

Mia sat at the kitchen table, waiting for Cal to get out of the shower. She idly spun the bottle of aloe around, deep in thought. She was so overcome with gratitude that Cal had saved something so precious to her. Her mother's nursing pin that she'd sacrificed so much for. She was so happy and proud to be a nurse, even if it was only for a short while before she got sick. Mia had been so proud of her too.

And the photos. He'd even thought to grab the one off the wall. That consideration for her, putting her things before his. She knew she was falling for him now. There was no question.

The news that Cal was trans had surprised her, but only because she'd never considered that he might be. Looking back on the perceived discomfort about gay people, him being adamant about not letting her go into the hospital with him, it made sense now.

She heard the door to the bathroom open and called out to Cal to let him know where she was. A few moments later, he was joining her in the dining room. He had on the sweats and the clean pair of socks, holding the t-shirt in his hands. "Uh, I waited to put the shirt on..." He gestured to his shoulder and Mia smiled.

A surge of emotion welled up, along with a hint of arousal. It took her by surprise, and she pushed it aside. "Have a seat," she said as she got up and poured a bit of the aloe gel in her hand. "Lean forward a little?"

He complied and Mia scooped up most of it onto her fingers and checked to make sure there were no other angry, red areas. Then she began to gently rub the gel onto the spot on his shoulder. He jerked upright and Mia pulled her fingers away in alarm.

"Sorry, it's just cold after the warm shower," he said with a shiver. She smiled, continuing to rub the gel in as her eyes moved over his defined back muscles. His skin was smooth, not much hair. She noticed the hair on

the back of his neck was getting kind of long. He was overdue for a haircut, she thought.

“There. Let it dry for a minute and you can put your shirt on,” Mia said as she capped the bottle. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Oh, yeah, water would be great. My throat is still a little sore.” He brought his hand up to his throat and rubbed it absently.

She poured herself a glass of water as well, bringing them to the table and then sitting back down. “Thanks for patching me up once again.”

“Yeah, I thought I told you to stop getting hurt on my vineyard.” Her voice was light, belying the visceral fear she’d experienced an hour ago.

Cal gave her a half-smile and nodded before he grew serious. “So, you want to talk about... what I told you?”

“Only if you are up to it. I know you must be exhausted.” Mia looked down at her water glass, trying to order her thoughts. She was worried about how much damage was done to the barn, how much they’d lost, but she knew she had to let the fire department finish their work before she could get down there and see.

But this thing with Cal, it had been building for months, and with the news that he was transgender, there was a lot for them to talk about.

“I’d rather just get it over with,” he said, prompting Mia’s eyes to catch his in a gentle regard. He looked down at his water glass and shook his head slowly before looking back up. “Sorry. I’ve tried this one other time, and it did not go well.”

Mia gave him a sympathetic smile. She imagined it would be so hard to have to be so vulnerable so early in a relationship and then be rejected for it. *Relationship?* Mia mentally shook her head at the premature thought. “I’ll

admit, I'm surprised, but that's not..." Mia closed her eyes for a second, knowing she needed to be careful with her words. When she opened them, Cal was regarding her with an open expression. It gave her the courage to not only voice what had been building, unspoken, between them, but to be completely honest with him. "It isn't a big deal to me, Cal. I like you. A lot."

"You like me, huh? A lot?" His smile was edging toward amusement and Mia realized she might have overplayed her hand. *Damnit, Lloyd, were you wrong? Shit, maybe he doesn't feel the same.*

Before she could sink into her chair in embarrassment, Cal reached out and covered her hand with his own. "Hey, I like you too. A lot. It's why I told you about me." He straightened up in his chair, pulling her hand slightly as his eyes narrowed. "You are the strongest, kindest, most interesting woman I've ever met."

"Not the prettiest?" Mia teased as she fluttered her eyelashes.

"If I had a dollar for every time I caught myself staring at you, I'd have enough to buy my own vineyard," Cal said with an earnest smile.

"Well, you're pretty easy on the eyes too, I guess," Mia said with a teasing grin.

"Really?" Cal asked.

The genuine disbelief in his voice made Mia's heart drop. She put her other hand over his. "I think you are incredibly handsome. It was one of the first things I mentioned to Lloyd when I told him I'd hired you," Mia said, feeling herself blush at the admission. But she wanted Cal to know the truth.

"So, you hired me for my looks, then?" Cal's smirk held a hint of genuine delight and that made Mia's heart do a low swoop through her chest.

"They didn't hurt." She winked.

Cal's smirk turned into a sheepish grin. "I can't believe we had this conversation with me shirtless."

Mia's eyes unconsciously traveled to his chest, where she saw the faint, small scars under his lower pectoral muscles.

He scooted his chair out and leaned back slightly and traced a scar with his finger. "Luckily, I wasn't very endowed. Not much to take out." Mia's eyes snapped up to his, contrite. "It's okay. I'll admit, I'm not out to many people who didn't know me before my transition. Well, hardly anyone. You and Dr. Sage."

Mia's jaw fell open slightly. Dr. Sage was the doctor she'd recommended when Cal broke his arm. "That's it?"

He nodded. "Yes. I wanted..." He stopped, took a breath, and started again. "I want to live my life on my terms. It's why I moved. I want to be the one in control of who I tell and when..." He looked down at his chest and then back up again. "I'm not ashamed that I'm trans. Not at all. The fact that I lived the first twenty-five years of my life presenting female has given me a perspective that no cis man has, you know?"

It was strange, hearing Cal refer to his life as a woman. No wonder he was so fascinated with Adam's story. "It must have been hard, living where you did and having to transition there, huh?"

"I was supported at home. My dad and my sister were great. My mom had a hard time at first, but she came around. They helped me through my surgeries and put up with me when I was adjusting to the testosterone." He smiled wistfully before his lips gave way to a pinched frown. "That's about as far as my support went. People are not open-minded where I grew up. They'd intentionally misgender me, well after I'd transitioned, just to be hateful. It wore me down."

“I’m sorry,” Mia said, realizing their hands were still intertwined. “Well, for what it’s worth, I’m so very glad you landed here.” She gave him a warm smile, which he returned.

“I am too. So much so.”