honest lines of someone who was actually seeing it.

He looked at it for a long time.

"You should submit the grant," he said.

She laughed despite herself. "I know."

He crossed the room and looked at the drawing up close. "This is—" He pointed at something in the upper corner—she'd drawn the crack in the ceiling in the reflection of the window. "You got the Italy coastline."

She stared at it. She hadn't consciously put it there.

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

"I'm going to stop pretending," she said. "That this is just the situation. That when the quarantine lifts this becomes—something we never talk about."

He looked at her.

"I don't know what it is," she said. "I don't know what it can be. I know what it can't be. But I'm not going to pretend it's nothing." She held his gaze. "Even if—even after. Even when we're standing in Lexi's kitchen at the next Christmas and none of this has a place to exist. I'm not going to pretend."

He looked at her for a long time.

"Alright," he said.

"Is that—"

"Alright," he said again, differently. "I hear you. I'm—with you." He took her hand. "Whatever that costs."

She didn't know what it cost. She wouldn't know until later. But the not-knowing, with him, felt more honest than the careful avoidance of the previous nine years.

She put her sketchbook down and they went out to get breakfast and the morning was warm and the quarantine was a fact they had stopped fighting and the five remaining days stretched ahead of them, strange and finite and entirely their own.

Afternoon Light

She discovered, over the following days, that she had been living at a slight remove from herself for a very long time.

It happened incrementally—the way realizations tend to, a degree at a time rather than all at once. She'd catch herself mid-laugh and notice that it was real, entirely unperformed. She'd find herself in the middle of a sentence and notice that she was saying what she actually meant rather than what was most convenient.

Scott watched her, and she watched him, and they talked more than she'd expected—not just the physical urgency of the first few days, but the long conversations that filled the late afternoons, the specific kind of knowing that comes from telling someone the parts you'd been keeping in separate compartments.

He'd wanted to be an artist when he was younger. Not a fine artist—he'd been too literal-minded for that, too attached to structure—but a designer, in the truest sense, someone who made things. Architecture had been the compromise between the impulse and the practical requirement, and mostly it satisfied him. But there was a project in his portfolio from the first year of the firm—a community library in a small Colorado town, his own money, no client—that was the thing he was most proud of and had never been in a show or publication because it wasn't commercially significant enough.

"You should submit it," she said.

He looked at her. "Was that—"

"Yes. It was deliberate." She gestured between them. "We appear to do this for each other."

He laughed. The real one, the undone one. She was accumulating them.

"You're going to submit the grant," he said.

"When we get home," she said. "Before the next cycle closes."

"I'll hold you to that."

"How?" she said. And then stopped, because the question had a weight to it—*how*, from the other side of this. How exactly, when they were back in their respective houses and their respective lives, when this room ceased to exist.

He looked at her steadily. "I'll text you," he said. "September, when the deadline is. I'll text you and ask if you sent it."

"And if Lexi asks why you're texting me—"

"I'll say I owe you a follow-up on something." He held her gaze. "I'm not going to disappear from your life, Kara. Whatever this is and isn't, you're not going to go back to someone I only see at Christmas."

She felt the warmth of that move through her—and beneath it, the ache.

"I don't know what we are," she said.

"No," he said. "Me neither." A pause. "But I know what we're not. We're not nothing."

She looked at the sketchbook on the desk, six pages fuller than it had been when she'd landed. She looked at the window and the tilting palm tree. She looked at Scott Callaway, her brother-in-law, the man she'd been quietly circling for five years without ever admitting to herself what the orbit was about.

"No," she said. "We're not nothing."

The Fourth Night

The fourth night was the one she'd remember most clearly.

Not because of anything dramatic—there was no dramatic turn, no climactic scene. It was simply the night they stopped moving toward anything and were just—there. Present. The quarantine news had been mixed that day, ambiguous enough to suggest that the flights might resume in two days or might not, and they'd both made their calls home and been honest about the uncertainty, and then they'd come back to the room and neither of them had turned on the TV or opened their laptops.

He'd asked her to show him the sketchbook. All of it—the whole thing, from before the quarantine, from before Denver, the months of work she'd accumulated in the back pages.

She'd handed it to him, which she'd never done with anyone except her art school peers, which was its own kind of admission.

He looked at every page. Slowly, the way he looked at things he found genuinely interesting. He asked about two pieces—one she'd done of the kids at the kitchen table, one of the field behind their house in the early morning frost—and she told him, and he listened.

"This one," he said, turning to the last page she'd done in Denver, the night before they flew. A simple thing—the spare room of her house, empty, the light coming in.

"I was going to turn it into a proper studio," she said. "Clear it out. Set it up." She paused. "I kept not doing it."

"Do it when you get back."

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I will."

He closed the book and handed it back and lay back on the pillows and she lay beside him in the low-lit room, not touching, just being there.

"What do you want?" he asked. Not urgently. Just asking.

"What do you mean?"

"For your life. What do you actually want."

She thought about it seriously, the way the question deserved. "I want to make things," she said. "Real things, that take time and cost something. I want my kids to know what that looks like—what it looks like when a person follows the thing they care about instead of the path that makes most sense." She paused. "I want to not be performing myself."

He was quiet.

"You?" she asked.

"The library in Colorado," he said. "The one nobody published. I want to build more of those. I want to build things that outlast me, not things that win awards." He paused. "I want to stop optimizing everything and let some things be impractical and take too long."

"Like this," she said.

He turned his head to look at her. "Like this," he confirmed.

She reached over and found his hand in the dark.

They lay like that for a long time. Not talking. Not moving. Just the two of them and the room and the honest, terrible, irreversible fact of what this had been.

"I love Lexi," she said.

"I know. I do too."

"And Ryan—"

"I know."

"This doesn't—it doesn't change what's true about them. It doesn't make any of that untrue." She looked at the ceiling. "It just—adds something true. That was already true, apparently. That I'd been ignoring."

He didn't answer for a long time.

Then: "I think I need to be different when I go home."

"Different how?"

"More—actual," he said. "More the version of me that lives in this room." He looked at the ceiling. "I think I've been the very organized, very functional, very reliable version of myself for a long time. And Lexi likes that version. She built her life with that version. And I think that version is real but not—complete."

"You're telling me this is some kind of awakening."

"I'm telling you that lying on a motel mattress in a quarantine, drawing the view from the window—I feel more like myself than I have in years." He turned to look at her. "You do that."

"I don't do anything. You were already in here."

"You looked at me like you expected to find something worth finding," he said. "People don't usually look at me like that."

She looked at him. "Then they're not paying attention."

He reached over and tucked her hair back from her face—the gesture so quiet and so practiced-feeling that it made her breath stop.

"What do we do?" she said. Not urgently. Just asking.

"I don't know," he said. "But I think we have to go home and feel what we feel and be honest about it." He paused. "Not tell everyone everything. But be honest with ourselves."

"And then?"

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

"And then—figure it out."

She turned toward him. He turned toward her. The room was quiet and the city was muffled and the problem of what came next was real and present and entirely unsolvable from where they were lying.

They didn't solve it.

But the night that followed was the most honest thing she'd done in years.

The Fifth Day

She submitted the grant.

Sitting at the desk at six-thirty in the morning while he slept, she found the application she'd opened and closed and re-opened for three years, and she read it through, and she uploaded the portfolio samples she'd been collecting and never submitting, and she pressed send.

Then she sat back in the desk chair and listened to the sound of the room—his breathing, the traffic, the particular quality of an early Los Angeles morning—and felt something settle in her chest that had been unsettled for a very long time.

He woke up and she told him.

His reaction was simple: he got up, crossed the room, and hugged her. Not romantic, not loaded—just a real, genuine hug, the kind you get from someone who means it.

"Good," he said.

"It probably won't—"

"Good," he said again.

She laughed. "Okay."

That day they went further from the motel than they had before—walked fifteen blocks to a small park, sat on a bench in the unexpectedly warm March sun, watched people move through the ordinary business of a grounded day. It felt like a holiday in the old sense—not a vacation, but a holy day, a day extracted from the normal sequence.

He told her about the Colorado library in more detail. Described the building, the light studies he'd done before putting pen to paper, the way the community had used it in ways he hadn't entirely anticipated. She told him about a series she'd wanted to make for years—large-scale, mixed

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media, domestic spaces at threshold moments. The kitchen at four AM. The hallway during an argument. The view out the window during a phone call that changes something.

"That's the work," he said.

"I know. I've known for years. I just—"

"Do it."

"I know. I'm going to."

They sat on the bench for an hour in the sun and she sketched and he leaned over occasionally to look and offered observations that were more genuinely useful than anything she'd gotten from most studio critiques, and she thought: this is the part that breaks her heart. Not the physical intensity of the first days, but this. The ease of being seen by someone who isn't afraid of what they find.

On the walk back, she took his hand. They were four blocks from the motel on a street with no one they knew, and she took his hand, and he held it, and they walked like two people who had all the time in the world and none of it.

The Announcement

The flights resumed on the morning of the sixth day.

The announcement came at seven-ten AM. Departing flights would resume at six PM, with priority booking for stranded travelers. They had until noon to confirm their rebooked seats, which the airline had automatically assigned.

She read the announcement. He read the announcement. They were sitting on opposite sides of the bed drinking coffee, which was how they started every morning, and the announcement sat between them in the way of a thing both expected and dreaded.

He looked at his phone. She looked at hers.

"We're on the eight-fifty," he said. "Same flight."

"Of course we are," she said.

The room looked exactly as it had the first night—the Italy-coastline ceiling crack, the window with the tilting palm, the hardwood floor she'd never slept on—and also entirely different. It held six days in it now. It held the shower and the fourth night and the bench in the park and the grant she'd submitted from the desk at six-thirty in the morning.

"I don't know what to say," he said.

"You don't have to say anything."

"I want to."

She looked at him. "Then say it."

He set his coffee down. "I've been—very careful," he said. "For a long time. About everything. I built things carefully and I managed things carefully and I was a very reliable person in a very reliable life." He looked at his hands. "And I didn't know I was disappearing until you looked at me like you

expected me to be there."

She swallowed.

"I'm not telling you I know what to do with this," he said. "I'm not saying I have a plan or that I'm about to blow up my life. I'm saying—I'm going home different. And some of that is going to show. And I wanted you to know that it's—that you're the reason."

She was quiet for a moment.

"I submitted the grant," she said.

"I know."

"That's—that's my version of the same thing." She looked at the sketchbook on the desk. "I've been performing a life that was mostly right and not quite real, and I'm going home and I'm going to make the studio and I'm going to submit more things and I'm going to stop pretending that the work doesn't matter as much as it does." She met his eyes. "That's my version."

He nodded.

"What happens when we're at Lexi's at Christmas?" she said.

"We're people who know each other," he said. "Genuinely. Which is different from before."

"And the rest of it?"

"Lives inside us," he said. "Where we keep the things that matter but can't be spoken."

She felt the ache of that—the accuracy of it, the particular sadness of a true thing.

"I'm not going to pretend I don't know what this was," she said.

"I know." He picked his coffee back up. "Neither will I."

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

They packed. It took twenty minutes—they hadn't unpacked much, had been living lightly in the way of people in transit. The room, stripped of their things, returned to itself: a motel room on Century Boulevard, modest and honest and entirely ordinary.

She stood at the door for a moment before they left.

He stood beside her.

"The New Norm," she said.

He looked at her.

"That's what my mother keeps calling it. The new variant. She keeps saying 'it's just the new norm, we'll adapt, we always adapt.'"

He looked at the room. The ceiling crack. The tilting palm through the window.

"Maybe she's right," he said.

She shouldered her bag. "Maybe."

They left.

The Flight

The gate at LAX was crowded in a way that six days prior would have felt normal and now felt, slightly, like re-entering a world she'd been absent from.

She and Scott moved through it with the easy coordination of people who'd been sharing space for days—he took the line for coffee, she found seats, they swapped the bags without discussion.

He sat next to her.

"You have the window," he said.

"I know. I took it this time."

"You should have had it before."

She looked at him sideways. He was looking at the gate, at the planes on the tarmac, at the particular amber light of a late afternoon at LAX, and she looked at his profile and committed it to the kind of memory she used for the things she was going to draw.

"She's going to be happy to see you," Kara said.

He turned. "I know."

"The kids."

"I know." His face softened—genuinely, the way it did when he talked about his daughters. "Harper's going to have a geological report ready."

"She will."

"I've missed them," he said. "I've—even with everything, I missed them."

"That's allowed," she said.

He looked at her. "Is it? Does that—does it change what—"

"No," she said. "Both things can be true." She looked at the tarmac. "You love your life. I love mine. We're also—this. All of it is true."

He nodded, slow.

"Don't torture yourself on the flight," she said. "You're going to want to."

"Probably."

"Don't." She looked at him. "You're going home. You're going to see your kids in Maui. You're going to hug your wife." She paused. "And you're going to be a better version of yourself than you were when you left Denver. That's allowed."

He looked at his coffee. "You're very—steady," he said. "About things."

"Someone has to be."

"I didn't think you'd be the one who managed it better."

She thought about the first night—the ceiling, the room 14 situation, the performance of being fine. "I'm not managing it better. I'm just—cleaner about where I put things." She paused. "I learned it from a life that required it. You learn to be steady when you have to be. You'll find it too."

He reached over and, under the edge of the armrest, found her hand. Brief. Certain. Committed to nothing and acknowledging everything.

She held it.

The gate opened.

They boarded.

Hawaii

She saw Lexi before she'd cleared the arrivals hall.

Her sister was in a yellow dress, tanned already, hair down, standing with the two girls in front of the barrier and waving with the particular enthusiasm of someone who had reorganized the entire itinerary twice while waiting and was now ready to begin.

Harper held a sign she'd made herself. *WELCOME DADDY AND AUNT KARA*. The letters were large and slightly uneven and entirely wonderful.

Kara stopped for a fraction of a second.

Then she walked forward and Lexi hugged her—that complete, unguarded Lexi hug, the kind that hadn't changed since they were children—and said, "I was so worried about you, the news was terrible, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Kara said, into her sister's shoulder. "I'm good."

"Scott—" Lexi was already past her, reaching for her husband, and Kara stepped aside and watched her sister fold into him, and watched his face over Lexi's shoulder, and the expression on it was—complicated and real and everything it needed to be.

Harper attached herself to her father's leg. He looked down at her and the expression simplified into something entirely uncomplicated and Kara felt the ache of it—not jealously, not competition, but something more specific and harder to name.

The younger one, Poppy, was already trying to grab Kara's carry-on to be helpful, and Kara let her, and bent down to talk to her about the flight, and by the time she straightened up the arrivals hall had sorted them into a family group moving toward the exit, and the quarantine was behind them, and Hawaii was ahead.

Maui

The hotel was everything Lexi's itinerary had promised.

The room had an ocean view. The breakfast had twenty kinds of fruit. Her parents were thrilled to see her and her mother immediately began explaining that she'd called Ryan three times to ensure proper nutrition for the children, which was accurate.

She swam in the mornings, early, before the beach got crowded. She sat with her sketchbook in the shade of a palm tree and worked. She ate dinners with the family—loud, overlapping conversations, kids' arguments settled at volume, her father making everyone take a sunset photo that required six attempts.

She and Scott were—normal. Warmly, genuinely normal, in the way that they'd actually always been, except that the warmth was no longer a performance and the normality no longer required the slight willed blankness she'd always maintained around him.

When he passed the salt at dinner, their hands didn't touch. When they happened to end up in the same conversation, she didn't avoid his eyes. When Lexi laughed at something and leaned into him, Kara watched and felt the complicated truth of it and let it be complicated.

On the third day she and Lexi went kayaking, just the two of them, while Scott took the kids to the beach. They paddled out past the break and floated in the long Pacific swells and Lexi tilted her face up to the sun and said, "I'm so glad you're here. I really was worried."

"I was fine," Kara said. "Scott was—it was good, having someone familiar."

Lexi smiled. "He said you talked a lot."

"We were stuck in a motel for six days."

"He said you were—good for each other. His words." Lexi glanced at her. "He said it reminded him of something he'd been missing. I didn't entirely

follow but he seemed—lighter. When he arrived." She paused. "Did something happen?"

Kara looked at the water. At the shore in the distance, the hotel a white shape among the palms.

"We talked about things we'd been putting off thinking about," she said. "Him with his work. Me with my work." She met Lexi's eyes. "I submitted the grant when I was there."

Lexi's face opened up. "Kara—"

"I know. I know I should have done it years ago. I'm submitting it now."

Lexi reached across the kayaks and grabbed her arm. "That's—I'm so proud of you." And then she launched into the particular Lexi-style of excitement that involved volume and detailed questions and Kara answered them and felt the particular warmth of being known by someone who had known you the longest.

She also thought: *I will carry this in the place where I keep the things that are true but unspoken.* And that was enough. It had to be enough. It was, in fact, more than she'd had before.

Road to Hana

She sat in the third row of the rental van and watched the road.

Lexi and her mother were navigating from the front seat with the specific dual-authority of two women who had each independently prepared for this journey. Her father was asleep by Stopover Four. The kids were in the middle row watching tablets. Scott was driving.

She looked at the back of his head—the way his shoulders moved with the curves in the road, the one hand easy on the wheel. She thought about the bench in the park. The sketchbook. The grant application sent from a motel desk at six-thirty in the morning.

She thought about what he'd said. *You looked at me like you expected to find something worth finding.*

She thought about her house in Denver, the spare room that was going to become a studio. The work she was going to make. The version of herself that had been waiting in that room, in those pages, for the right moment to insist on being real.

It turned out the right moment had been a quarantine in a Century Boulevard motel.

She thought: *life is a very specific thing.* Not general or predictable or the shape you designed for it. It was the particular thing that happened, the specific weight of it, the way it broke and reformed and left you different.

At Stop Seven, a waterfall overlook, the whole family got out and there was a twenty-minute project of getting the kids away from the edge and taking photos and discussing the geology (Harper, with reliable authority, explained the volcanic origin of the black rock in a tone that left no room for debate). Kara stood at the railing and watched the water go over and thought about the Italy-coastline crack in the ceiling and the window and the tilting palm.

Scott appeared at the railing beside her.

They looked at the waterfall.

"She'd know," Kara said, quietly. "If I told her."

"I know."

"She'd survive it. She's stronger than either of us."

"I know."

"But I'm not going to," she said. "Not because I'm protecting myself. Because I'm protecting what we all have." She looked at the water. "And because I don't think what happened was about leaving. I think it was about—waking up."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I've been thinking the same thing," he said. "That it was—a door into a version of myself I need to keep. Not you specifically. The thing you opened."

She nodded. She'd thought the same—a version, a door, a self that had been waiting.

"Stay in touch," she said. "Not—not secretly. Just—properly. Like family who genuinely know each other."

"Yes," he said.

"And in September—"

"I'll text you," he said. "About the grant."

She smiled. "And I'll ask about the Colorado library."

He smiled back. It wasn't the uncomplicated smile of the first dinner in Denver, or the charged smile of the motel. It was something more real—the smile of a person who had found something, and was figuring out how to hold it properly.

The New Norm

by Lenora Vale

Harper appeared between them and grabbed their respective hands, presumably to anchor herself while leaning over the railing to better examine the volcanic rock, and they let her, and the water went over the falls, and the road to Hana stretched ahead.

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She turned the spare room into a studio in the third week of April.

Ryan helped her move the last boxes, and she'd told him over dinner the week before that she was serious this time—studio, schedule, submissions—and he'd looked at her across the table with the specific, fond expression of someone who has been waiting for this for a while.

"Good," he'd said. Meaning it.

She built shelves. She brought up the good light from the basement. She set the sketchbooks she'd filled since February in a row on the bottom shelf and looked at them.

Six days in a motel on Century Boulevard. A quarantine she hadn't asked for. A conversation on a plane about a four-second moment in a hallway seven years ago.

She sat in the new studio in the late-April afternoon light and began a new canvas. Large—the largest she'd worked on in years. She didn't have a name for it yet. She had the feeling of it: the particular quality of a room that has held something important, the light through a window that's slightly different from when you entered, the sense of a space that has changed its nature.

She painted from nine in the morning until two in the afternoon and when she stopped she felt the particular, clean exhaustion of real work and knew she was back.

In September, her phone lit up with a text from Scott. A single line: *Did you submit?*

She texted back: *Submitted in August. Second cycle. You?*

His response took two minutes: *Two community projects submitted to the regional design awards. Also the library.*

She stared at the screen. *The Colorado one?*

The Colorado one.

She put her phone face-down on the studio bench and looked at the canvas and smiled at it.

In October, Lexi called to say that Scott had been nominated in the regional awards, and had she heard? She had. They talked for an hour about the trip—Lexi was already planning the next one—and the sketchbooks Kara had brought back from Hawaii, and the grant, which she had received, and the show she was planning for spring.

"I feel like something shifted," Lexi said, near the end of the call. "When you both came back from LA. Like something—opened."

"Maybe it did," Kara said.

"In both of you." Lexi paused. "I don't know what happened in that motel room—"

Kara's heart stopped briefly.

"—but I feel like I got a better version of my husband back. And you seem—" Lexi paused. "You seem like yourself. Like the real version. The one you hide."

Kara looked at the canvas. At the light coming through the window. At the row of sketchbooks on the shelf.

"I think the quarantine forced some things," she said. "Things that were already true."

"The new norm," Lexi said, wryly.

"Something like that."

She hung up and sat in the studio for a long time.

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The painting on the easel was two-thirds done. She'd been calling it *Century* in her head, though she might change that. It was the view from a specific window, a room that had held a specific weight, the way a space looks when something inside it has been acknowledged and cannot be taken back.

It cost something when she looked at it.

That was how she knew it was right.

She picked up the brush. The afternoon light came in at the low angle of late autumn, and she worked, and the life she was making was her own.

Word count: ~20,000 words **Heat rating:** Explicit / XX **Tropes:** Forbidden romance, forced proximity, in-law taboo, quarantine, slow burn, found self
Resolution: Open/hopeful — not a traditional HEA, characters return to their lives changed rather than together **Author:** Lenora Vale **Themes:** Self-actualization, creative identity, the cost of honesty, what "normal" really means