

[Insider] The Therapist Ch. 11

Despite Ethan coming in for his session a couple of days early, Mei ended up rescheduling hers. Instead of their regular Friday visit, she'd tried to push it to the following week. Nathan offered to see her Saturday instead and, after some initial hesitation, Mei agreed. Which was why he was sitting in his office on a Saturday morning, drinking a fresh cup of coffee and reviewing his session with Ethan.

Normally, Nathan would have spent this time going over his last session with Mei, looking for nonverbal tics and other signs that his methods were working. But Ethan's session was more useful to him now. Nathan needed to understand what had happened when they made the tape on Ethan's birthday. Mei had never rescheduled before, and he doubted the timing was a coincidence. Maybe she knew he'd want to talk about the video. Or maybe it had more to do with their last session, the way she'd ground herself against him before leaving. His cock stirred at the memory. Maybe it was both.

Nathan took another sip of coffee and leaned back in his chair. The question was, what did he want to happen?

On screen, Ethan was telling Nathan how much he enjoyed watching Mei let go. He wouldn't remember the conversation, but the thought would remain. Still, could Nathan trust him to bring it up to Mei? It had taken him a month to mention the sex tape, and that was something he'd wanted for years. Nathan flipped through his notes, trying to decide how far he wanted to push, then stopped when he found a single word underlined beneath Mei's last session.

Watching.

Mei liked being watched. That wasn't new. What he'd forgotten was how much her body seemed to respond whenever she talked about it. Nathan went back to the session where they'd discussed Kyle. Even then, the signs had been there. Then he found the notes from their last appointment, when she'd talked about being watched at the parent-teacher conference. That was when everything changed. When she'd stopped talking about it like an abstract fantasy and started responding to him instead. Nathan read the section again, his eyes lingering on the notes as the pieces started to fit together.

He closed the notebook. Mei had been circling this for weeks, whether she realized it or not. Then Ethan had given him exactly what he needed yesterday. The question wasn't whether Mei wanted to be watched. It was how far she would let Nathan take that desire once he gave her permission to stop pretending she didn't.

A soft knock pulled him from his thoughts. Nathan glanced at the clock. 2:58. Mei was early again. He stood, closed the notebook containing his previous session notes, and headed toward the living room.

Mei stood outside in a loose floral dress that fell almost to her toes. Her shoulders were bare, dark hair catching the afternoon sun as she looked up at him.

"Mei, welcome." Nathan smiled and stepped aside.

She returned the smile, holding his gaze as she slipped past him.

"Sorry about all the back and forth." She walked straight to the office, not bothering to wait for Nathan. "I've been helping out with this Daddy-Daughter Dance at school." She dropped into the middle of the sofa. "I didn't realize it was going to take so much of my time."

"Sounds like a lot." Nathan took his seat behind the desk, watching as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. He'd seen her do it before, usually when she was uncomfortable, but he wasn't sure what had triggered it this time. The excuse for rescheduling, or simply talking about the dance. "I remember you and Sierra discussing it at dinner. I'm glad to see you're sticking with it."

"It's more fun than I thought it would be." Mei relaxed deeper into the cushion. "Jack is..." She laughed and shook her head. "He's terrible at it. But I don't mind. It means I get to make more of the decisions."

Nathan picked up his pen. Her whole demeanor had changed at the mention of Jack. She was smiling more now, her voice lighter, a faint flush coloring her cheeks. He made a note about it before looking back up.

"How are things at home?"

"Good." She shifted in her seat. "Ethan has been great. And, well... you know the rest." She recrossed her legs and glanced toward the window before looking back at him.

"So, the last time we talked, you were planning for Ethan's birthday." Nathan clicked his pen. "How do you think it went?"

Her fingers curled into the fabric of her dress. "Oh, um... I figured you'd already heard about that from Ethan." Her hand moved to her knee, rubbing it once. "Didn't he tell you... everything?"

"He told me how it went from his perspective. I want to hear yours."

"Right." Mei chewed the inside of her cheek, her gaze drifting back toward the window. "It was good, I guess." A nervous laugh slipped out. "I bought, um... lingerie. I thought Ethan's eyes were going to pop out of his head when he saw me."

Nathan's cock stirred at the image. He ignored it and gave her a reassuring smile. "That couldn't have been easy, Mei. How did it feel putting it on? Did you hear your mother's voice in your head?"

"Terrifying." She looked at him. "But there was no voice."

Nathan wrote beneath his previous notes: *Husband's reaction still primary validation. No maternal voice. Experience framed through Ethan's response.*

"And the camera?" He looked back up. "Did it bother you when you came out? Did you feel like you needed to cover yourself?"

Nathan leaned back slightly as Mei began to answer. He already knew what had happened that night, at least the version Ethan remembered, but hearing it from her was different. He wanted to see how her body reacted as she recalled the events, if she would shy away. More importantly, Nathan wanted to know where her attention had been. On Ethan. On the camera. Or on the knowledge that someone else might eventually see what she'd allowed herself to become in front of it.

"No." She took a breath. "I thought it would. There was something, I don't know..." She wet her lips. "Exciting about it. I wasn't expecting that."

"That's great, Mei." He wanted to make sure he gave plenty of positive reinforcement here. It was important for what was going to come next. "There's no reason to feel uncomfortable around people you trust."

She nodded.

"What happened next? What were you feeling?"

Mei shifted on the couch, her thighs pressing together. "Wanted, I guess. Not just because of Ethan." She paused. "I mean, Ethan always makes me feel wanted, but the camera added to it." She swallowed. "That probably sounds awful."

"Why would it sound awful?"

"Because it's supposed to be about Ethan and his fantasy." Her cheeks darkened. "Not me thinking about other people... you know. Seeing it."

"If the idea of people seeing the tape, seeing you, excited you, why would that be a bad thing?" Nathan watched her carefully. "If anything, it sounds like you and Ethan are more aligned than you realized."

She cocked her head and her face twisted like there was something she wanted to say, but she was holding back.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"Just..." She searched for the words, then looked down at her hands. "The thought of other people seeing the tape. It... it shouldn't make me feel the way it does."

Nathan tilted his head. "Why do you think that?"

"Because I'm married." It came out louder than he expected. "The only person I should want to see me like that is my husband." She shook her head, her voice going softer. "Just because I don't hear my mom anymore doesn't mean I don't think about what she would think."

Nathan leaned forward, his elbows resting just above his knees. "Your mother didn't just define what you should and shouldn't do sexually. She also taught you how you were supposed to feel about wanting those things." He paused, giving her time to process it. "So now when something excites you, the excitement comes first and the shame shows up right behind it. That doesn't necessarily mean the desire is wrong. It means the guilt is familiar."

"Yeah, but..." Mei adjusted on the couch. "A married woman shouldn't get excited at the thought of other men looking at her."

"Even if that's the exact kind of thing that gets her husband excited?"

Mei stared at him. Her fingers slowly loosened around the fabric of her dress. Her lips parted, but nothing came out. Nathan could almost see her trying to fit the two ideas together. Being wanted by other men was wrong. Ethan wanted her to be wanted by other men. Both couldn't occupy the same space as easily as they once had.

He didn't want to give her enough time to second-guess that statement. She hadn't pushed back, and that was enough for now. Better to move forward and let the idea sit there while her guard was still down. "Walk me through the rest of that night. After the camera was on."

"You mean..." She crossed her arms, then uncrossed them, unsure where to set them. "The sex?"

"I mean whatever you feel comfortable telling me."

"It was great." Her face turned the color of a ripe tomato. "I mean, he seemed to really like it. We both did." She closed her eyes. "But eventually he..."

She trailed off. Her shoulders drew in, her knees pressing together until the tendons stood out beneath her skin.

"He told me," Nathan said, keeping his voice reassuring. "The camera got in his head and he had some performance issues."

"I just..." She pressed her palms flat against her knees. "I thought it was going great, then suddenly he just wanted to watch me." She looked at Nathan. "Which is totally fine."

He nodded, letting the silence stretch until she continued.

She looked at her hands. "At first I was just lying there and I was... I was pretty... um excited." She rubbed her hands over her thighs. "He just kept looking at me and I didn't want to just lie there. I wanted to, you know, excite him."

"And the fact that he was holding the camera, watching you touch yourself. Did that enhance the experience for you?"

"I wasn't trying to put on a show." She shook her head. "I wasn't really thinking about the camera at all. My brain sort of turned off and I just let my body do whatever it wanted." She was breathing through her mouth now, her knees drifting farther apart.

Nathan watched the movement. "What did your body want?"

Mei's hands stopped on her thighs. "To let him watch me... touch myself." The admission was barely audible.

Nathan recognized the pattern immediately. She was fighting it, but she was getting aroused. Every time she talked about being watched, her body responded. Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing audible, her thighs pressing together and drifting apart in a cycle she didn't seem to notice.

"I want to try something." He stood and moved to the side of the desk, perching himself on it. Her eyes followed him. "Close your eyes."

Her brow creased, but she didn't say no.

"Don't worry, we're not leaving the office this time." He smiled. "It's a visualization exercise. Similar to what we did when we talked about Kyle."

Her breath hitched at the name. She searched his face for a moment before finally closing her eyes, her hands still knotted together in her lap.

"I want to take you somewhere." He stepped closer, standing beside her on the couch. It was important the camera directly behind her saw him keeping a professional distance. "You told me about Kyle's apartment. The cracked door and how you imagined his roommate watching you."

"He wasn't really there," she said, quickly. Her breathing had already grown shallow.

"I know. But that's where this started for you, isn't it? The first time you realized the possibility of someone seeing you could be exciting." He watched the tension gather around her mouth. "I want you to put yourself back there. Only this time, I want you to change something."

The grip on her dress tightened. Nathan sat on the opposite end of the couch, leaving enough space between them that there was no chance of accidentally touching her and pulling her out of the exercise.

"You're with Kyle on his bed, he's touching your leg, your thigh. It feels nice, doesn't it?"

She nodded, exhaling through her nose.

"There's a gap in the door and your eyes find it, but the person watching isn't his roommate." Nathan paused. "It's Ethan."

Mei's fingers dug into the fabric, lifting the hem to just above her ankles.

"You can see the look on Ethan's face. The excitement in his eyes as Kyle's fingers slide up your leg." He adjusted his body slightly on the sofa, allowing his knee to touch hers.

Mei's breathing changed. The slow exhale through her nose became shallower, her lips parting slightly as the image settled in. Nathan watched her knees drift apart another inch.

"What does Ethan look like?"

A faint crease appeared between her brows. "He's..." She swallowed. "He's just watching." Her chest rose beneath the dress. "He looks excited. Like he can't look away."

Her knee pressed more firmly against Nathan's.

Nathan stayed still, despite the throbbing between his legs. "And what does that do to you?"

Mei didn't answer immediately. She pulled the dress higher, so it stopped at her knees. The flush that had started in her cheeks had spread down her neck.

"It... it makes me want to tell Kyle to keep going."

Nathan reached out, his hand hovering just below Mei's knee but he paused. He couldn't rush it. She wasn't actually under hypnosis here and one false move would destroy everything. He pulled his hand back.

"Where is Kyle's hand now? Show me."

"It's..." She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, her right hand shifting slightly in her lap.

"I'm not sure if—"

"It's okay, Mei. Ethan is watching, remember. He wants to see you experience it."

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She licked her lips, her hand moving to her bare knee. The second she touched it she gasped.

"He's sliding it up my leg. Toward my... my panties." Her hand disappeared under her dress. Her face contorted as she spread her legs wider, her knee pressing harder into Nathan's. She didn't seem to notice the contact anymore.

"How does that feel?"

"Good." Her voice cracked on the word. "Really good. I... I want Ethan to see it."

Nathan smiled and let out the breath he'd been holding and placed his right hand on her knee. He kept the pressure light, giving her time to register the touch before he did anything else.

Mei inhaled through her nose. Her leg tensed beneath his palm, but she didn't pull away.

"You want Kyle to touch you? For his fingers to be inside you while Ethan watches?"

Her jaw tightened and she nodded.

"That's good, Mei." His hand moved slowly higher along her thigh. "I want to talk to you briefly about my session with Ethan."

Her breathing stopped.

"Now, I can't tell you everything because of confidentiality, but I think there's something important you should understand about where his mind is compared to your own."

Nathan stopped on the inside of her thigh. Beneath the fabric, Mei's own hand had moved higher. He could feel the faint movement of her wrist against his fingers. His cock throbbed, but he forced himself to stay exactly where he was. Every part of him wanted to push this further, to see how much she would allow while her eyes were closed and Ethan occupied the fantasy, but she wasn't ready. Not yet.

"When Ethan retreated behind the camera, it wasn't because of anything you did. He was overwhelmed." Nathan's hand moved higher, coming to rest over hers. Mei's fingers didn't stop. "You gave him more than he knew how to deal with, and instead of pulling away from the experience, he found another way to stay inside it. He wanted to watch you truly let go."

A soft moan left her lips.

"He told me that was when he realized watching you was what excited him. It wasn't really about the tape." Nathan kept his voice calm, letting the idea settle before continuing. "It was seeing you lose yourself in the experience, even if he wasn't necessarily the person beside you."

"Are you..." Mei's breathing turned choppy. She pulled her hand back and gripped her inner thigh. Nathan left his own hand where it was. "Are you saying he wants me to be with other people?"

Her thighs parted further. Nathan watched the conflict move across her body. She'd pulled her hand away, yet everything else had opened toward him. The question had frightened her, but it hadn't killed the excitement.

"That's a conversation the two of you should have." His hand rested directly on top of her panty-covered lips. The fabric was drenched. He curled his fingers, feeling it give way, and her hips lifted in unison.

"Kyle is still touching you." Nathan pulled her back toward the fantasy playing behind her eyes. "And what about Ethan? Is he still there? Still watching?"

Her hips rocked against his hand. "Yes." The word came out on an exhale. "He can't look away."

Nathan moved the fabric to the side with his thumb. She was swollen and slick and the heat of her against his fingers made his cock pulse. Part of him wanted to unzip them, if only to relieve the pressure, but he didn't trust what would happen once he crossed that line. He stayed where he was instead, letting her feel the exposure.

"Ethan can see everything now," he said. "He can see Kyle's hand on you."

"Oh God." She spread wider. Mei found Nathan's wrist and wrapped her fingers around it. For a second he thought she might pull him away. Instead, she guided him closer.

He pressed two fingers inside.

"Ohhh, oh God."

Her walls clenched around him immediately and her hips lifted completely off the sofa. Both hands locked on his forearm and her nails dug into the underside of his wrist. The sound she made punched through the quiet of the office. He was going to have to edit the tape.

"That's it, Mei." He struggled to keep his voice even.

After weeks of slow, painful progress, he finally had his fingers inside her. His cock strained against his zipper as she tightened around him again. She was even tighter than he'd imagined, but wet enough that he could have pushed farther. The temptation hit him immediately. He ignored it. There was no reason to rush now.

"Let Ethan hear you. Let him see you lose control."

"Ohhhh." She turned her head to the side, pressing her face into her shoulder to try to stifle the cry.

"Don't hide from him." Nathan kept his movements slow, watching the way her shoulders tightened at the words. His thumb pressed her swollen clit causing her to throw her head back. "You said you wanted Ethan to see you. Let him see what this does to you."

Mei's grip on his arm loosened slightly. Her head lolled back and forth on the headrest. Every time she tried to catch her breath, Nathan would thrust his fingers deeper and another broken moan would slip free.

"Yes, yessss. Don't stop." She was panting now. Her hips rolling in circles, her body sucking his fingers deeper. "Watch me, baby. Watch me as I..."

Her eyes opened.

Mei looked down at his hand between her thighs, then slowly raised her eyes to his face. Her breathing was ragged, her fingers still buried in his forearm. For a moment, her grip loosened. Nathan stopped moving.

Her hands went slack against him as the office came back into focus. The couch. His face inches from hers. His hand beneath her dress. The fantasy had fallen away, and Nathan could almost see the realization working through her.

Then her fingers tightened around his arm again.

She pulled him closer.

"I'm gonna cum."

He went deeper. His thumb circled her clit as she locked eyes with him. Nathan's breath caught. The fantasy was gone now. She wasn't looking at Kyle. She was looking directly at Nathan, fully aware of where she was and who was touching her. For the first time since he'd started the exercise, he wasn't sure what she was going to do.

Her walls seized around him and her mouth fell open.

"Ohhh fuck. Ohhh God."

Her pussy contracted so tightly around his fingers his hand went numb. Her hips jerked off the couch. Her nails tore through the skin on his wrist and she held his hand against her through every wave, her body shaking.

"Yesss. Nnnnggggh."

Her hands fell away. Her body sank into the cushion. She was breathing in pieces, chest heaving, eyes half-closed. His fingers were still inside her. He could feel the aftershocks fluttering through her walls in smaller and smaller contractions.

He withdrew slowly. She whimpered when he pulled free, pressing the sound into her own shoulder. He stood and crossed back to his chair, not bothering to hide his erection.

"You did well, Mei." He clicked his pen. "You stayed with something that normally would have triggered shame, and you let yourself experience it without immediately shutting down."

Mei stared at him, still trying to catch her breath.

Nathan glanced down at his notes before looking back up. "You shared a lot with me today. Thank you for trusting me with it."

She pulled her dress back over her knees, letting it fall toward her ankles. "I don't even know what that was."

"I think you do." He smiled, writing absently in his notebook. "You imagined another man touching you while Ethan watched, and you didn't want either of them to stop."

Her cheeks darkened. "Yeah, but—"

"Yesterday Ethan told me how much he enjoyed watching you let go. Today you showed me how much the idea of him watching excites you." He leaned back in his chair. "The two of you are more aligned than ever before, Mei."

Mei stared down at her hands, then nodded. When she stood, her legs buckled and she caught herself on the arm of the couch. She took a breath and walked toward the door.

She turned and her gaze dropped to his hands resting on the notepad. Four small crescents on the inside of his wrist, dark pink, two of them breaking the skin. She stared at them.

"Do you really think he wants to... you know. Watch me with someone else?"

"I think the two of you should talk. About the tape and about any desires that may have sparked because of it."

She didn't respond for several seconds, then the faintest smile formed on her lips. "Thanks, Nathan."

"My pleasure."

Grace grabbed a sandwich from the gas station cooler while she waited for her tank to fill. She'd arrived in town just over an hour ago with barely a thousand dollars left on her credit card. The P.O. box listed on the Dead Air website was the first place she went, but it had been a dead end. She sat in the Mailbox Plus parking lot for over thirty minutes watching people come and go, and none of them were Nathan or Sierra.

The new plan had started to form somewhere between Colorado and Idaho. She'd come to terms during the drive with the fact that the likelihood of finding someone at a P.O. box was slim.

Sierra's Instagram was still open on her phone. Grace had been scrolling through it for months, but over the last twenty-four hours it had become obsessive. The good news was that she was starting to see a pattern. Sierra only ever seemed to post from one of three places. The studio, which Grace imagined was under tight security. Her home, which could have been anywhere. And a bar. The bar was her best shot. The problem was Sierra never tagged it or showed the sign.

Grace paid for the gas, her sandwich, and a bottle of water. She'd need it to take her pills soon. Back in the car, she sat behind the wheel zooming in on the walls of the bar, the background, anything that might give her a clue where to look. She pulled up the most recent photo and studied it again. There was a chalkboard at the end of the bar, barely visible in the picture. The image was blurry, but Grace could make out the word wheel along with what looked like a pretty disgusting tuna and gravy sandwich. Her face crinkled in disgust as she Googled bars nearby. Only two had the word wheel in the name: The Wheelhouse and The Rusty Wheel. From there, she pulled up pictures of the inside of each. The Rusty Wheel looked more modern, like somewhere college students would go and order drinks she couldn't pronounce. It didn't have the same vibe as Sierra's pictures.

She checked the second bar, The Wheelhouse, and immediately knew it was the right place. Same dark wood. Same stemless wineglasses. She even found the chalkboard menu in one of the pictures. A smile formed, and she allowed herself a second of happiness before the dread kicked in. What was she even going to do when she got there? Just walk up to Sierra and say she'd seen a picture of her ex in one of her posts? She would sound insane. Grace chewed on her fingernail, wincing when she caught the skin.

She could do this. What was it Dr. Waverly always said to her? Rehearse what you're going to say. Think of every possible way the conversation could go and prepare for it. That will make the panic start to calm. She wouldn't open with Nathan. She wouldn't tell Sierra anything overly personal at all. It would be better that way. More relaxed. She'd just approach her like a fan. Surely it wouldn't be the first time a fan happened to bump into Sierra in public. Her pulse ticked down as she ran through the line over and over until it sounded natural. *Oh my God, are you the Sierra from Dead Air?*

She closed the car door and drove to the bar.

She got the day wrong the first time. Three hours on a Tuesday, nursing a Rainier and watching the door until the bartender started cashing out. The good news was she'd only spent about twelve dollars. The bad news was that the bartender probably had her pegged as someone with an agenda. The bar shared a parking lot with an overnight parking company. She headed back to the Camry, set an alarm, then curled up in the backseat until the Seroquel pulled her under.

On Wednesday she took a bird bath at a travel center about fifteen miles down the road, changed into a fitted black top and jeans that were getting snug around the waist, then ordered a breakfast sandwich. There was no reason getting to the bar before six, so Grace kept herself busy looking at previous posts and trying to iron out her cover story.

The Wheelhouse was half full when Grace walked in. She let out a breath of relief when she saw a different bartender behind the counter. A stool near the corner was empty, and Grace took it, angling herself so she had a clear view of the door. She ordered another Rainier. At four dollars a bottle, she could make it through closing having spent just under twenty dollars if she needed to.

It had been almost an hour and Grace's beer was still half-full, getting warm in her hand. The TV above the bar was playing a Mariners game with the sound off, and she kept wondering if Nathan was there right now. Maybe he was a season ticket holder and went to all their games. She groaned at the idea of spending money on a baseball ticket just to play Where's Waldo from the nosebleed section.

Then the door opened and Grace's hand tightened around the glass.

Sierra was shorter than she expected. Five-five in boots, blonde hair loose around her shoulders. She smiled and waved at the bartender before dropping onto a stool two seats down, her phone a few inches from her face.

"Hey, Sierra. The usual?"

"Please."

Grace chugged the rest of her beer, her face contorting at the lukewarm bitterness. Her pulse was loud in her ears. Despite how much she'd practiced this, it was the part she hated most. The transition from stranger to conversation.

Sierra pulled out a pen, holding the cap in her teeth as she studied something on her phone. She picked up her wine, took a long sip, and set it down. Her eyes drifted sideways and caught Grace looking.

Grace smiled. She even managed teeth.

"Sorry." Grace looked away, then back. "Are you... this is going to sound weird. Are you Sierra? Like the Sierra from Dead Air?"

Sierra's posture shifted. She lowered the pen, her gaze traveling over Grace.

She interviews people for a living. She's going to see right through you.

Sierra set her phone down on the bar and smiled. "Depends on who's asking."

"I'm sorry, I don't want to be weird. I've been listening since episode ten. The Walton County one, the teacher who kept moving school districts." She was talking faster than she intended. When she'd rehearsed this she sounded calm, normal. Now she sounded like a stalker. Sierra was probably going to bolt any moment.

"Oh, that one." Sierra picked up her wine. "That one still makes me mad. So many tips and not a single one panned out." She shook her head. "But thank you. Seriously. Most people just skip to the murder episodes."

"The build is the best part."

"Tell that to my producers," Sierra groaned the moment she said it. "Sorry." Her smile widened and she stood, taking up the stool next to Grace. "I'm Sierra." She held out her hand.

"Laura." The name came out before Grace could second-guess it. She'd picked it at the gas station. Something plain, forgettable. "I'm actually not from around here. I'm just visiting from Virginia."

That was stupid. She's going to ask why.

"Just you know, family stuff," Grace said before Sierra could. "Nothing exciting."

Sierra tilted her head, her eyebrows pinching together. "You're an odd one, aren't ya, Laura?"

Grace chewed on her lip, the tears already starting to well in her eyes.

"I love the odd ones," Sierra said with a laugh. "People thought I was odd too. And look at me now. The host of a semi-popular podcast, drinking at a dive bar before the sun is down." She winked. "It's the dream."

For the next fifteen minutes they talked about the Nevada cold case, the family that vanished after the casino win. Grace had listened to that series three times on the drive and had genuine opinions about the brother-in-law and his alibi, and for a few minutes it was just two people in a bar arguing about a podcast. Sierra talked fast and cut her own sentences off to start new ones and Grace had to work to keep up.

She bought another round for each of them, trying not to think about how expensive the wine Sierra was drinking would be.

"Can I ask you something random?" Grace turned her glass on the bar. "If someone wanted to disappear, like new look, new city how would you even start looking for them?"

Sierra set her wine down. Her face had suddenly grown serious. "Are you trying to disappear? Or are you the one looking?" Her gaze went to Grace's arms. "Are you in some type of trouble?"

"No, nothing like that." Grace nearly spilled her beer she was so caught off guard. "I'm looking for someone. A man. He... he's dangerous. Well not dangerous I guess. But like..."

Coming here was a bad idea. She didn't know what she was doing. Sierra was a professional and Grace was so far out of her element it was clear to anyone paying attention.

"Sorry," she said, reaching for her wallet. "I should... you don't need me to dump all of this on you."

Sierra reached out, grabbing her arm. They were both quiet for a moment. The bartender passed behind her, refilling the older man's drink at the end of the counter.

"Sit down." Her voice was comforting. "What do you have on him?"

"Not much. An old photo. A general area." Grace set back down in the chair, her thumbnail pressing into the napkin, leaving a crescent in the damp paper. "I know what he used to look like, but if he changed enough I might not even recognize him."

"You'd be surprised." Sierra leaned her elbow on the bar. "People change the surface stuff hair, beard, glasses. But they don't change their habits. A guy who eats at the same restaurant every Tuesday in Miami is eating at the same type of food every Tuesday in another city." She took a sip of wine. "What did he do for work?"

Grace's fingers tightened around the glass. "I'd rather not get into specifics. Not yet."

"Fair enough." Sierra bounced her head side to side as she thought. "How about this? Just think about the things he did in Virginia, he probably does the same thing here. In my experience, when people try to disappear all they think about is their look not their personality, their habits. If you know what makes him tick then you can probably find his scent sooner or later."

Grace nodded. Her heart was hammering but her hands were still. She counted that as a win.

"Oh and another thing." Sierra pointed the pen cap at her. "Don't go through social media trying to find him. Find the people around him. Everybody leaves footprints in other people's feeds. Tagged photos, backgrounds, check-ins. If he's settled somewhere, he's in someone's life. You find that someone and you'll find him."

Grace almost laughed. She wanted to say *that's exactly how I found you*. Instead she nodded took a sip of her beer, swallowing it past the knot in her throat.

Sierra's phone buzzed against the bar. Grace's eyes instinctively went to the screen as Sierra reached for it. It was a miracle she didn't give herself away.

Nathan.

The world started to tilt and she released her beer, afraid she may spill it. Sierra picked up the phone, smirked at whatever he'd written, and typed something back. Grace couldn't catch her breath. She closed her eyes, trying to count backward like Dr. Waverly had taught her, but behind her eyes all she could see was his face. Nathan was a common name, she tried to tell herself. It could be anyone. But every bone in her body told her that wasn't true. She had come here to find him because she saw him in the background of one of Sierra's photos. It was no coincidence someone with the same name had texted her.

She opened her eyes, the world starting to still, just as Sierra set back down her phone and turned toward her. She picked at the corner of her beer label. Her pulse had crawled into her ears. She needed to say something. She needed to not be sitting here in silence while Sierra read her face.

"Thanks really," Grace said, finding her voice at the last possible second. "For talking through this I mean. I know most people don't like to mix work with personal or whatever."

"Don't mention it." Sierra waved her hand. "But if you come up blank after a couple of days give me a call. Something tells me this could be an interesting angle for the show." She reached into

a bag on the the other side of the chair and produced a business card with her personal number on the back.

Grace stared at the condensation ring on the bar. She could feel the story pressing against the inside of her teeth. This was the exact kind of story that would catch fire on a show like 'Dead Air'. She wanted, desperately, to tell Sierra every ugly detail about how Nathan took advantage of her, got inside of her brain and rearranged things only to later make her look like the one who was crazy. But, she relented. This wasn't a story for the masses, at least not yet. Not until she got Nathan alone first.

"Maybe next time," Grace said.

Sierra watched her for a moment, then shrugged one shoulder. "Fair enough."

The bartender reached up and changed one of the TVs. The Jeopardy theme filled the bar and Sierra's head snapped toward the screen like a dog hearing a whistle. She straightened on her stool and pointed at the first clue before Alex had finished reading it.

"Who is Mussolini." She glanced at Grace. "Sorry. It's my thing."

The contestant buzzed in and proved her right. Sierra grinned at the screen and took a sip of wine without looking away.

"You want to stick around?" She nodded toward the TV.

Part of her wanted to. She hadn't had felt this at ease talking to another person in public in she couldn't remember how long. She hadn't realized how much she missed it. But her hands had started to tremble around her glass. But it wasn't safe. It was all she could do to keep herself from asking *So, who's Nathan?* And she knew if she ordered one more beer she was going to hear herself say it.

"I should go." Grace set her glass down. "But thank you. For the advice." She put a five on the bar and stood. Her legs held. She made it to the door without rushing, without looking back, without doing any of the things her body was screaming at her to do. Behind her she heard Sierra shout "What is Der Ring des Nibelungen" and the bartender groan.

Mei had been gone for less than ten minutes before Ethan made his way upstairs to grab his laptop. He told himself he was going to catch up on work. His inbox had over fifty unread messages in it. He managed to get through the first three before his mouse wandered to the folder marked "Birthday".

He swallowed the lump in his throat as he lifted off the bed to ensure Mei wasn't heading back because she forgot something. His stomach knotted as he placed play. It was at least the fourth time since making the video he's watched it. It always went the same way.

The video started with he bedroom door and the sound of his own breathing behind the camera. Then Mei appeared in the lace. He was hard, instantly. He peered back over his shoulder, as he lowered his pants. He could hear the faint sound of someone's dog outside. He quickly lowered the volume as if the dog could hear what he was doing.

On screen, Mei climbed onto the bed. "How do you want me?" She asked. Ethan wasn't in frame yet. he could have been talking to anyone. His cock pulsed as he watched the first first minutes

of himself clumsy climbing onto the bed behind her. He watched the first couple of minutes. His breath caught as Mei cried out when he pushed inside of her. He focused on her face, the sounds she was making. It was like a dream come true... almost.

He scrubbed the timeline to the thirty-one minute mark. On screen, Mei was on her back. Her hair fanned across the pillow, one hand working between her thighs, the other pulling the lace aside. Her head was tipped back, her moans creping through the speakers.

He paused the video. Mei's face froze mid-moan, her eyes squeezed shut, her fingers buried between her legs. On the edge of the frame, his own shadow was barely visible. He stared at the shadow, then at the rest of the image, and his ears started ringing. His cock pressed harder into his hand.

No matter how many times he watched it, this was always the pattern. The parts he found sexiest, the ones that could nearly make him cum without even touching himself, were the parts he wasn't in. He'd given up trying to understand what that made him. What it meant. All he knew for certain was that this was always where he came the hardest.

He pressed play again and watched the next four minutes without blinking. She took him in her mouth. Her lips were slick, her eyes closed, and on the screen he could see her hand still moving between her thighs. The angle cut him out almost entirely. His cock was in her mouth, but everything else about the image could have belonged to a stranger.

His throat went dry as he stroked himself faster, precum coating his fingers. The man in the video could be anyone. Mei moaned around the mystery man's shaft, her hips lifting off the bed. Her lips stretched around him, all the way to the root. Ethan felt the familiar cramp low in his stomach. He sucked in air through gritted teeth, trying to keep his focus on his wife on the screen as he spilled warm cum over his hand.

Mei pulled Nathan's front door shut behind her, and the afternoon air pressed against her flushed skin. The sun had dropped while she was inside. It felt like she'd been in there much longer than the hour it had actually been. Her body still pulsed with energy, the last twenty minutes coming back to her in fragments, like she was seeing it through someone else's eyes.

She was halfway across the yard before she realized she could still feel him. A dull pulse thrummed between her legs, the soreness of muscles that had clenched too hard, the faint sting where damp fabric pressed against swollen skin. Her dress stuck to the backs of her thighs. She tugged it loose and kept walking. What she'd done was wrong. Deep down, she knew that, even as her body sang with pleasure. But it didn't feel wrong. At least, not the way it usually did. There was no disappointed voice in her head. She didn't feel like a failure or a bad wife. If anything, she felt liberated, like this was a gift she was giving Ethan, something even bigger than his birthday.

Nathan told her Ethan wanted to watch her. That watching her let go was what excited him. She closed her eyes, smiling as the wind cooled her face. If that was true, if Ethan had really told Nathan he wanted to see Mei lose herself, then maybe what happened wasn't betrayal. Maybe it was proof. Proof that she could become the woman Ethan secretly wanted her to be. Proof that they wanted the same thing, even if Ethan had needed someone else to say it first. Like Nathan said, maybe they were more aligned than ever.

She stepped inside, the chill of the air conditioner causing goosebumps to raise on her arms. The house still smelled like coffee, from hours ago when Ethan made a fresh batch. She looked around the kitchen, there was no sign of Ethan. She slipped off her sandals and climbed the stairs, excited to wake him from his nap with a little extra energy.

"Oh, You're awake." She didn't mean to sound disappointed.

Ethan was sitting on the edge of the bed with the laptop open beside him, his face flushed, the tips of his ears red. When he looked at Mei, his eyes went wide, and he slammed the lid shut.

"Yeah. I didn't hear you come in. I was, um, just catching up on work emails."

She raised an eyebrow, noticing the balled-up washcloth on the floor. His neck was splotchy, and he was breathing so hard she thought he might have a heart attack.

"Email, huh?" She leaned against the doorframe. "Did you get a lot of work done?" She pushed off the frame and moved to the bed, sitting down beside him.

"Yeah, it was, um... it was fine." His eyes darted to the laptop. "What are you doing?"

The panic in his voice was all the confirmation she needed, but she opened the lid anyway. On screen, she was frozen mid-orgasm, her hand between her legs with Ethan in her mouth.

"Mei, I didn't mean... I mean, I was just—"

"Shh." She put her hand on his arm. "Is this your favorite part?" She pressed play.

Ethan shifted beside her. His breathing changed. On screen, Mei watched herself. Her body arched off the bed, her moans muffled by the cock in her mouth. She looked like... she chewed on her lip. She looked like a whore. A whore who was just letting herself go. The thought processed slowly. So slowly, that she flinched when she felt Ethan's hand on her leg.

"It is," he said, tracing his fingers along her leg. "I don't know why it is. I—"

"Yes, you do." Mei's eyes never left the screen. She looked out of her mind with lust. Maybe she had been. She reached out and placed her hand on Ethan's leg. "Nathan said you talked to him. That you... you know, like watching me more than watching yourself."

Ethan's jaw dropped, his grip on her leg tightened. "That's not... well yeah. But. I'm sorry, Mei. I made you go through all of this for this tape and now you must think I hate it."

"I don't think that at all." She pulled her eyes away from the screen to look at her husband. Her free hand went to his cheek, running her fingers over it slowly. "I love that you like to watch me." She kissed him, slow at first and then harder, her tongue slipping past his lips. "... I like that you want to watch me." She admitted, her face getting warmer.

Ethan stared at her like she'd grown another head. His eyes moved from her face to the laptop, where the video still, her body thrashing on the very bed they were sitting on. "You don't think it's weird?" he asked. His voice was small enough that it hurt her. "That I like it more when I'm... barely there?"

Mei's thumb moved over his cheek. "I like knowing that you just want to see me..." she bit her lip. "excited." "Without all of the, you know, pressure."

Ethan swallowed. His hand tightened on her thigh. "I'm sorry. It... It wasn't you know, about you."

"I know." She kissed him again, softer this time, letting her lips linger until his shoulders eased. "That's why it turns me on."

"It turns you on?" Ethan asked, surprised.

Mei smiled devilishly, taking his hand and placing it under her dress. She nearly laughed out loud when Ethan gasped, discovering how wet she was.

"Does that answer your question?"

Before he could answer, she slid her hand up his leg and grasped his cock. "It excites you." His cock pulsed in her hand. "Thinking about me like that?"

He nodded, his eyes going back to the laptop screen over her shoulder.

Mei followed his gaze. On the screen, her body moved beneath the bedroom light, mouth stretched around him, fingers working between her thighs. "When you watch this part," she asked, stroking him slower, "what are you thinking about?"

Ethan's eyes flicked to hers, then away again. "You."

"I know." She kept her voice soft. "But how?"

His fingers inched higher and she spread her legs, welcoming his touch. A gasp escaped her lips as he pressed his fingers against the front of her panties.

"Wha... what do you mean?"

The question moved through her like a hand trailing down her spine. It scared her how much she wanted to know if Nathan had been right.

"If you're the one watching me..." She let out a sigh, her eyes flickering closed as Ethan tugged the fabric of her panties aside and parted her lips. His fingers slipped into her, and her body clenched around the second pair of digits to be inside her in less than an hour. "Then who is... ahh. Who is on screen with me?"

Ethan's fingers stopped moving.

For one second, the only sound in the room was the video playing behind her. Mei's muffled moan through the laptop speakers. The soft creak of the bed on screen. Ethan stared past her shoulder, his face tight with panic, like the question was going to ruin them.

"I don't know," he said.

Mei nodded, but her stomach fluttered. "But it's... it's not you?"

"It's..."

He looked between her and the laptop again. Mei held her breath not sure how she wanted him to answer the question, or even if she wanted him to answer it at all. His cock flexed under her touch.

"Sometimes it's me," he finally answered. "And sometimes it's... someone else. I don't know who just... not me."

Mei's body moved before she decided to move it. She pressed into his hand, and his fingers sank deeper, pulling a gasp from both of them. The sound seemed to break whatever restraint

she had left. She pushed him onto his back, threw one leg over him, and trapped his hand between her thighs.

Mei rolled her hips against his hand, slow enough that the conversation could survive it, hard enough that neither of them could pretend this was only talking. Ethan's fingers moved because she moved, because her body kept pulling the rhythm out of him. His other hand settled on her hip, gripping lightly, like he needed to hold her in place and keep her from getting too far ahead of him at the same time.

"Is that really what you want?" she asked. Her hips rolling into him. She wanted to reach into his pants, to pull him out. But she was afraid of ruining the moment.

Ethan's eyes searched hers. He looked terrified by the question, and more terrified by the fact that he didn't immediately say no. His fingers slipped a little deeper, and Mei's breath hitched, her forehead dipping toward his. "Would you..." He swallowed. "Would you seriously do that?"

Mei's hand tightened around him. For a second, Nathan's voice flashed through her head, telling her they were more aligned than ever. She pushed the thought away and focused on Ethan beneath her, on the tremor in his voice, on the way his cock pulsed against his slacks. "I... I think so." She felt him twitch hard under her palm, and Ethan gasped like the answer had been dragged out of him. "But only if it's what you really want."

His whole body went rigid. His cock swelled against her hand and his hips bucked forward. Then warmth spread beneath her palm, soaking through the fabric as a dark stain bloomed across the front of his pants. Ethan's face went pale with horror, his mouth opening as if he was about to apologize.

She kissed him before he had the chance. Her tongue searched his mouth, swallowing whatever apology he thought he owed her. When she pulled back, her lips stayed close to his, her forehead resting against his.

"Is that really what you want?" she whispered again.

He nodded at first, closing his eyes. When he opened them again he smiled. "But it can't just be anyone. I don't know even where to start." He let off a nervous laugh. "It would have to be someone we trusted. Someone safe."

Mei nodded slowly, even though her pulse had started to race. She shifted on his lap, adjusting herself until his fingers slipped free, then laid her head against his chest. "I love you," she whispered.

Mei had the rice going and chicken thighs marinating in soy sauce and ginger when Jack's truck pulled into the driveway. She wiped her hands on the dish towel and glanced through the kitchen window. She smiled as he climbed out of his truck, the tires entirely too big for the frame. His white t-shirt was tight around his chest, his jeans hugging his frame as he shut the truck door, sizing up the house.

He had had texted just over an hour ago, excited that the gazebo was finally finished. He'd sent a half dozen texts, the last one making Mei laugh out loud as he stood in front of the structure, his hands on his hips like some kind of super hero. Ethan looked up from the book he was reading when she laughed, looking over her shoulder and reading the texts. It was his idea to invite Jack

over for dinner, saying he wanted to meet more of her work friends. Mei found the timing of it suspicious, but it didn't stop her from picking up the phone and sending the invite.

"He's here," she called toward the living room. Ethan appeared in the doorway, drying his hands on his jeans even though they already looked dry. Mei's eyes narrowed. He had changed. The faded T-shirt and gym shorts he'd been wearing an hour ago were gone, replaced by dark jeans and the blue button-down she always told him made his shoulders look broader. Maybe she was reading too much into it. Maybe he had only wanted to look decent for company. But his eyes flicked past her to the kitchen window, then back to her face, and Mei felt a strange little twist in her stomach. Jack was just another one of her work friends. Ethan had met most of them over the years, and he never acted like this.

"You look very handsome," she said, smiling as she walked past him to open the door. She pressed her hand to his chest on the way by, and felt his heart beating a little too fast beneath her palm.

She opened the door and took a step back, surprised to find Jack already standing there. He filled the doorway in a way that made her tilt her chin to meet his eyes. An easy grin spread across his face, a six-pack tucked under one arm as he lifted his free hand in a friendly wave.

"Thanks for the invite." His eyes traveled over her. Suddenly, she was aware of the thin fabric of her dress, the warmth still lingering in her skin, the fact that Ethan was standing behind her watching all of it. She smiled and held Jack's gaze.

"I brought gifts." He lifted the six-pack.

Mei stepped aside, inviting him in. Jack crossed the threshold and spotted Ethan standing in the kitchen doorway. His grin widened as he stuck out his hand. "You must be the husband. I've heard a lot about you."

"Same." Ethan shook it. "Mei says you've been keeping her pretty busy."

"That's one way to put it." Jack grinned, looking over at Mei. "She's been a lifesaver. I'm in way over my head."

Mei took the beer and set it on the counter. The cool of the cardboard pressed against her bare arm and she thought about Nathan. A month ago she would have been a wreck at the thought of another man coming into her home. She would have thrown on another layer of clothes, hidden behind Ethan, and barely said two words. He really was amazing at what he did.

"Check this out," Jack said to Ethan from the other room. "Has Mei told you about the gazebo?"

Mei walked over and stood between the two men. Jack's arm brushed hers as he pulled out his phone. A sharp little current ran through her, making her gasp and lean back into Ethan before she could hide it. His arm wrapped around her waist, possessive and instinctive, pulling her closer. The small act only seemed to send the current deeper.

"You built that yourself?" Ethan asked, impressed.

The gazebo looked nothing like the plywood skeleton Jack had shown her in the teachers' lounge. White lattice wrapped the sides, fake ivy threaded through the slats, and a box of fairy lights sat beside it, waiting to be strung. It was exactly what she'd pictured when she blurted the idea in the hallway outside her classroom.

"Me and YouTube," Jack said, laughing as he swiped through a couple more pictures.

"Jack, it's incredible." Mei reached out to take the phone for a better look.

Her hand brushed his as he passed it to her. The heat of that brief contact made her step back into Ethan, and the phone slipped from her fingers, clattering to the floor.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry."

"It's fine." Jack waved it off casually as Ethan gave her a confused look. "I drop it about six times a day. That case is the best investment I've ever made."

They settled around the table. Ethan laughed at a joke Jack made as they talked about logistics. The dance was going to be in the school courtyard, a deviation from years past when it had always been held in the gym. Mei sipped her water as the two men talked like old friends. She smiled, looking between them, a strange happiness settling over her.

"Me and some other teachers are going to start setup at six," Jack said, looking over at Mei. His green eyes seemed to sparkle in the soft lighting on the dining room. "Think you can get there then? Or, if you'd like, I'd be happy to pick you up. Save you on gas."

Color tinted her cheeks. She looked to Ethan, suddenly unable to speak.

"If you don't mind picking her up, that would be great," Ethan said, reaching under the table and taking her hand. "If it won't be too much trouble, that is."

Mei exhaled slowly and nodded. She looked at Ethan, confused why he wouldn't just have her drive herself. Before she could think too much about it, Jack continued.

"In the meantime, do you mind looking over this playlist? I think I did a pretty good job, if I do say so myself."

"Let me see." She reached for his phone and started scrolling. She laughed, shaking her head. "Jack."

"What?"

"Why are there three Lizzo songs in a row?"

"The girls love Lizzo."

"Oh no." She lowered her forehead into her hand. "I'm going to take another pass at this."

Jack looked to Ethan for confirmation. "Lizzo is good, right?"

Before Ethan could answer, Mei interjected. "Oh my God, is this 'Get Low'?"

Ethan doubled over in laughter next to her.

"It's the edited version," Jack defended.

"They are seven-year-olds dancing with their dads." Mei wiped a tear from her eye, still laughing as she deleted the song without asking.

She went through the rest of the list, vetoing six more songs and adding a few that were slower, gentler. Jack watched her scroll and tap, offering occasional protests that she waved off without looking up.

She caught Ethan watching her, smiling. His eyes dropped to Jack's phone in her hand, then to Jack, then back to her. He took a drink, his eyes never leaving hers. She wished she could ask him what he was thinking in that moment. Mei's smile faltered as her stomach flipped. Just a couple of hours ago Ethan had admitted that he sometimes imagined her with other men. and now Jack had them both in tears they were laughing so hard. She tried to push the thought aside, telling herself she was reading too much into it. Ethan was just being polite. They were just having fun.

Jack let the laughter settle before his voice leveled out. He looked at Ethan. "Honestly, man. I would have canceled the whole thing this year if your wife hadn't stepped in." He raised his beer toward Mei. "The gazebo, the fairy lights, the playlist. All her. I just did the heavy lifting."

She smiled, chewing on her lip as she squeezed Ethan's hand. Her gaze went to Jack's forearm resting on the table. He was tanner than she'd realized, and she noticed a vein running along the inside. She imagined his hands were rough, firm. He'd build the entire gazebo with them. She shifted in her seat, reaching for her water.

Jack pushed back from his chair a little after eight. "I should probably get going. Mei, thanks again for an amazing meal." He stretched, his shirt riding up just enough to show a strip of stomach above his belt. Mei looked away, standing.

Ethan stood and the three of them walked to the door. "Glad we finally got to do this. Mei's really been forward to the dance." He shook Jack's hand.

"The pleasure's all mine. Thanks again for letting me borrow her." Jack turned to Mei and before she could process what was happening, he pulled her into a hug.

Her arms stayed pinned at her sides. Her shoulders went rigid and her breath caught. She could smell the sawdust on him. Her arms came up cautiously, finding the middle of his back. It was over faster than it happened, but the encounter left her dizzy.

"Have a good night," he said, waving casually over his shoulder as he walked to his truck.

Ethan waved back, his free arm pulling Mei close. "That was fun," he said, as they watched Jack climb into his truck. "Your date's cute."

She elbowed him gently. "Oh my God, stop." She smiled and rolled her eyes.

"Want me to help you clean up?" Ethan asked, shutting the door.

"Let's leave it for the morning." She was already unzipping her dress, as she walked up the stairs.