



The Therapist (Tutor #5)

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Category: Romance

Description: Dr. Robin Richardson built her career unraveling the darkest corners of the human mind. As a renowned therapist, she's helped countless patients face their demons—until she meets him.

Cooper Burdick isn't like her other clients. Magnetic, and utterly depraved, he confesses his most twisted proclivities with a smirk that dares her to judge him. But instead of revulsion, Robin feels something else...

She knows she should keep her distance. She knows his voyeuristic addiction is a path she can't afford to walk.

Yet with every session, Cooper pulls her deeper into his world—until the lines between doctor and patient blur, and her own sanity begins to unravel.

Now, caught in a web of seduction and psychological warfare, Robin faces an impossible choice: resist his dark allure... or surrender to the madness and let him consume her completely.

A dark, psychological romance perfect for fans of dangerous obsession, forbidden attraction, and mind-bending twists.

For readers of dark romance and psychological thrillers who love intense chemistry, power plays, and jaw-dropping twists.

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The cacophony of laughter that follows grinds my nerves.

I press my back against the painted concrete wall and revel in the chill of it. They always did jack the heat up too much.

I swallow thickly and push old memories deep into the recesses of my soul. The chatter isn't totally wrong, but it is painful, even at this event, my twenty year college reunion.

Once upon a time, I'd liked going out, meeting boys, and having fun; but by the time any of my classmates had the chance to get to know me, I'd already been marred. The thick wood door across from me should really block out the sound better.

The plastic-covered dorm mattress beneath me squeaks as I adjust myself. I close my journal with a satisfying thwack and stand.

The decades-old mirror reflects tired skin and too many fine lines surrounding my eyes.

Stray gray hairs resembling tinsel glint in the light.

Freckles blanket the bridge of my nose—or maybe they're the beginnings of age spots.

Using my middle fingers I lift the outside corners of my eyes slightly, revealing a sparkle of youth, and briefly contemplate how my life turned out so... plain.

More laughter comes from the other side of the thick wooden door. I wonder vaguely, what has them rolling this time, but I don't dwell on it too much. They're remembering someone else.

I'm a confident woman now. At least that's what I tell myself. That's what my patients would say.

It's how I'm perceived. I've won awards.

I've treated the most difficult human conditions.

My job is never to criticize, apportion blame, or be judgmental. I'm known as an expert. I'm called to treat when they need the best. I'm called to testify as an expert in high-profile court cases. I deal with the most depraved humans.

I've learned there is no end of immoral revelations and no end of sincere excuses.

Early on, I'd been startled to hear some of the things people admitted to: stalking, incest, cutting, and harming others.

Everyone has a story to tell.

Ordinarily, when I'm with a patient, I pay attention. Being distracted when I ought to be listening is not just bad manners; it's detrimental to both parties. Listening is my job, and I don't come cheap, so the very least I can do is focus when my patients speak.

But lately, I've been clock-watching during sessions. Longing for something more in life. The last three years have changed me...my perspective.

I was called to counsel on a case that turned out to be rather public. The Tutor—a

name coined for a madman who lured young women to his home under the guise of a tutoring job offer, then never let them leave—changed everything in my world for a second time.

You can't sit and listen to people's deepest, darkest, sordid desires all day and not start thinking differently eventually. Exposure therapy works for a reason.

I was introduced to Nora, the Tutor's latest and final victim, who'd escaped, and realized that love, true love, harbors no boundaries.

You can love a madman.

You can love your assailant. And it is real love—the feeling of it. The experience.

From there, I became threaded into the fabric of Nora's life. I met Liam, the Tutor's brother; Eve, another escaped victim of Holden's; and Charlotte or Lotte, who lived with Holden—a.k.a. the Tutor—for two years at a crucial age in her childhood.

I counseled them all. I came to know Nora's best friend, Aubry, who'd been abducted and had escaped a sex trafficking ring in our sleepy little town, completely unrelated to her friend Nora's experience.

All of them taught me something.

All of them drew some color back into my life that I hadn't truly realized was missing.

But through Nora, Eve, and Lotte, I've been partially employed by their non-profit, NEL.

I still have my own private practice, but NEL is near and dear to my heart. I work

with their existing programs to treat victims of all kinds of abuse. It's gratifying in a way that paid hourly sessions are not.

I watched each young lady come back from the precipice of a dark abyss and not only live, but find love again.

And it always comes back to love doesn't it?

The deepest of all human conditions.

Unconventional or traditional, love is what most seek to feel fulfilled. As a therapist, I know that's hogwash. Only you can make yourself happy and fulfilled—yet still—the one thing missing from my life is a great love affair.

Not for lack of trying.

The downside of this is that more and more, as time goes on, vanilla, traditional relationships don't seem to hold my attention.

I hear such filthy, abstract, accounts of love and desire daily that I find myself beginning to crave something darker than customary vanilla love.

I just don't know what kind.

I come from a conventional family.

I've lived a routine life.

I don't know where to find non-traditional without trauma.

I open the door to my room and step into the hallway.

In my youth I was determined to make others happy, to be the sunlight in their lives, but after Amelia, all I felt for a long time was gray.

I'd adopted the mantra that if you don't interact with others deeply, you never have to deal with feeling hurt or hurting others—even inadvertently.

But right now, in the moment, I want to show those old classmates I am fun.

I can be the life of the party. I will not repeatedly talk about my dog all night.

Breathing fast through my nose, I step across the corridor, take a deep breath, and place my hand on the knob. I plaster the biggest smile I can muster before opening the door.

People can change a lot in twenty years.

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One

Present

F lash barely lifts his head when I get home. One eye opens to peer at me through his soggy lid and a deep sigh is the only acknowledgment he gives to let me know he's alive. I drop my bag on the floor next to the side table and step out of my heels.

“Gee, thanks.”

His thick, short paws reach out as he allows himself a full body stretch before reluctantly getting up.

I give him a solid head and neck scratch before heading to the back door to let him out.

His long ears nearly drag on the floor as he waddles his way behind me.

The tick, tick, click of his nails on the hardwood a welcome, comforting sound.

I push open the back door and watch him disappear into the yard.

At a certain age, comfort becomes king. You walk in the door in the evening, with the overwhelming urge to change into jammie pants, an oversized worn band tee shirt from years past, and slippers.

And the bra, the bra is the first thing you want to go.

My slippers quietly swish across the hardwood floor as I set the oven to three hundred and fifty degrees. Pulling out a covered plate of leftovers, I lament that I'm eating them again. A nondescript casserole I made over the weekend for family dinner night at Eve's house.

All of us involved with The Tutor case—Nora, Aubry, Lotte, Eve, Agent Brown, and Detective Salve—attempt to have dinner together once every few months.

It's probably breaking some ethics rule somewhere, but that case bonded us all, fused us together in a way that tangled our personal lives, for better or worse.

It's nice to sit and share a meal together in a non-professional capacity. To laugh and talk and catch up. I don't have many friends. There are too many commitments already vying for my time to make or invest in new friends.

I set my ladybug-shaped egg timer for dinner, the rhythmic clicking reminding me of my life slowly ticking away. I blow out a breath and flop onto the couch. I take a moment to enjoy the utter lack of sound around me.

Listening all day to people talk makes the silence that much sweeter, come the end of the day. The house is quiet, just me and Flash.

No little footsteps, no giggles or witty banter from a child, spouse, or roommate.

Just me.

Singular.

I am not a beautiful woman, nor an ugly woman who looks pretty.

They are two different things. I am average.

Just an average woman who ended up in a non-average situation.

Looking back, I can't exactly pinpoint when life started snowballing.

It was gradual. A slow and tedious plunge into a dark pool.

My heart aches, an erratic lumpy thudding against my ribs.

Habit is a difficult thing to break and my mind wanders to thoughts I've pushed into the cobwebs during the day. My eyes wander to the windows, and the open back door. The thrill of being watched, however, never comes, and that deviant venom seeps into my bones a little more.

I know gray areas. Lines that should not be crossed, right and wrong, but I ignored them all—for him. I became no better than the patients I counsel with our blurred lines and aberrant proclivities. I take a sip of wine silently praying it brings the relaxation I crave.

The stack of mail on the side table and I are in a familiar staring match. Under today's mail, there is a wildly thick letter.

It arrived five days ago.

It remains unopened.

It wants to consume me, kill me, tear me apart.

It wants to thrill me.

I fear that thrill, the fire burning low in my belly.

It's something I've been able to control—for now.

I look away, knowing whatever the envelope contains more than likely has the ability to chew me up and spit me out.

But even just knowing it's there lets something dark into the cracks of my heart.

Flash comes in, right to me, and rubs against my shins with vigor before heading to his empty food bowl, picking it up in his teeth and tossing it on the floor to alert me that he's hungry.

I barely hear the clatter because I'm lost in memories of the last time I saw him. Of the way his eyes gave away his panic. Of the immense pressure on my chest that made it near impossible to catch a breath.

To watch something you value implode before your eyes is painful. You can't outrun wicked. You can only stand still and pray.

Guilt gnaws at my gut. It's not an unfamiliar feeling.

We all have secrets, me included. I am a pro at burying it. I'm ruthless in ignoring it and my deepest emotions. In a way, my profession trained me to be able to do just that, alongside the most disturbed.

The timer rings, loud and shrill. Flash's bowl crashes against the floor again.

I lit the fuse, then tried to run and hide, I think.

Hissing out a small snort, the sound of Flash's food bowl between his teeth forces me to get up off the couch.

He tosses his bowl toward the dog food cabinet.

I turn off the oven and pull out my dinner before filling his bowl. At least I have Flash.

He has no one anymore.

People aren't mirrors, they don't reflect how you see yourself. Which is a shame, because sometimes we, as humans, need to see ourselves in the light others cast us in. It's an overlooked idea in my book.

The problem is that sometimes the light people cast you in, versus the light you see yourself in, can make you feel like an imposter. People never truly share themselves with others fully. There's always a piece of themselves they hold onto for just them.

Something sacred.

Something no one else can touch or take away. But that was what he loved so much—witnessing those minuscule tidbits of people. I shake the runaway thoughts from my head.

After dinner, I check my emails before spending thirty minutes in the bathroom applying every face and anti-aging cream known to man on my face, neck, décolletage, and the backs of my hands. People forget about the backs of their hands, but they're a dead giveaway as far as age is concerned.

New paperback tucked under my armpit, I pass through the hall and back downstairs to make sure the lights are off and the doors are locked. The spindly, tile-topped table with the letter is an affront as I pass it.

Pausing, I look back at it. Curiosity, months in the making, seizes me.

All the missed calls.

The plethora of voicemails.

And now, the damned, thick, letter.

I let my forefinger run across it.

Testing it.

Almost hoping for an electric shock to steer me away from it, but nothing happens.

My phone vibrates on the table, the screen lighting up.

A text from Nora Lockwood.

We haven't spoken since her wedding just three weeks ago, which was an extraordinary event, but then, why wouldn't it be? She is a remarkable person, and everything she touches in life becomes exceptional.

She's been off honeymooning the last two weeks.

Instead of opening and reading the text, I power down the phone and plug it in to charge.

Confiding in her could be so easy, but I've cut myself off. Fear and shame and judgment ever-present in my gut, I've kept him and I a secret.

Secrets feel special, and my deviant lapse in judgment remains a guilty pleasure so long as it only belongs to me. I alone must live with my choices, my regrets.

Maybe I've been punishing myself. He is clever and manipulative, and eventually, I just gave in. It wasn't all my fault.

At least, I tell myself that.

He seduced me, and I didn't fight it. But he'd say I'm just as bad. That I'm a fiend for him. For the things he asked me to do. For the things I agreed to. So maybe we're the same. Maybe we deserved each other.

Maybe this damned letter taunting me is my penance.

I pinch it between my thumb and forefinger. It's at least two inches thick.

I don't look at it because I'm not going to read it.

I'm only holding it as a test.

I tell myself that as I carry it upstairs with me into my bedroom. My skin prickles.

"Bedtime Flash, com'on." My tone is harsh with emotion. I sigh and pat my thigh for Flash.

"Com'on bud."

My eyes pop open. My tank soaked through from night sweats. The red offending numbers read one thirty-two on the nightstand. Those same numbers cast a glow on the envelope beneath the paperback I read earlier.

Flash stirs at my feet. Panic wraps its icy fingers around me. I curl my toes, followed

by my fingers, before uncurling them in the same order. It grounds me. No one knows your involvement.

I grab the envelope and clutch it to my chest. It could say so many things. It could shatter my memories—taint them forever, or it could lift me up and give me strength.

Bringing it to my nose, I sniff it—as if perhaps his smell still lingers on it somehow.

With my eyes tightly closed, I can almost hear his sultry voice calling to me. I should not have carried the letter upstairs.

I slip a finger under the tab and pull at the envelope gently. Sliding my fingers inside, I pull out a thick wad of pages.

In the darkness, all I have are the sensations. I can't see the handwriting. I cannot read the words.

I let the moment linger, relishing these last bits of sanity before switching on the bedside lamp.

Robin,

It started out innocent. I swear. I just wanted to watch you, live, in the flesh. I had no intention of anything more or less. I certainly didn't intend to ruin your life. I'm writing this letter because I need to confess.

I stare at the wall, gathering my thoughts because what I want to say is specific, and I want you to understand that.

I want to be concise and clear in my intentions.

I need each statement to make an impact.

And although I used to be paid to write, I'm struggling to conjure up meaningful words to convey my emotions.

I don't know who's in control anymore, and with every stroke of my pen, I say a little prayer that you will even read this letter.

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I know you already know our story, but there are two things you aren't aware of. Guilt is a terrible emotion to carry with you. I need to get this off my chest. And really, I have nothing left to lose.

Smart women love intelligent men. More so than intelligent men love clever women. And that's where I had something over you from the start.

I'm shrewd, and that drew you in.

How could someone as astute as me have such provocative desires? I was a puzzle you needed to figure out. That's how it started, anyway. But even that—my intelligence, my puzzle, was a carefully planted piece in our game.

My love was your disease. But diseases are known to kill. You never saw me closing in. You couldn't see the shadows, hear the footsteps.

I became the heavy burden that you carry. I made you suffer, and for that, I'm sorry. You made me feel an electric fever deep in my soul.

That fever keeps me hostage and that's my penance to pay for the next five years.

There was a poison hidden in my kiss that you couldn't taste, a wickedness you couldn't outrun. Maybe you won't read this letter. I can't know if the curiosity of what's written here will win out.

I can almost picture you tucking a curl behind an ear, debating whether or not to tear open the envelope. I can see the expression on your face. The uncertainty of the

choice before you.

Is it worth it? Will it hurt or heal?

Is it right?

I need to confess. I think you need me to confess as well. If I don't, I'm afraid you'll overanalyze what we had until it consumes you.

Until it destroys you.

I watched you long before I sat across from you in that room, wallpapered with books and framed degrees.

I was contracted to cover the American Psychiatric Association conference the year you were presented with an award. It was the last freelance journalism job I took.

You glided up the steps of the stage with such grace; I was captivated. The stage spotlight highlighted your cheekbones. Your curls were tucked and pinned away from your face. And I was overcome by a singular, obsessive thought.

I want more.

But you see, what I wanted, I knew I could have. It was just a matter of gaining the right credentials or needs to access you. I know you'll cringe at my next thought but you'll also realize I'm right— which will probably piss you off even more.

From the conference, I had your profession and name. A quick internet search on my laptop brought up your office address and phone number. But I didn't want to waste time parked out front waiting.

The county registry of deeds search informed me, from the convenience of my couch, that you have a mortgage for 382 thousand dollars and the property address.

You're an intelligent woman. You can guess how easy it was to watch you from that point on.

As you know, stalking isn't my thing. But you did something to me, intrigued me like no others—so I watched you. I stalked you before ever making an appointment with you. For me—that's where it all began, but I know for you, it's a different story.

The masses, in general, are painfully predictable.

People are creatures of habit and routine.

Wake up at the same time every day. Leave home at the same time.

Stop to grab coffee or food, see the same coworkers every day.

Get to work by fill-in-the-blank time. Go for lunch, or eat lunch at the same time.

See or interact with the same people. Leave work and arrive home at a set time, give or take five minutes.

Some people only grocery shop on a certain day every week.

My point isn't to ramble, it's to spell out how easy it is to learn someone's daily activities simply by observing them.

Add in social media and you can almost live their life right alongside them in the shadows.

I can see you posted that you're at the movies, thus, I know which theater, which movie, and what time you're seeing it.

Alternatively, this also lets me know you aren't at home. And since I've watched you for months, I know you don't bother to lock your doors because you have a dog and live in a safe neighborhood.

You never felt my presence, heard me coming.

But I was there taking you in.

I'm rambling again, I know. But there's a point.

A simple point. It was easy to watch you. Easy to experience your life alongside you before we ever spoke.

I already knew you when we met.

My hands tremble, causing the pages to rustle. Tears brim in my eyes, making the last line blurry. If I read more, I don't know if I will survive—emotionally.

I could be okay with just the memories that I have.

Could. Such a devious word.

Could is easy.

Could is not action.

Could is no better than a what-if, at best.

But secrets are no better than lies. They can be innocent and sometimes even helpful. Or, they can be insidious and destructive. More often than not, they are the latter.

And the pages I hold may be full of secrets that destroy or validate, but I can't know which.

One hand balls into a fist.

Self-preservation wins out. I crumple the thick stack of pages and toss them in the wastebasket near the closet door.

Triumphant, I switch the light off and force my eyes closed.

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Two

Past

For years, on trips from home to the city for various social engagements, I've been able to pass Exit Forty-two without anxiety. Hold my breath as it blurs past, leaving it safely behind me. The exit to my alma mater.

Not this time.

College should have been the best four years of my life.

I'd waited, patiently, through high school, begging my parents to let me go out of state.

I needed to get away from home. I needed to start fresh somewhere I wasn't surrounded by the judging eyes of people I'd known my whole life.

People who'd deemed me a variety of lackluster adjectives by the time I'd reached ninth grade.

I wanted to be adventurous, fun, academic, and I couldn't do that at a state school alongside the same kids who'd shared a classroom with me since first grade.

I'd forever be dubbed the nerd. So I'd applied to one out-of-state school.

Waiting for that acceptance letter had been torture, but after months of praying every

night that I would get in, that my parents would let me attend, that financial aid would come through, the package arrived.

And it was as if a genie had granted a wish for me.

My college roommate, Amelia, was my best friend.

Easy going, free-spirited, gorgeous, and everything that I wasn't.

I could barely buy into the fact that she wanted to be my friend.

Even though she was a year younger than I was, she seemed so much more grand than I could ever hope to be.

Fate threw us together freshman year, but sophomore year, we chose each other.

She went missing four months after classes started that year.

I saw her seven months after she went missing. I was so elated and shocked to see her, I almost didn't notice her swollen belly. She stood outside the men's room at an interstate gas station looking the happiest I'd ever seen her.

She practically glowed.

When she saw me, all the joy drained from her face, weariness replacing it.

It stung. I'd thought we were friends. I'd been an anxiety-riddled mess for months.

I'd grieved her. Helped her parents put up flyers.

Stood on corners waving her picture at anyone who would look.

Have you seen her? I'd talked to the police.

I'd done everything I thought I could at the time.

But at that gas station, she begged me to not tell anyone. To let her stay. That she wasn't kidnapped but with her boyfriend and happy. She protectively cradled her belly as the pleas flew from her mouth. As if I were the danger to her.

"Please Robin, for the baby. My parents will never understand."

Her eyes darted between me and the bathroom door. I wanted to stay, to meet this boyfriend I didn't know...had never known. I wanted to let her know there was an investigation. To tell her that her parents were distraught. She begged me to let her go. Nearly pushed me away from her.

Confused, and if I'm honest, hurt, I agreed to keep her secret.

For a moment, I felt a special sense of purpose knowing I would carry this secret with her, for her.

I followed her rules. I'd promised her. I couldn't betray her trust. I also cried the entire drive back to campus, upset and uncertain I'd made the right decision.

It wasn't.

I had the chance to save her life, the baby's life, and I didn't. I broke the rules and broke any chance Amelia had at a normal life. When a professor ran into her at a grocery store another seven months later, she was recovered safely.

Danny, the man who'd taken her, was tried and sent to prison. Amelia's parents couldn't stand the sight of the baby.

An abomination, they said. Amelia was deemed unfit due to her mental state and the baby was taken away. Amelia was brainwashed. So distraught and heartbroken that she tried to kill herself—a few times.

Out of options, her parents committed her. We were still young. Barely old enough to legally drink. I became hyper-focused on trying to fix Amelia—changed my major to psychology, put all my energy into trying to learn how to bring her back to the world.

I was driven by the secret I'd kept. Spurred on by the guilt that consumed me. I watched her fall apart. Watched her parents crumble. Her family disintegrated, knowing the outcome could have been very different if I had only said something. It was my fault because I knew where Amelia was.

I could have saved her.

I blink rapidly, shaking my inner thoughts away as I sit up in my chair, stretching my back.

I've had back-to-back appointments for the last three hours, and sitting in the chair is taking its toll on my back.

Middle age has its downfalls. I suppress the urge to stand and move around.

He needs my complete attention right now.

Without it, I lose the trust I've built over the last three weeks.

He's a nervous one.

Reserved.

Skittish.

“I fantasize about killing her,” he whispers shamefully.

I catch his gaze. “When do you notice these fantasies happening?” I ask.

“After visitations with her.” He looks down and away from me.

I uncross my legs and lean forward.

“You have the control here. You can choose not to visit her.” My voice is soft and firm.

“She’s my sister,” he says, still staring at the carpet. His shoulders are rounded, making his appearance smaller, more fragile. A true victim’s mindset manifesting physically.

“She molested you. Violated your trust.” My voice is even—gentle. He needs the affirmation.

His head snaps up, eyes meeting mine. “She saved me too. I owe her.” His voice is an angry whisper shout.

I give him a pointed look.

“That’s your guilt talking. She killed your mother,” I remind him.

His eyes go stormy. “I killed my mother.”

“Not alone and at her command. Keep reminding yourself that this is not black and white. Your sister is mentally ill. You were young and impressionable and she used

that to her advantage. You don't owe her anything simply because you share blood.

"I look at the clock and notice our time is up.

"Let's work on that for next week. I want you to make a list of the people in your life you can look up to, the people who don't want anything from you in return for maintaining a relationship with them. "

He nods at me vigorously. I smile and stand, sending him the cue that our time is up.

"JJ, I'll see you next week. Don't forget to do your homework," I say, heading to my desk.

He nods at me and slips out the office door.

I make a note in his file to discuss his mother next week.

I need to get him to accept responsibility for his part in his sister's actions and his mother is the key to that vault.

The kid is being tried as an adult, but his mental capacity is that of a prepubescent boy, which is exactly when the bulk of his trauma happened.

I unlock my desk drawer and file his notes away in the appropriate folder before sliding the drawer shut and locking it again.

I blow out a sigh and arch my back over the back of my desk chair; the pop, pop, popping of my spine releases the pressure between my vertebrae and feels good.

I should really use the word-a-day calendar Nora gave me; the third one over, and learn some alternatives for good .

“Dr. Richardson?” The voice has my head snapping up.

His voice is smoky, a whiskey voice. The sort of voice that stirs the emotions in your belly. Pure testosterone. He stands in the doorway like a vampire waiting to be invited in. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I’m not prone to such visceral reactions generally.

“Yes.”

“I’m your four o’clock.” He stands tall, shoulders rigid. “Cooper.” He raises a brow at me.

I stare a beat longer before remembering to gesture for him to enter.

“Yes, hi. Come in.”

I shake his hand. The grip of his hand on mine isn’t lost on me.

He shakes my hand as if we’re old friends, tenderly.

One entwined with mine, the other resting over the back of my clasped hand.

Not at all like a stranger. I make a mental note as he settles into a chair, draping his coat over the back of another chair.

I can feel his eyes move down my body, then back up.

It’s not uncommon for my patients to give me a thorough once-over during their first two visits. I cross my legs and rest my notebook on my knee, the page blank except for his name and the date.

He's a new patient.

It's impossible not to notice how attractive he is, but I tuck those thoughts aside. He's fifteen years younger than me and, judging by his appearance, is probably swimming in women.

Taking him in, it occurs to me that he is the polar opposite of what I attract. Especially if last weekend's twentieth college reunion one-night stand is any indicator.

I school my disappointment at the memory of lackluster sex and subpar conversation the next morning before packing my belongings and high-tailing it home before he could ask for my number.

It'd been a stunningly pathetic show that I'd suppressed for the last three days through Basset hound snuggles and copious amounts of Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

I clear my throat and look at him. I'm surprised at his expression. It feels like he's conveying that we have unfinished business, which is atypical of new patients. Generally, their body language screams insecure and nervous.

The air feels electric around me. "So, why are you here?"

"My therapist said you're a miracle worker." His voice is even, which surprises me. The statement doesn't match his tone.

"I'm not. This is hard work. The goal of this room is to focus on you and how to make you happy. But it doesn't work unless you do all the hard parts. So, tell me a little about yourself and what you'd like to accomplish here."

His gaze is intense and focused on me. I lift my pad slightly and doodle a flower on

the bottom corner—a coping mechanism I often practice when I feel control slipping.

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“I have a problem. An addiction of sorts that I can’t seem to kick on my own. I’m worried it will begin to interfere with my day-to-day life and I think we could make progress together.”

The way he lingers on the word we makes the hair stand at the nape of my neck. The way he said it implies we have an established relationship or it could indicate he has boundary issues. I make a note in my notebook.

“Already writing things down? That can’t be good. What’d I say wrong, Doc?”

Snapping my eyes to his, I say, “Oh no. You’ll see I take lots of notes. It helps me after our appointments to recall and review so I can devise the best treatment plan for you.”

He lifts his chin, almost before a small grin pulls at the corner of his mouth. “Ok.”

“What is your day-to-day life like?” I ask.

“I am a freelance journalist, and I own and run a bed and breakfast right on the ocean. So I’ve got my hands tied pretty well right now with renovations and bookings and writing gigs.”

“That sounds wonderful. What part do you find yourself struggling with?”

He grins but says nothing. My stomach clenches. It’s the reluctant-to-speak patients that end up being the most devious. Well, unless they’re psychopaths, they love to divulge their secrets and gain recognition for their actions. A bubble of unease rises

up my esophagus.

He runs a hand through his hair. "I've always felt different."

In my line of work, there is nothing worse than a broad, vague answer. It's incredibly hard to get people to pinpoint what they really want to express.

"Any emotions you can't explain?" I say.

He only shakes his head at me.

I proceed with some standard questions. "Do you feel violent or angry for no reason?"

Again, a simple head shake.

Grinning, I toss in something different to test him. "How many windows did your childhood home have?"

"You ask a lot of questions," he says while crossing one leg over the other.

"You're not answering them. I can't help if you don't talk to me."

Cocking his head to the left, he says, "I grew up in a secluded sexual environment. We never discussed bodies or related bodily activities at home. My mother never gave me or my brother a bath. That was my father's job since 'we had the same parts'."

"That must have been hard through adolescence."

He nods. "It was."

“How do you think that affected you as a child?”

He drops his head in thought. “I suppose it made me very curious.”

“Curious how? About what?”

“About bodies. Women’s bodies mostly, since I knew what mine looked like.

I didn’t know how they differed or why. I used to stare at girls in the grocery store or school, trying to see through their clothes.

I don’t know. I just wanted to understand.

At home, bodies were taboo without explanation.

I had questions but no one to answer them. ”

I make a note to go back through the file his therapist faxed over because he seems fairly typical in terms of patients and not particularly what I specialize in.

“You say you knew what your body looked like, it’s common in repressed households for even looking at yourself to be frowned upon. Was that something you experienced?”

“I was not allowed to touch myself. The house had no mirrors outside the bathroom. My father didn’t seem to care if I looked in the mirror getting in and out of the bathtub.

Of course, when I was old enough to shower on my own, I’d leave the water running so I could...

” his voice drifts off with the red tinge in his cheek.

“Check yourself out?”

He gives a curt snort of laughter. “Yes. But vanity is nothing to be proud of.”

“Who told you that?”

“My mother.”

I nod as I jot down more notes.

“Curiosity is normal and when we’re denied basic knowledge about bodily functions and differences, vanity can be a very common outcome. There’s no shame in that.”

“I felt shame.”

“Interesting. Enough to stop staring in the mirror?”

He chortles. “No. Not enough for that. I liked watching my muscles flex with movements, I didn’t stare and think ‘God, I’m so hot’, I didn’t understand hot because it wasn’t relative.

I was fascinated by the way my skin stretched over me, by my penis, just hanging there, the way hair grew in some places but not all.

I liked to see what walking looked like without clothes and with clothes. ”

“Do you find yourself drawn to deviant sexual fantasies as an adult?”

He bites his lip. But not in a shy manner.

No, it's deliberate, as if he's stifling a grin or keeping a secret.

There's always a secret. The saying goes, you let your secrets out so they don't have power over you, but when a secret is out, a part of you is out too, and it belongs to others then.

You don't control the darkness anymore, and that's terrifying.

The real horror is knowing we all have secrets.

No one is immune to them.

He considers me a moment longer before his posture relaxes. His eyes seem to drill holes right through me. So intense. So fixated.

So full of desire.

"My whole life I've liked to watch people. I've always felt different, but it wasn't until after college that I could pinpoint my difference." His words are spoken quietly, quickly, as though some deviant admittance of guilt.

"There are many people who find gratification in watching people. It's not as uncommon as you might think," I say.

Cooper nods his head.

"Yes, I've heard that voyeurism is a fairly natural kink to have."

"Then what exactly troubles you? Does this interfere with your daily life? Is it preventing you from carrying on healthy relationships with partners?"

He drags a hand through his hair. “I keep a strict schedule, so no, it doesn’t interfere with my daily life. As for relationships, I’ve yet to find someone willing to participate in the lifestyle with me. But, I’d like to. A partner could make it more interesting.”

I smile reassuringly. “There’s nothing wrong with having these kinds of fantasies. We all do. So long as you don’t act on them without consent or in an illegal manner, they’re perfectly natural.”

It’s my job not to judge and I do my very best to keep my personal morals out of the equation while working with patients. His eyes lock on mine in a challenging way.

“What if I do?” he says.

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Three

Present

My entire day was lost to useless questions that didn't have answers. Cooper became my weakness. Electric desire buried deep in my soul now.

He permeated my mind, skin, bones. He's as much a part of me as I am. A fire burns low in my belly with no hope of being extinguished. He caught me off guard. Ripped away my defenses and ate me up, leaving only a pile of half-masticated bile behind.

I'm barely getting through the days. I've canceled most of my private appointments and I'm doing the bare minimum at NEL. I can't seem to reel it in, to focus. My mind is a whirlwind of what-ifs.

Nora's noticed.

I can see it in her eyes. She's concerned. Every morning, it takes all my effort to quell my anxiety that today could be the end of my career, and I need to do something, anything. I'm waiting for the final blow.

The knock-out.

I avoid her at NEL, coming and going during off-hours when I know she likely won't be there. I can't avoid her forever but I'm a terrible liar and I don't think I could lie to her.

The humidity is oppressive. I switch on the air conditioner in my room and holler, “Flash, come here buddy.”

I wait at the top of the stairs for the telltale click, click, click of his nails before heading into my room.

Flash hobbles in and it strikes me that he’s getting old.

Tears prick at my eyes. I can’t afford to lose anything else.

I pet his ears and give him a good back scratch before hoisting all seventy pounds of him onto the bed.

I spread the wadded-up ball of paper out until it’s nearly smooth. To date, this might qualify as my weakest moment.

I fished the crumpled letter from the trash can when I arrived home from work today. I left it crumpled on the table while I ate. Stared at it as though it was Pandora’s Box. I watched TV after dinner—avoiding the news, giving the papers the side eye from the living room.

An electric charge shot up my arm when I picked them up. Contaminated, my eyes closed, letting the poisonous memories sweep through me—fill me up as I walked upstairs. I let deviant desires swell as I crawled into bed.

And here I am, blankly staring at the wrinkled pages in my lap. I could turn my lamp off, push the pages off the bed, allowing them to flutter out of sight.

But I can’t. My willpower is feeble and waning every second that ticks by. The little wicked flame he put inside me kindled by his handwriting.

I want to stress that it wasn't just sexual for me. I adored watching all of you, not just those intimate moments that would follow. There was a time you were at home—alone. At this point, I'd made contact. Become your patient. Seeing you only once a week wasn't enough for me. I craved more.

I was outside your house—watching from my parked car as you did dishes at your kitchen sink. You must have had music on because your lips were moving—at least, that's what I assumed. A content smile played on your lips and then you switched off the light.

I was crestfallen.

I noticed a dim light flick on outside. I exited my car and walked around your block until—from the back street tree line—I could see your fenced-in yard. I swear my soul breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of you again.

Glass of wine in hand, you paced the back deck. A deep howl ripped through the quiet night and I watched as you lurched toward the deck rail and cursed.

Following your line of sight, I saw a fat, sausage-like dog whose big droopy ears nearly touched the grass at his paws. He bayed again. You hushed him—again.

But he wasn't listening and your face contorted into a myriad of frustration and confusion as you set your wine glass on the deck rail and made your way down to the dog.

Do you remember that night Robin?

I had tears in my eyes and wanted nothing more than to help you in the moment, but of course, that wouldn't have been smart. You didn't know you were being watched.

You crouched down to his level and unclipped his collar. Your brow wrinkled as you inspected it.

Robin, you barked at it! And then when nothing happened, you pressed it to your neck. Now do you remember?

My gut twisted with the need to aid you, but the tears in my eyes—the tightness in my chest from trying not to laugh prevented me from taking even a single step toward you.

It was moments like that, that I covet; that kept me watching and coming back for more. You can learn so much more about a person in those moments than others.

Grace or lack thereof, is noticed in the handling of those mortifying moments. The ones where you're walking down a sidewalk and trip over nothing.

Does the person drop their chin and plow forward, pretending, mortified, that it didn't happen? Do they look back over their shoulder to look for the offending non-existent cause? Or maybe they have a good laugh at themselves and carry on.

Those who hide (or try to) those embarrassing gaffs, in my opinion, can't be trusted. They're hiding more—something deeper.

But those who can laugh at themselves, who can acknowledge their guffaw...those are the people in life you want to surround yourself with.

You're one of those people.

I set the stack of pages on my nightstand.

I turn off the light after a single page, and I sink into the mattress.

Tears that shouldn't come do—hot and free, like steam rising from a geyser.

Flash stretches out on the bed, snoring his deep, rumbling snores and twitching the way he does when he dreams of chasing something.

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Four

Past

I 'm stuck on an endless Cooper loop at home.

Hardly anyone ever gives up their deep dark secret during session one, but there he'd sat, gaze intent on me, admitting that he does watch people—illegally.

His demeanor was too cool, too rehearsed.

I half-wonder if he said it simply for shock value.

His therapist has not returned my call. I roll my shoulders, trying to relieve the building tension.

Flash runs through the backyard, bellowing at a squirrel or chipmunk as I pace the porch, glass of wine in hand.

Something's off, has my hackles up. My new patient speaks to me like he's taunting me rather than unloading a burden or confession, and I'm completely intrigued.

It seemed almost as if he waited till his time was up to drop his bomb, that he purposely left me with a cliffhanger.

Maybe it was a test if I'd allow him to stay longer to keep talking? I try to unweave his motives but thinking his name outside the office feels odd. The way he looked at

me was atypical of a new patient.

Too acute. Laden with hidden intents.

Saying his name out loud feels positively taboo on my tongue.

Lost in my own thoughts, it takes a moment for me to realize that Flash shouldn't be barking.

I just bought him that damn bark collar, the one that blasts citronella near his snout in hopes it will keep him from annoying the neighbors—and myself—with his loud baying bark.

One nosey neighbor promised to call animal control and file a complaint if there's one more Flash infraction.

“Flash! No bark!” I holler at him.

I set my wine glass on the railing and stomp down the three deck stairs to him. He gives me a growl—harmless but loud—and nothing happens. The vibration is supposed to trigger the sensor and spray the citronella but it's not working.

I remove the collar and Flash trots away from me.

“You're the worst,” I grumble while fiddling with the collar. The fluid level looks right. The little LED indicator is on, so it must be charged. I glance around, even though my yard is fenced in and no one can see me, before I bark at the collar.

I don't know how else to test the damned thing. I try again, a little louder, but nothing happens.

These are the times I wish I had a man in my life. I'm not terribly technology savvy and this collar was supposed to be an easy way to defeat a stubborn dog.

It occurs to me that barking at it from afar probably isn't registering the vibration trigger. My options are to simply give up or put it against my throat. I'm not willing to give up. This collar cost a pretty penny and was guaranteed to make a difference.

Sucking in a deep breath I press the prongs to my throat.

Flash is on to another squirrel and another round of barking.

Out of habit, I holler at him to stop and immediately get a blast of citronella to the face.

Instantly my eyes water and I cough before my hand falls away—collar with it.

Another cloud of citronella squirts into my nose on its descent.

Flash is still barking as I drop to my knees, trying to suck in a breath.

"Robin? Robin! I'm calling animal control," my neighbor's voice cuts through the air.

I rasp out for Flash to shut up between coughs, but he's relentless. A peel of baritone laughter echoes in the night as I drop on my back into the grass, eyes burning, nose running, and chest heaving, while I spit and sputter.

Mortified, I wonder if my neighbor peeked over the fence and saw what a complete horror show this was.

Flash barks again, my eyes bug out of my head as I choke out a yell at him. This time

he stops. With an air of I-told-you-so, he walks to me, sniffs and licks my face, then lies down next to the discarded inhumane collar of death and growls at it.

Lying under the burgeoning stars in the sky, I burst out laughing. There are days not even I can believe the things that happen to me. I snag the collar from Flash's glare and fling it into the bushes when I sit up.

"Come on Flash, we don't need that kind of crap in our life."

He lifts his droopy eyes at me in solidarity and follows me inside.

Pen clamped between my teeth I shuffle into NEL's recreation room, overstuffed tote weighing down one shoulder. I don't need anyone's help zipping or unzipping my dress. I go out solo. I pay my own tab, with my own cash. The very word alone sounds sad—even to me.

We crave companionship when sometimes what we really need is a reset. Knowing these facts doesn't make me immune to societal standards. I'm in my forties. I'm supposed to have or want someone by my side.

And I do.

I try.

I date when I can, but at my age, finding someone truly compatible seems like an added time-intensive challenge to my already busy life.

Nora's in the corner, palm waving through the air at me. I do my best to smile around the pen in my mouth. My bag's sliding down my arm, headed for a solid thunk on the

floor as she approaches.

Her hands are outstretched. “What can I help with?”

I remove the pen from my lips and grin at her. “Gravity beat you to it.”

Shaking her head, she says, “When are you going to ask for help?”

I chuckle. “Right now, actually, before I forget.”

A groomed eyebrow arches. “Is this one of your attempts at a joke?”

“No,” I say, “I have a speaking engagement next month, the tenth I think, in Bathon and I don’t want to stay at the hotel. You mentioned Liam took you to a cute place a while back. Where was that?”

Her eyes light up. “It’s only twenty minutes from there.

You’ll be enamored with it.” She claps her hands together.

“You could use some time off. Stay the whole weekend. There are Adirondack chairs on the wrap-around porch that all face the ocean. I swear you could taste the salt water. It’s just what you—”

“Nora. It’s for work. Just a night,” I cut her short.

Her face falls and a pout emerges. “If you’re worried about Flash, he can come stay with me and Liam for the weekend.”

I glance at the clock behind her and realize I’m late for the group session I’m running. “It’s not that. Will you email me the contact info? I’m late to group.”

She flips her fiery hair over her shoulder while shooting me a pointed look. I assume that's a yes, as I head toward the meeting room.

“Dr. R!”

I look over my shoulder at her.

“I’ll do you one better,” she says. But she’s wearing that duplicitous look she so often gave me when we first met. I don’t have time to inquire; I plaster a smile on my face and cross the threshold of the meeting room to welcome the attendees.

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Five

Present

Flash gives me the most pathetic please-don't-go face I've ever witnessed.

I give him a quick pet between the ears and remind him I'll be home shortly.

It's only a dinner date, but the poor dog doesn't understand that when I leave the house it's not for eternity.

And he's well versed in showing me just how pissed off and anxious my leaving him at home makes him in the form of household trash chewed and strewn all over the place upon my return.

But tonight, I stuck the trash cans on tables so the little devil can't leave me any surprises. I'm already dreading this date. But when Aubry Clark sets you up on a blind date, you simply don't say no.

You slap a smile on your face and graciously agree because she has a heart of gold.

All my NEL girls do.

I wonder how much longer I can hold out. It's hard enough keeping the questions from flying at work. I don't know what the next move is or the one after that.

I'm out of my element, flying by the seat of my pants. How much longer will it be

before I feel like myself again? When will the fear of being caught subside?

It's been months now.

So when Aubry force-fed a blind date down my throat, I said yes—too readily—in hopes of keeping her and Nora from asking me what was wrong.

You have to give to get. Be willing to lose—except the only thing I have left to lose now is my livelihood and reputation.

Losing my career poses a real problem: lack of income. The thought of starting over somewhere new, as something else, in a lackluster job—terrifies me. My entire life has been spent working up to the prestige and reputation that I have. I covet the work I do. The help I'm able to provide.

I check my face and hair in the mirror next to the front door, wipe the smudge of lipstick from my front tooth, and decide this is as good as it gets. My heart's not in it anyway.

I don't want to date anyone else.

I clutch the strap of my purse and square my shoulders as I head out the door.

You're probably wondering why I'm writing this all down.

Shame and dread are formidable adversaries.

Once you carry them with you, they become an ever-present dull ache that pounds mercilessly inside you. I've carried my devils my whole life it seems, but you—you don't deserve those same demons.

I hope to slay them for you. To give you a reprieve. You deserve it.

If my words can accomplish that, then I can go on a happy man. I can accept my fate with grace.

I check my reflection in the window of the restaurant before stepping inside. My fingers nervously smooth down the front of my dress, as if the act might somehow armor me for the evening ahead.

It won't.

The hostess, a young woman with a tight bun and crisp black uniform, guides me to a secluded corner table. There he is—Sam.

Middle-aged, handsome in a department-store-catalog-conventional kind of way. His button-down shirt is meticulously ironed, each crease sharp enough to cut, and he wears a polite smile that stops just short of lighting up his eyes.

He stands when he sees me, adjusting his glasses. "Robin?"

"That's me," I say, forcing a smile as I slide into my seat.

Sam launches into small talk with the ease of someone who's rehearsed it a thousand times.

He mentions the unseasonably warm weather, details his tedious daily commute, and shares a tidbit about his golden retriever, Billy, whose antics seem to be the highlight of his anecdotes.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a dog person. I love Flash.

But I don't make my dog my entire personality.

I sip my water, nodding at intervals that feel appropriate, but my thoughts wander. My mind drifts. I wonder if he's ever done anything reckless in his life. If he's ever touched the edge of chaos and liked it. Something tells me no.

"I don't really drink," he says, as I glance at the wine list. "I like to keep a clear head."

Of course, he doesn't. I stifle the sigh longing to erupt.

I order a glass anyway. He tells me about his job—some kind of finance, something stable, something utterly soul-crushing to listen to. I make the occasional sound of acknowledgment, twirling the stem of my wineglass between my fingers.

The last portion of the letter I read before I left taints my date. Accept his fate with grace, my ass.

"You're quiet," Sam observes, smiling like that's charming.

I glance up at him, really seeing him now.

He's perfectly fine. Safe. Predictable. He'll never break my heart. Never make my blood run hot. Never drive me to madness with a single glance.

I take another sip of wine and summon a polite smile. "Tell me more about Billy."

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Six

Past

“C ooper, hello.”

He takes my hand in his again, and I don't miss the way his thumb grazes quickly over the back of my hand before releasing it. “Take a seat. I'll be right with you.”

At my desk, I watch from my peripheral as he adjusts his shirt before entering. He walks in, reads the room as if taking the temperature before adjusting his proverbial thermostat. An emotional contortionist, turning on and off the ability to care or have morals, perhaps.

I grab my notepad and a pen. He adjusts his jeans before crossing his legs. He's pulled together. Neatly dressed and attractive. He's watching me unabashedly as I sit across from him. My skin heats under his gaze.

“We ran out of time last week. I'd like to dive deeper into what you said.”

“What did I say, Doc?”

I shoot him a look that says ‘respect is appreciated.’ He casts his eyes down in acknowledgment. “You were saying that you do act on your desires. That you watch people.”

“Yes. That's it.”

I shake my head. “No. That’s illegal. There are consequences to stalking and peeping on people’s intimate moments.”

He throws his hands up to stop me. “I don’t stalk.

And I watch regardless of sex. It’s not watching the act of sex that gives me the rush.

I don’t...not watch those...people.” He’s choosing his words carefully.

I make a note to bring up honesty. I need to suss out whether he knows the difference between right and wrong before I can devise an action plan for his therapy.

“I watch to watch. To be privy to private moments.” His gaze is so severe that I feel pinned to my seat.

“I watch it all. The fights, watching TV, yes, sometimes sex, but really, it’s just the act of watching a person, or people, alone in a space they think they’re safe. ”

“Safe?”

“Yes, alone. Do they change from work clothes to pajamas? Do they brush their teeth before bed? Little secrets I get to learn about them. The kind of secrets they don’t show publicly.”

My pen flies across the pad: words, little notes to help me talk to him.

“Sometimes I think deviant behavior is genetic. In my blood.”

I look up. His eyes sparkle. “Why do you say that? Did your Father teach you this behavior?”

He laughs too loudly and shakes his head. “No. My parents were...simple people. High school sweethearts destined to never amount to anything more than they did.”

He rubs his hands on his thighs. Slowly. Deliberately. When I move my gaze from that action to his face, he’s grinning. I draw a breath through my nostrils, slowly, to ward off the sudden feeling that I’m blushing.

Attraction is a tricky thing, bodies reacting without consent from the brain. I can find him arousing without needing to act on it, I remind myself.

“Then why say that?” I ask.

He takes a deep breath for a moment and closes his eyes tightly before opening them again. I use the moment to quell the new found fire in my veins from the way he looks at me.

“My uncle. My mother’s brother. He was arrested when I was a kid. I think he did things to a girl—at least, that was the town gossip. I don’t really know much. My parents didn’t talk about it.”

I nod. “And your brother.” I glance at my notes to double-check I got that right. “Is he also deviant in any way?”

Cooper shakes his head. “I was eight when he was born. I don’t really remember that time well. I don’t even remember my mother being pregnant. Just him as a fat baby. He’s as boring and vanilla as they come.”

Tilting my head, I jot down more notes. “That’s odd. Not remembering your mother being pregnant. At seven or eight, it’s typical to have distinct memories of big family changes, like a new sibling or divorce or death.”

His bottom lip is caught between his teeth, a devilish look in his eye as he shrugs. Heat creeps up my chest, fast as I tuck an errant curl behind my ear.

“Nope. I didn’t go to the hospital either. I just remember coming home from school one day, and there he was. Little, crying, and chubby.”

“Did your mother breastfeed him?”

“Why?” he asks. I wait, impatient for him to answer. His forehead wrinkles in thought. “No. I don’t remember her doing that. Just a bottle.”

“That seems rather in line with the repressed atmosphere in the house.”

“Are you trying to find something wrong with him?” he asks.

“Not at all. Just trying to get the big picture so we can work on you accurately.” I lean back, cross my legs, and rest my pad on my knee. Cooper licks his lips.

“Have you ever stopped to wonder about your actions? The price you’ll have to pay if your proclivities come to light?”

His eyes narrow slightly. “I didn’t, until you.”

“You mean until now,” I say.

“That’s what I said.” His head is cocked, eyes roaming my body.

Not in a lewd manner, more... genuinely curious, in a memorizing-me kind of way.

His posture relaxed, I’d say he’s even content.

After you gain someone's trust and confidence, you have to then exhibit enormous patience with them.

I believe he's hiding something. Leaving a piece of the story out on purpose.

I bookmark the thought, I just need to keep him talking.

I take a sip of water from the glass on my side table. It's warm and does little to scare off the itch in my throat, the heat in my cheeks or the tightness coiling low in my belly.

"Let's regroup. I'd like to talk more about your current situation. How do you watch people?"

The color drains from his face slightly, and I think, Ah-ha! Now we're cooking. But he schools his expression quickly—like a pro.

"How I watch doesn't matter." His mouth barely moves as he grits the words out.

My pen hovers over the page. Making eye contact, I ask, "Then what does?"

He tilts his head backward, exposing his throat. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. "When the people I watch are intimate...it's...fascinating. A carnal dance of pleasure and pain."

I lick my lips. "Cooper, are you a virgin?"

"No, are you?" His response is quick and flippant. A defense tactic. I clear my throat.

"Continue please." I choose to keep the modicum of trust I've established and let that comment slide—for now.

“Have you ever watched anyone before?” I shake my head. “It’s not like pornography.”

“Do you watch a lot of that?”

“I did before I watched people. I thought maybe that’s all I wanted.

Was to see sex. But it’s so much more. A couple, for instance, just last week.

They didn’t do anything remarkable. They simply shared a room together.

Talked about their children. The man, the way he rubbed the woman’s arm so tenderly, while they talked.

It was an act of worship. He had nothing to prove to anyone but her, and in private he did just that.

But I saw them in public, and he was standoffish toward her, almost cruel.

To be privy to that tenderness it’s exhilarating.

Or even the woman who brought a stranger home, to watch the performance she put on, so calculated and practiced, to entice him into bed with her. Fascinating.”

“Do you masturbate while you watch?” I ask.

“Sometimes. Not always, and not all that often. There are some that I watch whose passion is so arresting that I can’t help myself. I want to participate but can’t, and that is the easiest way to achieve the desired effect.”

“You mean when you watch people have intercourse?”

He nods. He is not blushing. His shoulders are not slumped. He is not ashamed of admitting this.

“How often do you watch people? How do you pick them?”

“Almost nightly. Sometimes I’m busy and can’t watch, but on weeknights, almost nightly.”

“Did your old therapist discuss sexual addiction with you?”

“No.”

I make a mental note to reach out to his other therapist. Cooper is cunning and clever and she might have good insight for me. I use the capped end of my pen to itch my forearm.

“Take you, for instance,” he says.

My eyes snap to him instantly. I shift in my seat, ready to stand and have him leave if this escalates to a place I’m not comfortable.

“When you go home at night, in your house, do you do things that you wouldn’t do in public in the light of day?”

I let out a silent sigh of relief and nod. “Of course, we all do. That’s natural.”

“Yes, it is, but I like to see those little things people keep sectioned off. We’re not that different are we? You get to hear all about them, and I watch them.”

The clock on the wall is five minutes fast, but I’ve never been so happy to have it read four pm.

“We’ve got to stop for today. Next week at the same time?” I ask, nodding to the clock.

Cooper stands and stretches, exposing a sliver of skin between his jeans and shirt and I have to force myself to look away.

Following suit, I stand and give him my best professional smile.

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Seven

Present

“O k, time to come clean.”

I startle and turn to face Nora.

“What?”

“You’ve been so...off lately,” she says, watching me carefully.

I slash my hand through the air dismissively. “Nonsense.”

Her eyes narrow as she brushes her red locks over her shoulder. “Dr. R, come on. What’s up?”

A deep sigh rushes from my mouth. “Honestly, Nora, nothing.”

Nora sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, mulling over my response. “Was it the date?”

I blow out a breath, then grin at her. “The date was a bust. I’m too chicken to tell Aubry, though.”

Nora giggles. Liam blows in through the center doors, and, blissfully, Nora is distracted. Liam, in all his intense brooding, stalks right up to us and wraps Nora in a

possessive hug. She melts into him.

“Liam,” I say. He raises his chin at me in greeting before looking back down at her, all admiration and barely hidden affection.

“Secret’s safe with me,” Nora says, “I won’t tell Aubry anything.”

I grab my bag from the floor. “Thank you. Let’s just hope she doesn’t try again,” I say, hoping my tone is playful.

“You deserve love,” Nora calls to me as I head out. My stomach clenches. A pang of grief sweeps through me.

I stop and glance at her over my shoulder. “Thank you,” I say.

At home, after situating Flash with food and ample outdoor time, I pull another page from the stack and read it.

I don’t have long.

I have a standing appointment in an hour.

I find with so much time on my hands that I miss things. I have entirely too much time to remember, to think, to look back and wonder—or regret. I miss the sound of your pen scratching paper. Of your wise and watchful eyes.

The pink tint to your cheeks when you tried to hide your arousal. At night, in the solitude of sleep, I picture you that very first time I had you.

In our session that day, you tried to get me to acknowledge right and wrong. I watched you trying so hard to show me the boundaries and to willingly step inside

them, and I toyed with you. Pushing your buttons on purpose. Playing the game. Cut and dry, black and white—is there even such a thing?

I did it just to get a rise out of you. To watch your cheeks redden with frustration.

To see the blood pound in your veins. For the elite feeling that I, alone, got your blood rushing.

In the moment it felt good. I brimmed with pride.

But as you ushered me out of your office, I was hit by a wave of...

being underwhelmed. Getting a rise out of you simply wasn't going to satisfy the itch and I made a rash decision.

The office door swung wide with my force, slapping the opposite wall. I had to see how far I could take it.

How far I was willing to go.

How far you were willing to go.

Our two worlds collided. Whether it was an ending or a beginning, I had no way of knowing, and as you know, I like being in the know. I took hold of the lacy collar of your shirt and pulled you to me.

Robin, there was fire in those eyes, framed with heavy black lashes, as I barely pressed my lips to yours. I could taste the hesitation on your lips; the taboo desire.

That taste...it was incredible.

Thoughts twisted in my head as I kissed you.

I wanted to watch you with someone else.

I wanted to see how they gave you pleasure, how you accepted it. I wanted to be that man (or woman) as well.

I wanted to watch but also to participate. Such a foreign feeling for me then. I became insatiable, but I knew you would need to be eased into my fantasy world. I knew I needed to coddle you. Create the illusion of safety. There were already too many hurdles. Patient/ Doctor. Mid-Forties/Thirty.

And one we never anticipated.

You shoved me. Forcefully. Passionately, away from you.

Your chest heaved. You're breasts straining the blouse you wore. I can recall every detail of that moment. Fear coursed through me. Would this be the end?

Would you lecture me about boundaries, appropriateness, and the like, before shutting the door in my face and never speaking to me again?

I walk through the sterile halls of the psychiatric facility, the faint scent of antiseptic mixing with the dull hum of fluorescent lights.

It's been years since I've been here, but it feels like no time at all.

My heart tightens with every step, every echo of my shoes on the linoleum floor.

I know exactly where I'm going, even though the path feels unfamiliar.

The last time I came to visit Amelia, she wasn't as medicated. I remember her eyes—so full of life, before they dulled.

Now, the quiet droning of the staff and the muffled sounds of distant voices are the only things that fill the space between me and her room.

I stop just outside the door, my breath catching in my chest. I know she's in there. I know what I'll find: Amelia, sitting in that chair by the window, her body frail, eyes glassy.

She's lost so much weight. There's a dullness to her that wasn't there before. The girl who used to sparkle with life, the girl who was always so bright and untouchable, is gone.

She's just... a shadow now.

I knock softly.

There's no response, not even a twitch. But I know she hears me. She always did, even when she didn't show it.

I open the door slowly, stepping inside. The room is quiet, save for the soft hum of machinery that monitors her condition. She's medicated to the point where her eyes are unfocused, her lips parted slightly as if she's dreaming.

But she's not. She's not dreaming; she's just existing.

That's what they've reduced her to—existing.

I sit down next to her, careful not to disturb her.

She smells like sterile linens and antiseptic, but underneath it, there's a trace of her perfume—the one she used to wear when we were in college.

It's the faintest whisper of who she once was.

I wonder who's visited her, who brought her perfume and applied it.

"Amelia," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. "I've been thinking about you... about everything."

She doesn't respond. She never does.

"It's not fair." The words come out hoarse, edged with all the bitterness I've been suffocating on for months.

I swallow hard, my eyes burning with unshed tears.

"I understand now," I say, my voice cracking a little.

"I think I understand why you did what you did, why you stayed with him. I understand falling for someone... someone who's wrong, someone who can't love the way they should because their love is tainted.

Their needs are twisted, and you believe in them anyway.

You convince yourself that if you give them everything, they'll change.

They'll become the person you hope for."

I pause, my hands trembling slightly in my lap.

“I used to judge you, Amelia. I used to think that you were weak, that you didn’t know better, but I was wrong.

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t understand.

I couldn’t. I couldn’t have known, not until I—” I break off, my chest aching with the weight of the confession I’m finally able to make.

“Not until I fell for someone who wasn’t capable of love either. ”

The words hang in the air, heavy and unresolved. I want to tell her more, to spill out every regret, every realization that’s come to me in the years since I’ve been coming here, but I can’t.

She can’t hear it, not now. Not when she’s so far gone.

“I kept your secret, Amelia. I kept it because I thought you’d be okay.

I thought you had control. I thought you would walk away from him on your own, but you didn’t.

And I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t even try.

I let you disappear, and I let them do this to you.

I let you become this version of yourself...

someone who doesn’t even recognize her own reflection. ”

A single tear escapes, slipping down my cheek, but I wipe it away quickly, determined not to break down in front of her. She’s been through so much. She

doesn't need to see me weak, not now.

"I could've saved you, I know that now. I could've told them.

I should've told them where you were. I should've called the police, even if you begged me not to.

Maybe things would've been different. Maybe...

just maybe, this wouldn't have been your reality.

You wouldn't be here, medicated, lost to the world. I'm so sorry. I failed you."

I press my palms together, my fingers digging into my skin. The guilt surges like a tidal wave. The weight of the years without her has been unbearable, and I wish—God, I wish I could go back and change everything. I wish I could have saved her.

But the past is set. It's done. Amelia is a broken shell, and there's nothing I can do to fix her. I wonder if she'll ever know how much I wish I could've saved her, if she'll ever understand how sorry I am. How she shaped my life in so many different ways.

"I understand now, Amelia. I understand how it feels to lose yourself to someone who doesn't deserve you. I understand how you thought you could fix him, change him, save him with your love... but it doesn't work that way, does it? Some people aren't capable of love. Not the way we need them to be."

I reach out and take her hand. It lies limp in mine, warm but unresponsive. I take a deep breath, steadying myself before I speak again.

"I won't make the same mistake again. I won't stand by and let someone destroy

themselves like you did. I won't let myself drown in the illusion of love when it's really just a desire to be wanted." The words sit between us like static, buzzing in the fluorescent overhead light.

I sit with her in silence for a long time, the only sound in the room my shaky breath and the soft hum of the machines. I wish I could do more. I wish I could make it all better. But I can't. I just can't.

And so, I leave her there—this girl I failed, this girl who was once my best friend.

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Eight

Past

I Googled your event for the dates. I booked you a room with a view, as they say, at Ocean Voyeur.

Check in Friday evening, checkout Sunday morning.

It's on Liam and me. We appreciate all the hard work and hours you give to NEL.

We've already paid in full. Oops! Bring Flash to the center on your way out of town, he's staying with us.

Best, Nora

P.S. Savor it! You deserve some yutori!

P.P.S. Make sure you try the Gossling Arms White wine. It will change your life.

I now need to look up yutori. I let a sigh leak out through pursed lips. I should have known better. Nora is just the sort to do this to me. I wanted to drive up the morning of the event, do the speaking engagement, stay the night, and be home the next morning. A quick twenty-four-hour jaunt.

I should feel appreciation, gratefulness. I'm being petulant, and I know it. I rub the end of Flash's ear between my index finger and thumb while I ask Google what

yutori is with my free hand. His soft ear is comforting.

Yutori: the conscious act of slowing down to savor the world, creating space to relax and reflect.

Huh. Figures.

“Slowing down is the last thing I need,” I tell Flash.

He closes his eyes, soaking up the attention from where he sprawls across the couch.

The week ahead looks like a black hole on my calendar, and Nora’s generous escape hatch isn’t as enticing as it should be.

But I can already hear her voice in my head, bemused and persistent, reminding me to take more time for myself lest I implode—a cautionary tale she seems determined to avoid.

Ocean Voyeur, though. The name alone suggests indolence and pier-side extravagance.

I hit REPLY:

Subject: Re: Your weekend getaway

Dear Nora,

What can I possibly say? Thank you isn’t enough. You overwhelm me! I’m sure I’ll enjoy the it once I get there. I’m already bracing myself for the scandalous opulence of Ocean Voyeur.

Flash will be excited about his own mini-break with you and Liam!

Best, Dr. R

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Nine

Present

The air is chokingly heavy with moisture as I give myself permission to read just a little more. The heat wraps around me, thick and stifling, making my shirt cling to my skin. A drop of sweat rolls down the back of my neck, but I barely notice.

Three more missed calls from an unknown number.

I clear the notifications with a swipe of my thumb.

I swear it's as if someone gave out my number recently, and now everyone selling anything imaginable is calling me all day long. Extended warranties, surveys, donations—relentless.

I shift my focus back to the letter in my lap, the edges of the paper curled from use, from the way I've folded and unfolded it too many times. The ink bold, the words hit hard.

My throat tightens.

Nothing beautiful comes without a fight, but I struggle to see the beauty in anything these last months. And you were a fight, Robin. I fought for every forward step we took together. But it was worth it, don't you think?

I started a fire just to watch it burn. That's how it felt in the beginning.

But once it raged, it engulfed me.

And I liked it.

The screen of my phone lights up again. Unknown number. Again.

I exhale sharply, frustration curling in my chest. Maybe if I just answer and tell them to stop, they'll actually leave me alone.

I give in and swipe to accept.

“Hello?”

A beat of silence. Then—

“You have a collect call from—” A robotic voice. My stomach drops, my pulse spiking so fast it makes me dizzy. “—an inmate at—”

I hang up.

The phone shakes in my hand as I stare at the screen, my breathing shallow.

No. No, no, no.

I set the phone down, let it slide away from me before I can see it ring again.

The fan in the corner shifts back and forth, trailing lazy circles of warmth that only stir the heavy air without cooling it.

The futility of its movement is somehow fitting.

I lean my head back against the couch and close my eyes, trying to breathe around everything pressing in on me.

The call, the words on the page, thrum in my veins like an addiction, dangerous but impossible to refuse.

Ten

Past

We're four sessions deep and I fear I'm in trouble. The days that Cooper comes, I find myself dressing to impress, anticipation coursing through me until our time slot. He's charming, devilishly handsome, and seemingly pulled together. Try as I might, I can't shake him from my thoughts.

His therapist still has not responded to any of my calls, emails, or requests. A very curious thing in the world of psychiatry professionals. It raises red flags.

I glance at my word-of-the-day calendar from Nora.

Today's word—horripilation: the erection of hairs on the skin due to cold, fear, or excitement.

An interesting one. A definition I'd always chalked up to goosebumps. But when Cooper struts through my door, I feel horripilation ripple through my body.

He takes his seat. Watches me. I clench my thighs slightly from the intensity of it.

"Are you always this quiet?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. He stares. I'm so irritated with this whole silent business I could scream.

Cooper lounges in the chair across from me, all slow, indolent confidence, his long legs spread just enough to make it clear that control belongs to him—at least that's what he thinks.

I know better.

I rest my notebook against my lap, keeping my expression neutral.

“Why don't we start with the homework I gave you?”

A slow, knowing smile curves his lips. “You mean the part where I was supposed to resist temptation?” He exhales a quiet chuckle, shaking his head. “Dr. Richardson, I think you already know the answer.”

Of course I do.

I knew before he even walked in, before he sank into that chair like he owned the room, like he owned me . Cooper doesn't resist. He relishes. He drinks in every forbidden moment like a man parched for sin.

I cross my legs, the shift in posture subtle, but his sharp gaze tracks it anyway. He notices everything.

I clear my throat. “Tell me what happened.”

He leans forward slightly, forearms resting on his knees. There's something about the way he looks at me—intimate, assessing, like he's undressing me one thought at a time.

“There was a couple.” His voice is rich, low, the kind of tone that slides over skin like silk. “Celebrating their anniversary.” He tilts his head, a challenge dancing in his dark

eyes. “You’re blushing, Doc.”

I refuse to react. I refuse to let him win.

“Dr. R, please. We’ve gone over this. Keep going,” I say evenly.

He does. In explicit detail.

The way the woman leaned into her lover’s touch, her parted lips, the flush of her skin. How he lingered in the shadows, close enough to feel the heat of their stolen moment. How it thrilled him.

His voice is unhurried, deliberate, each word a provocation. He watches me as he speaks, waiting for the slip, the crack in my professional armor.

I won’t give him that satisfaction.

But my pulse betrays me, a traitorous thud against my ribs.

Cooper notices. He always notices.

“You disapprove.” It’s not a question. It’s a dare.

I set my notebook aside, meeting his gaze head-on. “That’s not what this is about.”

He smirks. “No? Then what is this about, Dr. Richardson?”

I lean in just enough to remind him that I set the pace here. I control this space. “It’s about why you need to watch. Why you need to stand in the dark while others burn.”

His smirk falters. Just for a second.

It's a tiny victory, but I take it.

Cooper exhales a quiet laugh, sitting back. "You're good," he murmurs, a grudging respect in his tone.

I don't answer. I just pick up my pen and make a note.

His smile widens. "Did I get under your skin, Doc?"

Cooper Burick has been beyond difficult.

Raising a brow at him, I say, "That's our time."

Cooper looks at the clock on the wall, then checks his own watch. "I have five more minutes." I wonder if Cooper's innards are as tightly wound as his body language suggests at the moment. I've hit a nerve.

"We'll pick this up next session."

I watch as he stands, in a rather furious tizzy, and struts out of the office, slamming the door behind him. Stretching my back, shoulders, and neck feels good. I set my pad, pen atop it on the corner of my desk.

He likes to call his disease a proclivity. I prefer to call things what they are—a disorder of sexual preference, as the DSM-IV dictates. And that's where I lost him today. I need to find an alternate route to get through to him so acceptance can happen. We can't make much progress without it.

Footsteps clomp in the waiting room. I tut, roll my eyes behind the safety of my closed door before reaching for the handle to see what's keeping him here. He's the last patient of the day and I'm ready to go home.

He throws open the door. Shocked, I stay glued to my spot—hand still reaching for the knob. He pulls me up by my shirt collar. His lips hover over mine, a whisper of warmth, a promise of sin. The air between us crackles, heavy with something I don't fully understand but both of us feel.

But then his mouth brushes mine, barely there, just enough for me to taste him.

I inhale sharply. I taste hesitation—mine. I taste hunger—his. The wrongness of this should stop me, but it doesn't. Instead, it only makes me burn hotter.

His fingers tighten against the lace of my collar, like he knows I might slip through them, might wake up and break this moment before it fully ignites.

It is unexpected and startling, but I'm stunned into momentary submission at the feel of warm, soft lips on mine.

He's gentle in the way he moves his mouth against mine. Almost reverent. The same way he looks at me during our sessions.

A hand curls around the back of my neck, pulling me flush against him. Wrong, wrong, wrong, right? An electric current pulses in my veins, and my mouth behaves without my brain's permission and kisses him back.

His grip on me, the vigor with which he tastes me, makes me feel like a weak-kneed school-girl. Replete with the overwhelming out-of-control hormones that afflict them. I clutch at his shirt.

He tastes of mint and lemon. The way he ghosts his lips over mine sends little shockwaves through me and I don't mean to, but I deepen our connection. I kiss him hard and with purpose. I melt into his warm, strong frame. I'm delirious with pleasure.

Until my brain kicks in and reminds me of the thousand reasons that this is, oh, so wrong.

I shove him, breaking the kiss. My chest heaving with exertion.

The wetness between my legs a sinful reminder of a boundary crossed.

He grins, grips the doorframe with his palm, and leans in again.

A rush of air abandons me as I duck under his arm planted against the doorframe, pivot, and stand beside him to avoid his lips on mine again.

“Can I ask you something as a friend?” he pants.

Ignoring the tightness of my nipples, the invisible cord pulled taut from breasts to pelvis, I say, “I’m not your friend. I’m your therapist.” His eyes roam freely over my body. Heat creeps up my neck, and my skin feels electric.

“But...that kiss.” His lips pull upward in a mischievous smirk.

I throw my hands in the air. “Let’s not make this harder than it needs to be.

” I feel like I’ve bitten off more than I can chew with Cooper Burick.

Standing, I wave my hands in front of me and take three steps back.

“We can’t continue, Cooper. I can’t continue to see you.

” He’s an inch from my face before I have time to take another step.

“I’m going to need you to change your mind.” His tongue darts out, wetting his lips.

“No,” I say firmly.

He leans toward my face a centimeter closer. I can feel his breath now. The shine on his lips a devious invitation to just give in. To stop fighting my arousal. For once, to break a rule.

“I’m not asking, Robin.” My name on his lips sounds sinfully inviting. I steel myself. I cement the right and lawful course of action in my bones.

“Unacceptable.” My voice is faint, but lacking real conviction. His nostrils flare as my words hang in the space between us.

He waves away my words as if they’re inconsequential and straightens. But Cooper is patient. He doesn’t push, doesn’t demand. He takes another step closer. His fingers clutch the collar of my blouse as he leans in. His head dips to mine.

His lips skim my cheek, and I swear electricity sparks everywhere they touch. They inch toward my lips.

He lets me feel it first—the heat, the taboo, the desire curling between us like a rising flame. His lips part against mine, not forceful but persuasive, coaxing, creating the illusion of safety while every fiber of my being screams that nothing about this is safe.

And maybe that’s why I want it so badly.

Then he speaks, his voice a murmur against my lips. “I want to watch you, Robin. I want to see you.”

His words snake through me, a slow, decadent poison, curling in places I pretend don’t exist.

That should be the final straw. It should snap me out of this.

It does—but not in the way I expect.

I shove him again. Hard.

He stumbles back, eyes flashing, breath uneven. I press a hand to my chest, trying to steady the frantic rhythm of my heart, trying to remind myself who I am, what I stand for.

Cooper watches me, and for the first time since he walked through that door, I see it—the flicker of uncertainty beneath his arrogance.

I drag in a shaky breath and meet his gaze head-on. “Get out.”

His jaw tightens. “Robin—”

“Now.”

I watch as he hesitates, as his fingers twitch at his sides like he wants to reach for me again.

He doesn’t.

Instead, he gives me one last look—dark, unreadable, promising—before turning and walking out.

The moment the door closes, a deep sigh hurls from my lungs. My fingers brush my lips as if Cooper’s lips on mine still exist there. The kiss felt good, and not just because I haven’t been kissed with that much zeal in ages, but that’s what worries me most.

If there are only three truths I've learned in this life, it's this: life is a maze, love a conundrum, and trouble can find you no matter where you try to hide.

Developing an emotional attachment to a patient is a liability. It clouds judgment. It happened with Amelia, although she was never my patient, and I feel it taking root with Cooper.

This was a mistake.

A beautiful, shattering mistake.

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Eleven

Present

The clock on the wall ticks steadily, a rhythmic metronome to the quiet tension in the room.

My newest patient—Claire Reynolds, according to the intake form—sits across from me, legs crossed, hands folded neatly in her lap.

There's something too controlled about her posture, too polished.

But I push the thought aside. People come into my office with all kinds of walls up.

I fold my hands on my notepad. "What brings you in today?"

She exhales, as if steadying herself. "I struggle with...attachment."

The words feel rehearsed. My skin prickles, but I nod, keeping my expression neutral. "Attachment how?"

She tilts her head, studying me, her lips curving just slightly. "With men, mostly. Dangerous ones. The kind you know you should stay away from, but can't seem to resist."

A pulse of unease flickers through me. I shift in my chair, keeping my voice level. "That's not uncommon. Many people are drawn to relationships that mirror past

experiences. Has this been a pattern in your life?”

She leans forward slightly. “I was hoping you’d understand. Given your history.”

Something in the air shifts. Subtle but suffocating.

I grip my pen a little too tightly. Anxiety coiling tight in my throat. “My history?”

Claire’s eyes gleam, and the mask slips just for a second. “With Cooper.”

My breath catches in my throat.

I force myself to stay still, to keep my face impassive. But inside, a cold, crawling sensation works its way up my spine.

“You’re not a patient,” I say, my voice sharper now.

She doesn’t deny it. Just offers a slow, knowing smile.

“I was just wondering,” she continues, as if we’re having a casual chat over coffee. “Was it true love? Or just a tragic mistake?”

I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the floor. “This session is over.”

Claire—or whatever her real name is—doesn’t move right away. She watches me like a predator who’s just confirmed the scent of blood in the water. Then, finally, she rises.

“I just have a few questions for you, I swear,” she murmurs, smoothing her blouse as she takes a step.

I don't respond.

I can't.

My pulse is hammering, my thoughts racing.

"Out." I point to the door.

She cocks her head at me, trying to suss something out before she finally leaves.

When the door clicks shut behind her, I bury my face in my hands for a moment, forcing the air slowly in and out of my chest until the hammering of my heart begins to subside.

I sink back into my chair, exhaling shakily.

I stare numbly at the notepad. The scrawl of our brief conversation glares up at me.

With a shaking hand, I rip off the sheet of paper and crumple it into a ball.

Pushing to my feet, I retreat to my desk, pull the thick stack of pages from my bag, and read.

The descent into... us — was maddening. But it was worth the wait. You canceled our next two appointments, fraught with guilt, I'm sure. But I wouldn't couldn't let you get away. I didn't play fair.

I used my knowledge of you to win. I preyed on your desires, your wishes, your loneliness. But the biggest gift, the luckiest stroke of fate, was the day you arrived at my door.

That I could have never planned for. But I'm not there yet.

We're not there yet.

There was the afternoon with the puppies.

When NEL posted to their Facebook page that they were hosting a puppy adoption event, I knew that you would be there.

The dog lover in you is too strong to resist such a cause.

I contacted NEL under the guise of my career in journalism and volunteered to cover the event for them.

God, the memory of you when I walked in. I play it over and over in my mind on days that are...hard.

You were on the lawn, surrounded by volunteers unloading puppies. The corners of your eyes crinkled in joy. A gentle breeze. A cloudless day.

Little yelps and mewls coming from the animals circling your bare calves. You plopped to the ground, and they clawed and climbed all over you, burying their noses in your skin and hair.

I was jealous of the dogs. I wanted to know what your skin smelled like, tasted of.

Others can give joy without intending to. Simply observing the unadulterated happiness those puppies caused you made my own soul warm with joy.

That's what watching did for me. Gave me glimpses into others' ups and downs, made me feel what they felt, but also gave me pride and accomplishment, knowing I

was the only one privy to witnessing those secret moments as well.

But then you looked up. The way you cast your eyes down when you saw me — it made my heart stutter. I wanted to see your light, not your remorse.

It only spurred me on. I would do whatever it took to see your glow. To make you glow. For myself, though.

I wanted that light for me.

Directed at me.

You stood up and approached me with a formidable expression blanketing your face. I should have been nervous, but the closer you got, the more at ease and excited I felt. I was the sole focus of your attention, and it felt good.

Before you reached me, Aubry, the event coordinator, appeared in my face—blocking you. Agitation consumed me, but I hid it well—I think.

I wanted to push her aside, out of my way. Out of your way. Because when our eyes locked, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

It was live wires and lightning. I hope these memories of mine mean something to you. I hope you remember them with the same affinity that I do.

Maybe this is just one long painful babbling heartache for you—but that's not the intent.

I need you to see that there was beauty in what we were—what we are. That we offered each other a gift in this life.

A groan slips out of me. I clutch the page to my chest and rest my forehead to the cool wood of my desk.

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Twelve

Past

The sun is high, warm against my skin, and the grass beneath me is soft as I sink onto the lawn.

Tiny, wriggling bodies press against me, tails wagging, noses nuzzling.

A puppy clambers into my lap, its oversized paws fumbling as it licks at my chin, and I laugh—truly laugh—for the first time in days.

It feels good to be here. At NEL. Among women I respect, doing something that matters.

For two weeks, I've drowned myself in work, hoping it would silence the gnawing guilt in my chest. I shouldn't have kissed him. I shouldn't have wanted to. But I did. I did kiss him and I did want it.

Canceling his appointments was the right thing to do. The only thing to do.

But when I lay in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, the memory of his mouth barely brushing mine, of his fingers curled in my collar, won't leave me.

I press my forehead against a puppy's soft fur, exhaling slowly.

Enough, Robin.

A shadow moves in my periphery. I look up, smiling—until I see him.

Cooper.

He stands just beyond the volunteers, hands in his pockets, watching me. His sharp blue eyes lock on mine—intense, assessing.

I freeze.

Heat rushes up my neck, and I drop my gaze, schooling my expression before he can read what's written all over my face. Damn him for being here.

I stand, brushing grass from my thighs, every muscle in my body stiffening. My heart pounds against my ribs as I stride toward him, expression blank, professional.

Before I can reach him, a figure steps into his path.

Aubry.

Her stance is rigid, arms crossed over her chest, chin tipped up in challenge. Her dark eyes narrow, and her body shifts, blocking me from view.

“You must be Cooper,” she says, voice even but edged with something sharp. “The one who volunteered last minute.”

A pause.

“Funny,” she adds, her gaze flicking over him. “You don’t look like a journalist.”

His eyes dart over her shoulder and lock on mine.

“What do I look like?” he asks, and there’s amusement in his voice, but his gaze... his gaze is something else entirely.

I force myself to hold it, to keep my expression neutral, unreadable. But it’s damn near impossible.

Aubry huffs, unimpressed. “Like someone who’s here for a reason other than journalism.”

Cooper chuckles, lifting his hands as if in surrender.

“I’m just here to cover the event,” he says smoothly.

“Puppies, good people, a wholesome cause—what’s not to love?

” His head tilts slightly, his focus never wavering.

“I was thinking of getting some candid shots. Maybe even some with that lady over there.”

He points to me.

My stomach tightens. Say no, I plead silently.

Aubry hesitates, glancing back at me, waiting for my reaction. She has no idea who he really is to me—how he’s unraveled me in ways I should be above.

The words are right there, waiting on my tongue. No. Absolutely not.

“Fine,” Aubry says and steps aside, but not before giving Cooper a warning look. He barely seems to notice, already lifting his camera, a knowing glint in his eyes.

I exhale slowly, forcing my limbs to loosen as I return to the grass.

The moment I sink down, the puppies are on me again—climbing over my legs, licking at my fingers. I reach out instinctively, stroking their warm fur, letting their joy ground me.

Then I feel it.

The weight of his gaze.

The distinct click of his camera.

I don't have to look to know that he's not just photographing the puppies.

He's photographing me.

I tell myself I should ignore him. That I shouldn't care. But my body betrays me. Heat pools low in my belly, spreading like wildfire as I imagine how I must look through his lens—soft smiles, messy hair, the bare skin of my calves exposed as I shift among the puppies.

Click.

I swallow.

Click.

I glance up just as he lowers the camera slightly, peering at me from above it, the edge of his mouth curved in something dangerously close to a smirk.

He knows.

He knows exactly what he's doing to me.

I shift, trying to refocus, but when I reach for a particularly squirmy puppy, my dress rides up just a couple inches higher. Click.

I exhale sharply.

He's going to look at these later.

Study them.

Memorize them.

The thought makes me dizzy.

Cooper steps in closer, angling for a better shot. I catch the way his fingers tighten around the camera, the way his breath hitches ever so slightly before he recovers.

He's affected too.

I should put a stop to this.

Get up. Walk away.

Instead, I let him take the picture.

"That's enough," I say, a hint of judgment in my voice.

Cooper extends a hand to help me up. I stare at it a moment too long in hesitation. He shakes it at me.

“It’s just a hand, Robin,” he says.

“Dr. Richardson to you.” I take his hand. The feeling of his warm, large hand around mine sends a shiver up my spine.

Cooper pulls me up to my feet. Our eyes meet for a lingering moment before I quickly look away.

“I should make myself useful,” I say, clearing my throat and dropping his hand.

I feel Cooper’s eyes following me. I try to ignore it, but the weight of his gaze is palpable.

I begin collecting the various dog toys strewn about.

My hands fumble with a knotted rope toy as I am painfully aware of him stepping closer.

He pauses right behind me, and I go still, heartbeat thumping in my ears.

Gently, he reaches around either side of me and picks up two stray tennis balls, dropping them into the bin.

His arm grazes mine, warmth radiating between us.

I close my eyes, biting my lip. Our proximity is electric, tension hanging thick in the air. Cooper’s chest nearly presses into my back as he lingers. I can smell his woodsy cologne, feel his steady breath against my neck.

“Robin...” he murmurs, voice low.

My name on his lips sends a spark down my spine. I turn my head slightly, eyes opening to meet his. They're dark, pupils dilated. My lips part as I let out a shaky breath. Cooper's eyes flicker down to my mouth.

Slowly, he starts to lean in. My heart pounds against my ribs. I can't pull away. I tilt my chin up, eyes falling shut...

The spell shatters at the sound of a glass breaking. I startle and jerk away. Locating the culprit, I see Lotte near tears next to a pile of broken glass on the patio. Dallas is beside her hopelessly telling her it's okay. My pulse slows.

"Excuse me, I need to go help," I tell Cooper while pushing past him.

Thirteen

Present

I fold my hands in my lap and watch as Tessa shifts uncomfortably in the chair across from me.

She doesn't look at me, not directly. Instead, her gaze drifts toward the window, her fingers tracing invisible patterns on the armrest. A defense mechanism.

A need to escape, even when there's nowhere to run.

"You don't have to talk if you're not ready," I say gently. I let the silence settle between us, nonthreatening and open-ended.

Tessa lets out a slow breath, then a sharp laugh—bitter, mirthless. "That's the thing. I don't even know what I'd say."

I tilt my head. "Start anywhere."

She clenches her jaw, her fingers tightening against the armrest. "I don't know what's real anymore. That's the worst part. People tell me he was a monster. That I was a prisoner. But it doesn't feel that way. And I hate myself for it."

There it is. The conflict knotted inside her, wound so tight it's strangling her from the inside. I lean forward slightly. "You're talking about Daniel."

Her eyes snap to mine, wary. “You say his name like he’s just some guy.”

I nod. “To you, he wasn’t just some guy.”

Tessa swallows, her throat bobbing. She’s testing the waters, waiting to see if I’ll judge her, if I’ll flinch.

I don’t. I hold her gaze, steady and calm.

“He protected me,” she says, voice barely above a whisper.

“From the others. From worse things. He... he made me feel safe.” She scoffs, running a hand through her dark hair.

“God, how messed up is that? I was locked in a goddamn house. I couldn’t leave, couldn’t talk to my family, but at least I had him . So tell me—am I insane?”

“No.” The answer is immediate, firm. “You survived. And when people survive trauma, their minds adapt to protect them. Bonding with him, feeling something for him, that was your mind’s way of making the unlivable... livable.”

Tessa snorts, but her eyes glisten. “Stockholm Syndrome. That’s what they call it, right?”

I hesitate. “That’s one way of looking at it. But labels can be limiting. What you felt, what you feel —it’s real. And it’s complicated. You don’t have to force it into a neat little box.”

She exhales, her posture sagging. “Everyone wants me to be angry. To hate him. But I don’t.”

I nod. “And that scares you.”

“Yeah.” A humorless chuckle. “Because if I don’t hate him, what does that make me?”

“Human.”

Tessa studies me, searching for cracks in my calm. She won’t find any. I’ve spent years navigating the labyrinth of trauma, walking people through their darkest corners without recoiling.

“I think about him all the time,” she admits, voice raw. “I wonder if he’s okay. If he misses me. And I know how fucked up that is, but it doesn’t change anything.”

I let the words settle before responding. “You spent months with him. Your brain was wired to see him as your protector, your lifeline. That doesn’t just disappear because you were rescued.”

Her laugh is shaky. “Rescued. That’s another funny word. I don’t feel rescued. I feel... uprooted. Like someone yanked me out of a world I had adjusted to, and now I don’t fit anywhere.”

The honesty in her voice tugs at something deep in my chest. I lean back, giving her space to breathe. “That’s the thing about survival. It doesn’t end when you escape. You’re still surviving, just in a different way.”

Tessa shifts again, her gaze flickering to the window. “I don’t talk to anyone about this. Not my caseworker, not my parents. They’d never understand.”

I keep my voice gentle. “What would happen if you told them?”

She scoffs. “They’d think I was sick. Broken.”

“Do you think you’re broken?”

Her lips press into a thin line. “I don’t know.”

I watch her for a long moment before speaking. “You survived something unimaginable, Tessa. And you did what you had to do to make it through. That’s not broken—that’s resilience.”

Tessa’s eyes well up, and she looks away quickly, blinking hard. I don’t press. The silence between us stretches, not empty, but full of everything she isn’t ready to say.

After a moment, she clears her throat. “I had a dream about him last night.”

I nod, waiting.

“We were sitting in that house, just talking. Like nothing bad ever happened. And when I woke up, I wanted to go back.” Her voice breaks on the last word, and she squeezes her eyes shut. “How do I stop missing him?”

I inhale slowly. “Maybe the question isn’t how to stop, but how to understand it. How to accept that you can feel relief and grief at the same time. That you can be free and still mourn what you lost.”

Tessa looks at me, something fragile in her expression. “What did I lose?”

I meet her gaze. “Certainty. The version of yourself that made sense in that world. And now, you have to rebuild. Piece by piece.”

A single tear slips down her cheek. She brushes it away roughly, like it offends her.

“I don’t even know where to start.”

“You just did.”

She lets out a shaky breath, something between a laugh and a sob. “I hate that you’re good at this.”

I smile softly. “That’s what they pay me for.”

For the first time since she walked in, her shoulders ease—just slightly, just enough. She isn’t healed. She isn’t whole. But today, she let herself speak, let herself be seen. And sometimes, that’s the bravest thing of all.

Tessa leaves our session over. And I wonder, what would it be like to let myself be seen? To have my secrets out in the open.

I shake the thought away and plop in the chair behind my desk.

From my bag, I pull a page from his letter and let myself read it. Just one more page.

Fate struck hard and fast. When you arrived, I was...confused. I thought perhaps it was a joke. A test. But when the color in your face drained, I knew it was serendipity working its magic.

Your professionalism and poise had me convinced that you would leave. All the obvious reasons screamed so loudly in the silence.

Ethics, morals, boundaries. You should have left, and you know that. I should have turned you away.

But I didn’t.

And you didn't.

You stayed.

My heart nearly stopped when you made your decision. I couldn't breathe. The greatest opportunity was laid at my feet like an offering from the Gods, and like a child on Christmas morning, I felt giddy with anticipation.

You bit your lip when I showed you to your room. The smallest gesture, but so indicative of your mindset.

You let me watch you. I couldn't tear my eyes from you that night. The show you put on changed me—my desires.

I like watching strangers, there's a distance—a comfort in that. As if I'm allowed a brief glimpse into their private life—as if I'm special. And as you know, the watching isn't centered on sexual behaviors alone.

I'm satisfied watching any interaction. Your show caught me off guard. Made my head spin. I had others to visit that night but you captured my attention and held it prisoner.

My heart raced as you looked over the accommodations, the way your eyes scanned the room—floor to ceiling—looking. My breath caught in my lungs when you fixated on the vent near the ceiling, bedside.

I felt caught—like a child, sure your gaze was focused on mine, ready to be chastised. Instead of scolding you praised—you made me feel watched.

It turned my stomach; this new sensation of being seen. It turned me on, took my proclivity to an elevated level.

And then you began. I nearly choked on the breath I held in my throat. You see, there's one force more powerful than free will.

Lust.

You told me "desires can be dark, shameful and wrong," but for me, that's what makes them so right. My chest heaved. My fingers itched to touch you, touch myself, touch skin. Blood rushed in my veins. The sound of it deafening.

That was quite possibly the beginning of the end.

In hindsight, our foundation was built on a fault line.

But, I think that's where I became excited to share my world with you.

To bring you into the fold. I became hyper-focused on the idea that someone might be interested in sharing my lifestyle with me.

What I'm trying to say is that as we erased lines, I became careless. Less vigilant.

I should have turned away. Respected the ethics and boundaries that existed. I should have done many things that would have altered the course we traveled.

I regret none of it. It was a signal; a beacon in the night that I was not lost in the darkness. That I was where I belong. I couldn't have predicted your secret just as you didn't know all of mine.

Robin, that night changed everything for me, and I think it did for you as well.

I find myself staring at the page before me. I'm unraveling a question that's been haunting me.

Do his walls come down when he thinks of me?

I still remember the first time we met, how I felt like I could breathe when I was around him. How everything seemed to fall into place when he was near. I wanted to believe that he felt the same way, that we were on the same page. But now, months later, I wonder if he ever really let me in.

Does remembering me take him back like it does for me? Back to moments when we were happy, when we were together in a way that felt real, or at least like it could be.

And when he remembers—do his eyes grow dim? Does he shut me out, bury me in his vault like a secret? Or does it make him pause, even just for a moment, and wonder what we could have been?

I remember something from that time. A piece of paper in my pocket, worn with use, faded ink—"I love watching you."

He'd tucked it in my coat pocket. Let me find it later. It had brought a thrill and a smile.

Does he hide me in the attic of his mind, tucked away like some forgotten talisman, locked in a trunk with all the other things he can't bear to relive?

Do his walls crumble, even a little, when my name crosses his mind? Or has he built such a fortress around himself that there's no room for anyone else?

I can't change the past. I can't rewrite what's been written, but I do wonder if, somewhere deep down, he lets me in, just enough to remember me.

A tear drips from my chin onto the page.

My cell vibrates on the desk, startling me. I glance at the screen and catch my former patient—now friend—Nora's name before it turns off.

Reaching out, I switch the ringer to silent, put the letter in my bag and turn off the desk light.

Like most people, I have a secret, and I've become good at hiding it, but he had secrets too.

We all had scars hiding beneath our skin.

Fourteen

Past

The speaking engagement went well. I'm tired from being 'on' all afternoon and I can't wait to settle in for the night.

Flower baskets hang in profusion from the porch.

Adirondack chairs are arranged to allow an unrestricted view of the ocean.

Dentil molding and window trims make the building eye-catching. It's beautiful here.

The moment I step into the dimly lit lobby of the Ocean Voyeur Bed and Breakfast, something cold and insidious slithers down my spine. The air is warm, laced with the scent of polished wood and something faintly sweet—vanilla, maybe. It should be comforting. It isn't.

I set my bag down and exhale, forcing my shoulders to relax, already missing the comfort of home and Flash.

This is fine. A simple mix-up, that's all.

I'd told Nora I wanted to stay one night—and she, in all her well-meaning enthusiasm, booked me two nights instead of one, a so-called 'weekend getaway.'

"Dr. Richardson."

My stomach drops. Heat pools low in my belly. I turn slowly, as if any sudden movement might startle him into action. Run , some primal part of me screams, but I don't.

Cooper leans against the doorway that leads to a sitting area, a ghost of a smirk playing at his lips. Always watching. Even now, his gaze is a touch too knowing, too hungry.

I swallow past the dryness in my throat.

“Cooper?” I ask evenly, keeping my expression neutral.

His brows lift, amusement flickering in his eyes at the forced formality. “What an unexpected surprise,” he murmurs. His voice is smooth.

I shouldn't have agreed to start seeing him again for therapy.

That thought strikes hot and fast, as damning as the memory of our last session.

“Desires can be dark, shameful, and wrong,” I had told him, my voice steady despite the weight of his gaze.

“But that's what makes them right,” he had countered, his words low, reverent.

And now I am here, standing in his domain, where every fiber of my being screams that I am prey.

“I didn't realize this was your place,” I say, forcing a polite smile as I reach for my bag. “I'll find another—”

“No need.” Cooper moves in closer, unhurried but deliberate. “Your room is already

prepared. Unless, of course, you'd rather leave." He tilts his head, studying me, his voice lowering to something softer, something nearly intimate. "You don't have to go, Robin."

A shiver dances along my spine at the sound of my name in his mouth. He rarely used it.

And the way he says it now...

I should leave.

But I don't.

Instead, I nod stiffly. "Fine."

His smile is slow, victorious. "I'll show you to your room."

I follow him up the winding staircase, my pulse a traitorous drum in my chest.

This is a mistake.

The hallway is dimly lit, with warm lamplight casting long shadows along the wooden floor. My heart pounds louder with every step.

He stops before a door at the end of the hall, pushing it open with an easy flick of his wrist.

I step inside cautiously, my eyes sweeping over the room. The decor is simple, elegant. A large four-poster bed dominates the space, sheets crisp and untouched. A reading chair is positioned near the window, its fabric worn in a way that suggests use.

I feel him behind me, watching.

When I turn, his eyes are already on me, locked onto my expression as if reading every flicker of thought, every pulse of uncertainty that ripples through me.

Something shifts between us, thick and unspoken.

“I—” My voice falters.

I shouldn’t stay. I should find somewhere else. Go back to the event hotel.

“I’ll let you get settled in.” Cooper turns and leaves.

I shut and lock the door behind him.

Crap.

At seven, I head downstairs to grab something to eat and have a glass of wine, or three.

Cooper is nowhere to be found and I’m thankful for the reprieve.

I think back to the sessions we’ve had over the last couple months.

His descriptions of watching people...the way he always said he watched them in a room.

Not outside their home, not from the street, not in public.

Dawning hits me. He owns an Inn. He watches them here. But how? I glance around, scouring the walls and hallways for any sign of a covert spot to watch people, but nothing jumps out at me. Think, Robin.

If this is truly where he watches, his addiction is much worse than I thought. He has free reign, twenty-four-seven here.

All access.

Perturbed, I head back up to my room. The third glass of wine has me feeling loose and warm as I climb the stairs to my room.

Inside, I shut the door and walk to the window. The view is stunning.

Ocean for miles, crashing against the shoreline. The wind whips seaweed on the beach around haphazardly. It is beautiful. I crack the window and inhale the briny scent deeply. I can see why Nora speaks so highly of it.

I bite my lip and turn around. My eyes scan the room—floor to ceiling—looking. My breath catches in my lungs when my gaze snags on it—

The vent.

High on the wall, just above the bed.

A chill seeps into my bones. I almost call out. To see if he's there. Watching.

How ridiculous.

I flop into the chair and bite my thumbnail in thought, but I can't shake the feeling that there are eyes on me. I close my eyes in an attempt to stave off the feeling. But...

The idea of him watching me makes my belly whoosh with excitement. Makes me wonder what it would be like to give in. To just have a taste of something out of the ordinary. My mind is loose from the wine.

I glance at the vent and realize I want him to feel caught—like a child, sure my gaze is focused on his, ready to be chastised. Instead of scolding though... I do something else entirely—I vow to make him feel watched for once.

I know he's there—Cooper, hiding behind the vent louvers like the voyeur that he is. I can feel his eyes on me like weights, heavy and greedy

Eyes glued to the vent louvers, I make a decision. A decision that shocks even me.

I shuck off my coat—slowly. I shrug it off one shoulder at a time, letting the fabric drag across my skin. The coat falls to the floor with a whisper.

Next comes my top. I grip the hem and lift it inch by agonizing inch, letting my fingertips graze my stomach, my ribs, the underside of my breasts. My skin breaks out in gooseflesh.

The fabric catches on my nipples, and I let it linger there for a moment, savoring the way the friction makes me shiver.

My skirt's next. I unzip it slow as molasses, letting the sound of the zipper ring out in the silence like a bell. When it falls to the floor, I'm left in nothing but my lace panties and bra.

I run my hands down my thighs, feeling the smooth silk of my skin, and then I hook my thumbs into the waistband of my panties. I drag them down with a deliberate slowness, bending over just enough to give him a show. I step out of the panties and kick them aside.

I reach around to unclasp my bra, slowly letting it fall down my arms and to the floor.

I turn to face the vent louvers. I let my hands wander.

My fingers trail over my stomach, down to my thighs, then up to cup my breasts.

I squeeze them hard, kneading the flesh and rolling my nipples between my fingers until they're so sensitive it almost hurts.

I let out a soft moan and then I slide one hand down between my legs. My fingers find my clit.

I circle it slowly at first, teasing myself, letting the pressure build until I'm shaking with need. My other hand stays on my breast, pinching and pulling as I work myself closer and closer to the edge.

My fingers dip lower, slipping inside me. I thrust them in and out, curling them just right to hit that sweet spot.

My moans come louder now, ragged and desperate, and I swear I can feel Cooper's eyes burning into me. My fingers work faster, harder, driving me toward that explosive climax. My head falls back as I come, my legs shake, and I have to brace myself against the wall to keep from collapsing.

When I finally catch my breath, I glance toward the vent louvers one last time, a wicked grin spreading across my face.

"Hope you enjoyed the show," I whisper before slinking away to the bathroom to clean up.

I wake in a panic.

Sweat drips between my breasts, the sheet there drenched. I stare at the vent near the ceiling in terror as my heart hammers against my ribs. My cheeks flame hot. My innards coil like a spring.

I climb out of bed and into the bathroom to brush my teeth and pee.

Avoiding my reflection as if the person reflected will be a monster full of unspoken criticisms, I slip on a dress and sandals.

I need to move. To exert my nervous energy.

There's a chance all the anxiety coursing through me is unwarranted.

He couldn't possibly watch his own guests.

The legalities, the potential for being caught, is so much greater than spying on people afar. Even voyeurs must abide by the don't-shit-where-you-eat adage, right? Still, the niggling voice at the base of my skull screams the worst case scenario and suddenly air feels hard to come by.

I race down the hall, followed by the opulent staircase and straight out the heavy wooden front door. I barely pause on the grand front porch before noticing a break in the dune grass.

A path.

I need more fresh air. A bigger open space. I head for the foot-trodden trail.

Dune grass gives way to a half-mile strip of sandy beach. Gray-green ocean foams

white as it crashes along the shoreline, the salty brine a delight when inhaled. I kick my sandals off and sink my feet into the cool sand.

Cliffs to the left rise up from the water, the top peppered with majestic pines.

At the water's edge, the sound of the sea is deafening.

Discourse swirls round deep in my gut, warring with the fascination and allure I gave into last night.

I close my eyes as cold salt water engulfs my feet and ankles.

It has been too long since I've felt this connected, this grounded to the outdoors.

"Breathtaking." The voice comes nearly against my ear, over the sound of the waves, startling me. Sliding my eyes left, I see Cooper standing slightly behind me. He's not looking at the scenic vista—his eyes are trained on me.

An uncomfortable pang of unease at the lusty thoughts running rampant in my head blooms in my belly alongside the blush creeping up my neck.

I turn to face him. He reaches out and brushes an errant curl from across my forehead back in place.

My heart hiccups against my breastbone. His bright eyes are stormy as his mouth opens.

"I'm glad you stayed."

Goosebumps erupt in the wake of the finger he trails down my arm, despite the heat.

Four measly words and everything cements from potential fantasy into fact.

He did watch me. I release the breath stuck in my lungs and turn back to the line where the sky meets sea.

Away from the heat of his intense eyes. My momentary lapse in judgement, an unethical—potentially career-ending—moment actually happened.

I had hoped he hadn't been watching as I fell asleep that night—almost.

After I came, I was spent, mentally and physically. The adrenaline of my actions drained. The rashness of my choice hit me and I laid in that bed, full of shame and unease.

My heart burns in my chest, What have I done? on repeat in my brain. In a panic, I chance a look at him, but am surprised to see he's gone.

My body is suddenly heavy like a cement block, I can't force my legs to work. Feet buried in the wet sand—stuck. Craning my head over my shoulder, Cooper's retreating form heads back to the inn in the dark.

Alone on the beach, a chill sweeps down my spine.

What have I done?

What have I done?

What have I done?

Fifteen

Present

The last of the group shuffles out of the therapy room, leaving behind the lingering scent of coffee and the faint hum of overlapping voices from the hallway.

I exhale, rolling my shoulders back. It was a good session—productive, even.

For once, the weight of everyone else's emotions doesn't feel quite so suffocating.

I gather my notes, ready to head back to my office when I catch Aubry lingering near the door. She leans against the frame, looking small beneath her oversized sweater. Her eyes flick between my notes and my face as if she's trying to decide whether to ask something.

"Dr. Richardson," she calls out, her voice edged with something unreadable. "You got a sec?"

"Of course," I say, slipping my pen into my pocket.

She waves me over to the reception desk, where a tablet screen glows in front of her. "Tell me I'm not losing my mind," she mutters, tapping the glass. "Look at this."

I step closer, following her gaze to the article open on the screen. The headline is some sensationalist garbage—"Peeping Tom Convicted"—but it's the image beside it that sends my stomach plummeting to my feet.

Cooper.

His mugshot stares back at me. My vision tunnels for a second, and I have to steady myself against the edge of the desk. Even in his mugshot he is handsome.

Aubry doesn't notice my reaction. She just huffs a laugh, shaking her head. "You recognize him, right?"

I swallow, my throat suddenly dry. "What do you mean?"

She turns the screen toward me, zooming in on the picture as if I haven't already burned every detail into my memory.

"That's the guy. The journalist who covered the puppy adoption event last year.

" She laughs again, incredulous. "Can you believe it? He volunteered here, Dr. R. He held puppies. He took pictures! Of you! He interviewed people. He was here."

The memory slams into me like a freight train—him asking polite questions, holding a notepad, a camera slung around his neck. A friendly smile. An unforgettable face in a sea of others.

"That's...strange," I manage, my voice light, casual. My pulse thrums in my ears.

Aubry scoffs. "It's crazy, right?" She shakes her head, already moving on, closing out the article with a flick of her fingers. "Anyway, just thought you'd get a kick out of that. See you tomorrow?"

I nod numbly, barely registering her words.

Aubry stands, walks off, humming to herself.

I stand there, frozen.

The drive from NEL to the house a daze. I drop my bag by the door and let Flash out before I slump onto the couch. The walls close in around me, my lungs tighten, narrowing.

Breathe.

In... Out...

Deep.

Steady.

When I finally feel like I can move again, I grab my phone. It slips through my fingers, spinning to the floor, landing with a soft thud on the carpet. I reach for it, force my fingers to act like they know how to work, unlock the screen and pull up my texts.

The last one from him was so long ago. I can't read them. I select the thread and hit delete. I should have done this sooner.

I push up. Let Flash in. Feed him before he throws a tantrum. My bag glares at me from its spot near the door. The pages tucked inside call to me. Why am I torturing myself like this?

I move my bag to the living room. Pour a glass of wine.

I can't help but feel the fever rise as I read his words. I'm tucked on the couch, glass of wine in hand, feeding into my compulsion to self-destruct.

I gave you time to adjust to the decision you'd made. I saw the uncertainty, the hesitation you felt at our next session. You'd been beating yourself up since your...show for me. It physically affected you.

I wondered at first if you were sick, or not feeling well but knew deep down, that was not the case. Your life had taken a sharp turn and you were adjusting. Working through the scenarios, the possible consequences.

I observed you carefully, looking for that thing you needed from me. Trying to pinpoint what I needed to do next. I never dreamed that thing was so simplistic.

Encouragement and physical connection are such little things to ponder, but the body, the soul, requires them. Humans need it.

I stood up from my chair as you spoke. Reached out for you. The thrill of being so close—of feeling the heat of your skin against mine—it overwhelmed me. You met me in the middle. Welcomed me even.

Holding you in my arms gave me a security that I'd never experienced before. Letting you cry, face pressed into my chest, tears soaking my shirt, it felt good. Not because you were upset and confused, but because I offered you comfort. Because I was the one to ease those feelings for you.

You looked up at me, tear-soaked cheeks glistening, and pleaded with only a look. I couldn't refuse you. Not that I wanted to. When our lips met this time it was all so different. The world parted, cracked wide, and swallowed us whole.

Your breath mixed with mine, your pulse pounded beneath your skin. You trembled in your passion, and it only served to spur me on.

My teeth pierced the soft flesh of your lip. You cried out but didn't pull away. You

kissed me harder. It was a lust-drunk moment. It was teenage hormones and recklessness. It was perfection.

When you gave yourself to me that first time, that night, I stared in awe as your body went rigid. Your jaw froze, locked open as if it were stuck, silently screaming while you came.

I did that to you. I commanded your body into that state. I became a fiend. I wanted that reaction over and over. But I needed it my way as well. That first time, for you, seemed to be an epiphany.

You didn't speak afterward. The edges of your mouth lifted slightly, lips barely parting to reveal those straight, white teeth. I desperately wanted to know what you were thinking, but something held me back.

The memory of the moans that fell from your passion-swollen mouth, your chest heaving in ecstasy, had me hard the morning after. Recalling the feel of your body moving against mine, fighting and welcoming simultaneously.

I laid next to your sleeping form in the early morning light and marveled at the way the sun peeking through the shades caused a halo around your curls. The dramatic swell of your hips from your waist. The natural flush on your skin from a deep sleep.

I had been so embarrassed. So overwhelmed at what I felt that I couldn't bear to see Cooper for weeks after.

It hit me like warm air through a screen—familiar, comforting, yet so dangerous. He's always been here in my soul, like a season that comes back again and again. He shadows my dreams, even when I think I can let go.

I think that's how it started. He snuck into my heart like a pinprick, and suddenly,

before I knew it, he rushed through me, pulling me under. And now I'm drowning in the thought of him, in the memory of us.

I always thought that with time, things would get clearer. But now, it feels like the longer I go, the harder it is to breathe. The world doesn't seem big enough for the pain I carry.

My feelings are messy and get lost in the noise of everything else life threw at us. I know with clarity that of all my demons, he is the one I need the most.

I'm in love with his ghost. A shadow of him that haunts my dreams and steals the air from my lungs when I wake up. I still feel him—dangerous and dark, like a secret whispered in the hush of the night.

The way he kissed me like a lover, then stung me like a wasp. And still, I pine for him. I can feel it in my veins like a sickness. But I can't stop myself. I'd walk straight into the flames of his inferno if it meant feeling something, anything, that might bring me closer to him again.

He's pierced my spirit in ways I'll never understand, and yet I can't touch him. I can't reach him, and that silence between us, the one I've perpetuated for so long, poisons me. It keeps me perpetually drowning.

I close my eyes and picture his face before me. If I could, I would launch an army to bring his heart back to mine. But the ground beneath me slips, and I now know what it's like to be weakened—held captive by the idea of him.

Sixteen

Past

I checked out the following morning, completely and thoroughly mortified at my behavior the night before. I couldn't bear to look at Cooper that morning. I couldn't even speak.

What was I thinking?

The four days from check-out until our session are torturous.

I agonize over every detail. Every misstep that I made.

Never in my life have I been so brazen or wanton.

It was reckless and stupid. But my life has been so monotonous lately.

So boring and lonely and banal. The night at the inn gave me such a thrill that I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. I am hooked on something I can't have.

I know I can't continue to treat him.

The air in my office is thick, charged. I take a sip of water.

He sits across from me, exuding the same quiet dominance that always sets me on edge. Legs spread, arms draped along the chair as if he owns this space. As if he

owns me . His dark eyes scan me, calculating, dissecting.

I clear my throat. "I can't be your therapist anymore."

His head tilts slightly, studying me like a puzzle he intends to solve. "No?"

I grip my pen tighter, nails pressing into the soft pad of my palm. "No."

Silence stretches between us, thick and oppressive. He doesn't argue. He doesn't plead. He just watches, waiting for me to unravel myself in the space between my words.

"I've given this a lot of thought," I continue, forcing the tremor from my voice. "This—our dynamic—it's not..." I exhale sharply. "It's not healthy."

His lips curl at the edges, just enough to make my stomach flip. "Our dynamic?" he repeats, voice dripping with amusement. "Interesting choice of words."

I hate the way my body reacts to his voice, the way it slithers down my spine and pools low in my womb.

I sit straighter, ignoring the heat creeping up my neck. "You know as well as I do that this—" I gesture between us, frustrated by how small my voice feels, "—is inappropriate."

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, closing the space between us. "Inappropriate," he muses. "That's one word for it."

I swallow hard. "Cooper."

"Robin."

The sound of my name in his mouth is my undoing. It always has been. He sees it, too—the flicker of hesitation in my eyes, the way my breath stutters.

His gaze darkens. “Tell me something,” he murmurs, his voice slow and deliberate. “Do you regret it?”

My stomach clenches because I do, but also, I don’t. “That’s not relevant.”

“Oh, but it is.” His lips curve, wicked and knowing. “Because if you truly regretted it, you wouldn’t be sitting there, gripping that pen like it’s the only thing keeping you from touching me.”

I bite my lip. I drop the pen.

His smirk deepens.

I force myself to stand, needing distance, needing air. “This conversation is over.”

He doesn’t move. Doesn’t argue. Just watches me, eyes smoldering with something dangerous. Something addictive.

I should end this cleanly before it’s too late.

But Cooper doesn’t let me go that easily.

He rises slowly, deliberately, and suddenly he’s there—so close I can feel the heat radiating off him, smell the faint trace of cologne mixed with something inherently him.

I step back. He follows.

My breath catches. “You need a new therapist.”

He reaches out, fingers grazing my wrist—a featherlight touch that sends a shiver straight through me.

Everything seems to crumble inside me at once. Tears spill down my cheeks which are hot with embarrassment. He pulls me flush against him. Wraps his arms around me. He is strong and solid.

His embrace is warm and comforting, a safe harbor in the storm. I feel my body relax against his, the tension and uncertainty melting away. He doesn’t say a word, just holds me as I let the emotions flow.

After a few moments, I pull back slightly to look up at him. His eyes are full of understanding and kindness, with no judgment at all. He reaches up and gently brushes a tear from my cheek.

His head dips toward mine. I bite my lip. His thumb pulls it from between my teeth and then his lips are on mine. This time, it is all so different. The world parts, cracks wide, and swallows us whole. I tremble in his arms. Unable to break the kiss.

Cooper’s teeth pierce the soft flesh of my lip, making me cry out. I kiss him back harder, completely caught up in the moment. The flush on my skin spreads like wildfire, my cheeks stained with a rosy hue. My eyes are hazy, clouded with desire and need.

The taste of passion lingers on my tongue, a mix of salty sweat and sweet kisses, igniting my senses and sending me into a frenzy. My heart pounds in my ears, the rhythm matching the pulsing thrum of his heartbeat. Every breath is a sigh, every gasp a moan as his hands pull me closer and closer.

He grabs me by the hips, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my waist. My breasts squish against his chest, and the slick heat between my legs makes me squirm. He pushes me back against the wall, the impact knocking the air out of my lungs. His body presses into mine.

He doesn't waste a second. His hands are on me, everywhere at once, demanding. One hand becomes a fist in my hair, pulling my head back so he can trail hot, biting kisses down my throat. The other tears at my blouse.

His mouth closes over one nipple, making me moan. He pulls back just long enough to hike my skirt up to my waist, his fingers shoving my soaked panties aside.

"I've fantasized about this," he says, his voice low.

"Cooper..."

Before I can say more, his fingers are sliding inside of me. I cry out, my head falling against the wall as his thumb circles my clit with just enough pressure to make me see stars. My chest heaves in ecstasy.

Cooper stares at me in awe as I come apart for him. My body tense, my mouth open in a silent moan.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:21 am

Seventeen

Present

Before I head to NEL to run another group therapy session, I let Flash outside to do his business and allow myself to read another page of Cooper's letter.

You were so satisfied with our arrangement.

It was written plainly in the creases of your smiling eyes, the way you stood a little taller, the glint in your eyes.

We made love, hard and soft and often. You did as I asked.

You were eager to please. Yet all I could think of was dragging you down into the depths of my universe.

Under the guise of our weekly therapy appointments, I planted seeds of thought in your head. I warmed you to the ideas that served me.

I wanted to watch you again but not with me.

I didn't anticipate you taking my hand and so easily walking down the dark path with me. I thought I'd need to half-drag you down my rabbit hole. I would have. I wanted it that badly. But you asked a question.

A calculated one at that—about fantasies—and I knew right then that I had you. That

your curiosity had won out, and you were firmly in my clutches.

You agreed. You stunned me into silence. You wanted to be a participant in my fantasies.

I have nothing but time now to think and relive our best (and worst) moments. I want someone to know our story. It's worth sharing. As you said though, I'm cunning and clever, and I know I can't share our story with anyone but you.

I don't wish to destroy your life any further than I have. You lost your moral footing. You stumbled, and that's okay. You aren't a criminal because of it. If you believe anything—believe that.

There's darkness in everyone. It's what makes us human.

It does not, however, ensure you're a bad person.

I think you forget all the good you do. All the souls you help to heal and find peace.

Having a deviant sexual appetite doesn't erase the light of your soul.

I'm sure you've been too hard on yourself recently.

I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry if my actions have ever caused you to question yourself.

My selfishness led to your pleasure. A pleasure you hadn't experienced before. It opened your eyes to different things, and I wanted that to be a positive experience for you. I like to think it was.

Don't be ashamed of that. There was nothing illegal about what we did. Consenting adults are allowed to play as long as all feel safe. And I did.

And the glow on your face, the hooded eyes and lazy smile you wore, proved you did—in the moment.

And Robin, you were mine. I would have protected you, shielded you if you'd shown any unease.

In a perfect world, I would have understood that what we had, what we participated in, was enough to satisfy me. I would have stopped watching at the inn. I would have boarded up the faux louvers and washed my hands of it.

Because I was content. What we had, what we did, satisfied me. Wholly.

But I'm human and gluttonous.

I'd lie there staring at you long after you fell asleep in my arms before creeping out of bed and crawling into the safety of my tunnels.

I'd watch people, still.

Well, that answers that. My chest tightens. He never stopped the voyeurism. I wasn't enough. My heart contracts painfully in my chest at the realization. Aggressively, I fold the pages closed.

I can't keep doing this to myself. I have to stop. This is unhealthy. What would a therapist say? I snort at myself while tucking the letter into the console table drawer.

She'd say, Robin , you made a mistake .

Move on .

The low hum of conversation in the lobby of NEL fades into the background as I round the corner toward the front desk. I'm dog-tired from the session, ready to go home and rot on the couch with Flash.

The air is thick with something unspoken, a tension I don't quite understand yet, but I know enough to recognize when I'm walking into an ambush.

Aubry, Eve, and Nora are standing in a loose circle, arms crossed, expressions ranging from disbelief to barely contained curiosity. The moment they spot me, all three turn in unison.

Aubry's the first to speak, of course. "So... anything you wanna share with the class, Dr. Richardson?"

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I'm assuming this isn't about scheduling conflicts."

"No, but nice deflection." Aubry tilts her head, arms still folded. "A journalist just waltzed in here, asking some very interesting questions about you. And more specifically..." She pauses for effect. "Your patient, Cooper."

A chill spreads across my skin, but I keep my expression carefully composed. "What did they ask?"

Nora, always the quiet observer, watches me closely. "She was vague. Too vague," she says. "Fishing. Which made us wonder..."

Eve leans in, eyes sharp. "Who the hell is Cooper?"

I exhale, choosing my next words carefully. "He was a patient of mine."

Aubry scoffs. “That’s all we get?”

I hesitate, feeling their collective curiosity pressing in on me. Play it close to the chest, Robin. “I testified in his hearing.” I pause. “And yes, he showed up to the puppy adoption event.”

Silence.

Eve’s brows shoot up. “A patient you had to testify against? That Peeping Tom?”

Nora blinks, shaking her head in disbelief. “I don’t understand. Why didn’t you tell us?”

I sigh. “Because it wasn’t relevant. Not to you. Not to NEL.”

Aubry lets out a dry laugh. “Oh, sure. A former patient, who you had to testify against, randomly showing up at an event we hosted isn’t relevant at all.”

I give her a pointed look. “He hadn’t been arrested yet during the adoption event. I had just started seeing him then.”

Another beat of silence, then Eve huffs. “Nope. Not good enough.”

Aubry grins. “Agreed.”

Nora straightens, her voice decisive. “Dinner. Your house. Tonight.”

I rub my temples. “I have work to do.”

Eve smirks. “Bullshit. You’re trying to avoid this conversation.”

Aubry claps her hands together. “It’s happening. We’ll bring wine.”

I stare at them, knowing full well I’ve lost this battle.

Nora arches a brow. “What’s that thing you always tell us? Avoidance isn’t a solution?”

I huff a laugh despite myself. “Using my own words against me? You know I can’t say much due to confidentiality.”

Aubry winks. “All’s fair in love and nosiness. And...if he’s in jail, he’s not your patient anymore right?”

I shake my head, exhaling in defeat.

Eighteen

Past

I shouldn't have let it happen. That night in my office—where it all began—was a mistake. A line I never should have crossed.

And yet, I crave him.

Cooper has a way of unraveling me, stripping me down to my rawest self, making me feel beautiful and filthy and seen. In his presence, I don't have to be the poised, put-together therapist. I don't have to be Dr. Robin Richardson.

I can just be... his.

I tell myself it's just for now. A brief indulgence before I return to reality. But then he touches me, and I stop caring about consequences.

Three weeks pass in a fever dream of tangled sheets and whispered confessions.

Our sessions no longer exist in the way they once did—there is no couch, no chair, no safe distance between us.

Instead, he has me pinned against walls, bent over desks, spread out beneath him on the floor of my own office.

His voice—low, commanding, coaxing—pulls truths from me I never dared to

acknowledge.

And I love it.

I love the way he looks at me, the way he makes me feel young and reckless and starved for something I hadn't realized I was missing.

But tonight... tonight is different.

I see it in his eyes, feel it in the way his fingers trace lazily over my bare thigh as we lie tangled in my sheets, our bodies slick with the remnants of our latest sin.

"Robin," he murmurs, his voice thick with satisfaction. Like he's the only one who calls me that, stripping me of the title that has defined me for so long. "I want something from you."

My stomach flips. He's been leading up to this for days—planting thoughts in my head, teasing me with promises of something darker, something more.

I swallow. "What is it?"

His lips curve into a slow, knowing smile. "I want to watch you."

I blink. "You do watch me."

He shakes his head. "Not like this." His fingers skim higher, trailing between my legs, coaxing a gasp from my lips. "I want to watch you with someone else."

A sharp pulse of heat floods my body. I sit up, my breath unsteady. "Cooper..."

"You trust me, don't you?" He props himself up on one elbow, eyes gleaming with

something dangerous. “You know I’d never put you in a situation you couldn’t handle.”

I do trust him. That’s the terrifying part.

I bite my lip, remembering the way he’s led me into his world piece by piece, showing me how exhilarating it can be to surrender.

He tucks a curl behind my ear, his touch unbearably gentle.

“Just think about it. I want you to experience it the way I do. To feel what I feel when I watch you.” His fingers tighten around my wrist, just enough to make my breath hitch.

“You liked it, didn’t you? Knowing I was watching that first time?”

A rush of shame, of arousal, twists through me.

Yes.

I liked it too much.

“Say it,” he urges. “I need to hear you say it.”

I wet my lips, pulse hammering. “I liked it.”

His smirk is triumphant, but there’s something deeper in his eyes—something reverent. He brushes his mouth against mine, a slow, claiming kiss.

“Then let me give you more.”

I close my eyes, letting the words settle over me. This is dangerous. Reckless.

But as he pulls me beneath him again, coaxing moans from my lips like confessions, I know the decision has already been made.

We're at the Ocean Voyeur. The room Cooper's put me in is grand and well-appointed. The soft glow of the bedside lamps casts long, inviting shadows, and the air is thick with something unspoken—anticipation, sin, promise. Cooper hands me a nip of vodka from the mini-fridge.

I stand motionless, my hands trembling at my sides.

My knees feel funny and I hear my heart beating in my ears.

I take a step away from the door, my feet sinking into the carpet with every step, little tufts of grey fibers tickling the spaces between my toes.

Looking around the room, I take in the enormous four-poster bed and the silk bedspread covering it.

The painting over a gas fireplace. It's opulent.

Too much so to feel homey and warm.

Instantly, I don't want to play anymore. I want to run back to the safety of my own bed and crawl under the covers with Flash.

My insides feel jiggly. Cooper smiles at me reassuringly. The feeling spreads to my hands. He notices, takes them in his own and squeezes. I can't look him in the eye, so

I focus on the scar, a faint, thin white line at his hairline.

“You’re going to love this. Please don’t be nervous.” His tone is gentle and calming.

“Do you remember the safe word? Just say it, and it will all end.”

“Tide.” The word croaks out of me like a frog.

Cooper nods and presses his body flush against mine. I hold on to him as if he’s going to miraculously dissolve into a wisp of smoke. He is so male. Authoritative. Confident.

He watches me with quiet amusement, his presence steady, grounding. He retrieves a tiny bottle of vodka from the mini fridge, twisting off the cap before pressing it into my palm.

“It’ll take the edge off,” he murmurs, brushing his lips over mine in a whisper of a kiss.

I down the vodka in one swallow, wincing as it burns its way down. My pulse pounds in my throat as I stare at him.

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

Cooper’s hands slide onto my shoulders, firm and sure, his thumbs pressing slow, soothing circles into my tensed muscles. His touch is reassuring, his confidence infectious.

“You can,” he assures me, his voice thick with certainty. “James will come in soon, and I promise when he touches you, you’ll forget all your insecurities.”

I shudder, not just at his words, but at the way he says them—with that calm,

knowing smirk.

“And you’ll be there?” I point to a chair in the bedroom.

“The whole time,” he promises.

I suck in a breath. My heart is a chaotic rhythm in my chest, my body warring between fear and something far darker—far needier. Arousal curls hot and low in my belly, pooling between my thighs in a way I’ve never felt before.

Never in my life have I done anything so risqué.

Before I can second-guess myself, there’s a knock at the door.

My stomach flips.

Cooper doesn’t hesitate—he moves past me, calm and collected, opening the door as if this were the most normal thing in the world.

And then James steps inside.

He is tall and devastatingly handsome, with sharp features and an easy confidence that makes my breath catch. His dark eyes roam over me, slow and assessing, his lips curving into a small, knowing smile.

“You must be Robin,” he says smoothly, his voice deep and honeyed as he steps closer.

I nod, unable to speak.

Cooper moves to the chair, settling into it with the kind of effortless dominance that

makes my knees weak. His long legs sprawl slightly, and he rests an arm over the side, watching—waiting.

“Go on,” he encourages. “Let him touch you.”

James moves behind me, his hands finding my hips first, then trailing up to my waist. His touch is light, teasing, but I feel it everywhere.

He leans in, his lips ghosting over my ear. “Relax,” he murmurs. “You’re shaking.”

I exhale shakily. “I’ve never done this before.”

James chuckles, his fingers slipping beneath the hem of my blouse, grazing the bare skin of my stomach. “Then I’ll go slow.”

I hear Cooper shift in his chair, and my eyes flick to him instinctively. He’s watching me—watching this—with dark, hooded eyes, his expression unreadable.

Heat floods through me at the realization.

James begins to undress me systematically, his fingers precise and patient.

He unbuttons my blouse first, sliding the fabric from my shoulders.

His hands skim my bare skin, igniting goosebumps in their wake.

My breath catches when he moves behind me again, unzipping my skirt and letting it slip to the floor.

Cooper exhales softly.

I turn my head toward him, seeking some kind of reaction, but his expression remains steady—though the way his fingers tighten slightly on the arm of the chair tells me everything I need to know.

This is affecting him.

And God help me, knowing that makes my desire burn hotter.

James's hands glide up my sides, his thumbs brushing the under-curve of my breasts. My head tilts back against his chest as I let myself sink into the sensation, into the forbidden thrill of it all.

And as Cooper watches from his chair—dark-eyed, intense, completely in control—I realize with startling clarity...

I like being seen.

James moves me to the bed, buries his face between my legs. Cooper undoes his pants and slips out his cock, stroking his hand up and down his length. I clutch the sheets in a death grip of lust.

My body hums with satisfaction, the aftershocks of pleasure still rippling through me as James presses a final, lingering kiss to my shoulder. His touch is reverent, his breath warm against my damp skin.

"That was incredible," he murmurs, his voice thick with spent desire.

I barely manage a breathless laugh, still floating somewhere between reality and the dark, decadent haze Cooper has led me into. I feel deliciously used, utterly worshipped. My limbs are heavy, my skin fevered, and I don't think I've ever felt so wholly... free.

James presses one last kiss to my temple before slipping from the bed, his body moving with quiet efficiency as he grabs his clothes. He doesn't say much as he disappears into the bathroom, but he doesn't need to. We both know what this was—what it was meant to be.

The sound of the shower turning on fills the silence, and I exhale deeply, rolling onto my side. My eyes find Cooper instantly. He's still in the chair, his posture deceptively relaxed, but I see it—the tension coiled tight beneath his skin, the hunger that hasn't abated.

For a moment, he just watches me.

Then, he moves.

I don't realize I'm holding my breath until he's standing at the edge of the bed, undoing the top buttons of his shirt with an easy, practiced motion.

My heart slams against my ribs.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” His voice is smooth, but there's an edge to it—something dark, possessive.

I nod, my mouth dry. “Yes.”

His lips curve slightly. “Good.”

And then he's climbing onto the bed, moving over me with slow, deliberate intent. His hands are warm, steady, as they trail over my skin—tracing the paths James had traveled, reclaiming me.

Heat sparks in my belly, my limbs pliant beneath his touch.

“You’re still trembling,” he says, his lips brushing against my jaw, down my throat.

I bite my lip. I can’t tell if it’s from the aftershocks of pleasure or the anticipation of more.

“Maybe I need more.” The words slip out, breathy and wanting.

Cooper hums in approval, his teeth scraping my pulse point as his fingers slide lower, parting my thighs. My breath catches as he touches me—possessive, knowing, making it clear that he is the one who truly owns my pleasure.

And when he finally takes me, it’s slow and consuming, the kind of lovemaking that feels like a fever dream—intoxicating, dizzying. His body moves against mine with practiced control, every thrust deep and precise, unraveling me all over again.

James exits the bathroom, smirks as he slips into his shoes, and leaves.

I cling to Cooper, nails digging into his back, lost in the sensation of being his.

He murmurs my name like a plea, his forehead pressing to mine, and when I shatter beneath him, it’s with a raw, helpless cry.

Cooper follows, his body tensing before he groans into my mouth, his release pulsing deep inside me.

For a moment, neither of us move.

We just breathe.

I don’t know how long we lay there tangled together, but eventually, the exhaustion seeps into my bones, my body sinking into the mattress as my head rests against his

chest.

His fingers trace lazy circles on my back.

I feel safe. Sated. Completely and utterly wrecked.

As my eyelids grow heavy, my last conscious thought is that I have never felt so wholly satisfied—so lust-drunk—in my entire life.

And with Cooper's steady heartbeat beneath my ear, I drift into sleep, unaware of the way his gaze lingers on me long after I've surrendered to the dark.

Nineteen

Present

I have maybe an hour before the girls arrive at my house.

Flash gives me a pitying look from the porch. I let him inside. I slide the drawer of the console table open and pull the letter from it. Just one more peek. Just something to quell the emotions building in me.

I've purposefully been sticking to the best moments. Partly because we didn't have many worst ones. But it's worth mentioning that even in the direct path of a curve ball, you took the hit and kept on.

In our absence from each other I feel it necessary to stress that I did not know.

I didn't.

I've told you before, but whether or not you believe me evades me. I didn't know. I'm still shocked. You blew up my world in my brother's backyard. My entire childhood was a lie. A fallacy.

But it wasn't just me was it? Your world imploded too. What are the odds of us having a connection like that? Do you believe in serendipity? I clung to you, or needed to in that time, but you...you pushed me away.

Almost as if the very thought of me repulsed you.

I am not pointing fingers or placing blame. It was an impossible situation to be thrust into. But in that moment, I reached for you, and you leaned away.

Fuck.

Tears well in my eyes, blurring his words. I blink until it stops. It has to, I need it to stop. Holding my breath like that is ruinous.

As lost and out of control as I felt, in our short time together, he rearranged everything. He is still always on my mind as if he wrote his name on the inner walls of me.

Twenty

Past

The scent of grilled meat and charred wood drifts in from the backyard, laughter and the low hum of conversation filling the warm summer air.

I'm inside Cooper's brother's house, wandering through, absorbing the details of his life—of their life.

The home is cozy, lived-in, but in the middle of nowhere.

Framed pictures line the walls, snapshots of a family I'm still trying to piece together.

My fingers skim across the frame of a photograph near the kitchen. A posed family portrait—Cooper's parents, his brother, and a man who looks just like his father but not quite. Something about him tugs at me, a recognition that coils deep in my stomach.

“Who's that?” I ask.

Cooper leans into me smiling. “That's my Uncle Danny.”

My breath shudders out of me.

It is Amelia's Danny.

A long-buried scream scratches against my throat as the memory surfaces in sharp, visceral detail—Amelia, broken and sobbing, clutching at empty space where her baby had been in the psych ward. The way they ripped her baby away after she was rescued from her kidnapper.

The unanswered questions. The pain that never healed.

“Where’s Danny now?”

Cooper looks sheepish. “Prison.”

I swallow, my pulse roaring in my ears.

Danny. The uncle in the picture.

A metallic taste spreads on my tongue as another realization slams into me from a session with Cooper.

He doesn’t remember his brother’s birth or his mother’s pregnancy. He should have.

The air thickens, pressing against me like a vice. My voice barely works when I ask, “What year was your brother born?”

Cooper turns, confused by the abrupt question. He tells me, the year falling from his lips so easily, so naturally, as if it means nothing.

But it means everything.

My free hand flies to my mouth, muffling the sound of my own horror, my own devastation. I stagger back, the room tilting violently. The weight of it is unbearable, pressing, suffocating.

Oh God.

I turn and run.

Bursting through the back door, I gulp in air, but it's not enough. It's not enough. My body trembles, my chest rising and falling too quickly.

Cooper's voice reaches me, urgent, concerned. "Robin?"

I shake my head, my back hitting the house as I try to steady myself, but nothing can steady me now. The world has been rewritten beneath my feet.

His hands land on my arms, grounding, searching. "What's wrong?"

I force myself to meet his eyes, my own filling with tears. I don't know how to say it. How to put words to something so enormous, so impossible. But it isn't impossible.

It's standing right there, laughing with a beer in his hand.

Cooper's brother is Amelia's son.

"Look at everything around us," I choke out, gesturing wildly, desperately. "Everything you've done." My chest caves in, my ribs barely holding me together. "Please, Cooper! I'm drowning here. I don't think I can save myself."

His grip tightens. "Robin, talk to me."

But I can't. Not yet.

Because if I say it out loud, it will be real. And if it's real, then I don't know how I'll ever find my way back.

“Are you alright?” he asks, voice taut with anxiety and frustration.

Those three words melt the shield of steel that has carried me through this entire ordeal.

No, I am not okay. I will never be alright again.

If I answer, my voice will crack, tears will come and I will be a sobbing lunatic.

I try to let the tension go out of my spine and shoulders, but they feel as pliable as a sheet of plywood.

“You don’t remember your mother being pregnant because she wasn’t. Danny is your brother’s father.”

Silence. It rings louder than any scream. Cooper stares at me, the meaning slowly sinking in, trickling through years of assumptions and lies. I see it when it hits him, the shattering. He steps back, his face drained of everything but shock.

“No...that’s not...” His voice wavers as though teetering on a frayed thread.

I shake my head, helplessly confirming what’s unraveling between us. “My college roommate. My best friend, Amelia, is your brother’s mother. Your brother is her and Danny’s son.”

He whirls away from me, stumbling toward the edge of the yard, where the trees stand tall and indifferent. His hands tangle in his hair, fighting what he doesn’t want to know. What he wishes I hadn’t said.

The agony tethering us snaps hard and fast.

I sink to the ground, my palms slamming against soft earth. Every piece of me wants to put it all back together for him—for both of us—but I can't even find my own footing. Everything has been built on a horrible lie.

He faces me again, eyes lit with something raw and unrecognizable. Betrayal? Desperation?

“Robin—”

A strangled sound escapes me as I push myself up from the dirt, my vision blurred by tears.

“She was kidnapped, Cooper. She was kidnapped and brainwashed by your uncle and has been rotting in a state psychiatric facility for the last two decades, a shell of herself. Absolutely gutted. And I saw him. I saw him in the papers, on the news, after she was found.”

Twenty One

Present

I shudder at the memory. At the hurt and guilt I felt. I could have saved Amelia, not from her son, but maybe just soon enough so that she wasn't as damaged from the ordeal as she was. She might have had a chance to come through the ordeal...live a normal life...like Nora.

But no, she was too far gone when they found her. Too brainwashed in her conviction that her abductor was truly the love of her life.

I'm embarrassed to say that it brought Cooper and I closer together instead of further apart. That we worked hard to heal each other in the months that followed. Instead of being repulsed by his family.

Unable to staunch the compulsion, I read a little more.

Memories tickle the edges of my recollection. Sometimes, I can't write fast enough to keep up with them. You gave me so many. But one stands out and begs for my attention often. Do you remember the day you asked me if I loved you?

I'm certain you do. I'm also certain my reaction was the catalyst to our end. It was only a question. One you needed an answer to, to be secure, to feel safe and loved and cared for. But it caught me off guard.

I didn't know what to say.

So I said nothing at all.

There is no room for silence to be misquoted. The thing is, I didn't know. Was it love? Was it lust? Would my passion, my infatuation with you, wane, burn out? I had nothing to compare my feelings to.

But it hurt you. I could see it in the way your mouth twisted itself out of shape, as though you'd just tasted something unpleasant. And I didn't know how to make it right. I didn't have the ability to analyze my emotions. To explain in certain terms what you meant to me. For that, I am sorry.

"If there's anything you want to tell me, now's the time." There was so much I wanted to tell you but I couldn't. I wouldn't. Robin, you were the only pure thing I had, and I wouldn't saddle you with the weight of my sins.

I needed you, the burning desire inside my chest. The fire in my heart to remain intact. Do you remember saying that?

I do.

I paused. Silence eating up the oxygen between us. Your face fell. Shoulders slumped. I willed the right response to leave my lips, but all my words sat stuck on my tongue as you packed up your strewn clothes from the floor.

A reminder of the fervor from the night past.

Love.

Such a foreign concept to me. Does anyone really love? Is anyone really capable of giving that all-encompassing idea to anyone else? Did I even believe in it?

Thoughts and idealism and realism kept me imprisoned to a solitary spot on the floor.
It felt like the carpet shackled my feet.

You left.

You left.

You left.

Because I didn't say a thing.

A knock rattles the door, startling me, and Flash leaps from the couch and bounds for it. That little traitor lets them know I'm close behind him with excited barking.

"Hold your horses," I call. I shove the letter into the drawer of the table on my way.

The girls file in. The scent of takeout fills my kitchen, cartons are spread out across my dining table like an offering.

Nora, Aubry, and Eve dig in without hesitation, comfortable in my space in a way that makes it feel less like an interrogation and more like a gathering of old friends.

But we all know why they're here.

"So," Aubry starts, mouth half-full of noodles, "let's talk about the guy you conveniently forgot to mention."

I exhale, staring at the untouched food on my plate. "I didn't forget."

Eve smirks. "Just omitted."

Nora tilts her head, ever patient. “Tell us about him.”

I hesitate. But these women—these former patients, these friends—have earned my honesty.

“His name is Cooper,” I say, forcing myself to meet their eyes. “And I fell in love with him.”

Silence.

Aubry is the first to react, eyes widening. “You fell in love with your patient?”

I nod. “It wasn’t supposed to happen. It shouldn’t have happened.”

Eve leans back, skeptical. “What was it about him?”

I take a deep breath. “He watched people. That was his thing—his proclivity, I guess. He watched me.” I swallow hard. “At first, it was unnerving. But then... I don’t know. It felt different. Like he saw me in a way no one else ever had.”

Nora’s brow furrows. “And you thought he loved you?”

I let out a humorless laugh. “I thought he did. He said things—intense, poetic things. Made me feel like I was the only person in the world who truly mattered to him.” I shake my head. “But then, after months together, I asked him. I asked if he loved me.”

Aubry leans forward. “And?”

I tighten my grip on my fork. “He didn’t answer.”

Another silence. This one heavier.

“So I left,” I finish, voice quieter now. “He got caught shortly after by some guests at his bed and breakfast.”

Nora gasps. “Wait. What bed and breakfast?”

I cringe. “The Ocean Voyeur.”

“Oh my god, Dr. R., Liam and I stayed there.”

I nod.

Aubry and Eve sit slack-jawed. “Do you think...” Nora drifts off.

Again, I nod. “I’m certain he probably watched you two.”

Nora shudders, although not in the repulsed way I thought she would.

“A month ago, a letter arrived from him. More like a small novel if I’m honest.”

“What’s it say?” Aubry asks.

I bite my lip. Nora reaches for her wine, taking a slow sip.

I push my chair back and walk to the side table, hesitating only a moment before retrieving the stack of pages. When I return to the table, I set them down between us.

“I haven’t finished reading it.”

Eve watches me closely. “Why not?”

I swallow hard. “Because I don’t know if I should.”

Aubry reaches for the letter. “Then let us read it.”

I hesitate, but in the end, I let her take it.

The three of them huddle together, reading in silence. Their expressions shift—curiosity, shock, something softer.

Aubry fans herself a couple times.

My stomach coils with tension and embarrassment and something else I can’t quite pinpoint.

It’s long.

It’s detailed.

It takes them entirely too long to read it all.

I pour myself another glass of wine. Use the restroom. Let Flash out and then back in again where he settles himself under my feet.

When they finally look up, it’s Nora who speaks first.

“You need to finish it.”

Aubry nods. “She’s right.”

Eve meets my gaze. “No more avoiding it, Dr. R.”

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Twenty Two

Past

I watch Cooper as he sits across the room from me. We're at the inn again.

Another weekend away.

Last night, another push of my boundaries.

The woman in bed with me plays with my nipples as Cooper watches.

Suddenly he's propped himself up over me.

Taking me in. His eyes sweep over my face and travel down my neck to my breasts.

They linger between breasts and belly button, and an overwhelming desire to know what he's thinking hits me.

Before I can utter a word, his gaze moves down, over my groin, caressing my thighs followed by my calves.

His eyes devour every aspect of my body in a way that I can physically feel.

An appreciative smile forms on his sinful mouth.

Cooper feels too hot, too bright, like a wildfire that will consume me if I get too

close.

He buries his face between my thighs and I feel his tongue; my body shudders toe to shoulder.

The woman continues teasing my breasts. A glance at Cooper shows his eyes on the movement of her hands on me.

He rarely joins in—preferring to watch while pleasing himself.

This participation has my pulse skyrocketing.

I reach out and touch the woman's breasts.

He growls between my legs.

“Cooper,” I gasp, a desperate warning. He only grips my hips tighter in response, and his name scatters off my lips again, syllable by syllable until I am nothing but an exclamation.

It takes too long for the aftershocks to fade, too long for my vision to clear and make sense of the dust motes haloed in sunlight above us. He crawls up beside me; dismisses the woman. His chest mirrors mine, both of us heaving like we've just sprinted out of hell and back.

We tangle together on the bed, my arms wrapped tightly around him. He could easily pick me up and toss me around. He heaves a long sigh that could have stirred the curtains. Then he puts his head on my lap.

“You okay?” Cooper brushes his thumb along my cheek, smirking when I don't—can't—answer right away.

We've been doing this for a few months now—this secret, illicit affair that has swept me off my feet...sent ripple effects throughout my life, through my very core values and judgment. Flash sleeps curled up on the dog bed that Cooper bought for him to use while we're here.

"Do you love me?" I ask.

The silence stretches between us, thick and suffocating, like a fog I can't wade through. I wait, my heart pounding, my ribs tight, desperate for something—anything—to fill the space between us.

The question still hangs in the air, fragile as glass.

Cooper doesn't answer.

I see it happen in real time—the way his expression shutters, the way his body goes rigid, every muscle locking up like he's preparing for a blow. Lie to my face because my heart can't handle anything else, I think

He doesn't look at me, not really. His eyes dart everywhere but at me—my face, my mouth, the sheets tangled around my body. I swear I can hear the frantic churn of his thoughts, the war waging behind his gaze, but he won't let me in.

And that's when I know.

My stomach twists. My throat clenches tight.

The realization cuts me open.

Because if he did love me—if he had even the faintest idea that what we had meant something—he would say it. Maybe not in those words, maybe not in a declaration

dripping in poetry and romance, but in some way.

Instead, there's only silence.

A sharp, ugly thing that slices between us, bleeding out everything I thought we were.

I force a swallow, but it does nothing to ease the burn clawing up my throat.

"If there's anything you want to tell me, now's the time," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

It's not a demand.

It's a lifeline.

A final plea.

But Cooper just stares at me.

I see the hesitation. The conflict. His lips part slightly like he wants to say something, but nothing comes.

Nothing at all.

A hollow ache sits heavy in my chest, pressing against my ribs, making it hard to breathe.

I stare at him, my stomach twisting, nausea creeping up my throat.

What have I done?

The question rattles inside my skull, over and over, until I can't take it anymore. I shove the sheets away, the fabric cool against my suddenly feverish skin, and slide out of bed.

I move quietly, methodically, as I gather my things. My dress from the floor, my bra hooked over the chair, my heels kicked haphazardly near the door. Each article of clothing feels heavier than it should, weighted with regret.

Flash stirs in the corner, his ears twitching as I kneel to clip his leash onto his collar. He lets out a small whine, sensing my mood, but I don't have the patience to comfort him. Not now.

I take one last look at Cooper—at the way his lips are slightly parted, yet not uttering a word.

It shouldn't hurt like this. My stomach is a pit of acid and my hands are shaking as I slip out the door, slamming it behind me.

By the time I'm in my car, Flash curled up in the passenger seat, my pulse is a relentless drum in my ears.

I grip the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity, my jaw tight as I pull onto the road.

My heart and my head are at war.

What the hell was I thinking?

I should have never let it get this far.

The weight of what I've done crashes down all at once, suffocating. I can already see

the headlines, the scandal. Prominent psychiatrist engages in illicit affair with deviant younger patient.

I could lose everything.

I slam my foot down on the gas, frustration clawing at my insides, but it doesn't help. Nothing does.

Because underneath the anger—the sharp, biting rage directed at myself—is something much worse.

Heartbreak.

I press my lips together, shaking my head.

I knew what Cooper was. I knew what I was getting into. And yet, I let myself believe—let myself hope—that maybe, just maybe, there was something real between us.

But love doesn't live in the shadows.

And Cooper? He was never going to step into the light.

I dig my nails into the steering wheel, my vision blurring for a split second before I blink the tears away.

I made a mistake.

A devastating, irreversible mistake.

And now, I have to live with it.

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Twenty Three

Present

I 'd like you to know, I did love you.

Do love you still. I do.

You're engraved in my soul. Etched on my heart. The following day you refused my calls, texts, and emails.

And the day after that.

I was distraught. Overcome by a deep sadness. In my funk, nothing consoled me. I crept through the tunnels at night but took no pleasure in what I saw.

It meant nothing anymore. It gave no relief. No excitement.

I fidgeted as I observed.

I moved from one room to the next—restless and anxious.

I broke my cardinal rule. No phone.

I was waiting for you to call, checking endlessly to see if you would reach out. I didn't want to miss it if you did. Days without you felt like years.

I was crumbling.

Phone in pocket I moved from louver to louver—watching.

And then you called.

Tears prick my eyes. It was me.

My fault.

He's in prison because of me. Yet still, he loved me.

Loves me.

The weight of their stares presses against me, heavy with expectation. My fingers tighten around the wine glass in my hand, the rim cold against my lips as I take a slow sip, buying myself another second. Another breath. Another chance to rethink this.

But I don't.

I set the glass down. "He was caught because of me."

Aubry, who had been reaching for another dumpling, freezes. "What?"

I nod, staring at the deep red of my wine. "I called him. That's how they found him. He answered my call."

I look up, and their reactions are exactly what I expected—shock, confusion, and a glimmer of something else. Maybe concern. Maybe judgment.

Nora tilts her head. “You called him?”

I nod. “I had to. I—I needed to.” My breath shudders as I exhale. “The truth is, I just wanted to hear his voice.”

The silence stretches between us, thick and suffocating.

Aubry’s expression shifts—softer, sadder. “Robin...”

I shake my head. “I know. I know it’s wrong. I know who he is. What he is.” My voice drops to something raw and unguarded. “He’s a sexual deviant. A manipulator. A man who watches and obsesses and—” My breath hitches. “And I still love him.”

Eve flinches, just slightly, but I catch it. “You still love him?”

I nod once. “Even now. Even knowing everything. Even knowing I should be repulsed.” My fingers press into my palm. “I can’t turn it off.”

Aubry lets out a long, slow breath. “Jesus.”

Nora studies me, unreadable. “Have you told him?”

I bark out a laugh. “What, that I still love him after I caused his capture? No. And I won’t.”

Aubry leans forward, her voice softer now. “Why don’t you?”

I look down at my hands, the weight of my confession sinking deep into my bones.

“Because when he looked at me, I felt seen. Because in the courtroom he pleaded with his eyes to absolve myself from any culpability, he never gave me up. Because

when he touched me, I felt wanted. Because for all his sins, for all his darkness..." I let out a shaky breath. "He never outright lied to me."

The letter sits between us like a living thing, heavy with unspoken words. The edges are worn now, passed between hands, read and re-read, as if the meaning could shift under their gazes. My fingers twitch against the stem of my wine glass, my heart a restless thing in my chest.

I wait for them to tell me I'm insane. That I'm weak. That I need to forget him.

But they don't.

Aubry is the first to speak. "You need to write him back."

I blink. "What?"

"You need to write him back," she repeats, firmer this time.

She lifts the letter between two fingers, tapping it against her palm.

"You love him. That much is obvious. And if you don't tell him what you need, what you expect if there's ever going to be anything between you again, you're just going to torture yourself for the next four years and six months."

I swallow hard. "Aubry..."

"She's right," Nora interrupts. Her gaze is steady, but there's something warm in it. Understanding. "If you love him, if you're even considering this, then you have to set boundaries. He cannot—cannot—watch people in private spaces anymore."

My breath catches. "That's who he is."

“No,” Eve interjects, shaking her head. “That’s what he chooses to be.

And he can choose to stop.” Her expression hardens, but there’s no cruelty in it.

“If he can’t, then he doesn’t get you. He said as much right here.

” She jabs the papers. ““In a perfect world, I would have understood that what we had, what we participated in, was enough to satisfy me. I would have stopped watching at the inn. I would have boarded up the faux louvers and washed my hands of it. What we had, what we did, satisfied me.””

The words hit me deep, striking something fragile inside me.

Aubry leans forward, elbows on her knees. “Robin, you have to be enough. If this is going to work—if you’re ever going to have a real chance—he has to want you more than he wants his obsession.”

I open my mouth to argue, to tell them it’s not that simple, not for addicts. I rub my temples. “You’re all assuming he even wants to hear from me.”

Eve snorts. “He sent you a letter, Robin. He wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t want a response.”

I exhale shakily, looking between them. “And if I write to him, and he says no? That he can’t promise me that?”

Nora’s voice is gentle but firm. “Then you walk away.”

I nod slowly, letting the weight of it settle in. “Four years and six months.” The words taste strange on my tongue.

A long time. A short time. A lifetime.

Nora reaches for my hand, squeezing it. “We’re with you. No matter what.”

Eve smirks. “Yeah, even if we think you’re out of your damn mind.”

I huff out a breath, half a laugh, half a sob. “Thanks.”

Aubry grins. “Now, let’s get you some nice stationery. If you’re going to send a letter to your criminally attractive, emotionally unavailable ex, you cannot do it on lined notebook paper.”

I shake my head, but a small smile finds its way to my lips. I should have known that these women would understand.

Nora had fallen in love with a monster and survived it only to fall in love with his brother, who not only understood her need for a different kind of romance but thrived in providing it.

Aubry, with Mike, who saved her from being trafficked. Eve, who not only survived Nora’s monster but escaped and who never gave up on finding her little sister that she’d had to leave behind.

They’re exactly the women who would understand and see past societal norms and conventions and social graces.

“Okay. But I’m most certainly not writing it with you all here.”

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Twenty Four

Past

Two weeks.

Two weeks of silence.

Two weeks of trying to erase him, trying to breathe without him. But the loneliness sits in my chest like a stone, pressing harder and harder until I can't bear it anymore.

My hand shakes as I press the phone to my ear.

The line rings once.

Twice.

And then—

“Robin.” His voice is a rasp, raw and desperate, and I nearly drop the phone. A choked sound catches in my throat, my vision blurring as I close my eyes.

I shouldn't have called.

“Robin, please, talk to me,” he pleads, his volume rising.

I needed to hear his voice, needed to know if I was the only one drowning in this

unbearable ache.

“God dammit,” he roars, “I should have told you.”

But before I can speak, before I can ask him anything—

There’s shouting. A commotion.

“What the fuck?” A man’s voice, angry and alarmed.

More yelling. A woman screams. Something clatters in the background.

“Who the hell are you?”

And then—chaos.

Thudding footsteps. A crash. Another scream.

“Cooper?” My voice is barely a whisper. “What’s happening?”

But the line is already dead.

My heart slams against my ribs as I stare at my phone, bile rising in my throat.

Something is wrong.

Very wrong.

He didn’t answer his phone the rest of the night. I barely slept. Thankful that it’s the

weekend, I lounge in bed until finally the desire to pee overwhelms me and I force myself up.

Downstairs, I feed Flash and let him out.

I grab the remote and flip on the news then pour myself a mug of coffee before heading to the couch to curl up.

The words on the screen send ice straight through my veins, dread curling in my gut.

‘Local Business Owner Arrested for Secretly Watching Guests at the Ocean Voyeur.’

The image of him flashes across the screen—his face pale, his lips pressed into a tight line as he’s shoved into the back of a police car.

My stomach drops.

No.

This can’t be happening.

I read the words again, but they don’t change. The weight of it presses down on me, suffocating. My mind races. How long has he been watching them? The whole time we were together? Was he slipping away to the tunnels after we made love? Before?

And then another thought hits me like a freight train—

My career. My license.

I gag, pressing a hand to my mouth.

Oh, God. I was involved with him. My patient.

It's only a matter of time before someone finds out. Before my name is dragged into this.

Flash scratches at the door. On shaky legs, I stand to let him inside. Tears stream down my face. I can hardly breathe.

My phone vibrates on the coffee table.

An unfamiliar number.

I hesitate. Then answer.

“Dr. Richardson?” A deep, clipped voice on the other end.

I swallow hard. “Yes.”

“This is Detective Halloway, we need to ask you some questions about a former patient of yours—Cooper Burick.”

My blood turns to ice.

“We'd like you to come in and make a statement. And—” the detective pauses, his tone sharp, probing, “—we may need you to testify against him.”

The room tilts.

Testify?

Against him?

The man who once whispered my name like a prayer? Who kissed me so deeply it felt like drowning?

Who, despite everything—despite the sickness curling in my stomach, the betrayal clenching my ribs—I know I still love?

I clutch the phone tighter, my breath coming in shallow, panicked gasps.

Twenty Five

Present

I wrote to him a month ago. It had taken me a while to get the words right. I must have balled up and thrown away four different versions of the letter I ended up mailing.

Cooper,

I got your letter. I read it once, slowly. Day by day, page by page. Then I read it again, and then I let it sit on my nightstand like it might dissolve into something less dangerous if I gave it time.

But your words don't fade, don't soften. They settle deep, winding through my ribs, curling around the parts of me I thought had turned to ash.

I needed to hear it. Your voice in my head, your confessions laid bare. The weight of your love pressing against me, filling the spaces you left hollow.

You loved me. You love me.

And God, Cooper, I love you too. I never stopped.

I tried—I told myself that love should be easy, that it should be safe.

That the kind of love we shared was meant to be left in the dark.

But I was wrong. Because love isn't safe, and it isn't easy.

It's raw and ugly and breathtakingly beautiful all at once.

It's knowing someone's darkest parts and still reaching for them in the light just as they are.

And I'm reaching for you now.

But I need you to reach back.

I will wait for you, Cooper. I will count the days, the hours, the moments until you are released. But if I do, there can be no ghosts between us.

No stolen glimpses through windows that were never meant to be open to you. No strangers under your gaze, unaware they are being seen.

Watching me—only me—has to be enough.

I need to be enough.

If you can give me that, then I will be here when you walk out of your cage. I will be waiting. I will be yours.

If you can't... then this is the last letter I'll ever send.

—Robin

I'm at the empty inn, missing him. Here to feel something...to feel closer to him. The waves assault the jagged cliffs, hammering the rocks like a battering ram. Wearing them down, smoothing them out. The same thing Cooper did to me.

Blurred lines.

Who am I supposed to be loyal to?

Do I stick to the role life's assigned me?

Can this survive? Will the best parts of who we were, who we are, retain this life?

We each gave the other a gift: acceptance and love.

Life is a maze, love a conundrum.

My phone vibrates in my hand.

Unknown number.

“What?!” I holler into the phone. “God damn, please stop calling me.”

My finger hovers above the End button when I hear, “Ms. Richardson, I’m Cooper Burick’s lawyer.”

I press my forehead against the window on the grand wrap-around porch, feeling the edge press into my skin, focusing on the uncomfortableness of it. “I’m sorry, who?”

There’s a sigh on the other end of the line. “You’re not in any trouble. I need to meet with you to go over Cooper’s estate.”

“Estate?”

“Are you available this week?”

I suck in a ragged breath. Exhale.

“I... sure.”

I’m seated in a leather chair across from Cooper’s lawyer a week later.

The sound of the city seeps through the office windows, a distant cacophony that makes everything feel surreal.

I’m sure the lawyer’s used to this—used to people being dumbstruck into silence—but he surprises me by flicking his gaze up from his paperwork with an empathetic smile.

“He left you in charge of his bank accounts, apartment in the city, and the inn. This is all via power of attorney of course. With a clause that upon release...”

The words spoken into my ear pull out a lynchpin. A towering pile of confusion, shock, and awe that crashes around my legs.

“Apartment in the city?” I ask, confused.

His brows pinch together as if he’s the confused party. “It’s a lot to take in.” He nods slightly, his pen poised. “You have questions?”

Do I? Not about what I need to do next—I have a feeling Cooper’s left instructions as detailed as they are overwhelming—but why?

Why leave me in charge of anything?

Why now?

“He said if you have questions, I can...” The lawyer sifts through the pages, distracted.

“Did he say why?”

He searches my face, maybe gauging how much information to disclose. Whatever he sees gives him the go-ahead. “Cooper wanted no loose ends. Said you’d understand that.”

The room seems to breathe around me, expanding and contracting in slow waves, and the inn resurfaces in my mind—Cooper’s dark form stretched across the cliffs like a shadow.

The lawyer slides a stack of papers toward me. “If you need time...”

And there’s that word again: time.

“I’ll take these with me,” I say.

He nods, gathers the rest of Cooper’s plans into neat piles. “It is important to him,” he adds softly, “that it is you, who manages everything.”

The air wrestles free from my lungs like it’s been commanded to exit under duress.

Twenty Six

Past

The courtroom is suffocating. I've been here many times over for many different cases, yet this time the walls press in, the fluorescent lights buzz overhead, and my heartbeat pounds in my ears like a war drum. I sit stiffly in the witness box, hands clasped in my lap to keep them from shaking.

Cooper is here.

Seated at the defense table, dressed in a suit that doesn't quite fit the way it used to. He looks different—thinner, paler—but his presence is still overwhelming. That same quiet intensity, the same piercing blue eyes that once burned into mine.

He's watching me.

I try not to look at him, but the weight of his gaze is unbearable. It drags me in, suffocates me, and suddenly, I can't breathe.

I'm called to testify.

My legs feel weak as I rise, stepping forward. The room tilts, my vision narrows. Cooper hasn't stopped looking at me, and it's like he's reaching for me without moving an inch.

I swallow hard, forcing myself to focus on the questions being thrown my way.

“Yes, Cooper Burick was my patient.”

“Yes, he was in therapy for voyeuristic tendencies.”

“Yes, he mentioned watching people.”

“But he never disclosed where he was doing it.”

That part is true.

The lie—the omission—festers in my gut like rot.

Because I did suspect. And then he confirmed without saying as much. Just acknowledging my show for him. The way he slipped out of bed late at night. The way the walls at the Ocean Voyeur always seemed to breathe.

But I say nothing of that.

The prosecutor presents the evidence.

A schematic of the Ocean Voyeur, showing the hidden tunnels. Photos of a labyrinth of passageways carved between the walls, louver vents in every room, perfectly placed for watching unseen.

The jury murmurs. The judge’s expression tightens.

I feel sick.

Cooper sits motionless as the testimony is given, his expression unreadable. But when I glance his way, his fingers twitch, and something in his eyes flickers—something dark, something ruined.

The attorney approaches, voice sharp, questions cutting.

“Did you ever suspect he was still watching people?”

I hesitate.

Just for a second.

I feel Cooper’s stare like a knife against my throat.

Say no.

“I—” I clear my throat. “No.”

The lie sits heavy on my tongue.

I don’t dare look at him again.

The trial grinds forward, slow and excruciating, like watching a car veer off the road, knowing the crash is inevitable but powerless to stop it. Every word spoken, every piece of evidence presented, is another crushing blow, another nail sealing his fate.

Then the couple takes the stand.

The man recounts the moment he heard the phone ring—inside the walls. The way he pulled back the vent with shaking hands, expecting nothing, only to find him staring back. Cooper. A specter in the darkness. A ghost who had never left.

A hush falls over the courtroom, thick with unease. The weight of it presses into my chest, making it hard to breathe. I claw at the neckline of my shirt, desperate for air.

Then the verdict.

Guilty.

The word slams into me, brutal and final.

The sentence: five years.

I inhale sharply, but the air catches in my throat. My vision blurs. I should feel relief. I tell myself I should. He won't drag me under any further. He won't expose me.

But all I feel is devastation.

The bailiffs move in. The spectators murmur. He stands, spine straight, face unreadable. The handcuffs clink as they cuff him, then, just as they turn him away, his eyes find mine.

There's no rage. No betrayal.

Only possession.

Like he still owns me. Like he always will.

And the worst part?

I know it, too.

All I feel is grief.

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Twenty Seven

Present

The envelope in my hands makes me feel queasy. I wet my lips and steel myself with a deep inhale before slipping my index finger along the seam to open it.

I pull the page out carefully and unfold it.

Doc,

I read your letter until the ink blurred, until the edges grew soft from my rough hands gripping it too tightly. Until I could hear your voice whispering the words against my skin, against the hollow space you left inside me.

I don't deserve the grace you've given me. I don't deserve you. But if you are offering me a place beside you—if you are telling me there is still a world where I get to love you, where I get to be yours—I will spend the rest of my days proving I am worthy of it.

You were always enough. You are everything. And I am sorry—I am so sorry—that I ever made you question that. That I stood in front of you, inches away, and didn't say the one thing that was burning inside me. That I let silence answer when I should have said yes.

Yes, I love you.

Yes, I have loved you since the moment you first looked back at me and actually saw me.

There has never been anything safe about the way I love you. It's all-consuming, reckless, something I would rip out of my own chest if it meant giving you peace. But I won't hurt you again.

I won't lose you again.

If the only person I ever get to lay eyes on again is you, then I will have led a good and worthy life.

Four years. Five months. Every second of it will be spent becoming the man who deserves you.

Because I am all in, Doc.

—Cooper

I carefully fold the letter and tuck it back into its envelope, running my fingers over the edges as if I can somehow absorb his words into my skin. My heart is swollen with emotion—too full, too raw, too alive.

The weight of it—of everything we lost, everything we are still fighting to hold on to—settles deep in my bones, but for the first time in a long time, it doesn't feel like a burden. It feels like hope.

A small knock on the door frame pulls me from my thoughts. I glance up as Lotte pops her head into my makeshift office at NEL, her bright blue eyes scanning my face with curiosity.

“You’re awfully smiley,” she says, tossing her blonde hair over one shoulder.

I grin at her, unable to help myself. “I guess I am.”

She quirks a brow, stepping inside. “Are you going to elaborate? Or am I supposed to just accept this new development in your personality without question?”

I regard her for a moment, this girl who has already come so far in her short eighteen years. She knows what it means to survive, to endure. She knows what it means to rebuild after ruin. My chest swells with pride.

I let out a slow breath, feeling the truth settle warm and steady in my chest. “Love,” I say simply.

She grins at me.

Lotte knows all about love.

“Anyway, Eve said to tell you that if you don’t show up for girls’ night on Friday, she’s going to personally drag you there.”

I chuckle. “Duly noted.”

Lotte turns to go but then pauses in the doorway. “Whoever he is,” she says, her voice quieter now, “he’s lucky.”

As she disappears down the hall, I allow myself one last glance at the letter, tracing the familiar loops of his name. He is lucky I suppose, but then again, so am I.

Four years. Four months.

I can wait.

As I step out of the office, the late afternoon sun spills through the tall windows, illuminating the wide, airy hall.

I walk slowly down the corridor, letting myself absorb it all.

My heart is still racing from the letter, from imagining tomorrow and four years from now and every day in between.

It feels wild in my chest, an untamed thing refusing to be tethered by time or distance.

Cooper's words pulse in my veins, bright and unfaltering.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:22 am

Epilogue

One Year Later

His voice echoes in my head from our last visit at the prison, a relentless echo asserting that I am strong and brave, even though every fiber of my being screams that I am neither.

I have never been strong enough alone to carry the weight of Cooper's ambitions, to bear the brunt of his obsessive love.

Yet, propelled by him, by the mere thought of him, I force myself onward.

My skin prickles as I think about all the secrets contained here.

If he can see me from so many miles away, so much time between us now, I want him to be proud.

I can't help feeling that he knows I am here.

Ignoring the guilt of reneging on my one demand for him.

Abandoning all common sense. In jeopardy of losing the respect of my few friends.

Every nerve in my skin ignites with a fierce, uneasy energy.

Those eyes of his, clever like a crow's, darting around his cell, sensing something

important happening. With every determined step, the electrifying bond between his heart and mine intensifies, pulling me deeper into this dangerous dance.

I pass the front door to the apartment he owns and round the corner. I'd held out. I'd tried to let this part go. His lawyer called to let me know that the apartment sublet runs out at the end of the next month, and I knew... I knew what Coop wanted of me.

So here I am.

An access panel no bigger than a large suitcase, concealed around the dead-end corner from the apartment's front door, sends my legs collapsing into a quivering heap. My fingers dig into my pockets as if they've grown roots anchoring me to the spot.

I am paralyzed. Breathless. My mind is a chaotic storm. Incapable of...anything. My stomach lurches violently, rocketing up into my throat.

I can't move.

Can't breathe.

Can't think straight.

My stomach makes an elevator trip up into my throat. My consciousness flits around, homing in on small sounds—my breathing, the muted voices inside the apartment, the occasional creak of the floor, or the heat kicking on.

Finally, I reach out. I grab the edges of the access panel. It slides from its grooves up and out easily. There is a cabinet handle screwed to the inside of it.

It takes a moment before I realize what it's for. A small paddle switch in the too-large-to-be-a-heat-duct tunnel very dimly illuminates the direction ahead.

I climb inside.

Holding the handle on the back side of the panel, I slide it back into place. It's not roomy, but it's not claustrophobic either. There is a comfortable amount of room to move around.

Every nerve inside me is lit up like a neon sign as I crawl. This is wrong. This is love. It's too late now.

This is—my thoughts die off when I reach the first heat register.

A woman younger than me by a decade stands in the kitchen in a flowing sundress. She is lovely and happy and swaying to music.

An equally striking man strides in, turning up the music with a flick of his wrist before he snakes an arm around her waist. My eyes are riveted to her as she moves with an intoxicating grace.

Together, they sway to the music, their eyes locked in a trance, grins stretching across their faces with a fervor that is almost palpable.

He dips her low, her hair cascading like a waterfall, and when he pulls her back up, holding her tightly against him, their kiss is so deep and fervent it sends a whirlwind through my mind, leaving me breathless and reeling just from watching.

All the tension drifts out of my body like layers of fog rising off the ocean. My limbs go slack, surrendering to the moment as I peer through the heat vent. The kiss breaks as the woman draws a ragged breath and sways like a tree in the wind.

My fingers brush against my own lips gently.

This is pure. This is raw and unfiltered. What I'm witnessing—it's an explosion of

passion, visceral and undeniable.

The image does things to both my body and imagination that are not fit for public consumption. My heart vibrates in my chest like a live wire. My mind is a whirling scheme of possibilities.

My love is a pale thing compared to the love Cooper asserts for me. He has gifted me this in his absence.

My heartbeat slows as I watch the scene unfold before me.

Rapt with curiosity.

I keep the pages of his first letter tied up in ribbon, locked away, and honor him this way for now. But there is deviance in all of us. That just makes us human.

It doesn't make someone a bad person.

And for now, this is a secret I can carry with and for him, until we can be together again.

So I watch.