

LIFE OF CYN

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

CAITLIN AVERY

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

— PLATO

CHAPTER ONE

This night was make or break, so when Cyn's husband, Nick, asked what she wanted to drink, she hit pause. Vodka took the edge off stress faster, but wine was better for pacing. As long as she had food, a martini would do the trick.

"Cosmo, please. Easy on the cranberry."

Another decision, done. She was so freaking tense from all of them: what to wear? How to rain-proof her hair? Was an umbrella necessary? A tropical storm was headed toward Boston. Luckily, it had held off so far, there was so much riding on this event—Nick's first work function. This job would pay off their debt, but the bankruptcy had nearly derailed the offer. If not for a well-connected old family friend, they'd still be in Phoenix. Cyn needed to make a good impression.

To prevent spillage, she sipped her cosmopolitan before she moved. The effect was quick—liquid courage could get her through anything. With head held high and shoulders back, Cyn's butterflies died, drowned by Stoli. Now, she'd joyfully join Nick on his mission to schmooze the boss.

“All set?” Clearly, Nick was used to decisions being driven by his wife’s anxiety.

This awareness made Cyn’s shoulders lift. She took another sip. “Yep.”

Snaking their way through the patio crowd, Nick towered over everyone. The celebratory banner that read: ‘Happy 20th Cambridge Savings,’ slapped his head as it whipped and dipped in the wind. Eggplant clouds dotted the dark gray sky.

When they entered the restaurant, a blast of A.C. hit them. It was good for Nick, who’d walked five blocks from the subway in August humidity, dressed in a button-down, but the breeze raised the hair on Cyn’s arms.

She took another sip to warm her soul, and Nick nodded toward a man at the bar with his back to them. “That’s James—at the end.”

Approaching from behind, Nick put a hand on his boss’s shoulder. James turned and Cyn’s smile dropped as his arm hit her hand, splashing the red drink on her.

She looked down at the bodice of her white dress, holding the glass away from her chest.

The boss apologized, and she gasped as his cologne hit her nose. *Drakkar Noir*.

His voice made her jaw drop.

She gazed up, filled with dread, as he turned to grab napkins. His profile told her all she needed to know—his hooked nose, square jaw, and the “beauty” mark on his cheek brought her right back to the room where he had defiled her, twenty years earlier.

The world quit spinning.

Nick’s boss was no stranger.

“I’m really sorry,” he said again, offering the napkins.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, forget accepting an apology. Her legs buckled.

Nick stepped in to assist, steadying her arm and intercepting the napkins. He grinned at his boss as he said his favorite mea culpa. “To err is human. To forgive is divine.” He threw Cyn a wide-eyed look that said *get it together*.

Both men waited for her to downplay the situation. But words wouldn’t come, only heat, like a sauna. She was a fish amid sharks. Was the entire room staring?

She wanted to throw the rest of her drink in the boss’s face—like chum—and run. But she was stuck, petrified by the memories of his rancid breath on her neck. The panting and banging. The pain as he stole her virginity at the age of seventeen.

Nick handed her the napkins, and she focused on cleaning up.

Out, damn spot. She cursed the juice that had ruined her dress.

Nick fought hard for normalcy. “This is my wife, Cynthia.” She ignored James’s offer for a handshake, and Nick glared at her. “James is top broker in the state.”

“Nice to meet you,” she muttered, through gritted teeth.

“Likewise,” James replied.

He didn’t recognize her. It made Cyn aware of the grays in her hair and post-pregnancy physique. Shame draped over her like a muumuu. She wished she’d worn a less fitted dress.

As small talk resumed, she listened, but didn’t participate.

James said his young son was taking up golf. Every pore on his face exuded arrogance. “Do you have kids?”

“A two-year-old, Mack,” Nick said.

Cyn’s dress was wet with sweat. She shivered in the arctic breeze.

“Where’d you end up moving? I know I mentioned Wellesley during the interview.” James’s question was obviously a test.

“We’re staying in Brookline with Cyn’s parents, but we signed a lease in Davis Square. We want to take our time to decide where to buy.”

Good cover. Their debt didn’t allow for a mortgage.

When Nick ended the conversation, using food as an excuse, the blood returned to Cyn’s face. As soon as they were out of James’ vicinity, she told Nick she needed fresh air, and rushed outside to the Faneuil Hall Plaza.

A dreadlocked drummer banged on a bucket for money, and Cyn’s heart competed with the cadence. Looking up at the sky, she exhaled. The clouds had gone from purple to raven’s wing and the air weighed as much as her disgrace.

Nick trailed after her. “Babe, the stain is hardly noticeable. Don’t get so worked up.”

“I’m freaking out.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“Let’s get you food. You’ve only had booze.” His tone sounded accusatory, like he suspected she’d had a drink or two before the party.

“I had one cocktail—that’s not it. I’m having a panic attack.”

His face softened. “What can I do?”

“Nothing,” Cyn said. Nick had been quite the fighter when he was young. An arrest in college set him straight. She’d never seen that side of him but didn’t want to tempt fate by telling him his boss was her rapist. “I’ll go home—you stay.” This event was too important for him to miss.

His shoulders fell. “No, I’ll go with you.”

“I’ll be fine,” Cyn insisted.

His forehead wrinkled. “Okay.” Experience had taught them both that no one could fix Cyn’s unease when it got this bad. “I’ll be home by eleven. Call if you need me.”

Cyn hurried toward the subway. Nearing the end of the outdoor mall, she stopped in her tracks.

Her parents were babysitting Mack, she really needed to vent to a friend, and under the circumstances, she deserved a good buzz. Grabbing the cell from her clutch, she texted Sue, her best friend from high school.

Hey! Her fingers trembled. I know it's last-minute, but can you meet me for a drink at Quincy Market? I was at a party for Nick's bank—u won't believe who I saw there!!

Lifting her thick brown hair off her neck, she closed her eyes, praying Sue would be up for a drink. The ding of a text gave her hope.

Nice cliffhanger, Sue wrote. Meet me at the Black Rose —15 min.

CHAPTER TWO

Cyn chose a table near the entrance of the bar and ordered another cosmo. Her heel tapped like a needle on a sewing machine as she waited for Sue to arrive. She hadn't seen her since their ten-year reunion. Cyn had fallen out of touch after life got tough in Arizona and she'd delayed a get together since the move. She didn't want Sue to know about her current dysfunction. Avoidance was how Cyn coped, but she wanted to change.

Her apprehension evaporated when Sue walked through the door a short time later and said, "So good to see you!" Her hundred-watt smile was lined by ruby lips that matched her pencil skirt.

After a long-lost-bestie embrace, they sat.

"Thanks for coming on short notice," Cyn said. "Your office must be close."

"Two blocks up on State Street. I'm an analyst."

Cyn crossed her eyes. "I'm an over-analyst."

"Some things never change."

When the waitress delivered Cyn's cocktail, Sue ordered a coke.

"I have to go back to the office later."

Cyn had worked like that before Mack was born.

"So"—Sue's eyes sparkled with curiosity—"what's the emergency?"

Cyn put her martini down and placed both palms on the table. "JK is Nick's new boss."

The whites of Sue's eyes grew. "You've got to be kidding me. What did you do when you saw him?"

The tapping of Cyn's foot synched with her rapid-fire sipping. She looked down at the table. "Nothing. I froze."

The waitress returned with the soda. Sue pulled the cover off the straw and puckered her lips around it, looking parched. Cyn admired her lash extensions, which fluttered when her eyes watered from the carbonation. "Did you tell Nick? He knows about the assault, right?"

Cyn cocked her head. "Yes, I told him in the beginning of our relationship." She lowered her voice. "I had some issues around sex. But I never said JK's name. And I can't tell him now."

The corners of Sue's mouth turned down. "Right. Nick would kill him." She knew Nick's history.

Sue's Louis Vuitton purse buzzed, and she retrieved her phone, typing a response before returning her attention to Cyn. "Just say the word, sister, I'll march right into that bank and give that asshole a piece of my mind."

The fighter in Sue excited Cyn. Her initial reaction had been pathetic. Years of demoralization had taken its toll. They'd had way more in common when they were young, as teammates in gymnastics and classmates in school. By the time they graduated from high school, they shared the same dark secret: one of

the most popular older boys in school had raped each of them at different parties.

“I can’t believe I acted like nothing happened. *Again.*” Cyn finished her vodka. “But I can’t risk Nick’s job. It’s our only income.”

“Are you licensed in Massachusetts yet?”

Cyn inhaled. “I quit selling homes before Mack was born.”

Sue’s impeccably-shaped brows arched. “You loved that job. What made you quit?”

Cyn wanted to lie, but Sue was her first real confidant. “I didn’t really quit. My income dried up when the market tanked. We ended up overextended on our investment property and lost it all. Including our home. We had to file for bankruptcy, and it was my fault.”

Sue covered her mouth. “I’m so sorry. That’s tough.”

The clackity-clack of horseshoes on the street drew Cyn’s attention to the open windows. A family on a carriage tour looked dreamy, kind of like Cyn’s next aspirations. “I’m about to start a new career. As a yoga instructor.”

Sue grinned.

“Wow, that’s different.”

Cyn smiled to hide her insecurity. “Different is good. I need to find peace before forty. The last few years have totally sucked. That’s why I can’t tell Nick about JK. There’s too much stress in our lives already.” She held up her empty glass for the waitress to see.

“*JK?*” Sue lowered her voice. “Why can’t you say, ‘James Kavanaugh raped me?’ There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Cyn started to wind and unwind the cover of Sue’s straw around her finger.

“Hey,” Sue said. Cyn looked up. “It wasn’t your fault. Or mine. And we know there were others.”

“Yeah, because we didn’t report him.”

“He would’ve gotten off. They always do.” Sue frowned as she stirred her soda. “I don’t know about you, but my parents would’ve *killed* me for drinking.”

“I was sober when it happened to me.” Cyn’s eyes got round. “He’s the reason I started drinking.”

“Well, thank God we’re braver now.” Sue clasped her hands together. “Let’s plot our revenge. Know any hitmen?”

“How much do you think a hitman costs?” Cyn grabbed her phone and opened Google. “Says here, between five and thirty grand. So, let’s figure at least fifteen for a good one. You think they use a gun?”

“Shhh,” Sue said. “You just incriminated yourself with that search.”

Cyn put her phone down. “I know, he’s not worth going to jail for. I wish everyone knew what an asshole he is. Instead, he’s super successful. Nick’s totally impressed with him. I wish I could turn his life upside down the way he did to me.”

“Maybe we should take out a billboard on the Mass Pike and expose him. Or roofie his drink at the next bank event.”

Twenty minutes later and another drink down, Cyn upped the ante. “How about this?” She spit as she whispered. “I’ll cut off his dick, and you beat him with it.”

Sue extended her leg from under the table to show her heel. “I’ll crush his nuts with my stiletto.”

“Let’s pour bleach in his eyes and blind him. Then we can drag him around town with a leash—on his hands and knees—and give any woman who’s been assaulted a chance to kick him in the ribs.”

Sue drained the last of her coke and set her glass down. “I’m in.”

All this talk of retaliation made Cyn’s skin glow. Or maybe it was her third Cosmopolitan.

Sue peeked at her watch. “I got to get back to the office

before everyone leaves. I hate being there alone at night.” She pulled an LV wallet from her purse and slapped two twenties on the table. “Drinks are on me.” They stood up to hug. “Call me when you figure out your plan of attack. I want to take pictures.”

Cyn stayed back to hand the waitress the cash. She watched Sue head for the door and saw the cherry red soles on her patent black heels. Louboutins. Sue could afford a hitman. Cyn had made light of it in conversation, but she wasn’t sure she was kidding. James Kavanaugh deserved payback.

CHAPTER THREE

At a quarter to ten, Cyn turned the handle to her parents' condo and quietly opened the door. She crept across the entryway, stubbed her toe, and bit her fist to keep from yelping.

She tapped the light switch, then limped to the kitchen where her parents kept their aspirin. She popped the child-proof lid off and dropped the bottle. A bunch of pills spilled out.

“Come *on*.”

She threw the ones on the floor in the trash and took two more with a glass of water. The windows lit up with a flash of light and thunder rumbled. Seconds later, rain started to hit the roof. She wanted to check on Mack but didn't want to wake him, it was better if he slept through the storm. Poor Nick would get caught in it, Cyn thought, as she walked to the bathroom, where her pajamas hung.

She heard Nick come home as she brushed her teeth. Half a second later, he rapped on the bathroom door.

“Come in.”

He rushed in to pee, drenched.

“Wet out there?” She handed him a towel.

He took it and didn’t look at her. “It’s pouring.” He washed his hands and looked in the mirror. “Are you better now?”

“Yes.” She pulled her pajama top over her head. As she stepped into her shorts, she swayed from the buzz and put a hand on the sink to catch herself. “How was the rest of the party?”

Nick squared off to Cyn. “Honestly? I missed my wife. You know—first date night in years? First night out in Boston?”

Cyn’s booze-infused joy deflated. “Sorry, hun.”

“But to forgive is divine, right?” He fake smiled. “Seriously, though—that was quite a reaction to a tiny little spill. What the hell happened?”

It wasn’t the spill.

“I don’t always know why I get that way.” Her face was stiff and sweaty, like a mask about to slip.

“Whatever. It seems like every time our needs conflict, yours are more important than mine.” The glare from his eyes hit the fog of Cyn’s bullshit. “I’ll see you in the bedroom. Let’s not wake up Mack.” Like a married automaton, he leaned down to kiss her. “Jesus, Cyn, you *reek*.”

She didn’t blink. “I had wine when I got home, to take the edge off.”

His hands clenched. “You’ve had wine every night since we moved in. It’s time to take a break. Remember what I said last year.”

How could she forget? He’d threatened to leave and to take Mack. Her contrition went right down the drain. “Fine, I’m done. Starting tomorrow, I’ll cut all the fun out of my life to be a better wife and mother.” She stormed out of the bathroom toward the kitchen.

Vodka had temporarily fixed her mood, but angst returned

with a vengeance. She almost slung the truth at him when he entered the kitchen. *Your BOSS is my rapist. Punish him instead!*

Choking on the truth, she gripped the back of a chair. Then she wrenched the cork out of the bottle of wine her mom had left on the table and snagged a glass from the cupboard.

“I think you’ve had enough.” The lines around Nick’s eyes spelled disgust.

“Not if I have to quit tomorrow.” She emptied the bottle.

“So, I’m the bad guy, because I don’t want you to have another breakdown?” His volume increased, but he tamped it back down. “Excuse me for caring. I’m going to bed.”

Cyn raised her glass. “Cheers.”

She regretted the wisecrack as soon as he left. She didn’t want to fight with Nick. Maybe she’d go on the wagon for a month to appease him. She could smoke cigarettes for stress relief until yoga fixed her head.

Now she wanted a cigarette. Screw it. She took her sweat-shirt from the coat rack in the foyer and pulled it over her head. Then she grabbed her purse and keys, glanced down the hallway before she snuck out the door, closing it gently behind her.

CYN WAS in and out of a blackout when red and blue lights hit the trees in front of her. Her mind clicked into gear as a cop car pulled up behind her.

Shit! Had someone overheard her threatening JK at the bar? Oh my God, did she follow through with it?

No, she had a fight with Nick.

She gathered the facts: she had just written a response to a text from him, there was an open pack of smokes on the

passenger seat, the Jeep was in park, but still running. She was braless, in pajamas.

Cyn rolled down the window as the cop approached and rainwater dripped on her arm. Panic rose like acid reflux. If she lost her license, she wouldn't be able to get to early morning yoga training. Light from the streetlamp above the officer's head bounced off the wet road. It gave her an excuse to shade her eyes.

"Yes?" She held her breath.

"We got a call that a car had been idling here for a while." The officer's eyes went to her thighs. She placed her hands on them.

"I pulled over for a second to text my husband." The defensive tone she'd had with Nick was gone, replaced by weakness.

"License and registration, please." His face was cool, his vibe serious.

She fought the shakes as she handed him her ID. "I was about to leave."

The cop returned to his cruiser. Cyn grabbed Tic Tacs from the storage bin and lodged two under her tongue. Her cell lit up with a text from Nick. She hid it in the bin with the mints and prayed. *Please get me out of this. I promise I'll quit.*

Blood pulsed in Cyn's neck when the officer returned.

"Okay, Mrs. McKinley, everything checks out." He handed her the paperwork. "Are you visiting from Arizona?"

She scrunched up her face to hide her eyes. "We recently moved here from Phoenix."

"You have 30 days to change your plates and get a Massachusetts ID."

"It's on my list." She lisped, on the word 'list'.

He paused. "Have you had anything to drink tonight?"

"No." Her stomach rose to her throat. "I had a fight with my husband."

He shined a penlight at her eyes. “Do you feel safe at home?”

“Yes, Sir.” She didn’t feel safe to drive. “I left the house to cool down, but I’m fine to go back now.”

“Next time you get behind the wheel,” he warned, “wear proper footwear.”

She looked at her slippers. “Sorry.”

He returned to his car and Cyn grabbed her phone to read Nick’s message. *R U OK???*

Yes. She texted back. *And I agree, I need to quit drinking.* She waited ten seconds to catch her breath and hit send. His wish had come to fruition.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next day, Nick hunched over his laptop, trying to remember the tricks he'd used to find clients as a broker twenty years ago. He hadn't sold any loans in Boston yet. It took a while to build a pipeline, and it had only been a few weeks, but his first sales meeting was this afternoon and he wanted to dazzle the boss. After lunch with his stepdad, Tom, he'd do a few more cold calls. Tom was driving out from western Mass to run an errand and had invited Nick to lunch. Nick couldn't say no, and the break would be good. His stress was through the roof after Cyn's shenanigans last night. It didn't make sense. One minute, she was okay, and then she lost it.

As he waited for Tom to arrive, Nick searched online for networking events. He'd just Googled 'real estate meet-ups in Cambridge,' when his boss stopped by to chat.

"You ready to show us what you got today, Mr. McKinley?"

James Kavanaugh had a big personality. Debonair in his Armani suit, Nick wondered if his movie-star good looks played a role in his success.

“I’m working on my goals right now.” Nick straightened up but didn’t stand. At six-foot-four, he didn’t flaunt his height around alpha males, especially those in positions of authority.

“That’s what I like to hear,” James said. “Your cube’s too bland, my friend. Make it your own. No boring photos of your family—”

Nick raised his brows.

“I’m talking about degrees, trophies, things that highlight success. Come to my office, you’ll see what I mean.”

“My stuff is in storage,” Nick said. “We’re moving Sunday. I’ll bring some next week.”

“I’d tell you to hang a jersey from your b-ball days, but there’s not enough space.” James cracked his knuckles. “Your resume said you were National champs, right?”

Nick nodded. “Twice.”

“I love working with other athletes. We know how to perform under pressure. What school did you go to again?”

“Arizona State.”

“You’re lucky they don’t play BC,” James said. “I’d never hire a rival. Did you know I was an all-star running back for the Eagles?”

“Wow,” Nick said. “Impressive.”

“You got what it takes to make it here. Stay positive, the deals will come. Keep making calls.”

“I’m on it.” Nick’s cell lit up with a call from Cyn.

Damnit.

He hit ignore and wished he’d stashed it in a drawer.

“Let me guess—your wife?” James lowered his voice and leaned in. “Women can’t get enough of us, right?” His pompous grin made Nick flinch. “All right, back to work, Romeo. See you at the meeting.”

Nick shook his head as James walked away. The guy was aggressive, an HR nightmare. He’d come across as arrogant the

first time they met, and Nick wasn't sure he wanted to work for the guy, but this job had been the only one on the table. The bank owner, a relative of an old family friend, had overlooked Nick's recent foreclosure. Such mismanagement of personal finances was a blemish for a broker. Nick needed to fit in here. He'd just have to accept James. With some of the highest sales in the country, he'd earned his right to be conceited.

Glancing at the clock, Nick guessed he had a few minutes before Tom arrived. He shut his computer down and opened his phone to see a voice mail from Cyn. He didn't want another apology, he wanted her to change. Her drinking had increased in recent years. Especially after the foreclosure of their home. Nick worried about her sanity. Last year, when anxiety became too much for her to handle, Cyn had checked herself into a psych ward for a week. Therapy helped her stay sober for a few months, as she addressed her demons head on, but eventually she started to drink again. Nick hoped last night would leave a lasting impression. It wasn't the first time she'd agreed to take a break. Hopefully it would be the last.

He pressed play on his voice mail and listened to her message. "Hey, babe, it's me. I know you're busy, so don't call me back, but I wanted to say how horrible I feel today. I'm so ashamed. I shouldn't have driven. I can't remember everything I said, but I'm sorry for all of it. Please don't hate me. I'm making your favorite dinner tonight—spaghetti and meatballs. Tell Tom I said hello. Talk later. Love ya, bye."

Nick loved her deeply, and most of the time he liked her, but he didn't want to forgive Cyn too fast. Better to let her sweat it out. His threat last night was a scare tactic. He knew the motivation to change often came when your back was against the wall. It had happened for him in a jail cell many years ago. Unlike Cyn's hollow promises to stay sober, he'd followed through. He hit rock bottom and got his life back on

track. He hoped Cyn had hit hers. He didn't want to follow through with the threat of divorce.

LUNCH WITH TOM gave Nick the emotional boost he needed. The familial vibe of the diner made Nick grin as the white-haired waitress acted like she adored everyone who walked through the door. The place was small, one row of booths and a countertop, but the intimate space allowed for chit-chat between the cook and the server, who looked related. It was homey here, especially with Tom sitting across from him. He always offered the right combo of empathy and optimism, and by the time the waitress took their order, Nick had gotten the work stress off his chest.

“Sounds like your boss is a ball-buster.”

“I don't like his style,” Nick said, “but his sales inspire me. The guy's an animal. Number one in Massachusetts, by a mile.”

Tom sipped his coke. “You'll give him a run for his money.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Nick looked around the place and admired the old 70s photos of Somerville that hung on the walls. “How's Mom?”

Tom sprinkled salt on the square napkin under his soda so it wouldn't stick to the glass. “She's excited to see you.”

“I'll come as soon as I can.” Nick wasn't a big fan of his mother. He saw her as a pushover but would visit them for Tom's sake.

“Bring the whole family,” Tom said.

“That's what I meant.” Nick shook his head. “Sorry, I'm a little mad at Cyn right now, but it'll pass.”

“What's up?” Tom believed in confession.

As the waitress set their burgers down, Nick decided not to expose Cyn. It seemed extreme to say she had a drinking prob-

lem; she mostly drank to relax. “We had a fight last night about a bad habit she’s developed. I’m rooting for her to quit, but I’m not sure she’ll do it.” Nick banged the “57” stamped on the glass of the Heinz bottle to get the ketchup moving—another diner trick Tom taught him.

“One thing I’ve learned in my sixty-two years is that you can’t change other people. That puts it all on Cyn, which is hard to accept.” Tom dipped his pickle in mustard and Nick made a face. “You got a lot on your plate. You should join a gym. That helped when you were a kid. I saw a boxing club near your office.”

“You think it’s a good idea to fuel the fighter in me?”

“We all need an outlet.”

A patron walked through the door and the short order cook yelled, “Hey, Steve-o! What did you think of that game last night?” Nick smiled at his thick accent.

“What about church?” Tom asked.

“Cyn isn’t into it.”

“What do you expect, with a name like that?” He flashed a grin and Nick pretended the recurring joke was funny. “Sometimes you have to put your needs first. That’s why I am going to enjoy every bite of this burger. Your mom keeps hassling me about my cholesterol.”

“She loves to dish out advice”—Nick grimaced— “not so great at taking it.”

Tom held up a bundle of fries, as if to propose a toast. “To our wives,” he shoved them in his mouth. “And the sanctity of marriage.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Cyn's eyes began to water as they stepped outside the daycare building.

Nick gave her a hug. "We did it."

"Freedom is weird. Why am I crying?" She smiled, half-heartedly.

"I'm about to cry at the cost of it." Nick's eyes opened wide. Daycare was more than their rent.

"We'll make it work. I'll bring home the bacon soon enough."

"Mmm," Nick hummed. "I love bacon."

"And by the time I get certified, you'll have a pipeline full of loans."

"Speaking of which"—he looked at his watch—"I have to go. Want to stop by the office later? I'll take you to lunch."

A lunch date wasn't worth another run-in with JK. Cyn wasn't ready yet.

"I want to get the house set up while I can," she said. This was her only free week to unpack. Yoga training started next Monday.

“Well, get on it,” Nick said, with mock misogyny. He bent down and kissed her.

She fluttered her eyelashes. “I’ll have everything hung and dinner ready by six.”

BY NOON, Cyn was pleased with her progress. She’d finished the kitchen and was ready to unpack the living room. Ripping into the box labeled photo albums, Cyn found a calendar sitting on top. *Something to hang*. She flipped open to July and scanned the events they’d enjoyed with their friends in Arizona. She turned to September and went in the kitchen to grab a pen. First Cyn wrote “Yoga training” across next week’s squares. Then she wrote “Mack’s first day of nursery school” in today’s space and smiled. Finally, she wrote a tiny “5” in the corner of today’s space, “4” in yesterdays, and so on, counting backward to “1”. The day of her brutal hangover. Five days without a drink. The number of times she’d wanted one was too high to count, too shameful to admit. Cyn stuck the calendar to the fridge with magnets and returned to unpacking.

Back in the living room, she opened a box full of glassware for the china cabinet. The woodwork and the ample size of this apartment made up for its drab exterior. The off-white siding had turned gray with age, and the side along the driveway was black with soot. But this was in super-hip Davis Square, so fifteen hundred bucks a month was a great deal for a big two bedroom, one-bath, first-floor apartment in a two-family home. It even had a small office, which made up for the fact that the landlady lived above them, and they shared the basement laundry room. The display cabinets were the apartment’s only charm. Cyn would make the most of them. She dove into the box of decorative wares to unveil champagne flutes, crystal

wine glasses, and a silver martini shaker. So many reminders of alcohol. Cyn sighed. Maybe she should bury them in the backyard—have a funeral. They reminded her of some of her favorite sensations: the spicy burn of vodka in her throat, the tickle of bubbly as it hit her nose, the tart tannins in wine that stained her tongue and lit up her mind like a Christmas tree. All the fun that accompanied a good buzz was history.

Cyn stood on the step stool and put the boozy accoutrements on the highest shelf. Out of sight, out of mind. Then she set a timer on her phone for ten minutes and sat on the couch to meditate. She focused on the “third eye” in the middle of her forehead.

Ten seconds later, the doorbell rang. She jumped up and headed to the door, where she saw the gray-haired landlady peered through the inlaid window.

Cyn unlatched the deadbolt.

“Hi,” she said with a smile.

“Did you make a copy of the key yet?” Mrs. McInnis wore a navy dress, taut at the waist, old lady pumps, and a pill box hat on top of curled hair. She looked dressed for church.

“You mean a spare?” Cyn asked.

“A copy for you to keep. I gave you mine yesterday. I need it back.”

“A key usually comes with the lease,” Cyn said.

“Not from me.”

“I’ll get one made then.”

Mrs. McInnis frowned.

“Later today,” Cyn added.

The woman turned and stepped carefully down the stairs without a goodbye. Cyn made a face at her and grabbed the mail.

Back inside the apartment, she unfolded the thick stack of Ads to find her first forwarded bill, for her own personal credit

card. She tore it open, like ripping off a band aid. The injury stung. \$181 in charges last month: \$34 for an audiobook, and the rest were drinking-related. Goodbye parties in Arizona and nightly drinks with her mom had added up. Cyn had used the credit card to postpone the expense. But here it was, with interest.

Her face flushed hot. If Nick saw how much money she'd blown on drinking, he'd be shocked. She decided to hide the evidence. She ripped the payment coupon off to pay later and went outside to toss the itemized bill. As she shoved it underneath a bunch of papers in the recycle bin, her sleeve caught an envelope and flicked it onto the ground. She picked it up and noticed the return address was stamped: Middlesex House of Correction and Jail. The part of Cyn that liked to smoke when she was drunk, wanted to sneak a peek at the contents. The law said she shouldn't read it, but what was the harm? She brought it in the house for a closer look.

She peeled open the envelope, already torn across the top, and pulled out a handwritten letter.

Hey,

I was so mad I missed you today, I forgot you go to Mass. I'll call you later next time. Nights are better for me anyway. That's when I spend the most time in my cell, and my cellmate drives me crazy. It's tough to think positive in here but let me practice. My cellmate is weird, but at least the rent is free. I start my job next week. The pay is pathetic, but it'll give me something to pass the time. If Ma asks about me, tell her I need money for the commissary. My first check won't get added to my account for a month. I miss you. I hope you can visit soon. Tell Ma she's welcome too, but I know it's not easy from Florida. Anyway, I'm glad you told me to write, it's nice to know someone cares. By the way, my counselor reads all my mail, so keep it clean, Aunt Maureen. Ha ha, just kidding.

Jerrod

Cyn wished she could show the letter to Nick, but he wouldn't understand why she grabbed it from the trash. She could hear him now.

Mail theft is a federal offense, Cyn.

She'd add it to the list of secrets she needed to keep from him.

CHAPTER SIX

By Friday of that week, Cyn had arranged the house, and hung everything except curtains. With two hours left before daycare pick up, she decided to organize her file cabinet, and listen to *Autobiography of a Yogi*. The yogi was Paramahansa Yogananda, an Indian monk who brought yoga to Boston in 1920. Cyn had bought the audio version to listen to on the way to training each day. When the sound and smell of an engine sputtering on the street became a distraction, she closed the windows in the office and turned up the volume on the CD player.

“There are always two forces warring against each other within us,” Yogananda said.

Cyn had been telling herself: I’m not going to drink today, while adding up the reasons she deserved a cocktail. One: it was Friday afternoon. Two: she’d finished her to do list. Three: all the secrets she’d kept from Nick this week had left a knot between her shoulder blades. She wished she could forget about all of it; JK, the near DUI, the landlady’s letter she’d read, and the juicy info about its sender.

She placed a folder labeled “foreclosure” in the file cabinet and threw in the towel—literally. Time to finish the laundry in the basement.

Outside the office, she glanced through the dining room window at the street. A giant pickup truck idled in front of the house. A huge guy sat in the driver’s seat on the phone, as black fumes pumped out of dual exhaust pipes on the roof of the cab. The vehicle looked like something you’d see on a country road with a gun rack on the back. Metallica pumped from the speakers. Cyn squinted to get a better look and her cell phone rang.

She perked up. Maybe it was her mom or a friend from Arizona, someone to brighten her day. She sighed as she saw it was her older sister, Melissa.

“Hey.” Cyn tried to sound busy. Melissa hated sloth.

“Is this a good time to chat?” she asked.

The music ended, and Cyn looked out the window. “I was about to change the laundry.” The muscle-bound man exited his truck. He looked like a strong man at the circus, who beat the elephants for fun. “But I have a few minutes.”

While I spy on this guy.

“I wanted to discuss plans for Thanksgiving,” Melissa said.

“You’re late.” Cyn loved to tease her type-A sister. Melissa had everything money could buy, a sense of humor not included.

“I called Mom last night, but I doubt she’ll remember what I said. She was slurring a lot.”

“What time?” Cyn asked.

“Nine.”

“Sounds about right.”

“There’s nothing ‘right’ about it.”

Melissa was the only member of the family who got mad about their mom’s drinking. Dad ignored it, Cyn mimicked it,

and their younger sister, Beth, didn't notice. Everyone coexisted with it except Melissa.

"We can only come for a night," Melissa said. "Felipe has to get back the next day. We'll stay at the Four Seasons. Beth's family can stay with Mom and Dad."

"It'll be great to see all the kids together."

"I thought I'd have to leave a message. When do you start work?"

Cyn's neck tensed. "I'll be in training through the end of the year. But we'll pay you back before then." Melissa had loaned them money for the move.

"Keep it. I don't need it."

Cyn rolled her eyes, although she was grateful for the reduced debt.

"How's the new place?" Melissa asked.

"It's an awesome location." Cyn knew how to impress Ms. Manhattanite. "Sorry to cut this short, but I have a ton of stuff to do before I pick up Mack from school. Can we talk later?"

Like, at Thanksgiving?

Cyn hung up and stripped down to her tank top. Melissa often made her hot under the collar. Two years apart, they'd been lifelong rivals, but she paled by comparison. Melissa's picture-perfect life drove her nuts.

She stomped down the stairs to change the laundry. She'd forgotten to flip the light switch and had to creep across the floor, to not kick anything. As she rounded the partition to the laundry room, Cyn gasped. The ginormous guy from outside stood at the dryer and folded clothes. He looked up at her and furled his brow. He was as wide as the dryer, but his frown said she'd invaded his space.

"I'm Cyn, the new tenant."

He punched the 'on' button on the dryer, and mumbled, "I'm (inaudible)—"

Maureen's nephew."

Cyn froze.

Did he say Jerrod?

A breeze hit the back of her neck. The door that led outside was behind her. "Nice to meet you," she lied. His sleeveless tee and bulging biceps said, 'you wanna piece of me?' She did not.

"This dryer sucks," he said. "I need another twenty minutes."

"No rush," Cyn said. *Are you heading back to jail, then?*

"I'm staying upstairs for a while. There's no street parking at night, so I have to use the driveway."

Would this creep be in the basement all the time? He was exactly the kind of guy Cyn was wary around. "Okay," Cyn said, meekly.

"My truck's pretty big, I'll have to block you in."

"That's fine for now." She didn't want to irk him. "But next week—"

"I'll be gone by then. Text me if you need me to let you out."

She backed up as he brushed past her. He stopped at a table near the door, blocking her escape route. Cyn's breath caught in her throat. He ripped a piece of paper from a note pad and grabbed a pen. His aggression reminded her of JK, who would definitely lose in a battle of brawn against this behemoth. Cyn pictured them standing in a gladiator ring—with JK as prey.

The gladiator scrawled his cell number down and thrust it at her.

"What did you say your name was?" She held her breath.

"Derek."

Not Jerrod.

She put her hand on her chest after he left and headed up her own staircase.

She rushed to the window to watch him climb in his truck.

Ever since her assault, she'd clung to her right to say 'no' when it didn't serve her. But she had no choice about this parking situation or being forced to interact with Mr. Prickly. She'd have to make the best of it.

LATER THAT NIGHT, as Cyn prepared to join Nick in bed, she rubbed lotion on her arm in the bathroom, and admired the tattoo on her wrist. She got it after her breakdown last year, a pink and purple hamsa hand, which symbolized protection in Buddhism. She headed to the living room to grab the book on Buddhism and leaned down to turn off the lamp on the end table. The glow of a cigarette caught her eye through the window.

Derek.

Her arm shot up to cover her braless chest.

She rushed to her bedroom, where Nick was asleep. His presence and size reassured her, but the glow of Derek's cigarette stayed with her. She shivered as she remembered him.

Huh. That guy would make a great hitman.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Six a.m. was a good time to drive to Cambridge, and with hardly any cars on the road, Cyn cruised down Mass Ave without stopping. The windows were down, and the songbirds' chirps added a soundtrack to her yoga CD. Yogananda's Indian accent drifted in and out of Cyn's attention, so she turned up the volume to focus on his message. He spoke about how it felt to become a world-renown yogi.

"When I heard the word guru," he said, "it frightened me, because I knew what the responsibility would be."

Cyn wasn't sure she could live up to the role of a yoga teacher. After ten years on the mat, she had the moves down pat, and years of gymnastics gave her an advantage, but her emotional state was questionable. She'd meditated twice over the weekend, to jumpstart her practice, and managed several minutes of mental quietude, but her mind went right back to hyper-drive when she was done. It seemed ludicrous for someone with her level of anxiety to teach people how to find peace. She prayed that Yogananda's bravery in the face of a higher calling would rub off on her.

She entered the studio at ten past six, to find she was the first of the trainees to arrive.

“Welcome to Shakti,” a short-haired brunette woman said. She held the door open to the yoga room. “I’m Meredith, your instructor.” She brought her palms up in prayer position, in lieu of a handshake. “Grab a spot facing the wall with the hand on it.”

The hamsa hand painted on the wall was as tall as Cyn and the same plum color as her yoga mat. She took it as sign that she fit in here. As fellow students entered the room and scattered their mats, Cyn smiled, relieved to be in the middle of the age range. At 6:30, Meredith welcomed them, had them introduce themselves, and then jumped right into the first class of the day.



AS THE LAST class before lunch ended, Cyn rested her head on the floor during the pigeon pose. Meredith encouraged them to embrace whatever emotion came up during this first week of training, and the next one to hit Cyn was envy, as some of the younger women discussed lunch options Cyn couldn’t afford.

She wondered if they planned to eat out every day. Cyn had brought a sandwich from home since restaurants were out of the question until she had regular income. At almost forty, she was poorer than she’d ever been. The last few years of financial strife had left her defeated. As she walked along the street in front of the studio, she wondered how long it would take her to make decent money as an instructor. As she looked for a place to sit in the sun, she spotted a public bench with an Ad for Cambridge Savings. The photo display showed “Top Broker in the State,” James Kavanaugh.

Before the move, Cyn knew she might run into JK if she

visited her hometown of Milton, but this was ridiculous. She couldn't believe Nick worked for such repulsive man. She stared at his boyish good looks, the All-American sparkle in his blue eyes, and thick dark hair that made him look younger than forty, wondering how many women had fallen for his charms, only to be attacked by him.

And boom, she was back in high school, hanging at a classmate's house on New Year's Eve, where JK showered her with attention. At seventeen, she was inexperienced with boys, but when the popular older boy invited her in the bedroom to see a fish tank, Cyn hoped he might try to kiss her.

"Look at the blowfish," James had said.

She leaned in and put her hands on the table.

When he grabbed her from behind and kissed her neck, her muscles clenched, but she figured the quarterback on the football team was simply confident. As he walked her over to the bed, she was tongue-tied. She wanted him to slow down his hands and kiss her mouth. Moments earlier, she'd been psyched that he liked her, but her tepid flirtation turned to worry.

"You're so hot in that skirt." His booze-scented-breath was humid in her ear. "I love it when you bend over like that in front of me. I know you want it."

He kissed her hard, and Cyn's stomach tightened.

"No." She pushed back against him.

"Don't be a tease." He gently forced her on the bed and started to kiss her neck while he held her arms above her head. She wriggled to get them free and could feel her pulse in her head. When he suddenly rolled her over, face down, the puffy comforter made it hard to breathe.

She got hot as adrenaline pumped through her veins. Then JK pulled up her skirt. She gasped and braced for impact.

I don't want this!

She was a good girl, in trouble.

JK tore away her underwear.

She twisted her hips and tried to roll onto her back, but his grip on her wrists was strong. She started to yell but a searing pain shut her up. Her mouth dried out as fear choked her throat.

With every thrust, Cyn became more and more numb. At some point she effectively left her body, and simply prayed it would end.

When it did, the good girl inside her was dead.

“Don’t tell anyone we did this.” JK zipped his pants. “I have a girlfriend.”

Cyn didn’t tell a soul, not even Sue, but word got out that she was easy, and people started to say, ‘what’s up, Cyn-er?’ to her face. Life would never be easy again.

As she stood on the street now, in front of JK’s image, Cyn’s heart pounded like it did after he grabbed her from behind. Memories of the attack never dulled, despite every attempt to annul them.



CYN RETURNED to the studio nervous and nauseous. She hadn’t touched her sandwich. The other students chatted, but she was a mess: short of breath, pain in her ribs, racked with anxiety. She wanted to go home, but that wouldn’t end her unease, so she sat on her mat with her eyes closed and waited for her next instruction.

“Hello,” a man with a French accent said.

She sat tall as the instructor walked past her.

“My name is Marcel. I’m a forty-year-practitioner of Vinyasa Flow. There’s one thing to know about my style; I love to inspire improvisation.”

Cyn wasn't sure what that meant. She wasn't inventive, and liked yoga for its repetition.

"Flow helps you let go," Marcel said. "Trust your body. It'll know what to do."

Then he jumped right into intuitive movement, and guided them through the sequence once, before he told them to repeat it several times on their own, without instruction.

"Don't think about what comes next, just do it."

Is this a test? Cyn folded forward and placed her fingertips on the floor. She drew a blank, but he was right, her body knew what to do. Several poses later, she wound up in downward dog, and held her hips in a pike position for five breaths. As she pressed her heels to the floor to stretch her calves, Marcel passed by, and she stiffened. She hated that her butt was up in the air.

"Take a few more rounds on your own," he said. "Add new moves as they come to you."

Cyn couldn't remember any other moves. Her hands started to sweat as she peeked around the room to cue her brain, but her neighbors were several steps ahead already. Cyn was about to step one foot forward when Marcel came up behind her and placed his hands on her hips. She tensed. Meredith had realigned her the same way this morning, but man hands set off sirens in her head.

"Listen to your body and let go of your expectations." Marcel ran his hands down her ribcage, his thumbs along her spine. It was a classic instructor move but Cyn flinched.

Please don't.

She pictured JK's sneer as he zipped up his pants. But Marcel was her *instructor*. Why couldn't she handle this?

"Exhale here." He lay his palms on the back of Cyn's ribs, and she dropped to her knees in a panic. She wanted to run out

the door but took resting pose instead. Marcel took the cue and invited the rest of the class to take child's pose.

Face down on the ground, Cyn fought off tears of embarrassment.

I'm such a freak. He's not trying to hurt me.

How many times had she struggled with these thoughts during intimate moments with Nick? It wasn't unusual for her to have flashbacks during sex, but this was a first, in yoga class. When Marcel brought them to back to a standing position for mountain pose, she saw the bright green leaves flutter on the trees outside the window. *Be here now*, she begged herself.

Marcel walked along Cyn's side of the room and told them to fold forward.

"Grab your ankles, and hang," he said.

Ugh.

CYN LEFT the studio two hours later with her sanity barely intact. As she approached the side street where her car was parked, she saw another public bench with JK's face on it. She hadn't noticed it this morning as she walked in the opposite direction. Frazzled, she climbed into the Jeep and prepared to head to daycare.

She flipped on the radio as a distraction and the DJ shared a breaking news story. "*Prosecutors have just announced that former sitcom star, Brett Cotter, will stand trial for aggravated assault. His accuser alleges he drugged and raped her twelve years ago at his house—*"

She hit the power button hard to turn it off and hurt her finger. Her eyes welled with tears, and she pounded the steering wheel for being so weak. She wanted to be a survivor like Sue.

'Know any hitmen?'

How else would she ever heal from this disaster? She needed to figure out a way to convince Derek to kill JK. Better to be the aggressor than a victim. The thought of Derek hurting that worthless piece of garbage dried her eyes. She rolled the windows down, pulled away from the curb, and at the first red light her gaze went straight to a liquor store. The laws in Massachusetts said booze must be sold at designated stores, marketed solely to adults, but many of them looked like carnival attractions with neon signs and colorful blinking lights.

She stared at that sparkly invitation. When the light turned green, she followed her instinct and banged a right into the parking lot. She sat in the car as the engine idled and paused. Maybe this instinct shouldn't be trusted. Was there a better way to deal with discomfort? Her therapist had suggested AA last year, but two weeks without a drink proved she could do it.

Cyn turned off the ignition and walked inside the store.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When the doorbell rang at 5:30 that night, she hid the bottle of wine in the meat drawer of the fridge. She assumed Nick was home early and hadn't dug out his key. Wine made her frisky, so she headed to the door with a warm smile. Her outlook had done a one-eighty since her first sip of vino, but she hadn't had a chance to brush her teeth and mask the booze smell.

Don't kiss him, she thought, as she stepped over Mack, who was lying on the floor. She smiled as she approached the entryway, only to find Derek, who stared through the window.

She opened the door and her wheels spun. *How do I inquire about murder for hire?*

"Yes?"

"Hey." Derek rubbed the stubble on his chin. "It turns out I have to stay here longer than I thought, do you need to get out of the driveway tonight?"

"No." Her third glass of wine had sealed that deal.

"I'll be gone tomorrow by six a.m."

"I leave then too, and I can't be late."

“Text me if you need me to move before then.”

Tandem parking was a pain, but Cyn would make do—this guy might be a great ally.

“Do you know how long you’ll be living here?”

“Til my wife stops acting like a bitch.”

Yikes.

Cyn spotted Nick as he walked up the sidewalk. He looked handsome in his suit.

“Hey,” Nick said, as he approached.

“Hi,” Cyn replied. “This is Derek. He needs to park behind us for longer than he originally thought.” Cyn excused herself to go cook dinner, and Nick finished the conversation.

“Tandem parking sucks,” she said, when Nick entered the kitchen. Animosity toward Derek seemed like a good cover for her actual plans for him.

Nick pulled Cyn into a hug and her heart fluttered. “I’ve got news that’ll cheer you up.” She held her breath, so he wouldn’t smell it. “I have my first loan in the pipeline.”

Her eyes lit up and she smiled. “Nice work, babe.” She high-fived him and then stirred the pan of fried rice.

“How long before we eat?” He opened the fridge.

She closed it, as if to scold him. “It’s almost ready. So what did Derek say? He better not make me late for training.”

“Don’t worry about ‘what ifs,’” Nick said.

“But—”

He put his finger to her lips “Shhhh...”

His gentle command turned her on, but as he leaned down to kiss her, she presented her cheek, lips shut.

“No snacks before dinner *or* kissing the cook? You’re tough.”

Then Mack waddled in, looking for Dada, and Cyn slipped away to rinse her mouth with Listerine.

AFTER DINNER, Cyn brushed Mack's teeth, read to him, tucked him in bed, and then sat on the couch with Nick, to celebrate his first deal.

"Rates dropped today," he said. "Might be the start of a good run. I have a bunch of people who want to refinance, and James sent me some leads for purchases. He's taken me under his wing, and if he's as helpful as he seems, we'll be out of debt in no time."

Cyn struggled to maintain a friendly expression. "You'd do fine without him."

"But it's good to have friends in high places."

Cyn was tempted to tell Nick the truth in that moment. Another run-in with JK in Nick's presence was inevitable. Maybe it was the mellow effect of the wine, but under the right circumstance, Cyn thought she could be civil. Especially if she had Derek beat him up beforehand. She assumed two black eyes would be cheaper and safer than a contract for a deadly 'hit'. A temporary punishment would still be worth the investment. She wanted to arrange something soon, maybe before the company Christmas party?

Cyn was lost in these thoughts when Nick squeezed her knee.

"You look pretty sexy in those yoga pants, hun."

She excused herself to brush her teeth and use the Listerine again, then met him in bed. As they lay next to each other under the covers, she worried Nick would smell her exhales. His roaming hands were making her horny, but if Nick knew she'd had wine, it would ruin the moment. More than the moment, if she was honest. She wanted to stay safe, so she climbed on top of him and whispered, "Let me reward you for your *hard* work."

“Come here—kiss me first.”

He meant on the lips. She focused on his chest, but he tried to pull her gently to his face.

“Don’t be bossy,” she said, half-kidding.

“I want to kiss you back.” He put his arms behind his head.

“Sorry,” Cyn said. “You know I don’t like being coaxed like that.”

“I know it’s harder for you when you’re not drinking, but practice makes perfect.”

Cyn’s face got hot and she rolled off him. “Maybe we should’ve kept talking on the couch. That was nice.”

“Talk is cheap,” Nick said. “I want to make love to you.” His sing-song tone didn’t mask his disappointment.

“Can I take a rain check?” asked Cyn. The space between them grew.

“Okay.” He clearly wanted to try again, but Cyn couldn’t risk a kiss on the lips.

With a solemn ‘good night,’ Nick turned his back on her.

CHAPTER NINE

Nick couldn't sleep after Cyn quit on him. Distracted by desire, he was annoyed with her for being sensitive. He was usually patient when it came to her quirks as she often stopped short before sex, going from 'hot to trot' to 'not tonight' in a nanosecond. But this denial was different. He'd wanted to celebrate with her and share an intimate moment, but she acted like she wanted to get it over with. Nick was sick of her rejections, after she refused to visit the office twice last week. He wanted to impress her with his newly decorated cubicle and introduce her to his coworkers. Nick loved showing off beautiful Cyn.

That's why he lived with her foibles. Not drinking would make her a better person, but it meant less sex. As he lay next to her in the dark, he wondered if she'd ever be able to enjoy it with reckless abandon while sober. He'd learned early on that she was more adventurous on wine. He was embarrassed to admit it, but that was one reason he'd let her drinking slide for so long. It was selfish to think that way, but he didn't want to say goodbye to intimacy with his wife,

which had happened during her previous attempts at sobriety.

He was half-asleep when he rolled over to spoon her as a gesture of support. The bed was empty. He glanced at the clock—12:15. A cupboard closed with a thud, and the sink turned on in the kitchen. He needed to use the bathroom, so he climbed out of bed and opened the door. Cyn's back was to him in the kitchen. She tipped her head back and drank from a glass.

"Hey," he said, his throat scratchy.

"Oooh," Cyn said, she dumped out her water as if in trouble. "You startled me."

"You're under arrest, Lady. That water ain't free." He had to tease her. She could be so extreme.

She glanced at the counter behind her. "I couldn't sleep."

"Why don't you say: 'I *can* sleep and see where that gets you. Mind over matter, babe.'"

She smiled. "I'll be in, in a minute."

He'd be sound asleep in two. "You have my permission to drink all the water we got, as long as you don't pee in the bed."

"You're so good to me."

"I'm quite a catch." His eyebrows fluttered like Groucho Marx.

THE NEXT DAY, concerned about their marriage, Nick visited the Catholic church a few blocks from his bank, to see a priest named Father Quinn. Last night as he lay next to Cyn, he'd wished she could have a glass of wine to relax. But that was selfish, a terrible idea. He decided to make confession, to see if he could discover his part in the ever-increasing space between them.

A sense of security washed over Nick as he entered the

sanctuary of Saint Benedict's Church of Somerville. Church reminded him of Tom, who'd taught him about the power of honesty. About twenty people milled about—four o'clock Mass had ended a while ago, and the next one wasn't until eight. Half of the parishioners looked Spanish, which reminded Nick of Phoenix. Somerville was a melting pot, with a large population of Portuguese.

He headed to the back of the building and found the confessional. After taking a few moments to think about what he would say, he entered the booth, knelt, and crossed himself before he spoke.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned." He could barely see the priest through the grill. "It's been a year and a half since my last confession, and I accuse myself of the following sins: I feel really disconnected from my wife lately. I asked her to quit drinking and she did. Now I kind of regret it."

"Why is that?" Father Quinn asked.

"She quit being intimate with me." Nick was far from pious, but he respected this holy space and didn't want to taint it with vulgar terms.

"How long has it been?"

"It's happened once in the last two months."

"Is that the only disconnect between you two, or is there something else?"

"We've been off for a while." Sadness grew with that admission. "Life has been tough for us for the last few years, financial trouble, and other stuff. We recently moved here from Arizona to be closer to family, and to make a fresh start."

"Asking your wife to quit drinking was part of that plan?"

"Yes," Nick said. "But it kills her libido. At least it has in the past." Nick's face got hot. He wasn't here to confess Cyn's problems. "I guess I should be more understanding. I'm here

because I need to get these thoughts off my chest. And I want to be a better husband.”

“I see,” Father Quinn said.

“I’ve also committed the sin of not attending Mass for a while,” Nick admitted.

“All right,” the priest said. “Say five ‘Our Fathers’ for your penance.”

As with every confession he ever did, Nick’s outlook had improved by the time he walked out of there. Maybe going to church together would help Cyn and him feel more connected. Until then, he’d renew his commitment to marriage, through thick and thin, and use his gentlest touch to entice his wife, when and if she let him.

CHAPTER TEN

Cyn pushed Mack along the bike path in his stroller. Six weeks into daycare, he had his second cold, and had fallen asleep in the car on the way home from school. Still zonked an hour later, she decided to walk with him while she awaited her phone session with her therapist. She didn't want any distractions during their once-a-month discussion and hoped the movement of the stroller would keep him asleep.

It was a windy day in mid-October. Cyn closed the visor over the stroller to block the breeze and veered to the right as a cyclist called out, "On your left." She smiled at the black Lab trotting easily in front of the red-faced human, who was panting like a dog.

When her phone buzzed in her pocket, she pulled it out to see *Linda, Shrink*, on the caller ID.

She tapped her earpiece. "Hey, Linda."

"Hi, Cyn, how are things?"

"Would you believe it if I said, good?"

"Well, that's progress."

"The move was fine, but I've been triggered a couple times

recently.” To make the most of the session, Cyn got right to the point. “You won’t believe what happened.”

“Let me guess: you saw your rapist?” They’d discussed this ‘what if,’ before Cyn left Arizona.

“Yes,” Cyn said. “He’s my husband’s new boss.”

“Oh my. That’s a tough situation for both of you.”

“I haven’t shared the revelation with him yet. He needs this job.”

“So how are you handled your stress?”

“Not great,” Cyn said. “I’ve meditated some but am drinking more than I should.”

“How often do you drink?”

Cyn weighed the benefit of Linda’s advice verses her desire to be comfortable. “I actually quit entirely for a while, and it went well.”

“How long?”

“Twelve days.” It had felt longer than it sounded. “I’ve been able to control it, but Nick really wants me to quit completely.” She didn’t mention she’d been hiding it from him. Linda knew that Nick threatened to take Mack away if she continued to drink so much after her hospitalization last year. Cyn didn’t say that he’d mentioned that again, or that she almost got a DUI. She shared details with Linda on a need to know basis.

“Twelve days isn’t very long, Cyn. And a sure-fire way to qualify as a problem drinker, is to admit you have to control it. A healthy drinker doesn’t do that.”

“What, admit it?”

“You already know all of this,” Linda said. “Let’s focus on other tricks that we’ve discussed to keep you calm when life gets tough. Don’t be afraid to check out AA if alcohol starts to rule your life again.”

BY THE TIME the conversation ended, Cyn was ready to commit to positive thoughts. Linda assigned her homework each time, and a gratitude list was the advice she gave today.

“Thank you for my wonderful husband,” Cyn said, under her breath, as she pushed the stroller up the street toward her apartment. “Thank you for my son, thank you for my parents, thank you for yoga training, therapy, this awesome neighborhood—”

As they approached the house, Cyn saw that Mrs. McInnis was about to back her Escort down the driveway, a ritual that often took more than one attempt. Cyn had learned that the landlady returned from Mass every day at this hour.

As she waited at the top of the driveway for the landlady to finish, Cyn winced as she scraped her bumper on the fence. The driveway was tight, flanked by the house on one side and a chain link fence on the other. The car was small, but it may as well have been the Titanic the way Mrs. McInnis maneuvered it.

Cyn gazed down the street while she waited, so as not to appear impatient. She was tired from a long day of yoga training and wanted to stash the stroller in the backyard so she wouldn't have to lug it upstairs. As she rocked a sound asleep Mack back and forth to stay busy, the sun sunk low on the horizon and a chill hit the air. When Mrs. McInnis hit the fence again, Cyn decided to help the process along.

“Wait.” She called out and held her hand up.

Mrs. McInnis nodded her head in frustration and waited for Cyn's assist. She rolled the stroller onto the grass next to the sidewalk and put the brake on, then walked toward the car, and pantomimed a slight left turn with the steering wheel.

Cyn held her hand up to say “stop” when the wheels were straight.

The landlady put the car in drive. Then revved the engine—loudly.

All of a sudden, the car surged forward, and missed Cyn by an inch.

She tipped backward into stiff bushes, that propped her up as her heart stopped.

The car zoomed past the stroller.

Cyn raced toward it to find Mack still asleep. She would’ve collapsed with relief if the sound of metal crunching hadn’t upstaged her personal drama.

Mrs. McInnis had shot out of the driveway, bounced over the curb on the other side, flown across the yard, and slammed into the foundation of the neighbor’s house, fifty yards away.

As Cyn rushed across the street, she jostled the stroller. Mack lifted his head and whined.

“Shhhh, it’s okay, honey.” She was breathless as she parked the stroller on the grass and rushed to the driver-side door. Smoke poured from the wrinkled hood. The inflated airbag filled the space where Mrs. McInnis sat and made it impossible to see her status.

As Cyn tried to open the door, the neighbor who lived in the house descended her stairs, mouth agape.

“Oh my goodness, Maureen, what happened?” The heavyset woman shuffled across her lawn.

As the airbag deflated, Cyn could see blood ran down Mrs. McInnis’s forehead. She gripped the steering wheel and shook like a person with palsy, in shock.

“Mrs. McInnis.” Cyn knocked on the window. She turned her head and Cyn pointed down. “You have to unlock the door.”

Neighbors approached from every direction, and two men

stepped in to help with the door. Cyn got out of their way and rolled the stroller back to their house across the street. Within minutes, the wail of sirens filled the air, and a fire truck negotiated the tight turn at the top of their one-way street. Mack was transfixed by the scene that came next: two fire trucks, an ambulance, and a cop car pulled up, lights flashing. Cyn was able to breathe easy with the arrival of all the help, but her entire body shook. Talk about gratitude. She felt immensely blessed to be mere witnesses to this mess.

Cyn cuddled on the couch with Mack until Nick got home an hour later. Her nerves were fried as she shared the details of their close call. Nick peered through the curtains. Mrs. McNinis's car was gone, but its bumper sat on the grass next to the foundation of the house.

"No skid marks," he noted. "Better steer clear when she's behind the wheel."

"I think she might be a little senile or something. I thought the tandem parking situation was annoying. Now we have to worry about the landlord accidentally running us down."

"Worry is a waste of time," Nick said.

"So is guiding that woman down the driveway."

"Thank God you guys are okay."

Later that evening, after Mack went to bed, Cyn tested the waters with Nick.

"What a crazy day. I wish I could have a glass of wine on nights like this." Cyn looked at Nick, hoping he'd clear her for take-off. The liquor store up the street closed at nine. There was still time.

"I thought you were doing well with it." Nick gave her knee a squeeze. "Isn't it 'out of sight out, out of mind' by now?"

Cyn relaxed under his touch, and her plan for a drink disintegrated.

“We could try something else to make you feel better.” His single raised brow implied an orgasm.

In that moment of support from him, she wanted to get honest and admit that she’d tried drinking again. She hated hiding it, especially when it offered a real solution. Alcohol made her calmer, but Nick’s message was loud and clear—he wanted her to be sober. Maybe sex could be an antidote for stress. Maybe an orgasm could rid her mind of chaos.

“Sounds like a plan.” Cyn pretended to notice a giant hard-on. “Woah—things are already looking up.” They laughed together and made love a short time later.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Halloween was Cyn's best day since they moved to Boston. She received a round of applause at the end of the first class she ever taught in yoga. It was a practice class with fellow trainees, and they were extremely supportive, but her series was smooth, and she was comfortable as the instructor.

It helped her see that she'd love her new job, and that made her crave a celebratory cocktail. She been restricting her indulgences to weekends only, in secret, so as not to worry Nick. Today was Thursday, but Halloween was a fair excuse to imbibe a bit. On the way to pick up Mack at daycare after work, she stopped at a liquor store to buy a couple of 'nips' of Stoli, the tiny bottles they offered on airplanes. It was hard to miss the bright circus lights around the windows of the store, that said: 'Welcome to Fun Town.' Cyn grinned as she came through the door to find the clerk behind the counter dressed in a clown suit.

Costumes were on her mind as she continued her drive to Mack's school. This morning, Nick had texted Cyn pictures of

the costume parade at daycare, and she was excited to see them in person. Mack was dressed as pumpkin pie. He wore a store-bought pumpkin suit with the symbol for 'Pi' attached to his back. Cyn was happy it was still intact when she entered the toddler room, where he washed dishes in the play kitchen with a ninja and a princess.

"Mama!" he exclaimed, as he ran to her.

"Are you excited to trick or treat?" Cyn was excited for her vodka.

"Yeah!" shouted Mack. He jumped up and down, and a curl bounced off his forehead.

The ride home was a visual delight. The leafless trees made for a creepier Halloween than they'd ever seen in Arizona. Around town, Victorian homes were adorned with tombstones, ghosts, and cobwebs. The proximity of properties that lined the narrow streets in this area meant Mack wouldn't have to walk far for candy tonight.

Back home, Cyn and Mack crossed paths with Mrs. McInnis. As they exited the Jeep, the landlady hobbled down the driveway using a cane. Dressed for church, she wore a fancy hat with mesh to hide her bruising. Mrs. McInnis's car was already fixed, and it looked better than her face. Cyn had seen the worst of it when she dropped off food a couple days after the accident.

"What is it?" the landlady had asked, after Cyn handed her a quiche.

Cyn interpreted the question as an ingredient inquiry and listed them. "Eggs, milk, cheddar, salt, pepper."

Mrs. McInnis grimaced.

Cyn grinned to compensate for the awkwardness. "It's a quiche."

The blank stare from the landlady made Cyn aware that

her brain wasn't firing all its cylinders. That was two weeks ago. Today she seemed better.

She offered Mack a sweet smile. "Did someone grow you in their garden?"

"I'm Punkin Pie!" he beamed.

"They're so cute at this age," she said to Cyn. "I was blessed with two of them, but they're all grown up now."

"Two sons?"

"One of each. I had a daughter first and then a son."

"That sounds perfect. Do they live nearby?" Cyn hadn't seen a sign of either one of them.

"My daughter lives in Gloucester. She's busy raising her own family these days, so I don't get to see her that often. And my son is—" she drifted off for a second, and Cyn thought it was another sign of senility.

"I'm not sure where he is."

Cyn assumed she couldn't remember and switched gears to cover the awkwardness.

"Well, it's nice chatting with you, enjoy your evening. Come on," she said to Mack, "lets' go get a snack."

She rushed him up the driveway to the front steps before Mrs. McInnis had a chance to start her engine.

TWO HOURS LATER, their Davis Square neighborhood became a hub of festivity. Based on the number of trick or treaters on their street, Cyn guessed that revelers came from all around town. There were porch parties galore, and every stoop on the street had candy. One three-family home, known as a triple-decker, drew a huge crowd. In addition to the zombie motif, the host provided extra-large candy bars to the kids, and a Solo cup of Sam Adams to authentic adults.

“Can I have one?” a lanky guy in a mask asked.

“I need to see your face,” the man at the keg said. The teen obliged and blew his own cover. “No beer for you, kid. Have a Hershey bar.”

“Is that Oktoberfest?” Nick asked the keg master.

“Of course.”

Nick perked up and turned to Cyn. “Mind if I have one?”

“Nope.” She projected nonchalance. Her second vodka nip called to her, but she’d wait until the boys were in bed. As Nick chatted with the man at the tap, Cyn stood in line for candy with the kiddo. She hoped to meet some neighbors and spotted a few moms from the playground. They tended to act unapproachable, a trait that reigned in Massachusetts, but Cyn assumed the party atmosphere might encourage a friendlier mood. She wished she could drink in the open as she gazed at the sea of strangers, self-conscious in her hot-pink wig.

Eventually, someone approached her, a wrinkled woman in her sixties, who walked a French Bull dog around the block each day. “You live in the McInnis place, right?” The woman’s dog was also dressed like a pumpkin, and Cyn was glad she didn’t have the kiddie leash on Mack.

“Yes.” She extended her hand to the woman as Mack pet her pup. “I’m Cyn, and this is Mack.”

“Welcome to the neighborhood, I’m Jill.”

“Do you live here?” Cyn gestured to the house behind them.

“For fifteen years.”

“Thanks for hosting.”

“Oh no, not me, I’m here for the freebies. Carl’s the guy with deep pockets.” She pointed to the man talking to Nick.

“He owns the place, I’m just a tenant.”

“He’s talking to my husband,” Cyn said.

“How’s Mrs. McInnis?” Jill asked. “I heard about the crash.”

“She seemed okay today when I saw her. Still black and blue though—she’s lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“Is her nephew Derek living there now?”

“Yep.”

Jill leaned in to speak quietly. “Watch out for that family—they’re a bunch of criminals.”

Cyn’s brows arched to the hairline of her wig. “Really?”

“Derek used to rob banks,” she said.

Wow. It might be easier than Cyn thought to hire Derek for nefarious services. Cyn was about to ask the woman if she knew why the other nephew was in jail, when Nick appeared.

“I’m ready when you are.”

“I want to get more candy,” Mack said, a ring of chocolate around his mouth.

“Jill, this is my husband, Nick”—they shook hands—“Thanks for the info about Derek,” Cyn said, before they shuffled toward the next set of stairs on the street.

“That woman said Derek used to rob banks.” Cyn said to Nick, as he smiled and watched Mack climb the stairs with a bulbous bag of candy.

“Better not rob mine.” One beer and he was flippant.

“He leaves at the crack of dawn and is gone all day. I assume he has a real job. Where do you think he goes so early in the morning?”

“The gym.” Nick waved at Mack, as he tromped down the stairs again. “You gotta lift every day to build muscle like that.”

She squeezed his bicep. “How do you do it?”

Nick flexed. “I’m an animal.” Then he meowed.

After the adventure ended and both boys went to bed, Cyn made herself a second cocktail. The sound of music, laughter, and chatter outside called to her. Despite an early start tomorrow, she wasn’t ready to call it quits. She didn’t want anyone at the party to recognize her, so she grabbed a different wig from

the costume box, and another jacket. She put the house key in her pocket, tiptoed out the back door, and closed it like a sneaky teen. She forgot about her need to get up before dawn, or about being a mom, or supposedly being on the wagon. Her only thought was this: if two drinks feel good, three will feel better. So, at half past ten on a Thursday night, Cyn returned to the keg party. She didn't even like beer, but she loved the effects of it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next day, Cyn was glad she'd gone back to the party. She met a bunch of cool people and maintained a reasonable level of sobriety. She couldn't remember what time she got home, or the name of anyone she talked to, but yoga training had gone fine in the aftermath, Nick was none the wiser, and she was just a wee bit sick. She'd broken her own rule about only drinking on the weekend, but during the drive home from the studio, Yogananda's words encouraged her to give it another whirl.

"As often as you fail," he said, "get up and try again. God will never let you down, so long as you don't let Him down, and so long as you make the effort."

Cyn didn't want to push the limit. She'd toe the line today.

She arrived home to find Mrs. McInnis had gone nuts with Thanksgiving decorations: a cartoonish scarecrow was spiked in the dry grass at the edge of the yard, two crimson Mums, New England's fall flowers, sat in planters at the top of the stairs, and an apple-ring wreath hung from the landlady's door.

Inspired, Cyn grabbed the bag of apples and ready-made pie crusts she'd bought at Trader Joes on the way home. Training had ended early because the afternoon instructor was sick. She had time to make a pie before she had to pick up Mack today.

After the pie had baked for thirty minutes, it smelled like it had started to burn. She rushed to the food-splattered oven and saw the crust had been blackened. Her shoulders caved.

Dammit.

A stained thermometer hung on the back of the top rack. The oven was set to 375, the thermostat showed 550.

She called Mrs. McInnis to report the problem, who said Derek would come down to look at it.

Fifteen minutes later, he knocked on the door. Maybe he didn't have a job.

Maybe he'll accept a lowball offer for a hit.

Cyn tried to think of a way to broach the subject with him as they waited for the oven to heat.

"So, what do you do for work?" Cyn asked.

"I'm an independent contractor."

"What does that mean?"

"I make sure whatever job someone needs, gets done."

"Huh." She tucked a straggly piece of hair behind her ear. "What kind of jobs?"

"Whatever the highest bidder needs."

Cyn paused. Was this a good time to propose an attack on JK?

The oven beeped. It was done preheating.

Derek opened it to look. "Looks like the thermostat's broken."

Dangit, thought Cyn, missed my chance.

"I'll call the handyman."

"Okay, just let us know when he'll be here."

Derek left and Cyn went outside to chuck the cooled pie in the trash. First, she grabbed the empty nips she'd stashed in her shoe last night, to get rid of them too. As she shoved them beneath a stack of papers in the recycling bin, she spotted another letter from the House of Corrections on top of the pile.

Like last time, the envelope had already been torn open. What was the harm in taking a letter from the trash? She brought it inside, to read it in secret.

Hey,

Sorry I haven't written. The last couple of weeks have been tough but I'm hanging in there. (That's me thinking positive). This place is depressing; there's a lot of messed up people in here. My cell-mate's a wacko—and hard to get along with, but I'm trying. Every day, I can hear you say, 'What would Jesus do?' Jesus was better off on the cross, to be honest. My job started, and it makes the days go by faster, but I have too much time to think. I know you told me to practice gratitude when things get tough, but it's hard to remember the good in prison. I can hardly see the sky. The windows are tiny. I miss the sun. Sorry. I need to vent. Thanks again for your support Aunt Maureen, and thanks for the loan. It was great to finally shave.

Jerrod

Cyn was impressed with this guy's desire to be a better person in the face of diversity. She could relate. If Yogananda was right about second chances, it seemed this criminal deserved one. It was nice to see the landlady in this light. She helped this guy, loaned him money, and offered advice. The neighbor, Jill, had said the family was full of criminals, but Mrs. McInnis was a little old church lady. She could be curt sometimes, but had a good heart, and deserved Cyn's respect. *Oops.* Maybe she shouldn't steal her letters then.

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Nick went into the bedroom to change and called out to her a few minutes later. "Hey, can you come here?"

Cyn sauntered in, ready for action.

But Nick had the box of wine. "What's this?"

She swallowed hard. "I decided to try it again."

"Why did you hide it in the closet?" He set the box on the dresser with a thunk. His mouth turned down, and vapor streamed from his ears.

"I wanted to see how it went," she said. "Before I told you."

Veins protruded from Nick's neck. "Don't lie to me."

"I wanted to see if I could set limits for myself, and I didn't want to worry you."

He raised his voice. "I worry that Mack sees you drink all the time."

"Okay, I'm sorry." Panic rose as her heart thumped in her chest.

"You have to stop doing this. Go to AA or something."

"Okay," Cyn said, "I will." Her body got cold.

Nick lips were pursed as he stared at her. "I'm so freaking sick of this. I think we need to take a break. And I'm taking Mack with me."

"What?" The blood drained from her face. She stood behind him as he pulled a duffle bag from the top of the closet.

"Where are you going?"

He whipped around to face her. "I don't know."

"We said we'd never leave each other."

“You left me. The woman I married is gone.” Abandonment was a deep-seated issue for Nick, and she’d blown it. “What *happened* to you?”

Cyn had only ever seen this level of disgust in the mirror.

“I’ll try AA.”

“Why should I believe you?”

Nick tossed the duffle on the bed and went to the bathroom to grab his and Mack’s toothbrushes. Returning to the bedroom, he stopped in his tracks.

“Dammit!” He threw his toiletries on the bed.

“What?” Cyn shrunk.

“Derek’s truck is blocking me in.”

He hoisted the bag off the bed and tossed it on the ground.

Cyn hung her head and retreated, praying space and time was all he needed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cyn took the subway to Cambridge the next day before she made her way to Dunkin Donuts in a daze. She wanted to curl up and die but was headed to her first AA meeting. Her head ached and her legs threatened to collapse underneath her. Nick had been serious about leaving. The shock, when he took Mack to his parents' house in western Massachusetts this morning, still resonated in Cyn's chest like the aftermath of a gunshot. She was riddled with fear that her marriage might end and sick at the thought that she might lose custody of Mack. Nick had never looked as furious as he did last night, and Cyn deserved his vitriol. The fact that she hid the drinking was worse than the offense itself. If she told Nick about all secrets she kept from him about her drinking during the last few years, he'd divorce her. Even if she stayed sober. How did she fall so far?

Goddamn JK—it was his fault.

Nick had accepted Cyn's brokenness as the start of their relationship. He empathized with her because he knew it was hard to heal from trauma. With guidance, he'd risen

above his own and Cyn figured he was the perfect partner for her.

They met on her first day as a teller at the bank where Nick was a loan officer. He stopped in his tracks when he saw her. “You look like a cool glass of water,” he said, with his generous smile.

Six months later, he asked her out.

Cyn remembered the moment Nick told her about his childhood abuse, because it allowed her to share her secret with him. It was the first time she’d dated a guy who could understand the long-term ramifications of her assault. The subject came up as they picnicked after a bike ride, when Cyn asked him if he’d biked much as a kid. Nick admitted his childhood had been horrific.

“My father hit my mom almost daily. He’d beat her, and she’d apologize.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You have nothing to be sorry about. I hated it when my mother did.”

Cyn fell in love with him the day he said, “You make me want to be a better person.” He proposed two years later, and they promised they’d never leave each other.

AS CYN STOOD in line at Dunkin Donuts in Somerville, she battled tears. She didn’t mean to check out of their marriage. She’d screwed up so badly. The shame made her crave a drink.

Resist.

“Charlotte?” Cyn turned to find a thirty-something woman with twins in a stroller. “Sorry,” the woman said, “I never forget a face, but I’m bad with names.”

Cyn couldn’t place her. “It’s Cynthia.”

“Ah, yes—you look different without a wig.”

“Ohhh, we met on Halloween.” Cyn pretended to remember, as she wondered what she’d said and done that night in front of this woman.

Ending the interaction as quickly as she could, Cyn rushed out the door with her coffee. She continued up the street until she was out of sight, then she sat on a bench to sip her latte, dreading the next step: a six-block walk to Saint Benedict’s Church of Somerville.

THE MAN behind the podium cleared his throat before he spoke. “Hi—Don, alcoholic.”

Cyn couldn’t concentrate. She was distracted by the audience. A woman on her left had a baby in tow. On her right, a preppy man in a blazer and argyle socks stared at his feet. And in the pew along the wall sat a skinny young man with ratted hair. He kept nodding out, and his glazed eyes made Cyn wonder if he was on drugs. This crew was not what Cyn expected when she chose a meeting at a church. She thought it would be full of people who’d been “fixed”.

Meanwhile, the speaker whistled through missing teeth. “Forgiveness has been key for me. Giving and receiving it.”

Cyn rolled her eyes. Now *I’m supposed to forgive the guy who ruined my life?*

She couldn’t leave the building fast enough when the meeting was done. Eyes on the ground, she rushed out the door, and one of the minions followed her.

“Hey, I wanted to welcome you. I’m Mary.”

Mary was old enough to be Cyn’s mom and looked respectable.

“I’m Cyn.” She glanced up and down the street, worried

someone might see them, as if a double scarlet letter A was stamped on the woman's forehead.

"I wanted to give you my phone number." Mary handed Cyn a card, which listed her as the President of Marketing for some company.

"Thanks."

"It gets easier." Mary smiled.

"That's good to know."

"Keep coming."

"Okay," Cyn said, "thanks." If coming to meetings showed Nick that she was serious, she'd commit for however long it took. And agreeing to attend next week seemed like an impetus to stay sober until then. She'd wanted a drink as soon as she woke up this morning, even as she poured the box of wine down the sink while Nick got Mack ready to go. The pain had been unbearable as she kissed her little guy goodbye. It took every ounce of her energy not to go to the liquor store after they walked out the door.

Nick had taken anger management classes to learn how to avoid his triggers, which eliminated his problem; she'd never seen him lose control in anger. When she quit drinking for a few months last year, Nick had extolled the virtues of group therapy, and suggested she try AA. On the long walk home, she refused to look at any benches in case they displayed JK. That rapist belonged on a Most Wanted poster, or in the ER. It was too late to seek justice in the eyes of the law. Cyn *had* to punish him herself. Sobriety would be easy if her past stopped haunting her. Hunting JK was a good place to start.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nick's stomach was in knots as he drove two hours to his parents' house. Knowing Tom would support him eased some of his stress.

An hour later, he and Tom stood in the backyard watching Mack explore the garden with Nick's mom. It was abnormally warm for November.

"Figures it'd be almost seventy degrees," Nick said. "We bought our winter coats last week."

"Don't like the weather in New England? Wait a minute, it'll change."

"Does that work with the wife too?" Nick wasn't sure how to broach the subject of his marriage being on the rocks. 'On the rocks' was the problem.

"Is Cyn still having problems?" Tom twirled the ends of the mustache he'd worn since the seventies.

"We've reached an impasse. She's been drinking too much, so I asked her to quit. I thought she did, but she's been hiding it." Nick stared at the ground.

“Does she think it’s a problem?” Tom asked.

“She says it’s hard to quit once she starts but keeps trying to control it.” The creases in Nick’s face eased as he watched Mack help Grandma shake the seeds from a sunflower in the garden. She’d covered it with cheesecloth to catch them.

“Has she tried AA?”

“She promised to go to a meeting this weekend. I’m not sure what I’ll do if it doesn’t work. I don’t want Mack to see her drinking all the time the way I was exposed to violence.”

“Mack needs your help more than Cyn?” Tom asked.

“She’s a grown up.”

“Aren’t we all?” Tom pointed to Nick’s mom, as she danced around with the sunflower. “Living with your mother isn’t always this idyllic.”

“I’m well aware of that fact.”

“We all have times in our lives when we struggle. Compassion goes a long way.”

“Some people need to be saved,” Nick said. “Mom was at the helm of our sinking ship when you came along. We would’ve all gone down without you.”

“That’s not how I remember it,” Tom said. “Your mom’s optimism was impressive, considering what she’d been through.”

“Thinking positive that her jackass husband would change someday was dangerous. I’m worried that giving Cyn another chance will hurt Mack in the long run.”

“It’s no surprise that Cyn’s having a hard time, with everything you guys have been through.”

“But I’m not drinking myself into oblivion.”

“Hey, now, you almost killed a kid at the height of your problem.”

“I changed.” Nick clenched his jaw.

“And we’re so proud of the man you’ve become.”

Nick sighed. “What should I do to help Cyn?”

“Support her,” Tom said. “And pray. It won’t fix the problem, but it’ll give you hope.”

NICK SAT BACK at the dinner table and put a hand on his stomach. “That was delicious, Mom.”

“I’m so glad you’re here. We’ve been praying you’d move home for years.”

“I’ll come more often when things settle down,” he said. “It’s been kind of nuts.”

“Crazy is as crazy does,” Mom said. “Peace of mind is a choice, not a state.”

“Don’t blame me for how insane my life has gotten,” Nick’s shoulder blades lifted.

Mom folded her hands in her lap. “Sorry.”

Don’t apologize! Grow a spine.

Tom covered for Nick. “Nick’s worried that Mack’s being negatively affected by all the change lately.”

“Kids are resilient,” Mom said.

Nick scoffed. “Yeah, right—it was so easy for me to get over everything.”

His mother squirmed. She hated to talk about the past. “Everyone has things to recover from. It’s the hardest part of being human.”

But if you’d left that asshole after I was born, we wouldn’t have so much to recover from.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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