

AMBER WARDEN

Finishing
Comfort

THE LAST SHOT
TAVERN

Finding Comfort

THE LAST SHOT TAVERN SERIES

AMBER WARDEN



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Content Notes

Amber Warden's stories often include characters overcoming tragic pasts or current hardships and may include situations that not everyone would like to read. Please see below content information to help you decide if this story is for you.

Sexual Content: explicit and steamy

Language: includes profanity; mostly mild and infrequent but dependent on character

Violence: fisticuffs/assault, no rape occurs but unwanted sexual advances/pressure

Childhood Trauma: child abuse/neglect, attempted filicide

Other: death of a spouse, anxiety and depression, discussion of mental illness, on page scenes of counseling, mention of non-main character suicide attempt

Chapter 1

Celia Griffin's hand tightened over the strap of her duffel bag. The lime-green and white suitcase had been with her for a while. It and the items inside, mainly clothes, were all the possessions she owned. Everything else had been sold or donated. Growing up, her family had taught her that getting attached to anything was useless. Well, they had before her mother's last incident.

She shoved the memory aside. She didn't need things. Daniel Edwards had impeccable taste. She glanced at her left hand, which was frozen in the act of knocking. The empty ring finger shouldn't have bothered her. He had proposed, but wanted to shop for her engagement ring together, or so he said. Celia's fingers curled into her palm as she withdrew her hand. She'd likely pick whatever he chose. It was easiest. Besides, she'd never thought she'd get engaged, and had no preference when it came to ring shape.

Was she really going to do this? Her breath shuddered as she stared at the closed door in front of her. She was heading

toward thirty and had never lived with a man before. She'd never dared. It was difficult to hide anything in the same living space.

Celia wiped her sweaty hand against her shirt and reached out again, rapping twice on the door. Her gaze moved down the corridor, first one way, then the next. The condo Daniel owned might be in a fancy building, but the neighbors were still too close in her mind.

She shifted the weight of her bag as she considered whether she should knock again. To her relief, the sound of heavy footsteps drew near, and, after a metallic scratch and rattle, the door opened.

“Cele!” Daniel said, holding out his arms.

Celia forced a smile as she leaned briefly against his chest. She'd tried to hint that she didn't like the nickname. The barking animal it reminded her of had never seemed cute or sexy. Not that those terms fit her, anyway.

Pulling back, she followed his gesture and entered. He'd moved so suddenly, right after the proposal, that it was the first she was seeing his new place. *Their* new place, she corrected herself, scanning the white furniture and black, modern paintings.

Daniel tucked his hands into his pockets. “It's hard to believe you're actually here.”

Celia eased her duffel off her shoulder, lowering it to the carpeted floor, also white, next to the sofa. She wished she had

taken her shoes off at the door. “We agreed long-distance wouldn’t work. And the job opportunity you had was wonderful, really, so here I am.” She shrugged, turning to face him.

“It hasn’t been that long, so I’m still getting settled, but my new job feels right.” His smile grew as his gaze became distant. “The people there are coming to me with questions already. I’m appreciated there. And respected.” His eyes found hers again. “Besides, it wasn’t like you were that fond of your own job. You’d switched again recently.” His voice tightened with the last words.

She lifted her hand to run it over her reddish-brown ponytail. “I didn’t mean to sound negative. I’m proud of you.” He was right about her job as well. Staying with one for too long was never ideal. It made people feel like they had gotten to know her.

“Thanks, Cele. That means a lot.” He glanced down at her bag with a laugh. “Is that all you brought with you?”

She nodded, letting her fingers play with the rubber band on her wrist.

He captured her hands. “Are you still wearing this? We’ve talked about these nervous habits of yours.” He lifted one of her hands to kiss it despite the rebuke. Then he tugged her forward. “Come on. I’ll give you the tour.”

Celia let him lead her around the condo. She was relieved when not everything in the other rooms was black and white. It hadn’t been that way in his last place, but he’d been renting

at the time. When he pulled her into the master bedroom, the mussed, green sheets on the unmade bed enhanced the red wood of the headboard and frame, which felt warmer than anywhere else in the house. Some of her nervousness faded in a room that felt similar to her tastes. “It’s beautiful,” she said, facing him to add a smile.

His body moved closer, crowding her against the bed until the backs of her knees hit it. “Comfy, too. You should try it out.” Then his lips were on hers.

Celia tried to relax into the kiss. With men, it often seemed like they were ten steps ahead of her in the kissing department. Daniel was no exception, and his kisses were wet enough for her to be distracted by it. That hadn’t changed, and her hands came up to press against his chest.

He moaned at her touch, lowering her back to the bed and lowering himself on top of her, trapping her hands between them. “It’s been so long,” Daniel murmured, moving his spongelike lips down her neck.

She tensed at the feel, and he snickered. “You’ve always been ticklish.”

That wasn’t exactly right. It was more like she wanted to wipe a drip of water away.

His hands had already moved to the hem of her shirt. He lifted his body enough to pull it off her, freeing her hands again.

She wasn't sure what to do with them. After a full day of travel, she was struggling to get into the mood. If she held him, it would send the message that she was into it. Reversing from there would be harder. Though reversing at all was always hard.

The voice inside of her, the one that sounded like a broken child, began to murmur that letting it happen would be easier. It wasn't like she'd ever had much luck in the sex area. She just wasn't the physical type.

The smacking sound of his kisses against her stomach returned her focus to what was happening. In the moments she'd lost, Daniel had removed most of his clothes. The muscles in his shoulders flexed as he bent to remove her shoes. He kept in shape and had a nice body. Any woman would be lucky to have his attention turned on her.

When he reached for the button on her jeans, her hands clamped over his.

A frown spread across his face as his eyes met hers. "Really, Cele?"

"I'm tired," Celia said. It wasn't a lie. "I've been traveling all day and could use a hot shower."

His hands closed over hers, moving them to the bed. He didn't release them as he lowered his chest against her again, brushing over her cotton sports bra. "Don't worry, I'll take care of everything. You don't even have to move." His lips twisted into a smirk as he stared down at her. "Like usual."

A dull throb began in her stomach, one she was familiar with. Celia yanked her hands free, shifting out from under him.

He rolled onto his back. “I was kidding.”

The air from the AC raised goose bumps on her bare arms. She found her discarded shirt, pulling it on again.

“We’ve talked about this.” Daniel drew his hand down his chest toward his boxers, and she looked away. “I have needs.”

Celia walked out of the room, heading over to her duffel and lifting it to her shoulder.

His hand closed on the strap. “What are you doing?”

She tilted her head toward the bathroom. “I told you that I need a shower. I’ve been traveling since five this morning.” The orange from the setting sun filtered through the white, gossamer curtains, staining the carpet with light.

Her fiancé stared at her. “You know, I never expected you to come.”

The pain in Celia’s stomach spread, a chill following it. “You asked me to marry you.”

It was as if she’d only said the words were only in her mind, how quickly he changed the subject. “I mean, you said this was the city where your mom went crazy, didn’t you?”

Any words dried up on her tongue. She’d told him a bit about her mother. It was unlike her, and the regret served her right. Celia swallowed. “That was a long time ago.”

His voice was already shoving hers aside. “You said you’d never move back here. But then you show up.”

Celia didn’t bother to remind him of the dozens of conversations they’d had to discuss their next steps. She tried to forget how he had urged her to be with him.

The metallic scrape of the lock sliding open had her turning to the front door as it was pushed open. A heaviness spread to her legs, rooting her to that damn white carpet as another woman walked in.

The blonde stalked forward, her eyes raking over Celia before shifting to Daniel. “Is this her?”

Daniel sighed. “I told you to give me tonight to talk to her.”

The other woman shoved her way between them.

Celia was more than happy to shuffle to the side. The two people in front of her looked good together. Both with light, styled hair and sharp eyes. Much better than she would look with her dark circles and washed-out brown hair.

The woman’s hand slapped against his chest. “Talking, huh? And you already in your boxers?”

Celia didn’t bother to point out that she was fully clothed. She doubted either of them would hear her.

“I told you, she’s not great in bed,” Daniel whined.

Celia wished she couldn’t hear them instead.

“She doesn’t have to be good. I know guys only think with their dicks.” The blonde darted forward, locking her lips with

the man that had been Celia's fiancé.

She glanced down at her empty ring finger. It had been a sign.

The smacking of wet lips followed, and a shiver ran through her. She edged toward the door.

With a last moan from Daniel, the woman lifted her head, her red lipstick smudged down one side of her lip. "Leaving so soon?"

The man Celia had tried to take a chance on looked dazed.

Celia didn't bother to say anything as she walked to the door, opening it and shutting it with a soft click behind her.

Chapter 2

Trenton Caldwell could find his way to her side in the dark, so the dreary afternoon didn't bother him. The rain was somewhere between a mist and a drizzle, so he didn't open the umbrella he carried. He had brought it just in case. In the past, his wife would have laughed about what a planner he was, how her spontaneous ways were the perfect offset. He smiled at the memory as he crouched at her tombstone.

He placed the new plant he had brought to the side with the umbrella as he touched her name—Emily Caldwell. “I’m here,” he said. His eyes closed, and he listened to the leaves in the nearby trees wisp in the wind of the mild storm. In the distance, a car door slammed, and a bird trilled in protest.

He'd read about how others claimed to have heard the dead, but her voice had never spoken to him. There had been no shadowy figure, no sudden shift of clouds to provide a beam of light, no waking up in the middle of the night, certain that her presence had been there. No matter how much he wished for even a moment more, she was gone.

Trenton didn't tell her all about what had happened since he'd last visited. If she was hovering near him, she would have seen it. No, he was there to keep the promise he had made at her bedside in the hospital. The monthly timeframe was his own logical spin on it.

He weeded the unwanted greenery from the edges of the stone. The cemetery she had chosen used the flat grave markers that had become more customary over the years. They were more appropriate for walking among the graves, but also lacked the presence of a stone pointing toward the sky, declaring to any that passed that a person had been on this earth.

Trenton's hand hovered over the last plant he had brought. Already it had withered, as most of the ones he'd chosen did. He'd never had a green thumb. His gaze shifted to the new plant, and he sighed. He'd forgotten the shovel he'd meant to bring. That was unlike him, but a call from a new client had come in at the last minute.

He dug his hand into the dirt instead, digging around the plant that had died until its roots loosened in the soil enough to let it go. He added it to the pile of weeds he'd pulled. Lifting the pot of the replacement, he took in the cheery, yellow blossoms. The happy color had seemed right for her.

He tilted the shrub to remove the plastic pot, remembering at the last minute to tear the dirt a bit to help the roots break free, and placed the new flowers into the hole. A few handfuls of dirt, and he was smoothing the ground around her new

plant. The drizzle of rain fell on his messy hands, but it wasn't heavy enough to wash away any of the dirt.

“Such pretty chrysanthemums.” A wheezy chuckle followed the words.

Trenton lifted his head to take in the older woman who stood not that far away. She swayed where she stood, leaning heavily on the walker her wrinkled hands gripped. The older woman's eyes were sharp, though, and the color of a cloudless day.

“Thank you,” he said, nodding to her.

“I've always been partial to yellow. A sunny color, if you ask me.” Her gaze lifted to the gray sky above. “A sight better than what we have today. Fitting, though. It was raining the day I buried my Henry.” She nodded to a grave farther down the row.

Trenton took in the remaining distance with a frown. He stood, dusting off his hands on his black slacks before moving to her side. He offered her an arm. “May I help you the rest of the way?”

The woman grinned at him. “Not just a looker, I see.” She nudged the walker with a sigh. “This blasted thing hates the grass.” Then she wrapped her hands around his arm.

Trenton allowed her to lean her weight on him as he escorted her to the grave she had indicated. “Do you want to sit?” he asked.

“Good Lord, no. I’d never get these stick legs to lift me back up again.” She kept her grip firm on Trenton’s arm as she stared down at the grave.

“I’ll give you a moment,” Trenton said, trying to gently disengage her.

The older woman shook her head. “I’ll only be a moment, anyway.” Her smile faded, her eyes narrowing as she stared at the stone. “I’m still mad at you, Henry. You went and died first. I miss you like the devil, but that doesn’t take away the mad.”

Trenton blinked as he stared at her.

“I’m doing fine. Better than fine, you old fool. I even got to talking with that one friend of yours. You know the one. So I’m not lonely, but I do miss you.”

She nodded and then tilted her head back to Trenton with a new smile. “All right, back to the sidewalk.”

Trenton supported her as she turned from the grave.

“You should see your expression, young man. Very proper, or so you seem to be.” She took a few more limping steps with his help. “Something you should remember: it does no good to lie to the dead. They’re dead. What can it help, telling them what they want to hear?”

“I don’t talk to her much,” Trenton admitted, surprising himself. He grabbed her walker with his free hand as they passed, lifting it to his shoulder, well above the grass and stones.

“A wife, was she?” the woman asked.

“Yes.” Trenton led her the last few steps to the paved path, placing the walker back on the ground.

“A shame, when they’re taken so young. Henry was ten years my junior. I was certain he’d last longer than me, unlike the husband before.”

Trenton blinked at her. He knew the next chuckle was at his expense.

“Life is short, young man. Those flowers, the ones you planted?” She waited, and Trenton nodded. “They symbolize loyalty, you know. Loyalty and devoted love. It’s a shame, if you ask me.” Her eyes crinkled in the corners as she smiled. “If you were a few years older, I’d be tempted to turn your head. Remind you how to live.”

Trenton let out his own grin. “I’m flattered, ma’am.”

She swatted at his arm. “Don’t ‘ma’am’ me. You’re too young to have built up enough stamina to keep up with me, that’s all. Besides, I’ve got twelve other beaux I’m leading on.”

“I don’t doubt you do.” Trenton leaned down, brushing his lips over her cheek. When he stepped back, she lifted her frail hand to fan her face.

“Whew! I’m going to think about you later tonight. Don’t you worry.” She looked up at the sky. The clouds had started to spread thinner, and an orange hue from the setting sun broke through. “Look at that. It’ll definitely be a good evening.”

With one last saucy wink, she gripped her walker again and turned from him.

Trenton watched her for a moment, shaking his head at her retreating figure. She'd been flirting with him a bit, he realized. He hadn't recognized it at first.

Walking back to his wife's grave, he bent to retrieve the garbage and the umbrella he no longer needed. The old woman was right. It had been so long he likely wouldn't have the stamina to keep up with her.

He looked down at the grave again. Still, he'd been keeping his promise.

Not feeling the usual satisfaction from the reminder, he strode toward his waiting car. A drink at The Last Shot, the tavern his friend ran, would help him to get his head on straight again.

Chapter 3

Stepping out onto the sidewalk, Celia had never been so relieved to leave a building before. The weight of her duffel bag dragged at her shoulder as she took in the fancy supermarket on one corner and the way too expensive coffee salon—literally the sign said “salon”—on the opposite. If she had caught the woman’s name, she’d be tempted to thank her properly. The crazy blonde had saved her from a fate she wouldn’t have wanted. Though the woman had also slept with Celia’s fiancé, so maybe they were even after all.

“How do you get yourself into these messes?” she muttered to herself.

In the fading light of the sky above, thunder rumbled. Between one moment and the next, rain began pouring down.

“Seriously?” She shifted the bag again. At least there wasn’t anything inside that would suffer from being a little wet. Clothes could be dried. And her phone was fancy. Daniel had bought it for her, with all the bells and whistles, despite her protests. She was thankful for the waterproof casing.

They really had been nothing alike. That was why she'd said yes. His normalness was supposed to counteract her inner crazy.

A passerby clipped her shoulder with a shouted, "Watch it!" thrown back as they darted on.

Grabbing the strap of her bag to help steady it, Celia told herself there was no use standing around. She started down the sidewalk in the direction of the supermarket. She didn't bother stopping inside for an umbrella. There wasn't much good it would do at this point.

A few blocks down the road, she ducked beneath the overhang of a bus stop. In this ritzy part of town, no one else waited. There wasn't even any graffiti inside, or gum stuck under the bench. She sat, letting her bag rest beside her. She'd thought she'd known her hometown, but when Daniel had given her the address, she'd had to look it up. Seeing the condo in person, it figured. Her family wouldn't have been able to afford the neighborhood, not with all her mother's hospital bills to pay. Even after everything, when she'd gone to live with her aunt and uncle, they hadn't been that fancy. More middle class than she was used to, but still with paper napkins.

"What was I thinking?"

The pattering rain didn't answer her.

She peeled her phone out of her damp, denim pocket, holding it in her hand. The movement lit up the screen, telling her the time with a cheery glow and asking for a passcode to

unlock it. She considered calling her cousin. Malcolm would be furious, though, and would likely rope his sister, Katie, into letting Celia stay with her. Celia frowned at the thought.

The squeal and swoosh of brakes sounded, and a bus stopped before her. The door creaked open, an older man holding on to the mechanism with a friendly smile. “You coming, miss?”

Water dripped down her forehead, and she lifted a hand to wipe it away, staring at that open door.

The bus driver looked through the large windshield, wiper blades working back and forth to shove puddles of water into different views. “It’s a wet one out there.”

Celia stood, moving into the rain before stepping inside the bus, her damp duffel bag brushing the wall before the first seat as she climbed the steps. In front of her, a green light glowed on some machine.

“You got you one of those new cards?” the driver asked.

She shook her head. “I’m new to town.”

The driver nodded. “Go on back and take a seat, anyway. You could use some shelter from the rain, and there isn’t anybody to notice.”

It was true none of the seats were occupied. “Thank you,” she told him.

He pulled the mechanism toward him, and the door behind her slid shut. “Just don’t tell anyone.” He offered her a wink.

Celia gripped her phone in her hand, glancing down at it and then up at the “No Phone” sign above.

The bus driver waved his hand. “Never you mind that. You call whoever you’ve got to call. A pretty thing like you shouldn’t be out in this weather.”

She blinked at the compliment, then gave him a half smile. “I must look worse than I thought for you to be so nice.”

He didn’t laugh, his expression turning solemn. “Everyone needs a little help now and then.”

She nodded, her hand gripping her bag tighter. “Thank you.”

The driver waited until she’d taken a seat to move the bus forward. Celia chose a row midway down the aisle, enough to give her a sense of privacy, but not to appear rude. The bag squelched as she lowered it to the ground between the seats. Then she returned to staring down at the phone in her hand.

Malcolm would be even angrier if she didn’t call him. They didn’t talk all the time or anything, but ever since she had gone to live with them when they were kids, he’d been there when she needed him. She had hoped those times had passed. She was an adult now, not the lost teenager she’d been.

Of course, her mother had always been an adult.

Her finger moved on its own, opening up her contacts. Malcolm was one of the two favorites she had. The other was Daniel. Pressing the screen, she brought the phone up to her

ear as she listened to the first ring. Outside the bus window, the rain continued to pour down, streaking the glass.

A click sounded, and muffled background chatter floated through the phone along with his voice. “Celia? I didn’t expect a call today, with you getting settled. How was the flight?”

“Fine,” she said, pausing after the word. Multiple other words crowded her mind, but she wasn’t sure which lead-in was best.

There was a clink of glass and more muffled voices. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” She cringed at the automatic words. If she was going to ask him for help, there was no use making it seem like everything was okay.

“You’re calling me,” Malcolm said simply.

“I don’t only call when something’s wrong.” Celia struggled to think of an example. “I mean, I called to let you know I was moving back. That was a good thing. You said so.”

She could hear his sigh through the phone. “Celia, just tell me.”

Her free hand fidgeted with the rubber band on her wrist as she flipped through things to say.

Malcolm was the one to break the silence. “Why don’t you come up to my bar? It’s been a while since you’ve seen it. You can tell me whatever it is while you’re here. Oh, bring that fiancé of yours. I still haven’t met him.”

She drew in a breath. “He won’t be coming.”

“Yeah?” A muffled rumble of a voice drifted in from the background noise. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Celia said.

“Yeah,” he said again, though it wasn’t a question. “You always are. Come on up. You remember the address?”

“I can get there,” she told him.

“Okay. See you soon.”

They both hung up, and Celia studied the dark screen of her phone. She pulled it up, pressing it against her chest as she stared out the window.

Chapter 4

Trenton pushed open the door to The Last Shot Tavern, shaking off his umbrella with a few flips of the mechanism and closing it as he slipped inside. The older woman at the cemetery had been wrong about the rain passing. After fastening the Velcro, he placed it in the rack near the door and then made his way across to the bar.

His friend, Malcolm, took pride in his tavern's woodwork, and the tavern showed off the best of that, with reclaimed oaken tables and high-backed wooden chairs and barstools. The bottom floor of the tavern had a long, wooden bar that took up the far wall, and tables and chairs for those that came for the food. To the right side were metal stairs leading up to the second floor, where the clack of billiards could be heard coming down. Even for a Monday night, it was relatively busy.

A mutual childhood friend sat on one of the barstools, flirting with the new waitress by the looks of it. Trenton felt a twinge of guilt that he couldn't remember her name as he slid into the seat next to Blake.

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight, thinking about that smile of your and how I struck out getting your number,” Blake was telling the waitress. Her smile grew even wider. With an exaggerated sigh, she reached for Blake’s hand, using her pen to write something on the back.

“There, will that give you some beauty sleep?” she asked, her eyes sparkling.

Blake squeezed her hand when she tried to release him, bringing it up to his lips for a lingering kiss. “Oh, honey, I’ll sleep even less now.”

“Order up,” Malcolm said from behind the bar with a pointed look toward the drinks he’d placed on a tray.

The waitress pulled away from their friend and took the tray.

Blake watched her ass as she sashayed away.

Trenton shook his head, his eyes on Malcolm, who was glaring at their friend.

“You know, Blake, she’s actually a halfway decent waitress,” he said.

“I bet she’ll be an even better lay,” Blake said.

Malcolm sighed, slapping a rag down on the bar and wiping a spot that didn’t need it. “Fine. I guess I’ll put the signs up for help again.”

“She might not quit,” Trenton said, wincing as the glare moved his way.

“Yeah right.” Malcolm’s eyes softened as he focused on Trenton. “How’d your visit go?”

“Oh shit, was that today?” Blake asked, turning back to the bar. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. I go every month.” Trenton smiled as he settled his arms on the edge of the bar. “Besides, it’s been close to three years.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Malcolm said, turning to grab a glass as he made Trenton’s usual.

Blake swirled his fingers in the condensation from his beer that had dripped onto the bar top. “I guess it was a good day for it. Rainy as hell.”

“True. There was a nice, older woman at the cemetery that I lent a hand.”

“Of course you did.” Blake rolled his eyes. “Saint Trent.”

Trenton took a sip of the gin and tonic Malcolm slid in front of him. “Well, she did flirt with me.”

“No shit?” Blake laughed. “It’s about time you got some action.”

“That was before she told me I was too young to have built up the stamina to keep up with her.” Trenton shook his head as he heard the words in her wispy voice again.

“Stamina, hell. You’ve probably forgotten how to use it.”

“Blake!” Malcolm snapped. “Just because you chase every woman that passes by doesn’t mean—” The ringing of his

phone had him breaking off, frowning down at it.

Blake leaned toward Trenton. “I could give you first crack at the waitress if you want.”

Trenton studied Malcolm’s frown as his friend answered his phone.

Blake nudged his arm, and the liquid sloshed in Trenton’s glass. “Hey, I’m being generous here.”

Trenton shook his head. “I don’t even know her name.”

“What’s wrong?” Malcolm was asking the person on the phone.

“Hell, I don’t know her name either,” Blake admitted.

Trenton choked on the sip of alcohol he’d taken, managing to swallow it instead of spit it across the bar. He coughed. “Are you serious?”

Blake shrugged.

“Jesus, Blake,” Trenton said, staring at his friend.

Blake held his hand against his chest dramatically. “Language, Trent!”

“Okay, see you soon,” Malcolm said into the phone before setting it down again. His frown hadn’t left.

“Did you hear this guy take the Lord’s name in vain?” Blake asked, jerking a thumb in Trenton’s direction.

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “You’ve said worse.” His finger nudged his phone, his mind obviously somewhere else.

“Did something come up?” Trenton asked.

“Maybe,” Malcolm said, reaching for his rag again. “Celia is stopping by.”

Blake let out a whistle. “Wow, Celia? You haven’t brought her up in a while. How is your cousin?”

“Did her trip here go all right?” Trenton asked.

Blake glanced his way. “Wait, she’s in town?”

Malcolm sighed. “Do you ever listen to anyone else talk? I told you, she’s moving back. Got here today, actually.”

“Nice of her to want to say hi then,” Blake said.

Trenton watched Malcolm’s lips press together as he continued wiping at an invisible spot on the bar.

“Is she as gorgeous as I remember?” Blake asked.

Trenton smacked the back of his head.

“Ow!” Blake reached behind him to rub the spot.

Malcolm leaned toward him. “You’re lucky he got to you first. Celia’s off limits. You know that.”

Blake held up his hands. “Shit, Mal. It’s been like ten years, and she’s your cousin. I thought you’d be over your crush by now.”

“Don’t make it sound that way,” Trenton said. “Malcolm doesn’t have a crush on her. He treated her like another sister. And it’s been fourteen years,” Trenton corrected. He couldn’t remember much about the girl. Long, reddish-brown hair and big, dark eyes were all that came to mind. “She moved in with

Malcolm's family while my mom was in the hospital." The old worry rose in his heart, despite everything turning out all right.

"How is your mom?" Blake asked, a deliberate attempt to change the subject.

Trenton let him. "Good. She and Dad just left on another cruise. They love their trips."

Malcolm's smile was a genuine one. "That's nice. They worked hard. It's about time they enjoy themselves."

"Does that mean you're keeping an eye on your sisters?" Blake asked.

"They're off limits, too," Malcolm reminded him.

"I was just asking! I'm not always thinking about hooking up."

Malcolm raised an eyebrow.

Trenton tried to be the peacemaker. "Julia and Maria are already back at the dorms, so they should be fine. And the other two have kids of their own now."

Blake blinked at him. "I didn't remember that."

"They're twenty-seven and twenty-eight. It's not uncommon." Trenton had always been relieved they'd been a couple of years younger than Blake. He'd been a player, even as a teenager.

Back then, Trenton had been keeping his family together during the hardest time they'd ever had. His mom had gone to the hospital and mercifully recovered, but as the oldest child, it

had felt right to step up. Looking out for his younger sisters while his father took care of his mother had never been a burden.

He'd always pictured himself with a lot of children of his own. Of course, that was no longer an option now that he was a widower. Trenton drained his glass, the liquid feeling like a lump in his throat on the way down.

Chapter 5

Celia looked up at the neon sign above The Last Shot Tavern. It looked like what it was, an old two-story renovated house rezoned as commercial on the outskirts of the downtown area. The bus she'd hitched a ride on had taken her nearly all the way, though she'd had to hoof it the last mile.

It hadn't been until she'd risen from her bus seat that she realized she'd never put her shoes back on before she'd left Daniel's apartment. Luckily, she'd had a spare pair of sneakers in her bag, the flat, cloth type. They had been white, but it was impossible to skirt around all the forming puddles in the darkening night.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, but her hair still straggled around her face and clung to her neck, at least the strands that escaped her ponytail. She looked like what she was, a homeless person down on her luck. Especially with her twelve-year-old duffel bag on her shoulder. It was probably why the local vagrants hadn't given her any trouble on her nighttime walk.

There was no use delaying it any longer, she told herself, forcing her feet forward. A glance at the hours posted next to the door made her realize it was almost closing time. Malcolm would be worried.

The interior was quieter than it had sounded over the phone, though maybe that crowd had already cleared out. There were a couple of tables still being used, and one lone businessman at the bar. Behind that wooden counter, her cousin stood with his back to her.

Malcolm hadn't changed much. He still kept his black, curly hair on the long side, pulled back in a bun at the back of his head while he was working. He'd worn it that way since they were teenagers, and she'd admitted to her own superstition behind her long hair.

She crossed to the bar, placing her duffel bag between her and the businessman before taking the seat directly behind Malcolm.

"I'm here," Celia said.

Malcolm pivoted. "So you are. It's good to see you." His hands jerked on his rag, as if he wanted to reach out to her, but he knew she wasn't a hugger. "I was getting worried. I tried to call again."

"Sorry." She dug her phone out of her pocket, placing it on the bar with the black screen facing up. "My phone died."

He slid it off the bar. "I'll take care of that. I keep a charger back here." Bending, he fiddled with something, likely

plugging the cord in. As he straightened, his eyes swept over her. “Not surprising it died, I guess. You’ve been up since the early hours to catch that first flight, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” Celia said. Fatigue had dragged at her during that last leg.

He bent again, tossing a clean bar towel her way. “You got caught in the rain too.”

She wasn’t sure how much a towel like that would do for her, but it felt good to wipe the dampness off her face. She wasn’t much of a makeup person, thank goodness, or there’d be black streaks and running colors, too.

Malcolm leaned his arms on the bar, his forearms bare from where he’d folded up the sleeves. He waited, but he knew her well enough to realize she wasn’t going to start. “So, what happened?”

Celia sighed. “It was a mistake, that’s all.”

He didn’t point out the obvious. That maybe she should have realized that before she quit her job, sold all her stuff, and flew to a whole different city that she hated. “That’s all, huh?” Malcolm frowned. “And how did you come to that conclusion before even a full day passed with that fiancé of yours?”

Celia bit her lip. Somehow, admitting that Daniel had been cheating on her felt worse. “Does it matter?”

“Just trying to figure out if I need to go mess up that face of his.” Malcolm straightened again, but there was no smile on his face.

Celia shook her head. “Honestly, I’m glad I found out sooner rather than later. I would have felt like more of an idiot weeks from now.”

Malcolm reached out, batting at her soggy ponytail. “That’s a good attitude. What can I do to help? You need money?”

“I’ve got a little.” Celia didn’t want to tell him how little that was. “But I was hoping I could crash in the extra room you have here, just until I figure out my next steps.”

Malcolm hesitated, surprising her. “About that, you see—”

On the second floor, a loud crash sounded, making Celia jump and Malcolm sigh.

“Hold that thought,” Malcolm said, lifting the slat of the bar to exit and hurry up the clanging metal stairs.

Celia frowned at the stairs. She’d forgotten the room was on the second floor.

A wave of air started up above her. She looked at the air vent with a shiver. It was summer. The AC made complete sense. Only the fact that her clothes were soaked through made her feel cold. Sitting was also causing her adrenaline to crash. As she huddled into herself a little, her shoes squelched on the first rung of the bar chair.

The businessman farther down the bar cleared his throat as he rose from his chair. She glanced toward him, surprised to see him shrugging out of his suit jacket as he approached.

She tried to shake her head at him, but it wasn’t very convincing with her teeth chattering.

The businessman draped his jacket over her shoulders. The sudden heat made her straighten. It was as if the man were a furnace. As warmth slid down her spine, loosening her tension, she clutched at the edges, still knowing she should push the cloth away.

“Look, this is very kind, but I have a fiancé.” Well, not anymore, but the lie was the easiest way she could see to make her position clear. The last thing she needed to do was pick up some guy in her cousin’s bar.

“I believe you just finished telling Malcolm that wasn’t the case,” the man said, calm as could be.

“You were listening?” Celia asked. “That’s rude.”

The man shuffled his feet. “I apologize, but you weren’t exactly whispering.”

“It’s fine.” She regretted the off-the-cuff response when he sat in the chair next to her, the one unoccupied by her life’s possessions.

“It didn’t seem like it was fine,” he said, his voice going gentle. “These types of things can be hard, though at least a break before marriage is cleaner.”

“Sounds like you have experience with breakups.”

“Me?” The man swiveled to stare at her in surprise. He closed his eyes then, but not before she saw a flash of something in them. “Not a breakup, not exactly.”

Celia found herself studying him, especially when those green eyes opened again to focus on her. Daniel had rarely

held that kind of focus in their time together. She'd been an idiot to agree to marry him.

Turning away from the new man she really didn't need in her life, she clasped her hands together on the bar. "Look, you seem like a nice guy, but I'm not interested." She cringed as the words escaped. They sounded harsher than in her head.

"Interested? Interested in what? My breakup?"

At the man's confused tone, she glanced back at him to see if it was some sort of trick. He seemed genuinely confused, though. "Not your breakup. I just mean, I'm not in a place to date anyone right now."

He was already nodding. "I think that's a smart decision. It's good to give these things time."

Celia blinked, wondering what his angle was. "So you're wasting your time with me. I'm not going to give you my number."

The businessman frowned back at her. "When did I ask for your number, Celia?"

The sound of her name had her stiffening, and she slid off the chair, keeping it between them. "How do you know my name?"

It was his turn to scramble up. "Oh, that's right. You probably didn't recognize me."

She took a step back. "Look, if this is some new pickup technique, it's kind of creepy." She was relieved to hear the

clang of the metal steps and glanced over to find Malcom descending.

He smiled at them. “Ah, good, Trent kept you company.” Malcolm paused, lifting an eyebrow at their postures. “Is everything all right?”

Celia rolled the name around her head. Malcolm had a friend called that back when they were kids. She’d seen the boy who was a few years older when she was young, but he must have already left the neighborhood during the last year she’d lived with her cousins.

The businessman held out his hand with a smile. “Trenton Caldwell. I’ve been friends with your cousin forever.”

“Right.” She shook his hand as briefly as she could get away with and remain polite. “I’m Celia.”

His smile appeared again. “I know. I recognized you, though it’s been a long time.” He pulled his hand back to his side, tilting his head. “And I don’t think you were in the neighborhood with us as often.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Celia’s family had lived farther away, and it hadn’t been until Malcolm had come over that one horrible day that things had changed. A shiver ran through her, and she pulled the borrowed jacket tighter around her.

“Are you still cold?” Trenton asked, concern lacing his voice.

“No, it’s a bit better. Thank you.” Celia pushed away the thoughts of the past and sat on the bar chair again. Knowing

that the man was a friend of Malcolm's let the rest of her tension seep away. "Sorry I was so defensive there at the end. I thought you were trying to pick me up or something."

Malcolm let out a loud laugh. "Trent?" He strode closer to them and slapped his friend on the back. "No worries there. This one has no lines to use on women. He's basically a monk."

Trenton ran a hand over his short, light-brown hair. "You don't have to put it that way." He resumed his seat as well, though she noticed he angled away from her more than before.

"I only speak the truth." Malcolm lifted the bar entrance to move behind it again. "I'll give you another drink on the house to ease the blow. You, too, Celia."

She watched him work as the fatigue settled on her shoulders. Behind him, row upon row of unique shot glasses took up the higher shelves. It stirred her from her haze, and she reached for her duffel, finding the plastic cup in the side pocket where she'd put it. "Oh, here. For you." She handed the gift to him. The shot glass looked like a green monster, with one baleful eye staring at her from the side.

Malcolm took it, chuckling again. "Subtle." He'd always told her he'd keep an eye on her, and she smiled that he got it. "Thank you," he said, turning to the shelves. He reached up to place it among the others, and she cringed at how it didn't fit in, plastic among all the glass.

"That eye is really... something," Trenton said.

Celia cringed, but when she glanced at him, he was smiling.

“It’s perfect,” Malcolm said, turning back to make the drinks. “Looks like me, don’t you think?”

Trenton laughed. “There’s not a right way to answer that.”

“It’s just something I saw in the airport,” Celia said, her hands dropping to her lap. She was lying. She’d gone shopping, looking for something for Malcolm, as soon as she knew she’d be coming back to town. He’d done so much for her over the years, and she’d wanted to get him something to express her gratitude.

Malcolm’s dark brown eyes looked all too knowing when they met hers. “Here,” he said, putting a yellow drink in front of her. He slid a clear one in front of Trenton.

She sipped at the coconut rum and pineapple juice, appreciating the sugar rush. “So, what was that noise upstairs earlier?”

“Oh, right.” Malcolm leaned on the bar again. “I hate to tell you this, but Blake’s working on the extra room upstairs. It’s a mess.”

“Blake’s still here?” Trenton asked, looking up at the ceiling.

Celia remembered Malcolm’s other friend, but that paled in comparison to what her cousin was trying to tell her.

Malcolm studied her even as he answered Trenton. “Who else would have made that much noise?”

A cheerful voice followed a clanging on the stairs. “Hey, it’s rude to talk shit about me when I’m not around,” Blake said. He moved to stand between her and Trenton, leaning on the bar. “I need a beer. Those damn pipes are messing with me. I cut off the water before it could flood, but it’s a mess up there.”

Malcolm froze. “Wait, the bar isn’t going to have water?”

Blake sighed. “I’ll rig something up before I leave tonight.” He turned his head, winking down at her. “Hey, Celia. Long time no see.”

She shook her head, but smiled at him. “Not long enough, Blake.”

He held a hand to his heart. “You wound me.” Blake leaned toward her, his breath warm as he whispered in her ear. “Have you reconsidered falling for me yet?”

Malcolm flicked his towel at his friend. “Leave my cousin alone, you dog.”

Blake laughed as he straightened, grabbing the beer Malcolm had placed in front of him and taking a long swig.

Warmth filled her from the old banter she’d forgotten, but it wasn’t the type of warmth Blake was likely hoping for. He’d been a player for as long as she’d known him. Watching him work his way through all the girls in their high school had taken the bloom off that rose long ago. Besides, she knew he didn’t mean anything by it. He never had.

“So, you in town for good?” Blake asked her.

“I’m not sure.” The unknown future stretched out in front of her mind, intimidating as always. Maybe that was why she’d said yes to Daniel. It hadn’t been a path that excited her, but it had been a path.

“How much longer is the work upstairs going to take?” Malcolm asked.

Blake grimaced and took another drink of his beer. “A while yet. I can only work on it at night with that other job, and it’s going to take a lot of work still. Maybe a month?”

“A month,” Celia murmured. She ran her finger along the condensation on her glass, trying not to panic over what her next step could be. She had enough to swing for a hotel for a couple of days.

“I could call Katie for you,” Malcolm offered.

Celia pressed her lips together. Malcolm’s sister hated her. Well, hate was too strong a word. For some reason, they always seemed to rub each other the wrong way. Celia could never put her finger on it, but she knew her cousin wouldn’t be happy with her as a roommate. Living with anyone would be a struggle for Celia, but living with Katie seemed somehow worse.

“No, I’ll figure something out.”

“Doesn’t your dad still live in town?” Trenton asked, looking her way.

The thought of her father made Celia’s breath catch.

“That’s not an option,” Malcolm said for her. His jaw had tensed and the hand he had on top of the bar curled into a fist.

Trenton looked down at the scarred wood in front of him. “I’m sorry.”

Blake slapped the man on the back. “You were just trying to be helpful as usual, Trent.” His head lifted, a grin spreading across his face. “That’s it! You should just move in with Trent, Celia. You’ve got that guest room still, don’t you? I remember crashing there once.”

Celia’s head rose in surprise. A glance over at Trenton showed a wide-eyed, green gaze.

“Do you ever think anything through?” Trenton asked his friend.

Blake shrugged. “What? Would it be a problem?”

“It’s actually not a bad idea,” Malcolm said.

Celia stared at him. “Really?”

Malcolm’s eyes softened. “I trust Trent. Like I told you before, he’s practically a monk. You don’t have to worry about him in that way.”

“Yeah, Trent is innocent as a babe,” Blake chimed in, nudging the shoulder of the man under discussion. “You’ll seem like just another sister to him.”

Celia vaguely remembered the younger girls. He’d had quite a few sisters if she recalled correctly. Possibly four.

Trenton straightened on his stool. “Hey, guys, it’s not only about that. Celia probably barely remembers me. It’d be hard to stay with a stranger, I’m sure.”

Actually, he was wrong there. For him to have brought up her father earlier, he didn’t know much about her past. That would tamp down any awkward conversations, and she was used to keeping things to herself. She fidgeted with the edges of the jacket he had lent her and looked up at Malcolm.

Malcolm was already gazing back at her, and he gave a slight nod.

Celia leaned forward, peering around Blake to study Trenton himself. “Would it be an inconvenience for you?” she asked him.

Trenton shifted his gaze to her, and the surprise there turned to gentleness as he shook his head. “No, I’d be fine with it. I’ll help in any way I can. But are you sure you’d be okay with it?” His eyes studied hers. “If you’re not, I can help pay for a hotel or something else suitable.”

“No, I won’t take any money,” Celia said, the words snapping out in a rush.

Trenton’s eyes widened, but he nodded. “Okay then. If you’d like to use my spare room, it’s yours.”

One more glance at Malcolm, and the calmness there convinced her. “I guess we’ll be roommates.”

It wasn’t like she had a ton of options.

Chapter 6

Blake pulled Trenton away from the bar while Malcolm leaned forward to tell Celia something. He was probably trying to convince her again that Trenton wasn't a lecher. Celia glanced his way, that crease still there between her brows. She was obviously still not too sure about this.

Trenton wasn't certain it was a good idea either. He might be out of the dating game, but he wasn't dead. He winced at the word and added a scowl when he turned to Blake for good measure. "Why do I think I don't want to hear anything you want to tell me?"

Blake grabbed his shoulders, leaning in close. "This is your chance, man. Celia is a darling. She's got some hang-ups because of her family crap, which Malcolm has never fully explained, but that just means she'll let you take it slow. This could be your way to get back in the game."

"You're trying to convince me to do what you told her I wouldn't do." Trenton jerked free of his friend. He glanced over at the woman who was still huddled in his coat. Her

fingers were white where she gripped the front. “She’s obviously just broken up with someone.”

“Exactly. She’ll be on the rebound. That makes it even more perfect. You don’t want a permanent thing, right?”

“You’re a jackass,” Trenton snapped. At times like this, he had no idea how he’d become friends with Blake.

“Oh, come on. It’ll be good for her too.” Blake’s cheer faded as he stared him in the eye. “You’ll be super sweet to her. I mean, how could you not be? You’re you.” Blake studied Malcolm’s cousin. “I get the impression she could use some of your brand of sweet.”

Trenton didn’t have to look back at Celia to remember her brown, wounded eyes, just as bottomless as in his limited memories. “And I will be kind to her. Without any pressure for sex on the table.”

He left Blake standing there as he moved over to the bar, reaching out to lift Celia’s duffel bag. “You ready to go?”

Her hand slapped down on top of it. “I can carry my bag.”

Trenton tried to tug it away gently, but her hand didn’t budge. “Let me help with it. You’ve had a long day.”

“No, it’s my stuff. I’ve got it.” She pulled it from him, hooking the longest strap over her shoulder, where it slid down the fabric of his jacket. She clutched it to her with a frown.

Trenton swallowed his smile. With her hair still damp and his jacket swamping her, she was pretty cute. Like a little girl playing dress up.

“I forgot I had that on,” she muttered, placing her bag on the floor long enough to shrug out of the jacket and hand it to him. Then the duffel was back on her shoulder.

“Go wait by the door,” Malcolm said, shooing her away. “I have something to tell Trent.”

Celia’s eyes narrowed on her cousin. “I thought you said you trusted him.”

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “Not everything’s about you, Celia.”

All expression fell from her face. “Right.”

Malcolm winced. “I didn’t mean anything by that.”

Celia smiled, a forced one, as she waved a hand at him. “It’s fine.” She turned her back, walking to the exit of the tavern and gazing out of the glass in the door.

“Damn it,” Malcolm muttered under his breath. Then he turned his gaze to Trenton. “I don’t have to tell you to keep your hands off her, do I?”

“No,” Trenton said. He glanced back to where she stood before the door. The woman had her own sign telling others to keep their distance. “You know I’m not looking for anything like that.”

“Good.” Malcolm sighed. “Well, not good for you, but Celia doesn’t need that right now.” He stared over at his cousin. “I get the feeling I should bash the fiancé’s teeth in, despite her claims otherwise.”

Trenton shook his head at his friend. “Violence doesn’t fix things. I thought you’d learned that by now.”

“It would make me feel better.”

Trenton continued to study Malcolm. “Can I ask you a question?”

Malcolm nodded.

“Why not offer her the guest room at your place?”

Malcolm’s smile faded. “She wouldn’t be comfortable there.” He grabbed the used glasses, turning away. “Now, go on. She’s exhausted.”

Trenton stared at his friend a moment more before saying good night, ignoring Blake’s thumbs-up from across the room. “You ready?” he asked again, and Celia silently opened the door to step outside. Trenton bent to grab his umbrella, where it still dripped nearby, and followed her out.

He opened it, holding it above her and stepping closer. “Here, no need to get even more wet.”

She stiffened, taking a step away. “I’m not sure that’s possible. Besides, share it and you’ll end up soaked yourself.”

Trenton started to protest, but noticed the tremor in the hand that clutched her bag. It wasn’t fear. No, she had enough spark not to be afraid of him. She was simply exhausted. “Then wait here under the overhang. I’ll bring the car up.”

“I won’t melt,” she said.

“That doesn’t mean my seats need to be soaked,” Trenton said, though he didn’t truly care. She stopped arguing. He handed her his coat again. “And use that to sit on.” Without waiting, he strode into the rain with the umbrella. His car wasn’t that far, but it was still pouring out. She was going to get sick if she pushed herself more tonight.

He maneuvered the umbrella closed, tucking it into the back seat, and slid into the driver’s seat. He turned the vents down from blasting AC and went to pick up his stubborn new roommate.

Trenton started to hop out to help her, but she had the duffel bag in the back seat and was closing the passenger door before he could fully put the car into park. She did end up sitting on his jacket. It was long enough that she could wear it over her shoulders again and still sit on it. He didn’t even have to tell her to put on her seat belt. She had a conscientious streak, he’d already noticed.

“I don’t live too far,” Trenton told her as he pulled out of the parking lot. She made a sound in her throat to tell him she’d heard, but otherwise the drive was silent. The downtown area slid past, and he turned onto his street.

“Wait, you live in this neighborhood?” Celia asked.

“Yes.” Trenton was a little surprised the car ride hadn’t put her to sleep. He glanced over, his own hands tightening on the steering wheel when he saw hers had turned white where they gripped his coat. “Is that a problem?”

“Please tell me it’s not that building.” Celia nodded toward the tallest condo, the one Emily used to say was where all the snobs lived.

“No, mine’s another block down.” Trenton hesitated, but finally asked, “Is that where your fiancé lives?”

A beat passed, but Celia nodded.

Trenton wondered who the man was, but refrained from asking anything else. He turned on his blinker and pulled into the parking garage. It didn’t take long to find his space. Celia refused to let him help her with her bag again, but she also didn’t hand him his coat back. Instead of slinging the duffel over her shoulder, she gripped the hand straps and held it in front of her.

“The elevators are over here,” Trenton said. “I’m on the fifth floor.”

Neither of them said anything on the trip up. He opened his front door and was pleased to find he’d left the hall light on like usual. He doubted she’d find a darkened hallway very welcoming that night. “You can leave your shoes by the door,” he told her, toeing his own off before going farther in, flipping on more lights as he went.

Celia frowned down at her mud-spattered shoes, peeling off her darkened socks as well before moving in.

“Your room is over to the right, past the bathroom, if you want to put your bag in there. I’ll give you a brief tour, very brief, and then you can get some sleep.” True to his word, he

showed her the living room and kitchen, where his own room was, the balcony, and ended back at the shared bathroom. “Sorry, there’s only this and a half bath off the master bedroom, so we’ll be sharing a little.”

“That’s fine,” she said, the only two words she’d added to the tour.

“Are you a night showerer, or morning?” he asked. Emily had always called dibs first thing in the morning and stolen most of the hot water.

“Night,” Celia said.

Trenton smiled. “That will work out, then, since I shower in the morning after my run.” He pointed toward the cabinet in the bathroom. “You’ll find towels in there. Is there anything else you need for now?”

“No,” was the quick reply.

Deciding she was too tired for much of anything else, he nodded. “Good night then.” He turned away.

“Trenton?” Celia called after him.

He paused to look back. She was still clutching his coat as if it were a lifeline.

“Thank you.” The words were simple and solemn, her expression matching.

He nodded. “Sleep well.”

He left her side, crossed the living room to his own room, and shut the door behind him. His hand remained on the knob

as he listened to her soft patter from across the condo.

Chapter 7

Her mother's arms tightened around her, the hug much too tight.

"Mom?" Celia called, her heart beating in her chest.

The grip around her became tighter, and Celia lost her breath. "It's okay, sweetie. It's okay." As her mother pulled back, relief filled her even as her pulse continued to race. "You don't have to worry," her mother was telling her. "You won't end up like me. I'll take care of it."

The shove in Celia's stomach took the rest of her breath away as she fell. Her back took the brunt of the top step, sharp pain arching up, but it was only the beginning. Her temple slammed into the wooden stair as she continued to tumble down, and stars flashed in front of her eyes.

Celia jerked upright in bed, the nightmare memory vivid in her mind as she sucked in the breath she'd felt like she was missing. She pulled her knees up, resting her still throbbing temple against them. "A headache. It's just a headache," she

murmured into her legs, letting the lingering panic subside. She should have never gone to bed without drinking some water, not after consuming alcohol, even the one rum.

It had been a while since her fall down the stairs as a child had haunted her. Of course, she'd been living on the first floor before. With the stairs in the tavern and the upper-level condos, it wasn't a surprise the fall was on her mind.

Her mother hadn't done it out of malice. In her mind, she'd been saving her daughter from the worst fate: experiencing the mental confusion she had suffered through all her life. The bruised spine, and broken wrist from trying to stop herself, had been difficult to cover, so her aunt had found out. And that had led to Malcolm checking in on her on another fateful day.

Celia lifted her head, holding her hands out in front of her. That wasn't the only time she'd broken her wrists. They had healed, but she sometimes felt phantom pain. Or so her last counselor had called it. Her fingers wrapped around the wrist without her rubber band, gently massaging as she took in the guest room around her.

Trenton apparently loved color. The bedspread looked as if an unsupervised child had found tubes of paint and squeezed it all out in globs. Those random colors had bled into the green lamp, the red dresser, and the yellow frame of the standing mirror. Celia avoided that, not needing to see her own face to know she was still exhausted.

Her pillows had followed the rainbow color scheme, and somehow seemed bright even among the darkness. Celia's

favorite part of the room were the sky-blue curtains, hiding the five-story drop beyond. If asked her favorite color, she would have said blue.

Knowing sleep would be far away after the dream, she crawled out of bed, leaving the sheets in disarray behind her as she padded out of the room. The bathroom was closer than the kitchen, and she had seen those little paper cups stacked in there earlier. She didn't bother flipping on the fluorescent light, not with the nightlight plugged in to the left of the sink. She filled one of the cups with water, drained it, and then also drained the refilled cup after.

The extra toothbrush and toothpaste next to hers reminded her that she wasn't alone in the house. The bathroom was full of props that wouldn't let her forget. Crushing the little cup in her hand, she let her eyes roam over the electric shaver and aftershave on the corner of the vanity. Daniel had always been clean-shaven. His scent from it had been one she'd enjoyed, some kind of smoky wood, or so her senses had guessed. She couldn't really imagine his things now. She'd obviously been paying very little attention all along.

It would have been the first time she'd lived with someone since moving out of her aunt and uncle's house. She continued staring at the manly articles spread around the bathroom. Well, she was still living with someone. Just not the someone she had planned for.

She should have learned. Plans never worked out. As soon as the world realized she had one, it would flip things. That

was just how life worked. Any control she thought she had was an illusion. Just as it had always been for her father.

Her mother had never pretended to be in control.

Celia tossed the smooshed cup into the trash and left the bathroom. No part of her wanted to return to the vomit of color waiting for her in the guest room. She turned to the living room instead. At least it wasn't full of white furniture. She couldn't remember what color the couch was, but it was something dark with a soft-looking material that would allow a person to sink into the cushions. Next to the couch was a black recliner that also begged for a person to kick back and nap.

Celia avoided it all, clicking open the lock to the sliding glass door that led to the porch. She slid it open, a warm breeze drifting across her arms as she stared out into the night beyond. It was still raining, the patter of it soothing. She closed her eyes, the smell drifting into her lungs, one she'd always liked.

A wicker porch chair was next to the glass. Celia sat in it, deciding it was far enough from the balcony railing to pretend the ground wasn't so far below. As long as she couldn't see it she'd be fine. Her fear of heights was ridiculous. Yes, she'd fallen down some steps, but it hadn't been multiple flights.

Pulling up her legs, she stared out above the railing, taking in the clouds that were shaded more of a silvery-white than gray, the lighter color the result of the moon peering out from behind them.

Her eyes and cheeks remained dry. Celia had never been a crier. Crying changed nothing.

The creak of a floorboard gave Trenton away. He didn't say anything. Instead of coming onto the porch, he sat just inside the sliding glass door, his long legs stretching out and entering her peripheral sight. "Couldn't sleep?"

She shook her head, not seeing a need to fill the silence with the obvious.

He didn't rush to talk more either. The rain continued, pinging against the railing as it soaked into the concrete at the edge of the balcony.

"I admire you," Trenton said.

Celia closed her eyes against the lie. He didn't even know her.

"I get the feeling your life fell apart today. That happened to me once. It was something I knew was coming, but I still wasn't prepared." He paused, and she listened to him sigh. "Malcolm was there for me. Pulled me out of it the best he could."

She laid her cheek on top of her knees. From that angle she saw more of his long legs, though his torso and above were in shadow through the door. "Malcolm is good at being there."

"He is. The best."

Celia thought of her cousin. He'd always been there for her, waiting to prop her up again. She wished she didn't need it. Somehow, it felt so hard to admit to him what a mistake she'd

made, how dangerously blind she'd been in her rush for normalcy.

“You're so strong. Despite everything upending on you, you're still keeping it together.” Trenton leaned forward, and the dimmed moonlight somehow made his smile seem even gentler. “That's why I admire you.”

She was already shaking her head. “You're wrong.”

His eyes never left hers. “About keeping it together? Even if you're not, that's all right. You're moving forward, even if it might be at a crawl. That's more than I did.”

Not keeping a tight wrap on her emotions was dangerous, but it hadn't been that hard. Not until the dream. Which made it all worse. “I'm not falling apart over my fiancé because it turns out I really didn't care about him at all.” Her lips twisted up in a bitter smile. “Isn't that sad?”

Trenton shook his head. “I'd say it's for the best. He likely wasn't worth it. I doubt he was innocent in what happened today. Am I wrong?”

She looked away from him, staring out at the night again. “You're not wrong.” She remembered Daniel's voice as he tried to tell her he had needs. He'd meant physical ones, but she hadn't been there emotionally either. It wasn't a surprise he'd turned to someone else. Maybe that was why she held no anger. “Does it really matter if I didn't love him, anyway?”

“Of course it does.”

The rough tone surprised her. When she turned to him, he looked furious on her behalf.

“Celia, the bastard let you move here with nowhere else to go, just so he could break it off with you. He had no intention of ever supporting you.”

“I don’t need a man to support me.”

“Of course not, but that doesn’t make his actions right. Basic human decency should have made him break things off before it came to that.” Trenton took a breath. It was his turn to look out at the night. “For once, I agree with Malcolm. Your fiancé deserves a punch to the face.”

She studied his clenched jaw, tracing it up to those green eyes, so vibrant even in the night. Laying her cheek on her knees again, she let out a small laugh. “That doesn’t seem very monk-like.”

His eyes slid back to hers, and her breath caught at the slight quirk in his smile. “Good of you to notice.” His smile fell, and it was as if the clouds shifted within his eyes. “My life falling apart that I mentioned?” He waited for her to nod. “My wife died.”

Celia didn’t know what to say. He looked so lost, as if he was experiencing it all over again. She doubted she’d ever cared about anyone enough to feel that way. Even Malcolm she kept at a certain distance. Instead of saying anything, she let the silence extend.

“I loved her very much. Still do,” Trenton said. He leaned back, the shadows finding his face again. “So I don’t date. It wouldn’t be fair to anyone. Not when my thoughts are of her.” He sighed. “The guys like to tease me about it, but I know it’s not to be mean. Them wanting me to move on is understandable.”

Celia tilted her head against the back of the chair, taking in the slow dripping of the rain from the balcony above. “Some things you can’t ever leave behind.” Her fingers slid around her wrists, remembering the pain that had been there. Every look in the mirror also reminded her. She looked just like her mother.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to make this about me.” Trenton cleared his throat. “While you’re hurting right now, I’m sure that bastard of a fiancé will be in your past soon enough. Give yourself time.”

She bit her lip. With him being so open, it made it hard to let him compare her hurt to his. Not about the fiancé she couldn’t care less about. She closed her eyes, taking a breath. “It’s not my breakup that kept me awake.”

The rain continued to fall, a sudden breeze letting some of the dampness land on her feet, where they were perched on the edge of the chair.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, so softly that his voice seemed part of the wind.

Celia shook her head. She could. The various counselors had shown her that, but she found it easier not to open that

dam.

“All right,” he said.

The silence that grew between them didn't feel awkward or strained. It just was, similar to how the rain fell.

With her eyes closed, the smell of the weather strengthened. With it was a hint of Trenton's cologne, but it wasn't unpleasant. When the breeze brushed against her cheek, the warmth was soothing. She wasn't sure how much time passed, but her eyes felt too heavy to open. Her breathing slowed, a steady movement of her chest. She could even hear her heartbeat, a dull steadiness that blended with the night.

When he slid his arms around her, she wasn't fully asleep. She normally didn't like to be touched, but Trenton had somehow become part of the scenery. She leaned against his chest as he carried her to the guest room and placed her on the bed there. He even tucked her under the covers.

“Good night, Celia,” he whispered.

Before she could return the sentiment, her mind slid off into oblivion.

Chapter 8

The rain from the night before had left the park drenched. Trenton adapted his pace to account for any slickness on the sidewalk, though the concreted had absorbed most of the moisture. He'd felt sleepier that morning when he woke for his normal jogging ritual due to his late-night chat with his new housemate.

He shouldn't have brought up Emily.

His teeth clenched as he sucked in his next breath, nearly choking on it. The lack of air let him concentrate again, slowing into a steady in and out as he increased his pace. He didn't understand the people that needed music to jog. The whole point was to find his body's rhythm.

Trenton's thoughts had slowed when he inserted the key on his wristband into the lock of the condo's front door. Inside, a cabinet clanged shut, followed by another, and then there was the rattle of a drawer opening.

Toeing off his running shoes, he made his way into the kitchen to find a bleary-eyed Celia staring down in his odds-and-ends drawer.

She looked up, blinking at him. “Coffee?”

He winced at the word. “Why don’t you go sit? I’ll make you something.”

She hesitated, then shuffled over to lean on the opposite counter.

Trenton crossed to the drawer, shaking his head as he slid it shut again. “You really thought the coffee would be in there?”

Celia shrugged, her lips dragging down into a pout. “I checked all the cabinets.”

He turned to hide his smile. She was a little kid at times. He’d thought the same the night before when he’d lifted her and she’d cuddled against his chest. She’d felt so petite in his arms.

He turned over ways to break it to her that he didn’t keep coffee in the condo. Relying on caffeine wasn’t healthy.

“Why don’t you go shower, and I’ll have something for you when you come out?”

Celia’s frown deepened. “Don’t need to. I shower at night.”

“Right.” He remembered that now. Her hair hadn’t just been damp from the rain the night before.

“Besides, I’m not the one who’s all sweaty,” she said.

He watched her gaze drift over his damp shirt and down to his shorts before she looked away.

She stared at the opposite wall as she said, “Just show me where everything is and I’ll start it brewing so you can get ready.”

Trenton cleared his throat. “I don’t have any coffee.”

Her shoulders tensed. Celia slowly turned to face him again. “You’re kidding.”

“You know caffeine is—”

“A godsend, yes.” Celia’s head bobbed up and down, no smile cracking her face. “A necessity even.”

He took a breath, but couldn’t hold the words back. “You only think that because you’ve been drinking it. That’s how caffeine works on the body. The more you drink, the more the body thinks that it needs that hit before reaching the same function.”

Celia blinked at him. “So you agree that I need coffee.”

Trenton laughed. “I’m sorry. I should have realized. What if I make you what I normally have? It’s full of vitamins and will give you a boost, I promise.”

She sighed, and he took that as assent. Before he could cross to the fridge, she raised a hand.

“Wait. Today’s a weekday. Don’t you need to get ready for work?”

He glanced at the clock above the stove. “I do have to leave in a bit, but I have some time.”

She waved him off. “Shower. I can wait.”

Celia was already wearing jeans and a shirt, despite saying she wasn't a morning person. Trenton paused, realizing she wore the same clothes as she had the night before. He'd noticed she still wore jeans when he joined her on the porch, but had thought it was due to the shared space. She didn't seem like the type he had to worry about strolling around the condo in a short nightie.

“Your duffel bag didn't hold up?” he asked.

She glanced down at her clothes, fiddling with a rubber band on her wrist. “It's not waterproof.” She shifted on her bare feet. “It'll be fine. I just need to wash everything.”

Trenton crossed to the sliding closet door across the hall from the kitchen, opening it to reveal the laundry inside. “Everything you'll need is in here.”

Celia stepped closer, peering at the stacked machines. She took a breath, then tilted her nose away from him.

He glanced down at his sweaty workout clothes and laughed. “I guess you meant I really do need a shower.” He backed out of the hall, gesturing toward the washer. “Go ahead and get started. I'll be back in no time, and then I'll give you that drink I promised.”

Trenton was the type to prepare everything the night before. His memories tugged on the extra supplies taking up the

bathroom. There was something about seeing two toothbrushes together again. When he stepped out in his normal dress shirt and slacks, the whooshing of the washer running filled the space.

Celia peeked at him from the couch, her legs pulled up as she hugged one of the throw pillows to her chest.

Crossing to the freezer, he pulled out two of his pre-prepped bags. He also grabbed the almond milk from the fridge and the powder from the top shelf before setting everything near the blender. It took no time before two glasses full of the vibrant smoothie were ready. He took one to her, holding it out.

She stared back at it. “That’s an interesting... green.”

He nodded. “Sorry, the kale takes over the color. I promise you’ll barely taste it.”

She took the glass from him, but didn’t take a sip, just fiddled with it. She wasn’t the first person to hesitate when given one of his smoothies.

Trenton turned back toward the kitchen before his smile could fall at the memory. He needed to clean up anyway, and made quick work of rinsing out the blender.

Celia stood, crossing over to the outer bar and setting the glass on it. She curled her fingers around it. Trenton noticed they were white again from the pressure of their grip. He dried his hands on the nearby kitchen towel and waited.

“About last night,” she said.

He winced. "I'm sorry about that. You were hurting, and me sharing my own pain was wrong. I didn't mean to lessen yours."

"No, that's not it," she said, frowning at him.

Trenton swallowed his next words, listening.

"You carried me back to bed," she said, staring into her smoothie.

"Oh, that." He smiled at her. "It reminded me of my sisters." On impulse, he reached out to ruffle her hair. The silky strands sifted through his fingers, leaving a tingle in their wake.

Celia froze under his touch, and he regretted giving in to instinct. He turned to the clock. "I have to head to the office."

She nodded, the movement jerky. "Of course. Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. And think nothing of last night. Consider it forgotten." Trenton moved his hands under the counter, as if hiding them would remove the remembered feel of her. He cleared his throat. "Do you have your phone?"

"I'll get it."

She let go of the drink as she escaped to the back bedroom.

Trenton flexed his hands, frowning down at them. Even his chest betrayed him with the ghostly feel of how she had pressed against it when he'd carried her the night before. Like a child, he reminded himself.

"Here it is," she said, moving back to the bar.

He held his hand out for it. “You should have my contact numbers, just in case.”

She unlocked her phone and passed it over.

Trenton put in his work and his cell, going ahead and hitting the call button and letting it ring before hanging up again. His glance at the clock wasn't feigned. “I'll save yours, too. I have to go, but make yourself at home.” Before he turned away, he pointed at the green smoothie. “And try that. I promise you won't be disappointed.”

“Thanks, I think,” she said, but a small smile graced her lips.

He paused, and he realized he was waiting for her to tell him to have a nice day, like Emily used to. Turning away, he headed to the door, not looking back.

Chapter 9

Celia stared at the green liquid in the glass. Condensation had formed on the outside, making her hand slick as she wrapped it around the drink. She could pour it down the drain. Trenton would never know. But his smile rose in her mind. His expression when he smiled was as if he trusted the world. He'd never call her out for lying.

Still not liking the idea, she took the smallest sip of the smoothie. She choked on the riot of flavors, too many to decipher, all rolling around in blazing glory. There had never been another drink like it in all the world, she was sure of that. She just wasn't certain if that was a good or bad thing. Needing to decide, she took a bigger gulp. The smooth texture of the blended drink was somehow wrong with the hint of kale and other vegetables in it. With the larger portion, the aftertaste was more obvious, some sort of protein powder.

One thing the drink did have going for it; she was wide awake. You had to be to process all the flavors.

She lifted the glass to take it with her as she prowled the condo. The tour he had done the night before had passed in a fog. The travel, the emotional garbage, and the trek through the rain had all combined to exhaust her. Her own bedroom and the bathroom she was familiar with. The living room was rich with darker colors, opposite of the kaleidoscope of the guest room she was sleeping in. The sliding glass door she'd opened the night before appeared spotless, not even showing possible finger prints.

He'd let her pop into his bedroom before, but she hadn't really taken it in. She sipped the smoothie for courage and crossed to his closed door, opening it to peer in.

The darker theme continued in his bedroom, with furniture in cherry wood and a sky-blue bedspread. It must have been one of those two-sided comforters, as the folded-over top was a light gray.

He made his bed. At least they had one thing in common.

Not that they needed to have anything in common. Celia downed the last of the smoothie as punishment over the thought, coughing as it slid down the wrong pipe and almost escaped through her nose. The glass fell from her hand, but a pile of dirty clothes cushioned the fall. It was the jogging outfit he'd worn earlier. So he wasn't a complete neat freak.

When she bent to retrieve the glass, a hint of his musky smell from earlier filled her senses. It wasn't sweaty man smell. Instead, it carried a hint of that woody cologne she'd

noticed the night before, and something else that seemed to be just him. Almost like apples.

Celia grabbed the glass and made a hasty exit. She didn't need that fluttery feeling in her stomach, the same one she'd felt when his hand had ruffled her hair but paused in the act, gently smoothing it as well. Her body might have risen in interest of the man, but she'd learned her lesson in letting it take the wheel.

Besides, Trenton had no designs on her. Which she was relieved about, she told herself. He thought of her as a sister and not a woman. That would make living together easier.

Daniel's voice rose in her mind, telling that blonde he'd hooked up with that Celia was lousy in bed. It hadn't stopped him from trying to have sex with her minutes before that. Her hand clenched harder on the glass. She'd almost given into his demands.

It was a pattern, or so the multitude of counselors had told her over the years. She'd been raised to be a people pleaser. When her mother was happy, she'd always been less crazy. When Celia did something to help, her father would smile at her. Usually he'd only have eyes for her mother. Not that Celia blamed him. It was the moments he took his eyes off the woman that things went wrong.

The sudden chirp of the washing machine broke through her thoughts. Celia crossed, making quick work of shifting the damp clothes to the dryer. It took a few moments to figure out

the functions, but soon the clothes were rolling around inside the machine.

Daniel hadn't been the first man to complain. A normal relationship expected sex at some point. Celia could never seem to get that part right. It wasn't that she wasn't interested. It was more that she couldn't turn her mind off. She would wonder if she was being normal, or if there was something else she could be doing, or if she should tell them that what they were doing wasn't working.

She'd been fooling herself to think she could do normal, anyway. It was better when she didn't fake it and stuck to her own company.

That would be hard to do living in a condo with someone.

First things first: If she wanted to eventually get out of her roommate situation, she would need money.

Celia washed out the used glass, setting it aside to dry. Then she pulled out her phone and started the process she was so familiar with. The later beep of the dryer interrupted her at one point, and Celia folded her clothes, surprising herself by placing them in the empty dresser in the room. Her duffel bag was still a bit damp, so she hung it in the empty closet. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she continued the job search.

After shooting off her resume to a few places, she sighed and set down the phone. It was the same as usual. Places that hired unskilled workers always had a lot of competition, but maybe she'd get a call back. College hadn't been a possibility, not for her.

The brightness of the room was almost blinding. She trailed her hand over the splatters of color that covered the bedspread. The movement was reflected in the mirror. She stood, studying herself in it. Average was what she saw, and the tension within her faded. The height, the not-too-straight but not-too-wavy brown hair with a hint of red, the jeans and a shirt, all of it could be seen with a passing glance. It was only when someone looked too close that they noticed the too skinny frame thanks to the nerves that kept her from eating.

Celia stepped closer, peering at the feature men had pointed out. Bedroom eyes, they called them. The brown was toward the darker side, and the shape was a tad wide, though that could be from her angular face. She didn't spend much time in front of mirrors, especially lately. She looked just like her mother had the last time she'd seen her. Only she didn't have the vast energy that had bubbled under her mother's skin, begging to be released. The crazy gleam that had often shone through the medication in her mother wasn't present in her own eyes.

She hid it well.

Grabbing the folded blanket on the foot of the bed, she hung it over the mirror. The yellow of the frame was a horrid color anyway and deserved to be hidden.

She shoved her phone in her pocket and strode out of the room, closing the door behind her. She no longer felt like sitting and crossed over to the sliding glass door. The balcony didn't draw her without the rain. Turning away, the wall art

caught her eye. More splashes of color marked the canvases. It was bold and artsy, and didn't seem like Trenton at all.

She crossed to the biggest one. The colors were even more vivid up close, and showed even less pattern, if that was possible. Just vivid reds, yellows, and oranges, crisscrossed all over. Celia blinked, feeling almost dizzy from it.

Trenton had said he'd had a wife. She let her eyes trace around the living room, but no photos of the two of them together graced the walls or shelves. Maybe it had been too painful of a reminder. One of her prior boyfriends had lost his parents while they were dating, and he had quickly packed away mementos for that reason. She'd held him while he cried, not knowing quite how to comfort him and hoping it would help. He'd left not long after that, so she doubted she'd gotten it right.

Celia didn't understand what it was to care for someone so much that it hurt when they were cut out of your life.

Sick of her own thoughts, and of the condo that was so foreign, she crossed to the entryway, slipping on the shoes she had left there. They were still slightly damp, but were also the only shoes she had. Pausing after she opened the door, she realized that if she locked it, she wouldn't be able to get back in. No key.

Looking back in, she was tempted to repack her duffel and take her things with her. It was a ridiculous urge. She'd just have to wait to return until after Trenton was home.

Turning the lock, she closed the front door behind her.



The temperature in The Last Shot Tavern was much more comfortable when she wasn't soaking wet. Only a few tables were occupied by the lunch crowd, leaving plenty open, but Celia crossed to the bar again, sitting in the same chair as the night before.

Malcolm raised an eyebrow at her. "You're living the life of leisure, coming in here this early for a drink."

She made a face at the suggestion. "Just a ginger ale, please."

He nodded, prepping it as he studied her. "You doing okay?"

Celia nodded. "I thought we should spend some time together, since we have it."

His smile was the one that had drawn her in as a teenager. Pure joy seeped out of him, and genuine concern for others. He'd been patient, and eventually she had shared some of her past with him. It had created a bond, one that she stretched as far as it would go. She hadn't found the breaking point yet.

It was too bad he was her cousin. He understood her in a way that she doubted anyone else ever could. And she had to admit, he wasn't hard on the eyes. He hadn't pulled his hair back, and it settled around his shoulders in a dark wave, only

enhancing the muscle tone in his arms, shown off by the rolled-up sleeves of his button-down.

Malcolm slid a glass in front of her. “I appreciate it, but that’s not like you. Everything going okay between you and your roommate?”

She shrugged. “He’s at his job. It felt strange being there, that’s all.”

Malcolm hummed in his throat. “That’s understandable. Have you had any thoughts about what’s next? Are you moving back to where you’d been?”

Celia shook her head. She didn’t mention that she’d already splurged on a bus pass to get around the city. “I thought I might give it a go here, if I can find a job.”

His sunbeam of a smile appeared again. “That’s amazing, Celia. I’ll be glad to have you closer.” The smile faded, and he leaned in closer. “Are you certain, though? I understood why you needed to leave.”

“I’m not a kid anymore,” she said. Malcolm often needed the reminder.

Her cousin laughed. “It was hard to tell last night, with you drenched and in Trent’s coat.”

She ignored the barb, taking a sip of her ginger ale. “I got caught in the rain. It can happen to anyone.”

Above them, something slammed, followed by quick, clanging steps down the stairs. When the waitress from the

night before appeared, her face was bright red, and she was already ripping off her apron.

“The next order has been up,” Malcolm told her.

The waitress’s apron hit the bar before sliding to the ground. “I’m done,” she said, not even pausing as she stalked out the door.

Malcolm sighed.

Slower steps descended the stairs, and Blake sheepishly met Malcolm’s hardening gaze. “You had to do it, didn’t you?” Malcolm asked.

Blake shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s not my fault you keep hiring the crazy chicks.”

Malcolm slammed the bar entrance up, stalking toward his friend and grabbing him by the arm to drag him away from the patrons already enamored by the drama. “If you didn’t fuck and then dump them, they wouldn’t get so angry,” Malcolm snapped.

Celia tuned out the rest of the argument. It was pretty obvious what had happened, and she didn’t need a blow by blow. Glancing at the food that had likely begun to chill, she slid off her chair and bent to retrieve the apron, tying it on. She worked through who in the crowd the completed dishes were likely for and grabbed the first two.

Crossing to the older couple by the window, she cleared her throat. The white-haired woman with the flowered blouse turned her way. “You had the chicken salad?” Celia asked.

“Oh, yes,” the woman said.

Celia placed the food in front of her, with the older man’s turkey sandwich with green beans instead of fries following suit.

The bushy eyebrows on the older man drooped. “Green beans. My wife is worried about my cholesterol, you know.”

“I plan on keeping you for a while longer,” she said, rolling her utensils open with a pointed look in his direction.

The old man sighed, but his expression eased into a smile as he looked across the table at his wife.

Celia reached for the nearly empty glass in front of the woman to avoid the personal conversation. “What were you drinking?”

“Oh, just an iced tea, sweetie,” the older woman said.

“Coming right up,” Celia promised, taking the glass with her. The tea carafe was in the corner near the kitchen. She refilled the glass, grabbing another plate on the way. After dropping off the older woman’s drink, she approached the short woman closest to the stairs, the one that had a certain tilt to her chin. “This one yours?” she asked, indicating the burger with loaded-down cheese fries.

The woman’s eyes locked on the food. “Oh, yes.” She moved her drink back to make room, glancing up to where Malcolm continued to lecture his friend. “All this drama gave me a bigger appetite.” The short woman’s eyes were locked on Blake.

Celia shook her head, but the woman didn't notice. "Do you need any condiments?"

Another order was up from the kitchen while she was gathering the ketchup, and Celia made quick work delivering both. When she returned to the bar with an empty beer glass, Malcolm was behind it again, eyeing her thoughtfully.

Celia slid the glass to him. "A refill of the blonde ale."

Malcolm nodded, turning to the tap. "I don't remember waitressing being one of your prior jobs."

She shrugged, her fingers smoothing down the apron. "It's a job if I'm in a pinch, though I don't seek it out typically." She glanced over at the older couple, leaning toward each other while they talked. "The tips are better for those that add a personal touch or a bit of charm."

"Ah," Malcolm grunted, placing the beer in front of her. "And charm isn't your style."

Celia didn't see a need to confirm that, choosing to deliver the beer instead. When she crossed back to Malcolm, she nodded at another table. "They're ready for their check, but I wasn't sure what you charged."

Malcolm moved over to the computer. "As you can see, Blake's way with women left me in a bit of a pinch. If you decided to help out here for a while, it would be a big help."

She hesitated as he printed out the check. Taking it from him, she collected the payment. Waitressing wasn't what she'd had in mind, but the tavern itself was nice, and hanging out

with Malcolm wasn't a hardship. There'd be work, but they'd get to see each other more.

She grabbed another refill on the way back and nodded at Malcolm. "I'd appreciate the work."

He grinned. "You're hired. Now get back here and I'll show you how to ring them up."

Celia nodded and slipped behind the bar. Standing next to Malcolm learning something new felt like a balm to her earlier dread. One step at a time, she reminded herself, and paid attention to the up charge for cheese on the fries.

Chapter 10

When Trenton opened the front door to the condo, it was darker than usual inside. He'd been in such a rush to leave in the morning that he'd forgotten to flick the hall light on like usual. Still, Celia hadn't seemed like the type to not leave a light burning for him, even if she did go to sleep this early. She also hadn't seemed like the type to ignore his calls and messages, but he hadn't gotten a reply to the few he sent. He'd decided to double his own dinner portion for lack of insight into what she'd wanted to eat. Since he was running so late, maybe she'd already had dinner, but the extra salad would keep until morning if so.

Juggling the bag of food and his briefcase, Trenton shut the door behind him. He blinked in the dimness, only slivers of the sinking sun reaching through the closed curtains of the balcony. With his hands full, he gave up on the idea of taking off his shoes in the entranceway, feeling a twinge of guilt as he ignored Emily's old rule.

He managed the light switch in the kitchen with his elbow, placing the food bag down on the counter and his briefcase next to it. He needed to head straight for the courthouse in the morning, and wanted to review the case notes one last time, though the details were already on repeat in his mind. His work had the possibility of changing someone's life, and taking a little more time to review facts always worked to their advantage.

There was no glass left in the sink. Whether she'd drunk the smoothie or not, she'd cleaned and put away the glass that had held it.

Trenton frowned at the still dim hall leading to the guest room. He took out his phone for a little more light as he left the kitchen and approached her room. No glow appeared under the closed door, so she'd turned any lamps off already. His hand hesitated on the knob, but he wanted to be sure, and so he eased the door open.

The guest bed was neatly made and empty. The room itself looked as it always had, except for the throw blanket hanging over the mirror. Not even her duffel bag was visible.

Trenton doubted she would have left for good without saying anything to him. One of his earliest calls to her had been about the spare key he'd forgotten to give her. When he flipped on the hall light and checked the vase on the side table, the key was still inside. He frowned at it. Maybe his voicemail and text had come too late, and she'd been locked out of the house.

He turned his phone in his hand, clicking on his most used contact and letting it ring.

The click was quick as usual, with a “Hey, hold on a second,” from Malcolm coming through. Splashes and the clink of glasses followed. “Here, two IPAs,” Malcom told someone on the other end before his muffled voice became clearer. “Hey, Trent, what’s up?”

“Sorry, I know you’re working. I was just wondering if you’d heard from Celia today? I don’t mean to hover, but—”

“Oh, she’s here,” Malcolm said.

“At the tavern?” The worry eased in Trenton’s stomach. She’d just gone to visit her cousin.

“Yeah, here.” The phone clattered and there was a muffled, “You need a break, anyway. Tell him what’s going on.”

“What?” Celia asked. It seemed like she pulled the phone closer, as her voice was louder when she came on. “Hello?”

“It’s Trenton.” The last of his tension faded. He used his shoulder to keep the phone in place to free his hands.

“Oh, are you already off work?” Celia asked.

Trenton laughed. “Already? The sun is gone for the day. How many hours did you think I worked?”

“What? But it can’t be that late.” A bump and shuffle sounded, and then a small gasp. “Wow, I didn’t realize. It looks like I missed a couple of calls from you too. Sorry about that, I had my phone on silent.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was calling to ask what you wanted for dinner, but I’m assuming you’ve eaten at Last Shot?”

“I haven’t really had time for that. The dinner shift has been busy for a Tuesday night.”

“It’s Malcolm’s ribs special. He only does it on Tuesdays.” Trenton paused with a salad in his hand. “Wait, did you say shift? Did Malcolm put you to work?”

“Yeah. Let’s just say my timing was right today.”

“Blake ran off another waitress, didn’t he?” Trenton sighed. His friend was a mess with women.

“I guess it’s common enough, then. Oh, it looks like one of my tables needs their check.”

Trenton glanced at the dark edge of the curtain. “What time are you getting off?”

“I’m not sure. Whenever the tavern closes, I guess.”

That wasn’t until midnight. “I’ll come up to give you a ride home.”

“No, you don’t have to do that. I’ve got it covered.”

Trenton paused, hearing a similar edge to her voice as had been there the night before, when he’d offered to carry her duffel bag. “Is Malcolm driving you home?”

“Malcolm? No, but I told you—”

“You’re not walking back to the condo after being on your feet all night.”

“Of course not. I got a bus pass today.”

Trenton set down the salad. “I’ll come up there.”

“Look, Trenton—”

“I understand you want to do things on your own, and I respect that. But you need to understand that I have quirks too. There’s no way I’m letting you find your own way home in the middle of the night.”

Her breath fanned the mouthpiece. “Fine. Thank you.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Trenton said, hanging up before she could try to argue with him again. He pinched the bridge of his nose. A bus at midnight. That seemed like asking for a pervert to make a pass at her.

He stared at the salads on the counter. What had been his go-to suddenly seemed less appetizing. He placed both in the fridge and headed toward the front door. There was some time yet. He’d grab something to eat at The Long Shot and get to see what type of waitress Celia turned out to be.



Instead of sitting in his usual bar seat with his back to the tables, Trenton chose the other side. As he sat, Malcolm nodded to him but continue to pour a draft to set with a few others on a tray. Celia hurried up, grabbed the tray, and returned to the tables, all without glancing at him.

“Ouch. Seems like you aren’t having luck with the ladies either,” Blake said, slumping into the seat next to him.

Trenton felt a twinge at the cold shoulder he had received from Celia, but focused on his friend instead. “Please tell me the waitress was worth the trouble you caused.”

“Nah, she was a lousy lay,” Blake muttered, fiddling with one of the coasters on the bar.

Trenton stared at him. “Jesus, Blake. What is up with you lately?”

Blake froze, then dropped the coaster. “Shit, you’re right. That was a dick thing to say.” He rubbed a hand over his face.

At least he had acknowledged it, Trenton thought. He didn’t push Blake; instead, he waited for what he would say.

His eyes found Celia again, and he watched her make her rounds. She wasn’t much for smiles or small talk, but she was efficient. He watched her place a refill next to one table, drop off some extra napkins, and promise the check to another table. She had a way of noticing the small things, it seemed.

It made it more obvious when she avoided acknowledging his presence as she passed him to pick up some food that was up.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve been fucking up more than usual,” Blake finally said.

“That’s not something I want to hear, not when you’re revamping my building,” Malcolm said, dropping off Trenton’s usual gin and tonic.

“Even there. I can’t believe I messed up that pipe yesterday.” Blake laid his head down on the top of the bar. “I may have taken on too much with that big job over on Ninth.”

Malcolm sighed. “I told you, my job doesn’t have to be finished immediately. Ease back here if you need to.”

“Thanks, man,” Blake said.

“And keep your hands off my staff,” Malcolm added. “It’s a pain to have to keep hiring people.”

“No problem there.” Blake turned his head the other way, tracking her with his eyes. “It’s a shame, but Celia has always been immune to my charms.”

Trenton had noticed that the night before. She had treated Blake like a pesky younger brother.

Malcolm studied his cousin. “She’s honestly one of the best waitresses I’ve had. I didn’t know she had it in her.” He faced Trenton. “Though she’s been in a snit since your call, well, in her own way. Nothing too obvious, just curt with a tad too much energy. What did you say to her?”

Trenton took a sip of his drink. “I wouldn’t let her take the bus at midnight.”

Blake lifted his head. “Wait, she’s mad that you’re giving her a lift back to your place?”

“She wants to be independent. It makes sense and is probably why she’s holding it together after that fiancé of hers.” Trenton frowned into his glass.

“Did she tell you what happened?” Malcolm asked, glancing back at her. “She still won’t give me any details.”

Trenton ran a finger down his glass. “It’s her story to tell.”

Malcolm’s eyes narrowed on him. “So she did say something to you.”

“Not much.” Trenton shrugged, hating the memory of that hollow look in her eyes.

“I get the feeling I need to find the man and let him have it,” Malcolm muttered. He flicked his rag down the empty bar, where it came to rest near the beer taps.

Trenton took another sip of his drink to avoid agreeing.

Blake lifted an eyebrow. “What, no lecture about violence not being a solution?”

Malcolm turned back, studying Trenton again.

Trenton swallowed. “I don’t lecture.”

“Please, it’s your favorite thing,” Blake said with a laugh. “Followed closely by disapproving looks.”

“You should know,” Malcolm said, his expression easing.

Trenton’s stomach ached, reminding him he hadn’t eaten and was drinking on top of it. “Can I grab my usual, Malcolm?”

“Sure, on the house tonight.” Malcolm tapped the bar in front of him. “Thanks for coming for her despite it pissing her off.” He turned toward the kitchen to call in the order.

“Sounds like she’s immune to your charms too.” Blake patted Trenton on the back. “Not many women have avoided falling for your sweetness.”

“Oh, yeah, women fall at my feet.” Trenton shook his head at his friend.

“Well, they would if you didn’t make it obvious you would step right over them. You’re totally oblivious, man. It’s like an art form, your complete lack of interest.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

Malcolm shook his head as he came back. “No, Blake’s right for once.”

“You could have left off the ‘for once,’” Blake muttered.

Malcolm ignored him. “You friend-zone women so fast their hearts quake. It’s as if you don’t see them as romantic prospects at all.”

Trenton shifted on his stool. “I’ve told you before; I have no interest in dating.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t appreciate some curves,” Blake said. He swiveled in his chair. “For instance, Celia has an amazing ass, but I bet you haven’t noticed.”

“Hey,” Malcolm said.

Trenton couldn’t help but follow Blake’s gaze. Celia was bent over, wiping down a table. He’d already noticed she was petite when he was carrying her to bed the night before. She was a skinny thing, but her ass filled out the jeans she wore, a

round handful. He bet the inch of skin she was showing from where her shirt rode up would be sensitive too. Trenton shifted, clearing his throat.

“My God, the man blushes,” Blake said, grinning at him. “So innocent!”

“I’m not some virgin,” Trenton said, taking a healthy swallow of his drink. “I was married, you know.”

“Come on, guys, she’s my cousin,” Malcolm said.

Blake nodded. “And your first love. Don’t think I’ve forgotten how you used to ditch us for her company when she moved in with you.”

Malcolm’s face darkened. “There was nothing romantic about that. A lot was going on at the time.”

Celia’s words from the night before came back to Trenton. Some things you can’t ever leave behind, she’d said. He’d thought she meant the breakup, but she’d denied it. “I don’t remember why she moved in with you.”

“Malcolm never said.” Blake reached over, downing the rest of Trenton’s drink and making a face. “I forgot you drink that crap. Blech. Anyway, I remember it all being hush-hush. I figured it had something to do with her sick mom. Celia wasn’t around much because she always had to take care of her.”

“Was that it?” Trenton asked, trying to think back and ignoring the way his pulse jumped at the idea of having

something in common with Celia. He had also helped out while his mother was sick.

“Leave it,” Malcolm snapped, scowling at them both. “No good can come of dredging up the past.”

“Whose past?” Celia asked. Tension had filled her body, making a tremor run through the plates in her hands. “Are you all talking about me?”

“I was reminding them about how you wanted me even back then.” Blake winked at her.

Celia rolled her eyes, the lie letting her move toward the kitchen again. “That’s some serious false memory you’ve got there.” She moved past them with the dishes.

Trenton stared after her.

“That was frightening. No one should be that smooth.” Malcolm turned away as the bell chirped that an order was ready in the window.

“Even I almost believed you,” Trenton said, though his gaze didn’t move from the kitchen door until a plate clicked down in front of him. He turned back to find his turkey sandwich on rye with a side salad.

Blake groaned. “You’re in a tavern. Can’t you eat a burger and fries like the rest of us?”

The sight of the food reminded him of how hungry he was. He grabbed half of the sandwich, digging in and trying to avoid the guilt that came from lying to his new roommate, even by omission.

Chapter 11

Celia stared into the dim light of dawn filtering into her room, her fist pressed to her chest, covering the pounding of her heart. She shivered as sweat trailed down her spine. It was ridiculous, having another dream about her mother.

Sleep would evade her again. The few hours she'd grabbed after Trenton had driven them home the night before weren't nearly enough, but they would have to do. Shoving herself up from the bed, she padded through the dark hallway to the light of the living room. Trenton left a lamp on there, as if it were perfectly normal for a grown man to have night-lights. The cool glow of the bulb was soothing in the corner, not too bright on her eyes.

The tile of the kitchen was cool under her bare feet as she approached the countertop. That was right, she remembered. Trenton didn't have coffee. She stared at the emptiness, kicking herself for not swinging by the store earlier in the day,

before she'd gotten sucked into Malcolm's tavern needs. She could have done a few hours' sleep with a hit of caffeine.

While she stared blankly ahead, wondering if it was too early to make a store run, Trenton's bedroom door opened. The man himself came striding out, no tired shuffle in his step despite him getting the same amount of sleep. She wanted to accuse him of having a hidden camera since, as soon as she couldn't sleep, he seemed to know. Only he hadn't acknowledged her at all, instead pressing against the wall to do some sort of leg stretch.

He was in a different pair of running shorts and a tank top, this time in her favorite dark blue. Celia had never thought she was into workout clothes on a man. A nice suit was more her style. Still, Trenton had firm calves below his shorts, and toned arms flexed as he gripped his other foot. He bent into the next stretch, and she admired the way the fabric clung to his ass, which was high and tight.

"Good morning," she said, her voice husky from sleep, she told herself. Not from ogling him.

Trenton dropped his foot and turned to her with his signature smile. "Good morning. I didn't expect you to be awake already, not after working that late yesterday."

Celia shrugged. "Couldn't sleep." She glanced at the empty countertop with another sigh.

Trenton followed her gaze, wincing. "I forgot to pick up a coffee maker. Sorry, it slipped my mind yesterday."

“I didn’t expect you to buy one. You don’t drink it.”

“But you do, and you’re the guest.” Trenton’s smile slipped as his lips firmed.

Celia crossed her arms. “That would make me a freeloader, and that’s not what I am. If I want coffee, I’ll buy it.”

“There’s no reason—”

“It’s my turn,” Celia interrupted.

Trenton blinked at her. “What?”

“Last night, I let you drive me home, even though I didn’t need you to. It seemed important to you, so I gave in.” The annoyance of his insistence had fueled her through most of her shift. It wasn’t until she was in the car, giving him the silent treatment as he drove her home, that she’d seen the sense in his gesture. The city was dark at night, and unlike the empty bus stop closer to the condos, there had been homeless men hanging out beneath the overhangs at the stops closer to the tavern.

“Driving you home was about safety, not about my feelings,” Trenton said, his frown gathering.

Celia’s arms tightened. “It was still your call. My independence is important to me. I need things to be my call when it comes to me.”

Trenton opened his mouth, and Celia braced for the disagreement. “Fine,” came out instead. “I can understand that, and I didn’t mean to push.”

Celia took in a full breath, letting her additional arguments fade from her lips. “Okay then.” Her fog of tiredness returned as the tension between them faded.

“Buying you that addicting, heart-murmur-creating liquid would have made me uncomfortable anyway,” Trenton said, that crooked half smile returning to his face. It was very different from his usual warm one.

“Be careful talking about my coffee that way. We just avoided a fight.” Celia smiled back at him. Then she rubbed her hands over her face. “Do you always get up this early?”

He nodded. “My morning run helps to transition me into the day. I love it.”

She bit her lip to avoid calling him a masochist. Giving up on any liquid momentum, she rounded the wall of the kitchen, shuffling into the living room where he still stood, studying her.

“Come with me,” Trenton said.

Celia’s eyes widened. “You’ve got to be kidding, right?”

“No, it really does wonders, especially for the mind.” He reached out a hand, grazing the skin under her eye. “You don’t look rested. Bad dreams again?”

Celia shrugged, looking away. “My subconscious is trying to work on some things.” Her skin tingled from where he’d touched her, but she refused to press her hand against it and let him know.

“This may be a way to quiet it.” Trenton held her gaze. “Or maybe give it even more time to figure things out.”

“I was on my feet all night. There’s no way you’re getting me to slap them around on concrete too.”

“Oh, come on, Celia. Give it a try.” Trenton nudged her shoulder, his smile turning into a bit of a pout. That combined with the way he said her name made her waver. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said. His smile was daunting in its brightness, causing her to turn toward her room. “I’ll change and grab some socks.” There was a weight to that joy of his that she was tempted to leave behind for good, but she still did what she’d said. She had no true workout clothes, but shorts and a tank top seemed appropriate enough. Her fingers paused with a sock rolled up and ready to put on. She couldn’t believe she’d agreed to go for a run. Blaming sleep deprivation, she pulled on the socks and went out to join him.

Trenton nodded at her, that sunbeam of a smile still in place, and preceded her into the front entryway. “This will be a good way for you to get a feel for the neighborhood as well. There’s a park to the south of us that’s a particular favorite of mine.” He was the type to untie his sneakers and bent to lace them tight.

“How far to the south?” Celia asked as she slipped on her own flat shoes.

He didn’t answer, and she looked over to find him frowning down at her feet. “Are those the only shoes you have?”

She had no desire to tell him she'd left her fiancé's place barefoot. "For now."

"We won't go too far then. It's not good to run without ankle support."

Celia saw a crack to wriggle through. "Maybe it would be better if I waited until I bought better sneakers."

"That eager to get out of it?" Trenton smiled when she shrugged. "Don't worry, we'll take it slow and keep close to the condo."

She swallowed a sigh, following him out and down the elevator. On the sidewalk, he walked her through a few calf stretches. At the fourth type, she huffed out a breath. "I thought you said we'd take it easy?"

Trenton laughed. "I'm worried about you, but you're right, we're ready. Why don't you set the pace? That way." He pointed over her shoulder, the opposite direction from her usual bus stop past the fancy supermarket.

Celia nodded, taking off in the direction he indicated. She started out at a slow speed, feeling the hardness of the sidewalk beneath her thin soles. It became a rhythmic slap, and she increased her pace until the tempo didn't bother her. The fog that had been hanging over her thoughts dissipated as her breathing took its place, not a steady in and out, but a panting whoosh. Still, it was hard to worry about anything when she couldn't breathe.

“Turn right to get to the park,” Trenton said. There was no pant to the words at all, and she was envious. He remained behind her, his running shoes more silent as he kept pace.

She followed his direction, seeing the trees in the distance, large oaks that spread their branches in thick chunks. The canopy blocked out the sunrise, keeping it from blinding them. Beneath the trees, birds could be heard, annoyingly chipper at the start of a new day.

“That’s about as far as we should go,” he told her. “Especially for your first time.”

His even tone, with no loss of breath at all, rankled, and she pushed faster. “I’m... good,” she choked out.

“Wait, Celia—”

She hated the way the hairs on the back of her neck responded to him saying her name. “A little farther!” Her heartbeat drowned out his words, no longer keeping time with her pace, but thumping in a way that ran down her legs. It was difficult to remember any silly dreams when her body was struggling for breath.

Trenton called out to her again, but the words were lost to the pounding in her ears. She realized what she was doing, and her pace faltered just as a crack in the sidewalk caught the toe of her shoe. He reached for her, his hands only managing to knock her to the side, not to stop her fall altogether.

Her knees took the brunt of the concrete, and her hands crashed down into the grass and dirt beside it. The ache in both

areas was immediate, and Celia began to inwardly curse her stupidity. More than one counselor had warned her about her tendency to take things to extremes.

Trenton dropped down beside her as she rolled over to her butt. His hands began a journey around her limbs. “How badly are you hurt?”

She shook her head, unable to find the words while his fingers barely skimmed over her skin.

He took her wrists, turning her palms up to inspect. “These will ache, but it looks like there’s just a scratch, unlike your knees.”

She swallowed before turning her eyes to her legs. It was as if the bleeding scrapes were waiting for more attention before the pain increased. Her head pounded as blood dripped along the curve of her bent knee and below.

“I’m sorry,” she said, keeping her eyes on the wounds.

“It was an accident,” Trenton said. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“I wasn’t listening, and I messed up your run. This might even make you late to work. I’m so sorry. I’ll make it up to you. I’ll—”

“Celia!”

Her eyes snapped up to his. They felt hot and gritty as they met with a steady green.

“I’m not mad.” He reached out, cupping her cheek. “I’m just upset you got hurt. This was my fault. I should have remembered how uneven the sidewalk was in the park.”

She shook her head, the action pushing his hand away. “It’s not.”

His lips quirked into more of a half smile, not that blinding brightness from before. “What a pair we are. Both taking the blame for something that was an accident.”

Celia let out a hiccup of a laugh. She was a mess, that was all. To avoid the thought, she pushed to her feet.

“You don’t have to get up yet,” he said, his hands hovering in front of her as if she’d topple over at any moment. “Give yourself another minute.”

“I’m fine.” Her knees throbbed, likely calling her a liar in their own way. She didn’t look down at them, not that avoidance helped much. The increase in pressure caused her to wince.

“See, you’re not fine,” Trenton said. His arm circled her back, and the next thing she knew her world tilted as his other arm found its way beneath her knees.

Her body stiffened in his grasp, her mind going blank.

“Don’t worry, I won’t drop you,” Trenton said, already striding back the way they had come. “But hold on, just in case.”

Her left hand curled over his shoulder and around his neck as if it didn’t belong to her at all.

“We’ll be home in no time,” he said, and continued to carry her as if she didn’t weigh a thing.

Chapter 12

Trenton lifted Celia into his arms, surprised by how delicate her shoulder felt beneath his hand. She'd looked small in his coat the other night. Since then, she'd mostly been in jeans and a shirt, and she hadn't looked lost like that again. He'd carried her to bed the other night, and it hadn't been a hardship. Despite being average height, she'd been lighter than he'd expected.

Tension stiffened her limbs, and he held her a little closer for reassurance. "Don't worry. I won't drop you." He started walking, wanting to bandage her up as soon as possible. "But hold on, just in case."

When the arm pressed against him came around the back of his neck and her fingers brushed there, a shiver ran through him. Odd, he'd never been particularly ticklish.

The image of her ass filling out her jeans from the night before popped into his thoughts, and heat moved up his neck. It wasn't the time to notice her charms, not after he'd failed to help her.

She'd been pushing herself too far during their run. One of his sisters got like that, too anxious to not think about something that she tried to throw herself into the next thing. He should have recognized it and eased her back.

"Trenton, please put me down." The grip Celia had on him tightened as she glanced around.

The park had begun to fill up with other morning joggers now that the sun had risen. He nodded to one who looked familiar, and the man grinned back.

"It's just scuffed-up knees. There's no need to make a scene." Celia's voice had a catch in it, and he glanced at her face. She had averted her eyes from the others, staring at Trenton's ear instead.

"Your injury is obvious. No one will think twice about me carrying you." The trees were at his back as he crossed to the buildings.

Her lips opened, but when another jogger passed, they pursed into a thin line. Instead of protesting again, her head hid in the crook of his neck. When her breath fanned over the skin there, he felt a tingle similar to the one before. With her so close, he caught the scent of her hair, smelling his own mint-cucumber shampoo. He didn't mind that she'd used it, but the thought of her using it made his breath catch. Maybe it was the fact that he was picturing her naked and wet in the shower that did it. Not that he'd seen her naked.

Trenton cursed himself, lowering her a bit to block the semi-erection that had formed. Willing it back down wasn't

doing much. It was ridiculous. He'd shared shampoo with his sisters before, and carried them just like this when they were hurt.

It had been a while since his sexual need had snuck up on him. It was all Blake's fault, getting him to objectify Celia.

Picking up his pace, Trenton was relieved when their building came into sight. He was careful not to jostle her as he climbed the few steps to the door, using his shoulder to push it open. The elevator was empty and waiting when they reached it.

"Please push our floor number," he said. It was a mistake to ask. Celia pressed her chest against his as she reached past his shoulder to push the 5 button. His naked shower image of her shifted based on the firm breasts pressed against him. Trenton wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, but his hardening dick didn't want to do either.

"We've almost reached our place. Will you put me down now?" Celia asked.

"Not until we're inside," Trenton told her. And he got himself under control. But she didn't need to know that. He apparently was a perv, just like Blake.

She put the key in the lock at the condo door and gave it a twist. When she started to hand the key back, he shook his head. "That one's yours. I meant to give you the spare yesterday."

“Oh,” was all she said, but her hand curled closed around the key.

Toeing the door open, he moved straight in, not bothering with the shoe thing Emily had always insisted on. He deposited Celia on the couch, then turned away.

“You still need to get ready for work. I can take care of the bandaging,” she offered.

He was already heading into the kitchen for the first aid kit. “Just let me take care of it. You’re injured because I talked you into running with me.” The reminder helped to tamp down his body’s interest.

“Me being a klutz is not your fault.” When he glanced over at her, she was frowning down at her battered knees, her hand stemming the slow drip of blood.

“Oh, hey, don’t do that,” Trenton said, grabbing the kit and jogging back to her. He kneeled in front of the couch, clicking open the case he’d brought. Inside were wipes. He tore one open as he grabbed her hand, turning it to show her dirty and now blood-smearred palm. “This might sting a little.” Though her hand itself hadn’t been bleeding, the scrapes there were filled with dirt. He winced himself as he began to wipe it clean. “Sorry, we have to get this dirt off.”

When Celia didn’t respond, he glanced up. Her eyes had widened, and she was staring down at him, biting her lip.

“It probably hurts, but I’ll be done as quick as I can.” Trenton squeezed her hand a little, glad to see that the dirt

hadn't been as caked in as he'd feared.

She looked away. "It's fine. I barely feel it." The way she shifted on the couch showed the lie in her words.

Trenton shifted to her other hand, which was quicker to clean without the extra smear of blood. He put the used wipes down, grabbing an antiseptic one for her knee. "This might be a little worse." He was careful not to rub as much as press. The bleeding had stopped, and a similar but deeper scrape appeared when he lifted the cotton away. He blew on the wound to help ease any ache.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked.

"Oh, sorry," Trenton laughed as he opened the bandage. "My sisters used to say that helped. They were constantly getting scrapes when they were little, but I guess it's silly for someone all grown up." He carefully pressed the edges of the bandage down before glancing up at her.

Those dark eyes of hers held a shimmer. His smile fell away as he reached for her cheek. "Oh no, does it hurt that bad still? I can add a cream to it."

For the slightest moment, her cheek pressed into his hand. Then she blinked, pulling away and looking anywhere but at him. "Don't be silly. I'm fine."

Trenton nodded, even though she likely couldn't see it. He began the same process on her other knee, though he skipped the blowing. "Malcolm warned me that you always say you're fine, even if you aren't."

“Malcolm worries too much,” she said with a sigh. “Seriously, Trenton, this isn’t a huge injury. I could have taken care of it myself.”

Ah, he thought, her independence was coming out again. His sisters had often complained about him trying to take care of things as well. “I know you could have.” His fingers smoothed the last bandage. “There, all done. Make sure you can bend your knees and it’s not too tight.”

She curled her legs up to the couch, proving her knees bent just fine. “Thank you, Trenton. Really.”

His eyes lifted to her face, and he stilled at the half smile there. When she laughed, the sound slid through to his stomach.

“And despite everything, you were right. I’m wide awake now from our run.”

He forced his own smile, snapping the kit shut and closing his used items into a fist as he rose, returning to the kitchen. “That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

Her second laugh was more natural, and the warmth that slid through him made it obvious he needed to get away. “You’re right about me running late.” His briefcase was sitting in the entryway, reminding him of what the day held. “And I have to be at court today. Good thing I have those salads from last night for lunch. The food trucks there are so unhealthy. Oh, and feel free to eat the other salad. It won’t keep.” He grabbed one from the fridge to set out so he wouldn’t forget it. He hesitated as the blender came into sight. “I wanted to make

you another wake-up drink today, but I probably won't have time."

"Trenton, stop!" Celia called from the living room. "No more worrying about me. Go get ready."

He hurried to the bathroom, rushing through his shower. It wasn't until he was drying off that he realized he hadn't brought any new clothes into the shared bathroom with him. He wrapped his towel around his waist as his mind raced through options even while he shaved, brushed his teeth, and completed his morning routine. There was only one solution. He glanced at the hamper full of his sweaty clothes, cringing at the idea of putting them back on.

A tentative knock sounded on the bathroom door. "Trenton?"

"Celia?" He cracked the door open to peer out. "What's the matter?"

She held up his phone, which he'd left on vibrate. It continued to pulse. "It said 'Work,' and they've called a few times."

He opened the door fully, grabbing the phone and holding it to his ear even as he crossed the living room. "Jacob, what is it?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Caldwell, but one of your clients insisted on talking to you," Jacob, his legal assistant, said through the phone. "A Mrs. Rentwood? That was the case file going to

trial today, so I thought you'd want to take the call, even if it was before normal hours."

Trenton's radar went off as he grabbed a new pair of slacks. He wondered if her soon-to-be ex had tried to exert some last-minute pressure. "Good call. Can you patch her through, or is she waiting for me to call her back?"

"I've got her holding. Thanks, Mr. Caldwell. Situations like hers made me interested in divorce law, but I don't yet feel able to field the emotions involved."

Mrs. Rentwood must have been crying when she called. Trenton dropped his towel to pull his boxers and slacks on, freezing as he realized he'd crossed the condo nearly naked and hadn't bothered to close his bedroom door. He'd been alone for so long, it was habit. Not that Celia was standing in the doorway, staring at him. His body liked the idea of that, but a tearful "hello" in his ear was the cold water he needed to continue getting dressed.

"Mrs. Rentwood. How are you holding up?" Trenton hit the speaker button to toss the phone on the bed so that he could slip his arms into the sleeves of his button-down dress shirt.

"Oh, Mr. Caldwell, I think I've made a mistake." She sniffed into the phone, her voice husky from her tears. "He said he still loves me. That he'll kill himself without me. I don't think I can do this."

Trenton closed his eyes so he could take a breath. Then he continued buttoning his shirt, a frown forming as he remembered the man who dared to call himself a husband to

the poor woman. “You know I will be behind you no matter what you choose, Mrs. Rentwood. But it’s my duty to look past this most recent contact. Do you remember what you told me happened the last time you went back to him?” Trenton remained hands-free as he donned his socks. From his bedspread, her broken exhale came through.

“Do you believe people can change, Mr. Caldwell?” she asked, her voice sounding so small.

Trenton’s hands clenched on the bedspread before he reached for the phone, clicking the speaker off to hold it to his ear. “I do hold out hope for people to change, but remember, it has to be their choice. Did your husband mention changing his ways during your conversation? And be honest.”

She sniffed in his ear. “No, he didn’t mention change. He just sounded so sad, and sorry, really sorry.”

Yeah, the deadbeat was sorry he was about to lose his meal ticket. “You’ve told me before that this is the cycle. And you put your trust in me to break that cycle. Please, Mrs. Rentwood, hold on to that trust just a little longer today. I’m actually on my way to the courthouse now. Will I see you there?” He waited, listening to the small hiccups of breath.

“Yes. I’ll head that way.” She cleared her throat. “And thank you, Mr. Caldwell.”

“Anytime. I’ll see you soon.” Trenton waited for her to hang up before ending the call. He gripped the phone, his mind racing through the files from the night before. He was going to

bring that woman her freedom if she let him. Pushing to his feet, he hurried through the door and into the living room.

Celia was perched on the couch again, her worried eyes meeting his. “Is everything all right?”

“It will be, but I have to leave. How are you feeling?” He hesitated, wanting to go over and prop up her legs.

She waved a hand at him. “Barely a twinge when I brought you your phone. Stop worrying about me.”

“Thanks for that. It was a call I needed to take.”

She nodded. “Now go.”

“I will. Are you working today?” He walked backward toward the entry hallway, waiting on her answer even as his mind was racing in another direction.

“Yes, the night shift.”

“I’ll see you there later when I pick you up.” Not giving her time to argue, he turned away, grabbing his briefcase as he rushed out the door.

Chapter 13

Celia flopped back onto the couch, her knees giving twinges of pain to remind her of her stupidity. Running like a crazy woman wasn't the only thing she hadn't thought through. She really should have averted her eyes from Trenton when he was only wearing a towel. The man had no right to be mouthwateringly gorgeous on top of being obsessively kind.

Her fingers rubbed along the edge of the couch as she thought about him bandaging her knees. She couldn't remember anyone having done that. It wasn't that she never got hurt. Like during the run, she made mistakes, often going too far, and could even be clumsy. Especially as a child. Though not all of her injuries back then had been from her clumsiness.

Celia pressed her lips together, pushing herself to a sitting position to get away from the thought. Who in the world would have been able to tend to a scraped knee back then? Her mother needed everyone to focus on her, and Celia's father had been unable to see anyone other than his wife.

She pictured Trenton crouching in front of her, blowing on her injury to ease the sting. He'd meant nothing by it, had even brought up his sisters. Her heart felt full all the same.

He'd also walked out of the bathroom naked except for some terry cloth and hadn't given her a thought. Random missed beads of water had spotted his long torso, leading down the perfect pelvic arch and into that towel. His legs below were muscled runner's legs.

It had been those dents just above the towel, on either side of his navel, that had caused her face to burn. Celia had wanted to run her hands down the creases and loosen the towel below. She was an idiot, getting all worked up. Trenton wasn't interested. And it wouldn't work out, anyway.

As much as she hated to admit it, Daniel was right. She was terrible at sex. Always had been. Losing her virginity years back had been a nightmare, and it had never gotten better from there. The doubts and uncertainties rose to swamp her during the act, and her mind had never been able to either catch up or let go before the guys were finished. Indecisiveness led her to do nothing, or just lie there, as Daniel had said.

It was much better to keep Trenton as a friend, where he wanted to be. He was one of the nicest people she'd ever met, even if he could be a bit stubborn. Her hand drifted down to rub the edge of the bandage he'd pressed on just so, applying enough pressure to make it stay without giving her any extra pain.

The snippets of his phone call that she'd overheard had been very telling. He was like a counselor to his clients. She wondered what type of lawyer he was.

Celia pushed to her feet and shuffled to the bathroom. She didn't want to get the bandages he'd put such effort into wet yet, so she sponged off the best she could without a full shower. They hadn't run long, but it still got hot out there. She placed her clothes in the hamper on top of Trenton's. The view made her pause, her clothes mixed with his. For the first time since leaving her aunt and uncle's house, she was sharing a space with another person.

Fishing through her pockets, she found the key he'd given her.

The black slacks she pulled on were loose enough in the knee to work, and she added a shirt to them. The pants were her normal interview ones, though now that wasn't necessary. Good thing, since none of the places she'd applied to had responded. She slid the key in her pocket again.

There was more time than she needed before her next shift. She returned to the living room and noticed a bookshelf in the corner. Pulling a book about healthy meals out, she couldn't help but think about Trenton as she started flipping through the pages.

Her stomach growling interrupted the paragraph about the multitude of benefits of kale. She was hungry for once. Maybe reading about food had helped. She closed the book, tilting it

to study it again, and then set it down. Glancing at the clock, she realized it was after eleven.

Trenton had said he'd left a salad for her. Celia padded to the kitchen. That was when she saw the plastic-covered bowl that held Trenton's salad on the counter. In his rush to leave, he must have forgotten it. Her fingers fiddled with the sealed lid. He'd probably already realized and figured something else out for lunch by then. She was silly to even consider bringing it to him.

That gentle smile of his as he crouched by the couch bandaging her knees tugged at her. It'd be a way to repay him, bringing him lunch. She still had plenty of time until her shift started. If he had time, she could even bring her own salad and they could eat together.

She fiddled with the plastic, sighed, and took out her phone. Listening to it ring, a part of her hoped he wouldn't pick up. The click in her ear dashed that hope.

Only it wasn't Trenton's voice that said, "Mr. Caldwell's office."

She regretted reaching out already. "Um, hi. I was looking for Trenton?"

"He's still in court today. May I ask who's calling?"

"Sorry, it's not important. He left his lunch at home, and I was checking to see—"

"Oh, that's not good. Mr. Caldwell hates the greasy food trucks down here. Hmmm, what should I do?" The man

seemed to be more talking to himself than to her.

“I mean, I could bring it to him,” Celia said, wincing as she made the offer.

“Really? That would be great, thank you! It will be great to meet you, too, Mrs. Caldwell. I haven’t been his assistant very long, but had heard Mr. Caldwell was married.”

Celia’s heart sank. “Oh, no, I’m not—”

“Oh, the short recess is over. I have to go back in. See you soon!”

Celia groaned aloud, but went to grab her socks. She didn’t want Trenton to go hungry, especially not if it was because he had been distracted with helping her that morning. Even if he had taken it too far.

The bus to the downtown courthouse was on a different route than the one she used to get to work. She’d have to give herself plenty of time to get to the tavern afterward. When she perched on the bus seat, her knees protested a bit, so she stretched out her legs, watching the neighborhood pass. It was almost an hour since she’d called when she climbed the white marble steps leading into the courthouse. She wasn’t sure where exactly he’d be, she realized as she put her bag, phone, and everything else in her pockets through the metal detectors.

The guard at the end looked uncomfortable as he took her tray of things to the side to speak to another. The older guard gestured to her, and she came over, her shoulders hunching as

he lifted the mace with the new house key attached. “Ma’am, you’re not allowed to bring weapons inside the courthouse.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. I always keep it with me since I ride the bus.” She didn’t want to part with it, and bit her lip.

The older man’s face softened. “Ah, I see.” He glanced at the younger guard and then around the nearly deserted entrance. Leaning toward her, he placed the mace in her hands. “Here, keep it. Just don’t get me in trouble by spraying anyone in here.”

“Oh, only if they start it,” Celia said.

He chuckled, gesturing that she could retrieve her other things.

Relieved, Celia gathered everything again, sticking the mace keychain in her pocket. She actually had used it on someone once and had regretted it. Her own eyes had stung. But the would-be robber had gotten it worse, and she’d kept the twenty bucks she’d had in her pocket that day.

The plastic bag with the salads crinkled as she rounded the corner to peer down the first hall. At the far end, she recognized the tall back of the man she was looking for, and some of her tension left her. He was standing in front of what looked like a bench, and she thought that would be perfect. They could eat quickly, and she would be on her way again.

He shifted, sitting on the bench and facing the woman she hadn’t seen since he’d been standing in front of her. The woman was crying, and Trenton patted her shoulder, only the

soothing murmur of his words reaching Celia. Suddenly, the woman threw herself against Trenton's chest, burrowing her head against it. Trenton held his hands up awkwardly, then gently resumed patting.

Celia froze in the hallway, not sure what to do. The woman obviously needed him, and Celia had no desire to interrupt. A little comfort from Trenton went a long way, she knew. And that's all he was offering the woman. His posture made his discomfort obvious, though he wasn't the type to turn away from someone in need—or she hadn't gotten the impression he was, at least. An uncomfortable rock lodged in her throat. Trenton was kind to everyone. She was sure of that.

A slight throat clearing behind her had her turning to face a young man in a suit. The mop of red hair on his head looked as if he had tried to tame it, but it had still curled around, and freckles stood out on his face as he smiled at her. “You must be Mrs. Caldwell. I'm Jacob, Mr. Caldwell's legal assistant. I'm so happy to meet—”

“Here,” Celia interrupted, shoving the bag with the salads in it into his stomach.

The assistant's hands automatically gripped it and she let go.

“If you wait for a little while, I'm sure Mr. Caldwell would like to eat with you.”

“Sorry, I can't stay,” she heard herself say.

Jacob blinked at her. “That's too bad, Mrs.—”

“And I’m not his wife. His wife died.” The words sounded harsher than she intended them, but Celia doubted there was a good way to say it.

The assistant’s eyes widened. “Oh no, I didn’t know.”

“No harm done,” she said. She glanced back at the far bench. Trenton had moved the woman away from him and was gripping her shoulders as he leaned down to talk to her. “What kind of lawyer is he?”

“A divorce lawyer.” Jacob moved to her side to follow her gaze. “This client was in a horrible situation, but the judge ruled in her favor. Things should go easier for her now.” The assistant’s eyes shone. “Mr. Caldwell is amazing.”

Celia watched Trenton continue to comfort the woman. She didn’t really understand, but she also didn’t doubt that he’d helped her. “I have to go.” She turned away from the scene.

“Thanks again for bringing this.” Jacob held up the bag.

She nodded, her feet already carrying her away. “Oh, and there’s an extra in there for you,” she called back without looking. The legal assistant might as well eat hers. She didn’t feel hungry anymore.

Chapter 14

Trenton finished dressing, listening to the quiet of the house. It was Saturday, so technically he could have slept in, but his morning run and shower were more of a ritual than anything else.

Celia had taken to sleeping in more the rest of the week, which made sense with her working until closing each night. He'd been surprised when Jacob had given him the salad she had brought the other day. He had wanted to scold her for doing too much after she'd taken such a rough tumble, but she'd seemed tired when he'd picked her up that night. So he'd thanked her instead, and she had simply nodded, and that had been that.

He had something else to thank her for as well. It seemed his legal assistant had mistaken her for his wife, but she had managed to tell the man something Trenton had not found the words for in six months. Jacob had said he was sorry to hear about his wife when they'd had lunch that day. He'd expected his normal reaction to the acknowledgement, but it had been

chased by the question of who Celia was. He hadn't been prepared, and each explanation his mind flipped through seemed wrong. Trenton had finally settled on telling Jacob that she was a friend of the family who was staying with him for a while.

It was hard to believe it had still been less than a week. Though they didn't see each other as much anymore with their differing schedules, it wasn't as if her presence hadn't settled in. He'd been surprised, and slightly embarrassed, when he'd found his clothes washed and folded neatly on his bed on Friday. No one but him had washed his clothes since Emily.

Trenton moved to the kitchen, taking out the fixings for breakfast. He wanted to make her another of his smoothies as thanks for all she'd done that week. He'd purchased a coffee maker and coffee, but it remained unopened in the corner. Instead, the glass for the smoothie he left her each morning was rinsed out and put away. It made him happy.

There was a click from her bedroom door, though she disappeared into the bathroom right after. Knowing she was awake and wouldn't be disturbed, Trenton turned on the Bluetooth radio, humming along as he worked. When he turned on the blender, it added an additional hum in the background. When Celia had started sleeping in, he'd found he was thankful Emily had forced him into buying the quieter model years ago.

Celia padded into the living room, sitting at the counter opposite the kitchen as he worked. "Morning," she said with a

yawn.

Trenton smiled at how she propped up her head with a hand. He'd nearly forgotten how tired she looked in the mornings. "Good morning. You could have slept in longer if you wanted."

She shrugged. "I'm working a double today, so I wanted to make sure I woke up fully well before lunch. Besides, I was curious what all you put into those things." She nodded toward the blender.

Pleased, Trenton launched into an explanation of the ingredients. Each one had been picked for the particular vitamins they added. He'd had to tweak it along the way, since it was the worst thing he'd ever tasted at first. He laughed as he told her that. "I'd been making it for Emily at the time, and she gave me an earful."

Celia paused in reaching for the glass he'd placed in front of her. "I thought you were the health nut. So it was your wife that got you into smoothies?"

"Yes and no." Trenton's smile faded as he poured the additional helping for himself. He took a sip, the flavors complicated but somehow balanced. The perfect blend of wake-up vitamins. "I started looking into it after she was diagnosed. I'd been reading into things to help, and diet came up over and over. Emily was never the type to watch what she ate, so it was hard for her to change. Me encouraging her and matching what she ate, even instigating, helped." He smiled again. "As long as it tasted good."

“I’m not sure good is the right word,” Celia said, but she lifted the glass and took a sip. “But it does somehow grow on a person.” She stared down into the green liquid.

“So you really have been drinking it. A part of me was convinced you poured it down the sink each morning,” Trenton admitted.

Celia let out a soft smile. “I admit, I was tempted to the first day. But I was also desperate with no coffee.”

He nodded toward the things he’d bought for her. “It wouldn’t hurt my feelings if you succumbed to your caffeine addiction.”

“How could I?” Her eyes lifted to meet his, and there was something lighter within the dark brown. “It’d be rude after you put the effort in to make me one of these each morning.” She lifted the glass in a quick salute to him, then took a longer drink.

“Maybe that’s why we’ve settled in well. You think about others like I do.” Trenton watched her smile fade before she turned away, slipping off the barstool and crossing to the couch. He considered his words, but couldn’t imagine what he had said to offend her. When she curled up on the couch, he saw her scabbed-over knees. She’d taken off the bandages a day or so ago, and the scrapes seemed to be healing well.

He took a gulp of his own smoothie before cleaning up all the ingredients. There wasn’t much to put back in the freezer, which was typical for the weekend. He always restocked on Sundays, chopping and bagging everything he’d need for the

week. He made a mental note to ask her what she'd like to add to the grocery list. Trenton glanced back to where she sat in the living room, happy to see her glass already half empty. He didn't really ever see her eat. She looked so capable most of the time, but there was a gauntness to her that worried him a bit.

Emily had looked the same a couple of months after her diagnosis, though that didn't mean anything. The two of them weren't very similar. Emily had been open to a fault, without the social cue most had to know when she was talking too much or said something thoughtless. Trenton smiled as he remembered the very beginning of their relationship. They hadn't gotten along at all. Before he had understood her, he'd thought she was purposefully rude. It took him a while to understand there was no malice behind her inept conversations. A part of him wondered if somehow she'd always been in such a rush to live more in the years she had.

Of course, she had initially thought he was boring and shy. Which had been fair. He was.

Celia looked up at his laugh, tilting her head as she studied him.

"Sorry, I was just thinking about something," Trenton said, grabbing his glass and joining her in the living room.

She eased back against the couch cushions, pulling her legs in tighter. "Your wife?"

"Actually, yes." He sat in Emily's favorite armchair. She'd liked the way it rocked, never one to sit still. He'd been

thrown off at first to notice Celia preferred his usual place on the couch. “I was remembering how she thought I was boring. You must think the same.” After all, she’d taken exception when he’d compared them.

“No!” Celia said, and Trenton’s eyes widened at the vehemence in the word. She bit her lip, leaning forward to set her glass down. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to shout at you.”

“It’s okay.” He smiled at her, though she didn’t see it since she’d ducked her head in embarrassment. At that angle, her brown hair had a sheen of red from the sunlight coming through the curtains. “I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. I thought that might be why you seemed bothered when I said we were alike.”

Her shoulders hunched forward, and he wished he hadn’t said anything. “That’s not it at all,” she said quietly. “You are kind, putting others before yourself all the time. The way you took care of me, and then that woman in the courthouse.” She shook her head, finally lifting it. Her eyes were those dark pools again, ones he wished he could change back to what he’d seen earlier instead, for just a moment. “I’m nothing like that.” Her fingers found the rubber band on her wrist.

The chair squeaked as Trenton sat forward. “I don’t agree. You brought my lunch the other day, after I’d forgotten it. That was kind.”

She was already shaking her head. “I did it so we’d be even.”

“Even?” He blinked at her, completely lost.

“You’d taken care of me, and it made me feel like I should do something to even the scales, that’s all. It’s important to not give or take too much. Otherwise, people get attached.”

Trenton was without words for once. He stared at her clenched hands.

“That’s why I also wanted to talk to you about the rent.”

“I’m not taking money from you,” he said. He’d already paid off the place, and she was doing chores around the condo already. “You’ve been cleaning and doing laundry and things. That’s more than enough repayment.”

Celia shook her head. “That was in exchange for the transportation at night. I owe you more for staying here.”

When Trenton studied her face, there was a tightness around her eyes that made it obvious how serious she was. “I’ll think about it,” Trenton said, surprising himself.

The tension in her fingers eased. “Please let me know what you’d consider reasonable. If you don’t, I’ll decide. I should have enough after today’s shift to give you the first week.” She leaned forward, gripping her glass again before standing and heading back to her room.

Trenton stared after her. No, she wasn’t like his wife. Celia was much more complicated, and he was disappointed in himself. He thought he’d figured her out, but it turned out he hadn’t been paying enough attention at all.

Chapter 15

Celia paused in lifting the tray when Malcolm kept a hand on it. Her eyes raised to meet his.

“Ah, there you are.” He smiled at her, using his hand to shove back a stubborn lock of his hair that had slipped out of his bun. “I had forgotten how single-minded you could get when working on something. It used to happen when you studied as well.”

“And you never had to study,” Celia said. It had galled her, how he could wing things while she had to put so much attention into academics. Then she’d remember how much he had done for her, and the irritation would pass. He was the one person she’d never be able to pay back. He had changed her life—how could she put a price on that?

“Don’t be jealous,” he teased. “In all seriousness, you’ve been working straight through the Saturday lunch shift. When Katie gets here, take at least a half-hour break. It’s begun to slow down.”

She nodded to let him know she heard.

“I mean it, Celia. Don’t make me out to be a bad boss.” He gave her that look he was so good at, the one that told her he could see right through her.

“I wouldn’t mind sitting for a bit,” she admitted.

He glanced down at her legs. “You’ve been less stiff today. Did your knees heal up?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Did Trenton tell you about that?” It hadn’t been one of her most shining moments, and she hated to think of him talking to Malcolm about it.

Malcolm lifted an eyebrow. “Since when do I need anyone to tell me what’s going on with you?”

“Well, that’s the truth,” a familiar voice said from behind Celia. She turned to see her other cousin, Malcolm’s sister, tying on an apron. Katie had a familiar gleam in her eye as she stared back at her. “Malcolm’s been keeping tabs on you for as long as I can remember.”

“Can’t you just say hello, Katie?” Malcolm asked, flicking his towel at his sister.

The move caused him to release the tray of drinks he’d been holding hostage. “I’ll get these over to table five,” Celia said, lifting the tray.

“You do that,” Katie said, leaning on the bar. “Did that hound dog scare off another one of your waitresses?”

Celia tuned the siblings out as she focused on her tables again. Malcolm had been right about the tavern slowing down. Her multiple tables dwindled until she was finally cleaning up after the last one. The tavern was never completely silent, not with the music overhead. Malcolm rotated between radio stations throughout the week, so at least it wasn't always the same songs.

“Here, I can finish this one,” Katie offered, putting her own rag down to block Celia's.

Celia didn't straighten, though her hand stopped moving to avoid running into the other woman's. “I'm almost done.”

Katie shrugged before she retreated. “Suit yourself. But the next table is mine.” She nodded over to the counter. “Food is up.”

“Food?” Celia glanced around, still finding no customers. “I didn't put any orders in.”

Katie rolled her eyes. “For you, of course. You're a skeleton, like usual. Go eat, or Malcolm will worry.” She moved away, checking the salt shakers on the other tables to collect the ones needing a refill.

Celia finished wiping down her last table, putting things back to the way they should look. When she crossed to the bar, a sandwich and fries were waiting, with a soda perched next to them. She sighed as she took the stool in front of the food, glancing at her cousin, who pretended to wipe down the other end of the bar. “Make sure you dock me for it.”

Malcolm straightened to scowl at her. “Stop being stubborn. I’ve told you all week, food is a perk of working here.”

Someone grabbed one of her fries, and she turned to watch Blake pop it into his mouth. “Why didn’t you say so sooner? I could eat something.”

Malcolm glared at his friend. “Stop running off all of my waitresses, and maybe I’ll consider it.”

“It’s not my fault they all find me irresistible,” Blake said, sitting down next to Celia.

She didn’t bother edging her plate away, letting him steal another fry. She’d never eat them all.

“That’s why they all left then, huh?” Katie set all the salt shakers she’d collected at the end of the bar. “Seems like they resisted just fine.”

Blake smirked at her. “Oh, that’s always after they’ve already given in to my charms.”

Katie let out a snort. “So it’s more that you’re that bad, then. Is it that you send them all running in horror, or just disappointment?”

“Neither. You’ll never find out for yourself, Katie, so stop acting jealous.”

“Jealous!” Malcolm’s sister’s face went scarlet.

Celia focused on the sandwich in front of her, forcing herself to take a bite. The two of them were as normal as ever. They’d picked at each other ever since Malcolm had stood up

for Blake back when. She hadn't been around for that, but had heard the story often enough. The number of other boys they had faced together increased with each telling.

Malcolm had already moved down the bar to step between the two. "Enough, both of you." He set his hands on the bar, and Celia checked for new scabs or nicks. She hadn't seen any all week, to her relief. Malcolm was a brawler, but only when he felt like someone deserved it. She'd half expected him to go after Daniel, but it seemed he had left well enough alone. It was a strange quality in someone who was always so caring, but he also had a temper. Mainly when it came to injustice, like a bunch of boys picking on someone.

Trenton was a different type of caring. She couldn't picture him hurting anyone. He'd sooner soothe them all with a kind word and a few pats on the shoulder.

Celia pictured a group hug between all the boys while she ate one of the fries.

"Ooh, who are you thinking about while wearing such a smile?" Blake asked her, tilting his head with his own knowing grin.

Celia choked on her fry, coughing and reaching for her drink to take a gulp, and to avoid answering. If she admitted it was Trenton, Blake would never let her hear the end of it.

"Not everyone is like you, Blake, thinking about the opposite sex all the time," Katie said, actually helping Celia out for once.

Blake tweaked the other woman's nose. "There's no one else like me, princess."

"Thank God," Malcolm and Katie said in unison, then laughed with each other.

Blake held a hand to his heart. "How you both wound me! Come on, Celia, you don't feel that way, do you?"

She was just glad the conversation had moved on. "I doubt God had any part in making you," she said, lifting her sandwich again.

Blake stared at her before chuckling. "I didn't expect that from you. The princess, sure, but you've always seemed so sweet."

"You just don't know her very well," Katie said, capping one of the salt shakers harder than needed.

"Maybe not," Blake said with a thoughtful hum. He leaned closer, his words brushing against Celia's ear. "But has Trent uncovered this mean streak?" he whispered.

Celia jerked away from him even as he stole another fry.

"Blake!" Malcolm snapped. "Didn't I just ask you to leave my waitresses alone?"

"No worries with these two," Blake said, waving his stolen food to point at Katie and then back to Celia. "I doubt they'll leave you in the lurch."

"Not that you have a chance with us, anyway," Katie muttered as she collected the salt shakers in her arms.

“Much to your disappointment, I know when my friend’s relatives are untouchable,” Blake called after her retreating back.

“I hope you’re serious about that.” Malcolm studied his friend with a frown.

“I’m rarely serious.” Blake munched on the fry. “But I can take a hint, and you’ve glared daggers at me before with these two.”

Malcolm sighed. “Please tell me you’ve made progress upstairs and I’m a little closer to having you out of my hair.”

“And what flowing locks you have.” Blake snickered, but his smile faded. “You’ve got a mess up there, Malcolm.” At the returned glare from his friend, he slid off the bar chair. “But I’m back at it. I might work a little harder if I knew some of those fries would be waiting for me.”

“Get some actual work done and I’ll spot you dinner and a drink later,” Malcolm agreed.

Blake shot him a thumbs-up and hopped up the creaking staircase to the floor above.

Celia finished the first half of her sandwich and pushed her plate away.

Malcolm pushed it back. “At least eat half the fries. With Blake stealing some, it’s not even half at this point.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Malcolm. I eat.” Celia met his gaze, refusing to look away. She had a smoothie every day. Her chin rose a little.

“So show me,” Malcolm said, not backing down. He ran a hand over his hair, letting it pause as it reached his bun. Then he sighed and fished something out of his pocket. “I’m sorry if this is overstepping, but here.” He shoved the paper toward her.

When Celia unfolded it, inside were three phone numbers in Malcolm’s barely decipherable handwriting. She raised an eyebrow at him.

“It seems like you’ll be here for a while, and I know you like the group type best.” He shrugged. “No pressure.” He grabbed the rag he had thrown at Blake earlier and turned to wipe something farther down the counter that didn’t need wiping.

Celia’s hand crumpled the paper as her pulse beat hard in her throat. She shoved it into her pocket, anyway. She’d told no one besides Malcolm that she’d continued counseling, and couldn’t believe he’d remembered her liking group sessions from so long ago.

There was always a delay when she moved somewhere new. It was so hard finding the good places. “I would have looked it up myself.”

Malcolm nodded, not arguing with her. “You still can.”

The nightmares had continued every night, though she didn’t always get up anymore. She didn’t want Trenton to worry. Her hand strayed down to her pocket before reaching for another fry and putting the unwanted food into her mouth.

Chapter 16

Trenton knew he'd arrived too early, but he'd found that he liked to watch Celia work. She still wasn't a server who exuded a warm welcome. When she read the customers' minds and provided what they needed before they asked, though, they didn't seem to care.

Malcolm set a gin and tonic in front of him. "Been seeing you here a lot," he said even as he turned to another customer at the bar.

Saturday night was busier than Trenton was used to, though he'd managed to snag a bar chair with a view of the tables. He purposefully kept his gaze averted from Celia when she bent over to clean off a table. After he'd pictured her naked while she was injured the other day, he'd been avoiding looking at her ass. He still couldn't believe he'd been such a jerk.

The bar chair next to him freed up, and the person to blame for his thoughts slid in next to him. "Can't stay away, can you?" Blake grinned.

“I’m just picking up Celia,” Trenton said, lifting his glass to take a drink.

“Two hours too early, I see,” Blake said. “Must be lonely back at your place now that you’re used to her being there.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. We barely see each other, what with me working days and her working nights.”

“That’s a pretty hard protest I’m hearing.” Blake waved a hand to catch Malcolm’s attention. “Did I earn my way for tonight?” he asked when their friend came over. “I’m starved.”

Malcolm sighed, but nodded. “I’ll put something in, but do me a favor.”

Blake narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Last time you said that, I started working on the upstairs here, and it’s been nothing but a pain.”

“Nothing like that. Don’t take any of Celia’s food anymore.”

Trenton glanced at his roommate as Blake frowned.

“She didn’t seem to mind,” Blake said.

“I do,” Malcolm pushed.

“I mean, sure.” Blake nodded when he realized how serious Malcolm was. “I didn’t mean anything by it, just habit.”

“I know,” Malcolm said, scribbling an order on a ticket and taking it to the kitchen window.

Trenton had noticed how skinny she was the two times he'd carried her. "So she's been eating here?" he asked Malcolm once his friend had returned.

"In a fashion." Malcolm moved to the other side of the bar, filling a few orders.

Blake frowned as he studied Celia. "She looks the same as always to me. Does she have an eating disorder or something?"

"Not that I've seen," Trenton said, though they hadn't shared any meals together. "I asked her a few times if there was anything she wanted when I go to pick up groceries, but she never says she does."

"She wouldn't," Malcolm said, leaning on the counter in front of them again. "She wouldn't want to owe you for it. It's probably been tough on her to even stay at your place."

"She asked me to charge her rent," Trenton admitted.

Blake snorted. "As if you need the money, Mr. Lawyer."

"She was very serious." Trenton had tried to figure out the lowest he could ask her for without ruffling her feathers.

"She gets that way. Even forced my mom and dad to take her money." Malcolm shrugged, straightening again. "They put it in an account for her and gave it all back as part of her graduation present."

"Sounds like your parents," Blake said, a soft smile crossing his face.

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “You only like them because they spoil you.” He’d shared his parents with most of his friends, but especially with Blake, at least before Celia moved in. Blake’s single mom had gone through boyfriends, and not all of them had appreciated her son.

“What type of food does Celia like?” Trenton asked, glancing over at her again. “She won’t say, and I haven’t seen her eat anything besides my smoothies.”

“She actually drinks your green poison?” Blake shivered.

“I really improved them before Emily passed,” Trenton said, the usual weight pressing on him as he thought of his wife being gone.

Blake shook his head. “Celia might be as nice as you if she forces down that shit.”

Trenton sighed, knowing he’d never convince his friend. He’d made the mistake of using him as a guinea pig before the smoothies were halfway decent.

Malcolm just laughed. “Celia has never been picky. She likes anything quick and easy. She actually did all the cooking before she moved in with us as a kid, but her family never had much, not with all the medical bills.”

Trenton stored this snippet that his friend had shared. Back then, he hadn’t paid much attention to Malcolm’s quiet cousin. Being a couple of years older, and his mom getting sick, had kept him distant during that time. He and Malcolm had even drifted apart until a few years later. He’d run into his friend

again around the time he'd met Emily, when Malcolm had opened the tavern.

"A couple of light beers, Malcolm," Celia said from over his shoulder, sending his friend to the drafts. When Trenton turned, Celia was looking at him. "Sorry, I'm going to be a couple of hours still. I hate to make you wait."

Trenton shook his head. "It's not your fault. I came a little early to hang out with Blake."

"Oh, is that why?" Blake asked, grinning.

Celia's eyebrows drew together.

"Just ignore him," Trenton said. "I often do."

The tension drained from her face as she shook her head. "I doubt you ignore anyone." She reached out, taking the tray that Malcolm held. "Thanks."

Trenton watched her walk away.

"You're checking out her ass, aren't you?" Blake asked.

Malcolm smacked his head even as he slid a beer in front of their ridiculous friend. "Stop that. Not everyone is like you." He returned to work, grabbing another drink for a customer.

Trenton's fingers clenched around the glass in his hand. Blake wasn't completely wrong. More than once he'd had to adjust himself after thinking about her, despite his best intentions.

"Hmmm." Blake shifted closer, poking Trenton in the cheek. "Do I see a blush?"

Trenton jerked his face away. “You’re imagining things.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Blake took a gulp of his beer, wiping a hand across his lips. “But there’s no way in hell you came here tonight to spend time with me.”

Trenton’s gaze sought Celia out on its own. She was bending over to place a beer on the table, and Blake was right. He was checking out her ass. Her black slacks cupped more flesh there than her skinniness would make one expect. Just as her breasts had pressed into him more fully when she was pushing the button in the elevator the other day.

He shifted on his bar chair, annoyed with himself for making it so easy for Blake.

His friend snickered beside him. “Good to know you’re still a man after all.”

Trenton had lifted his drink, but he let the glass clink back on the bar. “Stop pushing this. I have no intention of doing anything.”

“Of course not.” Blake lifted his own glass in a toast. “You like to regularly deny yourself. Like Buddha or whatever.” He took a longer sip.

“It’s not about that. She’s not even a week out of her relationship and doesn’t need me or anyone else sniffing around.”

“Well now, that depends on what the dick said to her when he broke things off,” Blake said.

Trenton focused on the strangely serious expression on his friend's face. "What do you mean?"

"She talked to you about her breakup, right? I mean, you are nice old Trent, so easy to talk to." Blake shrugged when Trenton's lips pressed together. "Let me guess. The ex-fiancé piece of crap had another woman. Or told her she wasn't good enough in some way. Most guys go that route if they're doing the splitting."

"Please tell me this isn't from experience," Trenton said, wincing.

"Hell no. Women want more from me, but I remind them of what they signed up for, despite how amazing they are. A quick, feel-good fling." Blake took another long drink. "I am wonderful for a woman's self-esteem." His eyes wandered the bar. "Let's face it, they are so much better than we are, and they should know it." His gaze locked on Katie, and his smile faded even as he looked back at his beer again.

Trenton pretended not to notice.

"Anyway, if her breakup was like I expect, attention from you would actually help her." Blake drained the last of his beer. "Especially with how attentive you are to others. I get the impression Celia hasn't had much attention." His gaze shifted again, but this time behind the bar. "Except from Malcolm, of course."

The regard Malcolm had for his cousin had been obvious for quite a while. Trenton often thought it was a shame the two were related by blood. Malcolm had his share of women, but

he'd never stayed with any long. And he'd never looked at them the way he'd looked at Celia. "He'd kill me if I touched her," Trenton reminded Blake.

Blake shrugged. "You'd be doing him a favor, I think."

Trenton shook his head. "I doubt he, or his fists, would see it that way."

Blake snorted. "Coward."

"Speak for yourself." Trenton glanced at Malcolm's sister, who was pretending not to look Blake's way. "He scares you too. Or is it a coincidence that the Griffin girls are the only ones you've never touched?"

The other man frowned. "I'm surprised at you. I doubt you want me to make a play for Celia."

"You and I both know it's not Celia I'm talking about," Trenton said. He studied his friend as he squirmed in his chair. "Malcolm's sister has held a torch for you for a long time."

Blake started to lift his beer again, but his frown deepened at the empty glass. "Katie and I would never work. Liking me is just a habit for her."

"What about all the waitresses?" Trenton asked, studying his friend. "Or do you really not realize you're doing it because she's sure to notice?"

Blake froze. He closed his eyes. "Shit. You might be right." He let out a sigh. "Though I hope to hell you're overthinking things again and I just wanted to get laid." He propped his

head on his hand to study Trenton. “Not all of us can go years without any sex.”

Trenton didn't bother to deny it. “I made a promise to Emily.” Despite the years that had passed, he never forgot it. She'd been terrified about being forgotten more than anything.

“Hell, man, I'm sorry.” Blake straightened and scrubbed a hand down his face. “Why in the world do you stay friends with me?”

Malcolm slid food in front of Blake. “A question we ask ourselves every day.” He ruffled the man's hair with a fond smile. “Now stop giving Trent a hard time and eat.”

The conversation moved to lighter topics for the rest of the night. Trenton continued to study Celia during her shift. She wasn't a smiler, but there was a lot less tension in her face while she lost herself in the small but constant tasks. It seemed like she'd found her element.

The ride home was quiet like usual, but there was nothing heavy about the silence. A healthy sleepiness had fallen over Celia, and Trenton hoped she slept well that night.

They took off their shoes in the entry hall, as was their habit. When she glanced at him, a small smile formed on her lips. “Good night.”

“Good night,” he returned, feeling that tingling sensation again.

It was so odd. One smile from Celia felt precious to him. Emily had smiled often up until her diagnosis, and most of the

way through her last years. Grinning was her normal expression, and he'd taken it for granted.

Trenton knew Celia would shower for the night before heading to bed. He went to his own room, settling in, resting his head on his pillow. It was late. He should have been asleep already. Instead, he rolled to his side, then to his back again. When the faint click of her bedroom door closing came, he realized he'd been waiting for it.

Celia was always quiet, but he'd still noticed she often woke in the middle of the night, or possibly didn't sleep. Most of the time, she'd go for water and then return to her room. He'd gone out a few times only to see the light on in the guest bedroom. She'd seemed to want privacy instead of company.

He told himself to sleep, trying his other side. After the passage of time, he sighed and tossed off the covers. There was no click when he opened his door. He'd gotten good at pulling it just right when sleep had been so precious to Emily.

Trenton had only gone a few steps when he saw her. Celia hadn't heard him, but instead stared out the glass doors at the moon above the city. She wasn't dressed to entice in any way, not in the shirt and shorts combo she wore. Only the shirt was too big, and the sleeve had slipped down to reveal the pale skin of her shoulder in the moonlight. Her feet curled up beside her appeared delicate, despite the fact that she'd been on them for hours. She stared down at something in her hand, and the stillness in her face edged him closer.

"Is everything all right?" he asked softly.

Her hand clenched tight around the paper she held, as if hiding it from view. “Yes.” She wasn’t one to force a smile. “Sorry to wake you.”

“You didn’t. I was thirsty.” It was a lie, but also not a lie. She couldn’t be responsible for waking him when he hadn’t been asleep. His hands clenched at his sides. “You really don’t need to apologize to me.”

A mixture of thoughts flashed in those dark eyes, all ones he couldn’t follow. “Well, good night again,” she said, turning and padding toward her room.

Trenton watched her disappear before returning to his own room.

Chapter 17

Celia hadn't expected Trenton to be gone in the morning, though a part of her was relieved. It would have been the first full day they were home together. Malcolm closed the tavern every Sunday—not for religious purposes, but because he believed it was important to take a full day off each week.

Trenton hadn't had work, or so he had initially said, but the note he'd left under the smoothie he'd made for her mentioned running to the office.

She shouldn't have left her room the night before. Considering her counseling options had made it hard to sleep. It helped her to talk about her past to strangers. To voice the concerns over the biological patterns she'd seen in herself. She used counseling to help identify the warning signs that her symptoms were getting worse.

She'd never blamed her mother for the things she'd done. Between one moment and the next, her mother would forget. No, the injuries had happened because her father had often

denied what was happening. That was the one thing Celia refused to do, deny her inner instability.

Trenton hadn't seemed to notice yet. He cared about everyone equally, as if worrying for others was normal. She'd been the one to avoid him, pretending to sleep in during the mornings until he'd left for work. The man had no idea how appealing he was. Even at the tavern the night before, he'd completely ignored the women who were clearly interested in him. Instead, he'd been watching her with that concerned look he got sometimes.

Celia wished she could get him to stop doing things for her. First letting her stay and acting like she was ridiculous to push to pay rent. Plus the smoothies he made for her every morning, picking her up from her shifts every night, the care with which he'd bandaged her, and the concern over her sleepless night. It was stacking up way too high.

She took her smoothie back to her room, spreading out the tips she'd earned that. She highly doubted that Trenton would actually give her a figure for rent, so she carved out what she thought would be fair. It still left her some extra.

She knew she should probably save it. She couldn't stay with Malcolm's friend forever. Another sip of the smoothie gave her an idea she couldn't quite shake. Trenton liked healthy foods, and there was one of those organic supermarkets not too far from his condo. Celia wasn't the best cook, but she could chop up a salad or something and treat him to lunch.

The soft, surprised smile she imagined him wearing made her happy. She downed the rest of the smoothie, shoving her money into her pocket before returning to the kitchen to rinse out the glass. She'd always been big on everything having its place. The calm routine of it as a child had seemed to help on her mother's good days. It had been nice to find out that Trenton treated his place the same way. If he'd been messy or cluttered, she would have probably driven him crazy.

Well, not crazy, she told herself with a wince. Maybe bothered him to distraction, if that was even possible. The man was too focused for his own good.

The only time he tripped over himself was when he talked about his wife. He'd obviously loved her very much.

Celia checked the clock. She had plenty of time to scrape together lunch for the two of them. Trenton's note had mentioned picking up some documents, so he likely wouldn't be long.

She patted her pocket, which held not only her money but also the spare key Trenton had given her. Even when she was home, she carried it. She'd had plenty of places on her own, so it wasn't like it was her first key. Still, it was the first place she'd stayed in with another person since she'd moved out on her own. It wouldn't last forever, but the reminder that she was handling it well made her happy.

At the supermarket, she grabbed a hand basket to keep her selections light. She didn't have to do anything fancy, just

healthy. Trenton liked to eat more vegetables than the normal man. A salad would be perfect.

She hadn't brought any bags, so she felt she deserved to be conned into one of the reusable totes. Trenton would probably find that environmentally friendly. Happy with her purchases, she headed to the automatic doors at the entrance.

"You've got to be kidding me," a voice said.

Celia froze, clutching the bag in her hand as she turned to her former fiancé. Daniel was alone, at least. She nodded and started to move past him.

His hand encircled her arm, halting her. "What are you still doing here, Celia?"

Frowning, Celia reluctantly raised her gaze. "I don't need to explain myself to you."

Daniel shook her arm. "It makes no sense. You said you never wanted to return to your home town. I was sure you'd hopped on a return flight when you left my place."

"A flight back to what, Daniel?" Celia asked. "I had already gotten rid of all my stuff. I thought we were going to build a life together."

"Don't do that," he said, shaking his head at her. "Don't make it my fault."

Celia closed her eyes, letting out a breath. "No, it's mine." She had been impulsive, completely unlike herself. Opening her eyes to study him, she had a hard time understanding what had come over her. She'd been so careful for so long,

switching jobs as she got comfortable out of choice, not randomness. Her mother had been the spontaneous one, and it had always ended badly. She huffed out a breath at the thought. She really should have known.

“You think this is funny?” Daniel asked, shaking her again. “Stalking me?”

“What?” Celia blinked at him. “I’m not stalking you.”

“Seriously, Cele? You haven’t even left my neighborhood.” He waved his free hand around the supermarket, drawing the eyes of some of the other shoppers.

Celia’s skin crawled at their shifting gazes. She took another breath. They weren’t staring at her, but at him, she told herself. She was the one acting normal. “I’m staying with someone near here. I honestly forgot you lived so close.” It was a sad underscore to how much she’d fooled herself. She hadn’t cared for the man at all if he’d been so far out of her thoughts in less than a week.

Daniel pulled her closer, lowering his voice. “Don’t bother lying. You stalking me is what I would expect after everything you told me about your mother.”

A rushing sound filled her ears, blocking out his next words. She had told him bits of her past, a first for her in a relationship. She’d considered spending her life with him, she reminded herself. It hadn’t been crazy to tell him.

Her lips felt numb as she said, “Is that why?”

He stared at her. “Is what why?”

“You chose not to build a life with me. After we had talked about nothing but that for months.” Her thoughts sped up as she realized it hadn’t been long after she’d shared that piece of herself that he’d broken things off. “Was what I told you about my family why you did what you did?”

“Well, hell, Cele, who would want the genes of a lunatic running through their kids?” Daniel frowned at her. “You know who my family is.”

He said it like the snob he was, but that wasn’t what she remembered. When she’d met his family, they had been nice to her. They’d seemed so normal.

Celia’s arm hung limply in his grip. “Why not just tell me, then? Why did you let me come all the way here?”

“See, you are pissed.” Daniel’s eyes narrowed on her.

“Celia?” The voice at her back, so unexpected, brought a rush of warmth into her stomach.

Trenton’s arm came around her shoulders, and he tucked her protectively into his side. He frowned down at the other man’s grip on her arm. “You need to take your hand off her, now.”

Celia’s eyes flew up to his at the tone she’d never heard from him before. Trenton wasn’t smiling as he stared at Daniel.

Daniel let her go, raising his hand in defense. “Hey, I’m not the one we need to worry about here. She’s the crazy stalker.”

The whispers of the shoppers became a drone as Celia dropped her gaze.

“She’s no such thing,” Trenton said, squeezing her shoulder. “I assume you’re the fiancé?”

Daniel let out a laugh. “So she has been talking about me after all.”

Celia raised her eyes to stare at the man she had barely known at all. “I couldn’t help but celebrate escaping the worst decision of my life.”

The smile dropped from Daniel’s face as he lurched toward her.

Trenton pulled her out of reach, stepping between them. “She’s under my protection. Don’t do that again.”

Daniel raked his eyes up and down Trenton before latching them onto her again. “It didn’t take you long.”

“Is that really where you want to go with this?” Celia asked, remembering the blonde from before. She started to turn away. “It’s okay, Trenton. Let’s just go.”

“I pity you,” Daniel told him. “She’s the worst lay I’ve ever had, and that’s saying something.”

Celia’s insides twisted as the people around them seemed to close in. She willed her feet to move, but they had locked up on her.

“I mean, she’s already nothing to hold on to, but hell, even a stick should move a little. It was like fucking the dead.”

Trenton’s arm left her shoulders, and the chill from before spread at the loss.

Then her eyes lifted in time to see him punch Daniel in the face.

Chapter 18

Trenton punched the idiot fiancé again, a sense of satisfaction running through him as the man's eyes widened in panic.

“Trenton!” Celia grabbed his shoulder, tugging on it. “Trenton, stop!”

Realizing what he'd done, Trenton's next swing froze. He blinked down at the man before scrambling off.

The fiancé rolled to his side, spitting out blood. At least the sneer had faded when he stared up at them. “You're as crazy as she is.”

Celia's hand trembled against his arm, and Trenton moved in front of her to block her from view.

“Let's just go,” she said, the words flat and soft at his back.

“Yes, go.” Daniel coughed as he tried to sneer, blood from his split lip making it less than intimidating.

Trenton winced, remembering all the times he'd told Malcolm violence wasn't the answer. "You don't want to press charges?" Trenton glanced at all the eye witnesses to his loss of control. "It's within your rights to report my actions to the police."

Celia's former fiancé glanced at the murmuring crowd. "I said leave." His eyes narrowed on Celia. "I'll get a restraining order if I see you again, you crazy bitch."

Celia paled, and Trenton wished he had hit the man more. Malcolm would have made a smear of him on the ground.

Trenton stepped toward Daniel, but Celia grabbed his hand. He turned away instead, noticing the shopping bag she'd dropped during the commotion. He picked it up. "This is yours, right?"

Celia blinked at him, then nodded. Her shoulders hunched at all the continued stares.

Trenton ushered her out, and his arm moved around Celia as the automatic glass doors slid closed behind them. She tensed at his touch, so he dropped it to point toward where he had parked. She scrambled into the passenger seat before he could open her door.

The silence didn't feel right as he backed out of the space and drove toward the condo. "I'm sorry I was gone so early this morning."

Celia stared out the window. "It was for work. I understood."

Trenton winced, flexing his aching knuckles. He hadn't needed the files. He'd gone because there had been a part of him that had really wanted to see her. To check on her, he'd tried to tell himself, but he'd run to the office knowing it was a lie.

"How did you know I would be there?" Celia asked.

He glanced at her, but she was still looking away. Her fingers pulled at the rubber band on her wrist. "I didn't. Sunday tends to be the day I grab groceries. I texted you to ask if there was anything you wanted."

"Oh," she said.

She remained silent on the elevator ride up to the condo. After they entered the front door, he moved to the kitchen, putting the bag of groceries on the counter.

"I'll put the food away," she said.

"I can help," he offered, reaching toward the bag, but her hands grabbed his.

Celia stared at his bloody knuckles.

Trenton still couldn't believe he'd hit the man. "Oh, right. I'll get cleaned up first."

Only she didn't release him. "Where's the first aid kit?" she asked, still staring at his hand.

"It's fine, Celia," he said, relieved when she looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I probably made things worse by hitting him."

His lips twisted into a half smile. “I guess that wasn’t very monk-like of me, was it?”

She didn’t smile back. “The first aid kit.”

He nodded toward the cabinet.

“Go sit on the couch,” she told him, turning to find it.

Trenton wanted to protest again, but there was something off about her. Of course there was, he told himself, doing as she asked. Someone she’d had a relationship with had used her as a verbal punching bag.

He wanted to hit the man again.

Celia kneeled in front of him, taking out a sanitation wipe to dab at his knuckles. His hand felt so big in hers, and a tingle ran through his stomach at how delicate and feminine hers looked.

“Does it sting?” she asked.

“Not too bad.” He watched her work, the tingle moving up his spine. “I think the blood is actually his.”

“You reminded me of Malcolm,” she said, pausing as her eyes went distant. “He used to always get into fights back when I first moved in.”

For some reason, the idea irritated Trenton. “He’ll never let me hear the end of it when he finds out. Though I deserve to be called a hypocrite. I’ve always told him violence isn’t the answer.”

“It’s not.” Celia pressed a bandage to his knuckles, then released his hand. She sat there limply, as if her strings had been cut, and a helplessness filled Trenton.

“It’s okay to not be okay,” he told her. “You don’t have to pretend with me. Someone you used to care about was a jerk to you.”

Celia shrugged. “He wasn’t wrong.”

Heat moved through him and he reached out, his fingers tilting her chin up until their eyes met. “What in the world are you defending him for? No man has a right to talk to a woman that way.”

“I’m not.” She bit her lip. “Not really. But what he said...”

Trenton’s fingers traced over her chin and up to cup her cheek. “What part of what he said made you look like this?”

“It was that word. I mean, I’ve always—” She broke off, and his hand fell away as she shook her head. “No, I don’t want to say it.”

He wanted to reach out again, but put his hands on his knees instead. “It might help. I promise you’re safe with me. You can tell me anything.”

Those dark eyes of hers captured him, their damp depths sucking him in. “It’s...” She glanced down, and it was as if a calm settled over her. “I’ve always been terrible at sex,” she mumbled.

“What?” Trenton’s hands clenched on his knees as her words shot through him.

Celia shrugged. “Daniel was right. I’m a terrible lay.” The way she said it was so accepting. “I’ve never gotten the whole sex thing right. My mind can’t seem to get out of the way, and it’s not like my body inspires the guys that much.” Her hands moved up and down her torso.

Trenton’s eyes followed the movement. Her breasts were high and tight, and no, not large, but delicate like she was. The tingle from before settled into his scalp, and his mouth ran dry as his eyes slid to the jeans-covered hips he’d admired before.

“It’s fine,” she lied, staring at her lap. “I’m just not the sexy type. Guys don’t want me that way.”

Trenton reached down, sliding his hands under her elbows and lifting her toward him. Her head tilted up, making their lips connect more easily. Those large, dark eyes flew wide, staring into his as he softened the kiss, moving his lips over hers to entice instead of take.

He pulled back a little, trying to judge how she felt.

“Why did you do that?” The breathiness of her voice slipped into him like heat.

“Because I want you,” Trenton admitted to both of them. Then he closed the distance and took her lips again.

Chapter 19

Celia's eyes slid shut as she returned Trenton's kiss. His lips were exactly how she would have pictured them—if she had let her mind think about him that way. Firm, but somehow coaxing. His arms slid around her, pulling her against his body. Her mouth parted as she relaxed against him, and his tongue joined with hers.

That was how it felt with Trenton, a joining. He didn't seem like he was ten steps ahead of her and already thinking of the finish. His body rested against the couch, letting her weight pin him as she pressed closer. Her hands slid around his neck, stroking the back of it, where his hair ended. He made a sound in his throat, an enticing hum that sent a surprising throb through her.

Seeking the feeling, she stroked his neck again even as her tongue slid against his, liking the way he kissed but also somehow restless.

He hitched her closer, his hands urging her hips tight against him as her legs parted to either side of him. Her body liked the

position, arching against the hardness she'd found, and he groaned into her mouth. His angle tilted, the kiss deepening.

Trenton was holding her. It was Trenton kissing her. And all because of her lie.

The thought sent a chill to chase away all that warmth. She hadn't really lied; she'd just focused on what felt easier. She was lousy in bed. That was so much easier to tell him than that she was crazy.

Trenton tilted her until her back fell against the couch, his mouth parting from hers as he hovered above her. Her thoughts had made her stiffen against him, she realized, and regret spilled in to add to her chill.

His hand cupped her cheek as it had before. "We don't have to take this any further if you don't want to, Celia."

She liked the way he said her name with that huskiness from their kiss. His lips were right in front of her, and she lifted herself up, brushing hers against them, enjoying the combination of firm and soft together.

His fingers slid along her face, sending a shiver through her as their lips parted again. No one had touched her that softly. It was almost as if he was worried she'd break. "I want you, too," she told him.

He didn't lunge for her as any other guy would. Instead, his fingers lingered against her face, brushing back her hair. A strange squirming started in her belly at the way he studied her.

“Then why do you look the way you do?” he asked, his gaze not moving away as his hands continued to soothe her.

The tension in her worsened. “How do I look?”

“As if you’re terrified.” He leaned down, brushing his lips against her cheek instead of her mouth. When he pulled back enough for their eyes to meet again, his were searching hers. “You don’t have to be afraid of me.”

She shook her head. “It’s not you.” She was scared of him seeing the true her, the one she hid from everyone, but she clung to the more obvious. “I’m really no good at this, like I said. What if I mess it up?”

A relieved smile slid over Trenton’s face. He looked best when he smiled. “That’s not possible.”

Her lips tightened as flashes of all her messed-up attempts at sex flew through her mind. “Oh, it is.”

It was his turn to shake his head. “If it starts to feel wrong, it’s just not meant to be. That’s no one’s fault.”

The man was way too sweet. She wanted to hug him close and let that warmth of his seep inside her.

Trenton’s eyes slid to her mouth. “Do you want me to kiss you again?”

“Yes,” she breathed out, meeting him halfway.

Celia had never understood the kissing thing before. It had been pleasant enough in the past, at times anyway, but it had never been something to make a fuss about. Trenton’s lips

were different. They were hard against hers, but also soft, as if soothing her. When he slid his tongue against hers, she wrapped her hands around his neck again and held on as an ache began down below. He settled some of his weight on her, his hips lining up with her still spread legs, and the ache intensified. A moan slipped from her and into his mouth.

Trenton groaned back, deepening the kiss. She felt like she should be doing something, but all thoughts slipped into the warmth that was filling her. Her hands moved over his shoulders, then down his sides, until they settled on his ass, which was still covered by the black work slacks he wore even on a Sunday. Gripping him for leverage, she pulled him tighter to her as she arched closer. His hardness through their clothes slid against her, but instead of easing the ache, a frustration built. Her head fell back as her legs wrapped around him. This time his hips shifted into her on their own, rubbing the same spot, but not enough, not nearly enough. Another moan slid from her.

Trenton closed his eyes, a long swallow making his Adam's apple bob just above her. She leaned toward his neck, her lips caressing him there, with the tip of her tongue nudging the ball.

He shuddered against her, his hips pressing her harder into the couch, lined up perfectly to make her squirm.

"Celia, wait," he gasped. Then his hands locked with hers, shifting them away from his body until they were above her head.

The posture made her breasts press more firmly against his chest and she shimmied, rubbing the tightened nipples against him. She closed her eyes, panting through the pleasant pressure before doing it again.

He jerked away from her, sitting up. The abrupt movement released her hands and jostled her on the couch. She opened her eyes in time to watch him finish pulling his shirt over his head and toss it aside. He reached for her own then. As he tugged it up, her torso lifted, helping him remove it. She wasn't wearing a bra underneath it. She so rarely needed to. Her already hardened nipples tightened even more from the air brushing them.

“Beautiful,” he murmured before lowering his head to her. His tongue laved one of her nipples before those soft yet hard lips surrounded it and tugged. An answering tug below had her hips lifting, but his hardness was no longer close enough to feel.

“Trenton,” she called, her hips arching again.

As if he thought she was protesting the one-sided breast worship, his hand moved to the other, the tips of his fingers swirling and bringing more pleasure. Then he pinched and her head shifted against the couch as another moan escaped her.

She moved her arm in front of her mouth, pressing it firmly against her lips.

His head lifted as his other hand continued to tease her. “No, don't stop.”

Her head shifted again as his fingers played, but she forced her eyes to focus on him, trying to decipher his words.

“I want to hear what you like,” Trenton said, moving her arm off her mouth himself.

She blinked up at him. There was no smile on his face. Instead, his intent stare made the warmth in her stomach spread. His fingers plucked at her nipple as he studied her face, and she moaned again.

“Christ, Celia,” he said, his hands moving to wrap around her even as his chest came down. He lifted her as he slid against her breasts, the hardness of his chest rubbing the peaked nipples in a lingering caress as he captured her mouth again. His tongue stroked inside, and hers slid to match it and then sucked. It was his turn to groan as he moved against her again. His hardness had returned to the juncture of her thighs, and she gasped into his mouth at the sharp pleasure that arced through her. Not wanting to let that hardness slip away, she hooked her legs around him again, keeping it pressed against where she ached the most.

Trenton arched into her once, twice, and then stilled. He sucked in a breath, then appeared to forget to release it.

A sense of disappointment slid into her, and her legs fell wider even as she moved against him. The hardness hit right where she wanted it, and she began to buck, wanting to keep that feeling.

His hands slid down the bare skin at her sides to stroke her clothed hips even as his breath shuddered. “Shh, it’s okay.

Wait a minute, Celia.”

She stilled, her eyes opening to find his.

“I don’t want to rush this,” he told her, hugging her close.

It was sweet and felt nice, but her body craved more. “Let me go,” she said, the thickness in her voice something she’d never heard before.

He immediately lifted off of her, sitting up. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean to—”

She lunged at him, her weight making him fall back to the couch with her on top. She rubbed her tightened nipples against him as she worked up his body, her hands cupping both sides of his face this time. “Don’t stop,” she told him and then kissed him, tongue and all.

His breath caught, but then he returned her gesture, slanting his mouth against hers again and again.

Her hands moved between them, undoing the button on his slacks and his zipper. She broke the kiss in order to track down his body, her hands taking his pants with them and exposing his boxers beneath. She rubbed her cheek along the hardened length of him as she finished removing his pants. As she worked back up his legs, she paused above his boxers, dropping a small kiss on his dick through the material.

He fell back against the couch, squeezing his eyes shut. “Celia, I don’t expect you to—” He broke off, swallowing hard.

She watched his throat bob, wishing she was close enough to lick it again. Her eyes fell down to him as her fingers slid into the edge of his boxers. “Let me know if it starts to feel wrong,” she said, and pulled his boxers down his legs and off.

His dick was long, erect, and hard. Her eyes slid past it to find that caring face of his, his eyes shimmering with desire. For her.

“Don’t—” He had to swallow again to get out the words. “Don’t touch me too much.”

Her hands clenched at her sides as her eyes dropped to her lap.

He sat up, his arms encircling her. Before she could blink, he had reversed their positions, his torso above her. “It’s not that I don’t want you to. It’s just been a while for me, a long while.” His lips twisted as he smiled down at her. “I wouldn’t last through it.”

“Oh,” she said, confused by the message. As long as he got off, what did it matter?

He was already tracking down her body, undoing her jeans, and dragging them and her underwear off of her.

Celia shivered. She was completely naked on the couch, and so was he. Her mind tried to throw up a distracting thought, but then his hands caressed her feet, so gentle it tickled a bit. She shifted them, restless, and he let her, using the movement to pull her legs apart enough for his lips to cruise up the inside of her ankle. His fingers cupped the soft skin beneath her

knees, pulling her legs apart even more as he sucked on her inner thigh. Each pass of his lips fed an echoing tug to her core, and her legs opened more naturally, wanting more of the sensation.

But when he lifted his head and started to move to the center of her legs, her hands captured him, halting his movement. Panic slid through her at the thought of him there, and she shook her head, not having the words.

He lifted, moving up her torso to capture her mouth instead in another searing kiss. Her hands relaxed where they still gripped his head, sliding around the back of his neck again.

Trenton hadn't settled on top of her, but to the side, his dick pressing hard against her leg. Her body started to turn, wanting to feel him against her again, but then froze as his fingers found her instead.

One of his fingers slid within her, and he groaned into her mouth. "God, you're so wet, Celia."

She shook her head, but not in denial, in confusion. Her hips arched as her legs fell open again, and his finger slid deeper. She made more of a mewling sound than a groan, everything within her tensing at the intensity of the ache.

He slid his finger out of her, and she wanted to cry. "I—" The protest stuck in her throat as his slick finger moved against her above her entrance. It was as if an inferno slid within her, and her breath strangled in her throat.

“I’ve got you, Celia,” he said, his finger entering her again. All thought raced out of her as everything focused on the feel of his finger withdrawing, then its slick slide over the most sensitive part of her. Instead of retreating, he circled, sliding again, and again.

Suddenly a pulsing slid through her, one so intense her legs spasmed closed around his hand. Trenton captured her scream with a kiss as the waves inside seemed to shake her apart, his finger stroking her through it.

Her body became boneless as she fell limp against the couch. His hand had slid away from her down there, and instead he hugged her to him, softly ending the kiss. “You’re so sweet,” he murmured in her ear. “I want you so much. Can I still have you?”

She nodded, but a drowsiness had slipped over her, and she curled into him.

He chuckled against her, one of his hands slipping between them. Then two of his fingers entered her.

Her eyes widened as the ache from before returned, somehow even more intense almost immediately as his fingers moved. She gasped as a bright sparkle glittered behind her eyes each time his fingers plunged in. “Wait, Trenton, it—” He wasn’t in time to capture her scream as the pulsing arced through her, more intense than before. Her legs curled up, pulling his hand tighter against her before she lost all thought.

“Oh, God, Celia.” He shifted, but her eyes felt too heavy to lift. When he next spoke, the air moved above her vagina,

making a shiver shift through her. “I need to do it again.” Then his tongue stroked over what his slick finger had rubbed before. It was as if her body had been waiting for his mouth, a lance of feeling shooting into her even as his hands grabbed her ass and shifted her fully against his lips. The same soft lips that had kissed her before closed gently around her sensitive part, and sucked.

Her hips bucked against his mouth as he licked, then sucked. A lance of pleasure so intense it could have been pain shot through her on the tenth stroke, and her body pulsed again, with him using his mouth on her throughout the long pulses.

She didn't think she could remember her own name anymore.

His head turned, and he kissed her thigh before crawling up her body. His dick settled against her wetness, so hard and hot, as his hands slid under her to grip her ass again. “Are you still with me?”

Her head shifted on the couch as she forced her eyes open. His were intense on hers, searching. Her mouth was too dry to find any words.

Instead, she slid her arms around his neck again, and her legs curled up until her feet could wrap around his back. The movement caused him to slide slightly inside of her.

His eyes closed as his jaw tensed. With a groan, his hips arched forward, and the full length of him slid inside her to the hilt. He was big and hot and hard, and she'd never felt so full.

Her head shifted as she clenched around him. All she felt were thrums of pleasure. It was the first time a man had filled her and there had been no pain.

He pulled back, his dick sliding almost fully out of her, and then slid deep again. Pleasure rocked through her, and her legs tightened around him. “Please,” she said, but she couldn’t imagine what she was asking for. Maybe that he’d never stop.

Trenton kissed her again, capturing her next strangled cry as he repeated the movement, only faster. Her hips rose to meet him this time, and the bright sparkle behind her eyes returned. She’d lost count of his strokes when that strange pulsing started again, but she welcomed it, allowing it to spread throughout her. Trenton tensed against her, his whole body stiffening as he cried out in her mouth, and his warm pulsing joined hers.

He collapsed against her, heavy, but she didn’t care. She wrapped her arms around him. His heart pounded in time with hers, fast and sporadic, thumps of happiness.

That was what she felt: happy.

“So that’s what good sex is like,” she murmured into his neck.

His laugh rumbled against her.

Chapter 20

Trenton knew he should lift himself off her, but he was reluctant to do anything to part them. He'd never lost himself so completely in sex, or come so hard that his ears rang. She'd been so damn responsive, though, as if any touch from him and only him would toss her into another orgasm. He'd never been so rock hard and desperate to be inside a woman.

Not even with his wife.

The thought finished off his softening, and he sat up as his penis slipped out of her. Glancing down, he saw the slickness between her thighs and froze. Damn, he hadn't taken care of her at all. "I came inside of you."

She struggled to rise onto her elbows. "What?"

Trenton met her gaze. "I didn't wear a condom."

"Oh," Celia said, "I'm on the pill." She bit her lip, her eyes sliding away. "I've always heard an orgasm for a guy isn't as good with a condom, anyway."

The ache in his suddenly clenched knuckles returned. He really should have kept punching that fiancé. He rose, scooping her up in his arms.

Celia's eyes went wide as she clutched at him. "What are you doing?"

He carried her to the bathroom, setting her down in the shower. He angled the shower head toward himself as he turned it on, figuring he needed the blast of cold water.

She stood there, staring at him as he finished setting the water temperature and shifted so the spray could soothe her body. Trenton reached for the soap, lathering it into a washcloth. Then he slid it along her neck and over her shoulders. She shivered, and his hand clenched on the rag, but he continued the soothing path.

"Trenton?" Confusion filled her voice, and her fingers were clutching that rubber band.

"Is it not okay to help wash you?" he asked, pausing the path of the soap.

She shrugged, her eyes shifting away. "No guy ever has."

He'd figured that was the case. "How many partners have you had?"

She frowned. "Three." Her eyes flew up to his, then away. "I mean, four."

Trenton was pleased that she hadn't lumped him in with the others. "Give me their names, and Malcolm and I will go beat the shit out of them."

“What?” she asked, her voice strangled, and her gaze flew to his again.

He forced a laugh. “I’m joking.” *Mostly*, he added to himself. He used his free hand to brush her hair over her shoulder, adding stroking circles to his touch to soothe them both. “But you shouldn’t be with a man that doesn’t cherish you.”

She didn’t respond, but creases lined her forehead as she considered his words.

Trenton moved the cloth down her front, over her breasts, and she bit back a moan. His hand froze as his penis started to harden.

She stepped back, away from the spray. “Something’s wrong with me.”

He frowned, following her. “Why do you say that? I think you’re perfect.”

Pain flashed in her eyes before they dropped to the tile below. “You barely know me, Trenton.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but realized he had no argument. They’d lived together not even a week. “Why do you think something’s wrong?” he asked instead.

She waved her hands down her body. “I’ve never acted like this before. It’s like my body doesn’t belong to me anymore.”

The idea that his touch had changed her added to his growing erection. He slowly moved the cloth he held forward, stroking it once between her legs.

She bit her lip, her eyes widening before they squeezed together. “What are you doing?”

He made his next stroke longer, avoiding her most sensitive areas. “I already told you. Washing you clean.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” He continued to wash her as her body tensed. “It’s happening again.” The last was said in a whisper.

His hardness had become painful. She was the sweetest woman he’d ever known, to be so vulnerable with him. He wanted to bundle her up in his arms, but he also wanted to sink deep inside her. He’d never wanted sex again so quickly, not even during his teenage years.

He warmed the cloth and brought it back to her, stroking to soothe, not entice.

Her arms crossed over her breasts.

His hand dropped away from her. “Are you worried about what happened?”

“It was just so strange. The pulsing inside of me.”

“You mean your orgasms?” He hadn’t lost count, despite how fast they’d come over her.

“Oh,” she said, her arms tightening on herself.

The shower pounded on his back as he dipped his head to meet her eyes. “When you said you were bad at sex, did you mean that none of your partners had ever brought you to orgasm?”

“It always tended to hurt because my body doesn’t respond right to sex.” She said it so matter-of-factly that he knew she actually believed it.

The washcloth dropped from his hand to the tile floor with a splat as he shifted closer, his hand moving between her legs again. Knowing she was likely overly sensitive from before, he stroked gently over her clit.

Celia gasped, her arms unfolding to clutch at his arm.

He felt the shudder rush through her at his next stroke. “Celia, your body was made for loving.”

Her head fell back against the tile wall of the shower as he continued his gentle teasing. “But, before...” She trailed off as she bit her lip again. The tension within her was tightening.

He caught her against him as her legs gave out, making his finger drag over her clit even more delicately. “Only focus on the now. I’m going to make you forget everything you thought about sex before.”

Her gaze fell to his hard penis pressed against her thigh. “You mean...” She gasped again, clenching her hands around his arm as a shudder ran through her.

“Do you not want to again?” he asked.

Her eyes locked on his. “No, I do.” Then her focus fractured as she orgasmed in his arms.

He brought her to it again with his fingers inside of her the second time, wanting to cry when he sank into her warmth after. Her legs wrapped around his back, and he worried the

wall behind her was too hard, but he couldn't keep his hips from pumping into her. They came together, with his seed filling her. It was reckless of him, even if she was on the pill. Birth control wasn't perfect, but he hadn't been able to pull out. And he didn't own any condoms. He hadn't needed them with his wife, and hadn't had sex with anyone since.

He cleaned her afterward, keeping his ministrations short due to her sensitivity. Her eyelids had begun to droop.

He was the one to towel her dry. He carried her to her bed, as he had done nearly a week ago. The action had felt so different then. He tucked them both into the guest bedroom, spooning her from behind.

His lips pressed a kiss against her neck. "Sleep," he told her, watching her eyes drift shut.

Even he slept for a while. He'd forgotten how sex could do that to him.

He woke with a jerk, swallowing his wife's name. Celia continued to sleep on, so he hadn't disturbed her, thank God.

Trenton eased away enough to sit up, dragging his hands down his face. He hadn't dreamed of Emily's last moments in such a long time. She'd been so frightened, and he'd been so helpless.

He slid out of the bed, glancing back at Celia to make certain she still slept. The sheet had slipped down, revealing her bare shoulder and most of a breast. She looked so delicate lying there, and his chest ached to watch her. He turned away.

Padding naked down the hall and to his own bedroom, he slipped new boxers on. A picture of Emily and him on their last vacation together, in the Smoky Mountains, sat on top of his dresser. Staring at it had him reaching for more clothes, and he pulled on his running outfit. Celia continued to sleep as he locked the front door behind him.

Running had always been his escape from thoughts, but even it didn't work this time. Instead, Emily's barely there voice sounded in his ears, begging him not to forget her. No matter how hard he pushed, he couldn't drown the memory out.

He wasn't a fool. He knew exactly why his subconscious was taunting him. Celia had felt perfect to him. Whether cuddled around her, pressed against her, or sliding deep inside of her, he'd felt a peace that he'd promised himself he'd never feel. He couldn't, not if he wanted to keep his promise to Emily.

As he eased inside of the house, he listened to the continued silence. He wasn't surprised, not after how Celia's body had responded to him. Guilt slammed into him. Sure, he'd given her pleasure, but that didn't take away the fact that he'd taken advantage of her weak moment.

He was as big of a jerk as that scumbag ex-fiancé.

Trenton slipped into the bathroom, showering again. He moved through the steps quickly, unable to block out the memory of her pressed into the wall as he buried himself

within her. The living room and the bathroom. He'd screwed himself royally.

He put on the clothes from earlier in the day, tossing the pre-cum-stained boxers in the laundry with his running clothes.

The kitchen seemed safe enough. He hadn't yet lifted her onto the counter and feasted on her, though his body hummed at the idea. The wedding picture on the fridge helped to ease his tension.

That was when he noticed the bag of groceries still sitting on the counter. Crossing to it, he began taking out what Celia had bought. There was nothing that would spoil too quickly. It appeared to be the fixings for a great salad, and his stomach rumbled to remind him of the calories he'd burned. He began rinsing off the vegetables, some of his frustration with himself easing as he slid into his normal Sunday routine of cutting up things healthy to eat.

He hadn't always eaten that way. It had all come from the reading he'd done once Emily came down with her illness. A healthy diet wasn't proven to work, but many sites talked about it possibly extending a patient's life. Of course, none of it had helped. She'd died within six months, despite the prognosis the doctors had given her.

"Trenton?"

He turned to see Celia. She hadn't come out wrapped in that sheet as he'd half feared. Trenton hadn't been able to predict how he'd react to that. Instead, she wore her typical jeans and

a shirt, though her hair still looked like she'd been to bed. The memory of her head tossing against the couch as she'd come hard against his fingers had his hand tightening around the knife.

“You must be starving,” he said as he turned back to the counter. The same counter he'd just daydreamed about hoisting her onto so that he could screw her again. He put down the knife when he almost stabbed himself.

“I bought all of that stuff to make something for you.” She'd come up behind him to look over his shoulder. Her breasts pushed against his arm, reminding him of how tight they were. “You're stealing my thunder. How about I finish up?”

He wanted to turn and fold her into his arms. Instead, he patted her shoulder. “Sure, that sounds good.” He made a hasty retreat out of the kitchen, worrying that he was acting too strange.

Celia didn't call out after him. She'd already lifted his knife and continued where he'd left off. Trenton watched her through the open counter. Too big of a part of him wanted to make dinner beside her.

He went to his bedroom instead, sitting on the side that had been Emily's. He stared down at the nightstand. Then he slid the drawer open to take out the hospital band that she had worn at the end. His fingers brushed along her name, and he let the full memory of her death take him. His hand clenched around it as a tear slipped down his cheek.

A soft knock sounded on the bedroom door. "It's ready."

Trenton cleared his throat. "I'll be right there."

Her footsteps retreated.

He wiped at his eyes and put the memento back in the drawer. He stood, moving to his dresser again. The sight of their picture didn't bring him pain or guilt. He felt acceptance instead.

Celia had set the salads on the countertop, glasses of water beside them. She turned on her stool to smile at him, though her smile looked tentative.

He'd never eaten at the counter before. Something inside of him relaxed at the idea of it. Despite almost a week passing, they hadn't shared a sit-down meal. He sat on the stool next to her, his arm brushing against hers, but it felt companionable, not sexy.

She lifted her glass, tilting it in a small toast. "I hope you like it. I'd meant to make it for lunch." She glanced behind them to where the curtains had dimmed to orange from the setting sun. "But I guess dinner works, too."

"Is this why you went to the supermarket?" He kept his tone even, bringing up her earlier encounter on purpose. It was important for her to be able to talk about it.

She tensed, but lifted a forkful of lightly dressed salad to her lips. "Yes," was all she said before she took the bite.

Trenton let the silence stretch as he ate his own salad. It was simple but delicious, with just enough dressing.

Celia huffed out a breath. “I can’t believe he called me a stalker. I’d forgotten he lived so close.”

“He was worth forgetting,” Trenton said, glancing at his knuckles.

Her eyes had moved to them as well. “You really shocked me, you know, punching him like that. Malcolm would have done it, but you always seem so...”

He turned to her. “What?”

“Gentle, I guess.” A blush crept up her neck. “Though I guess that’s not all there is to you.”

He hadn’t been gentle when he’d pounded into her in the shower, Trenton thought, feeling himself flush as well.

“I owe you an apology,” he said.

Celia stilled beside him, and her eyes searched his face.

“You’d had an... unpleasant experience, and I took advantage of that.” He winced to think of it. He’d been there to comfort women before, many women, and it had never turned into what he’d done with her. “I’m really sorry, Celia.”

“You’re sorry you had sex with me,” she said, her tone flat.

“No!” He winced. “Never that. I’m just sorry about the timing.”

“Because you took advantage?” It came out as a question, though more like she was asking herself.

It sounded a bit ridiculous to Trenton’s ears, too, after what they had shared. “I also don’t want to lead you on.” He took a

breath. "I'm not going to be able to fall in love with you." He faced her again, not letting himself turn away. "I'm still in love with my wife. I think I always will be."

Instead of sadness, her eyes softened as she reached out a hand, laying it over his on the counter. "She was very lucky to have you."

A constriction moved into his throat, cutting off more words.

"It sounds like you're trying to tell me you don't want a relationship with me." A half smile crossed her face. "That it was only sex."

He was certain he wouldn't have used the word 'only' but nodded anyway.

"Trenton, I don't think you understand what you've done for me. Today, with you..." Celia's partial smile turned into a full one. "It was amazing. I wouldn't undo it for the world."

The guilt he'd been feeling since he woke up slipped away at the joy in her expression. "It was amazing for me, too."

She patted his hand before pulling back. "I won't lie and say I wouldn't want to do it again. Often."

His mouth went dry as his fantasy about the kitchen counter rose again.

Her hand moved to caress his face. "But I don't want to be the one to put that look on your face." Her hand fell away, leaving tingles behind. "So, friends?" she asked.

Trenton wanted nothing more than to pick her up and carry her back to the guest room to have sex with her. The urge would go away, he promised himself as he nodded. “Yes, friends.”

She slid off the stool, pausing as she glanced at her plate.

He waved his hand at the food. “I’ll clean up everything.”

“Thanks,” she said with a nod, turning from him. “Good night.” She didn’t look back as she walked away, closing the guest room’s door with a soft click.

Trenton buried his head in his hands. He’d clean up a little later. As soon as his chest stopped feeling like a vise was squeezing it.

Chapter 21

Celia stared up at the ceiling even after the sounds of Trenton getting ready for work faded. She hadn't been able to sleep since she'd hidden away the night before. She hadn't lied to him. Despite the way her body hummed every time she thought about his hands, she was fine being friends. It was safest that way.

She pictured his soft, green eyes, gentle but also shrewd in the way they studied her. He was used to taking care of people, just as she had been as a child. And with that came the ability to see more than was safe.

She'd always known something was missing in her sex life and her relationships. It had built up to a frustration and a resentment that had become familiar. If she was honest with herself, it had also kept things comfortable. No one had come too close, and that was the way she liked it.

The cloud that had become her mind wouldn't let her turn off her thoughts. She knew what that meant. Just as she knew the urge to lie there was a bad sign. But still, she stared up,

scenes from her childhood etching themselves in the popcorn ceiling.

Her ears rang with Daniel's words from the day before. She had the genes of a lunatic running through her.

There had been no self-recrimination at the sudden end of their relationship. He had been sleeping with other women. But now, remembering how she'd told him a piece of her story, she couldn't help but marvel at the self-destruction that decision had sowed.

And she hadn't even told him the worst memory.

Her hand curled around her rubber band.

She wasn't certain how much time had passed when her cell phone began to ring. She had an app that kept it silent unless Malcolm called. He tended to worry, so she'd set up a rule just for him.

That worry had helped to motivate her more than once.

Still, it was never immediate. She didn't move during the first call. Her heartbeat sped up when the second call began. She should answer it. If she picked up on the second ring, he would know everything was okay, even though she wasn't feeling up to snuff.

Celia managed to reach over and press the talk button on the fourth ring. She didn't say anything, knowing that Malcolm would see any lie for what it was.

"I'm coming over," he said, and hung up.

The abruptness of it let her sit up in bed. She frowned at the phone. He hadn't done that since they were kids. Of course, she hadn't lived close enough for him to do it before now.

She dragged herself out of bed, changing into the jeans and shirt from the night before. The memory of dinner with Trenton wasn't a bad one, despite him saying he couldn't be in a relationship with her. Trenton was a sweetheart, and it was right for him not to be with her.

A quick brush through her hair was all she could handle. No teeth brushing that day.

On the counter where they had sat the night before, a green smoothie waited for her, a ring of condensation around it. Celia sat, taking a sip.

Malcolm didn't knock, but walked into the condo when he arrived, pocketing his own set of keys. "Celia?"

"I'm here," she said, taking another sip of the smoothie.

He came around, pausing to study her. He hadn't pulled his hair back, and the black locks hung around his shoulders. As he moved over to sit on the other stool, he tilted his head at her. "Did I overreact?"

She shrugged. "Had a bad morning, two days in a row." She couldn't call the prior day bad altogether, not with the hours spent in Trenton's arms. Her thoughts crashed together as she stared at Malcolm. "Wait, did Trenton call you?"

Malcolm frowned. "Trent? No. Though he damn well should have."

“So how did you hear?”

“I’ve got a couple of buddies at the precinct,” Malcolm said, scowling at her. “Why didn’t you tell me about your run-in with your fiancé?”

“It was silly, he—” Then his words registered. “Wait, precinct? He went to the cops?”

“That asshole tried to take a restraining order out against you, Celia. Was telling everyone that would listen that you were some crazy stalker with a history.”

A chill ran through her. “I have no history.” Some hospital records, but even they were from before she was of legal age.

“Which is why my buddies sent him packing. That and he’d gone to the wrong place. Since we have the same last name, they warned me in case he got it right on his own.” He reached out, brushing her hair behind her ear. “What happened?”

“I’ve got terrible taste in men,” she said with a shrug.

“Don’t I know it.” Malcolm shook his head. “I haven’t liked anyone you’ve dated.”

“I haven’t really liked them either,” she admitted. “What in the world is wrong with me?”

He pulled her in for a hug, his chin resting on top of her head. “Nothing. Let’s make a deal, though.”

“What?” she asked, finding comfort in the familiar way he held her.

“I get to choose the next guy you date.”

She choked on a hiccupping laugh as she pulled back. She lifted her smoothie, downing the last of the contents.

Malcolm wrinkled his nose at her. “I can’t believe you drink Trent’s concoctions, though I guess I’m glad you’re actually putting something in your stomach.”

“I like them.” It was really more the thought of Trenton making the smoothies for her that helped, since the taste was an acquired one.

“Okay, no more beating around the bush. Tell me what happened with this guy yesterday.”

Celia recapped her supermarket visit. “I should have never opened up to him.”

“Well, you thought you were going to marry him.” A crease formed on Malcolm’s forehead. “Which story did you share with him?”

She reached for the glass again, but it was already empty. “The stairs.”

He frowned, but nodded. “You know what I’m going to nag you into today, right?”

Celia used her elbow to nudge the piece of paper he’d given her the night before toward him. “I was thinking the group one.”

“Got it. I’ll drive you there.”

It wasn’t something worth arguing over, and she didn’t really want to. After grabbing her phone and putting on her

shoes, they headed down together.

Malcolm drove a truck, one she had to climb up into, though not too far. They drove in silence, but not a strained one. Malcolm knew she didn't like to talk much, not when her thoughts were so sluggish.

He pulled into the parking lot of the center, one that looked like so many of the others she'd been to. "I'll wait here and drive you to the bar after."

"You don't have to do that, Malcolm," she protested. "I'm fine to—"

"Don't start. I'm waiting." He turned toward her, frowning again. "I was assuming you wanted to work your shift, but let me know if you don't."

"No, I do." Working always helped, no matter how mindless the task.

Not seeing anything else to say, she took a breath and reached for the door.

"Celia?" Malcolm asked, his hand on her arm making her pause.

She looked back at him.

"The precinct mentioned the man who came in didn't look too hot. Did you..."

She shook her head. "Trenton punched him."

Malcolm's mouth fell open. "Trent?" He closed it again, his lips pressing together. "I guess that means I don't get to."

“Violence doesn’t solve anything.” Though she hadn’t been sad to see Daniel a bit worse for wear.

“Now you sound like Trent.” Malcolm let out a soft chuckle. “Or how he usually sounds.”

“I think he felt bad about it,” she said. The memory of what came after, while she bandaged his hands, hummed through her. And not just the sex. Trenton had said he wanted her.

“I’ll bet,” Malcolm said, but his voice sounded distant.

She slid out of the truck to hide any expression she might be making. A goofy smile would worry him more. As she approached the double doors, any urge to smile faded. Sometimes she could fool herself into believing she was beyond the sessions, but she never would be.

The coffee was never good, but she’d learned that it helped to have the cup in her hands. She didn’t bother adding anything to it since she didn’t intend to drink it.

The woman behind her must have had the same thought, as she also left it black.

“Are you both new?” another woman, this one a decade or two older, asked them.

The woman behind Celia, who had long, dark hair and bruises on her neck, gave a simple, “Yes,” and moved to a seat.

Knowing sitting too soon would make her anxious, Celia focused on the older woman. “To this one, but I’ve attended others in the last city I was in.”

“Oh, where are you from?”

“Well, here originally.” Celia never liked to give out too many details, but that answer seemed safe enough. “I just moved back.”

The older woman slipped into small talk, which let Celia drift into the motions of group counseling again. It turned out that Malcolm had also done almost all the paperwork for her, even her employment at The Last Shot. She wondered if he’d added her new information earlier that day.

When the counselor arrived—another woman—Celia chose a seat next to the other newbie.

Malcolm had found a good group, she was relieved to see after the first half hour. No one made less of what the regular attendees shared, even if it was obvious they’d shared it all before, probably many times. There was simply understanding and support if and when it was wanted.

“I see we have a couple of new faces today,” the counselor said. “It’s fine if you are only here to listen, but if you have anything you’d like to share, we’re here to listen as well.”

The dark-haired newbie next to Celia shook her head, then stared down at her lap. The bruises on her neck weren’t that old, but Celia knew it wasn’t her business to pry.

She took a breath, her hands tightening on the Styrofoam cup. “I will.”

The eyes of the others in the group settled on her, but not in a judging way. This was why she preferred group. Having so

many people around to listen and understand made her feel less alone.

“I’m Cece,” she said by way of introduction. She had found early on that a pseudonym helped to give her the distance she needed to speak. “And most of my story is from a while ago. It became hard again because—” Her throat threatened to close and she swallowed. “Because I told someone one of my memories and they used it against me.”

The group was mostly quiet, with a couple of sounds of commiseration.

“So I thought I would share the story with you to help me remember that it’s not”—she swallowed again—“all my fault.”

“An important thing to remember,” the counselor said, her gaze lingering as it scanned the room. “Blaming ourselves is a struggle that many have.”

“And if something is our fault?” the other newbie asked. She was gripping the arms of her chair tightly.

“I’d ask you to consider the truth in those words. Really consider it.” The counselor leaned forward. “We are all responsible for our actions, even those who act like they are incapable of rational decisions.”

The woman pressed her lips together, her blue eyes flashing before she ducked her head again.

Celia didn’t fully agree with the counselor either. Sometimes people were crazy, and your own actions could

spawn theirs, no matter how irrational they were. She often wondered how her own craziness would manifest. It liked to hide away, making her feel semi-normal, but she knew it lurked inside.

“Do you still want to share your story, Cece?” the counselor asked, all pressure removed from the question.

Celia nodded. “From the beginning, I always knew I had to be careful around my mother. My father would say she had bad days. Or would blame the weather. Anything besides my mother herself. It wasn’t until I was older that I heard her actual diagnosis, though we just called it the crazy gene. My mother couldn’t process the world around her properly. Paranoia was a big part of it, with extreme self-loathing. My mother hated herself.”

Celia took a breath, the memories tumbling on top of each other. “As I got older, it was often my job to watch over her. It wasn’t that she couldn’t take care of herself. She could cook, clean—anything, really. I was mainly watching for those moments. The times when her crazy gene would kick in and she would try to hurt herself.”

Celia’s father had removed most things from the house, but he couldn’t remove everything. And her mother had been intelligent, far more intelligent than he was. She always found a way.

It was almost always aimed at herself, though. Her mother truly had hated herself. More than hate. People were out to get

her because she deserved it, she always said. And she would finish herself off first, before they got there.

Celia had become good at gauging how much time was too much to leave her mother alone. And when checking in would be too often and likely cause an episode instead. There was that perfect in-between moment, and when she hit it just right, the day would run smoothly.

“That was why I was caught off guard that day. She was on her best behavior. It was almost like having a normal mother, the way she laughed and talked to me.” Celia wasn’t seeing the room any more. She was climbing the stairs, her steps light with the thought that her mom would be happy to see her again.

The tight hug on the top of the stairs had caught her off guard, she remembered. It had been too tight, chokingly tight, so tight that her ribs ached. The words, “I love you. I love you so much!” had been repeated over and over in her ear as the arms tightened further.

Celia had called to her mother with the breath she had left. “Mom?”

“It’s okay, sweetie, it’s okay,” her mother had said. Then her mother had released her, and that moment of relief had slipped in, though not enough for her heartbeat to slow. “You don’t have to worry. You won’t end up like me. I’ll take care of it.” And then the shove at her midsection, and the fall down the stairs.

“I ended up with a bruised back, a broken wrist, and a scar from a stitched-up forehead,” Celia admitted, her hand lifting to brush the raised skin, where the scar had mostly faded. “I was lucky that time. My mother had done it on impulse. It was when she really planned out ways to kill me that it got worse, and her final attempt is what led to me living with my aunt and uncle.” Celia rubbed her hands over her arms. “But even though later attempts were worse, most of my nightmares are still of that initial fall down the stairs. I think because I was so shocked by it. I had known my mother hated herself, but I hadn’t realized it extended to me until that day. And all because of the genes that she shared with me.” *The crazy genes*, she reminded herself. Her mother had wanted so badly to save her from them, yet here she still was.

“I didn’t say all of that to my fiancé, of course. Just the part about my mother pushing me down the stairs, and that it was on purpose. And the part about her saying it was in the genes. I had agreed to marry him, and I decided he deserved to know.”

“That must have taken a lot of courage, to tell him part of your story,” the counselor said.

Celia considered it. “I thought so at the time. Now I wonder.”

The counselor tilted her head, considering. “Wonder what?”

“I think I got the outcome I was hoping for. He left me. And all I feel is relief.”

The other newbie next to her lifted her head at the word.

Celia thought about Malcolm coming over, what he'd told her his police friends had said, and her lips twisted partially in humor, partially in frustration. "Though I could have done without the name-calling and the restraining order. I swear I'm not a stalker." The smile dropped. "I was honestly so relieved that I had completely forgotten about my fiancé, so much that I had forgotten he lived in the same neighborhood where I'm staying."

"That's interesting," the counselor said, though she glanced at the clock. "I'd be happy to dig into those feelings more with you if you decide to have one-on-one sessions with me." She straightened in her chair. "Now, it's important that we..."

Celia listened with half an ear to the techniques and suggestions that she'd heard a hundred times before. Throughout it, the dark-haired woman next to her seemed to be shooting her glances.

When the group session was over, a few people came over to talk to her, to give her that feeling that she wasn't alone. It often helped, but Celia found herself distracted by the other newbie that hovered near her. The woman had said she was completely new to this type of counseling, and the bruises on her neck indicated there was enough of a need for it. Celia had the urge to reach out. Maybe for once her own story could make her strong for someone else.

By the time she moved past the other members, the other newbie had gone. She felt some disappointment, but mostly

relief. She had very little to offer someone in need, not when she was struggling herself.

Throwing out her untouched coffee, she left the counseling center to find Malcolm, the person who had been strong enough to set her on a new path. Someone much stronger than she was.

Chapter 22

Trenton couldn't take his eyes off Celia. He told himself he was worried about her, but that wouldn't explain why he was staring at her ass, picturing the way it felt in his hands as he lifted her in the shower, her legs wrapping around him when he sank inside of her.

He shifted forward on his bar stool to hide his growing erection. If he'd known having sex again would turn him into a randy teenager, he would have never done it.

Which was a total lie, he admitted to himself. As guilty as he felt, he wouldn't want to erase having sex with Celia. Ever.

His eyes drifted back to her. She hadn't been wearing a bra when he'd undressed her. He stared at her chest, wondering if there was a slight jiggle. It was impossible to tell with that apron Malcolm had his waitresses wear over their normal clothing. He closed his eyes. He'd broken things off with her and had no right to touch her again.

His eyes opened, and he caught Malcolm staring at him. It was not a good stare. He needed to stop fantasizing about Malcolm's cousin right in front of the man. Despite his discomfort, his penis was still raring to go.

Trenton lifted his drink to drain it. His wedding band flashed at him as he toyed with the empty glass, tossing cold water over him that he desperately needed. Emily would have smacked him for looking at any woman that way. Especially since it had taken her four tries to get him to realize she wanted to have sex with him. She'd stripped for him on the last try. He smiled at the memory. He really had always been an idiot when it came to the opposite sex.

Malcolm slid a new drink in front of him. "Take it easy on this one. You came to drive my cousin home."

"Yeah, you're right," Trenton said, lifting the drink to sip.

"You're not one to down alcohol normally. Something weighing on you?" Malcolm caught his eyes.

Trenton was sure in that moment that he knew, but he wasn't going to tie the noose for his own executioner, so he shook his head.

"About yesterday?" Malcolm prompted.

Trenton was so screwed. He closed his eyes at the thought. No matter how appropriate, it meant he was a dead man. "Did Celia tell you?"

"Of course she did. My cousin doesn't keep things from me." Malcolm straightened. "She seemed as surprised as I

am.”

That was putting it lightly, though her shocked face as he'd kissed her had been adorable. “I don't know what came over me.”

Malcolm tapped Trenton's knuckles. “I'm glad you punched him. Especially since you can no longer hassle me the next time I take a swing at someone.”

“What?” Trenton asked, suddenly realizing he was having a conversation about something completely different.

Malcolm raised an eyebrow. “It'd be pretty hypocritical if you did, now wouldn't it?”

“What would be hypocritical?” Blake asked, slapping Trenton on the back as he took the seat next to him. “Beer me, Malcolm.”

Malcolm winced. “I thought I've told you not to say it that way. It makes you sound like an idiot.” He straightened before moving toward the taps. “And ask Trent what he was up to yesterday.”

“God, I hope it was getting laid,” Blake said.

Heat moved up Trenton's neck. He hastily lifted his hand to show his friend his knuckles. “I punched somebody.”

Blake's eyes widened. “Well, shit, bring me two beers, Malcolm! The world must be ending.”

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “No way. Especially not on my dime.”

“Have you made much progress up there?” Trenton asked, lowering his hand to the bar.

“Don’t change the subject. Who in the world would Mr. Gentle have hit?”

Malcolm set the beer on the bar. “Celia’s ex. They ran into him at the supermarket.”

“Oh, well, that’s okay then. He sounded like a real prick.” Blake took a gulp of his beer, wiping some of the foam off his upper lip with the back of his hand. “So what did he say to make you mad enough to punch him?”

“The man called Celia a crazy stalker and tried to file a restraining order against her,” Malcolm said, his own hands clenching the top of the bar.

Trenton frowned. “That wasn’t it. And the restraining order had to be a bluff.”

“No, he went to the cops this morning.” Malcolm said, frowning as well. “And what do you mean, that wasn’t it?” Malcolm shifted his gaze to where Celia was cleaning off a table. “She didn’t mention the jackass saying anything else.”

“He actually went to the cops?” Trenton asked. He wanted to kick himself for handing Malcolm a string to pull apart. Talking about sex and Celia in the same sentence was sure to give him away. He was way too honest at times.

“Yeah, but don’t worry, that’s not the right place to do it anyway.” Malcolm waved that topic away. “Tell me what else this guy said.”

Trenton stared down at his glass, sure he was on the path to his own demise. “If Celia didn’t mention it, then I shouldn’t.”

“Maybe it was too hard on her,” Blake said. A small smile was beginning to form on his lips as he looked over the rim of his glass at Trenton. The man had a sixth sense whenever it came to sex. “You should tell us so she doesn’t have to.”

“It was...” Trenton lowered his voice, leaning forward. “About her lack of sexual performance.”

Malcolm laughed. “That wouldn’t have been as hard on Celia, not after the crazy part.”

Trenton frowned as he thought back on her reaction. She’d been very clear about the sex issues. But there’d been something else there, he remembered, something she hadn’t said.

“That jackass is lucky I wasn’t there. I’d have put him in the hospital.” Malcolm walked over to another customer who had signaled to him.

Blake leaned into Trenton. “So, how is she in bed, really?”

Trenton spit out his drink to Blake’s laughter. He was glad he’d only taken a sip, and mopped at it with the square napkin.

Blake’s eyes drifted until they landed on Celia. “Please tell me she’s as sweet to taste as she looks.”

Trenton grabbed his friend’s shirt, pulling his face closer. “Don’t talk about her that way.”

Blake grinned, putting his hands up in surrender. "I was just testing the waters. It seems I was right after all."

Trenton released him, and Blake reached for his drink, still with that ridiculous full-on cheer.

"You two are perfect for each other. I fully approve." He gestured down at Trenton's crotch. "And I'm relieved to hear that everything still works after so long."

"Keep your voice down," Trenton said, glancing at Malcolm.

Blake sobered a bit. "You'll have to tell him some time if you're going to date her."

Trenton stared down at his glass. "I'm not."

Blake's drink froze halfway to his mouth. He set it down, leaning toward Trenton again. "Are you serious? I didn't pin you for a benefits-only guy."

"It was a onetime thing," Trenton said. He twisted the wedding band on his finger. "I'm still in love with Emily."

His friend's smile faded completely. "I'm sorry, man." Blake reached out to pat his shoulder. "I know you loved her."

Trenton pulled away. "Love, Blake. Present tense." Something dark swirled in his stomach. "Just because she's dead doesn't mean I no longer love her."

"We know you do," Malcolm said, coming down the bar. He nudged Trenton's drink forward, and Trenton took a long gulp. "The anniversary is coming up soon, isn't it?"

Trenton nodded. "It'll be three years in a few weeks." Even saying it out loud didn't make it seem real.

"Do you want company?" Malcolm asked, his eyes kind as they met Trenton's.

It made Trenton feel even worse about screwing his friend's cousin. "No, I'd rather go alone." Even if he wasn't the type that talked to the dead.

Malcolm nodded, glancing over his shoulder. "What's up, Celia?"

She moved up to the left of Trenton with a small nod to him. "Another round for table four, two pale ales and a vodka cranberry." She glanced over her shoulder. "And table one needs his keys taken again tonight."

Malcolm sighed. "Jerry doesn't know when to call it quits. I'll take care of it." He turned to pour the drinks first.

Trenton reached for his gin and tonic, and his hand accidentally brushed against Celia's. They both jerked away as if the touch burned, and Celia dropped the napkins she had been grabbing.

"Sorry!" they said at the same time.

Her skin had been so damn soft. His hand tingled.

Malcolm frowned at them as he returned with the drinks. "Why are you two acting weird?"

Celia flushed.

“Why indeed?” Blake took another long gulp around his smile, and Trenton wanted to smack his friend.

“We’re not,” Trenton said, though he could smell his soap on her skin. The scent made him think of their shower and got him hard all over again.

“I bet I know what it is,” Blake said, winking at him. “One of you walked in on the other in the bathroom, didn’t you? That’d be all kinds of awkward.”

Malcolm sighed. “Not everyone acts as childish as you, Blake.” He lifted the flap on the bar to move over to his regular drunk. Trenton watched him take the man’s keys. That was just like Malcolm. He often took care of people.

Celia was frowning as she stared down at her hand. “I’m almost done for the night, and then we can head home.” She turned, taking the drinks over to the customers.

Trenton’s scalp tingled at her calling the condo that. Home.

“I don’t know, Trent,” Blake said, though he’d turned back to his beer. “I’d have a hard time staying close to something that good and not touching it.” He downed the last of it and slapped Trenton on the back. “But I guess that’s why you’re the monk.” He turned away, calling a good night to Malcolm as he left.

Trenton toyed with his own glass. He doubted his friend would call him that if he realized he was still hiding an erection beneath the bar.

Chapter 23

Malcolm gestured at Celia from the bar. She hurried over, wondering what was wrong.

“Take a break,” he told her, waving at the sandwich on the bar.

Celia didn’t bother protesting. After most of another week had passed, she’d become used to him feeding her. Besides, he’d taken it easy on her and only forced the sandwich.

The tavern tended to get busy on Saturdays, and Katie only came to help at night. Eating during a lull was important to keep Celia’s energy up, even if she had no appetite.

The bell over the front entrance rang. Celia jumped up, but it was only Blake. He crossed to the bar, dropping into the seat beside her. He eyed her sandwich enviously.

Celia knew better than to pass him half. “How’s the work upstairs coming?”

“Slowly. I wish I had a full week just to knock it out.” Blake sighed as he propped his head on his hand.

She'd realized earlier in the week that he was working throughout the day before even coming into the bar for the upstairs renovation. And he was doing all the work for free beer and food. Blake might often cut up, but he was a good friend to Malcolm.

"Don't keep staring at Celia's food," Malcolm said, waving his towel at Blake. "I'll put in an order for you if you're hungry."

"I could eat," Blake said with his more usual grin.

"Don't I know it," Malcolm strode farther down to call into the kitchen.

Celia forced another bite of the sandwich, chewing methodically.

Another ding sounded above the front door. Malcolm still had his head popped into the kitchen, so she put down her food and wiped her hands on a napkin.

Blake laid a hand on her arm, stopping her from rising. "Malcolm won't like it."

Her cousin was lifting the flap on the bar. "Blake is right." He pointed a finger at her. "You, sit and finish eating. I'd been taking care of this bar long before you came back."

She did as she was told, looking thoughtfully after him. Malcolm had his hair pulled back in his loose bun, and was chatting with the customers as he showed them to a table.

"He's good at taking care of people in all sorts of ways," Blake said, watching him as well. "I guess you know that

better than anyone.”

“Malcolm saved me,” she said. He literally had. If he hadn’t shown up that day, she was certain her mother wouldn’t have stopped.

“So I gather. I never heard the whole story, though.” Blake looked over at her, lifting an eyebrow.

Celia shook her head. He wouldn’t hear it from her. “He helped me again by giving me this job.”

“Have you thought about what you’ll do long term?” Blake asked. “I can understand if you want to stay with Trent as long as you can. He’s the only person even better at taking care of people than Malcolm is.”

“Yeah,” she said, toying with her sandwich but not picking it up. She didn’t regret having sex with him—she couldn’t—but it had changed things between them. He avoided touching her at all costs. She avoided coming out of her room in the mornings, and even if she had a nightmare, she stayed in her room at night.

He still left a smoothie out every morning and picked her up every night, but otherwise, they were perfect strangers. She guessed it was probably normal to feel awkward around someone she’d been naked with. None of the guys she’d previously slept with had hung around after they broke things off. Except for Daniel, who had thrown her lack of prowess into her face.

“Don’t just poke it. Eat,” Malcolm chided her as he filled some water glasses to take to the new table.

She lifted it and took a big bite.

Blake sat up straighter. “Things have been tough on him since Emily died. I think having you around to take care of has been good for him.”

Celia swallowed the food, feeling it slide down her throat. “I’m not so sure.” She reached for the water glass Malcolm had left for her, then took a long swallow.

Blake looked at her again, as if he was studying her. “True. Maybe you two are too alike. You’re almost as serious as he is.”

“Not everyone can be as carefree as you, Blake,” Malcolm said as he returned.

“That’s the sad truth. But admit it. Trent needs something lighter in his life. Like a fling.” Blake’s eyes slid to hers. “Or a friends-with-benefits thing. Nothing too serious.”

Celia got the hint and flushed. Not because she was offended, but because she couldn’t help but think about having sex with Trenton again.

“Trent’s not like you,” Malcolm repeated, setting a plate in front of Blake.

Blake dug in. “More’s the pity. He could really use a chance to loosen up. It’s been almost three years. Without sex! Even you don’t go that long.”

“Hey, I get around just fine, thank you,” Malcolm said, scowling to cover up his own red cheeks.

“You’re the king of ‘nothing too serious.’ And the girls don’t seem to get mad at you, unlike me. Maybe you should give Trent some pointers.” Blake grinned at her cousin as he took a huge bite of his sandwich.

Malcolm shook his head. “Trent’s a grown man and can make his own decisions. Leave him alone.” He glanced at her. “Besides, it’d be awkward for Celia if he started bringing women home.” The customers waved toward him and he moved away.

“Well, what do you think, Celia?” Blake asked, leaning closer to her. “After your breakup, you’re due for a rebound. You should think on this friends-with-benefits idea as well.” His smile was just a bit too knowing, Celia realized. “It couldn’t hurt. And who would be sweeter than dear old Trent?”

She’d been fighting thinking about sex all week. Every time she showered, thoughts of what Trenton had done to her under the stream of water returned. She ached just standing in there and wondered if he did as well.

Swallowing the last bite of her sandwich, she said, “I’ve got to get back to it.”

“Sure, run away,” Blake called after her retreating back.

“You’d know a thing or two about that, wouldn’t you?” Katie asked. Celia hadn’t even noticed Malcolm’s sister come

in for her shift. She left the two of them to their banter and relieved Malcolm at the customer's table.

Celia was glad it was a busy night. She had less time for thoughts of sex with Trenton to make her flush, though Katie had noticed her distraction and told her to snap to it more than once. Celia had never thought about sex much before. Good sex made a difference, apparently.

Closing up took longer than it did most nights. Trenton didn't say anything about it as he sat patiently at the bar. She tried to apologize, but he just waved her off with that gentle smile and led her to the car when she was done, still so careful not to touch her. He'd been careful ever since their hands had brushed at the bar at the beginning of the week.

Celia stared out the window at the passing buildings. She always knew they were getting close when they passed that damn supermarket. Though it wasn't fair to blame the awkwardness between her and Trenton on what had happened there.

She'd been doing better since Monday's counseling session, and had attended twice more in the days since. The other newbie hadn't been there. Celia hadn't shared again, but hearing stories similar to her own, similar in emotion if not in circumstance, helped to ease some of her anxiety. Sure, she was crazy, but she was handling it. She'd gotten up and dressed every day. It had only been one bad day.

She still caught Malcolm studying her during her shifts sometimes. He was worried about her. As much as she

appreciated it, she'd rather he didn't have to.

Trenton parked, coming around and opening her door like he always did. He didn't touch her as they walked to the elevator together.

Right before the elevator dinged, boisterous laughter sounded behind them, headed their way. For it being so late at night, she hadn't expected to run into many other tenants in the condos.

"Hold the elevator!" one of the men called, slurring his words as they all lumbered toward it.

Trenton pressed the 'Door Open' button even as his eyes narrowed on them. When they got close enough, he eased from the doorway, using his body to position her into the farthest corner of the elevator. She couldn't see much over his broad shoulders, but could smell the alcohol coming off the group of men that shuffled on. Trenton's hand reached back and grabbed hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

She hadn't realized how much she'd missed that casual touch. She focused on the feel of his hand in hers, and the width of his back. Trenton was a born gentleman. For the first time, she pictured what it would be like if he were truly hers. She'd always been the one in her relationships to remember anniversaries and to plan dates and to pick up the favorite coffee or snack of the person she was with. With Trenton, it would probably be difficult to keep up with his brand of thoughtfulness.

Even the day they'd had sex, he'd been much more focused on her pleasure than she had on his. The thought made her frown. She'd mainly just been there. Daniel's accusation that she barely moved made her wince. She hated that he was right.

The group of drunken men got off the elevator a floor below them. Trenton shifted over to give her more room, staring down at their clasped hands as if he hadn't realized he'd reached out for hers. He pulled away, running that hand over the back of his neck. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine." Celia bit her lip to keep her thoughts inside. The thought that she hadn't minded at all.

He unlocked the front door, and they entered the condo together. In the living room, she couldn't help but stare at the couch.

Trenton looked at anything but it. "Well, good night," he said, heading for his room.

Her throat ached to call out to him. To ask if not wanting a relationship really meant they had to avoid each other. His door clicked shut without her saying anything.

She kept the shower quick, having the same problem she'd thought about before. Her body was obviously a traitor. It had never wanted sex before. Now she was stuck with a familiar ache.

The condo was dark after she turned off the bathroom light and stepped out. No sounds came from Trenton's bedroom

across the way, and the light was off. Her fingers toyed with the rubber band as she remembered their conversation.

Trenton had broken things off because he'd been worried about her. He didn't want a relationship, that was all. But he never said he didn't want sex. She'd been the one to put that spin on it.

Celia wasn't emotionally available either. She had way too much baggage to saddle someone as sweet as Trenton with it.

She'd never had a sex-only agreement with someone, would have never considered it after all her failures in that department. That type of need had never been on her radar before.

It was now. Celia let herself imagine having sex with Trenton again, to relive those moments on the couch she stared at. Her nipples became hard nubs under her shirt, and the ache from before slid through her. Maybe she'd get it fully right this time. Sex had always been something that happened to her, not that she participated in. Even with Trenton, she'd fallen into her passive role.

What type of expression would he make if she came onto him?

Her feet moved forward before she'd fully decided, but she didn't want to stop. Trenton wouldn't hurt her. If his answer was no, she could accept that if it was said in his gentle tone.

The knob of his bedroom door made a soft click as she turned it. Inside his room it was dark, with only soft light from

the moon falling over the bed. Trenton's eyes were closed and his breathing remained even as she padded closer.

He really was a good-looking man. Close-cropped hair, a straight nose, those soft yet hard lips. The sheet rode low across his stomach, which was smooth and flat in the moonlight. It wasn't low enough to show those perfect indents that led down below.

She sat on the edge of his bed beside him, softly calling his name. "Trenton?"

His nose wrinkled a little, in a way she couldn't help finding cute, but he didn't wake up. It was something new she hadn't known about him. He'd always seemed to sense when she was out of her room, so she had assumed he was a light sleeper.

Her hand went to his shoulder, lightly shaking him. The warmth of his skin had her fingers switching to a stroke. She forced herself to stop, searching his face. His eyes remained shut. Asleep as he was, she worried that touching him wasn't okay, even as her hands tingled against him.

His lips were slightly parted, but straight when so often they were tilted up in his gentle smile. Celia had never initiated a kiss before. The admission sent a sadness through her. She stared at her lap, willing herself to leave his room. He still hadn't woken up, and she shouldn't take advantage of someone like him.

A bigger part of her wanted to, though. It was as if Blake was the devil on her shoulder, whispering in her ear. Who would be sweeter than Trenton, indeed.

She bent over him, bracing her hand on the other side of him as she brushed her lips against his. The meeting of their lips was as soft as she remembered. His breathing changed, and she opened her eyes to stare into his.

Celia's lips hovered. "Trenton..." She didn't even recognize the breathy tone as her own voice.

They moved together, their lips pressing firmer as they savored the taste of each other. It wasn't enough. Celia changed the angle, letting her tongue slide against his. The sensation made her ache, but she never wanted it to stop. Now fully awake, his hands cupped the sides of her face. His lips met hers again and again, taking away all thought as she met him stroke for stroke.

He was panting as much as she was when their lips parted. His eyes closed as his head fell back to his pillow. "Celia, you shouldn't be here."

The words eased the fog that had begun to settle over her. She bit her lip. "What if I told you that you wouldn't be taking advantage? That I would go into this with my eyes open?" She took a breath, looking toward her lap.

He shifted on the bed. "You're meant to be loved, Celia. You deserve to be."

She shook her head. He really had no idea. Not even her parents had loved her. "You don't know me that well, Trenton. I'm not looking for love." She leaned over him again, staring into his eyes. "No relationship works for me. Just sex."

His hand reached out, stroking her cheek. “Your expression looks sad. I don’t want to be someone that makes you sad.”

“I’m not sad, I’m—” She clenched her teeth. Kissing him hadn’t helped things. She wished she’d had the right words to be past talking by now. She was wet and aching. Her face flamed, but she was fine with that in the dark. “I’m horny!” She hadn’t meant to scream it at him, but the man was clueless.

His eyes widened, and he blinked up at her. She’d horrified him, she guessed, pulling back. Her arms crossed over her chest, and she hissed in a breath as they brushed over her sensitive nipples. “This is all your fault. My body never acted like this until after we—”

He lunged for her, pulling her toward him hard enough that she sprawled over his chest. Then his lips were on hers again, and she kissed him back, relieved that the talking was over.

Her body thrummed as his hands slid over the top of her nightclothes. He bunched up her shirt, parting their mouths long enough to slide it up and off of her. Her nipples brushed against his bare chest, and she moaned into his mouth when he captured hers again.

Her legs spread as she tried to find that hardness below. She wanted it flush against her to ease her ache. They didn’t have the right angle, and her frustration grew, especially when his fingers began adding even more friction to her nipples.

He was doing everything again, she realized. He was touching her, kissing her, stroking her. Even on top of him, she

was just lying there.

Her lips parted from his as she pushed herself upright. The hard length of him pressed against her just right, and they both moaned as she slid against it.

“Celia...” He gasped, reaching for her again.

She grabbed his hands, holding them down at his sides. The movement pressed her tight to him again, and while it felt good, her shorts were in the way. Trenton slept naked apparently, something else she hadn't realized. His hands flexed against her before going still. She studied his beautiful face. There was a glaze there that she hadn't gotten to see before. He was turned on. By her.

She leaned down, still holding his hands, and kissed him. Her eyes stayed open as she watched his slide shut. Her tongue stroked his, and the closed lids tightened. When his tongue next darted into her mouth, she sucked on it, her ache becoming even more intense at his moan.

The idea tantalized her. She'd touched guys before, but never been turned on by their reactions. Touching Trenton was different.

She broke their kiss, tracking her lips down his body. His hands jerked under hers when her tongue circled his nipple, but then went still. She tested strokes, tugs, and bites, but while he stared into her eyes, the moan she was looking for didn't come.

As she dropped lower, her force against his hands eased, though he didn't try to move them. When her kisses found their way below his belly button, his body tensed and his hands jerked. She'd found those divots from before. Her tongue licked down one, and he shuddered. She pressed her lips against his skin and sucked hard. His fingers wrapped around her wrist as he let out a gasp.

She liked the mark she made, but still wasn't satisfied with his reaction. His erection had lengthened, and she dipped lower, rubbing her cheek against the smooth skin of it. He sucked in a breath and held it.

Celia shifted the last few inches and closed her lips around the tip of him, sucking softly. She was rewarded with a choked sound from Trenton. Her eyes lifted to meet his as she slowly took in more of him until he was as deep as she could take him. Then she slid back up, almost freeing him from her mouth completely before repeating the gesture.

The muscles of his thighs tightened when she moved faster. The angle was still slightly awkward, so she pulled one of her hands free, using it to grip the base of his dick tightly as she took him deep again.

His head fell back as the moan she'd been hoping for was wrung out of him. An answering tightening down below made her hum against him, and she began to go even faster.

Suddenly he grabbed her, dragging her up his body and rolling them over. His hands freed her quickly from her shorts and underwear, and then his fingers were seeking her entrance.

“Thank God,” he muttered when he touched her, shifting above her. His jaw clenched and his body quivered as her hands gripped his upper arms. “I’ll make this up to you, I swear it.” Then he slid completely inside her.

The hardness of him felt so good she cried out.

He froze, searching her face. “Damn it, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

Celia gritted her teeth, trying to arch against him to take more. “Please, don’t stop!”

Trenton’s head fell against her neck, and he began to pump in earnest.

She wrapped her legs and arms around him, meeting his every thrust. The new angle had each forward motion filling her, causing a stronger sensation to build within. Celia let her mind go, reaching for the feeling. Lights danced behind her eyelids as he slid against some perfect spot, again, and again, until she broke.

The pulsing spread, so intense that she let out a scream and her arms loosened.

Trenton caught her, pulling her tight against him as he rode her through it. With a sudden shout, he stilled, and his own pulsing joined hers.

When it ended, he collapsed on top of her, his weight the perfect reward for the effort it had taken to enter his room.

Chapter 24

Trenton remained buried within Celia. He hadn't gone completely soft, and he hitched her hips closer with his arm.

She gasped, hugging him tight.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice too husky to really be his. He cleared his throat as he tried to peer down at her.

She tilted her head back, her shy smile sending a bolt of lust through his penis even as his chest squeezed. He began to harden inside her.

Christ, he wanted her again already. His hips shifted forward and back, as if testing the waters, and she let out a hum.

When he'd woken up to her kiss, he'd thought it had been a dream at first. Having sex for the first time in years had addled his brain. She wasn't the type to go crawling into someone's bed.

Except apparently she was. And he was so thankful, even as a wave of guilt washed over him.

Celia shimmied against him, her legs wrapping around his hips tighter, and his erection grew. Those dark eyes of hers held a longing that called inside of him. “Can we do it again?” she asked.

He rocked against her, and her eyes squeezed shut. “Anything you want, Celia, though I owe you some attention after moving things along so quickly.”

That soft smile returned to her lips. “I liked it.”

Trenton dropped his head to hers, taking her mouth in a hard kiss. He ached to just thrust into her until they both came again. His hand slipped between them, and he brushed against her clit, swallowing her moan. He continued to stimulate her, wanting the moans to change to a scream again. He couldn't pull out or stay completely still, but continuing to rock into her kept them connected.

Her legs had fallen from around his hips, quivering with each repeated pass of his finger. She took longer to find her second release, but he never tired of watching the flushed passion coloring her face. When she tipped over the edge again, she let out a choked cry instead of the scream he'd been craving. Her orgasm caused the walls of her vagina to squeeze him over and over. Trenton's eyes blurred as he clenched his teeth against the sensation. He somehow managed not to come, his hardness painfully sensitive to her every quiver.

Her muscles loosened from the release, her thighs falling wider. Trenton thrust deeper to stay inside of her, and her eyes popped open. “Can you go again?”

His control nearly snapped at the wonder there. “Don’t tell me you’re done with me already.”

Her arms wrapped around the back of his neck, and she pulled herself into him, her breasts tight against his chest as she took his mouth in another kiss. When she pulled back, she looked so pleased with herself that he smiled at her, despite the ache in his penis telling him to thrust like a maniac.

“Can I—” Celia broke off, looking away.

He cupped her cheek until she faced him again. “You can say anything to me. Communication is good for sex. What do you want?”

“Can I be on top?” she rushed out. Her eyes fell as she played with the ends of his hair. “I’ve never—” She swallowed, then tried again. “Before, when I, did that...” She couldn’t finish that thought either.

He imagined cupping her tight breasts as she rode him and lost his breath. The same heat filled his stomach as when she’d tracked down his body to take his penis in her mouth with that strange mixture of innocence and sexiness. He’d wanted to pump himself dry in her mouth, and had barely managed to pull her up so he could sink into her instead. She’d been so wet for him; she’d obviously enjoyed it too.

Trenton gripped her ass, arching into her even as he rolled them on the bed. Celia's hands pressed down on his chest as she settled tight against him. She sat still, blinking.

He stroked up and down her hips. "You have me where you want me now. Do as you wish. I'm here for you."

Her body began to relax, softening around his hardness. He wanted to lift her and let her weight impale her again, but resisted.

She shook her head, leaning forward. "This isn't just about me. I want you to like it too."

Trenton was sure his smile held a bit of grimace. "Don't worry about me. Anything you do will make me come again. The trick will be lasting long enough."

Her frown deepened as she straightened. The motion took him deeper, and her body froze from the sensation. He wanted to groan as she tested what had happened, leaning forward, then straightening.

To distract himself, he reached for her nipples, pinching both tight buds between his fingers. She let out a moan as her hips lifted toward the sensation. When she lowered, his penis tightened almost to the point of pain. He wasn't sure how long he would last, but he wanted to find out.

He lowered one of his fingers to her clit, using it to encourage her to continue the smooth, up-and-down strokes. She was beautiful, eyes closed, giving herself over to every

sensation. She held nothing about her reaction back and soon quickened her pace.

When he knew he couldn't hold out any longer, he closed his fingers in the softest pinch. She screamed, taking him deep as her thighs clenched tightly against his hips. The first wave of her orgasm had him coming so hard he thought he might black out.

When both of their orgasms were over, she collapsed against him, too boneless to hold herself up. He wrapped his arms around her and turned her to the side, slipping out of her this time. Her lips moved against his throat in a soft kiss, and he smiled against her hair.

They both fell asleep.

When he next woke, she was staring at him with those big, dark eyes that made him want to pull her close. He was in big trouble, he realized, as his heart started to dance in his chest. "Good morning," he said, the gruffness of sleep still in his voice.

"Morning," she returned, ducking her head and resting it against his chest. "You're still here."

Regret filled him as he realized she'd been sad to wake up alone the last time they'd had sex. "Well, you are in my bed," he teased, hoping to keep things light.

She nodded against him before lifting her head. She bit her lip, looking away, before saying, "I'm sorry if I took advantage of you last night."

Trenton wished he wasn't tapped out and could take her all over again. She was too darn adorable. "I thought we agreed last night that you can take advantage of me any time you like." He gave in and hugged her close, feeling the tension leave her shoulders.

"We didn't really talk it through," she said, lying against him.

"True." Trenton thought about turning away from her again, avoiding her. He didn't like the idea. "If you're sure no relationship works for you, I'm happy to give my body over for your use." She let out a soft laugh, and he stroked his hand over her tousled hair. "See, I really am a saint, like the guys said."

"They called you a monk, and I don't think it fits." She lifted her head, and all the anxiety from the last week seemed to have faded from her eyes.

They leaned forward together, indulging in a soft kiss. It wasn't the sexy variety from the night before. It was a friendly kiss, he told himself, squashing the fluttering in his stomach.

"Celia," he said, drawing back to study her again. "If at any time you change your mind, please say something. I don't want to hurt you."

"I will." Her eyes searched his. "What about you?"

"I'll tell you," he agreed.

Her fingers slid to the nape of his neck, playing with the hair there even as she bit her lip. "Can I ask you something

then?”

“Yes.”

Her fingers continued to stroke, though she seemed to be unaware of it. He watched her eyes scan the room before coming back to his. “This room. Was it the one you shared with your wife?”

“Yes, it was.”

She bit her lip again. “Then, what we did here? Was it a problem for you?”

He finally understood her concern beneath the question. A concern for him, he realized. “Oh, well, I should have said it is, but it isn’t. The room itself was ours, but I redecorated after she was gone.” He’d had to. It had been too much to have her surround him all the time. The guys had dragged him out to do it a year ago, but it had been the right decision. “Most of the rest of the place she had a hand in decorating, though.”

She nodded. “Like my bedroom. All the color didn’t seem like you.”

“It’s quite a rainbow, isn’t it?” He smiled at the memory of saying just that to his wife. His hand returned to stroke over Celia’s hair. “I don’t want you to tiptoe around me. Anything you think about is okay to ask.”

Her fingers paused as she looked at him. “Will you tell me more about your wife?”

Trenton expected the pain to hit, but no swamp of sadness came. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything.” Celia shrugged, her other hand coming around his neck and her fingers curling together before pressing against his skin. “How did you meet?”

“We went to the same university and ran into each other the last year. We really shouldn’t have. She wasn’t going the route toward law school.” He smiled as he thought of Emily shoving the environmental propaganda into his chest and waving her hands as she lectured him about trees. “She actually never picked a major, but floated between classes. Malcolm called her flighty when he met her.”

“He tends to be rather logical,” Celia said with a small laugh. “I never expected him to become a bar owner, but it suits him. So you introduced her to Malcolm when you started dating?”

“Well, we hadn’t gotten that far yet. I thought she didn’t like me, and so I tried to be extra nice to her when we ran into each other. Which was suddenly really often.” Trenton let his head rest against her hands. “Apparently, she was coming around on purpose because she liked me. When I took her to Malcolm’s new tavern, I thought I was just showing her a place she’d asked about as a favor. She thought it was a date.”

Celia laughed, pressing her face against his chest. “You really don’t notice women, do you?”

Trenton’s eyes scanned over her naked hip to where the sheet bared part of her ass. “Not usually,” he admitted. He bit his lip before he could admit she’d been an exception. They’d

agreed to no complications, and that sounded like a relationship thing to say.

“So, if she never picked a major, what did she end up doing?” Celia asked.

“All sorts of things. After she dropped out, she worked for a lot of nonprofit organizations at first, but it made her realize there was more business to it than helping the causes. She tried a few other things, but eventually fell into being an artist. Some of the paintings around the condo are hers.”

“The bright ones with splashes of color,” Celia said, nodding as if it made sense.

“Yes, those are all her.” Trenton remembered the exuberance and energy Emily had brought into his world. She’d been so different from anything he had pictured for his life, but he had loved every second of it.

When he focused on Celia, he found her frowning. “Wait, you said she dropped out? So she never received a degree, despite all the money she spent?”

“She regretted that for a while, especially since her parents were angry about her wasting their money. They made up eventually, and it wasn’t like her to live in regrets. The life she ended up with was exactly as it was meant to be, she once told me.” Trenton was surprised at the continued frown on Celia’s face.

Her fingers slipped down from his neck as she sighed, turning her head to rest against his chest.

“What about you, Celia?” Trenton asked, studying the part of her face he could still see, trying to decipher what was bothering her. “I know you’re working at the tavern right now, but what did you used to do?”

Her fingers played with the edge of the blanket. “Just random jobs. Anything that made a decent wage but didn’t require a degree. I could never have afforded school, and I couldn’t take more from Malcolm’s parents.”

His tension left as he understood. Malcolm had never given him a lot of the details, but he knew Celia’s home life had been strained enough for her to move in with his family. Trenton had always gotten the impression that Celia did not have an easy life, even before that, when he just saw her as Malcolm’s sad-eyed cousin that rarely smiled. “You must think Emily sounds rather spoiled.”

Her head jerked up. “No, not at all!”

Trenton smiled to soften the accusation. “It’s okay. It was part of what made her who she was, but even Malcolm was annoyed by it at times.”

Celia shook her head. “That’s really not it. I’m just... envious, I guess. It sounds like she had the perfect life.”

His smile faded at the words. “She felt the same. I think that’s why she had such a hard time when her diagnosis came. Though being told you’re going to die isn’t something anyone would take easily.”

“So it was sudden?” Celia asked.

“The doctors predicted she’d have several years. Even they were shocked when she entered hospice six months later.” Trenton mainly remembered Emily’s fear. During those last days, there had been such regret that she hadn’t done enough to be remembered. They hadn’t had any children, and her parents had already passed away. Trenton had been the only one left to remember her, and so he had promised he always would.

Celia didn’t say anything. Her hand began stroking his shoulder.

“She died nearly three years ago. The anniversary is two weeks away.” It hadn’t slipped his mind despite the distractions. He’d made her a promise, after all.

The ringer on his phone chirped at him. Literally, it sounded like birds. He frowned at it, wondering when Jacob had managed to figure out his password again. His assistant was too smart for his own good.

Turning the screen to see who was calling, Trenton smiled as he answered it. “Hello, Mom.”

Celia tensed against him as he listened to his mother’s greeting. She started to lift from his chest, and Trenton shook his head at her, rubbing her back to tell her it was fine.

“I wanted to ask you a favor for today’s lunch,” his mother was saying. He pictured her sitting at the kitchen stool she had always used when she talked on the phone.

Trenton winced as he realized he'd forgotten about the monthly lunch with his family. "What did you need?"

"Will you pick up your sister? Her car is acting up again, and I told her I didn't think it was safe." His mother had always been a worrier.

"Yes, I will." Trenton looked down to see Celia biting her lip. "Hold on a second, Mom," he said, pressing the 'Mute' symbol. He reached out, brushing over Celia's lip, which she released with a gasp. "You've been doing that a lot. Maybe it means you're hungry," he teased with a smile. She shook her head at him, pointing to the phone. "Oh, my mom can't hear us. I wanted to ask if you'd like to have lunch with my family."

Celia blinked at him, then frowned. "That's not a good idea. Your family might think—" She gestured between them, red creeping across her cheeks as if she just remembered she was lying on top of him naked.

His body also began to take note, and Trenton considered hanging up on his mother, wondering which choice would be more appropriate. The idea of talking to his mother while he struggled with an erection made him flush as well.

Trenton reached out, brushing his fingers over her blush. "I'd explain. And you could use some home cooking."

She stared down at her hands, not able to say yes or no.

He unmuted his phone, holding it back up to his ear. "Sorry about that, Mom. What would you say to me bringing an extra

person to lunch?”

“One of your friends? You know they’re always welcome.”

“Great. I’ve got to go if I’m going to pick up Rachel beforehand.” Let her believe that was the reason.

“Of course. Thanks again, Trenton.”

He hung up, putting the phone back on his nightstand.

Celia had frozen where she lay.

“You don’t have to go, but you’re more than welcome to if you want. Sunday is your free day, and my family is great.” Trenton ran a hand along her back to soothe her. “And my mom’s cooking is delicious.”

Celia rolled away from him and sat up, clutching the sheet against her. “I know I’m too skinny, but I’ve been eating.” She held out her free hand, staring at her delicate wrist. “I look awful in the light, don’t I? A skeleton. At least, that’s what Dan—”

Trenton cut off her words with a kiss, not wanting to hear the man’s name while he was in bed with her. When he pulled back, her expression had softened. “No more of that. It should be obvious that I find you desirable.” He reached out, stroking the side of her silky, small, and perfect breast that the sheet didn’t quite cover. “But perhaps I haven’t been clear enough.”

Her breath drew in, those dark eyes of hers shimmering with something only for him.

He cupped the back of her head, bringing her closer for a proper kiss. When she let out the soft moan that drove him crazy and leaned against him, the sheet fell down between them and those wonderful breasts pressed against his chest.

Trenton rolled her under him, accepting that he was going to be late to pick up his sister.

Chapter 25

Celia hadn't taken Trenton up on his offer to have lunch with his family. She was certain that they would be welcoming, sweet, and kind, just like Trenton. Bright and perfect, similar to his wife. The total opposite of her.

She knew the thoughts were her insecurities showing through. Just as she'd practically begged Trenton to prove to her that he wanted her. Celia's body still hummed from her morning and night spent with him.

Sometimes she was truly pathetic.

Even that thought made her cringe. Which was a big part of why she hadn't gone with him. She needed to go to the counseling session today.

The bus was empty on a Sunday afternoon. Not that it was ever very full. She sat by the window, watching the buildings pass by. The city was in an in-between state of familiar and new. Some buildings appeared to be the same as they had been when she'd passed them in the back seat of her father's Honda.

And then there were the new restaurants and shops that looked trendier than she ever remembered her hometown being.

The closest stop she'd found was a couple of blocks north of the community center. As she rounded the corner of the second block, she almost ran into the dark-haired newbie from the week before. Though Celia had attended a couple of sessions during the week, she hadn't seen her since the previous Sunday. The woman was staring down the street, frozen in place.

Celia shifted to the side, bending to peer into the woman's face. "Is everything okay?"

The woman blinked, as if waking from a dream. "Oh. It's you."

"Cece," Celia said, holding out a hand.

She took it, her grip there and gone. "Jami."

Celia nodded to indicate she'd heard the name, then glanced down the way the woman had been staring. "Were you looking at something?"

Jami shook her head.

Celia decided not to pry. That was the thing about a good group. They were there to make you feel less alone, but also to leave you alone when you needed it. She gestured to the building, which was set back from the street. "Are you going today?"

Jami hesitated, but then her lips pressed together. "Yes."

When Celia started forward, the other woman followed. The path they were on led through an iron gate that had been open the other times she'd come. There was a neglected garden beyond it, with a few worn but clean benches scattered around, before the path led to the back entrance of the center. It always made sense for the centers to have a back entrance, but Celia had begun going that way out of convenience more than anything. It was closest to the bus stop. She wondered if the other woman used it for the same reason.

After they entered, Jami went to find a seat, bypassing the refreshment table. Celia didn't blame her. The coffee really was terrible. She filled a Styrofoam cup anyway. A couple of the regulars recognized her and came over to offer their greetings. Celia couldn't remember their names, only their situations. One was a middle-aged mother with a teenager that was often violent with her. The other was a sweet-tempered older woman with a husband with Alzheimer's that had anger issues. While both of them had their hardships, Celia got the impression her story had shocked them. They meant well, but that didn't always help the awkwardness.

She excused herself when it was polite and made her way over to the circle of chairs, taking the one next to Jami. It was comforting to fall into silence again.

Her mind drifted to waking up that morning in Trenton's arms. She normally liked her space while she slept, but they'd been pressed together still. His sleepy smile in the early rays of the sun peeking through the curtains had made her feel so at peace.

“You look happier than last week,” Jami said.

Celia raised her head to find the other woman studying her. She wasn't sure what to say. “That's one part of what I'm feeling today.” She shrugged, fiddling with the cup. “I'm just never sure which of the many emotions will come out on top.”

Jami's lips parted, as if she was going to say something, but the counselor had entered, clapping her hands together for attention.

“Let's all take a seat so we can begin.”

Jami's lips firmed again, and she turned toward where the counselor had chosen to sit. The angle showed a portion of her neck, where the bruises from the week before had faded in color, though they were still visible. Celia wondered who had caused them.

“Who would like to share today?” the counselor asked. Celia always wondered if they taught them how to use that voice as part of their schooling. It was a cross between soothing and encouraging, with a bit of professionalism thrown in.

She let the words and stories flow around her. There was something about listening to other people's struggles. It didn't always make her feel better, but it did make her feel a bit more normal.

“Do none of you ever want to get out?” Jami asked, cutting off the older woman's words about how she knew her husband couldn't help the outbursts due to his illness.

The counselor leaned forward, but instead of the frown Celia was expecting for the rude interruption, there was gentle concern. “Would you like to share your story next?”

“No,” Jami said. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. Each person is experiencing their own personal story, and there’s no right or wrong. There’s finding what is the best choice that will make you happy.”

“It just seems...” Jami bit her lip, her hands gripping the plastic of the chair beneath her. “All of you are finding ways to cope, to deal with things. Does escape never come up?”

“You never fully escape,” Celia murmured, her own hands clenching together.

Many of the others shifted in their chairs, looking away from her.

The counselor leaned forward. “Cece, did you want to share more of your thoughts on that?”

Jami’s blue eyes lifted to focus on her.

Celia took a breath. “I escaped a while ago, back when I was fifteen. Yet here I am.”

“How?” Jami asked, an intensity in her voice. “How did you escape?”

Celia winced, but a teenage Malcolm rose in her thoughts, easing the lump in her throat. “I had help. A cousin of mine found out what was going on. But that was also the worst

memory I have of my mother.” She took a breath, wondering if she was finally ready. All the counseling sessions, and she had never shared that memory. But here there was Malcolm. And there was Trenton. “I told you before about how my mother pushed me down the stairs. Her intentions were clear to me. My father blamed the illness and said a push down the stairs wasn’t a way that someone would do something like that. He assured me that my mother didn’t want to kill me.”

Celia had known he was wrong, but she also knew he was doing his best to keep things together. Other times followed. Her mother had stashed a knife one time, but Celia had been able to wrestle it away and her father made sure no more were in the house. She’d checked on her mother another time at the exact right moment to smother the beginnings of a fire that she had started in her room. Matches were then removed. The days where she was responsible for looking after her mother made her stomach ache. That was when she’d started to have trouble eating.

“My mother’s illness was steadily getting worse, but my father needed to work, and we couldn’t afford regular care for her. I started missing more and more school. I remember on that last day listening to the recording of the school calling, wanting to speak to one of my parents about my attendance.” She drew silent, feeling like she was back in that kitchen, longing for what had once been.

“She called to me from upstairs, her voice sounding so tiny. Not like her at all. I hurried up to find her.” Dreading what she would find, Celia admitted to herself.

Her mother wasn't in her room. Instead, the window stood open, the screen nowhere in sight. Those flowered curtains drifted in with the breeze, and her mother's voice came to her from out on the roof.

"She sounded so happy. Excited even." That had surprised her. Some of the tension had left as she'd hurried over to the window, searching for her mother. Her parents' room had always been the highest point in the house. It was the only thing up the stairs, which was why Celia had dreaded going up there. The window looked out over the lower section of roof, and that was where her mother had gone. The woman's arms were out, her eyes turned up toward the sun as she balanced on the precipice of the roof. Then her foot slipped, and Celia had no more time to think. She scrambled onto the roof after her mother.

"I thought I caught her in time. But really, she hadn't been slipping at all," Celia murmured, the lump returning in her throat.

"Got you!" her mother had cried, her arms clamping hard around Celia's, trapping her hands against her sides. The dark eyes shined in the bright sunlight. The bared teeth sent a shiver through her.

Celia had tried for the calming voice her father had coached her on. "Mom, you know this isn't safe. Let's go back inside."

Her mother's face leaned even closer. "I know. You try to hide it from him, but I know. You're as crazy as me. Maybe crazier."

“You’re not crazy, Mom,” Celia lied, everything within her screaming to get away.

“I can’t be saved, but I can save you,” her mother said. And then she’d shoved her.

“It was similar to the stairs, but also so different. My shoulder hit the slanting roof, and I tried to scramble for a hold. Then the sense of nothingness came. I made the mistake of trying to brace my fall with my hands.” Celia lifted them, staring down at what appeared whole and healthy. “The doctors did a good job resetting the bones that I broke that day.”

The pain had been too much for Celia. She couldn’t move, couldn’t even lift her head. A part of her still worried that her mother would fall as well. That now that she was alone, she would jump and finally get what she’d wanted all along.

“She didn’t, though. Later, I pictured her calmly climbing back through the window to find the scissors she had hidden away. That was the sharpest thing she could find, what with my father getting rid of all the kitchen knives.” Celia bowed her head, her fingers curling together in her lap.

She had sensed when her mother had approached. She hadn’t known at the time, hadn’t realized about the scissors. Instead, her mother stroked her back. “I’m sorry. So sorry,” her mother had whispered, the words so soft Celia doubted she’d really heard them.

“I’d landed on my stomach. So when the first stab came, it was in my shoulder. The same spot that my mother had

stroked.”

Celia had tried to get away. Despite her broken hands, she dragged herself along the driveway the few inches she could manage. “By the fourth time the scissors stabbed into me, too shallow to do what my mother wanted, I just wanted it over.”

That was when the shout had come. The sound of pounding feet. A seventeen-year-old Malcolm had pulled her mother off her. Celia had never asked what he’d done with her to make sure she didn’t return. She didn’t remember a lot about the rest of that day. Just the feel of Malcolm holding her broken hand that she didn’t bother telling him hurt. All of her hurt, but that warmth from his hand had helped despite the pain.

“And so, I never went back to live with my parents after that day. In a way, what happened was supposed to happen, and it brought me to Malcolm. We’d never been close. I wasn’t around enough for that. Him even stopping by that day when his family never came over made no sense. I’m just really thankful for it.”

The room was silent. Celia didn’t lift her head, scared by what she would see on their faces.

“Thank you so much for sharing, Cece.” There was a creaking as the counselor shifted in her chair. “And we are so thankful that you are here today.”

“Even that’s because of Malcolm,” Celia admitted. “I was starting to have a bad spiral, but he somehow seems to know and is there.” He’d always been, ever since that day. Guilt often shadowed her thoughts because of it, and she’d try to

distance herself from her cousin, but he never let her, not completely.

The counselor gently moved the session on, but Celia had a hard time focusing. Afterward, Jami stood, but didn't move immediately away.

"You're very lucky to have someone like that," she said.

Celia lifted her gaze. "I know." And she couldn't claim that she'd done anything for it. She pushed people away. It was just what she did.

For the first time, she regretted not going with Trenton that day. It would have been awkward and uncomfortable, so she'd done what she normally did. Avoided it.

"I'm sorry. You must have to relive that day over and over again, and I made you talk about it." Jami crossed her arms, pulling them tight against her.

"Actually, it's not that day." Celia wasn't sure why it wasn't, since that was the worst. Maybe it was because she had been so out of it after the fall. Maybe her mind had blocked it out to help her cope. Instead, the moment she relived the most was that first shove down the stairs. "And I was the one who chose to say something," she told the other woman.

Jami stared at the ground. A tremor shook her arm from how tightly she clasped herself. "I'm still sorry."

Celia wasn't surprised when the woman turned away. She'd done something very similar one of her early times in group. Someone had shared a part of their story to help ease the

frustration Celia herself was feeling. She hadn't gone back to the group after that, had actually packed up and moved.

Jami left through the same door they'd entered together. Celia wanted to chase after her. It was as if a bubble of air swelled inside her stomach, urging her to go, to reach out. Her feet wouldn't move. Celia's jaw clenched as she shut her eyes. It was Malcolm's face that rose in her mind. He would have gone to her, just as he'd been there for Celia so long ago.

She finally moved forward, running to the back door and scanning the garden. Not seeing the woman, she clambered down the steps, hurrying toward the iron gate beyond them. But though she looked in both directions, there was nothing to see. Jami had already rushed well out of sight.

Chapter 26

Trenton leaned down to press a kiss to his mom's cheek. "That's quite a tan you managed. It looks like the cruise agreed with you."

His mom smiled at him. "It did, though being with your father was also a big part of it."

Trenton's heart squeezed as his father came up behind her and wrapped her in a hug. "I pay her to say that," he said with a laugh.

Trenton didn't bother to argue. His father always liked to tease. His cheer centered on his wife. Trenton remembered the year they thought they were going to lose her. He'd only been eighteen at the time and had withdrawn from his first year of college to help out at home. They'd all rallied around her.

Rachel's oldest child ran into the house and her eyes followed the boy even as she hitched her toddler up on her hip. "Thanks again for picking me up, Trent. Even though it turns out I could have driven myself."

He nodded, thankful that he'd gone over. "I'm glad it was an easy fix. You should have called me." His younger sister had bags under her eyes, and he wanted to offer to take his niece again, but knew she'd deny him. Ever since her divorce, she'd been stubborn about making it on her own. He'd tried to honor that, and only called her every other week.

"Well, it's fixed now," his mother said. "What do you say to your brother?"

Rachel sighed. "I already thanked him, Mom."

Their mom reached out to Rachel. "Let me have that little darling. I don't get to see her nearly enough."

Rachel hesitated, but handed her daughter over.

"You go in and talk to your sisters. Julia and Maria are already in the living room." She turned away with the toddler in her arms and headed toward the kitchen.

Knowing when she was beaten, Rachel moved farther into the house.

Trenton's father nodded to him. "I'm glad you were able to fix it for her. Your mom and I were worried."

"It wasn't a problem." He followed his father into the kitchen, where his mom was cooing at the little one. "Thanks for letting me know, Mom."

She nodded to him between coos, the softest smile on her face.

Trenton had always wanted children of his own. Emily and he had been waiting. She hadn't been ready yet, and then...

"Can you take the lasagna to the table, Trenton, honey?" his mom asked.

Thankful for the interruption to his thoughts, he crossed to the oven.

"Giving away my jobs again," his father said, coming up behind her to wriggle his fingers at their grandchild.

Trenton had always wanted a marriage like his parents had. His had been just as happy, just as fulfilling, but also somehow different. His heart sank as he used the potholders to lift the tray.

"Girls, please set the table!" his mom called to the living room. The normal grumbling followed.

Trenton took comfort from it as he moved to the dining room. That was what he'd wanted for Celia. A smile came to his face as he pictured her expression at being pampered by his mom.

Lunch followed soon after, with the usual banter and catch-up. His fourth sister, the one only a year younger that Blake used to make eyes at in high school, hadn't come. She had the biggest family, and softball season had started for her oldest. Trenton's parents went to cheer them on most Sundays, though they'd missed the first ones due to their vacation.

"So your friend decided not to come, Trenton?" his mom asked as she flew a spoon toward the toddler's mouth.

“Tell me it wasn’t Damon,” Rachel said with a groan.

Damon was the fourth friend in Trenton’s childhood group, along with Malcolm and Blake. Trenton tried not to think about how Dame had once kissed his sister. “I actually haven’t heard from him for a while.” He made a mental note to check in on him.

“He’s on tour again,” Maria chimed in. “His newest album is amazing. I play it during my study sessions.”

“How is school going?” their father asked.

Trenton was happy when she lit up. Her first couple of years at college hadn’t been the kindest. Once she’d switched out of business and into teaching, she’d finally found the best fit.

“So which of the boys was it if not Damon?” his mom asked, bringing the conversation back to him.

Trenton felt a looming pitfall. “None of them. I wanted to bring Celia, Malcolm’s cousin.”

Julia frowned down at her plate. “I don’t remember a Celia.”

“You were only a sprite around the time she moved away,” Trenton said. “You were so cute back then.”

The baby of the family stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed.

Rachel frowned. “I don’t remember much about her either. Just that she was quieter than Malcolm or Katie. She moved in with them back then, didn’t she?”

“For a little while,” Trenton agreed. He shifted in his chair, somehow uncomfortable talking about her. It almost felt like gossip, and Celia didn’t deserve that.

“Maria, have you decided which school to intern at next spring?” their father asked, and the conversation shifted to her, much to Trenton’s relief.

His youngest two sisters shot out of their parents’ house shortly after lunch, heading back to the dorms to study. Trenton helped carry the plates into the kitchen and started on the dishes.

Rachel had gone to a back room to change her youngest, leaving him alone with his parents.

“I didn’t realize you were close to Celia,” his father said, leaning back on the counter beside the sink.

“We’ve been getting to know each other over the last couple of weeks,” Trenton said.

“I wish she had come. I’ve heard a bit of that child’s story.” His mother wasn’t one to look sad very often. Trenton paused with his hands still in the running water.

“You mean back when we were kids?” He hadn’t asked Celia much, sensing it wasn’t an easy topic for her to talk about. Even her admitting that she had wanted to get a degree, but it was a financial impossibility, had made his chest ache, even more than her reaction to him tending to her skinned knees.

“I only found out about her situation after the fact,” his mom said.

His father crossed to her, pulling her into his arms. “There was nothing you could have done from a hospital bed. You were fighting your own battle.”

Trenton remembered those days well. When Emily had been in the hospital more and more, he’d had to face his dread of the space. His mother had recovered. It had been hard to accept that his wife would not, and up until she was moved to hospice, he had still held out hope.

His mom frowned. “That doesn’t make it fine. All children should be protected.”

“Even the Griffins didn’t know what was happening.” His father’s arms tightened around his mom. “Not until that little girl was in the hospital.”

Trenton turned off the sink. “Wait, the hospital?”

His father nodded. “She was brought in around the same time as your mother, back when she had to stay for a stint.” He shook his head at his wife. “Even going through what you were, you made me go check in on the Griffins. It was shocking, what that girl’s mother did to her.”

Trenton’s legs weakened, and he leaned against the sink. “I had no idea.” He thought about her moments in the dark, her having trouble sleeping, and his eyes shut.

“Well, why would you?” his mother said, coming over to put her hand on his shoulder. “You were busy taking care of

your sisters for us. Besides, if I hadn't gotten sick, you would have already been off to college."

"Still, Malcolm didn't say anything." His friend had always been closed-lipped when it came to his cousin. Trenton had respected that, assuming it was hard on him, since he obviously cared for her.

That was why he didn't know how to tell Malcolm about what had happened between them. A lump grew in the pit of his stomach. Apparently, he knew very little about the woman he was sleeping with. He winced at the thought.

"Your friend was very shaken up at the time," his father said. "It must have been a hard thing, stepping in for her like that."

Trenton hesitated, but couldn't keep the words in. "What happened to her?"

When his father opened his mouth to answer, his mom raised her hand to stop him. "Trenton, honey, you were going to bring her here today. That must mean you're growing close to her. Don't you think you should ask her yourself?"

"Wait, you like Celia?" Rachel asked from the door, bouncing her toddler on her hip. "I mean, *like* like her?"

Trenton winced. "It's not like that. I'm just helping her out right now." Trenton's neck heated as he remembered how he had helped her the night before. He cursed himself, knowing his mom was too sharp not to notice.

His father patted his shoulder. "That's a good thing."

“Yeah, and you’ve poked your nose into our business often enough,” Rachel said, rolling her eyes. “It must be familiar for you. Like having a fifth sister.”

His mom didn’t smile, her too perceptive eyes studying his.

Trenton shifted his feet. The picture of a broken Celia in a hospital bed wavered in his mind.

“Your dad and I can finish up here,” his mom said, nudging him away from the sink. “You should take Rachel and her kids home.”

“I’ll track down my wild one,” Rachel said, turning back to the living room with her daughter.

Trenton frowned at his mom. “I know what you’re trying to do, but it’s not like that.” His heart pounded harder in his chest. “You know I love Emily.”

“I’m not trying to do anything,” his mom said. “But don’t you want to go talk to your friend?”

He couldn’t deny the words. Searching his mom’s face, he leaned down to kiss her cheek again. “I do. Thanks, Mom.” Then he went to help Rachel gather her children. There was absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to check in on his friend, he told himself, giving in to the building urgency to talk to Celia again.

Chapter 27

Celia fidgeted in front of the center, waiting for Malcolm to show up.

After failing to catch up to Jami, she'd sat on the bench in the garden, and thought about the person who had first reached out to her. Before she'd fully thought it through, she'd dialed Malcolm.

He picked up on the second ring. "Celia, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"I'm coming over."

"Really, Malcolm, everything is—"

He cut her off. "I'm coming."

Guilt filled her, followed by the urge to see him. "I'm not even at the condo."

"Group, right?"

"Yeah," she admitted. He always knew.

“On my way.” He hung up before she could protest again.

When she walked through the center toward the parking lot, the conversations of the other women paused. Celia kept her head down, picking up her pace before she could hear the words in their whispers. Sometimes this happened. Often enough that she knew not to engage. It was as if she'd won the crazy contest. Her fingers twisted the rubber band on her wrist as she stood off to the side, trying to ignore the stares as the others left.

When Malcolm's truck pulled up, she was quick to hop in. “You really didn't have to come,” Celia told him.

“You're rarely the one to call me,” he said, looking over at her.

She opened her mouth to protest, but the truth of the words hit her. She'd called him when she had no place to go. Every once in a while, she called when her memories became too much. “I'm so sorry, Malcolm. I've made you do everything, haven't I?”

“I never mind.” He smiled at her, and the kindness in it reminded her of Trenton. Though Malcolm wasn't always sweet, he had been with her. Even when he worried.

“I know. I can't thank you enough for always being there for me.” With the memory swimming so close to the surface, she could almost hear the younger version of him telling her she'd be okay as he held her broken hand.

Malcolm put the truck in park, turning toward her. “Did you talk about it today?”

Celia didn’t try to pretend she didn’t understand. “Yes.”

He leaned forward, pulling her into a hug that was made uncomfortable from the gearshift between them. “I’m so proud of you.”

She accepted the praise, even though she hadn’t really done anything.

He pulled back, clearing his throat. Malcolm had always been there, but he wasn’t often a hugger. “This was the first time you talked openly about it, wasn’t it?”

She nodded, looking down at her fingers.

“What brought that about?” he asked. There was a note to his tone that she recognized.

“I told you before, I’m fine. There was another person there, one that I thought needed to hear it.” She frowned as she remembered how quickly Jami had left. “I might have made things worse for her, though.”

“Seriously, Celia?” Malcolm asked. “That’s amazing.”

She lifted her eyes. “I just told you I might have made it worse.”

“I’ve never heard you talk about wanting to reach out to someone like this. No matter what, that’s a good thing.” He untwisted her fingers until they lay straight on his palm.

“You’re not responsible for the other person’s reaction. Not when your intention was to help.”

Celia shook her head. “You make it sound like more than it is.”

“It’s not only this, Celia. You’ve been talking about Trent a lot lately, at the bar. You two seem to be getting along.” He pulled his hand away, returning it to the steering wheel. “I was worried when I suggested it, since you like to be alone.”

“Trenton is easy to get along with.” Thinking about him brought up other memories, ones she didn’t feel comfortable having around Malcolm. “He takes care of people, like you.”

Malcolm ran a hand over his bun. “I’m nothing like Trent. As much as I tease him, he really is a saint.”

The way Trenton had taken her after she’d gone down on him was anything but saintlike. Celia shifted in her seat. “He invited me to have lunch with his family today.”

Malcolm studied her again. “That must have been overwhelming.”

She shrugged, hating to admit that she’d felt that way. “I regret not going a little now. I remember his parents being nice.”

“They are, though his sisters can be a handful sometimes.”

An idea stirred in her mind, similar to what she’d tried to do twice now. “I’d like to do something for him. He’s done a lot for me.” The phrase didn’t sound so innocent, not after the night before, not to mention that very morning. “I was

thinking dinner, but after what happened at the supermarket...”

“So that’s why you called.” Malcolm nodded, shifting to face forward again. “And here I was worried about you when you’re making so much progress.”

Cold slithered within her stomach. “I’m never going to be fixed, Malcolm. You know that.” There was no getting rid of the crazy gene inside her. Except for her mother’s solution, but she wanted none of that. Her lips firmed. No, that would never be an option.

“You don’t need to be fixed, Celia.” Malcolm frowned at her. “You can’t believe that I think that.”

“No,” she admitted. He would never say anything like that to her.

“Good.” He faced forward again, his hands loosening a little. “Now put on your seat belt. I know just where we’ll go.”

Shopping with Malcolm was fun. She kept the meal toward the healthy side, though Malcolm talked her into buying rolls to go with the food. “Trent didn’t used to be a health nut. That came after Emily got sick.”

“He told me a little about that,” she admitted, remembering how he’d explained the smoothies. “She sounded really great.”

“Emily? She was a pain, but she loved him. And he still loves her.” Malcolm paused, glancing at Celia. “You know that, right? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Trenton told me.” Celia felt a little guilty as Malcolm continued to study her. She’d never kept secrets from him before, but couldn’t find the words to explain what was going on between Trenton and her.

“I was a little worried, with how you reacted to each other the other day.” Malcolm began to put their items on the belt for checkout. He wouldn’t let her pay for them either, though Celia was no longer surprised by his generosity.

It wasn’t until after they put the bags in the truck and they had both climbed in that she told him, “You don’t have to worry about me all the time, Malcolm.”

“I’ll always think about you, Celia.” He didn’t smile as he said it, looking into her eyes. She was the first to look away. “Besides, I know how easy it is to like Trent. And you are a girl. Even if he doesn’t see it.”

She bit her lip, knowing that Trenton definitely saw her as a girl.

“I’m glad it’s not what I thought.” Malcolm started the truck. “Now, let’s get you back to the condo.”

“Yes, home,” Celia murmured, too low for Malcolm to hear her.

After he helped her carry all the groceries up to the condo, Malcolm offered to stay and help, but she told him no. “I want to do this myself.”

He nodded, smiling. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

It wasn't until she started cooking that she realized how unfamiliar she still was in the kitchen. Trenton always made her breakfast, with his smoothies. The salad she had brought him at the courthouse he'd really bought, and had been premade. The other salad he'd mostly made himself, when he'd woken up after...

Her cheeks heated as memories of what they'd done resurfaced. She hesitated while rinsing off the vegetables, second-guessing herself. Trenton had made it very clear that they weren't in a relationship. Maybe he'd see her gesture as trying to change that. She bit her lip as she set the food on the cutting board, turned off the water, and wondered what to do.

Malcolm hadn't seemed to think anything was wrong with her making a meal for Trenton, but he didn't know they'd slept together. Did friends with benefits not do stuff like that?

The door to the condo opened, and she tensed, her hands hovering over the vegetables as if to hide them.

"Celia?" Trenton called, and the sound of the door shutting followed.

"In here," she admitted, her head hanging down. "I'm sorry, I thought I'd make you dinner, but if that—"

Trenton hugged her from behind, his arms warm around her as his head lowered on top of hers. The tightness that had been growing in her chest eased, and she leaned back into him.

Malcolm had hugged her, too, but Trenton's felt so different. It brought a happiness that made her want to smile.

As if he realized what he'd done, Trenton released her. "Sorry if that was too much. I just missed you."

Celia turned to face him, her lips starting to tilt up until she noticed he wasn't smiling. "I'm the one who's sorry. I should have gone with you today."

"I never want you to do anything you're uncomfortable with, Celia." He glanced behind her, his eyes widening. "What's all this?"

She cringed. "It's too much, isn't it? I'll get rid of it." She turned to the counter, reaching for the vegetables.

His hand covered hers, and she stilled. "It's not too much. It's nice." He turned her again to face him. "Is everything all right?"

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out again. "I'm acting crazy, aren't I?"

"Not crazy," he said, taking her hand. "Uncertain. You making dinner for us is sweet, though I'm not hungry yet."

"Right," she said, wondering how stupid she could be. "You just came back from lunch with your family. I'll put everything up for now."

"It'll keep. Come on." He tugged on her hand, leading them to the living room.

She sat next to him, focusing on her hand, which was still within his. His fingers were long, and his palm warm.

“You’re overthinking things. Remember what I told you before.” Trenton reached out, his hand tilting her face toward his. “You can do anything that feels right to you.”

When his kiss came, it was similar to the one they’d shared earlier that morning. Sweet and soft and really, really bad for her heart. No one she’d dated had ever kissed her that way.

When it ended, Trenton pressed his forehead against hers. “Can I ask you something?”

She nodded, which bumped their heads together. Pulling away, she rubbed where they had hit, her fingers brushing over the small scar she had there.

“My parents mentioned you were in the hospital as a kid. Around the same time that my mom was there when she became ill.”

“Oh,” she said. She backed up farther, pulling her legs up and leaning into the corner of the couch. “And you want to know why?”

“If you want to tell me,” he said.

She wondered if she did. The panic she’d always felt at the memory didn’t rise. Maybe it was because she’d talked about it so recently. Maybe it was because it was Trenton. “Malcolm never told you?”

“He’s never told any of us much about what happened back then.”

It made sense. Malcolm wouldn’t have. “He saved me that day. If he hadn’t come by my house, I wouldn’t be here.”

Trenton's hand shifted before pressing against the couch cushion again.

“My mother pushed me off the roof and then stabbed me with a pair of scissors, more than once.”

Trenton's eyes closed, any sense of his smile gone, and Celia immediately regretted what she had done.

Chapter 28

Trenton's hands clenched on the couch at her words. She'd nearly been killed, and he had never known.

"It wasn't her fault," she rushed on, her hands wrapping around her pulled-up knees. "She couldn't help it. She was crazy. There was a diagnosis and everything."

All he wanted to do was hold her, but she was curling tighter into herself.

"That's why, you know," she said. Her eyes lifted to his, as if she was waiting to judge his reaction.

Trenton forced his breathing to remain even, for him not to reach out to hold her. He'd lost a thread of the conversation. "Why what?"

"I'm not relationship material. I carry that crazy gene, too." She shook her head, but not in denial. "Daniel was right to call things off, even if he did it the wrong way."

Trenton's hands grabbed hers, squeezing gently. "He's not right, Celia." Malcolm's words from the other day suddenly

made sense, not to mention Celia's own conflicted expression before she'd mentioned sex and Trenton had lost his control.

Her ex-fiancé had called her crazy back in the supermarket. A crazy stalker. If she had told him what she was telling Trenton now, that had likely made it all the worse. "You're so strong," Trenton told her. The whole week, while he'd been obsessing over not having sex with her, she'd likely been coping with the memories the word 'crazy' had evoked. And he'd had no idea of her pain.

She shook her head just as she had done on the porch the very first night. "I'm a mess."

"Not at all." He gave in, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her forward to kiss her again. Their lips sliding over each other felt right. At first, it remained gentle, soothing. He wanted to let her know she wasn't alone. That she was safe.

Then she let out a small sound in her throat, wrapping her arms around the back of his neck. He deepened the kiss, his tongue gliding against hers once, twice, before he lost count.

He opened his eyes, needing to see her, to convince himself she was there and whole. Hers were open as well, the dark of them drawing him in. There was a glimmer there, as if she needed to cry. He started to pull back, but she made a hum of protest, her eyes closing as she pressed tight against him.

Trenton lost track of time as he lost himself in her. What should have been just a kiss was so much more than that. His mind sent out a slither of worry, but then she sucked on his

tongue as she'd done before and every thought besides having her again slid out of his head.

She was the one to part her lips from his. "Trenton, I want you."

The words made him ache. Trenton stood, picking her up and carrying her to his bed. He was kissing her again even as his body came down over hers, and their tongues tangled. Both of them fumbled with each other's clothes, unable to let go long enough to take them off. It was slow going, but there was no rush.

When she was naked, he ended the kiss, pulling back enough to study her skin. In the afternoon light, she held a glow, smooth and unblemished. He ran his hands down her, mapping every contour, every delicate inch. He could find no evidence of the violence she had once endured.

"Do you truly have no scars from it?" he asked.

She tensed under his hands, but that eased as he continued his soothing strokes, bending his head for his lips to remap the same path. The inside of her elbow was sensitive to his kiss, and he sucked there, making her breathing come faster.

"Trenton..." He loved the way she said his name, as if unaware she was saying it.

He passed over her chest, making his way down her other arm, pausing to give her inner elbow on that side the same treatment. Her hips rose to press against him, so he used his

tongue to soothe her. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“Tell—” She swallowed before trying again. “Tell you what?”

Trenton was happy that she hadn’t purposefully ignored the question. He rewarded her with another kiss, this one short and hard. “I asked if you have any scars.”

Her hand rose to her forehead, where a darker spot he hadn’t noticed hid behind her bangs. “Here.”

He leaned up, his lips kissing it gently. She shivered beneath him.

“And mostly on my back,” she said, biting her lip.

He sat up, looking down at her. She was so beautiful. “Can I see them?”

Celia hesitated, but then rolled away from him and onto her stomach.

Multiple lines crisscrossed her shoulders and farther down her back. Possibly a dozen. Trenton bent, his lips brushing over her shoulder first. He heard her suck in a breath with his first kiss. By the time he reached a point low on her side, she was trembling.

“Trenton, please.”

He rolled her back over, lowering his weight on top of her again as he captured her mouth. She moaned as his chest brushed against her nipples, and what hadn’t been a rush

became more urgent for them both. He wanted to be even more connected.

Reaching down between them, he found her slick to the touch. Unable to help himself, he eased his finger inside, then pulled out again, running the wet tip over her clit. He watched each sweet scrunch of her nose, each wrinkle of her brow, as he touched her. When she tensed against him, her mouth falling open, he captured her shout, loving the way she shuddered through her orgasm.

He ached to have her and positioned himself against her entrance. He waited for her eyes to open, those eyes that he had always been drawn to. When they did, she reached up, caressing the side of his face. “Trenton...”

He slid within her, a peace coming over him when he finally buried himself deep.

Her arms wrapped tight around him as he began to move. There wasn't a race to completion this time. Trenton didn't want it to end. He kept his rhythm steady, his legs tangling with hers.

Her brow furrowed before her head fell back. Those dark eyes of hers shimmered with emotion as they locked on his. Her hips found his rhythm and her body shuddered with each stroke. “Trenton?” she asked, a soft sound following, the beginning of a moan. “This feels... different.”

“Bad?” he asked, only managing the one word as he lengthened his strokes, starting to speed up.

“N-No,” she said. “Never that.” She let out a breathy “uh” afterward, and Trenton realized the need for both of them had become more urgent.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he told her, but her eyes had gone blank, her head moving against the pillow.

He grabbed her legs himself, and they widened even as his rhythm changed. With only a few fast strokes, he was coming, and he buried his face into her neck, smothering his cry. She gasped as she felt him pulsing within her, and her own orgasm followed.

Trenton lay on top of her, breathing hard. He was terrified to let her see his face. She’d realize, and then he would be lost.

He’d gone and fallen in love with her.

Panic filled him at the thought. He couldn’t. Emily still needed him to remember. To be faithful, at least in his heart. That had been his promise.

Realizing he was likely too heavy, he rolled to the side, thankful when Celia pressed her face against him. Her body relaxed, and he realized she’d fallen asleep. That seemed to be the case after they had sex. At least he’d found one way to help with the anxiety she felt.

It was perfectly natural to care about her, he told himself. He always took care of people. It didn’t have to be love. He could still keep his promise to Emily.

Sleep didn’t claim him. Instead, he held Celia, feeling both content and panicked at the same time.

Chapter 29

Celia glanced over at Trenton, where he sat at the bar. He'd been acting weird since the night before. Ever since she had admitted to being crazy.

Directly after, when they'd had sex, it had felt different. She had liked it, but there had been something almost sweet about it. Which made sense. That was Trenton all over. And the way he'd made her feel had been wonderful. He'd taken charge again, but she'd actually been okay about that.

But when she'd woken up in his arms, his smile had seemed almost forced. Even when he cooked dinner with her, well, more chopped vegetables with her, he'd been quieter than usual. Not that he was a huge talker.

Malcolm had asked her how dinner had gone when she showed up for her shift. She'd said fine, but Malcolm hadn't bought it.

Dinner really had been fine. Trenton assured her again that it wasn't too much. Maybe that was part of what felt off. He

was reassuring her a lot. That must have been annoying for him. Especially after he had called her strong.

She winced even thinking of the word. It just proved how little he knew her. Even Malcolm never called her that.

“Miss?” one of the customers called to her. Celia paused, blinking down at him. “The ketchup?”

“Of course!” she said. She couldn’t believe she’d forgotten it. He’d already asked her twice. When she rushed toward the bar, where the extra bottles were kept, Malcolm was already holding one out to her. He didn’t release it when her hand closed on it.

“Is everything okay?” Malcolm asked.

Celia’s eyes slid to Trenton before she forced them down instead. “Yeah, everything is fine.” Malcolm let it go without pushing, and she hurried to exchange the bottle with the empty one on the customer’s table.

She forced herself to focus on the customers. She was overthinking things again. Most of the last hour passed quickly. Blake came down the metal stairs, nodding to her as he crossed to the bar. She had no intention of letting him figure out she’d taken his advice. The man would gloat. And likely blab.

It wasn’t until she was on the last call for rounds that it happened. Celia approached the bar to put in the drink request.

Trenton put his head in his hands as she drew up behind him. “I’m terrified,” he said to Blake. “Honestly, if we weren’t

living together, I'd already have left."

Celia froze. Her mind locked on what she'd been afraid of all day.

Blake's eyes widened as he saw her behind Trenton, so she knew, but she had to ask. "Are you talking about me?" Heat built in her stomach as her legs trembled. Even Trenton was frightened of her crazy gene.

The back of Trenton's neck tensed, and he turned toward her. He hopped off the bar chair, his hands held up. "I can explain."

It was the way he held his hands. As if he was protecting himself, and also calming the crazy person. "There's no need to." The trembling had entered her voice, likely making it seem like she was going to cry. But that wasn't what she was fighting. No, not at all.

"Celia, I don't want you to—"

"Don't say it!" She was desperate to cover what he would say next. He obviously didn't want her to act crazy. He didn't have to explain it out loud. "You, Trenton? Even you?"

"Wait," he said, stepping toward her. "I don't think you heard the whole conversation."

"Thank God." Her hands fisted at her sides.

"Celia?" Malcolm asked, hopping up and over the bar, as if the crazy woman couldn't wait the moment it would take for him to lift the pass-through.

Celia held her hand up. “Stop!”

Malcolm froze.

Celia didn’t trust herself to move closer to Trenton. “This is because of what I told you last night, isn’t it? The part about the crazy gene.”

Trenton’s eyes widened. “No, of course not!” He stepped closer. “If you’d just let me explain—”

“No need!” She’d known it all along. He’d been different since last night. Even Trenton, who was kind and welcoming and helpful, couldn’t handle being around her when he learned the truth. “And don’t worry. I’ll find another place to stay.” She ripped off the apron she was wearing, wanting to be anywhere but there. When Malcolm reached for her, she shoved it in his arms. “I just need a few minutes,” she told him, turned, and ran out of the tavern.

Malcolm followed her, of course. “Celia!”

She knew she was being crazy. The tears she’d denied herself before filled her eyes, and she ran harder, darting between cars.

“Celia, wait!”

“Just leave me alone!” she shouted behind her, trying to go faster.

He caught her despite her struggle against him. “Never.”

The tears started, and she looked up at him, knowing they were a weakness of his. All the times he’d been there for her,

and she hadn't cried very often. When things were tough, an emptiness filled her instead of tears. At least, it usually did.

Malcolm's hands fell away like she expected. Celia shoved him, hard, and he fell on his ass. "Don't follow me!" she told him, taking off again. She knew he would anyway, but having to scramble up again slowed him down. She hunkered down around the next corner behind a set of stairs, holding her breath.

He skidded to a stop a little farther down the sidewalk, looking around frantically. "Damn it, Celia," he muttered, and finally turned back toward the tavern.

The tears wouldn't stop now that they'd started. She passed the normal bus stop. Her thoughts whirled too fast for her to follow. All she could hear was her mother's voice telling her she would save her from herself.

Sometime later, a bus slid to a stop beside her. Celia looked up, confused. She was nowhere near a bus stop.

"What are you doing out here again, young lady?" It was the face of the kind man from the very first night she'd been in town. Somehow, when he looked at her like that, the tears came harder.

"Come on up. You shouldn't be out here like this."

The bus was empty, which was a relief. Celia huddled in the front seat, knowing she looked insane. The bus driver kept giving her glances in his large mirror, telling her that was the case.

When she managed to get herself under control, she looked out the window. They were just passing that dreaded supermarket. “Can you let me off here?”

The bus slowed, but the driver looked at her in concern. “Are you sure I can’t call anyone for you?”

“No. I don’t want to bother you anymore.”

He sighed, coming to a stop and reluctantly opening the door.

She scrambled from the seat, climbing down the stairs.

“Young lady?” he called, causing her to pause. That same smile, one that Trenton had often worn, was there. “You were never a bother. You shouldn’t think that way. We all need help sometimes.”

She nodded, unable to thank him.

“It’s not right for a lady to be alone at night, the way you have been. If it was a boy that did this to you, well now, you should tell him exactly how you’re feeling. Don’t hold back.” The bus driver’s sweet expression turned into a scowl, though she still thought it was sweet. “Go let him have it.”

The idea made her even sadder. Trenton didn’t deserve that. He’d been there for her after what Daniel had done...

The thought of the man who had let her move there, tried to have sex with her knowing he was going to break it off, and then called her the crazy one, no matter how true it was, sent a wave of heat through her that dried the rest of her tears.

She'd left quietly both times, as if being angry wasn't allowed. He already knew she was crazy. What had she been scared of?

Her fingers loosened from the rubber band, curling into fists at her sides instead.

The bus driver smiled. "There, that looks better. Good luck, young lady."

She gave him one more nod, turning away and heading toward Daniel's condo.

Celia expected to have trouble with the security in the building, but he'd left her on the list of people living in the unit. It made the restraining order even more ridiculous. He obviously wasn't as worried about her as he claimed. And why would he be when she'd slunk away?

When she reached his door, she didn't hesitate. The hour was late, so a good pounding would be needed to wake him up. She used the side of her fist, liking the way it thumped against the wood. Not expecting an immediate response, she kept it up, each thump slowing her heartbeat to match.

The latch of the door clinked, and Celia forced herself to stop as it was pulled open. Daniel didn't stand there. Instead, it was a brunette that she'd never seen before.

"What the hell?" the woman asked.

He wasn't even with the blonde anymore. The heat spread higher, settling in her throat, which ached to let out exactly what she thought. Celia shoved past the woman, who was

wearing only a sheer nightgown that brushed her thighs. As she rounded the couch, Daniel shuffled out of the bedroom that would have been theirs, wearing only his boxers and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

They widened when he saw her. “Celia?”

She shoved at his chest. “Seriously? Another woman already? How many people did you sleep with while you were engaged to me?”

The brunette had followed her into the living room. She frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. “What is she talking about, Daniel?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? This is that crazy bitch I was telling you about.”

Celia’s hand moved on its own, slapping him across the face so hard it ached. “I am crazy! But that doesn’t take away what you’ve done!” The shrieking was coming from her and she couldn’t stop it. The momentary satisfaction from the slap shifted into panic as she realized the words wouldn’t stop. “You left me with nothing! You let me move out of state, after selling everything, with barely a penny to my name. Who does something like that?”

Daniel stepped forward, his confident carelessness shifting into anger. “Your decisions are your own fucking problem. Don’t put that on me.” His face was so close that she smelled the alcohol on his breath. “Who are you really mad at here?”

“You asked me to marry you.” The fight had gone out of her voice. She couldn’t understand why she had said yes to him so many times.

“And you jumped at the idea. It was my family’s money, wasn’t it?” Daniel sneered at her. “You were using me as well, admit it.”

She had been using him, she realized. Not for the money, she didn’t care about that. She’d used him to feel normal. His family was well off, but loving and supportive. He had a regular job, was easily frustrated, lousy in bed, and made her feel like any other woman in the world. “I really am an idiot,” she said, the anger from before deflating.

“Hell, Celia, did you really expect me to marry you after you told me that stuff about your mother? I only proposed because my parents urged me to, but even they agreed you weren’t suitable after I told them about it.”

“You told your parents?” A cold dread crept inside. It had only been Malcolm for so long. Her hand swept out toward the brunette. “Did you tell her, too? And the blonde from before?”

“What blonde?” the brunette asked.

Celia had had enough. She turned from him, pushing past his latest conquest and heading toward the door.

“It’s the middle of the damn night, Celia. Don’t you realize how crazy you seem, coming here like this?” Daniel called after her.

“You’re right,” Celia called over her shoulder. “I am crazy.” She slammed the door behind her, wishing she could close off her thoughts just as easily. Her energy faded, and she slid down the wall next to it, listening to the shouting that started up inside.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she dreaded pulling it out. As she’d expected, there were twenty missed calls from Malcolm, and nearly as many texts. She read the last one, guilt replacing the anger from before. “Answer. I’m worried.”

It would be so easy to let him put her back together again, just like he’d always done. She texted back, “I’m fine. Talk tomorrow.” Then she put the phone away, wondering how she was going to go home to face Trenton.

The door next to her opened and slammed shut again. The brunette halted, staring down at her. She was no longer wearing her nightie, but jeans and a halter top.

“What are you still doing at this prick’s house? You should be thanking your lucky stars you found out. I know I am.”

The reminder that she really was thankful helped Celia to climb to her feet.

“Come on,” the brunette said, grabbing her arm and dragging her to the elevator. They rode in silence most of the way down. The brunette studied her. “You don’t seem so crazy to me.”

She’d just shown up at her ex’s place in the middle of the night and shrieked at him. Right after going off on the man

who had been nothing but sweet to her since she'd moved in. "I am crazy." The idea that people she barely knew had heard about her childhood made her cringe.

The brunette shrugged as the doors opened. "Whatever. Thanks anyway, even if you are." She strode away, a confidence in her step that Celia had never felt.

As she forced her own steps forward, exhaustion pulled at her. She needed to make it back to Trenton's condo. He deserved an apology. And, somehow, she needed to set him free. He shouldn't feel like he needed to run away from his own home. She'd start looking for a new place tomorrow.

Chapter 30

Trenton watched Malcolm run out of the tavern after Celia, calling her name. He started to follow, only to be halted by a hand on his arm.

“Let Malcolm handle this,” Blake said, his worried eyes also on the door. “She won’t listen to you right now.”

Trenton tried to pull away, but Blake clamped down harder. “I have to try,” he told his friend.

Blake hesitated. “This is a mess. You saw her, right? I think she could use a friend.”

“And I can be that.” Trenton jerked against his grip again.

“You just admitted you were falling in love with her,” Blake said, shaking him. “That means you’re not a friend.”

Trenton flushed. “That’s not what I said.”

“Hey, give me some credit. I can read between the lines. You said you talked about Emily with her, and it didn’t hurt like you were expecting, but that you were terrified about

breaking your promise to her as well and wanted to run away. What else could make you, the saint, do that if not love?"

Panic filled him, especially that it was Blake saying it. "It doesn't have to be love."

"You're a bigger mess than me," Blake said, letting him go. "And I'm sorry. I was so surprised I didn't see her."

"It's not your fault." Trenton knew it was all his. He'd put that hurt expression on her face. The one he'd wanted to avoid. The one that had made him pull away originally. "I need to fix this."

Blake reluctantly nodded. "Okay, man. Good luck."

Trenton turned and pushed through the tavern door at a run, his eyes seeking her. Instead, he saw Malcolm trudging back alone and ran over to him, his stomach sinking. "You didn't find her?"

He didn't see the punch coming, but it knocked him flat on his ass. Malcolm leaned down, grabbing his shirt and jerking him up. "You fucked Celia, didn't you?"

Trenton flushed.

Blake shouted, grabbing Malcolm and pulling him back before his fist connected again. "Hey, Mal, stop that."

Malcolm tried to shake him off. "God damn it!"

Trenton winced, climbing to his feet. "Look, I'm not important. We have to find Celia."

“Don’t act like you know what’s best for her,” Malcolm said before lunging at him again.

Blake struggled to hold on to him. “Seriously, man, chill! This isn’t going to help anything.”

Trenton glanced toward the street. “She wasn’t at the bus stop?”

Malcolm shrugged Blake off, running his hands through his hair, which had come loose. “Don’t you think I looked there?” he snapped. “I can’t believe it was you. What about Emily?”

Trenton’s gaze fell. “I still love my wife.”

Blake’s eyes widened. “Yeah, but Mal—”

Malcolm’s fist had already connected with Trenton’s stomach, and Trenton collapsed to the parking lot again. At least this time Malcolm didn’t try to follow it up. He deserved worse, Trenton admitted to himself.

“I trusted you,” Malcolm said, turning away as he pulled out his phone.

Trenton tried to breathe through the pain as he listened to his friend leave a message for Celia to call him. Blake reached down to help him up.

“She’s not answering.” Malcolm dialed again anyway, hanging up when the robotic voice started telling him the number he dialed was unavailable. He glanced at Trenton. “So she told you?”

Trenton didn't pretend he didn't understand. "I can't believe you never said anything. Finding her like that had to be the worst thing you've ever experienced."

Malcolm's eyes widened. "I can't believe she told you about that. She just spoke about it for the first time in counseling yesterday."

Trenton hated that he hadn't even realized she was going to counseling. He really hadn't been paying enough attention to her. "I asked about it. My parents brought up that she'd been in the hospital, and the thought made me panic a little."

Malcolm stared back at him.

"Wait, I'm not following this at all. When was Celia in the hospital?" Blake asked.

"Back before she moved in with my family. It was the reason she moved in." Malcolm hesitated. His jaw tightened. "I stopped her mother from killing her."

Hearing her past spoken out loud in such frank words made Trenton realize all over again how hard things had been on her.

"Fuck," Blake said. "I had no idea."

"How would you?" Malcolm said. He sighed, looking down at his phone again. "She was doing so well, too." He studied Trenton. "I thought part of it was staying with you."

Blake winced. "Just because of today doesn't mean—"

"Did you really have sex with her?" Malcolm asked. "Despite how you still feel about Emily?"

Trenton couldn't hide from it. "Yes."

"How long?"

"Since the supermarket incident with her ex. She defended the way he talked about her, and I just—"

Malcolm held up a hand. "I don't want to hear this. Go back to the condo in case she goes there." He stalked into the tavern, trying to call Celia again.

"This will all blow over," Blake said, though even his expression looked unsure. "Malcolm would have reacted like this no matter when he found out. You know that, right?"

"He loves her," Trenton said, watching his friend disappear inside.

"Yes, but he knows they're cousins. He knows it couldn't happen. And she definitely doesn't see him that way." Blake glanced at Trenton. "I wish she'd come over to the bar just a minute earlier. If she'd heard you then, she—"

"It's better this way," Trenton interrupted. A numbness spread inside him when he thought of the possible damage he had done. "Malcolm was right to hit me. I had no business taking things this far, not when I knew how it would end." He focused on Blake. "I love my wife still. I'll always love her."

"Yeah, but—"

"I have to go." Trenton didn't want to hear any more placating words. He'd messed with the confidence of someone who deserved someone way better than him. Someone more like Malcolm.

“I should go check on Mal, anyway.” Blake slapped Trenton on the back. “I hope she went back to your place.” He jogged back to the tavern.

“Me too,” Trenton murmured. The ride home felt odd without her sitting beside him. She didn’t usually say anything, but her presence, over the course of only two weeks, had filled up a space he hadn’t realized had been empty.

When he entered the condo, he knew she wasn’t there. It was missing that feeling. It was almost as if the pressure of the air changed when Celia was present. He checked her room anyway, finding it empty. The bedspread was pristine, reminding him that she’d woken up in his arms that morning.

He’d only wanted to take care of her. Instead, he’d used her.

The next hour, sitting alone in the living room, was hard, but not the hardest he’d endured. That was sitting beside Emily’s bed in hospice, listening to her beg God for just a little more time.

The click of the door shot him to his feet. He hovered in the hallway, watching Celia’s eyes drop as she slipped off her shoes.

“We should talk,” he said, forcing the stream of words he wanted to say all at once to stay inside.

“Not tonight.” Celia raised her head to face him, looking so pale. Her fingers plucked at her rubber band. He’d noticed she did that when she was trying to stem her emotions.

He could do nothing but nod, backing up to give her room.

She passed him, shrinking into herself as she did. The shutting of her bedroom door seemed final. He'd talk to her in the morning, he promised himself.

"She's here," he texted Malcolm.

The response was swift. "Fuck off."

Trenton had no idea how to make things right. It didn't even matter that she had misunderstood his words. He'd been so focused on himself that he'd completely ignored how she'd likely been feeling. He lowered his head. Somehow, he'd explain. He had the whole night to find the words.

In the morning, Celia was already gone, her duffel bag with her.

Chapter 31

There weren't many places open in the early hours of the morning. It turned out even the community center was closed. Celia shifted her full duffel bag on her shoulder, staring down at her phone. She pressed the 'Talk' button, moving it to her ear.

Malcolm answered on the first ring. "How are you doing?"

"I'm—" Celia swallowed the word 'fine.' It wasn't true. "Better."

He paused, and his voice was soft when he asked, "Can I come get you?"

She closed her eyes, picturing the younger Malcolm who had been at her bedside when she'd woken up in the hospital. His expression had been so anxious. She had done that to him, and she kept doing it. "Why do you let me do this to you?"

"You're not doing anything to me," Malcolm said. It wasn't his normal gentle tone, and he paused. "Are you at the condo?" It was as if he was careful not to say Trenton's name.

“Are you sure about this, Malcolm?” she asked.

“Stop worrying about me. Are you?”

“No,” Celia admitted. “I left already. Can you pick me up at the center?”

“I’m on my way. And Celia?”

She swallowed at the soft way he said her name. “Yeah?”

“I’m always going to care about you. You can’t get rid of that, so stop trying.”

A part of her pain faded as she sat on the steps to wait. She didn’t deserve Malcolm, but she was still so thankful to have someone like him. It didn’t take him long. When he got there, he jumped out of the truck, hurrying over to take her bag before she could completely stand up.

“Come on,” he said, leading her to the truck. He placed her bag behind the seat, waiting to close the door after she climbed in. He put the truck into drive, easing away from the curb.

“You didn’t go straight back to the condo last night. Where’d you go?” he asked.

She still couldn’t believe she’d gone to Daniel’s like a crazy ex the night before. “I just needed some time.”

He nodded, and they drifted into silence. He had always been good about letting that happen.

When they stopped outside of the house where they’d lived back when they were teenagers, she was surprised. “Why

here?” She didn’t want to see her aunt and uncle, not in her current state.

“Don’t worry, my parents moved into a smaller place after Katie moved out. I bought this one from them.”

“Oh.” She studied the house, feeling surprised and also a bit guilty. “I didn’t know.” Malcolm always checked in with her, but she asked very little about his life, she realized.

Malcolm ran a hand over his neck. “Well, I was worried talking about it would bring back bad memories. My parents weren’t always the best toward you.”

“That’s not true, they—”

“Don’t, Celia. You and I both know they could have done more.”

She shook her head, but he’d already climbed out of the truck, coming around to her side to open the door.

He grabbed her bag after she hopped down. “Owning this place was one of the reasons I didn’t suggest you stay with me. I thought it would be weird for you to come back here.” He unlocked the door, gesturing for her to go inside.

Celia glanced toward the other truck parked at the curb in front of the house. “Do you have a roommate?”

Malcolm sighed. “No. Blake wouldn’t leave me alone last night and slept on the couch.”

“I was worried about you, jackass.” Blake grunted as he pushed himself up from the couch. He had a bad case of bed

head, his brown locks sticking straight up as he shuffled toward the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“It’s in there. I made some before I left.” Malcolm set her bag by the wall, following his friend into the kitchen to pull down some mugs. “Want some?” he called over his shoulder.

Celia felt a pang. She hadn’t had any since moving in with Trenton. “Sure.”

Malcolm made two cups, black for Blake and with cream and sugar for her. That was like him, remembering how she liked her coffee.

Celia glanced at Blake, who gulped down a large sip. “I’m sorry I made a scene last night,” she said.

Blake shrugged. “No worries. I cause scenes all the time.” He rubbed a hand over his ruffled hair with a yawn. “Did you and Trent work things out?”

Celia winced, looking away. “Not yet.”

Malcolm leaned back against the counter. “You left before he woke up, didn’t you?”

He really knew her too well. “I’ll talk to him soon. I need to apologize.”

Blake set his cup down on the table with a thump. “Look, he wasn’t saying you were crazy or any shit like that last night.”

“Blake,” Malcolm warned.

“No, I hate this type of misunderstanding bullshit. He was just scared because you were making him feel things he’s only

felt with his wife. That was why he was talking about running away or whatever.”

Celia tried to process the words, but Malcolm looked just as confused. “What?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Blake said, shrugging. “It must have been the sex. Three years of abstinence isn’t normal.” He lifted his mug again, toasting in her direction. “I don’t know how you got to him, but way to go.”

Heat crept into her cheeks at his wink. Then what Blake was hinting at settled into her chest. There was warmth from it, but also a sense of panic.

“Well, shit,” Malcolm said, closing his eyes. “I should have realized.”

“No!” Celia burst out, startling them both. Malcolm’s eyes softened, and he started to open his mouth to say something, but she shook her head hard. “It’s not like that between us. He promised me, no relationship. It was just sex.”

Blake snorted. “Trent would never be able to do that.”

She blinked at him. “But the other night, you said...” She trailed off as his smile widened.

“Well, one of you needed a nudge in the right direction.”

Malcolm straightened from the counter. “God damn it, Blake.”

Blake shrugged. “I’m not sorry. You’ve got to admit, they’re perfect for each other.”

Malcolm frowned. "I don't have to admit to any such thing." He paused when his phone rang. His frown deepened as he saw the number. "That's strange." Answering, he started walking toward the living room. "Katie?"

Blake stared after him.

Celia's fingertips dug into her sides. "Listen, Blake, you're wrong. I wouldn't be good for Trenton at all." She stared down at her feet.

"Because of the whole crazy thing?" Blake asked.

Her head jerked up.

"Look, I've seen crazy girls. You're not one of them." He shrugged even as she shook her head. "And if you are, don't you think Trent would be the best one to be with? I mean, hell, I want him to take care of me sometimes."

Celia's fingers pressed in even harder. "But that wouldn't be ___"

"I need to go," Malcolm said, his eyes blank as he searched his pockets for his keys.

"What happened?" Celia asked.

Blake looked worried as well. "Did something happen to Katie?"

"She's in the ER. That was her boss." Malcolm shook his head. "He doesn't know exactly what happened, but she collapsed at the office."

Blake snatched the keys from his friend. “Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

Celia followed them out, quiet on the ride over. Celia had always been a little envious of Malcolm’s sister. Katie was never sick, and she rarely seemed to worry about anything.

When they entered the hospital, a tall, dark-haired man in a business suit gestured Malcolm over. Blake frowned over at them as they talked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Is that her boss?” Celia asked.

“Yeah. Katie is a secretary for his financial company.” He shrugged. “He’s supposed to be some super successful guy, but really his family has a bunch of money and he just invested it or something.”

Celia studied the man, liking the calming way he was talking to Malcolm. “He seems nice, if he cared enough to go with his secretary to the hospital and even knew to call her brother.” Her aunt and uncle would have made a scene. They had a hard time dealing with stressful situations, which was why taking in Celia had been so difficult for them.

“Maybe,” Blake reluctantly agreed.

Malcolm slapped the businessman on the shoulder, then came back over to them. “It turns out it was her appendix. She’s already in surgery, and the doctors said it was caught in time. They’ll let us know once the surgery is done, but they expect everything to be fine.” He let out a breath, looking

down at the phone in his hand. "I need to tell my parents. Celia, can you..." He looked up at her, concern in his eyes.

Celia waved him off. "Go call them. I'll stay here."

Malcolm nodded, moving off to the side.

Blake sat down heavily, his face pale. "Her appendix," he murmured, closing his eyes.

Concerned, Celia sat next to him, her hand hovering before she gave in and patted his back.

The businessman walked over to them, nodding to Celia. "You must be Ms. Griffin's cousin. She mentioned you were in town."

Celia stood, feeling strange as the stand-in for Katie's family. Katie would have hated that.

The man held out a hand. "I'm Nicholas Bryant. Ms. Griffin works for me."

She shook his hand. "I'm Celia. Thanks for calling Malcolm."

Nicholas reached into his pocket, fishing out a business card and handing it to her. "Now that her family is here, I need to return to the office."

"Of course you do," Blake muttered.

Nicholas looked down at him, but didn't respond. He glanced over at Malcolm again. "I hope it won't be an imposition, but if one of you could call me later with the results, I would appreciate it."

“I will,” Celia said. She watched him nod again and stride out of the hospital.

“What a jerk,” Blake said from where he was still sitting.

Celia glanced toward the door, but the man had already disappeared. “I think he’s worried about her.”

Blake’s lips pressed together.

They were moved to a different waiting room. The hospital was smart, in a way. There were no clocks on the wall to tick off the time. Malcolm paced, so he was already standing when the doctor came. He moved off to the side with him, nodding as the doctor talked.

Celia’s aunt and uncle arrived while the doctor was still there, and they rushed over to Malcolm. What had been calm and quiet was suddenly the exact opposite as they started asking questions, talking over one another.

“Are you the parents of Katie Griffin?” the doctor asked.

Celia’s uncle nodded to the man.

Celia’s aunt clutched Malcolm’s arm. “Malcolm, do you know how she is?”

“I was just telling your son that she came out of surgery fine. She’s being situated in a recovery room, and you can visit her shortly, but one at a time.”

Next to Celia, the tension went out of Blake and he leaned his head back against the wall. “Thank God.”

Celia studied him. She'd always thought he and Katie had more of a love-hate relationship than his level of concern was suggesting now.

"It will be another day until she's released, and it would be best if someone helped her for a few days. She's not to lift anything, and minimal movement would be appropriate."

"Oh," Celia's aunt said. She turned to her son. "Malcolm, will you be staying with her?"

Malcolm looked over at her. "Celia has already offered to stay with her to help."

Celia wanted to cringe, but nodded instead. She knew what he was doing. Staying with Katie would give her a reason to move out of Trenton's condo. She stood. "I can help out."

They both straightened, and his mother's arms lifted, then dropped, as if she wasn't sure how to greet her niece, who had lived with her as a daughter. "Hello, Celia. I didn't realize you were in town."

"I moved back just the other day," Celia said, moving closer.

Malcolm's father nodded, and Celia was thankful when the doctor took their attention again. She listened to him speak, wondering what Katie would think about having a new roommate when she woke up.

Chapter 32

Trenton stared at his computer in his office, not seeing the words on the screen. Jacob came in, putting some files down on his desk. “Here are those two cases you asked for.”

Trenton blinked, trying to remember which cases he meant. “Thank you, Jacob.”

“No problem.” His legal assistant hesitated. “Is everything okay?”

Trenton nodded. “It will be.” Once he tracked Celia down and managed to tell her how sorry he was.

His cell phone rang, and he lunged for it, startling Jacob. It wasn't Celia. Of course it wasn't. He closed his eyes. She'd never actually called him before.

Jacob backed out of the room, and Trenton answered the phone. “Hi, Mom. Is Dad okay? You don't normally call me while I'm at work.”

“Sorry, Trenton, honey. I was just thinking about you and wanted to check in.”

Trenton wasn't that surprised. As long as he could remember, even as a child, his mom had somehow known when he was sad. She'd called him before he could call her when Emily was being moved to hospice. He couldn't lie to her and say everything was fine, so he let the silence between them linger.

"Did you have a chance to ask Celia what you were asking us last Sunday?"

He should have been prepared for her to ask. "I did." It brought the story to his mind again, and how badly he had needed to hold her when he'd heard. "I never knew she and Malcolm went through that."

"Well, why would you? You were taking care of me, and your dad, and all your sisters, too, back then."

"True," Trenton agreed, but the reminder didn't help.

"How are you, honey, really?" his mom asked.

Trenton rubbed his forehead. "I messed things up, Mom. I'm not sure how to fix them."

"With Celia?" she asked.

Trenton let out a soft laugh. "How do you do that?"

"I know all my kids better than you all think," his mom said, and he heard the smile in her voice. "And you do know how to fix things. Talk to her."

"She's avoiding me," Trenton admitted. "She even moved out this morning."

“I thought you two might be living together.”

He winced. “I offered her a place to stay when she had nowhere to go.”

“You’re a sweetheart like that. Always trying to take care of people. It makes me so proud of you.”

Her praise made him feel even more raw. “You wouldn’t be if you knew what I’d done.”

“I’ll always be proud of you, no matter what.” His mom paused. “Did you intend to hurt someone with your actions?”

“Of course not,” Trenton said. He had never wanted to hurt Celia or Malcolm.

“Then you can fix it.”

Some of the hopelessness he was feeling began to lift, but he still shook his head. “I don’t even know where to find her.”

“I thought I raised someone more tenacious than that,” his mom chided.

He smiled into the phone. “Thanks for calling, Mom.”

“Anytime, honey,” she said. “And bring her over when you get things worked out properly.”

“I hope to,” Trenton said, not ready to make that promise yet. He still had no idea what he was going to say to her. To his surprise, the phone rang again, this time showing Blake’s number. He answered. “Blake?”

“Hey, Trent, I thought you should know something happened to Katie.”

“What?” Trent stood. “When? How is Malcolm?”

“He just went in to see her. She came out of surgery a little while ago.”

“Surgery? It was that serious?”

“Her appendix or something, but they said it was going to be okay.” Blake’s voice lowered, more like he was talking to himself. “She’s going to be okay.”

Trenton had realized long ago how things were for Blake. “How are you holding up?”

“Me? I’m just here for Malcolm.”

“Right,” Trenton said, sighing to himself. “Is he okay?”

“Better now that she’s out of surgery. Sorry, I should have called you sooner.”

“That’s not a problem. I appreciate you calling me.” Trenton patted his pocket to check for his keys, walking around his desk. “I’m heading to the hospital now.”

Blake was silent for a moment. “You should know, Celia’s here.”

Trenton closed his eyes. “All right. Thanks.”

“Sure,” Blake said, and they both hung up.

Trenton didn’t know what to say to either of them, and the drive over didn’t help him find the words. He asked at the desk and received directions to the proper waiting room. Malcolm was walking down the hall as he approached, and Trenton slowed. “Hey, I heard. Is Katie okay?”

“Yeah, she will be.” Malcolm frowned. “They said her boss getting her here so quickly helped. I just called to let him know she’d come out of surgery.” He sighed. “I guess I can no longer hate the guy.”

Trenton shook his head at his friend, his lips tilting. “I didn’t realize you hated him.”

Malcolm shrugged. “It was the business suit.”

Trenton looked down at his own outfit. “I wear suits.”

Malcolm leveled a stare at him. “Well, I don’t like you very much right now, either.”

Any possibility of smiling faded. “I can understand that. I’m not too happy with myself. I’m really sorry, Malcolm.”

His friend was the first one to look away. “Tell her. You didn’t do anything to me.”

“Didn’t I?”

Malcolm flushed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Blake told me a bit more about what you were saying to him last night.”

Trenton closed his eyes. “I had no business saying anything to him. I was being an idiot.”

When he opened his eyes again, Malcolm was smiling at him faintly. “It’s rare for you to be,” he said. “That means something.”

Trenton’s stomach dropped. “Malcolm, you know I can’t—”

Malcolm held up his hand. “Don’t explain things to me. Celia’s over near the vending machines. She’s getting my parents coffee, since they’re being overly dramatic, like usual.”

Trenton hesitated. “Are you going to be okay dealing with them right now?”

Malcolm shrugged. “I’m used to it.” He slapped a hand on Trenton’s back as he passed, turning down the hall toward the waiting room.

There was a sign a little farther down, showing Trenton exactly where the vending machines were. His feet felt too heavy to move, but he lifted one anyway. Each step was easier than the last. He did want to talk to her. Maybe a neutral space would make it easier.

Celia was muttering at the coffee machine, pushing a button, but nothing was happening.

“Celia?” he called softly, but she still jerked around, her eyes widening.

“Oh, Trenton.” She closed her eyes, taking a breath before opening them. “Did you see Malcolm already?”

Trenton pointed over his shoulder. “We just talked. He asked me to check on you to see if you needed help with the coffee.”

They stared at each other, and his throat ached to see the same sadness from the night before etched on her face.

“I’m sorry,” they both blurted out at the same time.

Trenton winced, but her eyes widened. He stepped toward her, coaching himself not to reach for her hands like he wanted. “You need to know, I never thought you were crazy.”

Celia ducked her head.

Trenton pressed on. “I shouldn’t have been talking to Blake about us. Hearing your story and being with you that night...”

“I know, it’s a lot. You don’t have to explain.”

He gave in, reaching out to grasp her hand. “I couldn’t help falling for you a little more. Celia, I—”

“Don’t say it!” she snapped, jerking away.

Trenton could only stare at her.

“I realized after I calmed down that you would have never said what I accused you of. I’m so sorry about that. You’re a nice guy, Trenton.”

The words made his stomach sink. “I wasn’t that nice to you.”

“You only had sex with me because I asked you to. Otherwise, you would have left things alone, as they should have been.” Her head lifted, her eyes finally meeting his. “Trenton, I really am crazy.”

“You’re not.” He tried to move toward her, but stopped when she lifted her hands.

“No, I am. After I left the tavern last night, I went to my ex’s place and the way I behaved... Well, he would be within his rights to take out a restraining order.”

Trenton couldn't help but be surprised. "You confronted him?"

"In the worst way possible. I was out of control." She looked down at her hands. "I take after my mother."

There was such sadness in her eyes. Trenton didn't know the right words to help fix it. "Celia, I don't think—"

"That's why I moved out. I can't do something like that to someone like you. Not you." She attempted to smile at him, and his heart squeezed even as she failed. "Trenton, I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me. You've been a good friend."

He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. "I enjoyed our time together. I don't think you're crazy at all, Celia. You must know that."

She nodded. "I know that, Trenton. I'm sorry I said otherwise last night."

He didn't feel satisfied by her agreement. She obviously still thought the worst of herself. But he realized nothing he could say would convince her otherwise, not in that moment. "You still don't have a place to stay, do you?"

"I'm moving in with Katie to help during her recovery," she said.

"That's nice of you." Trenton closed his eyes, telling himself it was for the best. If she returned, he doubted he'd be able to keep his hands off of her, and he didn't want to lead her on again. He needed to stay true to Emily.

Celia shrugged. "It was Malcolm's idea. Once she's better, and we get on each other's nerves, I'll find a place of my own." A small smile hovered. "I have a bunch of money saved up since someone refuses to take the past owed rent."

"I'm not taking money from someone I've had sex with," Trenton said.

Celia flushed. "I understand."

"So you're staying?" he asked. "In town, I mean."

"Yeah," Celia said. "I like working at the tavern. Unless..." She frowned, looking at the ground.

"I'm glad," he said, and her eyes raised to his again. "I was worried you'd leave. I didn't want that."

"Okay," she said.

Trenton moved forward, his chest squeezing when she tensed. He reached out to the coffee machine, pushing a different button than the one she'd been pressing when he came in. The coffee began trickling into the Styrofoam cup. "This is going to taste awful, you know."

"Good," Celia said, flushing again when he glanced at her. "It's for my aunt and uncle, and they've been making Malcolm do everything, even though they're the parents."

He laughed. "I haven't seen that mean streak in you before."

Celia shrugged. "I must still be feeling a bit too honest from last night." She shook her head. "Do you know, he was with a completely different woman?"

Trenton wished he had hit her ex even more times. A lot more.

“I’m angry, but also really, really relieved.” Celia shuddered. “I can’t believe I almost married that man. I don’t regret how things worked out.”

“You shouldn’t. You deserve better.” Trenton handed the first cup of coffee to her, then started the second.

“I don’t regret us having sex either,” she rushed out.

Trenton stilled, memories of what they had done sliding through him.

“I mean, I don’t think we should anymore, but I appreciate you showing me what it could be like.”

The idea that she appreciated it so that she could go find someone else to try it with made him clench his teeth.

“But I think I should be alone right now,” she continued. “The last few days pointed out how messed up I still am.”

“Celia...” Trenton turned to her, trying to find the words.

“Please, no platitudes.” She picked up the second cup of coffee, turning away from him. “I need to bring these to them.”

“Of course,” Trenton said. He didn’t immediately follow.

His mom was wrong. He didn’t know how to fix things.

Chapter 33

Katie was as big of a pain as Celia thought she would be. It wasn't that she needed her help. It was that she tried to refuse it, despite being pale and weak. Celia tried to convince Malcolm to take her place, but he refused.

“If you're going to stay around here, you have to figure out how to deal with each other.”

He'd even given her time off from her shifts. Time off she really didn't want.

The only reprieve from Katie for Celia was the counseling sessions she went to. Besides the group ones, Celia had agreed to one-on-one therapy. She wasn't sure it was helping, but she felt better for trying. The counselor had seemed relieved as well, as if Celia's story had shaken her, though maybe Celia was projecting.

When Celia got home after her latest counseling session, Katie's best friend was waiting for her.

“Where the hell were you?” Erin asked. Celia had always found the woman imposing, even as a teenager. Athletic, outspoken, and one of the guys, she was the opposite of Celia in every way. Plus, Erin was tall and built, with muscles that rivaled Malcolm’s.

“Is Katie all right?” Celia asked, hurrying past her cousin’s friend.

“I’m fine!” Katie called from the living room. “Stop ragging her, Erin. Celia and I have figured out what works best for us, and having her gone at times keeps us from killing each other.”

The phrase made Celia freeze.

“Damn, chick, are you really still so sensitive?” Erin asked, brushing past her. “That was, like, twenty years ago.”

“Erin!” Katie shouted, her worried gaze moving to Celia. “Look, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s fine,” Celia forced out.

Erin whirled back to her, stabbing her in the chest with her finger. “That! That right there was why Kay and I had such a hard time being friends with you back when we were kids. It’s like you want to be a victim. All doe-eyed, trembling lips, oh-take-care-of-me with Malcolm. Annoying as hell.”

A wave of shock moved through Celia, followed by the heat she’d felt the week before, when she’d gone to face Daniel. “I don’t want to be taken care of by anyone.”

“Well, you do a shitty job taking care of others. I thought you moved in here to help Kay out during her recovery, but when I stop by, I find her struggling to walk to the couch on her own. That pissed me off.”

The heat faded to a chill, as if it never was. “I’m sorry.” Celia moved around the livid blonde to peer at her cousin. “When I asked before I left, you said—”

“Oh, so it’s Kay’s fault, is it?” Erin asked with a scowl in Celia’s direction.

“Calm down, Erin. It is my fault.” Katie rubbed a hand over her forehead. “Celia always checks in before she leaves for her appointments. I just—” Katie paused, looking away. “I find it hard to let her help me after I’ve been mean all these years.”

Erin’s hands fell to her sides, and she moved closer to the couch. “Why didn’t you say so? I offered to stay with you for a while.”

Katie glared at her friend. “You’re so loud.”

Erin laughed, ruffling her friend’s hair. “Well, yeah.” She glanced over at Celia, waving her in. “Come on, sit. Sorry I hassled you. I thought you were slacking.”

Celia shook her head. “I don’t want to get in the way. I’ll just—”

“Sit!” Erin said, rolling her eyes. “See, this right here makes you seem whiny. If you’re going to stick around, we should hang out a little.”

The suggestion made Celia blink. Katie and Erin had always avoided her when they were kids. Now they wanted to ‘hang’? She moved into the living room, easing onto the edge of the armchair.

Erin leaned against the back of the couch. “So, what are these appointments you’re going to? Are they every day? I can always stop by, if so.”

“The appointments are only an hour. I scheduled them in the morning so I’d have time to check on Katie before my shift at the tavern.” Celia frowned. “Actually, I worry more about that time. If you could come in the evenings—”

“Don’t do that. I’m already getting better,” Katie said. “I don’t need you to come over to babysit me.”

“You almost died, Kay,” Erin said.

Katie waved her off. “It was my appendix. A lot of people have that happen.”

“Malcolm said if you hadn’t gotten to the hospital so quickly, it would have been worse.” Erin frowned. “I always thought your boss was a prick, and now I’m so damn happy he was there.”

Katie rolled her eyes. “Nicholas is a nice man. You just don’t like anyone in a suit.” Her lips lifted in a sly smile. “It also doesn’t work in his favor that you find him attractive.”

“Hot as hell,” Erin said with a nod, not ashamed at all. “But you’re the one that works so closely with him. Don’t tell me

you haven't considered anything when you work late into the night."

Katie looked away. "I'm not blind, but you know he's not the one for me."

"I don't know why you don't just bone Blake," Erin said.

"Erin!" Katie glanced over at Celia, red creeping over her cheeks.

Celia shrugged. "It's pretty obvious."

"Oh, God!" Katie buried her head in her hands, then peeked through. "To him, you think?"

"Hell no," Erin said. "That boy is clueless. Despite burying his dick in any girl that moves."

Katie groaned. "Don't remind me."

"I still don't know what you see in him. He and all those other boys used to eat bugs in their dirt pies when we were kids." She shuddered. "Once you see that, there's no going back."

"That's gross. They never ate bugs," Katie said.

"Oh, they did." Erin grinned at her friend. "So the next time you're picturing Blake naked, picture this big, fat worm—"

"Please stop," Katie said, her head falling back in embarrassment.

Celia felt the words pressing at her lips and gave in. "Even Trenton?" She couldn't picture him as a little boy. Especially

hurting bugs. He'd be more likely to take a cockroach outside and release it.

Erin grinned at her. "Oh, ho! So you and Trent really did get it on. Kay and me were wondering, what with you living with him."

Celia flushed, regretting opening her mouth.

"So, what happened?" Erin asked, moving around the couch to sit, lifting Katie's legs to place them over her lap. "Did he dump you for that dead wife of his?"

"My God, Erin," Katie muttered.

"What?" Erin shrugged. "He's been pretty open about how she was it for him. True love. Soulmates. All that crap."

Celia bristled. "Trenton is a sweet guy. He made his love for his wife very clear from the beginning."

Erin nodded. "So you couldn't change his mind?"

"I didn't want to change his mind. A relationship was never in the cards, not for me." It didn't stop Celia from remembering the way he kissed her that last night. It had been filled with him, sweet and soft, with an underlying need he so rarely showed.

"You mean because of all your mom issues? I told you before, you should be over that stuff." Erin shrugged.

"You don't 'get over' your mother trying to stab you to death," Katie snapped. "Jesus, Erin. Leave Celia alone."

“Come on, that was forever ago, and the woman is dead. Problem solved.”

Celia’s skin tingled. “It wasn’t my mother’s fault. She was diagnosed with—”

“Bullshit,” Erin interrupted, and Celia’s mouth snapped shut.

“Seriously, Erin, you need to stop.” Katie struggled to sit up, wincing.

Celia hurried over, bracing her cousin’s back with a pillow. “You shouldn’t move like that.” Her hand hovered over Katie’s stomach, feeling heat even through her shirt. “I’ll get you an ice pack.”

While she opened the freezer, she could hear voices murmuring from the living room. It must have been mostly Katie, because Erin’s words would have been clear even through the wall. She grabbed the ice pack, and headed back in.

While she was placing it across her cousin’s stomach, Erin fiddled with her ponytail. “I’m sorry, chick. I didn’t mean to say anything that would upset you.”

“You didn’t upset me.” Celia moved back to her chair when Katie waved her off.

Erin groaned. “Come on, you’re too nice! No one’s really like that.”

“Trent is,” Katie said, waving her hand at Celia. “They’re perfect for each other, aren’t they?”

The words brought the same twist to Celia's stomach that she'd been feeling ever since the night she'd blown up at Trenton for no reason. Some of the customers that had been there had given her the side-eye when she came back to work. "I'm not nice."

"Yeah, you are," both girls said together.

Erin shuddered. "Creepily so."

"I'm not," Celia said, her lips pressing together as the twist in her stomach grew into a pain.

"You are," Katie said.

"No." Celia shook her head to emphasize the word.

Erin waved the denial away. "Face it, chick, you are."

"No, I'm not!" Celia shouted, closing her eyes when both of theirs widened. The breath in her lungs felt full and tight. "I'm as crazy as my mother!" Admitting it felt like it released the pressure within. Her head began to feel fuzzy.

When she opened her eyes, Katie was looking away, but Erin had leaned forward, staring at her intently. "How so?"

"Erin," Katie groaned.

Her friend waved her away. "For her to say it, there must be something behind it."

Celia shifted, her fingers numb as she met the woman's gaze. "My mother was crazy. It's in the genes."

"Bullshit," Erin said again, batting that away. "You must have done something to say that. What have you done that's

been crazy?”

Celia stared back, her mind churning. “I blew up at Trenton in the middle of *The Last Shot*.”

“Why?” Erin asked.

Celia blinked. “What?”

“Did you have a reason? Something he said, maybe?” Erin shrugged. “That guy’s nice, but he is a guy.”

“He was saying how he had been terrified since I told him about my craziness. That he wanted to run away.” Celia frowned, bowing her head. “Or that’s what I thought he’d said. And he’d been acting strange ever since I’d told him.”

“I heard about that,” Katie said. “You just didn’t hear everything.”

The heat inside Celia shifted. “Malcolm?”

Katie rolled her eyes. “No, you know how tight-lipped my brother can be. But Blake was there, and he’s never been able to keep a secret. Like this one.” She pointed to her friend.

Erin shrugged. “I take that as a compliment. But let’s focus. So you thought the guy you were sleeping with was talking shit about you?”

The heat moved into Celia’s cheeks. “I never said—”

Erin waved her protest away. “No, but it’s pretty obvious you two had sex. Did you know you’d misunderstood at the time?”

“Of course not. I never would have...” Celia frowned. Her fingers curled into her rubber band. “And I already apologized to him. I was completely in the wrong.”

“Still, at the time, you thought he was being a jerk and telling his friend something personal you’d shared with him.” Erin shrugged, leaning back again. “I’d have probably punched him. Kay?” She looked over at her friend.

Katie looked away, but nodded. “I would have shouted at him, too.”

Celia’s mind went blank as she stared at the women.

Erin grinned at her. “So normal, not crazy. You got anything else to convince me?”

Celia frowned at her. “Afterward, I stormed over to my ex’s house.”

“Oh, ho!” Erin laughed. “You must have been all riled up.” She winked at her. “I wish I could have seen it.”

Celia’s fingers loosened as she leaned forward. “You don’t understand. It was midnight, and I pounded on his door. A brunette woman answered in her nightie.”

Katie frowned. “I thought Blake told me it was a blonde.”

Celia closed her eyes, realizing Katie had been right. Blake apparently blabbed things. “It had been.”

“Oh, damn, and he was already with a new bimbo?” Erin leaned forward again. “This is getting good.”

Celia frowned. “Actually, the brunette turned out to be really nice. She—”

Erin groaned, interrupting. “Seriously, chick? Don’t ruin the story.” She waved her hand again. “What did you do once she answered?”

“When Daniel came out, I started screaming at him. All the things that had bothered me about when I first moved here came spewing from my mouth. I couldn’t stop it.”

Erin shrugged. “I would have decked him.”

Katie rolled her eyes. “I swear, you’re just like Malcolm. It’s like I have two brothers.”

“Don’t try to get out of it. What would you have done, Kay?”

Katie frowned. “Is all I heard true? He asked you to marry him, to move here with him?”

Celia hesitated, but then nodded.

“And on the first day you showed up, some other woman came and basically kicked you out? With no place to go, no job, and no money?”

Celia cringed. “It wasn’t his fault that I didn’t look for a job, or have any money. I should have—”

It was Katie who held up a hand this time. “Yes or no?”

Celia bit her lip. “Yes.”

“Then I would have decked him, too. Maybe we should all pay him another visit.”

Erin laughed. “Let’s wait until you heal up, Kay. I’ll give you first swing.”

Celia’s mouth dropped open. “But we had already broken up. I had no right to show up there, screaming like that. It scared me when I couldn’t stop myself. I was acting crazy.”

Erin stood, coming over to put her hand on Celia’s shoulder. “Chick, it would be crazy not to be angry. You were being completely normal.” She began to rub her shoulder soothingly. “I haven’t heard anything that would make you crazy at all, including your mom stuff. That’s her, not you.”

None of her counselors had ever said that to her. Celia tried to blink back the heat in her eyes, but she burst out crying.

“Oh, shit!” Celia heard Erin say as the rubbing got faster and less gentle. Her shoulder began to ache. “Kay, what do I do?”

Celia saw Katie’s sad smile through her tears. “Let her cry. Sometimes that’s what’s best.” Her cousin nodded at her.

Celia could do nothing else anyway. She bowed her head, letting the tears come.

Chapter 34

Trenton stared at the glass filled with the green smoothie. He'd made two again. Two weeks after she had left, and he was still making that mistake.

At least it was Monday again. Sunday had been the worst. His family only had lunch once a month. He'd gone for his run as usual in the morning, but then the whole day had spread out before him. Even going to the supermarket had reminded him of Celia. He almost wished he would run into that ex of hers again. Which was ridiculous. Separating from him had been the best thing for her. Celia deserved someone so much better than that.

Not him, though. Trenton was the worst person in the world for her. He took care of people, it was true, but she really didn't need to be taken care of. Celia needed to be first in a person's thoughts. She deserved to be. And that was something Trenton could never offer her.

Celia had seemed sad when he saw her at the tavern, though she'd made a point of smiling at him. She'd even come over to

thank him again. He'd accepted her gratitude, even though he didn't deserve it.

She'd left the guest room pristine, so there hadn't been much for him to clean after she moved out. He'd even found her sheets in the dryer. When he'd remade the bed, it didn't take away from her lingering presence. She'd always kept it just as neat.

He'd washed his own sheets, hoping it would help with his sleeplessness. It hadn't. Lying there made him remember the few times they'd slept together. It wasn't just the sex, though the memories of that left him hard. He thought washing her smell away might help, but he'd forgotten. They'd already been living together, so it had been his soap and shampoo, his laundry detergent, he smelled on her skin.

Trenton had stood in the soap aisle the day before, considering trying something new, but he liked what he used.

After Emily had died, smells that reminded him of her had been soothing. It was a reminder that she had been there, that she had existed. He'd eventually changed them when the reminder became an ache. That was when the guys had helped him realize he barely left the house and taken him out to buy new furnishings for his bedroom.

With Celia, those types of things brought an instant restlessness. Maybe he should go back to the store.

His phone rang, and he reached for it, glad for the distraction. Seeing who it was, he smiled as he pushed the 'Talk' button. "Damon, it's been a long time."

“Hey, sorry about that. Things have been hectic.” Damon cleared his throat.

“No problem. You’re on tour again, aren’t you? Are you taking care of yourself?”

He listened to his friend talk about his lifestyle. Trenton couldn’t imagine singing in front of a crowd. He didn’t even sing in the shower or the car. Damon had always had such a unique voice, though.

“I wanted to ask your advice on something if you have a minute. I was trying to catch you before work.” Damon hesitated. “Is this too early?”

“I never mind you running your contracts by me. Did something new come up?” Trenton went over to his work laptop, waiting for it to boot up. He was a divorce lawyer, but part of why he’d gone that route was his appreciation for contract law. There was something about understanding expectations based on agreements that he found comforting. “Can you send a copy over?”

“It’s not about a contract. This isn’t technically in your wheelhouse, but, I don’t know, I thought you’d give me some perspective.” Trenton listened to his friend sigh over the phone. “I mean, you remember what I was like. The biggest dork to walk the earth. It hasn’t exactly been hard to get used to women throwing themselves at me now, but this feels different.”

“So this is woman trouble?” Trenton winced, thinking about the mess he’d made with Celia. “Blake or Malcolm would be

better for that.”

“Please, those guys would brush it off like my manager did. He thinks I’m making too big a deal about it.”

Trenton frowned at the serious note in his friend’s voice. Damon had only ever taken his music this seriously. “What’s going on?”

Damon cleared his throat again, lowering his voice a little. “I think I have a stalker.”

The word reminded Trenton of Celia’s ex’s accusations. “Are you sure it’s not some girl that you’ve blown off who wants more?”

“The thing is, I don’t know. I haven’t been able to figure out who it is.”

Trenton lost the thread a little. “Wait, so you haven’t seen this stalker at all?”

“Not in person. They’ve been leaving me things. First it was a letter stuck to my dressing room at a concert. It wasn’t inside the room, and said some of the typical things about how amazing my music was. I thought it was a little weird, but nice, too. So much fan interaction is crazy social media posts nowadays, so it felt more personable.”

“But you started to receive more?”

“At every concert, actually. I started finding things inside my dressing rooms, even my suites at hotels. Not always letters. Sometimes, things from my songs, like that one about the apple? There was a whole basket of them on my bed, with

red ribbons that matched my song from a couple of albums ago.”

“Are you certain the hotel didn’t set that up? Or your manager?” Trenton started typing up some notes in a document. “I don’t see how a random fan could get a key to your hotel without that being traced.”

“I don’t either, but I’ve checked with everyone, and no one seems to know anything.”

“They could be lying if they realized you didn’t end up liking it.” Trenton added a note about checking into hotel security. “Do you have a timeline, with places, that I could see?”

“Not for the first ones, but I made my manager keep track after that. I’ll have him send it over.”

“Okay, thanks. I’m sure we’ll be able to explain it.” Trenton straightened, thinking about it. “How do you even know all the gifts are from the same person? Couldn’t it be from different fans?”

Damon paused. “The gifts all have a tag, signed the same as the letters. ‘Your Match.’ Weird, right? Normally the fans go on about being my biggest fan.”

“That does sound odd enough to be a specific person.” Trenton frowned again. “This falls more under criminal than legal, so I might bring Malcolm in since he has contacts in law enforcement.”

“That’s fine. Just don’t mention it to Blake yet. He can’t keep anything quiet.” Damon sighed.

Trenton knew that was true, and he felt a smidge of alarm. He’d forgotten that when he’d confided in Blake just before Celia blew up at him that night.

“I really appreciate this, Trent. It’s been freaking me out a little.”

“You know I’m always here when you need something.” Some of Trenton’s tension faded with the familiarity of helping someone else. He’d been too focused on himself lately.

“I just felt bad about the timing. It was the anniversary yesterday, wasn’t it? How are you doing?”

A ringing filled Trenton’s ears at the reminder. A reminder he’d never needed before. Not when Emily had made him promise. He’d never forget her. Only, apparently, he had. “I forgot about that,” he mumbled, stumbling back to a chair to close his eyes against the sudden dizziness.

The silence drew out on the phone until Damon cleared his throat. “Well, that’s okay. I mean, you’re always thinking about Emily, and I’m sure she knows that.”

The soothing words didn’t seep inside. Trenton didn’t believe in the afterlife. Emily hadn’t either. That’s why being forgotten had terrified her. He had promised.

“Trent?” Damon’s voice barely registered in his ear. “You okay?”

He had done so well. She might not have been in his thoughts during every moment, but at least every day. Except for lately. Trenton had been selfishly thinking about himself. And trying to block out thoughts of Celia, without success. He'd thought about Celia but not his wife on the anniversary of his wife's death.

His eyes closed. "I've got to go, Damon."

"Trent, I don't think—"

But he hung up, holding down the button to turn off his phone. He shoved himself to his feet, moving into the kitchen as if weighed down by his failure. He took the wedding picture of him and Emily off the fridge, staring at it. "I'm so sorry," he whispered. His legs didn't feel capable of holding him, so he slid down to sit on the tile. That dizziness returned, making his wife's image blur. Trenton closed his eyes, not able to face her.

Chapter 35

Celia nodded at the customer, adding their empty plate to her stack before heading back to the kitchen. Ever since she'd cried the other day, she'd been feeling somehow lighter. Even the counselor had noticed.

She still thought she had some crazy in her blood, but maybe she'd figured out how to keep it buried and didn't have to worry as much.

When Celia returned from the kitchen, she was startled to see Erin rush through the front door. She hurried over to meet her cousin's friend. "Is Katie all right?"

Erin patted her absently on the head, holding her phone to her other ear with her hand. "Yeah, she's good, chick. No worries there."

The woman had started doing things like that. Celia felt warmth flow through her along with a bit of annoyance. Erin treated her like a kid, and Celia thought the way the woman smiled at her meant she did it on purpose.

Erin wasn't smiling now. "I am focusing, Dame. Malcolm's right in front of me." The tall blonde strode forward, thrusting her phone toward Malcolm, who had to fumble to turn off the beer tap to take it.

"What are you doing, Erin?" he asked, shaking off a wet hand.

Erin put her empty hands on her hips. "Damon wants to talk to you. Pick up your damn phone next time. My brother's been trying to get ahold of you all day."

Malcolm put the phone to his ear. "Damon? Is everything all right?"

Celia moved around the bar to finish pulling the drafts. Malcolm had started teaching her some of the bar stuff, though she could still only make basic drinks. She glanced at him, worried.

"Wait, slow down. What about Trent?" Malcolm asked.

Celia set the mug down, her scalp tingling.

Blake shifted on his bar seat, looking at Erin. "Do you know what's going on?"

Erin shook her head. "Dame wouldn't tell me. I assumed it was a guy thing."

"Of course I checked in about the anniversary," Malcolm frowned as he spoke into the phone. "When I did, he said he didn't want company. I tried to call earlier this morning, but it went straight to voicemail. I just figured he was at work."

Blake turned his beer glass in his hands. “Trent is always like that on the anniversary of his wife’s death. He likes to be alone.”

“What?” The sudden drop in Malcolm’s voice had them all staring at him. “No, I heard you, I just—” He broke off, listening to something on the other side. “No... Yeah... Thanks for calling, Damon. I’ll head over there.” He hung up, sliding Erin’s phone back to her. “Thanks, Erin. I’m sorry about the trouble.” He lifted his own phone, frowning at the screen. “Fifteen missed calls. Damn it.”

“From Trenton?” Celia asked. Her heartbeat pulsed in her neck.

“No, not from Trent. Damon was trying to call. Said Trent hung up on him this morning, and he hasn’t been able to call back.” Malcolm took off his apron, tossing it on the counter as he ran his hands through his loose hair. “Can you handle things here, Celia? I want to go check on him.”

Blake scrambled off his bar chair. “I’ll go with you.”

Malcolm hesitated. “I don’t think—”

“Trent wouldn’t hang up on anyone. I mean, I would, but not Trent.” Blake frowned at his friend. “Did Damon know why?”

Malcolm glanced at Celia, then away. “He forgot.”

Blake huffed out a breath. “How the hell would Damon have already forgotten?”

“Not him, Trent.” Malcolm did another side-eye toward her.
“You know, yesterday.”

Blake’s eyes widened. “Oh man. Let’s go check on him.”

Malcolm nodded, lifting the pass-through and then stopping.
“Celia, are you certain you’re okay here? We can wait, close up things so that—”

Celia shook her head, moving toward him to push on his arm. “Just go. I’ve got it.” She watched as the two friends ran out of the tavern.

Erin moved closer to the bar, leaning on it. “Are you sure about this?”

Celia frowned at her. “I can pour a few drinks while I wait on the tables. Monday night is never that busy.”

Erin stared steadily at her, ignoring the snap in her voice. “No, I mean, are you sure you don’t want to go with them? It’s Trent. You care about him, don’t you?”

A churning filled Celia’s stomach. “It’s better if the guys go.”

Erin lifted an eyebrow. “You mean easier on you.”

“I’ve never had things easy,” Celia said. Katie’s friend always made her want to hide or hit something.

“True,” Erin agreed, taking some of the frustration away. “But I don’t know, chick. If it was the guy I loved, I’d want to be there for him.” She continued to meet Celia’s gaze. “Even if I didn’t think he loved me back.”

The churning slid up into Celia's throat. "You're so..." She closed her eyes, thinking about Trenton. She couldn't even picture what he was going through for someone like him to not reassure his friend.

"Right all the time, I know," Erin said with a wink. She held out her hand over the bar. "Give me your apron and get out of here."

Celia's hands went to the ties, pausing. "Will you be able to handle things here?"

"It's not rocket science, and I've filled in for Kay before. I'll manage."

Celia untied her apron, handing it to her as she rounded the bar. "Thanks, Erin."

Erin grinned at her. "You owe me twice now."

Celia nodded, not able to deny it. As annoying as Katie's friend could be, she did help, in her own way.

Celia turned, hurrying out of the bar. She saw the taillights of Malcolm's truck. She was too late to catch them, but she knew how to get to the condo. The bus ride took longer than it would to drive there, and she tapped her foot as the familiar streets went by. She hadn't seen them often at night, not with Trenton picking her up from work.

When the elevator opened onto the fifth floor, she found Malcolm and Blake in the hallway.

"Come on, man. Open up," Blake said, pounding on the door.

“I still have a key,” Celia said, holding it up as she hurried toward them. Even when she’d known she was moving out for good, she hadn’t been able to leave it.

“I have one, too, remember?” Malcolm said. Yes, Celia recalled him unlocking the door when he’d come once before, back when he’d been worried about her not answering right away. He gestured to where the door was cracked open. “He put the chain on and isn’t answering.”

Celia frowned at it. Then Trenton was inside.

Malcolm moved closer to the door, putting his head near the crack. “Trent, we need to see for ourselves that you’re all right. One minute, and then we’ll leave you alone if that’s what you want.”

Celia’s fingers twisted her rubber band as she watched the two men continue to try. During the whole ordeal, Trenton never answered.

“What do we do?” Blake asked.

Malcolm frowned at the door, shaking his head. “We can’t just leave.”

“Can I have a few minutes?” Celia asked.

Malcolm looked toward her. “I know you want to help, but I’m not sure that’ll work, Celia. I have a feeling, well... never mind.” He sighed.

“You think it’s because of her, too, don’t you?” Blake asked.

Having someone say it out loud made Celia wince.

“Shut up, Blake.” Malcolm hurried over to her, taking her hands in his. “Look, Celia, he doesn’t mean—”

“This is about Trenton, not me,” Celia said, pulling away. “I’m not blind to what’s going on. I’m crazy, not stupid.”

Malcolm winced. “You’re not crazy, Celia. I never said—”

“No, I did,” Celia interrupted. “Now take a break and let me try something.”

Blake moved up to Malcolm’s side. “Let’s go get some air for a minute. It’s been most of a day.” He nodded at Celia with a smile. “We can give her a few minutes.”

Malcolm stared at her even as he was dragged to the elevator, their gazes only breaking when the doors slid shut.

Celia took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she approached the crack in the door. “Trenton? It’s Celia. I think I might have forgotten something here.” She winced at the white lie. “Can you let me in?”

She listened, but only silence followed.

She untwisted the rubber band from around her wrist. It was a long one, and she’d always had to wrap it around multiple times. That was part of why she liked it. When she snapped it, the multiple layers dulled the sting a bit. Besides, she’d always worn one like that, ever since she’d been a teenager, long before one of the counselors had recommended it to help calm her racing thoughts.

It had been quite some time since she’d had to do something like this. Her fingers had been skinnier back when her mother

had locked them out. She stuck her hand through the door and managed to slide the band through one of the chain's loops on the fourth try. It had been more difficult when her mother was there. The woman would close the door on her hand, screaming that she wouldn't be taken alive.

Celia folded one side of the band through the other, pulling on it a few times to make sure it was secure. She just hoped the rubber band would stretch long enough without breaking. She'd had this one for a while, and it may have been brittle enough to snap. A curse slipped out when she missed the doorknob on the first pass, but she caught it on her next attempt. She pressed her head against the door, closing her eyes.

"Trenton?" she called, but there still wasn't an answer. "I'm coming in," she warned. When she pulled the door shut, she heard the clang of the chain.

Pushing it open again, she moved inside the dark condo. Trenton had always left a light on in the past, and the lack of one sent a chill through her. He was lying on his side on the kitchen floor, his eyes closed. "Trenton!" she called, falling to her knees beside him and searching for injuries. Finding none, she frowned and shook his arm. "Trenton, wake up."

He stirred. When he rolled to his back, the empty bottle clinked as it rolled away and a picture fell from his hands. Celia picked it up, looking at a younger Trenton smiling so happily at a gorgeous, red-haired woman. Emily really had

been beautiful. Celia set the picture to the side, leaning over him and cupping his face with her hands.

“Trenton,” she called softly, stroking him with her fingers. His nose wrinkled as his brows pulled together. She remembered that he was a heavy sleeper. Alcohol likely hadn’t helped. Still, it was impressive that their banging hadn’t woken him. “Trenton, come on. Please wake up so I know you’re okay.”

His eyelids fluttered, and then those green eyes stared up at her, though it took them a few blinks to focus. “Celia?” he asked, though there was a slur to her name.

She glanced around him, but relaxed when there were no plastic pill bottles or anything. The poor man had simply gotten drunk. “Yeah, it’s me. How are you feeling?”

He frowned in confusion, but then his thoughts found the pain that had led to him lying there before. He closed his eyes. “You shouldn’t be here. I can’t...” He trailed off, biting his lip, too kind to tell her the full truth, that it hurt to see her there when he was mourning his wife.

“I’ll leave soon, when Malcolm arrives.” She pulled her hands from him even though they wanted to linger, then typed a quick text into her phone.

Trenton grabbed her hand, squeezing. As if he realized what he had done, he jerked away, hissing in pain when his elbow hit the refrigerator.

Celia reached out, her fingers rubbing at the spot where he'd banged it. "Lie still. How much did you drink?"

His eyes moved to where she touched him. "Don't," he said.

She pulled away, holding her hands up. "I'm sorry." Heat rolled into her eyes when she realized she wouldn't be able to touch him again after that day. "I never meant to make things harder for you. I'll wait outside."

"Celia, wait." Trenton grabbed her, and she lost her balance, tumbling forward until she hit his chest. Trenton grunted, but his arms locked tight around her.

"I'm okay. You don't have to protect me." Celia wriggled, but his grip pulled her closer. "Trenton, let me go so I can leave you alone."

"What if I don't really want you to go?" Trenton asked. His hand moved to cup the back of her head, and he brought her down to him, his lips pressing against hers, soft and hard at the same time. Her chest tightened, and she squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears inside.

He broke the kiss, and their foreheads touched. "I'm such a jerk. When I touch you, I don't want to keep my promise at all."

"What—" Celia swallowed as her lips brushed against his. Her eyes opened to find him staring at her. "What promise is that?"

"I promised I'd never forget her. That was Emily's biggest fear. That her death would make it as if she never existed at

all.” Trenton stroked the side of her face. “That’s why I can’t be with you. I promised I’d always remember her.”

“I understand, Trenton.” Celia leaned into his hand. “I’ve always understood. I just couldn’t help myself. You’re so sweet. You’ve done so much for me.” Celia smiled down at him. “You are in no way a jerk. The complete opposite.”

“I forgot her yesterday. The day that she should be remembered the most. It was what she’d been afraid of. No one remembered her. Not even her husband.”

A noise sounded from behind her, and Celia turned to find Malcolm and Blake standing in the kitchen doorway, looking awkward.

Celia looked back at Trenton, putting her hand over his, where it still rested against her cheek. “You didn’t forget her, Trenton. Look at yourself. You more than remember.” She gave his hand a squeeze.

“But yesterday—” Trenton broke off as she removed his hand and stood.

Celia backed away, nodding to Malcolm, who moved past her.

Blake patted her shoulder as he crouched down by his friend, lifting the empty bottle for a sniff. “Damn, man, you need to call us the next time you decide to drink alone.”

Malcolm glared at him. “Don’t be an idiot.”

Celia studied Trenton as he stared at his friends. She stepped forward, and his eyes shifted to her again. “I almost

died once,” she said. Her eyes moved to Malcolm. He had tensed, his jaw hard. “Someone saved me, so I didn’t, but I thought about it that day. I’ve remembered what happened ever since, actually, and think about what could have happened. And you know what?” She took a breath, forcing herself to meet Trenton’s gaze. “I’d hate it if people remembered me that way. If all they thought about was my death.”

Blake winced even as Malcolm shook his head. “Celia, that’s not helping.”

“No, it needs to be said. Ever since I returned, I’ve heard more about Trenton’s wife’s death than her life. He only talked about her life when I asked him about it.” Trenton was the one to look away. “You’re doing her a disservice that way. I think forgetting yesterday was probably a good thing for you. Instead, remember her like she’d want to be remembered.”

Not able to face the damage she’d likely done, Celia turned and fled the place that had finally, after so many hadn’t, felt like home.

Chapter 36

Trenton's gaze fell to the wedding picture of him and Emily on the tile next to him. Her smile carried the joy that she hadn't been able to contain back when they first met. She'd had little of that joy in the last months of her life.

"I'm sorry, Trent. Celia had no right to talk about Emily that way." Malcolm shifted to sit next to him, his hand patting Trenton's shoulder. "Celia has been acting a little odd all week."

"It's spending so much time with Erin and Katie," Blake said. "Those two are blunt to a fault, especially Erin."

Trenton propped himself up against the fridge, lifting the picture. "Celia was right. Even looking at this memory, I always thought about how she's gone. I never let myself remember the happiness we felt that day." He smiled down at the grinning woman he had loved. "She was always so joyful. I loved that."

“That annoyed the hell out of me,” Blake said, setting the glass bottle down.

Malcolm glared at their friend. “Jesus, Blake, shut up.”

Trenton met Malcolm’s gaze. “Admit it. Emily annoyed you, too.”

Malcolm flushed. “She was your wife.”

“That’s right!” Blake chuckled. “Those two used to argue all the time. Especially when she brought up all that environmental shit.”

“Just because we disagreed on politics doesn’t mean I didn’t like her.” Malcolm looked away, pushing his hand through his hair.

Trenton smiled as the memories filled him. “She used to do it on purpose.”

Malcolm’s eyes snapped to his. “What?”

“Emily always said you were too in control. She enjoyed shaking you up.” Trenton thought back, his fuzzy drunken memories coming faster. “She did the same with me, but was always disappointed.”

“Because you don’t get riled, no matter how bad people act.” Blake shook his head. “It’s that ‘way too nice’ thing you have going on.”

Trenton turned, sticking the magnetic frame back on the fridge. “Yeah, nothing Emily did really upset me. I just enjoyed her and the life we had together.” He closed his eyes,

the guilt seeping in again. “I can’t believe I forgot the anniversary of her death. It’s only been three years.”

“You seriously don’t need to beat yourself up over that,” Blake said. “I’m sure she gets it, if she’s some floating spirit watching. Even if she isn’t, you do your best to remember her. You always do.” He stood, crossing over to the counter. He snagged an almost full bottle of gin, crossing back. “Despite how much it hurts, you’re there for her.”

Trenton stared at his friend as he took off the top, took a swig that made him choke, and held the bottle out. “You think I need more alcohol in my system?”

Blake shrugged. “You’re making too much sense still. Let’s fix that.”

Trenton took the bottle being nudged at him. The gin slid down his throat with a slight burn. He preferred to cut it with tonic.

Malcolm sighed, stretching his legs out. “Let me ask you something.”

Trenton nodded, tilting the bottle for another sip.

“Are you in love with Celia?”

The gin almost came out of his nose. Trenton coughed, his eyes watering as he swallowed.

“That’s what he pretty much said to me,” Blake said, taking the bottle from him.

Malcolm let his head fall against the cabinet. “I knew something was up back when you punched her ex. Like we said before, you never get riled.”

Trenton stared at his bare feet. The hand he held against his chest felt warm. Malcolm was right. For him to have gotten violent, he had to have already begun to care about her back then. “I didn’t realize it until the idea of her in the hospital sent me spinning. And then when we—”

Malcolm cleared his throat loudly. “I don’t need to hear the details.”

Blake took another drag on the bottle. “I wouldn’t mind hearing a few.”

Malcolm kicked at him. “Don’t be a jackass.” He sighed, studying Trenton. “So you do love her. Enough that she took over your thoughts on a day you would normally only think about your wife.”

Trenton winced. “It was wrong. I’m so sorry, Malcolm. I know you love Celia, too.”

“She’s my cousin. Of course I do.”

Blake shook his head, trying to pass the bottle to Malcolm. “It’s more than cousins.”

Malcolm waved off the alcohol, frowning as he stared at each of them. “I’m not sure what you’re both getting at, but Celia and I are related. I don’t love her romantically.”

Blake snorted. “I mean, maybe you don’t want to but—”

“It’s not like that!” Malcolm groaned, banging his head against the cabinet.

Trenton took the bottle. “She’s always been an important part of your life.”

“You know why now. I hadn’t thought about her much until that day when I saw her mother—” Malcolm broke off, swallowing hard. “When I saved her. And then the way she was treated, even by my parents. I couldn’t stand it and wanted to help. Pretty soon, I understood her better than anyone. She really hasn’t let anyone into her life, even those guys she dated.”

Trenton could feel his friend’s gaze on him. “I know. I screwed up.”

Malcolm sighed. “It’s not about what you did; it’s about what you’re going to do. If you’re not going to do right by Celia, then you need to stay away from her.” He shook his head, pushing himself to his feet. “If you hurt her again, I’m not sure how I’ll handle it.” He reached a hand down.

Trenton took it, the drink adding a dizziness to his vision as he stood. “I’ll stay away from her. With Emily in my heart, I don’t think—”

“You love your sisters, right?” Blake asked, groaning as he dragged himself to his feet.

Trenton blinked at him. “Yeah.”

“All four of them? Equally?”

Trenton shrugged. “Of course. They’re family.”

“So you can love two people at once. Or I guess four.” Blake shrugged. “Problem solved.”

“That’s simplifying things too much, Blake,” Malcolm said.

“I don’t think so. I mean, when I find two girls—”

Trenton held up his hand. “No, we’re not going there.” The room still wouldn’t blink into focus.

“It’s nowhere near the same,” Malcolm agreed.

Blake shrugged, but didn’t continue his thoughts. He frowned through the open counter space at the living room on the other side. “I thought we redecorated this place?”

“Only the bedroom.” Malcolm followed Blake’s gaze with a frown of his own. “Have you seriously not changed anything else?”

Trenton shuffled out of the kitchen to avoid their looks. “The furniture is perfectly fine. I didn’t see a need to get rid of it.”

Blake followed him, glancing around. “Condos are pretty small, huh?” His head poked into the bathroom. “Is it just this one bathroom? Damn, that must have been cozy with a woman here.”

Trenton blamed the heat in his cheeks on the alcohol taking over his system again.

“Are you really happy here?” Malcolm asked. He crossed to the glass doors, looking out at the porch. “You can almost see into the condos across the way.”

“Emily and I picked out this place together,” Trenton said. But it wasn’t his wife he thought of when Blake sat on the couch.

Malcolm turned and frowned at the painting splashed with color. “As long as you’re happy. It might be good that you’re giving up Celia, though.” He sprawled in one of the arm chairs with a fond smile. “A long time ago, I mean really long, she dreamed about a house with a fence and a dog.”

Although she’d never mentioned liking animals, Trenton could picture her with a dog hopping up on her lap.

Blake frowned, rooting around in his pocket until he pulled out his vibrating phone. “Hey, Damon. Yeah, we’re here with him now. Hold on. I’ll put you on speaker.”

As Blake leaned forward to put the phone on the table between them, Damon’s voice came out of the speakers. “Well, he better be shitfaced or something. Scared me. Trent never not answers.”

Trenton sat on the carpet and leaned against the couch, his legs stretched out. “I drank a whole bottle of gin.”

“He was asleep on the floor of the kitchen when Celia found him.” Malcolm spoke up so the phone could catch the words.

Blake frowned. “How did she get in when we couldn’t? The chain was on.” He nudged Trenton with his foot. “Did you get up for her, but not us?”

Trenton rubbed his fingers against his forehead. “I don’t think so. I remember the tile feeling cool to the touch when my

eyes opened.”

Malcolm chuckled. “Celia knows how to pick locks. I forgot about that. She had to learn when she was a kid, with her mom constantly locking her out.”

“Your cousin, Celia?” Damon asked through the phone. “Is she back in town, with those bedroom eyes of hers?”

“Shut up, Damon,” Malcolm said, though there wasn’t any heat behind it.

Their friend laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re still hung up on her? She’s your cousin.”

Malcolm groaned. “So all of you thought I wanted to have sex with her?”

“Well, yeah,” Damon said. “The shared blood thing held you back, but I always assumed that was part of why you hardly dated.”

“I never wanted to have sex with Celia.” Malcolm closed his eyes with a heavy sigh.

“Well then, it’s a good thing someone else fucked her, right?” Blake asked.

“Oh shit,” Damon said. “Tell me you didn’t, Blake. We all knew she was off limits.”

“Not me.” Blake’s head shifted on the couch as he stared at Trenton.

Heat gathered in Trenton’s stomach. “Don’t talk about Celia that way. I didn’t fuck her.” The word made the room spin, and

Trenton swallowed against it.

“What would you call it, then?” Blake asked with a smirk in his direction. “Making love?”

Trenton didn't blush at the term. Memories flashed through his mind, and he shifted where he sat. “Yeah. I guess I would.”

“Wait, Trent and Celia?” Damon sighed through the phone. “I've been away too long.”

“It just happened,” Blake said, grinning up at the ceiling. “That's why Trent forgot about the anniversary. Sudden, mind-blowing sex after three years of abstinence rotted his brain.”

Malcolm covered his face with his hands. “Let's please stop talking about this.”

“I never gave Blake any details,” Trenton told them, though the description wasn't wrong. He could barely think of anything but having her again when they touched. “Besides, it's over. Celia deserves better than what I can offer.”

“Don't you think she deserves to decide that?” Malcolm asked, sitting up straighter.

Trenton stared at him.

Blake reached for the bottle. “You were always upfront about it, right? You know, the still loving Emily stuff?”

“I didn't hide anything from her,” Trenton said. “I wouldn't do that.”

“That wouldn't be our Trent.” Damon laughed. “The oblivious lady killer. Always ignoring come-ons and sexual

advances. Didn't Emily have to get naked before you realized?"

Trenton let his head fall back. "I can't believe I told you guys that."

"You didn't." Blake smiled as he lay back on the couch again. "Emily did. That girl said every thought in her head."

Warmth filled Trenton's chest at the reminder. "I liked that. It made marriage to her very easy." He'd never had to wonder why she was in a mood, or what she wanted to do, or even when she wanted to have sex. She always just told him.

"She was way too open," Malcolm said. "Not even my sister told me when her, you know"—he waved his hands in the air—"female time started. Emily was way too into sharing. It terrified me."

Trenton smiled. "She knew that." He'd loved when she would sit up in their bed at night, talking with her hands about how she'd made Malcolm uncomfortable. He'd been so happy that his best friend and his wife had their own friendly relationship. Even if it was mostly teasing on her side.

He let their voices pass around him, listening to each reflection, each memory of a life well lived. That had been his life with her. A series of happy moments that he'd relegated to the back of his mind. Celia had been right to lecture him. Talking about the good times with Emily didn't bring him pain. A contentment filled him instead of any anxiousness about her absence. He let the stories continue to wrap around him as the night passed.

Chapter 37

Celia listened to one of the other women talk in group while she gripped her Styrofoam cup. The seat next to her had remained empty the past few weeks, with the other newbie, Jami, not returning.

“I knew I had to make a different choice. It wasn’t for me.” The woman across the way pressed a hand to her swollen stomach. “I had someone else to protect, and that was most important.”

The smile the woman shared was for herself, or perhaps for the baby on the way. It held a gentleness and a radiance all at the same time.

Celia had never let herself imagine having a family. When she was a teenager, she’d felt like the mother in the relationship with her own. She’d had to care for and cherish her mother. That part hadn’t been all bad, had actually let her feel some peace among the chaos, especially when her mother would lay her head against her shoulder and tell her she loved her.

She'd steadily begun to accept that she might not be completely crazy, what with Erin and Katie telling her that over and over. The counselor hadn't given her an absolute one way or the other, just encouraged her to explore how she felt letting go of the wall she had built around herself. Celia didn't think she'd really let the wall down. Instead, she'd poked a hole in it to peek out.

It would be reckless of her to bring a child into the world.

"I can't make excuses for him anymore," the woman said, her hand moving softly over her pregnant belly. "It's the right decision. If he can't be the father our child needs, which I know he can't, then I have to make this choice."

Trenton would be a wonderful father. The thought of him smiling as he held a baby in those gentle hands of his sent tingles over her skin. Which was ridiculous. She hadn't even seen the man since she'd broken into his house, though Malcolm had assured her Trenton was fine.

A jostling of a door had Celia peering over at the back entrance. It was the woman from before, Jami. She was already turning from the entrance, heading back into the garden.

The pregnant woman had wrapped up her story, and the counselor was thanking her for sharing.

"Excuse me," Celia murmured, rising to hurry toward the exit.

Jami hadn't gone far. She sat on the steps with her head bowed, her long, dark hair falling forward.

Celia slowed, bending to sit on the step beside her. She let the silence remain, liking the feel of the sun on her skin. Since it was still morning, the heat of the day wasn't pressing on them.

"What are you doing out here?" Jami asked, her voice muffled against her knees.

Celia had promised herself she'd try again, should the woman return. She doubted saying that would comfort her. It made Celia sound a bit like the stalker Daniel had accused her of being. "I wasn't sure I'd see you back here."

"I shouldn't have come," Jami said, lifting her head. Her hands trembled before pressing hard against her skin.

It had taken Celia quite a while to become comfortable in group sessions. So often she had left to never return. "I understand that feeling."

"You—" Jami cut herself off, leaning back against the steps to squint into the sky above. "No, I guess you probably do. Even though you're so lucky, it doesn't take away from the past."

"Lucky?" Celia asked. She'd never once applied that term to herself.

"You're past the point of a decision; didn't even really have to make one at all." Jami cringed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. It sounded awful."

The way the woman looked at her, Celia wondered if maybe she should be feeling angry. Instead, Malcolm's caring expression rose in her thoughts. "No, I agree with you. I'm so lucky and so thankful to have had Malcolm all these years."

"You mentioned he was your cousin, right?" Jami asked, and Celia nodded. "He sounds amazing." Her head lowered again, resting on her knees. "I wish I had a Malcolm."

Celia held out her hand. "Can I have your phone?"

Jami peeked up at her, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why?"

"I'll plug in my number. If you ever get to a point where you need someone, you can call." Celia smiled. "And I'll send Malcolm your way."

The woman's lips tilted up. "You can't be serious."

Celia wriggled her fingers. "What do you have to lose?"

Jami let out a full smile. "When you put it that way..." She handed over her phone.

Celia was reminded of the time Trenton had put his numbers in her phone. She'd looked at his number a lot over the past two weeks. He'd stopped coming by the tavern. While she understood, she still missed him.

Letting the phone ring for a pulse or two, she hit 'End' and handed it back. "I'll put your name in mine, too, so I'll know."

Jami tucked her phone away again, looking out at the overgrown garden. "I should get back." There was an urgency

to her words Celia recognized. The woman stood, hesitating. “Thank you, Cece.”

“It’s Celia, actually.” She shrugged as the other woman studied her. “It helps me to share, the pseudonym. I wanted you to know, though.”

“You’re really sweet.” Jami nodded once. “I’m glad I met you.”

Before Celia could return the sentiment, the woman jogged away.

She took in a steadying breath. Then she lifted her phone and assigned the new number in it a name.

During her forced dinner break, she told Malcolm about the woman.

“Wait, you offered her me?” Malcolm asked, laughing a little. His dark hair was pulled back in the bun he often wore, though strands had escaped into his face. He shook them back as he finished pulling the draft of beer.

Celia nodded, eating a fry. “You’ve always taken such good care of me.”

“That’s different.” Malcolm tweaked her nose as he walked past.

A warmth filled her as she watched her cousin cross to the customer to drop off their drink. While she waited, she ate another fry covered in ketchup, not even needing to force it. She’d found she liked them that way. She swallowed as Malcolm settled behind the bar again. “Don’t lie. Blake told

me about some of the other women you've helped over the years.”

Malcolm shrugged. “Never on purpose.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Celia frowned into her plate of food. “I doubt she'll call anyway.”

Malcolm nodded. “A lot of them don't.” One of the customers gestured to him, and Malcolm went to pull another beer to take to them.

Celia finished the last of her fries, and had already eaten more than half the sandwich. She worked on a few more bites while Malcolm made another round of the few tables. She pushed her plate away as he returned, and he smiled when he picked it up. “I'm proud of you.”

Celia sighed. “You worry too much about me eating.”

“Not that, silly, though I like when you eat well, too.” He dropped off the plate in the kitchen, wiping his hands as he walked back. “No, I'm proud of you for reaching out to someone. I know that's hard for you.”

Celia wanted to squirm on the barstool.

“With Trent as well. What you said to him that night really seemed to help,” Malcolm said.

Celia bit her lip. “Is he doing all right? He hasn't been coming in here lately.”

Malcolm winced. “That's likely my fault. I warned him away from you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s not your call.” She thought back to the sight of Trenton on the floor of the kitchen. “But if it’s better for him, then I’m fine with it.”

“I wasn’t worried about him.”

Celia snorted. “Please. I know you better than that.” She slid off her seat. “Though if you’re worried about me, you don’t need to be. I’m doing better.”

“I just don’t want to see you like the other night again.” Malcolm’s hand tightened on top of the bar.

She put her hand over his fist. “That wasn’t really about Trenton. You know that, right?” She squeezed. “Honestly, being with him kept me from spiraling out worse from that other idiot I’d rather not name.”

Malcolm turned his hand in hers. “Let’s agree to disagree. Besides, I just told him to stay away if he wasn’t going to get serious about you.”

“I was fine with the no-relationship thing.” Heat crawled up her face as the memory of him slipped into her. “More than fine.”

Malcolm pulled away. “I don’t want to hear this.”

Celia let herself laugh as she turned from the bar to return to her tables.

She was finishing up with her last table for the night when the door to the tavern opened. She lifted her head, and there he was, with that gentle smile she had nearly convinced herself

she didn't miss. Instead of crossing to the bar like he had always done when he'd come to pick her up, he crossed to her.

Trenton looked like he had back when she'd first come to the bar. A businessman, very put together, with a pleasant demeanor and a lousy pickup strategy. It was hard to believe she'd thought he was hitting on her originally. To see him, it was as if nothing had changed from their time together, nothing except for an uncertainty as he looked at her.

"I was hoping we could talk," Trenton said, his hand lifting to rub the back of his neck. "I thought I could drive you home."

Katie's place hadn't begun to feel like that word, not like Celia's time at Trenton's condo. She glanced at Malcolm. He'd been taking her back to Katie's after her shift, not wanting her to take the bus at night.

Malcolm waved her off, turning away to finish his closing process.

Celia still held the last customer's credit card. "I have a few things to finish up."

Trenton smiled. "I know. I'll wait."

She'd always felt his presence when he'd come for her before, but it had been soothing, supportive. This time was different. Even he seemed nervous. She was pretty sure she knew why, and it made her actions slow.

Trenton had come to gently break her heart.

Celia had known that would be the outcome ever since she'd left him in the kitchen that night. Trenton wasn't the type to not care about the person he was with. Their time together had wrecked him. She knew it was for the best, but she dreaded hearing him say it.

The situation was her own fault. She'd promised him she could do a sex only arrangement, but had fallen for him anyway.

It had been so easy for her to remain detached before, but she was starting to suspect she'd always chosen men who wouldn't make that tough on her. Even her fiancé. She had said yes for the promise of a normal life, not because she'd wanted to be with him.

Trenton was different.

"Go on, Celia," Malcolm said, interrupting her procrastination. "I'll finish up things here." He glanced at Trenton. "Call me later if you need to."

She nodded, taking off her apron before approaching Trenton, where had already stood up beside the bar.

"Ready?" he asked.

Celia wondered what he would say if she said no. She nodded instead, following him to his car. He held open her door for her like the gentleman he was.

Despite him saying he wanted to talk, he remained silent on the drive. Celia's fingers played with the rubber band on her wrist.

Trenton parked along the road near Katie's place, which was dark except for the porch light. He turned toward her, but she couldn't raise her head.

"I wanted to thank you for the other day," Trenton said.

Celia jerked her head up. "What?"

"You told me a truth that the guys never could. You made me see that I was only remembering Emily's death, not her life."

A part of her tension eased. "Malcolm was mad at me, I think."

"Not even he could say it, but it was what I needed to hear." Trenton pressed his back against his door, turning as much as he could to face her. "I visited her grave the next day, but that won't be my monthly ritual anymore. She's not there; I've never thought she was there. All it did was remind me she was gone."

Celia studied his face, surprised at the steady eyes that returned her gaze.

"The guys reminisced about her that night. It helped. That was how I really should have been remembering her." Trenton reached out, his hand settling over hers, stilling it. "I have you to thank for that."

"I can't take credit for it." Somehow it made it worse, that she was the cause of him leaving her for good. "Why did you wait so long to thank me, anyway? Not that I needed it." His

hand was so warm. At any other time, it would have steadied her. Now it only brought a craving for what she couldn't have.

“I had to be certain, Celia. You deserve that, just as Malcolm said.”

She faced the window, seeing the grimace in her own expression.

“I love Emily. I always will.” Trenton's voice came to her as if through a tunnel. “But it's not because of my promise to her. I love her because she's worthy of love. Just as you are.”

Her hand clenched on the car door. So that was his method. Killing her with kindness. “Don't.”

“Don't what?”

Celia turned to him, her eyes burning. “Don't tell me I deserve someone better than you who can love me. There is no one better than you.”

Trenton shook his head. “My drunken stint on the kitchen tile says different.”

“Because you felt guilty for not putting someone else before you.”

“That wasn't why I felt guilty that day.” He tugged on her hand, bringing it against his chest, over his heart. “I felt guilty because all I could think about was you. Even on the day I should have been focused on Emily. That's how much I love you.”

Celia blinked at him, not understanding his words. “But you just said you’d always love her.”

“And I will. Just as I hope to always love you.” Trenton covered her hand with his, over his heart. “I’ve come to realize that I have room in my heart for both of you. But is that something you can accept?” Trenton leaned toward her to search her eyes. “Celia, you deserve all the happiness in the world. I want to be a part of that. But will I be hurting you instead?”

A tightness filled her chest. She tried to move toward him, but the seat belt held her back. She pulled her hand free to undo it.

Trenton pulled his own hands back, as though thinking she didn’t want him to touch her. “I understand.”

“You don’t understand anything,” Celia said, pressing the button and leaning across the console to kiss him. She stared into his surprised eyes. “I never wanted you to forget your wife. You won’t be hurting me.” Feeling a lightness she’d never experienced before, Celia wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again.

Chapter 38

Trenton lost himself in her lips, trying to pull her tighter against him in the enclosed space without success. His hand fumbled for the lever on the driver's seat, letting the upper part fall completely back so that he could pull her over to his side. She came willingly, eagerly, her lips leaving his to trail down his neck.

“I missed you,” Celia murmured, the words brushing across his skin with her lips.

He was certain he'd missed her more. He had no idea how he'd gone three years without sex. His hands moved to cup her ass, pressing her tighter against him. Her hum against his throat was more than enough reward.

He captured her lips again as he shifted up a little to give her legs room on the seat to straddle him. “I forgot how impossible it is to make out in a car. Haven't done this since I was a teenager.” He let his lips graze her neck, figuring it was his turn.

Her head arched to give him more access, a shudder running through her. “I’ve never done this in a car before.”

Trenton had meant to end things there for the night, but he hardened even more at her words. He used his grip to slide her against him, squeezing his eyes shut as she moaned and did it again on her own. He scrambled for his control. “Wait, Celia, wait.”

She continued to slide against him, her hand finding the skin beneath his shirt and the edge of his pants. “I don’t want to.” She fumbled with his zipper, and it sounded impossibly loud in the car. Then she lifted from him and her hand wrapped around his penis. She squeezed, then began to stroke. She’d pulled him through his pants, so her hand didn’t get all the way to the base, but it didn’t matter.

“Tighter,” he begged, and she squeezed on the next stroke, beginning to pump. He grunted, his hips lifting into it as his jaw tightened. His eyes met hers, and there was a hunger there that made him want to come, but he wanted to watch her orgasm more. His hand cupped the back of her head, bringing her lips to his, his tongue stroking deep as he pulled her body higher, and her hand fell away.

She broke the kiss. “I wanted to keep going.”

“Not without you,” Trenton said, pulling her head down again. Her tongue tangled with his as he fumbled with her button and zipper. He needed two hands to pull her pants and underwear down enough to bare her. They trapped her legs, and her thighs clenched around his hand as he found her to

stroke. Her wetness coated his finger before he slid it over her clit, swallowing the mewling that filled his mouth. His penis probed her wet entrance, and he needed to break the kiss to clench his teeth against the spike of pleasure even that shallow grip gave him.

Her legs wiggled beneath the steering wheel. “Trenton, help me.” She faced him again, frustration flashing across her cute, disgruntled face.

His hands moved beneath her shirt instead, his thumbs stroking over her hard nipples. “I just want to give you the full experience of making out in a car.” She arched her back to give him more of her breasts, even as she moved her legs more, working him between her thighs. He wasn’t going to last, not if her thighs continued to squeeze him.

His hands moved back to her ass, then her thighs, pulling them as far apart as he could with her pants still trapping her. His first stroke was shallow, coating the head of his penis as she squeezed him.

Celia wrapped her hands around his neck, her forehead pressing against his. She arched her hips forward even as his lifted, taking more of him, but not enough for either of them if her frustrated groan was any indication.

Trenton gripped her hips again, helping to pull her against him so that his thrusts went deeper. On the deepest one he could manage, she cried out, her body stilling as if it couldn’t go on.

“That...” She swallowed, her eyes going blind, and she cried out again as he repeated the stroke, finding the spot more easily the second time. “Trenton, I—” She broke off again on his third stroke, a choked sound strangling in her throat.

“It’s okay, Celia. Let go.” *And take me with you*, he nearly begged, working against her again. It only took three more thrusts before she clenched on him, and he shouted into her mouth as she milked his own release from him.

His arms wrapped around her, hugging her against him as he struggled to remember much of anything. She lay boneless over him, her breathing eventually evening out. “Don’t go to sleep yet,” he murmured, remembering where they were. The windows had fogged up, even with the AC running.

She mumbled something against his throat, burrowing her head against his neck. His hands slid down to her ass again, and he pulled her tighter against him, pushing a bit deeper inside her again. Her head lifted as her eyes popped open. He kissed her because he could, but kept it short.

“Sorry, this wasn’t the plan,” he said with a rueful smile. “I would have taken you back home tonight if it had been.”

She flushed. “I liked it.”

He laughed, kissing her again, this one more lingering, bringing a stirring below that she hummed interest in. He sat up, gently depositing her in the passenger seat. “We’ll come back for your things tomorrow,” he said, zipping his pants and straightening his seat. He paused, glancing at her as she finished pulling up her own pants. “Assuming that’s all right?”

Celia fastened her seat belt. “Drive already.”

He couldn't keep away the smile as he shifted into drive. It didn't take long for him to park at the condo, and they were soon riding the elevator to the fifth floor. Once the door was shut and locked behind them, Trenton lifted her into his arms, kissing her even as he carried her to the bedroom.

When they got there, he didn't undress her. Instead, he lay down with her, rolling them to their sides so they faced each other. Her brows drew together in confusion, and he smiled as he reached between them to rub it away. “We should talk more first.”

“About your wife? I really do think it's sweet, how you feel about her. It's one of the things I love about you.” She bit her lip as she realized what she said, then looked away from him in embarrassment.

Part of the remaining tension he carried dissolved, and he cupped her cheek. “Say that again.”

“Of course I love you. Who wouldn't?” Celia tilted her head into his touch. “Even that woman in court that one time was a bit in love with you.”

“I don't care about her emotions; I care about yours.” He paused, feeling like a jerk. “I mean, I care that she was upset, and I'm glad she's doing better now, but—”

Her hand covered his mouth, and he was grateful for the interruption. He kissed her palm, and her eyes widened as his chest squeezed. Such a little gesture, and she likely had never

experienced it before. He kissed her again before pulling her hand away. “I want to be clear. This won’t be just sex anymore. I want a relationship with you. I want to take you on dates and watch awful movies and fight over misunderstandings and everything else being with you entails. Is that what you want, too?”

His heart raced as she looked away. “There’s going to be times, you know. Times when I get upset or depressed, or make things about me. I mean, I’m working on it, but my past will always be with me.” Celia took a breath. “When I told my story to the group, I was honest. I don’t believe I can ever fully escape. Though Erin and Katie have almost convinced me that some of my crazy thoughts were actually normal reactions.”

“I still don’t agree with you calling yourself crazy, but I don’t want you to protect me from that part of you. During those times, I want to be there, even if you don’t think I should be.” His hand drifted back into her hair. “That’s part of a relationship, or at least the type that I want.”

She searched his eyes. “As long as you don’t hide it if it’s ever too much. Even if you confess to Malcolm instead of me.”

Trenton opened his mouth to protest, but the tilt of her chin made him rethink it. “I don’t think I’ll ever tire of loving you, but if I do, I will let you know.” As his best friend and her cousin, Malcolm was dear to them both, but Trenton had no intention of dragging him into the middle of their life together.

“Okay then. Let’s do this.” She lifted her head, capturing his mouth in a kiss. “Have we talked enough now?” she asked against his lips.

Trenton laughed, rolling her on top of him. “I love your sexiness, too.” And her continued ability to blush, he thought to himself, ready to delight in her yet again.

Excerpt from Finding Nerve

KATIE'S AND BLAKE'S STORY

Blake Morgan hated it when the woman he was having sex with called out his name, especially if he couldn't remember hers. He used his grip on her thighs to hike her legs higher, changing the angle since she was acting so close. Sick of how she chanted his name like they were in a stadium, he captured her mouth with his, rolling his hips to try to send her over the edge. Two more thrusts and she pulsed around him. He had hoped her orgasm would help him reach his, but no dice tonight. Still, that wasn't her fault.

He lifted his head as he slipped out of her, easing her legs down. "Fuck," he moaned. "That was so good."

He'd found himself a blusher. She wobbled as she straightened against the wall. When she leaned forward for another kiss, he tilted his head so it landed on his chin, giving her a quick hug to act as if they'd just crossed actions.

He turned afterward, peeling off the empty condom and tossing it into the nearby trash. He was still stiff when he

zipped up his jeans, but tried to ignore it. “Thanks for coming my way tonight. I’ve got so much work left to do here.”

“I didn’t mind.” The woman stepped away from the wall he’d fucked her against, reaching for her discarded purse. He was glad she’d taken the hint. “We both were clear about what this was, and you certainly delivered. I needed something like this after the last guy I was with.” She shivered, adding a pout to it. “Way too dark. He was a Kirpatrick too. I guess with all that money, it makes sense he’d want some kink to it.” Her lips tilted into a smile. “I prefer your style. Call me if you need to let off a little steam again.”

Since he couldn’t remember which of the numbers he’d hit up, he doubted it’d be likely, but winked at her all the same. “I can’t help but think about it already.”

She threw a confident smile over her shoulder at him before starting down the metal staircase. He followed, relieved Malcolm didn’t have to watch another woman storm out of his bar. Blake would have never heard the end of it, which was an annoyance he didn’t need when he hadn’t even gotten an orgasm out of the encounter.

He made sure he walked her out, adding a shoulder rub to her send off. Glad to see the woman’s back, he slunk over to the bar, sinking onto one of the barstools.

“Jesus, another one?” Malcolm, the bar owner and his best friend, slid a beer in front of him without Blake asking for it. “Every night this week is a bit much, even for you.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Blake said, taking a long pull of the bottle.

Malcolm rolled his eyes. “At least you’re not running off my waitresses anymore.”

“Because it’s all family now. You nearly gave me blue balls hiring only Griffin girls.” Blake’s hand tightened on the neck of the bottle. “Though, with your sister recovering, that only leaves Celia. Trenton called dibs there.”

Blake jerked forward as a menu slapped the back of his head. “Like you ever had a chance,” Celia said. “I recognized what you were way back when we were kids.” She nodded to Malcolm. “Two pale ales and a blonde.”

Malcolm nodded as he went to the beer taps.

“And what am I?” Blake asked, tossing his usual smile at her.

“Someone with a short attention span.” Celia studied him. “Though I never realized it was quite this short.”

Blake hid his wince behind his beer. “I might be a temporary diversion, but I’m a fun one, I promise.” He lowered the bottle again, his smile feeling more natural. “I hear you moved back in with Trenton.”

Celia’s cheeks turned pink before she turned away from him. “I didn’t realize Trenton told you.”

“Told him what?” Trenton asked, coming up behind them. He leaned closer to Celia, kissing her cheek.

It had been over three years since his friend had smiled so much, and Blake was happy for him. “Like he had to tell me with that stupid expression of his.”

“So you did move back in?” Malcolm asked, setting the tray of beers on the bar, but not relinquishing it to Celia.

His cousin bit her lip. “The doctor gave Katie a clean bill of health before I left.”

Blake hid his relief by downing the rest of his beer. He’d avoided going by to see Katie. Mainly because he’d felt such a strong need to after catching a glimpse of her in the hospital.

“I know you, Celia. I had no worries there.” Malcolm studied the two of them before releasing the tray.

“Besides, it’s more likely Katie threw you out,” Blake said. Just as she would have done to him. He’d always ruffled her feathers, just as her cousin had, but for entirely different reasons.

Celia sighed. “I think she was pretty sick of the hovering.” She picked up the tray and crossed to her waiting table.

Trenton took a seat next to Blake, watching her go.

“Bold move, checking out her ass right in front of her cousin,” Blake teased.

Trenton froze, his gaze shifting to Malcolm.

Their friend sighed as he cleaned a spot on the bar that didn’t need it. “Celia makes her own decisions. We’re good.”

“Damn, if I’d known it would be that easy, I would have gotten to her before you.”

Blake’s teasing earned him a glare from both men.

“I would have kicked your ass.” Malcolm tossed the bar towel toward the register. “And it’s not like Trent got off scot-free.”

Trenton frowned down at the bar. “I deserved it.” He looked over at Celia again, his expression much too serious for a man already head over heels in love. “I hope to never be the cause of her stress like that again.” His eyes switched to Malcolm. “If I ever am, I expect you to finish what you started.”

Blake slapped his back, needing to break some of the tension. “Like someone as nice as you would make the same mistake twice.”

Malcolm’s face eased. “True.” He smiled at his friend.

“Though, with all the sex you’ve been having, I guess we can’t call you a monk anymore.” Blake sighed.

Heat flared up Trenton’s neck. “At least that’s one bright spot out of all of this.”

“I don’t need to hear this,” Malcolm said.

Blake laughed.

Trenton slid off the stool, escaping by crossing to Celia. Blake studied them together. “You really okay with it?” he asked Malcolm.

“They’ll be good together,” Malcolm said. Blake turned back to his friend, his worry fading at the mellow look on his face. Malcolm pointed at him. “But don’t you go getting any ideas. My sister is still off-limits.”

“No worries there. Katie is not my type.” Blake fiddled with the label on his beer. His friend’s sister had always been out of his league. Back in high school, while he’d been barely passing and getting the crap kicked out of him, she’d been studious and even volunteered on the weekends. She’d had two parents that loved her, a big brother looking out for her, and an innocence that terrified him. Hell, Blake was pretty sure she was still a virgin. The label ripped beneath his hand.

“And you always annoy the hell out of her.” Malcolm took his beer away from him. “You want another one?”

Blake glanced at the clock. Shit, it was already that late. “Nah, I still need to get something done up there.” He pushed himself off the barstool.

“Blake,” Malcolm called. When he turned, he found his friend staring at him way too seriously. “If you need to take a break on the project here, you know I’d understand, right?”

Blake had never been able to hide his problems from the man. “I know. Thanks, but I’m good for now.”

“Fine. But find another place for your next round. I’m pretty sure all the customers knew what you were up to.”

The mystery woman’s damn chanting hadn’t helped matters. “I’ll keep that in mind for tomorrow,” Blake said, laughing as

his friend rolled his eyes. He turned to the stairs, hopping up them to get back to work.

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About the Author

Amber Warden started reading romance before she probably should have. Before long, she was anticipating the steamy scenes and skipping past the description of sweeping hills to the good parts. She loves dreaming up new characters and lives out her fantasies in her stories. Her main hope is for those reading to take away the feeling that they are more than enough for anyone.

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