

Chapter 1

The rain started as Dr. Nathan Coleman crossed the city limits, a light mist that clung to the windshield of his Mercedes. He checked his GPS as he navigated the winding coastal highway, his pale blue eyes reflecting back at him through the screen. He ran his fingers through his beard, still getting used to the way that it felt on his face. His entire life, he'd been clean-shaven. The facial hair felt foreign to him, like he was wearing someone else's skin. But it was important that he start fresh. He didn't want to draw attention, not yet.

The radio crackled as he tried to find a station within range.

"—Grace Hart was released this morning from St. Augustine's Psychiatric Facility in Florida after an eleven-month stay. Hart, thirty-two, first entered the public eye as one of the original victims in the Holy Isle case. After the presumed death of the Father, she was committed to St. Augustine's for two years and released shortly thereafter. It was during that initial stay that she met best-selling author and relationship expert Dr. Nathan Coleman, who began treating her nearly three years ago.

Hart was recommitted following accusations that she stalked and sexually assaulted Dr. Coleman. Though prosecutors initially considered filing charges, the case did not move forward, and she has now been discharged. The situation has ignited heated debate among mental-health professionals and the public alike: while prosecutors assert that Hart became dangerously obsessed with Dr. Coleman, others argue that his unconventional therapeutic methods amounted to reckless experimentation that contributed to her breakdown. Dr. Coleman has declined to comment and has since retired from practice in Northeast Florida. In local news—"

Nathan switched it off.

His hands shook lightly on the wheel, his jaw tightened. Eleven months. Eleven months of critics and blowhards who thought they understood the type of work Nathan was doing. Eleven months of colleagues not returning his phone calls, of ethics reviews and publishers postponing release dates. All of it because of Grace Hart.

The name still made his blood boil.

He could still see her in that first session, buttoned up to her throat, hands folded, voice barely above a whisper when describing her marriage. *"We haven't been intimate in months. Maybe longer. I don't know anymore."* Her husband sitting beside her, frustrated but trying to hide it. A classic case. Religious upbringing, sexual shame, dead bedroom. He'd seen it dozens of times.

Three weeks later, she'd been a different woman. Laughing during sessions. Making eye contact. Her husband called it a miracle. *"I don't know what you're doing, but keep doing it."*

Nathan's hands tightened on the wheel as he subconsciously accelerated around a corner. She should have been his greatest success.

But then, everything changed. Her growth had turned into an obsession. His or hers... that question was up for debate. She shouldn't have remembered anything that happened during their sessions, and certainly didn't have any proof of misconduct. Yet, she showed up at his house, naked... wanting. She sent him photos, letters.

The tires of his Mercedes squealed as he took another turn too fast, his speed climbing. He could still feel her body against his, the warmth of her as she enveloped his cock. He tried to push the thought aside as he began to stiffen.

Then in an instant, it all fell apart. She showed up at his office while he was with another client, insisting that something had happened between them that she couldn't quite remember.

Dr. Coleman let out a long breath, loosening his grip on the steering wheel as he let off the gas. The highway curved inland, and suddenly, Harmony Falls materialized through the mist. Downtown clustered along the waterfront, older brick buildings from the lumber boom era, renovated into breweries and boutiques. Church spires pierced the low clouds. Residential streets climbed eastward into forested hills.

Perfect.

Small enough that a sex therapist would seem progressive, necessary even. Large enough to maintain privacy, to avoid small-town gossip. Close enough to Seattle for legitimacy, far enough to be forgotten.

Nathan followed his GPS instructions into The Bluffs, where newer construction blended with renovated homes. His rental sat at the end of Harborview Lane. A modest two-story with a separate entrance that led to an in-law suite, perfect for someone trying to start up their own practice.

He pulled into the driveway and killed the engine. Time to begin again.

Nathan popped the trunk and surveyed the moving truck already parked at the curb. The driver had left the ramp down, boxes stacked inside waiting. He grabbed his leather overnight bag first, then a box labeled "Office—Books."

"Need a hand?"

A man in his late twenties jogged across the lawn from the house next door. He was athletic-looking, with sandy brown hair and a friendly face. He wore jeans and a Seahawks hoodie, making Nathan realize he needed to update his wardrobe.

"Ethan Morrison." He extended his hand. "My wife and I live right there. Saw the truck and figured—" He stopped mid-sentence, his mouth growing into a smile, his eyes wide in recognition. "Wait. Holy shit. Are you... You're Dr. Coleman. Like, THE Dr. Coleman."

Nathan's stomach dropped, but his face remained neutral. He set down the box and shook Ethan's hand firmly.

"I am. Though I wasn't expecting anyone in Harmony Falls to recognize me."

"Dude, my sister has your book. *Unlocking Intimacy*, right? Between that and your TED talks, I swear she idolizes you."

"Well, it's always nice to meet a fan."

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck and leaned into Nathan. "Honestly, I gave your book a read. Hoped it would help with my wife, Mei. She and I..."

Nathan's expression must have shown something, because Ethan caught himself mid-sentence. "Anyway, it's a pleasure to meet you." He grinned, then called over his shoulder. "Mei! Come meet our new neighbor."

A woman emerged from the house with a watering can. She gave the planters a disappointed look, then set the can down on the porch, wiped her hand on her jeans and hurried over. She was petite, maybe five-three in her canvas sneakers. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, putting her Asian features and bone structure on display.

"This is my wife, Mei." Ethan wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Nathan couldn't help but notice how she wore long sleeves despite the warm weather.

"Welcome to the neighborhood." She extended her hand, her dark, almond-shaped eyes meeting his briefly. "I hope Ethan hasn't talked your ear off already. He gets excited about new people."

"Hey, I'm being helpful," Ethan protested, pulling her tighter. Her laugh was light and playful. Nathan studied their posture trying to figure out exactly why they would need one of his books.

"How are you finding Harmony Falls so far?" she asked, pulling her hand away quicker than expected, her fingers immediately finding each other, fidgeting at her waist.

"It seems peaceful. Exactly the type of place I was hoping for."

The conversation continued for another ten minutes talking about local coffee shops and good hiking trails. He learned she was an avid baker and enjoyed going to the farmer's market every Saturday.

Ethan grabbed a box from the truck as the conversation fell into a lull. "What brings you to Harmony Falls?"

"Hoping to start my own practice. Something a bit more intimate than what I had down south."

"Really?" Ethan couldn't hold back his smile as he glanced over his shoulder at Mei. "Are you looking to take on new clients?"

"Eventually." He looked to Mei and noticed the way she dug her foot into the gravel, suddenly more timid than just a few short minutes ago. "Taking some time to settle in first."

"Well, let me help you unload, then maybe I can show you around town in a few days? Grab a drink once you're settled?"

"I'd like that."

Nathan watched Mei hover at the edge of their conversation, never interjecting, but always close enough to hear what was being said. She'd glanced at him perhaps twice, quick assessments before retreating. The cardigan had thumb holes she'd pushed her fingers through, using the fabric as a partial barrier.

Nathan lifted another box, watching her closely. The way she pulled at her collar when Ethan mentioned him taking on new clients, despite it already being in place. The way her body seemed to relax when Ethan mentioned going out for drinks that wouldn't include her.

"We should let you get back to it," Mei finally said, apologetic. "Sorry for interrupting."

"Not at all," Nathan said, meeting her eyes just long enough to seem genuine without being invasive. "I'm grateful for good neighbors."

As they left, Nathan watched Ethan's hand find Mei's back, watched her body's involuntary response. He turned back to his moving boxes, but part of his mind had already started cataloging details, drawing conclusions, seeing patterns. She was so much like Grace. So much untapped potential, so... He shook his head, pushing the thought aside. Had he learned nothing from the Grace debacle?

Three days later, they found themselves in a place called Murphy's, a brick building that looked like it had been standing since the city was founded. Classic rock hummed from the overhead

speakers while the tattooed bartender, his arms nearly as thick as Nathan's legs, listed off the beer options.

Nathan ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair, feeling slightly out of his element. He was more accustomed to soft jazz and a glass of wine older than he was. Still, something about Ethan, and more specifically Mei, had caught his attention. Maybe it was the chance to redeem himself after Grace. Or maybe it was because he had been so close to a revolutionary breakthrough with her that he knew this time he could get it right.

"Two IPAs," Ethan said, noticing the aggravated look the bartender was giving Nathan.

"Thanks. It's been a while since I've been to a place like this. It has... character."

"Right? Been here since the fifties. It was the first bar I went to when I turned twenty-one." The bartender slid two open bottles across the bar, and Ethan took a long drink. "God, I needed this. Rough week at work."

Ethan liked to talk, and Nathan was happy to let him. Everything from a marketing campaign he was working on going sideways, to his clients changing their minds every step of the way. Nathan stayed engaged the entire time. He asked questions, nodded at the right moment. They were basic techniques, but effective.

After ten minutes, Ethan's laughter faded. He rotated his beer, watching condensation slide down the sides.

"Can I ask you something? Professional question."

"Of course."

Ethan glanced around the bar, then back at his bottle. "How do you... I mean, when couples come to you, what's usually the... " He trailed off, took a drink.

Nathan waited. Let the silence work.

"Forget it. Stupid question."

"Ethan." Nathan's voice was gentle, calm. "Whatever you're thinking about asking, I've heard worse. I promise."

Ethan sucked on his bottom lip, his pulse spiking as he tried to act nonchalant. "Okay."

"She's an incredible woman, ya know? Like, the love of my life." He took a large drink of his beer, trying to find the nerve to say the next part. "But, our sex life..."

He glanced around again, making sure no one was listening, then lowered his voice. "It's not that she doesn't... I mean, there are moments where I can tell she's enjoying it. The way she..."

He caught himself, shook his head. "But then it's just gone. Like she shuts down."

"Gone how?"

"Just..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Like she's holding back, ya know? Like she can't let herself get into it."

"Have you tried to talk to her about it?"

"Yeah, a few times." He slid closer to Nathan as the song playing faded out, not wanting anyone else to hear his conversation. "I even tried what you said in your book. About starting small and building up. But something as simple as making love with the lights on freaked her out." He started peeling the label of his IPA. "I mean, she went along with it, but every time I looked at her body, I could feel her tense."

"What was her sexual history before you two were married?"

"She came from a pretty strict upbringing. Her parents are first-generation immigrants from China, so sex was never discussed in their house." He looked around and saw an older, heavysset man a few seats down, looking over. He lowered his voice. "Mei doesn't really talk about past relationships. I know she wasn't a virgin when we met, but I get the feeling her past was pretty boring."

Nathan saw the paranoid look on Ethan's face and noticed his voice getting lower. As much as he liked to overshare with Nathan, it was clear he was getting uncomfortable having this conversation in such a public space. "What would you change, if you could?"

"I want her to feel free. To enjoy sex without the shame." Ethan picked at the beer label. "I just want her to be able to... She's just in her head the whole time."

"That's understandable."

Ethan was quiet for a moment. "I... I have a birthday coming up in a month."

Nathan waited.

"And I've always had this fantasy—" He stopped, laughed uncomfortably. "It's stupid."

"Ethan, there's no such thing as a stupid fantasy between a husband and wife."

Another pause. Ethan watched the label peel away from the bottle, wet with condensation. "I travel a lot for work. And I thought... I've always wanted to make a video. Of the two of us. Nothing crazy, just..." He trailed off. "You probably think I'm a pervert."

"I don't." He clapped his shoulder. "That's actually more common than you'd think."

"But, it just doesn't seem possible. I mean, she doesn't even want the lights on."

"I'm putting together an office in my house. Would Mei be willing to start seeing me there?"

Ethan leaned forward, his face lighting up. "You'd do that? You'd take her on as a patient?"

"If she was willing. But I need to be honest with you." Nathan finished the rest of his beer, then raised his hand at the bartender to signal he needed another. "My last patient. Things ended... poorly with her."

"You're talking about the Grace Hart trial."

Nathan flinched. He was hoping he'd be able to control the narrative, but it seemed Ethan was a big a fan as he'd said. "I am."

"Did she..." Ethan hesitated. "I mean, did anything actually happen between you two?"

"I spent two years helping Grace overcome severe trauma. She developed feelings—transference, it's called. When I maintained boundaries, she..." Nathan shook his head. "The accusations were her way of processing rejection."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. From what I heard, she was pretty unhinged. You're worried Mei might turn out like that?"

"It's unlikely," Nathan replied, happy that Ethan wasn't one of those nut jobs who blamed him. "But I wanted to make sure you knew about it. To ensure there were no misconceptions."

"So... does that mean you'll do it? You'll see Mei?"

"If she agrees to it, absolutely." The new beer arrived, and Nathan took another drink. Maybe this atmosphere wasn't as bad as he thought. "But, I need you to understand that once I start seeing her, I can't discuss anything about her with you. It all becomes confidential."

"Yeah, of course," Ethan said, with more enthusiasm than expected. "I'll talk to Mei. Let her know that you want to see her."

They talked for another twenty minutes about Harmony Falls, about hiking trails, about nothing important. When they finally left, Ethan clapped Nathan on the shoulder.

"Thanks for listening, man. It helped just to talk."

Nathan stood in the parking lot after Ethan drove away, keys in hand, looking up at the clouds obscuring the stars. He wasn't sure how things with Mei would go, not without talking to her first. But he couldn't help but think that he was getting a second chance.

Nathan unlocked his Mercedes and headed back toward Maple Street, toward the house with the carefully arranged office and the neighbors who needed help.

This time would be different.

Two days later, Nathan watched through his office window as Mei and Ethan made their way up the long driveway. She wore a cream-colored dress that went to her ankle and was buttoned to her neck, despite the warmth of the late August sun. He ran his fingers through the scruff on his cheeks. He allowed himself a moment to wonder what she looked like under that dress. Would her body be as tight as Grace's? He dismissed the thought as quickly as it appeared, rushing to the door to greet his first client in this new life.

"Come in, please." He stepped aside, gesturing them into the office. "Make yourselves comfortable."

The space was designed for exactly this. He'd arranged two armchairs facing his own, positioned side by side for couples. The large windows allowed for great natural light and allowed the room to feel non-threatening.

Nathan took his seat across from them, notepad in hand but not yet writing. "Thank you both for coming. I know this can feel awkward at first."

"We appreciate you making time for us," Ethan said quickly. "Mei's been looking forward to this. Right, babe?"

Mei nodded, looking around the office. Her gaze drifted to his master's degree from the University of Florida that hung on the wall beside them. "Florida? Big party school. I'm shocked you found time to get any studying done."

Nathan nodded. She'd dodged Ethan's question entirely, using humor as a shield. "I had a good tutor."

"Looks like you got unpacked pretty quick. Are all of those awards yours?" She nodded to the shelf behind Nathan. The 'I love myself' shelf, as it was commonly referred to in his line of work was full of various awards and accommodations he'd gotten over the years.

"They are, yes. It turns out I'm very good at my job." He gave her a warm smile, and her eyes drifted to the floor. "Now, Mei." he powered on, sensing the shift. "I want to start by asking you directly. Do you want to be here?"

She chewed on the inside of her lip. Her eyes flicked up to his for a brief second before dropping back to her lap. "Yes."

"Do you understand why Ethan arranged this?"

Another pause. Her thumb rubbed softly against the other. "Yes."

Ethan jumped in. "She's just nervous. She doesn't like talking about bedroom stuff. I thought—"

"Ethan." Nathan smiled warmly, his tone firm. "I'd like to hear from Mei. In her own words."

Ethan sat back, chastened.

Nathan waited. The silence filled the space between them, but he didn't rush to fill it. One of the first things therapists learned was to let the client break the quiet.

Finally, Mei spoke. "We're... I'm not very good at... at sex." Her cheeks flushed crimson. "Ethan wants me to be more comfortable with it."

Nathan made a note. She'd started by saying we then quickly shifted to I. She'd started to frame it as a shared problem, then shouldered the blame alone.

"What does good look like to you?"

She lifted her gaze for just a moment, studying Nathan like she was trying to decide if he was a friend or foe. "I don't know. More... active, I guess."

"When you're intimate with Ethan. Does it feel good? Do you ever initiate?"

Her fingers twisted together, and Nathan made a note. Even this was too much, too fast. "It..." she looked at Ethan, who seemed to be staring a hole into her. "Yes. I like it. But, I never start it."

"Every once in a while I'll hear her moan and I know she likes it, but when I—"

Nathan held up his hand, noticing the way Mei seemed to be trying to crawl into herself. "I appreciate you wanting to support your wife. But for this to work, I need to hear from Mei in her own words. Can you let her speak for herself?"

"I... um... of course," Ethan said, sinking down into his chair a little and looking away.

The faintest smile pulled at Mei's lips. Just for a second. "He's not used to being told to be quiet."

Nathan smiled at Mei. Color tinted her cheeks. The smile disappearing just as quickly as it formed as she looked back to her feet.

"Mei, I think I can help you." Her gaze lifted. "You seem like a very confident person in social settings. But when we broach the topic of sex..." She sank down further into her chair. "You seem a little self-conscious. I think I can help with that. If you want me to, that is."

She nodded softly. "I do. I just... how does this work?" Her thumbs worked the holes of the cardigan. "Like, do we just sit here and... talk? Or is there going to be—" She glanced at Ethan the color in her cheeks growing darker. "Homework?"

"Very good question." Nathan kept his tone light. She was already overwhelmed and scared. He didn't want to make it worse. He leaned forward slightly. "Mostly, we're just going to talk. About your history, your feelings, what intimacy means to you. Nothing will happen that you don't want to happen. You're in control here."

She nodded again, this time with more conviction.

"What is it you're hoping to get out of these sessions?"

Mei blinked, the question catching her completely off guard. Nathan watched her work the question out in her head. He knew it was Ethan pushing for this, but it was important that she take ownership of it.

"I... I want to stop hearing my mother's voice." Her palms dug into her legs. "Every time Ethan touches me, I hear her. Telling me I'm being cheap. That nice girls don't..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I just.. I don't want to be a disappointment."

Nathan nodded slowly, his expression warm. Understanding.

"That's a good goal," he said. "And an achievable one. But it's going to take a lot of work and honesty." He looked her over one last time. She still seemed uncomfortable, but her eye contact was more consistent than when they first started. "Can you do that? Can you commit to being honest with me, even when it's hard?"

Mei's hands finally loosened in her lap. She looked up, holding his gaze longer this time before dropping it again. "I'll try."

"That's great." Nathan turned to Ethan. "Our first official session will be tomorrow evening. Just Mei and me. Seven o'clock work?"

"Yes."

Ethan rose, extending his hand. "Thank you, Dr. Coleman. Really."

Nathan shook it, then turned to Mei. She'd stood as well, still not meeting his eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mei."

"Okay."

As they left, Nathan closed the door and returned to his office, sitting in the chair Mei had occupied. It still held the faint warmth of her body, the ghost of her presence.

He picked up his notepad and reviewed what he'd written:

Conservative upbringing. Severe shame conditioning. High anxiety. Wants to change but paralyzed by fear. Responsive to validation. Eager to please. Husband well-meaning but oblivious to depth of issue.

Nathan set down the pen and leaned back, his mind already mapping the path ahead.

"I was on the verge of a scientific breakthrough with Grace, then she ruined everything. Mei is stronger. This time, I'll prove my theories correct."

Grace had been weak. Mentally fragile, emotionally unstable, prone to obsession even before he'd started working with her. Her breakdown wasn't caused by his work, it was an inevitable result of her own instability.

But Mei was different.

He could see it in the way she held herself together despite the anxiety. The way she'd managed to function in a marriage for three years despite crushing shame.

Grace had broken because she was already cracked. Mei wouldn't.

Which meant Nathan could finally prove what he'd always known: that his methods were revolutionary. That deep hypnotic conditioning could transform someone completely, unlock potential they didn't even know they had, reshape a person's entire relationship with their sexuality and their body.

Ethan wanted a sex tape of him and his wife? He'd get a lot more than just that.

This time, he'd be smarter. More careful about covering his tracks. He'd ensure Mei had no memory of the sessions' deeper elements, no conscious awareness of how thoroughly he was reshaping her responses. Ethan would be thrilled with the results and never question the process.

And Nathan would finally have his vindication.

Chapter 2

The next twenty-four hours went by in a flash. Nathan spent the day getting the office in order, setting up his computer and the private server that would hold patient files. In Florida he had an office that was the size of a small house, here, he had 150 square feet to make it feel safe.

It was already mid-afternoon by the time he got everything in place. He took a step back and admired his handiwork. The room looked almost identical to the one he had in Florida. It was clean, cozy, safe. Then, he turned his attention to the four small boxes sitting on his desk.

Nathan mounted the camera on the wall above the leather couch, adjusting the bracket until the angle was perfect. This one was obvious and professional-looking, about the size of a deck of cards, with a small red recording light that would blink when active. The kind of equipment legitimate therapists used for session documentation.

He stepped back, walking to his side of the desk and bringing up the camera feed on his computer. The angle mattered more than anything. He needed plausible deniability just in case things went south... again. From this vantage point, the camera would capture Mei from the neck up. Next, he tested the microphone, making sure it picked up their conversation clearly. Everything was set up exactly as it should be. Anyone who saw the footage would see nothing more than a normal session between patient and therapist.

He'd tell Mei about the camera before her session later that day. He hoped it would put her mind at ease slightly about being alone with Nathan. Therapists recorded sessions all the time for note-taking purposes. Nothing unusual about it.

The other three were different.

He opened the next and lifted out a camera disguised as a smoke detector. This one would mount on the opposite wall, giving him a different angle of the seating area. A profile view, and most importantly a full shot of her body the main camera might miss. The third rested in his palm, no bigger than a bottle cap, designed to tuck into the bookshelf at eye level. It would capture every micro expression on her face. The final camera would go in front of the Zen garden on his desk. It would provide a more intimate point of view during his sessions.

All of this was for research, of course. If Mei showed signs of instability like Grace had, he needed to be aware of them early on so he could plan accordingly. He would study her transformation, frame by frame and ensure the conditioning was having the intended effects. Perhaps even compare them to his sessions with Grace to watch for any anomalies.

He folded the step ladder and carried it to the closet, then paused at the diploma wall. He ran his fingers along the underside of the University of Florida frame until he found the edge of the wall safe hidden behind it. His heart began to race as he entered the six-digit number. The chirp of the password being accepted and the soft click of the lock releasing sent a rush of endorphins through him, the same thrill he used to feel before a first date.

Inside, arranged in neat rows like specimens in a collection, sat seven external hard drives. Each one contained hours of footage that no ethics board would ever see. He closed his eyes and let

his fingers glide across each one, a satisfied smirk forming on his face as he felt his cock begin to swell.

When he opened his eyes, his hand was hovering over the third drive, conspicuously labeled 'GH-03'. This was her breakthrough session and he remembered it like it was yesterday. Grace walked into his office with a confidence he hadn't seen in her before. When he asked her about her weekend, her fingers went to the buttons on her shirt. Normally, she gripped the fabric, trying to hold the shirt in a way that didn't show off her chest, but on this day she was casually popping the buttons open. It wasn't until the second button was undone that she seemed to understand what she was doing and reverted back to her normal behavior.

His hand clenched into a fist. That was also the first piece of evidence called at trial claiming that Nathan was manipulating her. They looked at that video and tried to paint it as proof that he knew she was attracted to him and he should have passed her off to another doctor. He chuckled at the absurdity of it all. Why would he pass her off after seeing exactly how much his methods worked? After months of failed intimacy with her husband, she was starting to regain her libido after just a couple short sessions. Why did they frame that as a negative?

She'd been weak. That was the problem. Mentally fragile in ways he hadn't anticipated, prone to fractures he couldn't have predicted. Maybe he should have been more cautious given her background. Maybe he was blinded by his own ambition. But he had been so close to greatness, before she ruined it all unable to handle the gift he'd given her.

He closed the safe and rehung the diploma. Straightened it until the frame sat perfectly level.

Mei was different. She had a stronger foundation. Grace had already been fractured when she arrived. Not just with what happened on the island but also childhood trauma, depression. Mei was just repressed. Repression could be undone. Repression was exactly what his methods addressed.

This time, I'll prove what I've always known.

He crossed to the window and parted the plantation shutters. Right on time. Ethan and Mei stood on the front porch as he gestured toward Nathan's house. His mouth moved, encouraging words Nathan couldn't hear. Mei's arms were crossed tight over her chest, her shoulders hunched forward like she was bracing against wind that wasn't there.

Ethan leaned in and kissed her forehead while saying something that made her nod. Then, his hand slipped from her back and Mei started across the lawn.

Nathan watched her for a second, catching the way her gaze stayed on her feet, the way her hands clasped and unclasped at her waist. She wore loose fitting jeans, and a t-shirt of some band he didn't recognize. While not as buttoned up as she was yesterday, it was clear it wasn't her decision to be here.

Ethan is the key to making this work. He'll defend the process, make sure she stays comfortable.

He tore himself away from the window and began gathering the last of the boxes, tossing them into the waste basket under his desk. He took a deep breath as he scanned the room one more time for anything that looked out of place. When the doorbell rang, he counted to five before exiting the makeshift office and opening the door with a warm smile.

Mei stood at the door, her head bowed slightly, unwilling to make eye contact. He looked across the lawn where Ethan stood watching his wife like it was his child's first day of school.

"Mei. Welcome." He stepped aside, gesturing her in. "I'm glad you decided to join me today."

"Thank you." Her voice soft, like she was fighting the urge to run back the way she came. He guided her toward the office, watching as her eyes darted around the unfamiliar space.

"It's... different than yesterday," Mei noted as they stepped into the office and Nathan closed the door behind them.

"Just some minor adjustments, to make it feel more welcoming. Have a seat, please."

Mei stood in front of the couch, chewing on her lip. "You replaced the chairs?"

"When I practiced in Florida my clients always said the chairs were too stiff. They preferred the couch." She hesitated, unsure of where to sit, like even that was too intimate for her.

"I can drag this thing out and grab the chairs if you'd rather—"

"No." She sat awkwardly on the middle cushion. "Please, don't trouble yourself."

"Very well then. Can I get you something to drink? Water? Tea?"

"No... no thank you." She slowly adjusted her posture, making herself more comfortable.

"Very well." He walked to his side of the desk. Normally, he'd position his chair on the same side as his patient, but he sensed that Mei wasn't ready for that yet.

"Please, try not to be nervous." He settled into his seat, giving her a warm smile. "I appreciate you giving me a chance to help you today. I'm sure it wasn't easy coming alone."

Mei gave a weak smile.

"Before we begin, I want to make sure you understand that I record all my sessions. It helps me review and provide better care. Everything that happens in this room stays completely confidential—the recordings are for my professional use only. Is that okay?"

Mei glanced at the camera behind her, then back at Nathan. She nodded.

"I need verbal consent, Mei."

"Yes." She swallowed. "That's fine."

"Good." Nathan picked up his notepad, more for show than necessity. The cameras would capture everything he needed. "I thought we'd start with something simple today. Tell me about how you and Ethan met."

Mei's posture softened at the request. She sat up a little straighter, sitting back into the couch to get more comfortable. Her gaze found Nathan's and he smiled at her. She was relaxed, good, he needed to build trust with her for this to work.

"We had a few classes together in college. I was shy, and kept to myself, but Ethan," she giggled. "Well, you've met him. He would constantly overshare."

"I may have noticed that about him."

"Anyway, one day after class, he walked up to me and said he'd been working up the courage all week to ask me out. His roommate thought he was crazy. He must have rambled for at least ten minutes." She giggled, a small dimple appearing in her cheek. "He took me to this Italian place, it was nice, and Ethan was, well, being Ethan. He was talking fast and using his hands a lot when he talked." She shook her head, laughing hard enough that tears welled in her eyes.

"He swung his arm a little too wide and sent the marinara sauce flying. It splattered all over the guy in the table next to us."

Nathan chuckled, and that seemed to be all the encouragement Mei needed to relax. Soon, they were both howling and spent the next five minutes trying to get their laughter under control.

"The best part," she continued, "was that the guy couldn't even be mad. Ethan apologized immediately, then spent the next five minutes telling him his life story and how he was blowing the date. I think he became just as enamored with Ethan that night as I did."

"That's quite the story. I'm sure you can't wait to tell that one to your kids."

She nodded, the smile still wide on her face.

"It sounds like you've always felt at ease with Ethan, even early on."

"I did. He was... easy. Does that make sense? Like, I didn't need to try with Ethan. I could just be."

"That's a beautiful foundation." Nathan made a note on his pad. "How did the date end? Was that your first kiss? Anything more?"

She sank down into the sofa slightly. Her smile flickered as her gaze dropped to the floor. "No." Her hands folded in her lap, thumb rubbing against palm.

Nathan let the moment sit, to see if she was going to expand on her answer. When it was clear she wasn't, he pressed.

"So, when was your first kiss. Tell me what that was like."

"It was... nice." She brought her bottom lip between her teeth, not daring to look up. "It was at his apartment. After our third date."

"Was Ethan your first kiss?"

"No." She looked up at Nathan, for a moment, it almost sounded like she was insulted. "I mean... There were other boys. Before him. A few."

"That's perfectly normal."

"But, it isn't like I was some kind of slut or something." Color rose to her cheeks. "It's not like I had a roster of guys I was running through. I just... I dated. A little. Like normal people do. I wasn't a prude."

Nathan tilted his head slightly. "Mei, why would I think that?"

"What?"

"You said you weren't a slut. I never suggested you were. Why was that the first place your mind went? Are you worried that people may view you a certain way?"

Her mouth opened, then closed. She looked over Nathan's shoulder, where light barely filtered in through the closed slats on the shutters.

"You mentioned your mother yesterday. Is she the one that—"

"I don't want to talk about my mother."

"That's okay." Nathan's voice remained soft, unthreatening. "We don't have to. Let me ask you something different." He waited until her gaze returned to him. "When did you know you wanted to marry Ethan?"

The tension in her shoulders released slightly. Not all the way, some of the earlier ease had been lost, but enough for him to notice.

"Thanksgiving," she said quietly. "His family's Thanksgiving. His mom made this huge meal and everyone was laughing and talking over each other and..." She trailed off, her eyes growing distant. "It was chaos. But it was loving. His dad told embarrassing stories about Ethan as a kid,

and his sister kept stealing food off his plate, and nobody was..." She swallowed. "Nobody was keeping score. Nobody was waiting for someone to make a mistake so they could point it out."

"Was that different from your childhood?"

"It felt like what families looked like on tv." Her voice had gone soft. "I looked at Ethan across the table and I thought... I want this. I want to feel like this forever."

Nathan made another note. *Seeking safety. Seeking belonging. Validation?*

"When did you and Ethan first become intimate?" He watched her eyes go wide. "How far into the relationship was it before you two had sex?"

Her fingers tightened around each other, her jaw setting. "It was... we'd been dating for about six months. He brought it up. Said he wanted to, but only when I was ready."

"And were you? Ready?"

"I thought I was." Her fingers twisted together. "I... yeah. I think so."

"Do you enjoy sex with your husband now?"

The color in her cheeks deepened. "I... Sorry, is this really important? I mean, can't we talk about something else?"

Nathan clicked his pen twice. It was a habit he'd picked up years ago. A way to break the silence in a room without being direct. "I think it is. Does it make you uncomfortable talking about sex?"

"I just... I don't understand why it matters if I enjoy it."

"Well," Nathan took a breath ensuring he was keeping his tone even. "Not wanting to be more adventurous with your husband could be your subconscious way of saying you don't enjoy sex."

"That's not it."

"So, you enjoy it?"

"Sometimes. Parts of it." Mei flinched, realizing she'd been tricked into answering.

"Which parts?"

"I don't..." She closed her eyes, exhaling slowly. "I like being close to him. I like when he holds me after."

Nathan made a note, she'd avoided the actual question and skipped straight to aftercare. He wanted to press her, to see if she even realized she'd done it, but her defenses were already

high. Instead, he decided on a different tactic.

"Do you ever just catch him staring at you afterward?" He leaned forward. "Admiring your beauty after intimacy."

"I... no."

Nathan studied her for a moment, dancing around what he wanted to ask. "What about pictures? Most young married couples love to send flirty messages. Does Ethan ever ask for pictures?"

Mei shook her head. "I couldn't. I don't—" She let out a frustrated sigh. "No."

"Why not?"

Her hands pressed flat against her thighs. "I don't like... being looked at... like that."

"By Ethan?"

"By anyone." She looked directly at the Zen garden and Nathan's pulse quickened. "When we're together, I keep the lights off. I know he doesn't like it, but I can't... I don't like all the attention."

Nathan made a note, then looked up with a gentle expression. "Tell me about your wedding night. Was that different? Did you let him see you then?"

She went completely still. Nathan watched her hands begin to tremble in her lap. Her breathing had gone shallow, her chest barely moving. He actually thought she was going to run out the door, like he pushed too hard.

"I can't."

"Can't what?"

"I can't... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Her eyes darted to the door, then back to her lap. "I thought I could do this, but I can't. I'm sorry. Ethan wanted me to try, and I'm trying, but I can't talk about —" Her voice cracked. "I'm sorry."

Nathan set down his notepad and sat up straight in his chair.

"Mei. Look at me."

She lifted her gaze, her eyes glassy with tears.

"You don't have to apologize. What you're feeling right now, this overwhelming anxiety, it's your mind's way of protecting you from something painful." He watched her absorb what he was saying. "But it's also keeping you stuck. Keeping you from the intimacy you want with your husband."

The wind picked up outside, and a light rain began to fall. They listened in silence for a moment as the drops beat against the window picking up speed.

"There's a technique I use with clients who struggle to access difficult memories. It's called guided hypnosis. It allows you to explore these feelings without the anxiety overwhelming you."

Mei's brow furrowed. "Hypnosis? Like... making me cluck like a chicken?"

Nathan smiled appreciating her attempt at humor. "A little more subtle than that. Think of it more like deep relaxation. A way to quiet the noise in your mind so we can have a conversation without your defenses getting in the way."

"Is it... safe?"

"Completely. You'll be aware the entire time. If anything feels wrong, you can simply open your eyes and we stop."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not at all. Most people find it quite pleasant, actually."

She chewed her lip, glancing at the door again. "What will I remember?"

"Everything important. There may be some gaps due to the relaxed state of your body, but it won't be anything to worry about." He held her gaze, his voice steady and reassuring. "Mei, I know this feels scary. But Ethan sent you to me because he thought I could help. This is the best way of doing that. It will help make you the wife you want to be for him."

"Okay," she whispered. "I'll try."

"Good." Nathan rose from his chair and dimmed the lights slightly, leaving just the warm glow of the desk lamp. "Why don't you lie down? It will help you relax."

Mei glanced at the length of the sofa, then back at Nathan. "I'd rather sit. If that's okay."

"Of course." He didn't push. Not yet. "Whatever makes you comfortable. Just sit back. Let your hands rest in your lap."

She obeyed, settling deeper into the cushion.

"Now, I want you to focus on your breathing. In through your nose... hold it... and out through your mouth. Good. Again. In... hold... and out."

Her chest rose and fell in slow rhythm. His eyes darted to smoke detector, ensuring the angles would work.

"I want you focus on the clock on the wall. Watch the seconds hand as it ticks. Each tick makes you relax a little more. Watch is as you feel your anxiety begin to melt away." Her gaze stayed focused on the clock, each blink of her eyes lasting longer than the last. "Keep breathing. In... hold... out. Feel your body getting heavier with each breath."

Her eyelids fluttered.

"Your arms are heavy. Your legs are heavy. Every muscle in your body is releasing, letting go of all that tension you've been carrying." His voice had dropped into a lower register, each word flowing into the next like water. "You're safe here, Mei. Nothing can hurt you. You can let go."

Her hands went slack in her lap.

"Your eyes are getting heavy now. So heavy. It's okay to let them close. Let them close when you're ready."

Her eyelids drooped, fought to stay open, then finally surrendered. Her breathing had deepened, her chest rising and falling in slow, even waves.

"Can you hear me, Mei?"

A small nod. Without taking his eyes off of her, he hit a few buttons on his keyboard, bringing up the camera feeds while pausing the feed. Later he'd adjust the footage as needed in case there were any questions.

"Good. Very good." Nathan studied her face. Her jaw was slack, her lips parted slightly. "When I count to three, you're going to feel yourself sinking deeper. Deeper and safer. One... two... three."

Her body seemed to melt into the couch, and she tucked her feet under her small frame.

"Mei, I want you to raise your right hand."

Her hand lifted from her lap, hovering a few inches above her thigh.

"Very good. Now lower it."

It dropped back down, limp and obedient.

Nathan's pulse quickened and he glanced toward the UF diploma on the wall. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer honestly. You're safe here. Nothing you say will be judged. You'll feel more free when you answer, like a weight has been lifted. Do you understand?"

She nodded slowly, laying back on the sofa and resting her hands in her lap.

"When you're intimate with Ethan, do you keep your eyes open or closed?"

"Closed." Her voice was distant, dreamy.

"Why?"

"So I don't have to see him looking at me."

"What are you afraid he'll see?"

Nathan watched her tongue slip from between her parted lips, gently wetting them. "That there's something wrong with me. That my body is... That I'm tainted. That I'm a whore who doesn't deserve his love."

The word choice was so out of character for Mei that Nathan actually flinched.

"Why are you tainted?"

"Before Ethan there were others. Not a lot, but a couple. My mother caught us once and..."

Her body began to shake, her breathing growing more rapid.

"It's okay, Mei. We don't have to discuss that." He jotted a quick note on his pad, her trauma went deeper than he thought. "Take a deep breath. You're relaxed here, calm."

The rapid movement of her chest began to even out.

"How did your mother catch you?"

"I was being too loud. Home for winter break. I thought she was at work. The anger in her eyes, the disappointment." Her hands began to clench and unclench.

"It's okay, Mei. Your mother isn't here now." He moved to the other side of his desk, perching on the corner. "You should feel comfortable with your body, Mei. It's not tainted, it's perfect. You should get enjoyment from letting others see it." He paused, closing his eyes and taking another breath to contain his excitement. "Would you like me to help you with that, Mei? Would you like to feel comfortable with your body again?"

"Yes."

"Good." Nathan's mouth had gone dry. "I want you to stand up for me."

She rose from the sofa in one fluid motion, her eyes still closed, her arms hanging loose at her sides. The lamplight caught the curve of her cheek, the delicate line of her collarbone where it disappeared beneath her t-shirt.

"How do you feel?"

"Relaxed."

"Good. You're doing so well." He almost reached out. She was close enough now he could touch her, but he needed to show restraint. "Part of your healing is learning that your body is nothing to be ashamed of. That being seen is flattering, exciting even. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I want you to take off your shirt."

Nathan watched her for any sign of resistance, a twitch of the hand, a furrow of her brow, but there was nothing. Her hands moved to the hem, then stopped. Hovering. Her fingers curled into the fabric but didn't lift. Her first sign of resistance.

"It's okay, Mei. This is part of your healing. Your body is beautiful. Nothing to hide."

Her fingers tightened into fists, lifting a fraction of an inch before pausing again. Then her grip loosened and she pulled the shirt over her head in one smooth motion. She stood before him in a plain white bra, her dark skin contrasting it in a way that made Nathan adjust himself. Her chest was larger than he'd first thought, behind those layers of clothes.

"How do you feel, Mei?"

"Good."

"Not anxious? Not ashamed?"

"No."

"Good. That's very good." His voice remained steady, but he could feel his heartbeat in his throat. "Now I want you to remove your jeans."

Her hands went to the button without hesitation. The zipper slid down. She pushed the denim over her hips and let it pool at her feet, stepping out of it without a second thought. White cotton underwear, to match the bra.

She's responding perfectly. No resistance. Complete trust.

"You're doing beautifully, Mei. I want you to know that. Your body is nothing to be ashamed of. I can see why boys paid attention to you in college."

The faintest smile formed on her lips. Nathan made another note. *Vocal during sex in college before being caught by mother. Subconscious shows signs of enjoyment when complimented.*

"Now. Remove your bra."

Her hands reached behind her back. The clasp released with a soft click that made Nathan's mouth go dry.

The bra slid down her arms and fell to the floor. Her nipples were the color of dark caramel against her golden skin, so different from Grace's pale pink ones. Smaller, too. Tight little buds that hardened in the cool air, drawing into peaks that begged to be touched.

Grace's breasts had been larger, heavier, nipples the size of quarters that flushed red when aroused. He'd spent hours with those recordings, studying every response. Were Mei's as sensitive? Would she gasp the same way when they were touched?

He shook his head trying to focus on the task at hand. He studied her face again. Her face remained neutral. She was completely desensitized, proving his theory that exposure therapy was the correct path for her.

Exposure therapy. Desensitization. This is exactly what she needs.

"And your underwear."

She hooked her thumbs into the waistband. They trembled there. Her whole body trembled actually, despite the room was warm. Nathan glanced at the camera above her shoulder. He'd have to edit all of this out. She was more strong-willed than he'd given her credit for. A slight miscalculation he wouldn't make again.

"Mei. You're doing beautifully. One more step and you'll be free. Completely free of all that shame."

Her thumbs pressed down but the fabric didn't move. Some final wall trying to hold.

"Your mother was wrong about you. Your body isn't shameful. It's beautiful, and you should want to show it off."

The shiver stopped. Her thumbs pushed down and the underwear slid over her hips. Down her thighs. She stepped out of them carefully, standing naked before him.

She kept herself trimmed but not bare, a neat triangle of dark hair that did little to hide the soft swell of her mound. It was almost quaint. Grace had been waxed smooth, most women her age were, and he'd grown accustomed to that clean vulnerability. But there was something about Mei's modesty that stirred him in a different way. She groomed herself just enough to feel put-together, but not for anyone else's benefit. Not for Ethan. Certainly not for a lover's gaze.

He could see the faint shadow between her thighs, the soft crease where her legs met her pelvis. If he told her to spread them, she would. Without hesitation. Without memory. He wondered if he would find her wet.

The thought sent a pulse of heat straight to his groin.

Not yet. Establish the foundation first. Build the conditioning.

But God, it was tempting. She was so perfect standing there. Grace had always carried tension in her body and there was always a certain sexual energy with her. It came from years of conditioning, from her time with The Father, from being sexualized at such an early age. Some part of Grace had always been ready. But Mei... fuck, Mei was perfect. She was just wild enough when she was younger for her body to remember the joys, but conditioned long enough for her mind to reject the idea. The thought of severing that made his mouth water as his cock strained against his pants.

"How do you feel, Mei?"

"Light." She giggled softly. "Like I'm floating."

"That's wonderful. You should feel proud of yourself. You've taken an enormous step today." He kept his voice warm, even as his pulse hammered in his ears. "This is how you should feel when others see you like this. It should be freeing. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. When you get home tonight. I want you to make love to Ethan. I want you to enjoy it, the way you enjoyed it before your mother caught you."

"Okay."

"Good, now get dressed and in a moment I'll start counting backward. Then when you wake, you'll feel refreshed and calm. You'll remember that we talked about your anxiety, and that you felt safe here. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Remember this moment, standing here, feeling free in your body, feeling proud of it. This feeling will stay with you. You'll begin to feel more comfortable being seen. By me. By Ethan. By others. It won't happen all at once, but it will happen. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She was already back in her panties and slipping her bra over her chest. Nathan was almost disappointed to see her dressing, but he knew it needed to be gradual. This wasn't something he could force. It was gentle suggestion, enhanced by positive reinforcement. If he pushed too hard... he wouldn't. He couldn't. Not again.

Mei sat back down on the sofa fully clothed. Nathan did a quick check around the office, ensuring there wasn't anything out of place. When he was satisfied he walked back to his side of the desk and sat.

"I'm going to count from five to one. With each number, you'll feel yourself rising back to full awareness. When I reach one, you'll open your eyes, feeling rested and peaceful. Five... four... beginning to rise... three... two... almost there... one."

Mei's eyes fluttered open.

For a moment, she simply sat there, blinking in the low light.

"How do you feel?" Nathan asked as she looked around the room slightly confused.

Mei stood slowly, like she wasn't sure if her legs would work. "Good... I feel... good."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember talking, about Ethan about..." she looked at her feet. "Oh God."

"It's okay, Mei. This is a safe place."

"About my mother and getting caught."

"You made really good progress today, Mei. You did beautifully."

Mei nodded like she was unsure if she believed him. "You won't... Ethan won't find out about what we talked about, right?"

"Of course not. Everything we discuss here is under strict doctor-patient confidentiality."

She released a breath she'd been holding. "Okay."

Nathan rose from his chair and offered her a smile. "Same time next week?"

Mei nodded slowly, still looking dazed. "Okay. Yes. Same time."

He walked her to the door and watched her cross the lawn toward her house, where Ethan waited on the porch. She moved differently than when she'd arrived less guarded, somehow. Or perhaps just confused.

Nathan closed the door and returned to his office. The cameras had captured everything. He settled into his chair and loosened his tie, finally allowing himself to acknowledge the erection that hadn't faded.

Progress, he told himself. *She's already making such great progress.*

He sat at his computer and rewatched the session.

Ethan kept his voice low. He could feel the goosebumps on Mei's back. She was nervous. She hadn't moved from the porch in nearly a minute, despite telling Ethan she was walking next door for her session.

"Just give him a chance," he said softly. "One session. If you still think it's a bad idea after today, I won't ask you to go again."

Mei chewed her bottom lip. "Promise?"

"Promise." He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "It means a lot to me that you're trying. I know it's hard."

She nodded, and finally stepped off the porch. Ethan watched her cross the lawn, her stride so small it took her at least twice as long to reach the front door. He hoped he wasn't coming across as pushy. He knew how hard it was for her to open up, but Dr. Coleman was the best in his field. He knew that if anyone could help Mei get through her issues, it was him

She glanced back at him one last time as she reached the door. He gave her a thumbs up and what he hoped was an encouraging smile. Then, the door opened. Nathan appeared and Mei disappeared inside.

Ethan stood on the porch for another moment, unsure what to do with himself. He'd taken the day off because Mei had been so nervous this morning. He woke to her pacing the kitchen, barely touching her breakfast, asking twice if he thought this was really a good idea. He didn't want her to feel like he was hovering, but the thought of leaving her alone felt wrong. She'd always been like that with new people, he rationalized. Once she got comfortable with Dr. Coleman it wouldn't be a big deal.

He went inside and grabbed his laptop from the kitchen counter. Settled onto the couch. The screen woke, his browser still open from that morning.

GRACE HART RELEASED: Alleged Stalking Victim or Victim of Malpractice?

He'd meant to close his browser earlier, before Mei could see. Now, with an hour to kill and his wife next door with the man at the center of the controversy, he found himself reading.

The article was a standard recap. It talked about Grace's history with the Holy Isle cult, her marriage, her treatment with Dr. Coleman, the eventual breakdown and accusations. He skimmed past the parts he already knew, past the speculation and the quotes from "experts" who'd never met either of them. Then, even though he knew better than to get sucked into the rabbit hole, he found himself clicking the link at the bottom of the page that promised exclusive interviews and never before told stories.

He regretted the action as soon as he made it. The redirect took him to Reddit.

r/TrueCrime - The Grace Hart Case: What Really Happened?

He knew better than to trust Reddit for anything, but curiosity and a lack of anything productive to do won out.

The thread was a mess of theories and armchair psychology, but buried in the comments was a link to an interview he hadn't seen before. A local Florida news segment from two years ago, back when Grace was still in treatment and everything seemed to be working.

When he clicked play, he was greeted by a man whom he assumed was Grace's husband. He looked older than Grace, maybe late forties with thinning hair and glasses. The interviewer asked about the therapy, about the changes he'd seen.

"It's been incredible, honestly. I first met Grace at church, six months after the horrific stuff that happened on that island. Despite her being pretty reserved, we hit it off instantly. It was love at first sight and we married less than a year later despite her inability to be intimate. She'd started seeing Dr. Coleman during that time..." He shook his head in disbelief. *"The results were amazing. And now, she's like a whole different person. More confident. More... free. She initiates things now. She's adventurous in ways I never expected. Whatever he's doing, it's working."*

Ethan paused the video, his heart beating a little faster. That was exactly what he wanted for Mei. Not the adventurous part necessarily, though he wouldn't complain, but the confidence. The freedom.

He scrolled further, scanning comments, clicking links. Most of it was garbage, conspiracy theories about Nathan actually being The Father, accusations that Grace had made everything up for attention, debates about whether hypnotherapy was even real. He ignored the noise, looking for more accounts from people who'd actually known them.

A BuzzFeed article caught his attention. *"Grace Hart's Inner Circle Speaks Out."*

The piece was mostly fluff, just old friends saying Grace had always been "intense," coworkers describing her as private. But near the bottom, a quote from someone identified only as "Grace's childhood best friend" made him pause.

"The therapy changed her, but not in a good way. She'd come back from sessions and couldn't remember anything. Like the whole hour was just... gone. A black void. She'd ask if she'd already gone to her appointment, what Dr. Coleman said about her. It scared me. I told her to stop going, but she said he was helping her. He had her completely brainwashed."

That was strange. He'd read Nathan's books, watched his TED talks. Hypnotherapy wasn't supposed to work like that. People remembered their sessions, even if the memories were fuzzy. Total amnesia was—

The front door opened and Ethan closed the laptop, not wanting Mei to see anything about the scandal. He stood as she walked in, anxious to see how it went.

"Hey." He crossed to her, hands finding her waist. "How'd it go?"

"Good." She leaned into him slightly, which was more than she usually did. "It was... good."

"Yeah? You feeling okay?"

"I think so." She pulled back to look at him, a small crease forming between her brows. "He made talking a little easier than I expected."

"Well, that is what he gets paid for." Ethan smiled and pulled her close, his hands sliding down her back to the hem of her shirt.

"Why's the back of your shirt tucked in?" He tugged it free, fingers finding bare skin.

"Is it?" Mei pulled back and for a moment looked genuinely confused. "I must have done that when I went to sit. Didn't want it riding up."

"What kind of stuff did you guys talk about?" He felt her tense in his arms.

"Just... stuff. He asked a lot about you. How we met, when I knew I wanted to marry you." She paused. "He... he hypnotized me. Said it would be easier for us to talk."

Ethan waited, hoping she'd continue. When she didn't he asked. "What was that like? Did you..." he thought about the article he just read. "Do you remember it happening?"

"Yeah, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"I remember," she said with a little more force. "It was like I was floating. Like I was there, but just listening to someone else having a conversation."

"What kind of stuff did he ask?"

"Just..." She pulled away, arms crossing over her chest. "Just stuff."

"Okay, I won't push. As long as you're feeling good about it. Does that mean you want to keep seeing him?"

"I am." She stepped away looking Ethan in the eyes. "I think you were right. It may really help."

"Good." Ethan ignored the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Want to grab lunch? I'm starving."

The bedroom was quiet as Ethan sat in his pajama pants, scrolling through his phone as Mei finished brushing her teeth. After Mei got home from her appointment with Dr. Coleman, the day progressed like any other. They went out for lunch where she talked about all the chores she needed to do around the house, despite it already looking immaculate. She hid behind her menu as Ethan ordered for them, and then, later in the evening they had a quiet dinner at home.

All-in-all it was a good day, a normal day. Then, the bathroom door opened and Mei stood in the doorway, her cheeks pinker than normal, wearing nothing but one of his oversized t-shirts that hung just past her thigh.

"Hey," she said softly, as she walked toward the bed.

"Um... hi." He must have looked ridiculous, he was sure his mouth was hanging open as he tried to catalogue what was going on. It wasn't just that Mei was nearly naked, a rarity in itself, it was that she seemed so confident as she made her way to his side of the bed.

"Sorry, I um... I didn't realize you were coming out like... like that. I'll kill the light." He set his phone on the nightstand and reached for the light.

"It's okay." She swung a leg over his hips, her hands resting on his chest. "Leave it on."

"Are you sure? I know you don't like—"

"Thank you," she said, cutting him off. "For pushing me to go today. I know I was being difficult."

"You weren't. You were nervous."

She smiled and pressed her lips to his. "You're sweet. You always take such good care of me." Her fingers ran through the soft patch of hair on his chest. "I should take better care of you."

Ethan's hands slid under the hem of her shirt, grabbing her hips. Her skin was warm and as his fingers pressed into the soft flesh of her back she let out the slightest moan, before letting her hands slide around his neck, her lips parting as her tongue pressed against his.

As her body pressed further onto his and the kiss deepened Ethan's manhood continued to grow pressing into the warmth between Mei's thighs. He glanced at the light next to bed, waiting for Mei to break the kiss and reach over to turn it off. But she never did. If anything, she seemed to press down on his hardness and he found himself wondering how far he could take this before she remembered the light.

His hands slid up her sides, slow enough that she could stop him if she wanted. When his thumbs brushed the bottom of her breasts she sucked in air and her hips rocked against him.

His cock was fully hard now, he wasn't sure what had gotten into her, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Ethan pulled back just enough to look at her. Her eyes were half-lidded, her lips swollen from kissing, her cheeks flushed.

She chewed on her lip and sat up straight. Ethan expected her to lean over and turn off the light once and for all now that she wasn't so caught up in the moment. Instead, she grabbed the hem of her shirt and lifted it over her head.

She wasn't wearing a bra. Her breasts were bare, small and perfect, her dark nipples already tightening in the cool air. Her dark hair was spilled across her shoulders obstructing his view of her chest just enough to make it look even more erotic.

"Fuck, Mei. You're so beautiful."

She tucked her chin and turned her head bashfully. "You're making it weird, Ethan." She went to cover her chest with her hand, but Ethan reached out, grabbing her wrist. When she turned her head to look at him, he pulled her back into a kiss. He felt her body start to relax, her hand falling back to Ethan's chest as she moaned into his mouth as her hips began to move.

Ethan moved with caution, it wasn't that he was unfamiliar with his wife's body, or even that they didn't have an active sex life, but she was never the aggressor. Whatever she and Nathan talked about today worked and he didn't want to spook her. His hands moved slowly to her breasts and she gasped against his mouth. Then, as his thumbs brushed her nipples she froze, her whole body going rigid.

For several awkward seconds they both sat there frozen in time. Then, Mei's shoulders dropped and she exhaled. Her mouth went to his neck kissing it gently. "I love you, Ethan."

He smiled, his thumbs circling her nipples as she gasped in his ear. She kissed his neck again, with more urgency than before as her fingers trailed down Ethan's body and wrapped around his shaft through his pajama bottoms.

This time it was Ethan that gasped, his whole body jerking.

Mei pulled back immediately, her eyes wide. "Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No." He laughed, a little breathless. "No, that was... you just caught me off guard."

"Oh." Her cheeks flushed darker. "Sorry. I just thought that—"

"Mei." He cupped her face, tilting it up until she met his eyes. "It was perfect. Just... unexpected."

Her face was bright red and she looked at Ethan's chest. She swallowed hard, then with a shaky hand slid her fingers into his pajama bottoms.

Her fingers wrapped around him and Ethan groaned again, his head falling back against the headboard. She stroked him slowly, like she was afraid of hurting him, then firmer as she heard the soft moans coming from him. Her mouth returned to his neck, her kisses trailing up to his ear, and he felt her smile when his hips bucked into her hand.

"That feels incredible," he breathed.

She hummed against his throat, her thumb sliding across the tip of his cock. He was fully hard now, straining against her palm, and every stroke sent heat pooling low in his stomach.

His hands traveled along her naked body, abandoning her chest as he grabbed the swell of her ass. Her underwear was soft, and didn't cover her entire bottom. He throbbed in her in hand. Was she wearing cheeky cut panties? His touch shifted, moving toward the soft skin of her inner thigh. When his fingers brushed between her legs, she inhaled sharply but didn't pull away. She was wet. Wetter than he expected. The thin fabric of her underwear was already damp against his fingertips.

"Mei..." He slipped his fingers beneath the fabric and to his surprise she pressed her hips into his palm. "You're so wet."

Her stroking stopped, her hand resting idly on his cock as she rolled her hips to his touch.

"I know." She kissed along his jaw, her hand still working him. "I want to."

"Off," she murmured, tugging at his waistband. "Take these off."

He lifted his hips and she helped him push his pajama bottoms down, kicking them somewhere toward the foot of the bed. Then her hands went to her own underwear, hesitating for just a moment before sliding them down her thighs.

She was naked on top of him. Completely bare. The soft glow of the light all but forgotten as she positioned herself on top of him, one hand braced against his chest. He could feel her heat hovering just above his cock, close enough to make him ache. Then, with one swift motion, she sank down onto him, taking him fully as they both moaned.

She took him slowly, inch by inch, her eyes fluttering closed as her body adjusted. Ethan gripped her hips, watching her face. The slight furrow between her brows. The way her lips parted. The soft exhale when she'd taken all of him.

"Ahhh—" Her hand flew to her mouth, like she couldn't believe it came from her. Slowly, she lowered it, placing it back on Ethan's chest before she started to move.

Ethan wanted to keep his eyes open, to watch his wife in the pale light of the room as she slowly worked him. But every time she drove her hips down, he found his eyes fluttering closed, the sensation of her heat sucking him deeper too much for him to bear.

Her pace was slow at first, like she was still figuring out the logistics. Ethan could count on one hand how many times they'd had sex any way other than missionary, and he resisted the urge to thrust into her and take over.

Her hips rolled and they both groaned. She did it again, more confident this time, and a quiet moan slipped past her lips.

"You feel so good," he said. "And you look so beautiful."

She opened her eyes.

That was the mistake.

His gaze was traveling over her body. Looking at her breasts, her stomach, the place where they were joined. He wasn't leering, wasn't doing anything wrong. He was just... looking. The way a husband looks at his wife, but it was too much for her. Her smile faltered and her rhythm stuttered before stopping completely.

"Can we..." She didn't finish. Instead, she lifted herself off him and lay back against the pillows, her arms crossing over her chest.

Ethan's heart sank, but he tried his best to not sound disappointed. "Hey. It's okay."

"I'm sorry." She wasn't looking at him. "I thought I could, but—"

"Mei." He shifted onto his side, his hand finding her cheek, turning her face toward him. "You have nothing to apologize for. That was... do you have any idea how amazing that was?"

"I ruined it."

"You didn't ruin anything." He kissed her forehead, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. "We can stop if you want."

"No." Her fingers pressed against his chest. "I don't want to stop. I just... can you be on top?"

"Of course." He shifted between her legs. "Do you want me to get the light?"

Mei chewed on her lip glancing at the light then back at her husband. "No. I'm... I'm okay." She reached down, grasping him gently, and smiled as his eyes fluttered shut. She guided him back inside her.

Her hands ran over his back, pulling him closer as they sighed into each other's mouth. His pace quickened, his fingers digging into Mei's thigh as her soft moans grew louder. He sat up, on his knees, the sight of her naked body accepting him made him push harder, driving deeper inside her.

"Oh—" her hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes went wide with embarrassment. Ethan smiled, slowing his pace grounding his body against her clit in a way that made her lift her hips.

"You feel incredible," he breathed against her neck.

Her nails dug into his shoulders in response as the smell of sex filled the air. Her teeth scraped against his neck, another muffled moan that she tried to suppress. He could feel her tightening around him, her thighs trembling.

"Mei—" His voice was strained. "I'm close. I can't—"

She didn't answer with words. Instead, she clenched around him and the last thread of his control snapped.

"Ohhhh, fffffuck." He buried himself deep, his hips jerking as he came. She held him through it, her hands in his hair, her lips pressing against his temple.

When the aftershocks faded, he realized she hadn't finished. "Let me—" he started, his hand sliding between them.

"No." She caught his wrist. "I'm good." She gave a lazy smile and kissed his lips. "It was perfect." She struggled to catch her breath. "Right now I just want to lie here and fall asleep with you."

He rolled off her carefully, settling onto his back. She curled against his side, her head on his chest, and pulled the sheet up, but only to her waist. Her breasts rose and fell with each breath, bare in the lamplight. She made no move to cover them.

Her eyes were already closing, her lips curved in a small smile. She looked peaceful. More relaxed than he'd seen her in a long time.

Ethan lay there, replaying the last twenty minutes as he watched her drift off to sleep.

Holy shit.

It wasn't the night he'd imagined when she climbed on top of him. She'd retreated, pulled back to safer ground when the exposure became too much. But she'd tried. And even now, she wasn't hiding from him the way she usually did.

One session. One hour with Dr. Coleman.

He didn't know how long he lay there. Long enough for her breathing to deepen into sleep. Long enough for the sweat to cool on his skin. Long enough to replay every moment, the victories and the retreat, over and over in his mind.

"Whatever Nathan did, it's working. I need to thank him properly."

One session. Just one, and Mei had already shown more progress than he'd dared hope for. She'd initiated. She'd kept the lights on. She'd made sounds he'd never heard before. Suddenly, the video he wanted to make with her felt like a real possibility.

This was exactly what he'd wanted when he'd suggested therapy.

Tomorrow, he'd text Nathan. Invite him back to Murphy's. Buy him as many beers as the man could drink. Whatever he was doing with Mei. Ethan didn't need to know the details. He just needed it to continue.

His wife was finally becoming comfortable in her own skin.

Chapter 3

"Uuuuhhhh," Ethan's voice cracked as he braced himself above her. His arms were trembling, and sweat was rolling down his forehead as his release rolled through him. Mei's body lifted from the bed, her legs wrapped around his thighs. Her eyes were closed, her face a mask of pleasure as she held him there. She hadn't made much noise this time, just the occasional sharp breath when he found the right angle, but her body was still responsive. Her fingers were still gripping his shoulders as she let out a shaky breath and lowered back onto the bed, the faintest of smiles on her lips.

"Good morning." He pressed his forehead to hers, giving her one last kiss. "Twice in less than twenty-four hours." He grinned. "Did my birthday come early?"

She barked out a laugh, her cheeks tinting as she slapped his arm. "Don't get used to it. Besides, you're the one that woke me up." She kissed his cheek as he rolled onto his back. "I was just going with the flow."

The sheets had ended up bunched at the foot of the bed at some point, and Mei lay beside him uncovered. She didn't reach for them. She just lay there, basking in the afterglow of what just happened, arm covering her eyes, trying to catch her breath.

"I should shower." She stretched, arching her back slightly before swinging her legs off the bed. "I still need to find something to wear for spirit day. It's dress like a Hawaiian day."

"Good thing I just gave you a lay."

Mei's body went stiff as she stood from the bed. Ethan groaned, fearing he'd said too much. He expected her to reach for her kimono next to bed. Her gaze caught it, then she looked down at her body like she was weighing her options.

Ethan admired the sway of her hips, her toned legs and perfect bubble butt. He let out a sigh when she disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

He climbed out of bed and grabbed a pair of boxers from his dresser, looking over the mess they'd made in the bedroom. It almost felt too good to be true, like he was in a dream.

"I'm going to run into town and grab a coffee before work," he called after her. "You want me to bring one back?"

"No thanks. I'm okay."

He stood there for a minute staring at the bed. He never wanted to wake up.

Wheelhouse Coffee was only a ten-minute drive into town. Like most of the shops on Front Street, it was an older building and had seen better days. But it had been part of the community for fifty years and was still owned by the original family. Friday mornings were usually busy. It was the usual crowd of regulars mixed with those who liked to treat themselves before the weekend.

"Mornin', Ethan," Dana, the barista, yelled from behind the counter. She was already reaching for a cup. She was in her twenties, with dark hair and a nose ring. The granddaughter of the original owners. She worked here most days. "Large dark roast, splash of oat?"

"You know me too well."

"What's got you so bright-eyed this morning?" She raised an eyebrow as the espresso machine hissed behind her. "There's a little more pep in your step."

Ethan chuckled. For a moment he considered her question, but then how could he respond? That his wife's therapist had somehow convinced her to enjoy sex after just one session? That another man had found a way to excite her more about sex than he ever could? A cold chill washed over him. It didn't just sound ridiculous, it sounded creepy, in a way he couldn't describe.

"Just a good morning," he said, and left it at that.

Dana gave him a look like she'd noticed whatever just passed through him, but she didn't press it. Instead, she went back to work on the espresso and Ethan pulled out his phone and found his sister's contact.

You won't believe who moved in next door. We should catch up soon. Dinner this weekend?

He switched threads and opened Nathan's contact. He wanted to say something, to acknowledge what had happened, but knew he had a tendency to say too much. The image of Mei walking across the bedroom flashed through his mind, and his chest swelled.

He started typing, deleted it. Started again.

Hey Nathan. I guess the session yesterday was successful? I'm already seeing a difference in Mei. Last night was incredible. This morning too. I don't know how to thank you. Murphy's this weekend? I owe you a beer. Or ten.

His skin pimpled with goosebumps before he pressed send. His mind drifted back to articles he'd dug up yesterday, to Mei's shirt being tucked in. Then to the good part. Mei coming to bed in just his oversized t-shirt. The way she initiated.

He hit send.

"Ethan." Dana slid his coffee across the counter. "Large dark roast. You want a pastry? Just pulled the almond croissants."

"I'm good, thanks." He pocketed his phone and grabbed the cup. The coffee was hot enough to burn, and he blew across the surface as he headed for the door.

His phone buzzed as he crossed the street, the flashing yellow caution light blowing gently in the wind.

Nathan: *I'm glad to hear it, Ethan. She put in a lot of hard work yesterday. A beer sounds great. Murphy's tomorrow night, say 7?*

Ethan sent a thumbs up and leaned against the tailgate of his F-150. The paint had faded from blue to something closer to gray years ago, and the bed was scratched from hauling mulch and lumber, but it ran great. He took a long drink of his coffee and watched Front Street come to life. A woman pushed a stroller past the bookstore. An older man in a flannel unlocked the door to the hardware store across the street.

His phone buzzed again.

Sierra: *Can't this weekend. Dealing with James stuff. Rain check?*

He scrunched his face. *James stuff*. That was Sierra-speak for things had gotten bad again. Ethan and his sister were always close growing up, so she shared more with him than maybe a sister should. She told him about how their sex life had fizzled out a couple of years ago. That was when she'd first found Nathan's book *It helped*, or so she said. But every few months they would seem to get in this funk where she was convinced he was cheating, he would call her crazy, and she would reach out to Ethan to vent about it, before repeating the entire process over again. It was a vicious cycle, and one he didn't feel like dealing with at the moment.

He pocketed his phone. He was on cloud nine right now, and he didn't want anyone bringing him down. He'd call her next week. When things settled.

He pushed off the tailgate and started down the sidewalk. Jade Garden was just a couple of blocks down the road. The chill in the air before rain always made the walk enjoyable. The salt from the harbor carried through the air, mixing with the aroma from Wheelhouse making the stroll all the more pleasant, and he nodded at a few friendly faces as he passed.

The boba shop was small, just a counter and four stools, run by a woman who barely spoke any English. The menu was handwritten on a chalkboard, and a string of paper lanterns hung above the register.

"Mango tea, light ice, extra boba?" Ethan mumbled as he entered the shop.

The woman smiled warmly and nodded, taking his credit card.

He watched her work as he waited, his mind drifting to Mei trying to explain the water cycle to a bunch of second-graders in Hawaiian shirts. She loved her job and would always come home raving about one of her students. But he knew how much it took out of her, and she'd appreciate the boba to get her through the day.

Tea in hand, he headed back up Front Street toward the truck. The walk was short, five minutes at most, and by the time he climbed into the cab, he'd already decided how tomorrow night would go. He'd buy Nathan a beer, tell him about Mei's progress. He'd ask about the hypnosis, just for his own peace of mind. Then thank Nathan one last time for ensuring his marriage didn't end up like Sierra's.

The mango tea was sweating on the kitchen counter when Mei came out from the bedroom, her hair still damp from the shower. She stopped in the doorway, still wrapped in just a towel and stared at it. Ethan must have come home while she was in the shower, set it down, and left again without a word.

She picked it up and shook her head, smiling despite herself. The tapioca pearls shifted at the bottom as she took a sip. She closed her eyes, savoring the taste. Perfect. Light ice, extra boba. It was little things like this that made Ethan so perfect.

She carried it upstairs to get dressed.

Spirit day. She was pretty sure she had a Hawaiian shirt somewhere in her dresser. In just a few hours she'd have twenty-three second-graders running around more interested in their plastic leis than listening to her explain the water cycle. She was going to need every ounce of that tea.

She slipped on a pair of green, cotton panties and baggy jeans. That was the easy part. Next, she started rummaging through her other drawers, pushing aside her usual cardigans and blouses, looking for something that could pass as Hawaiian. Her hand brushed against something in the back. A fabric that was softer than the usual cotton or wool she expected. She pulled it out.

A white bralette. Delicate lace trim along the edges. The fabric was light enough it was nearly see-through. She turned it over in her hands, the lace soft between her fingers.

Her breath caught as she stared at it. She'd forgotten she still had this.

No. That wasn't true. She hadn't forgotten. She'd buried it. Shoved it in the back of a drawer after her mother... She pushed the thought away. When she moved in with Ethan she kept it. Not because she planned on ever wearing it again, but because throwing it away would have meant her mother had won.

Her thumb traced the edge of the fabric as she remembered the night she bought it. Something shifted in her chest and she unconsciously rubbed her thighs together. The memory arrived all at once. The weight of it against her skin, the way her boyfriend stared at her when she came out of the bathroom with it on.

Her hands fidgeted and her breathing grew shallow. As if in a trance, her fingertips reached up, tracing her collarbone, just above where the fabric sat. She chewed on her lip, turning it over in her hands again as if trying to decide what to do with it. She had to go soon. She still hadn't found a shirt to wear, and she needed to leave in forty minutes. Ethan had never gotten to see her in anything like that before. It wasn't fair. He was so good to her. He'd brought her a boba today without being asked. But this was stupid. She was already running late. She needed to—

She dropped the towel and slipped it over her head.

Somehow, it still fit. She smiled and turned to face the mirror on the back of her dresser.

The white lace was tight against her skin, snug around her ribcage, the thin straps pulling it taut across her chest. She could see the outline of her nipples through the fabric, dark against the thin weave, already hardening in the cool air of the bedroom. The bralette left her midriff bare, a strip of golden skin between the lace and the waistband of her jeans, which sat just below her navel. Her collarbones, the swell of her chest, it was all on display.

The rush of excitement from when she was younger washed over her. She felt powerful, sexy. In a way she hadn't felt in years, maybe ever. She turned slightly, examining her profile. The way the lace followed the shape of her. She lifted one hand and ran a finger along the edge where lace met skin, following the line of it across her chest. The touch sent a small shiver down her side.

Her mind drifted to last night. The way Ethan's eyes lit up when she walked out of the bathroom. His words of encouragement.

She grabbed her phone off the dresser. He would lose his mind. She'd tell him she was thinking about him, send the picture then rush off to work. He'd probably turn the truck around, race home and lock her in the bedroom.

She laughed to herself as she framed the shot in the mirror, making sure to capture everything from her collarbones to just below her waist. The lace. The skin. The way it all looked in the pale Friday morning light. The shutter sound was sharp in the quiet bedroom. Mei looked down at the screen.

The woman in the photo stared back at her. Dark hair slightly damp, falling over bare shoulders. White lace. Exposed skin.

Something shifted. Not a thought, exactly. More like a change in the air pressure of the room, a subtle wrongness that seemed to wash over her. She looked at the photo again. At the woman's smile. At the way her chest was offered up to the camera like—

"Jiàn huò."

The word arrived in Mandarin first, the way her mother's voice always sounded when she was truly angry. Mei's brain supplied the translation half a second later.

"You look like a cheap whore."

Her confidence cracked, the air left her lungs.

What was I thinking?

Cold water dumped over her head. Her hands were shaking. She jabbed at the screen, deleting the photo. Her finger missed the button twice before it finally disappeared and the phone clattered onto the cluttered dresser.

Did it send?

Panic seized her chest. She fumbled picking up the phone and checked her messages. Checked her photo album. Checked her recently deleted. Nothing sent. The photo was gone.

The relief almost buckled her knees, but the fear stayed. The fear that someone might have seen her like that, even Ethan. It was obscene. No self-respecting woman would dress like that, let alone send a photo of it. She wrapped her arms tight around her chest, her shoulders curled inward. It was the same feeling she had six years ago, when her mother came home and rushed into her bedroom because she heard noises. Mei began to shake, remembering the cold look in

her mother's eyes. The words she said and Mei rushed to put on clothes, her boyfriend terrified beneath the sheet.

The shame flooded back, filling all the space the confidence had occupied seconds ago. It was familiar, almost comfortable in its awfulness. She knew how to exist inside this feeling. She'd been doing it for years.

Why did I think this was a good idea?

She couldn't track it. The decision to put the bralette on, to take the photo, it didn't feel like something she would do. In the moment, it had felt so natural, so easy. And now it felt like something she'd done in a dream. Something that had happened to someone else in a room she didn't quite remember entering.

She couldn't look at the mirror. She turned away from it, fast, and grabbed the first shirt she saw on the hanger, an old flannel shirt, and yanked it over her head. She would just use one of the plastic leis she had for the kids. Next, she ripped the bralette off, not looking at it as she shoved it back into the drawer. Same spot. Deep in the back, under everything else.

On her way out, she grabbed the boba tea from the dresser. The condensation had soaked a ring into the wood. She wiped it with her sleeve.

She didn't look at the mirror again.

The rumble of Ethan's truck pulled Nathan from his notes. He crossed to the window and parted the plantation shutters just enough to watch the F-150 back out of the driveway next door. The truck rumbled past, and Nathan tracked it as it made its way down the short road. Then it turned onto Harborview Lane and disappeared.

Nathan's gaze shifted to the house. Mei was in there alone, probably still wrapped in the blankets after a night of lovemaking. Or, maybe she was already in the shower, running through all the things she and Ethan did last night.

His mouth went dry as he loosened the collar of his shirt. He was fairly certain she was still feeling the effects of his conditioning. How would she respond if he walked over and asked to borrow a wrench or some flour? He closed his eyes, imagining her answering the door still wrapped in a sheet. She would step aside, let him in, completely comfortable with the intrusion.

He held the image for a moment longer and felt his jeans grow tight. No, he needed to focus. He had work to do. There would be time for all of that later. He adjusted himself, then turned back to his desk.

The monitor displayed a frozen frame from yesterday's session. Mei on the couch, eyes closed, hands resting in her lap. Timestamp: 19:23:47. He'd been reviewing the footage since six this morning, taking notes in his legal pad, cataloging each response and compliance marker. He sipped his coffee, the third so far this morning. He always found it easiest to review footage first thing in the morning while his mind was sharp, before too many distractions festered in his mind. He stole one more glance out the window then pressed play.

The footage advanced frame by frame. Her breathing deepened. Her shoulders dropped. The tension in her jaw released as she sank into the trance. Textbook induction. He made a note: *Subject responsive to standard relaxation protocol. No resistance during initial phase.*

He scrubbed forward to the eighteen-minute mark. This was where it got interesting. On screen, his recorded voice gave the instruction. *"I want you to take off your shirt."*

Her hands moved to the hem. Then stopped. Hovering. He remembered noticing it during the session, that brief hesitation before she complied. At the time, he'd filed it away as minor resistance, nothing unusual.

Now, watching the footage, he saw something else.

He switched to the bookshelf camera feed. The angle was tighter here, focused on her face. He scrubbed back ten seconds and let it play.

"I want you to take off your shirt."

Her fingers curled into the fabric. Her lips parted slightly. And there, beneath her closed lids, her eyes were moving. Rapid, darting movements. REM activity. Her subconscious was processing something, working through the suggestion, pushing back against it even as her hands obeyed.

He paused the frame and leaned closer to the screen. His fingers ran through the scruff on his face, still getting used to the coarse texture. He'd missed this yesterday. The resistance had been invisible to the naked eye, buried beneath her apparent compliance. But the footage didn't lie. Some part of Mei had fought him. His tongue slid past his lips, moistening them slightly. "Interesting."

He scrubbed forward to the underwear. Same pattern, but stronger. Her thumbs hooked into the waistband and froze there for two, three seconds. Her whole body trembled. On the bookshelf feed, her eyes moved rapidly beneath the lids, and her brow furrowed just slightly. A micro expression of distress that vanished the moment she complied.

He made another note: *Subject shows stronger will than anticipated. Resistance manifests subconsciously during key compliance moments. Compare to GH at equivalent stage.*

Grace had been easier. Even in her first session he could tell she was eager to please, almost desperate for his approval. By Session 3, she'd started dressing differently. She'd leave one

button undone on her blouse, hold eye contact longer. She even began playing with the pendant on her necklace, drawing his attention to her chest without seeming to realize she was doing it. The conditioning had taken hold fast because she'd had nothing to fight it with. The island had broken her before Nathan ever met her.

Mei was different, a greater challenge. While she had similar scars as Grace she didn't have the trauma. Her issues with her mother were long-standing. They would need to be dismantled brick by brick.

The thought brought a smile to his face. A stronger foundation meant a more impressive transformation. When Mei finally let go completely, it would be because he'd earned it. Grace was merely his playground, a stepping stone to understand his techniques and missteps. Mei would be his masterpiece.

They had three more sessions together before Ethan's birthday. Session 3 was a turning point for Grace, for Mei it would be a spark that would grow into an inferno.

He saved his notes and began the editing process. The official recording needed to be clean, just in case anyone asked. He trimmed the footage, adjusted timestamps, removed any frames that might raise questions. The version that remained showed nothing but a standard therapeutic session. A woman discussing her anxiety. A doctor listening with professional concern. The angle was too high to show Mei's body, and the audio that was left was nothing extraordinary.

When he was satisfied, he copied the unedited files to an external drive. His cock swelled as he grabbed the black Sharpie from his desk. *MM-01*.

He crossed to the diploma wall and swung the University of Florida frame aside. The safe chirped as he entered the code, and the lock released with a soft click. Seven drives sat inside, arranged in neat rows. He slid MM-01 into the empty slot at the end, then let his hand drift back across the others. His fingers brushed the spine of GH-03 and lingered there.

Grace at her best. Grace before she'd ruined everything.

He pulled his hand back and closed the safe. Straightened the diploma until it hung level.

His phone buzzed on the desk. He crossed back and checked the screen.

Ethan had messaged him while he was reviewing the footage. A smile curved on his lips.

I'm already seeing a difference in Mei. Last night was incredible. This morning too.

He typed a quick reply confirming tomorrow night at Murphy's, then set the phone aside. Ethan was the key to all of this. He'd tell Nathan everything he needed to know, be his eyes when Mei

was at her most comfortable. That was how he'd really know when his methods were starting to take hold.

He shut down the computer and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair.

Eight drives in the safe now. Room for more.

The laptop screen was the only light in the apartment. Grace hadn't noticed the sun go down. She'd been at the kitchen table since noon, and now the windows showed nothing but black glass and her own reflection. Her brown eyes looked hollowed, with large bags under them, her dark hair suggesting it was time for a shower.

She looked away. She knew she looked a mess, but that wasn't important. She was tired of every man in her life taking what they wanted from her. Using her for their own sick pleasure then casting her out into the cold. The legs of the chair scratched the floor as she stood, pacing the room.

The apartment was small. One bedroom, a kitchenette, a bathroom with a shower stall barely wide enough to turn around in. A downgrade from the house she'd shared with Thomas, but he was gone now, had served her the papers while she was still in St. Augustine's Psychiatric Facility. She didn't blame him. She'd shown up at another man's house naked. She'd sent photos, written letters she couldn't remember writing. What husband could survive that?

On the counter, three prescription bottles stood in a neat row. She took them every morning. Lexapro, Seroquel, Trazodone. The cocktail St. Augustine's had sent her home with, the chemical leash that was supposed to keep her stable. She was stable. She was taking her meds, filling out job applications, reading the self-help book her discharge counselor had recommended. She was doing everything right.

The dishes in the sink said otherwise. The unopened mail piling on the coffee table. The fine layer of dust on the television she hadn't turned on in two weeks.

None of that stuff was important right now. What was important was finding him.

The table around her laptop was covered in paper. Printouts of therapist licensing databases, maps of Washington and Oregon with small towns circled in red pen, screenshots of Nathan's old practice website that she'd pulled from the Internet Archive before it disappeared completely. News articles about herself, highlighted and annotated in the margins. All of them calling her a stalker. Nathan had called her an obsessive patient, very unstable. But that wasn't always true. Not until he started putting her under. Planting seeds in her mind. Of course, she couldn't tell anyone that. She would sound crazy, and she wasn't crazy.

She'd learned to be careful. St. Augustine's had taught her that much. Looking crazy got you locked up, even when you were right. So she kept her research organized, her notes legible, her process methodical. If anyone asked, she was writing a book. Processing her trauma. Moving on.

But there was no one left to ask.

She pulled up another licensing database and typed in his name. Florida had been a dead end. He'd let his practice there lapse, forwarding address unknown. The ethics review had found "insufficient evidence of misconduct." He still had his license. He could practice anywhere. But he wouldn't go just anywhere. He would go somewhere with rain.

She remembered the sessions at his house. The ones that would always end up in his bedroom. She couldn't remember how, or even when it started, just the intensity of it. How much she'd wanted to please him. Her nails dug into her forearm as she recalled those nights.

He would put on rain sounds to fall asleep. White noise through the bedroom speakers, the soft static of a storm that wasn't there. He'd told her once, half-asleep, that if he ever retired he'd move somewhere where it rained all the time. Somewhere quiet.

He wouldn't stay in Florida, not with all the press, and Hawaii felt too out of place for him. She'd narrowed it down to three states. Washington, Oregon, Northern California. Hundreds of towns. Thousands of therapists. And she had no proof he was even practicing, no proof he'd gone anywhere near the coast.

The warm sensation of blood on her fingers brought her back to the apartment. She jerked her nails away from her forearm, then let out a frustrated groan as she slammed the laptop shut and moved toward the kitchen for a paper towel.

She pulled the last one from the roll and pressed it against her arm, then filled a glass of water at the sink. Once she was satisfied the bleeding had stopped, she moved to the trash can to throw the towel away, but paused when she saw it was overflowing. She couldn't remember how long it had been like that. She turned toward the cabinet under the sink to grab a fresh bag, but her eyes went wide.

A journal was wedged behind a box of trash bags. She'd shoved it there when she moved in, not wanting to look at it, not ready to throw it away. One of the ones from during treatment. Her therapist in St. Augustine, not Nathan, had told her to document everything. Write down what you remember. Write down what you don't.

She pulled it out. The cover was soft, worn at the edges. She opened it to a random page.

Her own handwriting. A date from two years ago.

Session 5. I felt butterflies as soon as I walked into his office today. His eyes lit up the second he saw me and his smile immediately made me feel safe. Not since The Father has anyone

understood me like this. Thomas tries, but he doesn't get it. I used to feel so much joy when I went home to him, but now I can only think about when I get to see Nathan again. He makes me want to be free. To open myself in ways I thought were gone forever. I wore a skirt to our meeting today and I swear every time I saw his eyes go to my legs I felt a heat I'd never felt with Thomas. Did I marry the wrong man?

Grace's stomach turned. She remembered writing this. She remembered believing it, but she couldn't remember why or how it started.

The night that everything fell apart, the one that the media played on a loop. She couldn't even remember driving there. Only that she was standing on his doorstep, naked, certain he wanted her, convinced this was what they both needed.

He put this in me. Her nails found her arm again and she pulled them away. He made me feel this way. He made me think I wanted him. And then he turned it against me.

The obsession she'd felt, the desperate, consuming need to be near him, it hadn't been love. It hadn't been attraction. It had been programming. Code he'd written into her brain while she sat in his office trusting him. And she was still running it. Every time she thought about him, every time she pulled up another database, every time she caught herself reaching for the phone to call a number that had been disconnected for a year. She knew that was him. Still inside her. Still pulling the strings.

The difference now was that she could see it. She couldn't cut the wires, but she could follow them back to the source. She could get him to admit what he'd done. To tell her how to make it stop, to—

She slammed the journal shut, her hands shaking.

She was going to find him. Not because she loved him. The media would say it was because she was obsessed, in love. Maybe she was, once. But now she knew those feelings had been manufactured. Dr. Nathan Coleman was trying to play God, but he wouldn't get away with it.

The gaps in her memory, the things she couldn't explain. He had those answers, and she needed to know them. He would tell her how to make it stop, how to cut out the part of her brain that still reached for him in the dark.

She would make him tell her.

"I'm not crazy." Her voice was hoarse in the empty apartment. She said it again, louder. "I'm not crazy."

Nathan was already seated at the bar when Ethan's truck pulled into the lot. He watched through the window as Ethan climbed out, noted the spring in his step, the way his shoulders sat looser than they had a week ago. A man who'd gotten what he wanted. He walked with confidence, the same confident stride Nathan had seen hundreds of times before.

The bartender, the same one from before with tattoos climbing both arms like ivy, had already been by once to ask Nathan if he wanted another whiskey. Nathan just shook his head, pulling the last drop from the glass and sliding it back to him. He'd let Ethan order him an IPA when he got inside.

"Nathan. Thanks for coming out." Ethan was already grinning when he walked up to the bar, the words threatening to tumble out without prompting.

"Wouldn't miss it." Nathan shook his hand, gestured to the empty stool beside him. "What are we drinking? I'm still not sure what any of these flavors are."

Ethan laughed and flagged down the bartender, happy to take charge with his new friend. "Two Hazy Wonder IPAs."

The bartender nodded and turned to pull the beers. Ethan drummed his fingers on the bar, grinning like a kid with a secret he couldn't keep.

"So." He was already leaning in. Classic disinhibition. "I don't know what you did, but it worked."

Nathan raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? I'm glad to hear that. What happened? Did she open up a little more?" He knew what would come next, but it was important that Ethan felt like he was the one in control of the situation.

"Thursday night. After the session." Ethan shook his head, still grinning. "She came to bed in just my t-shirt, which honestly would have been more than enough."

The tattooed bartender brought them their drinks and for a minute looked like he wanted to stay and listen. When he realized they had stopped talking because of him he smiled and headed toward the other side of the bar.

"But then, she climbed on top of me. Initiated the entire thing. She even kept the lights on." He laughed, disbelieving. "I mean, sometimes she would... I don't want it to sound like—" He caught himself and glanced around the bar, then lowered his voice further. "I'm just saying, it's a bit out of character for her to get like that." He took a long drink from his beer. "And the sounds she was making. I mean, she was actually into it. Not in her head at all."

Nathan nodded, trying to feign wanting to slow him down. "Sounds like it was quite the night. Any regrets in the morning?"

"That was even better." His voice carried again and he lowered his head as if ducking from the police. "Friday morning when we woke up she—" He trailed off, the grin widening. "Let's just say I was almost late for work."

Internally, Nathan was cataloging every word. *Initiated. Lights on. Vocalizing. Morning sex unprompted.* The suggestions had taken hold faster than expected. Mei's response rate was exceeding his early projections.

"That's wonderful to hear. She's doing the work. You should be proud of her."

Ethan's grin faltered slightly. "Yeah. It was amazing. But then..." He picked took another pull of beer, slower this time. "When she got home from work Friday, it was like she was someone else. She looked out of it. I chalked it up to work, you know these things happen, especially when dealing with kids all day." He grimaced as he recalled the events. "But then we went to bed and it was like she was racing to turn out the lights. When I kissed her goodnight, it was like her entire body tensed up." He spun the cold bottle around in his hand. "Is that normal? For her to be so hot then cold?"

Fascinating, Nathan thought to himself. She seemed to take to the conditioning just as quickly as Grace, but then it decayed at a much more rapid rate. He'd need to adjust, to find the missing thread.

"That's not unusual," Nathan said, shrugging. "First sessions often create a kind of... overcorrection. Patients feel liberated, they push themselves further than they're ready for, and then the anxiety catches up. She probably felt vulnerable about how open she'd been with you."

Ethan nodded slowly. "That makes sense. I just—" He looked around the near empty bar. "I don't want to lose the progress, ya know?"

"You won't. These things take time. The fact that she responded so strongly this early is a good sign."

They sat in silence for a moment while Ethan considered what he was being told. He set his bottle down and rotated it slowly, watching condensation bead on the glass. Nathan recognized the tell, he had more questions but wasn't sure how to ask them.

"Can I ask you something?" Ethan finally said. "About the hypnosis."

"That depends. I can't answer any questions that would jeopardize confidentiality." He balled his free hand into a fist under the counter. This was dangerous territory. "Honestly, even just talking to you like this could be seen as an impropriety."

"I know I just... how does it work? Is she in any danger? Like long term stuff?"

Nathan kept his face neutral. He needed to shut this down, but his curiosity got the better of him. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. She said she remembered being under, and she also said mostly. But then there's..." Nathan almost felt sorry for him. The man couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it. "I read some stuff online. About how hypnotherapy is supposed to work. And people were saying their loved ones started having gaps."

He was doing research, that wasn't good. There were so many false narratives about what Nathan did. Fake news that didn't understand the science and spoke in absolutes.

"Ethan, I'm going to be direct with you." He turned to face him fully. "Mei is completely safe with me. But she revealed some heavy stuff. Now, my guess is, she told you she couldn't remember because she doesn't want to share it with you."

Ethan's eyes went wide. He hadn't considered that Mei would be hiding something. Nathan pressed on. "I need you to trust the process. What happens in session is between Mei and me. That has to be absolute."

"I wasn't trying to—"

"I know. You're her husband. You love her. It's natural to be curious." Nathan held his gaze. "But if Mei knew you were asking me about her sessions, it would compromise everything, your marriage included." He let the words land. He didn't want it to sound like a threat, but he needed to put enough fear in Ethan that he would stop digging.

He gave a reassuring smile, then continued. "She needs to know that space is hers. Not a performance for you, not a report she has to give. Just her, working through her own barriers."

Ethan's shoulders dropped. "You're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"There's nothing to apologize for. Just trust me. You asked me to help for a reason." Nathan clapped him on the shoulder. "She's doing beautifully. I mean that."

Ethan nodded, took another drink. The tension in his jaw loosened. Nathan watched him reset, watched the guilt settle into acceptance.

Too easy.

They talked for another twenty minutes. Nathan asked about work, about Harmony Falls, about the hiking trails he'd read about. He let Ethan ramble, nodding at the right moments, steering the conversation like water finding its level.

Eventually, Ethan circled back. "So my birthday's in three weeks," He said it casually, but Nathan caught the undercurrent. "You think she'll be ready? For, you know..."

"The sex tape?" Nathan was smiling. He knew it would get a rise out of Ethan.

"When you say it like that it sounds—"

"It sounds like a husband who wants to feel close to his wife." Nathan shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with that. But three weeks..." He shook his head slowly. "I'm not going to lie, it's a tight window. But if we can keep Mei focused on the positive changes I think we have a chance."

He watched the mix of emotions cross Ethan's face. He didn't need to give any further guidance. Ethan was smart enough to understand what that meant. Most importantly, he hoped Ethan would realize it meant stop looking for reasons for it to fail.

They finished their beers. Nathan signaled for the check, but Ethan waved him off.

"I got this. Least I can do."

Nathan didn't argue. He pulled on his jacket while Ethan settled the tab, then they walked out together into the cool evening air. The parking lot was half-empty, a few trucks scattered under the yellow lights.

"Hey," Ethan said, stopping beside his truck. "Can I ask you something else? Totally unrelated."

"Sure."

Ethan hesitated. pulled out his phone and read a message, then pocketed it again.

"My sister. Sierra. She's up in Bellingham." He avoided Nathan's gaze. "She's the one I was telling you about before. With all your books."

"I remember."

"Right. Anyway, her marriage is kind of all over the place. Has been for a while. I was wondering if you would, you know, see about taking her on as a client. I don't know if you do remote sessions, or if she could drive down sometime. But I figured I'd ask."

Nathan considered this. Another patient. Another woman with a struggling marriage, another husband oblivious to the depth of the problem. The symmetry was almost elegant.

"I'd need to speak with her first," he said carefully. "See if she's a good fit. But I'm open to it. If she can come to the office. I don't do remote work. I don't trust the internet."

"Or even..." Ethan kicked a rock into the parking lot. "What about me?"

"What about you, Ethan?"

"I just... You're already working with my wife and obviously my marriage has some things we are working on. Would it be helpful if you started seeing me as well?"

"You want me to take you on as a patient?" Nathan didn't shock easily, but this surprised him.

"Totally separate from Mei of course. I just, well you know, maybe it would help with her progress. See that you can be trusted, and I have my own baggage I'm dealing with."

"Tell you what." Nathan extended his hand. "Let me think about it. I don't have the capacity to take on both you and your sister yet." Ethan nodded. "I'm not saying no, just need some time to consider which case would make the most sense for me. Which one would help you the most?"

"Of course," Ethan said, quickly. "I understand either way. I'm just happy you're working with Mei. Truly."

They said their goodbyes and Nathan started his Mercedes, watching Ethan climb into the cab of his truck. Both options created very unique possibilities for Nathan and for his treatment plan.

But it was Ethan who would ultimately bring Mei further along in her conditioning. Nathan didn't work with many male patients. Most of his work had always been with the female in the relationship, he preferred it that way. Still, seeing Ethan could unlock a lot of doors that were previously closed. Not only could he ensure Ethan didn't stumble onto something damning but he could use it as a way to have Ethan help lower Mei's guard even quicker.

The Therapist Ch. 02

Hey Friends! Hope everyone is having a great start to the year.

Chapter 2 is finally here! I started outlining it just days after posting Chapter 1. Path 3 won with a decisive 49% of the vote, so Nathan's taking the darker route. Once Hannah and I wrapped Window to Temptation, I dove straight into writing this.

Of course, my "roughly 5k words" goal nearly doubled. What can you do? 🙄

I've also been chipping away at the Newlyweds Epilogue between writing sessions. I'm about 2/3 done and planning to finish it this weekend before jumping into EP.

Alright, enough from me. Can't wait to see what you think of the chapter and which path you'll choose for Ethan!

The next twenty-four hours went by in a flash. Nathan spent the day getting the office in order, setting up his computer and the private server that would hold patient files. In Florida he had an office that was the size of a small house, here, he had 150 square feet to make it feel safe.

It was already mid-afternoon by the time he got everything in place. He took a step back and admired his handiwork. The room looked almost identical to the one he had in Florida. It was clean, cozy, safe. Then, he turned his attention to the four small boxes sitting on his desk.

Nathan mounted the camera on the wall above the leather couch, adjusting the bracket until the angle was perfect. This one was obvious and professional-looking, about the size of a deck of cards, with a small red recording light that would blink when active. The kind of equipment legitimate therapists used for session documentation.

He stepped back, walking to his side of the desk and bringing up the camera feed on his computer. The angle mattered more than anything. He needed plausible deniability just in case things went south... again. From this vantage point, the camera would capture Mei from the neck up. Next, he tested the microphone, making sure it picked up their conversation clearly. Everything was set up exactly as it should be. Anyone who saw the footage would see nothing more than a normal session between patient and therapist.

He'd tell Mei about the camera before her session later that day. He hoped it would put her mind at ease slightly about being alone with Nathan. Therapists recorded sessions all the time for note-taking purposes. Nothing unusual about it.

The other three were different.

He opened the the next and lifted out a camera disguised as a smoke detector. This one would mount on the opposite wall, giving him a different angle of the seating area. A profile views, and most importantly a full shot of her body the main camera might miss. The third rested in his palm, no bigger than a bottle cap, designed to tuck into the bookshelf at eye level. It would capture every micro expression on her face. The final camera would go in front of the Zen garden on his desk. It would provide a more intimate point of view during his sessions.

All of this was for research, of course. If Mei showed signs of instability like Grace had, he needed to be aware of them early on so he could plan accordingly. He would study her

transformation, frame by frame and ensure the conditioning was having the intended affects. Perhaps even compare them to his sessions with Grace to watch for any anomalies.

He folded the step ladder and carried it to the closet, then paused at the diploma wall. He ran his fingers along the underside of the University of Florida frame until he found the edge of the wall safe hidden behind it. His heart began to race as he entered the six-digit number. The chirp of the password being accepted and the soft click of the lock releasing sent a rush of endorphins through him, the same thrill he used to feel before a first date.

Inside, arranged in neat rows like specimens in a collection, sat seven external hard drives. Each one contained hours of footage that no ethics board would ever see. He closed his eyes and let his fingers glide across each one, a satisfied smirk forming on his face as he felt his cock begin to swell.

When he opened his eyes, his hand was hovering over the third drive, conspicuously labeled 'GH-03'. This was her breakthrough session and he remembered it like it was yesterday. Grace walked into his office with a confidence he hadn't seen in her before. When he asked her about her weekend, her fingers went to the buttons on her shirt. Normally, she gripped the fabric, try to hold the shirt in a way that didn't show off her chest, but on this day she was casually popping the buttons open. It wasn't until the second button was undone that she seemed to understand what she was doing and reverted back to her normal behavior.

His hand clenched into a fist. That was also the first piece of evidence called at trial claiming that Nathan was manipulating her. They looked at that video and tried to paint it as proof that he knew she was attracted to him and he should have passed her off to another doctor. He chuckled at the absurdity of it all. Why would he pass her off after seeing exactly how much his methods worked? After months of failed intimacy with her husband she was starting to regain her libido after just a couple short sessions. Why did they frame that as a negative?

She'd been weak. That was the problem. Mentally fragile in ways he hadn't anticipated, prone to fractures he couldn't have predicted. Maybe he should have been more cautious given her background. Maybe he was blinded by his own ambition. But he had been so close to greatness, before she ruined it all unable to handle the gift he'd given her.

He closed the safe and rehung the diploma. Straightened it until the frame sat perfectly level.

Mei was different. She had a stronger foundation. Grace had already been fractured when she arrived. Not just with what happened on the island but also childhood trauma, depression. Mei was just repressed. Repression could be undone. Repression was exactly what his methods addressed.

This time, I'll prove what I've always known.

He crossed to the window and parted the plantation shutters. Right on time. Ethan and Mei stood on the front porch as he gestured toward Nathan's house. His mouth moved, encouraging words Nathan couldn't hear. Mei's arms were crossed tight over her chest, her shoulders hunched forward like she was bracing against wind that wasn't there.

Ethan leaned in and kissed her forehead while saying something that made her nod. Then, his hand slipped from her back and Mei started across the lawn.

Nathan watched her for a second, catching the way her gaze stayed on her feet, the way her hands clasped and unclasped at her waist. She wore loose fitting jeans, and a t-shirt of some

band he didn't recognize. While not as buttoned up as she was yesterday, it was clear it wasn't her decision to be here.

Ethan is the key to making this work. He'll defend the process, make sure she stays comfortable.

He tore himself away from the window and began gathering the last of the boxes, tossing them into the waste basket under his desk. He took a deep breath as he scanned the room one more time for anything that looked out of place. When the doorbell rang, he counted to five before exiting the makeshift office and opening the door with a warm smile.

Mei stood at the door, her head bowed slightly, unwilling to make eye contact. He looked across the lawn where Ethan stood watching his wife like it was his child's first day of school.

"Mei. Welcome." He stepped aside, gesturing her in. "I'm glad you decided to join me today."

"Thank you." Her voice soft, like she was fighting the urge to run back the way she came. He guided her toward the office, watching as her eyes darted around the unfamiliar space.

"It's... different than yesterday," Mei noted as they stepped into the office and Nathan closed the door behind them.

"Just some minor adjustments, to make it feel more welcoming. Have a seat, please."

Mei stood in front of the couch, chewing on her lip. "You replaced the chairs?"

"When I practiced in Florida my clients always said the chairs were too stiff. They preferred the couch." She hesitated, unsure of where to sit, like even that was too intimate for her.

"I can drag this thing out and grab the chairs if you'd rather—"

"No." She sat awkwardly on the middle cushion. "Please, don't trouble yourself."

"Very well then. Can I get you something to drink? Water? Tea?"

"No... no thank you." She slowly adjusted her posture, making herself more comfortable.

"Very well." He walked to his side of the desk. Normally, he'd position his chair on the same side as his patient, but he sensed that Mei wasn't ready for that yet.

"Please, try not to be nervous." He settled into his seat, giving her a warm smile. "I appreciate you giving me a chance to help you today. I'm sure it wasn't easy coming alone."

Mei gave a weak smile.

"Before we begin, I want to make sure you understand that I record all my sessions. It helps me review and provide better care. Everything that happens in this room stays completely confidential—the recordings are for my professional use only. Is that okay?"

Mei glanced at the camera behind her, then back at Nathan. She nodded.

"I need verbal consent, Mei."

"Yes." She swallowed. "That's fine."

"Good." Nathan picked up his notepad, more for show than necessity. The cameras would capture everything he needed. "I thought we'd start with something simple today. Tell me about how you and Ethan met."

Mei's posture softened at the request. She sat up a little straighter, sitting back into the couch to get more comfortable. Her gaze found Nathan's and he smiled at her. She was relaxed, good, he needed to build trust with her for this to work.

"We had a few classes together in college. I was shy, and kept to myself, but Ethan," she giggled. "Well, you've met him. He would constantly overshare."

"I may have noticed that about him."

"Anyway, one day after class, he walked up to me and said he'd been working up the courage all week to ask me out. His roommate thought he was crazy. He must have rambled for at least 10 minutes." She giggled, a small dimple appearing in her cheek. "He took me to this Italian place, it was nice, and Ethan was, well, being Ethan. He was talking fast and using his hands a lot when he talked." She shook her head, laughing hard enough that tears welled in her eyes.

"He swung his arm a little too wide and sent the marinara sauce flying. It splattered all over the guy in the table next to us."

Nathan chuckled, and that seemed to be all the encouragement Mei needed to relax. Soon, they were both howling and spent the next five minutes trying to get their laughter under control.

"The best part," she continued, "was that the guy couldn't even be mad. Ethan apologized immediately, then spent the next five minutes telling him his life story and how he was blowing the date. I think he became just as enamored with Ethan that night as I did."

"That's quite the story. I'm sure you can't wait to tell that one to your kids."

She nodded, the smile still wide on her face.

"It sounds like you've always felt at ease with Ethan, even early on."

"I did. He was... easy. Does that make sense? Like, I didn't need to try with Ethan. I could just be."

"That's a beautiful foundation." Nathan made a note on his pad. "How did the date end? Was that your first kiss? Anything more?"

She sank down into the sofa slightly. Her smile flickered as her gaze dropped to the floor. "No." Her hands folded in her lap, thumb rubbing against palm.

Nathan let the moment sit, to see if she was going to expand on her answer. When it was clear she wasn't, he pressed.

"So, when was your first kiss. Tell me what that was like."

"It was... nice." He brought her bottom lip between her teeth, not daring to look up. "It was at his apartment. After our third date."

"Was Ethan your first kiss?"

"No." She looked up at Nathan, for a moment, it almost sounded like she was insulted. "I mean... There were other boys. Before him. A few."

"That's perfectly normal."

"But, it isn't like I was some kind of slut or something." Color rose to her cheeks. "It's not like I had a roster of guys I was running through. I just... I dated. A little. Like normal people do. I wasn't a prude."

Nathan tilted his head slightly. "Mei, why would I think that?"

"What?"

"You said you weren't a slut. I never suggested you were. Why was that the first place your mind went? Are you worried that people may view you a certain way?"

Her mouth opened, then closed. She looked over Nathan's shoulder, where light barely filtered in through the closed slats on the shutters.

"You mentioned your mother yesterday. Is she the one that—"

"I don't want to talk about my mother."

"That's okay." Nathan's voice remained soft, unthreatening. "We don't have to. Let me ask you something different." He waited until her gaze returned to him. "When did you know you wanted to marry Ethan?"

The tension in her shoulders released slightly. Not all the way, some of the earlier ease had been lost, but enough for him to notice.

"Thanksgiving," she said quietly. "His family's Thanksgiving. His mom made this huge meal and everyone was laughing and talking over each other and..." She trailed off, her eyes growing distant. "It was chaos. But it was loving. His dad told embarrassing stories about Ethan as a kid, and his sister kept stealing food off his plate, and nobody was..." She swallowed. "Nobody was keeping score. Nobody was waiting for someone to make a mistake so they could point it out."

"Was that different from your childhood?"

"It felt like what families looked like on tv." Her voice had gone soft. "I looked at Ethan across the table and I thought... I want this. I want to feel like this forever."

Nathan made another note. *Seeking safety. Seeking belonging. Validation?*

"When did you and Ethan first become intimate?" He watched her eyes go wide. How far into the relationship was it before you two had sex"

Her fingers tightened around each other, her jaw setting. "It was... we'd been dating for about six months. He brought it up. Said he wanted to, but only when I was ready."

"And were you? Ready?"

"I thought I was." Her fingers twisted together. "I... yeah. I think so."

"Do you enjoy sex with your husband now?"

The color in her cheeks deepened. "I... Sorry, is this really important? I mean, can't we talk about something else?"

Nathan clicked his pen twice. It was a habit he'd picked up years ago. A way to break the silence in a room without being direct. "I think it is. Does it make you uncomfortable talking about sex?"

"I just... I don't understand why it matters if I enjoy it."

"Well," Nathan took a breath ensuring he was keeping his tone even. "Not wanting to be more adventurous with your husband could be your subconscious way of saying you don't enjoy sex."

"That's not it."

"So, you enjoy it?"

Sometimes. Parts of it." Mei flinched, realizing she'd been tricked into answering.

"Which parts?"

"I don't..." She closed her eyes, exhaling slowly. "I like being close to him. I like when he holds me after."

Nathan made a note, she'd avoided the actual question and skipped straight to aftercare. He wanted to press her, to see if she even realized she'd done it, but her defenses were already high. Instead, he decided on a different tactic.

"Do you ever just catch him staring at you afterward?" He leaned forward. "Admiring your beauty after intimacy."

"I... no."

Nathan studied her for a moment, dancing around what he wanted to ask. "What about pictures? Most young married couples love to send flirty messages. Does Ethan ever ask for pictures?"

Mei shook her head. "I couldn't. I don't—" She let out a frustrated sigh. "No."

"Why not?"

Her hands pressed flat against her thighs. "I don't like... being looked at... like that."

"By Ethan?"

"By anyone." She looked directly at the Zen garden and Nathan's pulse quickened. "When we're together, I keep the lights off. I know he doesn't like it, but I can't... I don't like all the attention."

Nathan made a note, then looked up with a gentle expression. "Tell me about your wedding night. Was that different? Did you let him see you then?"

She went completely still. Nathan watched her hands begin to tremble in her lap. Her breathing had gone shallow, her chest barely moving. He actually thought she was going to run out the door, like he pushed too hard.

"I can't."

"Can't what?"

"I can't... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Her eyes darted to the door, then back to her lap. "I thought I could do this, but I can't. I'm sorry. Ethan wanted me to try, and I'm trying, but I can't talk about—" Her voice cracked. "I'm sorry."

Nathan set down his notepad and sat up straight in his chair.

"Mei. Look at me."

She lifted her gaze, her eyes glassy with tears.

"You don't have to apologize. What you're feeling right now, this overwhelming anxiety, it's your mind's way of protecting you from something painful." He watched her absorb what he was saying. "But it's also keeping you stuck. Keeping you from the intimacy you want with your husband."

The wind picked up outside, and a light rain began to fall. They listened in silence for a moment as the drops beat against the window picking up speed.

"There's a technique I use with clients who struggle to access difficult memories. It's called guided hypnosis. It allows you to explore these feelings without the anxiety overwhelming you."

Mei's brow furrowed. "Hypnosis? Like... making me cluck like a chicken?"

Nathan smiled appreciating her attempt at humor. "A little more subtle than that. Think of it more like deep relaxation. A way to quiet the noise in your mind so we can have a conversation without your defenses getting in the way."

"Is it... safe?"

"Completely. You'll be aware the entire time. If anything feels wrong, you can simply open your eyes and we stop."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not at all. Most people find it quite pleasant, actually."

She chewed her lip, glancing at the door again. "What will I remember?"

"Everything important. There may be some gaps due to the relaxed state of your body, but it won't be anything to worry about." He held her gaze, his voice steady and reassuring. "Mei, I know this feels scary. But Ethan sent you to me because he thought I could help. This is the best way of doing that. It will help make you the wife you want to be for him."

"Okay," she whispered. "I'll try."

"Good." Nathan rose from his chair and dimmed the lights slightly, leaving just the warm glow of the desk lamp. "Why don't you lie down? It will help you relax."

Mei glanced at the length of the sofa, then back at Nathan. "I'd rather sit. If that's okay."

"Of course." He didn't push. Not yet. "Whatever makes you comfortable. Just sit back. Let your hands rest in your lap."

She obeyed, settling deeper into the cushion.

"Now, I want you to focus on your breathing. In through your nose... hold it... and out through your mouth. Good. Again. In... hold... and out."

Her chest rose and fell in slow rhythm. His eyes darted to smoke detector, ensuring the angles would work.

"I want you focus on the clock on the wall. Watch the seconds hand as it ticks. Each tick makes you relax a little more. Watch as you feel your anxiety begin to melt away." Her gaze stayed

focused on the clock, each blink of her eyes lasting longer than the last. "Keep breathing. In... hold... out. Feel your body getting heavier with each breath."

Her eyelids fluttered.

"Your arms are heavy. Your legs are heavy. Every muscle in your body is releasing, letting go of all that tension you've been carrying." His voice had dropped into a lower register, each word flowing into the next like water. "You're safe here, Mei. Nothing can hurt you. You can let go."

Her hands went slack in her lap.

"Your eyes are getting heavy now. So heavy. It's okay to let them close. Let them close when you're ready."

Her eyelids drooped, fought to stay open, then finally surrendered. Her breathing had deepened, her chest rising and falling in slow, even waves.

"Can you hear me, Mei?"

A small nod. Without take his eyes off of her, he hit a few buttons on his keyboard, bringing up the camera feeds while pausing the feed. Later he adjust the footage as needed in case there were any questions.

"Good. Very good." Nathan studied her face. Her jaw was slack, her lips parted slightly. "When I count to three, you're going to feel yourself sinking deeper. Deeper and safer. One... two... three."

Her body seemed to melt into the couch, and she tucked her feet under her small frame.

"Mei, I want you to raise your right hand."

Her hand lifted from her lap, hovering a few inches above her thigh.

"Very good. Now lower it."

It dropped back down, limp and obedient.

Nathan's pulse quickened and he glanced toward the UF diploma on the wall. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer honestly. You're safe here. Nothing you say will be judged. You'll feel more free when you answer, like a weight has been lifted. Do you understand?"

She nodded slowly, laying back on the sofa and resting her hands in her lap.

"When you're intimate with Ethan, do you keep your eyes open or closed?"

"Closed." Her voice was distant, dreamy.

"Why?"

"So I don't have to see him looking at me."

"What are you afraid he'll see?"

Nathan watched her tongue slip from between her parted lips, gently wetting them. "That there's something wrong with me. That my body is... That I'm tainted. That I'm a whore who doesn't deserve his love."

The word choice was so out of character for Mei that Nathan actually flinched.

"Why are you tainted?"

"Before Ethan there were others. Not a lot, but a couple. My mother caught us once and..."

Her body began to shake, her breathing growing more rapid.

"It's okay, Mei. We don't have to discuss that." He jotted a quick note on his pad, her trauma went deeper than he thought. "Take a deep breath. You're relaxed here, calm."

The rapid movement of her chest began to even out.

"How did your mother catch you?"

I was being too loud. Home for winter break. I thought she was at work. The anger in her eyes, the disappointment." Her hands began to clench and unclench.

"It's okay, Mei. Your mother isn't here now." He moved to the other side of his desk, perching on the corner. "You should feel comfortable with your body, Mei. It's not tainted it's perfect. You should get enjoyment letting others see it." He paused, closing her eyes and taking another breath to contain his excitement. "Would you like me to help you with that, Mei? Would you like to feel comfortable with your body again?"

"Yes."

"Good." Nathan's mouth had gone dry. "I want you to stand up for me."

She rose from the sofa in one fluid motion, her eyes still closed, her arms hanging loose at her sides. The lamplight caught the curve of her cheek, the delicate line of her collarbone where it disappeared beneath her t-shirt.

"How do you feel?"

"Relaxed."

"Good. You're doing so well." He almost reached out, she was close enough now he could touch her, but he needed to show restraint. "Part of your healing is learning that your body is nothing to be ashamed of. That being seen is flattering, exciting even. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I want you to take off your shirt."

Nathan watched her for any sign of resistance, a twitch of the hand, a furrow of her brow, but there was nothing. Her hands moved to the hem, then stopped. Hovering. Her fingers curled into the fabric but didn't lift. Her first sign of resistance.

"It's okay, Mei. This is part of your healing. Your body is beautiful. Nothing to hide."

Her fingers tightened into fists, lifting a fraction of an inch before pausing again. Then her grip loosened and she pulled the shirt over her head in one smooth motion. She stood before him in a plain white bra, her dark skin contrasting it in a way that made Nathan adjust himself. Her chest was larger than he'd first thought, behind those layers of clothes.

"How do you feel, Mei?"

"Good."

"Not anxious? Not ashamed?"

"No."

"Good. That's very good." His voice remained steady, but he could feel his heartbeat in his throat. "Now I want you to remove your jeans."

Her hands went to the button without hesitation. The zipper slid down. She pushed the denim over her hips and let it pool at her feet, stepping out of it without a second thought. White cotton underwear, to match the bra

She's responding perfectly. No resistance. Complete trust.

"You're doing beautifully, Mei. I want you to know that. Your body is nothing to be ashamed of. I can see why boys paid attention to you in college."

The faintest smile formed on her lips. Nathan made another note. *Vocal during sex in college before being caught by mother. Subconscious shows signs of enjoyment when complimented.*

"Now. Remove your bra."

Her hands reached behind her back. The clasp released with a soft click that made Nathan's mouth go dry.

The bra slid down her arms and fell to the floor. Her nipples were the color of dark caramel against her golden skin, so different from Grace's pale pink ones. Smaller, too. Tight little buds that hardened in the cool air, drawing into peaks that begged to be touched.

Grace's breasts had been larger, heavier, nipples the size of quarters that flushed red when aroused. He'd spent hours with those recordings, studying every response. Were Mei's as sensitive? Would she gasp the same way when they were touched?

He shook his head trying to focus on the task at hand. He studied her face again. Her face remained neutral. She was completely desensitized proving his theory that exposure therapy was the correct path for her.

Exposure therapy. Desensitization. This is exactly what she needs.

"And your underwear."

She hooked her thumbs into the waistband. They trembled there. Her whole body trembled, actually, despite the room was warm. Nathan glanced at the camera above her shoulder he'd have to edit all of this out. She was more strong-willed than he'd given her credit for. A slight miscalculation he wouldn't make again.

"Mei. You're doing beautifully. One more step and you'll be free. Completely free of all that shame."

Her thumbs pressed down but the fabric didn't move. Some final wall trying to hold.

"Your mother was wrong about you. Your body isn't shameful. It's beautiful, and you should want to show it off."

The shiver stopped. Her thumbs pushed down and the underwear slid over her hips. Down her thighs. She stepped out of them carefully, standing naked before him.

She kept herself trimmed but not bare, a neat triangle of dark hair that did little to hide the soft swell of her mound. It was almost quaint. Grace had been waxed smooth, most women her age were, and he'd grown accustomed to that clean vulnerability. But there was something about Mei's modesty that stirred him in a different way. She groomed herself just enough to feel put-together, but not for anyone else's benefit. Not for Ethan. Certainly not for a lover's gaze.

He could see the faint shadow between her thighs, the soft crease where her legs met her pelvis. If he told her to spread them, she would. Without hesitation. Without memory. He wondered if he would find her wet.

The thought sent a pulse of heat straight to his groin.

Not yet. Establish the foundation first. Build the conditioning.

But God, it was tempting. She was so perfect standing there. Grace had always carried tension in her body and there was always a certain sexual energy with her. It came from years of conditioning, from her time with The Father, from being sexualized at such an early age. Some part of Grace had always been ready. But Mei... fuck, Mei was perfect. She was just wild enough when she was younger for her body to remember the joys, but conditioned long enough for her mind to reject the idea. The thought of severing that made his mouth water as his cock strained against his pants.

"How do you feel, Mei?"

"Light." She giggled softly. "Like I'm floating."

"That's wonderful. You should feel proud of yourself. You've taken an enormous step today." He kept his voice warm, even as his pulse hammered in his ears. "This is how you should feel when others see you like this. It should be freeing. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. When you get home tonight. I want you to make love to Ethan. I want you to enjoy it, the way you enjoyed it before your mother caught you."

"Okay."

"Good, now get dressed and in a moment I'll start counting backward. Then you wake, you'll feel refreshed and calm. You'll remember that we talked about your anxiety, and that you felt safe here. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Remember this moment, standing here, feeling free in your body, feeling proud of it. This feeling will stay with you. You'll begin to feel more comfortable being seen. By me. By Ethan. By others. It won't happen all at once, but it will happen. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She was already back in her panties and slipping her bra over her chest. Nathan was almost disappointed to see her dressing, but he knew it needed to be gradual. This wasn't something he could force. It was gentle suggestion, enhanced by positive reinforcement. If he pushed too hard... he wouldn't. He couldn't. Not again.

Mei sat back down on the sofa fully clothed. Nathan did a quick check around the office, ensuring there wasn't anything out of place. When he was satisfied he walked back to his side of the desk and sat.

"I'm going to count from five to one. With each number, you'll feel yourself rising back to full awareness. When I reach one, you'll open your eyes, feeling rested and peaceful. Five... four... beginning to rise... three... two... almost there... one."

Mei's eyes fluttered open.

For a moment, she simply sat there, blinking in the low light.

"How do you feel?" Nathan asked as she looked around the room slightly confused.

Mei stood slowly, like she wasn't sure if her legs would work. "Good... I feel... good."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember talking, about Ethan about..." she looked at her feet. "Oh God."

"It's okay, Mei. This is a safe place."

"About my mother and getting caught."

"You made really good progress today, Mei. You did beautifully."

Mei nodded like she was unsure if she believed him. "You won't... Ethan won't find out about what we talked about, right?"

"Of course not. Everything we discuss here is under strict doctor patient confidentiality."

She released a breath she'd been holding. "Okay."

Nathan rose from his chair and offered her a smile. "Same time next week?"

Mei nodded slowly, still looking dazed. "Okay. Yes. Same time."

He walked her to the door and watched her cross the lawn toward her house, where Ethan waited on the porch. She moved differently than when she'd arrived less guarded, somehow. Or perhaps just confused.

Nathan closed the door and returned to his office. The cameras had captured everything. He settled into his chair and loosened his tie, finally allowing himself to acknowledge the erection that hadn't faded.

Progress, he told himself. She's already making such great progress..

He sat at his computer and rewatched the session.

Ethan kept his voice low, he could feel the goosebumps on Mei's back, she was nervous. She hadn't moved from the porch in nearly a minute, despite telling Ethan she was walking next door for her session.

"Just give him a chance," he said softly. "One session. If you still think it's a bad idea after today, I won't ask you to go again."

Mei chewed her bottom lip. "Promise?"

"Promise." He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "It means a lot to me that you're trying. I know it's hard."

She nodded, and finally stepped off the porch. Ethan watched her cross the lawn, her stride so small it took her at least twice as long to reach the front door. He hoped he wasn't coming across as pushy. He knew how hard it was for her to open up, but Dr. Coleman was the best in his field. He knew that if anyone could help Mei get through her issues it was him.

She glanced back at him one last time as she reached the door. He gave her a thumbs up and what he hoped was an encouraging smile. Then, the door opened. Nathan appeared and Mei disappeared inside.

Ethan stood on the porch for another moment, unsure what to do with himself. He'd taken the day off because Mei had been so nervous this morning. He woke to her pacing the kitchen, barely touching her breakfast, asking twice if he thought this was really a good idea. He didn't want her to feel like he was hovering, but the thought of leaving her alone felt wrong. She'd always been like that with new people, he rationalized. Once she got comfortable with Dr. Coleman it wouldn't be a big deal.

He went inside and grabbed his laptop from the kitchen counter. Settled onto the couch. The screen woke, his browser still open from that morning.

GRACE HART RELEASED: Alleged Stalking Victim or Victim of Malpractice?

He'd meant to close his browser earlier, before Mei could see. Now, with an hour to kill and his wife next door with the man at the center of the controversy, he found himself reading.

The article was a standard recap. It talked about Grace's history with the Holy Isle cult, her marriage, her treatment with Dr. Coleman, the eventual breakdown and accusations. He skimmed past the parts he already knew, past the speculation and the quotes from "experts" who'd never met either of them. Then, even though he knew better than to get sucked into the rabbit hole, he found himself clicking the link at the bottom of the page that promised exclusive interviews and never before told stories.

He regretted the action as soon as he made it. The redirect took him to Reddit.

r/TrueCrime - The Grace Hart Case: What Really Happened?

He knew better than to trust Reddit for anything, but curiosity and a lack of anything productive to do won out.

The thread was a mess of theories and armchair psychology, but buried in the comments was a link to an interview he hadn't seen before. A local Florida news segment from two years ago, back when Grace was still in treatment and everything seemed to be working.

When he clicked play, he was greeted by a man whom he assumed was Grace's husband. He looked older than Grace, maybe late forties with thinning hair and glasses. The interviewer asked about the therapy, about the changes he'd seen.

"It's been incredible, honestly. I first met Grace at church, six months after the horrific stuff that happened on that island. Despite her being pretty reserved, we hit it off instantly. It was love at first sight and we married less than a year later despite her inability to be intimate. She'd started

seeing Dr. Coleman during that time..." He shook his head, in disbelief. "The results were amazing. And now, she's like a whole different person. More confident. More... free. She initiates things now. She's adventurous in ways I never expected. Whatever he's doing, it's working."

Ethan paused the video, his heart beating a little faster. That was exactly what he wanted for Mei. Not the adventurous part necessarily, though he wouldn't complain, but the confidence. The freedom.

He scrolled further, scanning comments, clicking links. Most of it was garbage, conspiracy theories about Nathan actually being The Father, accusations that Grace had made everything up for attention, debates about whether hypnotherapy was even real. He ignored the noise, looking for more accounts from people who'd actually known them.

A BuzzFeed article caught his attention. *"Grace Hart's Inner Circle Speaks Out."*

The piece was mostly fluff, just old friends saying Grace had always been "intense," coworkers describing her as private. But near the bottom, a quote from someone identified only as "Grace's childhood best friend" made him pause.

"The therapy changed her, but not in a good way. She'd come back from sessions and couldn't remember anything. Like the whole hour was just... gone. A black void. She'd ask if she'd already gone to her appointment, what Dr. Coleman said about her. It scared me. I told her to stop going, but she said he was helping her. He had her complete brainwashed."

That was strange. He'd read Nathan's books, watched his TED talks. Hypnotherapy wasn't supposed to work like that. People remembered their sessions, even if the memories were fuzzy. Total amnesia was—

The front door opened and Ethan closed the laptop, not wanting Mei to see anything about the scandal. He stood as she walked in, anxious to see how it went.

"Hey." He crossed to her, hands finding her waist. "How'd it go?"

"Good." She leaned into him slightly, which was more than she usually did. "It was... good."

"Yeah? You feeling okay?"

"I think so." She pulled back to look at him, a small crease forming between her brows. "He made talking a little easier than I expected."

"Well that is what he gets paid for." Ethan smiled and pulled her close, his hands sliding down her back to the hem of her shirt.

"Why's the back of your shirt tucked in?" He tugged it free, fingers finding bare skin.

"Is it?" Mei pulled back and for a moment looked genuinely confused. "I must have done that when I went to sit. Didn't want it riding up."

"What kind of stuff did you guys talk about?" He felt her tense in his arms.

"Just... stuff. He asked a lot about you. How we met, when I knew I wanted to marry you." She paused. "He... he hypnotized me. Said it would be easier for us to talk."

Ethan waited, hoping she'd continue. When she didn't he asked. "What was that like? Did you..." he thought about the article he just read. "Do you remember it happening?"

"Yeah, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"I remember," she said with a little more force. "It was like I was floating. Like I was there, but just listening to someone else having a conversation."

"What kind of stuff did he ask?"

"Just..." She pulled away, arms crossing over her chest. "Just stuff."

"Okay, I won't push. As long as you're feeling good about it. Does that mean you want to keep seeing him?"

"I am." She stepped away looking Ethan in the eyes. "I think you were right. It may really help."

"Good." Ethan ignored the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Want to grab lunch? I'm starving."

The bedroom was quiet as Ethan sat in his pajama pants, scrolling through his phone as Mei finished brushing her teeth. After Mei got home from her appointment with Dr. Coleman, it progressed like any other. They went out for lunch where she talked about all the chores she needed to do around the house, despite it already looking immaculate. She hid behind her menu as Ethan order for them, and then, later in the evening they had a quiet dinner at home.

All-in-all it was a good day, a normal day. Then, the bathroom door opened and Mei stood in the doorway, her cheeks pinker than normal, wearing nothing but one of his oversized t-shirts that hung just past her thigh.

"Hey," she said softly, as she walked toward the bed.

"Um... hi." He must have looked ridiculous, he was sure his mouth was hanging open as he tried to catalogue what was going on. It wasn't just that Mei was nearly naked, a rarity in itself, it was that she seemed so confident as she made her way to his side of the bed.

"Sorry, I um... I didn't realize you were coming out like... like that. I'll kill the light." He set his phone on the nightstand and reached for the light.

"It's okay." She swung a leg over his hips, her hands resting on his chest. "Leave it on."

"Are you sure? I know you don't like—"

"Thanks you," she said, cutting him off. "For pushing me to go today. I know I was being difficult."

"You weren't. You were nervous."

She smiled and pressed her lips to his. "You're sweet. You always take such good care of me." Her fingers ran through the soft patch of hair on his chest. "I should take better care of you."

Ethan's hands slid under the hem of her shirt, grabbing her hips. Her skin was warm and as his fingers pressed into the soft flesh of her back she let out the slightest moan, before letting her hands slide around his neck, her lips parting as her tongue pressed against his.

As her body pressed further onto his and the kiss deepened Ethan's manhood continued to grow pressing into the warmth between Mei's thighs. He glanced at the light next to bed, waiting for

Mei to break the kiss and reach over to turn it off. But she never did. If anything, she seemed to press down on his hardness and he found himself wondering how far he could take this before she remembered the light.

His hands slid up her sides, slow enough that she could stop him if she wanted. When his thumbs brushed the bottom of her breasts she sucked in air and her hips rocked against him. His cock was fully hard now, he wasn't sure what had gotten into her, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Ethan pulled back just enough to look at her. Her eyes were half-lidded, her lips swollen from kissing, her cheeks flushed.

She chewed on her lip at sat up straight. Ethan expected her to lean over and turn off the light once and for all now that she wasn't so caught up in the moment. Instead, she grabbed the hem of her shirt and lifted it over her head.

She wasn't wearing a bra. Her breasts were bare, small and perfect, her dark nipples already tightening in the cool air. Her dark hair was spilled across her shoulders obstructing his view of her chest just enough to make it look even more erotic.

"Fuck, Mei. You're so beautiful."

She tucked her chin and turned her head bashfully. "You're making it weird, Ethan." she went to cover her chest with her hand but Ethan reached out, grabbing her wrist. When she turned her head to look at him, he pulled her back into a kiss. He felt her body start to relax, her hand falling back to Ethan's chest as she moaned into his mouth as her hips began to move.

Ethan moved with caution, it wasn't that he was unfamiliar with his wife's body, or even that they didn't have an active sex life, but she was never the aggressor. Whatever she and Nathan talked about today worked and he didn't want to spook her. His hands moved slowly to her breasts and she gasped against his mouth. Then, as his thumbs brushed her nipples she froze, her whole body going rigid.

For several awkward seconds they both sat there frozen in time. Then, Mei's shoulders dropped and she exhaled. Her mouth went to his neck kissing it gently. "I love you, Ethan."

He smiled, his thumbs circling her nipples as she gasped in his ear. She kissed his neck again, with more urgency than before as her fingers trailed down Ethan's body and wrapped around his shaft through his pajama bottoms.

This time it was Ethan that gasped, his whole body jerking.

Mei pulled back immediately, her eyes wide. "Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No." He laughed, a little breathless. "No, that was... you just caught me off guard."

"Oh." Her cheeks flushed darker. "Sorry. I just thought that—"

"Mei." He cupped her face, tilting it up until she met his eyes. "It was perfect. Just... unexpected."

Her face was bright red and she looked at Ethan's chest. She chewed on her lip then with a shaky hand slid her fingers into his pajama bottoms.

Her fingers wrapped around him and Ethan groaned again, his head falling back against the headboard. She stroked him slowly, like she was afraid of hurting him, then firmer as she heard

the soft moans coming from him. Her mouth returned to his neck, her kisses trailing up to his ear, and he felt her smile when his hips bucked into her hand.

"That feels incredible," he breathed.

She hummed against his throat, her thumb sliding across the tip of his cock. He was fully hard now, straining against her palm, and every stroke sent heat pooling low in his stomach.

His hands traveled along her naked body, abandoning her chest as he grabbed the swell of her ass. Her underwear was soft, and didn't cover her entire bottom. He throbbed in her in hand. Was she wearing cheeky cut panties? His touch shifted, moving toward the soft skin of her inner thigh. When his fingers brushed between her legs, she inhaled sharply but didn't pull away. She was wet. Wetter than he expected. The thin fabric of her underwear was already damp against his fingertips.

"Mei..." He slipped his fingers beneath the fabric and to his surprise she pressed her hips into his palm. "You're so wet."

Her stroking stopped, her hand resting idly on his cock as she rolled her hips to his touch.

"I know." She kissed along his jaw, her hand still working him. "I want to."

"Off," she murmured, tugging at his waistband. "Take these off."

He lifted his hips and she helped him push his pajama bottoms down, kicking them somewhere toward the foot of the bed. Then her hands went to her own underwear, hesitating for just a moment before sliding them down her thighs.

She was naked on top of him. Completely bare. The soft glow of the light all but forgotten as she positioned herself on top of him, one hand braced against his chest. He could feel her heat hovering just above his cock, close enough to make him ache. Then, with one swift motion, she sank down onto him, taking him fully as they both moaned.

She took him slowly, inch by inch, her eyes fluttering closed as her body adjusted. Ethan gripped her hips, watching her face. The slight furrow between her brows. The way her lips parted. The soft exhale when she'd taken all of him.

"Ahhh—" Her hand flew to her mouth, like she couldn't believe it came from her. Slowly, she lowered it, placing it back on Ethan's chest before she started to move.

Ethan wanted to keep his eyes open, to watch his wife in the pale light of the room as she slowly worked him. But every time she drove her hips down, he found his eyes fluttering closed, the sensation of her heat sucking him deeper too much for him to bear.

Her pace was slow at first, like she was still figuring out the logistics. Ethan could count on one hand how many times they'd had sex any way other than missionary, and he resisted the urge to thrust into her and take over.

Her hips rolled and they both groaned. She did it again, more confident this time, and a quiet moan slipped past her lips.

"You feel so good," he said. "And you look so beautiful."

She opened her eyes.

That was the mistake.

His gaze was traveling over her body. Looking at her breasts, her stomach, the place where they were joined. He wasn't leering, wasn't doing anything wrong. He was just... looking. The way a husband looks at his wife, but it was too much for her. Her smile faltered and her rhythm stuttered before stopping completely.

"Can we..." She didn't finish. Instead, she lifted herself off him and lay back against the pillows, her arms crossing over her chest.

Ethan's heart sank, but he tried his best to not sound disappointed. "Hey. It's okay."

"I'm sorry." She wasn't looking at him. "I thought I could, but—"

"Mei." He shifted onto his side, his hand finding her cheek, turning her face toward him. "You have nothing to apologize for. That was... do you have any idea how amazing that was?"

"I ruined it."

"You didn't ruin anything." He kissed her forehead, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. "We can stop if you want."

"No." Her fingers pressed against his chest. "I don't want to stop. I just... can you be on top?"

"Of course." He shifted between her legs. "Do you want me to get the light?"

Mei chewed on her lip glancing at the light then back at her husband. "No. I'm... I'm okay." She reached down, grasping him gently, and smiled as his eyes fluttered shut. She guided him back inside her.

Her hands ran over his back, pulling him closer as they sighed into each other's mouth. His pace quickened, his fingers digging into Mei's thigh as her soft moans grew louder. He sat up, on his knees, the sight of her naked body accepting him made him push harder, driving deeper inside her.

"Oh—" her hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes went wide with embarrassment. Ethan smiled, slowing his pace grounding his body against her clit in a way that made her lift her hips.

"You feel incredible," he breathed against her neck.

Her nails dug into his shoulders in response as the smell of sex filled the air. Her teeth scrapped against his neck, another muffled moan that she tried to suppress. He could feel her tightening around him, her thighs trembling.

"Mei—" His voice was strained. "I'm close. I can't—"

She didn't answer with words. Instead, she clenched around him and the last thread of his control snapped.

"Ohhhh, fffffuck." He buried himself deep, his hips jerking as he came. She held him through it, her hands in his hair, her lips pressing against his temple.

When the aftershocks faded, he realized she hadn't finished. "Let me—" he started, his hand sliding between them.

"No." She caught his wrist. "I'm good." She gave a lazy smile and kissed his lips. "It was perfect." She struggled to catch her breath. "Right now I just want to lay here and fall asleep with you."

He rolled off her carefully, settling onto his back. She curled against his side, her head on his chest, and pulled the sheet up, but only to her waist. Her breasts rose and fell with each breath, bare in the lamplight. She made no move to cover them.

Her eyes were already closing, her lips curved in a small smile. She looked peaceful. More relaxed than he'd seen her in a long time.

Ethan lay there, replaying the last twenty minutes as he watched her drift off to sleep.

Holy shit.

It wasn't the night he'd imagined when she climbed on top of him. She'd retreated, pulled back to safer ground when the exposure became too much. But she'd tried. And even now, she wasn't hiding from him the way she usually did.

One session. One hour with Dr. Coleman.

He didn't know how long he lay there. Long enough for her breathing to deepen into sleep. Long enough for the sweat to cool on his skin. Long enough to replay every moment, the victories and the retreat, over and over in his mind.

His mind raced as he turned off the lamp and tried to fall asleep.

The Decision

PATH ONE: GRATITUDE

"Whatever Nathan did, it's working. I need to thank him properly."

One session. Just one, and Mei had already shown more progress than he'd dared hope for. She'd initiated. She'd kept the lights on. She'd made sounds he'd never heard before. Suddenly, the video he wanted to make with her felt like a real possibility.

This was exactly what he'd wanted when he'd suggested therapy.

Tomorrow, he'd text Nathan. Invite him back to Murphy's. Buy him as many beers as the man could drink. Whatever he was doing with Mei. Ethan didn't need to know the details. He just needed it to continue.

His wife was finally becoming comfortable in her own skin.

PATH TWO: UNCERTAINTY

"Tonight was incredible. But something about it doesn't quite add up."

The sex had been amazing. Better than amazing. The kind of sex he'd fantasized about since their honeymoon. But the speed of the change nagged at him. One session. One hour. And Mei had gone from missionary in complete darkness to nearly riding him with the lights on.

He thought about her vagueness when he'd asked what they talked about. The way she'd tensed when he pushed for details. The tucked-in shirt she couldn't explain.

She'd come back from sessions and couldn't remember anything. A black void.

He pushed the thought away. Mei said she remembered. That wasn't the same as how the friend explained Grace.

But something felt off. Some piece that didn't quite fit.

He'd give it one more session. See if the progress continued. And if things still felt strange after that, he'd press Mei for details.

For now, he'd let himself enjoy what had happened.

PATH THREE: SUSPICION

"Tonight was everything I've ever wanted. So why can't I stop thinking about those articles?"

Ethan stared at the ceiling, his wife's bare chest rising and falling beside him.

The sex had been incredible. But lying here in the aftermath, all he could think about was Grace Hart's husband on that news clip.

She's like a whole different person.

Tonight, Mei had been like a different person. More confident, more eager, more free.

Wasn't that exactly what he'd wanted?

But the friend's words kept circling back: *The therapy changed her, but not in a good way.*

He looked at Mei sleeping peacefully beside him, more relaxed than he'd ever seen her. What had Nathan done in that office? What had they talked about that she couldn't, or wouldn't, share?

Tomorrow, he'd dig deeper. Find more articles, more interviews. Maybe track down the childhood friend who'd spoken to BuzzFeed.

Someone out there knew what Dr. Coleman's methods actually involved. And Ethan was going to find out.

PATH ONE: GRATITUDE - "Whatever Nathan did, it's working. I need to thank him properly."

63%

PATH TWO: UNCERTAINTY - "Tonight was incredible. But something about it doesn't quite add up." He'd give it one more session.

27%

PATH THREE: SUSPICION - "Tonight was everything I've ever wanted. So why can't I stop thinking about those articles?" He'd dig deeper.

10%

[Insider] The Therapist Ch. 03

Hey Friends! Who's ready for another crazy ride in the world of Dr. Nathan Coleman? We are still very early, but this was maybe my favorite chapter so far. It felt very easy to write, and you get a pretty good look inside the lives of Ethan and Mei.

Now that we are three chapters in, I may go ahead and publish to the supporter tier later this month to try and drum up a little more excitement for it. Hope you're all enjoying the choices and story as much as I am. Can't wait to hear what everyone has to say.

"Uuuuhhhh," Ethan's voice cracked as he braced himself about her. His arms were trembling, and sweat was rolling down his forehead as his release rolled through him. Mei's body lifted from the bed, her legs wrapped around his thighs. Her eyes were closed, her face a mask of pleasure as she held him there. She hadn't made much noise this time, just the occasional sharp breath when he found the right angle, but her body was still responsive. Her fingers were still gripping his shoulders as she let out a shaky breath and lowered back onto the bed, the faintest of smiles on her lips.

"Good morning." He pressed his forehead to hers, giving her one last kiss. "Twice in less than twenty-four hours." He grinned. "Did my birthday come early?"

She barked out a laugh, her cheeks tinting as she slapped his arm. "Don't get used to it. Besides, you're the one that woke me up." She kissed his cheek as he rolled onto his back. "I was just going with the flow."

The sheets had ended up bunched at the foot of the bed at some point, and Mei lay beside him uncovered. She didn't reach for them. She just lay there, basking in the afterglow of what just happened with her arm covering her eyes trying to catch her breath.

"I should shower." She stretched, arching her back slightly before swinging her legs off the bed. "I still need to find something to wear for spirit day. It's dress like a Hawaiian day."

"Good thing I just gave you a lay."

Mei's body went stiff as she stood from the bed. Ethan groaned fearing he'd said too much. He expected her to reach for her Kimono next to bed. Her gaze caught it, then she looked down at her body like she was weighing her options.

Ethan admired the sway of her hips, her toned legs and perfect bubble butt. He let out a sigh when she disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

He climbed out of bed and grabbed a pair of boxers from his dresser, looking over the mess they'd made in the bedroom. It almost felt too good to be true, like he was in a dream.

"I'm going to run into town and grab a coffee before work," he called after her. "You want me to bring one back?"

"No thanks. I'm okay."

He stood there for a minute staring at the bed. He never wanted to wake up.

Wheelhouse Coffee was only a 10 minute drive into town. Like most of the shops on Front Street, it was an older building and had seen better days. But it had been part of the community for fifty years and was still owned by the original family. Friday mornings were usually busy. It was the usual crowd of regulars mixed with those who liked to treat themselves before the weekend.

"Mornin, Ethan," Dana, the barista, yelled from behind the counter. She was already reaching for a cup. She was in her twenties, with dark hair and a nose ring. The daughter of the original owners. She worked here most days. "Large dark roast, splash of oat?"

"You know me too well."

"What's got you so bright-eyed this morning?" She raised an eyebrow as the espresso machine hissed behind her. "There's a little more pep in your step."

Ethan chuckled. For a moment he considered her question, but then how could he respond? That his wife's therapist had somehow convinced her to enjoy sex after just one session? That another man had found a way to excite her more about sex than he ever could? A cold chill washed over him. It didn't just sound ridiculous, it sounded creepy, in a way he couldn't describe.

"Just a good morning," he said, and left it at that.

Dana gave him a look like she'd noticed whatever just past through him, but she didn't press it. Instead, she went back to work on the espresso and Ethan pulled out his phone and found his sister's contact.

You won't believe who moved in next door. We should catch up soon. Dinner this weekend?

He switched threads and opened Nathan's contact. He wanted to say something, to acknowledge what had happened, but knew he had a tendency to say too much. The image of Mei walking across the bedroom flashed through his mind, and his chest swelled.

He started typing, deleted it. Started again.

Hey Nathan. I guess the session yesterday was successful? I'm already seeing a difference in Mei. Last night was incredible. This morning too. I don't know how to thank you. Murphy's this weekend? I owe you a beer. Or ten.

His skin pimply with goosebumps before he pressed send. His mind drifted back to articles he'd dug up yesterday, to Mei's shirt being tucked in. Then to the good part. Mei coming to bed in just his oversized t-shirt. The way she initiated.

He hit send.

"Ethan." Dana slid his coffee across the counter. "Large dark roast. You want a pastry? Just pulled the almond croissants."

"I'm good, thanks." He pocketed his phone and grabbed the cup. The coffee was hot enough to burn, and he blew across the surface as he headed for the door.

His phone buzzed as he crossed the street, the flashing yellow caution light blowing gently in the wind.

Nathan: *I'm glad to hear it, Ethan. She put in a lot of hard work yesterday. A beer sounds great. Murphy's tomorrow night, say 7?*

Ethan sent a thumbs up and leaned against the tailgate of his F-150. The paint had faded from blue to something closer to gray years ago, and the bed was scratched from hauling mulch and lumber, but it ran great. He took a long drink of his coffee and watched Front Street come to life. A woman pushed a stroller past the bookstore. An older man in a flannel unlocked the door to the hardware store across the street.

His phone buzzed again.

Sierra: *Can't this weekend. Dealing with James stuff. Rain check?*

He scrunched his face. *James stuff.* That was Sierra-speak for things had gotten bad again. Ethan and his sister were always close growing up, so she shared more with him than maybe a sister should. She told him about how their sex life had fizzled out a couple of years ago. That was when she'd first found Nathan's booked. It helped, or so she said. But every few months they would seem to get in this funk where she was convinced he was cheating, he would call her crazy, and she would reach out to Ethan to vent about it, before repeating the entire process over again. It was a vicious cycle, and one he didn't feel like dealing with at the moment.

He pocketed his phone. He was on cloud nine right now, and he didn't want anyone bringing him down. He'd call her next week. When things settled.

He pushed off the tailgate and started down the sidewalk. Jade Garden was just a couple of blocks down the road. The chill in the air before rain always made the walk enjoyable. The salt from the harbor carried through the air, mixing with the aroma from Wheelhouse making the stroll all the more pleasant and he nodded at a few friendly faces as he passed.

The boba shop was small, just a counter and four stools, run by a woman who barely spoke any English. The menu was handwritten on a chalkboard, and a string of paper lanterns hung above the register.

"Mango tea, light ice, extra boba?" Ethan mumbled as he entered the shop.

The woman smiled warmly and nodded, taking his credit card.

He watched her work as he waited, his mind drifting to Mei trying to explain the water cycle to a bunch of second-graders in Hawaiian shirts. She loved her job and would always come home raving about one of her students. But he knew how much it took out of her, and she'd appreciate the boba to get her through the day.

Tea in hand, he headed back up Front Street toward the truck. The walk was short, five minutes at most, and by the time he climbed into the cab, he'd already decided how tomorrow night would go. He'd buy Nathan a beer, tell him about Mei's progress. He'd ask about the hypnosis, just for his own peace of mind. Then thank Nathan one last time for ensuring his marriage didn't end up like Sierra's.

The mango tea was sweating on the kitchen counter when Mei came out from the bedroom, her hair still damp from the shower. She stopped in the doorway, still wrapped in just a towel and stared at it. Ethan must have come home while she was in the shower, set it down, and left again without a word.

She picked it up and shook her head, smiling despite herself. The tapioca pearls shifted at the bottom as she took a sip. She closed her eyes, savoring the taste. Perfect. Light ice, extra boba. It was little things like this that made Ethan so perfect.

She carried it upstairs to get dressed.

Spirit day. She was pretty sure she had a Hawaiian shirt somewhere in her dresser. In just a few hours she'd have Twenty-three second-graders running around more interested in their plastic leis than listening to her explain the water cycle. She was going to need every ounce of that tea.

She slipped on a pair of green, cotton panties and baggy jeans. That was the easy part. Next, she started rummaging through her other drawers, pushing aside her usual cardigans and blouses, looking for something that could pass as Hawaiian. Her hand brushed against something in the back. A fabric that was softer than the usual cotton or wool she expected. She pulled it out.

A white bralette. Delicate lace trim along the edges. The fabric was light enough it was nearly see through. She turned it over in her hands, the lace soft between her fingers.

Her breath caught as she stared at it. She'd forgotten she still had this.

No. That wasn't true. She hadn't forgotten. She'd buried it. Shoved it in the back of a drawer after her mother... She pushed the thought away. When she moved in with Ethan she kept it. Not because she planned on ever wearing it again, but because throwing it away would have meant her mother had won.

Her thumb traced the edge of the fabric as she remembered the night she bought it. Something shifted in her chest and she unconsciously rubbed her thighs together. The memory arrived all at once. The weight of it against her skin, the way her boyfriend stared at her when she came out of the bathroom with it on.

Her hands fidgeted and her breathing grew shallow. As if in a trance, her fingertips reached up, tracing her collarbone, just above where the fabric sat. She chewed on her lip, turning it over in her hands again as if trying to decide what to do with it. She had to leave soon. She still hadn't found a shirt to wear and she needed to leave in forty minutes. Ethan had never gotten to see her in anything like that before. It wasn't fair. He was so good to her. He'd brought her a boba today without being asked. But this was stupid. She was already running late. She needed to—

She dropped the towel and slipped it over her head.

Somehow, it still fit. She smiled and turned to face the mirror on the back of her dresser.

The white lace was tight against her skin, snug around her ribcage, the thin straps pulling it taut across her chest. She could see the outline of her nipples through the fabric, dark against the thin weave, already hardening in the cool air of the bedroom. The bralette left her midriff bare, a strip of golden skin between the lace and the waistband of her jeans, which sat just below her navel. Her collarbones, the swell of her chest, it was all on display.

The rush of excitement from when she was younger washed over her. She felt powerful, sexy. In a way she hadn't felt in years, maybe ever. She turned slightly, examining her profile. The way the lace followed the shape of her. She lifted one hand and ran a finger along the edge where lace met skin, following the line of it across her chest. The touch sent a small shiver down her side.

Her mind drifted to last night. The way Ethan's eyes lit up when she walked out of the bathroom. His words of encouragement.

She grabbed her phone off the dresser. He would lose his mind. She'd tell him she was thinking about him, send the picture then rush off to work. He'd probably turn the truck around, race home and lock her in the bedroom.

She laughed to herself as she framed the shot in the mirror, making sure to capture everything from her collarbones to just below her waist. The lace. The skin. The way it all looked in the pale Friday morning light. The shutter sound was sharp in the quiet bedroom. Mei looked down at the screen.

The woman in the photo stared back at her. Dark hair slightly damp, falling over bare shoulders. White lace. Exposed skin.

Something shifted. Not a thought, exactly. More like a change in the air pressure of the room, a subtle wrongness that seemed to wash over her. She looked at the photo again. At the woman's smile. At the way her chest was offered up to the camera like—

"Jiàn huò."

The word arrived in Mandarin first, the way her mother's voice always sounded when she was truly angry. Mei's brain supplied the translation half a second later.

"You look like a cheap whore."

Her confidence cracked, the air left her lungs.

What was I thinking?

Cold water dumped over her head. Her hands were shaking. She jabbed at the screen, deleting the photo. Her finger missed the button twice before it finally disappeared and the phone clattered onto the cluttered dresser.

Did it send?

Panic seized her chest. She fumbled picking up the phone and checked her messages. Checked her photo album. Checked her recently deleted. Nothing sent. The photo was gone.

The relief almost buckled her knees, but the fear stayed. The fear that someone might have seen her like that, even Ethan. It was obscene. No self respecting woman would dress like that, let alone send a photo of it. She wrapped her arms tight around her chest, her shoulders curled inward. It was the same feeling she had six years ago, when her mother came home and rushed into her bedroom because she heard noises. Mei began to shake, remembering the cold look in her mother's eyes. The words she said and Mei rushed to put on clothes, her boyfriend terrified beneath the sheet.

The shame flooded back, filling all the space the confidence had occupied seconds ago. It was familiar, almost comfortable in its awfulness. She knew how to exist inside this feeling. She'd been doing it for years.

Why did I think this was a good idea?

She couldn't track it. The decision to put the bralette on, to take the photo, it didn't feel like something she would do. In the moment, it had felt so natural, so easy. And now it felt like something she'd done in a dream. Something that had happened to someone else in a room she didn't quite remember entering.

She couldn't look at the mirror. She turned away from it, fast, and grabbed the first shirt she saw on the hanger, an old flannel shirt, and yanked it over her head. She would just use one of the plastic leis she had for the kids. Next, she ripped the bralette off, not looking at it as she shoved it back into the drawer. Same spot. Deep in the back, under everything else.

On her way out, she grabbed the boba tea from the dresser. The condensation had soaked a ring into the wood. She wiped it with her sleeve.

She didn't look at the mirror again.

The rumble of Ethan's truck pulled Nathan from his notes. He crossed to the window and parted the plantation shutters just enough to watch the F-150 back out of the driveway next door. The truck rumbled past, and Nathan tracked it as it made its way down the short road. Then it turned onto Harborview Lane and disappeared.

Nathan's gaze shifted to the house. Mei was in there alone, probably still wrapped in the blankets after a night of lovemaking. Or, maybe she was already in the shower, running through all the things she and Ethan did last night.

His mouth went dry as he loosened the collar of his shirt. He was fairly certain she was still feeling the effects of his conditioning. How would she respond if he walked over and asked to borrow a wrench or some flour? He closed his eyes, imagining her answering the door still wrapped in a sheet. She would step aside, let him in, completely comfortable with the intrusion.

He held the image for a moment longer and felt his jeans grow tight. No, he needed to focus. He had work to do. There would be time for all of that later. He adjusted himself, then turned back to his desk.

The monitor displayed a frozen frame from yesterday's session. Mei on the couch, eyes closed, hands resting in her lap. Timestamp: 19:23:47. He'd been reviewing the footage since six this morning, taking notes in his legal pad, cataloging each response and compliance marker. He sipped his coffee, the third so far this morning. He always found it easiest to review footage first thing in the morning while his mind was sharp, before too many distractions festered in his mind. He stole one more glance out the window then pressed play.

The footage advanced frame by frame. Her breathing deepened. Her shoulders dropped. The tension in her jaw released as she sank into the trance. Textbook induction. He made a note: *Subject responsive to standard relaxation protocol. No resistance during initial phase.*

He scrubbed forward to the eighteen-minute mark. This was where it got interesting. On screen, his recorded voice gave the instruction. *"I want you to take off your shirt."*

Her hands moved to the hem. Then stopped. Hovering. He remembered noticing it during the session, that brief hesitation before she complied. At the time, he'd filed it away as minor resistance, nothing unusual.

Now, watching the footage, he saw something else.

He switched to the bookshelf camera feed. The angle was tighter here, focused on her face. He scrubbed back ten seconds and let it play.

"I want you to take off your shirt."

Her fingers curled into the fabric. Her lips parted slightly. And there, beneath her closed lids, her eyes were moving. Rapid, darting movements. REM activity. Her subconscious was processing something, working through the suggestion, pushing back against it even as her hands obeyed.

He paused the frame and leaned closer to the screen. His fingers ran through the scruff on his face, still getting used to the coarse texture. He'd missed this yesterday. The resistance had been invisible to the naked eye, buried beneath her apparent compliance. But the footage didn't lie. Some part of Mei had fought him. His tongue slid past his lips, moistening them slightly. "Interesting."

He scrubbed forward to the underwear. Same pattern, but stronger. Her thumbs hooked into the waistband and froze there for two, three seconds. Her whole body trembled. On the bookshelf feed, her eyes moved rapidly beneath the lids, and her brow furrowed just slightly. A micro expression of distress that vanished the moment she complied.

He made another note: *Subject shows stronger will than anticipated. Resistance manifests subconsciously during key compliance moments. Compare to GH at equivalent stage.*

Grace had been easier. Even in her first session he could tell she was eager to please, almost desperate for his approval. By Session 3, she'd started dressing differently. She'd leave one button undone on her blouse, hold eye contact longer. She even began playing with the pendant on her necklace, drawing his attention to her chest without seeming to realize she was doing it. The conditioning had taken hold fast because she'd had nothing to fight it with. The island had broken her before Nathan ever met her.

Mei was different, a greater challenge. While she had similar scars as Grace she didn't have the trauma. Her issues with her mother were long standing, they would need to be dismantled brick by brick.

The thought brought a smile to his face. A stronger foundation meant a more impressive transformation. When Mei finally let go completely, it would be because he'd earned it. Grace was merely his playground, a stepping stone to understand his techniques and missteps. Mei would be his masterpiece.

They had three more sessions together before Ethan's birthday. Session 3 was a turning point for Grace, for Mei it would be a spark that would grow into an inferno.

He saved his notes and began the editing process. The official recording needed to be clean, just in case anyone asked. He trimmed the footage, adjusted timestamps, removed any frames that might raise questions. The version that remained showed nothing but a standard therapeutic session. A woman discussing her anxiety. A doctor listening with professional concern. The angle was too high to show Mei's body, and the audio that was left was nothing extraordinary.

When he was satisfied, he copied the unedited files to an external drive. His cock swelled as he grabbed the black Sharpie from his desk. *MM-01*.

He crossed to the diploma wall and swung the University of Florida frame aside. The safe chirped as he entered the code, and the lock released with a soft click. Seven drives sat inside, arranged in neat rows. He slid MM-01 into the empty slot at the end, then let his hand drift back across the others. His fingers brushed the spine of GH-03 and lingered there.

Grace at her best. Grace before she'd ruined everything.

He pulled his hand back and closed the safe. Straightened the diploma until it hung level.

His phone buzzed on the desk. He crossed back and checked the screen.

Ethan had messaged him while he was reviewing the footage. A smile curved on his lips.

I'm already seeing a difference in Mei. Last night was incredible. This morning too.

He typed a quick reply confirming tomorrow night at Murphy's, then set the phone aside. Ethan was the key to all of this. He'd tell Nathan everything he needed to know, be his eyes when Mei is at her most comfortable. That's how he'll really know when his methods were starting to take hold.

He shut down the computer and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair.

Eight drives in the safe now. Room for more.

The laptop screen was the only light in the apartment. Grace hadn't noticed the sun go down. She'd been at the kitchen table since noon, and now the windows showed nothing but black glass and her own reflection. Her brown eyes looked hollowed, with large bags under them, her dark hair suggesting it was time for a shower.

She looked away. She knew she looked a mess, but that wasn't important. She was tired of every man in her life taking what they wanted from her. Using her for their own sick pleasure then casting her out into the cold. The legs of the chair scratched the floor as she stood, pacing the room.

The apartment was small. One bedroom, a kitchenette, a bathroom with a shower stall barely wide enough to turn around in. A downgrade from the house she'd shared with Thomas, but he was gone now, had served her the papers while she was still in St. Augustine's Psychiatric Facility. She didn't blame him. She'd shown up at another man's house naked. She'd sent photos, written letters she couldn't remember writing. What husband could survive that?

On the counter, three prescription bottles stood in a neat row. She took them every morning. Lexapro, Seroquel, Trazodone. The cocktail St. Augustine's had sent her home with, the chemical leash that was supposed to keep her stable. She was stable. She was taking her meds, filling out job applications, reading the self-help book her discharge counselor had recommended. She was doing everything right.

The dishes in the sink said otherwise. The unopened mail piling on the coffee table. The fine layer of dust on the television she hadn't turned on in two weeks.

None of that stuff was important right now. What was important was finding him.

The table around her laptop was covered in paper. Printouts of therapist licensing databases, maps of Washington and Oregon with small towns circled in red pen, screenshots of Nathan's old practice website that she'd pulled from the Internet Archive before it disappeared completely. News articles about herself, highlighted and annotated in the margins. All of them calling her a stalker. Nathan had called her an Obsessive patient, very unstable. But that wasn't always true. Not until he started putting her under. Planting seeds in her mind. Of course, she couldn't tell anyone that she would sound crazy, and she wasn't crazy.

She'd learned to be careful. St. Augustine's had taught her that much. Looking crazy got you locked up, even when you were right. So she kept her research organized, her notes legible, her process methodical. If anyone asked, she was writing a book. Processing her trauma. Moving on.

But there was no one left to ask.

She pulled up another licensing database and typed in his name. Florida had been a dead end. He'd let his practice there lapse, forwarding address unknown. The ethics review had found "insufficient evidence of misconduct." He still had his license. He could practice anywhere. But he wouldn't go just anywhere. He would go somewhere with rain.

She remembered the sessions at his house. The ones that would always end up in his bedroom. She couldn't remember how, or even when it started, just the intensity of it. How much she'd wanted to please him. Her nails dug into her forearm as she recalled those nights.

He would put on rain sounds to fall asleep. White noise through the bedroom speakers, the soft static of a storm that wasn't there. He'd told her once, half-asleep, that if he ever retired he'd move somewhere where it rained all the time. Somewhere quiet.

He wouldn't stay in Florida not with all the press, and Hawaii felt too out of place for him. She'd narrowed it down to three states. Washington, Oregon, Northern California. Hundreds of towns. Thousands of therapists. And she had no proof he was even practicing, no proof he'd gone anywhere near the coast.

The warm sensation of blood on her fingers brought her back to the apartment. She jerked her nails away from her forearm, then let out a frustrated groan as she slammed the laptop shut and moved toward the kitchen for a paper towel.

She pulled the last one from the roll and pressed it against her arm, then filled a glass of water at the sink. Once she was satisfied the bleeding had stopped, she moved to the trash can to throw the towel away, but paused when she saw it was overflowing. She couldn't remember how long it had been like that. She turned toward the cabinet under the sink to grab a fresh bag, but her eyes went wide.

A journal was wedged behind a box of trash bags. She'd shoved it there when she moved in, not wanting to look at it, not ready to throw it away. One of the ones from during treatment. Her therapist in St. Augustine, not Nathan, had told her to document everything. Write down what you remember. Write down what you don't.

She pulled it out. The cover was soft, worn at the edges. She opened it to a random page.

Her own handwriting. A date from two years ago.

Session 5. I felt butterflies as soon as I walked into his office today. His eyes lit up the second he saw me and his smile immediately made me feel safe. Not since The Father has anyone understood me like this. Thomas tries, but he doesn't get it. I used to feel so much joy when I went home to him, but now I can only think about when I get to see Nathan again. He makes me want to be free. To open myself in ways I thought were gone forever. I wore a skirt to our meeting today and I swear every time I saw his eyes go to my legs I felt a heat I'd never felt with Thomas. Did I marry the wrong man?

Grace's stomach turned. She remembered writing this. She remembered believing it, but she couldn't remember why or how it started.

The night that everything fell apart, the one that the media played on a loop. She couldn't even remember driving there. Only that she was standing on his doorstep, naked, certain he wanted her, convinced this was what they both needed.

He put this in me. Her nails found her arm again and she pulled them away. He made me feel this way. He made me think I wanted him. And then he turned it against me.

The obsession she'd felt, the desperate, consuming need to be near him, it hadn't been love. It hadn't been attraction. It had been programming. Code he'd written into her brain while she sat in his office trusting him. And she was still running it. Every time she thought about him, every time she pulled up another database, every time she caught herself reaching for the phone to call a number that had been disconnected for a year. She knew that was him. Still inside her. Still pulling the strings.

The difference now was that she could see it. She couldn't cut the wires, but she could follow them back to the source. She could get him to admit what he'd done. To tell her how to make it stop, to—

She slammed the journal shut, her hands shaking.

She was going to find him. Not because she loved him. The media would say it was because she was obsessed, in love. Maybe she was, once. But now she knew those feelings had been manufactured. Dr. Nathan Coleman was trying to play God, but he wouldn't get away with it.

The gaps in her memory, the things she couldn't explain. He had those answers, and she needed to know them. He would tell her how to make it stop, how to cut out the part of her brain that still reached for him in the dark.

She would make him tell her.

"I'm not crazy." Her voice was hoarse in the empty apartment. She said it again, louder. "I'm not crazy."

Nathan was already seated at the bar when Ethan's truck pulled into the lot. He watched through the window as Ethan climbed out, noted the spring in his step, the way his shoulders sat looser than they had a week ago. A man who'd gotten what he wanted. He walked with confidence, the same confident stride Nathan had seen hundreds of times before.

The bartender, the same one from before with tattoos climbing both arms like ivy, had already been by once to ask Nathan if he wanted another whiskey. Nathan just shook his head, pulling the last drop from the glass and sliding it back to him. He'd let Ethan order him an IPA when he got inside.

"Nathan. Thanks for coming out." Ethan was already grinning when he walked up to the bar, the words threatening to tumble out without prompting.

"Wouldn't miss it." Nathan shook his hand, gestured to the empty stool beside him. "What are we drinking? I'm still not sure what any of these flavors are."

Ethan laughed and flagged down the bartender, happy to take charge with his new friend. "Two Hazy Wonder IPAs."

The bartender nodded and turned to pull the beers. Ethan drummed his fingers on the bar, grinning like a kid with a secret he couldn't keep.

"So." He was already leaning in. Classic disinhibition. "I don't know what you did, but it worked."

Nathan raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? I'm glad to hear that. What happened? Did she open up a little more?" He knew what would come next, but it was important that Ethan felt like he was the one in control of the situation.

"Thursday night. After the session." Ethan shook his head, still grinning. "She came to bed in just my t-shirt, which honestly would have been more than enough."

The tattooed bartender brought them their drinks and for a minute looked like he wanted to stay and listen. When he realized they had stopped talking because of him he smiled and headed toward the other side of the bar.

"But then, she climbed on top of me. Initiated the entire thing. She even kept the lights on." He laughed, disbelieving. "I mean, sometimes she would... I don't want it to sound like—" He caught himself and glanced around the bar, then lowered his voice further. "I'm just saying, it's a bit out of character for her to get like that." He took a long drink from his beer. "And the sounds she was making. I mean, she was actually into it. Not in her head at all."

Nathan nodded, trying to feign wanting to slow him down. "Sounds like it was quite the night. Any regrets in the morning?"

"That was even better." His voice carried again and he lowered his head as if ducking from the police. "Friday morning when we woke up she—" He trailed off, the grin widening. "Let's just say I was almost late for work."

Internally, Nathan was cataloging every word. *Initiated. Lights on. Vocalizing. Morning sex unprompted.* The suggestions had taken hold faster than expected. Mei's response rate was exceeding his early projections.

"That's wonderful to hear. She's doing the work. You should be proud of her."

Ethan's grin faltered slightly. "Yeah. It was amazing. But then..." He picked up another pull of beer, slower this time. "When she got home from work Friday, it was like she was someone else. She looked out of it. I chalked it up to work, you know these things happen, especially when dealing with kids all day." He grimaced as he recalled the events. "But then we went to bed and it was like she was racing to turn out the lights. When I kissed her goodnight, it was like her entire body tensed up." He spun the cold bottle around in his hand. "Is that normal? For her to be so hot then cold?"

Fascinating, Nathan thought to himself. She seemed to take to the condition just as quickly as Grace, but then it decayed at a much more rapid rate. He'd need to adjust, to find the missing thread.

"That's not unusual," Nathan said, shrugging. "First sessions often create a kind of... overcorrection. Patients feel liberated, they push themselves further than they're ready for, and then the anxiety catches up. She probably felt vulnerable about how open she'd been with you."

Ethan nodded slowly. "That makes sense. I just—" He looked around the near empty bar. "I don't want to lose the progress, ya know?"

"You won't. These things take time. The fact that she responded so strongly this early is a good sign."

They sat in silence for a moment while Ethan considering what he was being told. He set his bottle down and rotated it slowly, watching condensation bead on the glass. Nathan recognized the tell, he had more questions but wasn't sure how to ask them.

"Can I ask you something?" Ethan finally said. "About the hypnosis."

"That depends. I can't answer any questions that would jeopardize confidentiality." He balled his free hand into a fist under the counter. This was dangerous territory. "Honestly, even just talking to you like this could be seen as an impropriety."

"I know I just... how does it work? Is she in any danger? Like long term stuff?"

Nathan kept his face neutral. He needed to shut this down, but his curiosity got the better of him. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. She said she remembered being under, and she also said mostly. But then there's..." Nathan almost felt sorry for him. The man couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it. "I read some stuff online. About how hypnotherapy is supposed to work. And people were saying their loved ones started having gaps."

He was doing research, that wasn't good. There were so many false narratives about what Nathan did. Fake news that didn't understand the science and spoke in absolutes.

"Ethan, I'm going to be direct with you." He turned to face him fully. "Mei is completely safe with me. But she revealed some heavy stuff. Now, my guess is, she told you she couldn't remember because she doesn't want to share it with you."

Ethan's eyes went wide. He hadn't considered that Mei would be hiding something. Nathan pressed on. "I need you to trust the process. What happens in session is between Mei and me. That has to be absolute."

"I wasn't trying to—"

"I know. You're her husband. You love her. It's natural to be curious." Nathan held his gaze. "But if Mei knew you were asking me about her sessions, it would compromise everything. your marriage included." He let the words land. He didn't want it to sound like a threat, but he needed to put enough fear in Ethan that he would stop digging.

He gave a reassuring smile, then continued. "She needs to know that space is hers. Not a performance for you, not a report she has to give. Just her, working through her own barriers."

Ethan's shoulders dropped. "You're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"There's nothing to apologize for. Just trust me. You asked me to help for a reason." Nathan clapped him on the shoulder. "She's doing beautifully. I mean that."

Ethan nodded, took another drink. The tension in his jaw loosened. Nathan watched him reset, watched the guilt settle into acceptance.

Too easy.

They talked for another twenty minutes. Nathan asked about work, about Harmony Falls, about the hiking trails he'd read about. He let Ethan ramble, nodding at the right moments, steering the conversation like water finding its level.

Eventually, Ethan circled back. "So my birthday's in three weeks." He said it casually, but Nathan caught the undercurrent. "You think she'll be ready? For, you know..."

"The sex tape?" Nathan was smiling. He knew it would get a rise out of Ethan.

"When you say it like that it sounds—"

"It sounds like a husband who wants to feel close to his wife." Nathan shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with that. But three weeks..." He shook his head slowly. "I'm not going to lie, it's a tight window. But if we can keep Mei focused on the positive changes I think we have a chance."

He watched the mix of emotions cross Ethan's face. He didn't need to give any further guidance. Ethan was smart enough to understand what that meant. Most importantly, he hoped Ethan would realize it meant stop looking for reasons for it to fail.

They finished their beers. Nathan signaled for the check, but Ethan waved him off.

"I got this. Least I can do."

Nathan didn't argue. He pulled on his jacket while Ethan settled the tab, then they walked out together into the cool evening air. The parking lot was half-empty, a few trucks scattered under the yellow lights.

"Hey," Ethan said, stopping beside his truck. "Can I ask you something else? Totally unrelated."

"Sure."

Ethan hesitated. pulled out his phone and read a message, then pocketed it again.

"My sister. Sierra. She's up in Bellingham." He avoided Nathan's gaze. "She's the one I was telling you about before. With all your books."

"I remember."

"Right. Anyway, her marriage is kind of all over the place. Has been for a while. I was wondering if you would, you know, see about taking her on as a client. I don't know if you do remote sessions, or if she could drive down sometime. But I figured I'd ask."

Nathan considered this. Another patient. Another woman with a struggling marriage, another husband oblivious to the depth of the problem. The symmetry was almost elegant.

"I'd need to speak with her first," he said carefully. "See if she's a good fit. But I'm open to it. If she can come to the office. I don't do remote work. I don't trust the internet."

"Or even..." Ethan kicked a rock into the parking lot. "What about me?"

"What about you, Ethan?"

"I just... You're already working with my wife and obviously my marriage has some things we are working on. Would it be helpful if you started seeing me as well?"

"You want me to take you on as a patient?" Nathan didn't shock easily, but this surprised him.

"Totally separate from Mei of course. I just, well you know, maybe it would help with her progress. See that you can be trusted, and I have my own baggage I'm dealing with."

"Tell you what." Nathan extended his hand. "Let me think about it. I don't have the capacity to take on both you and your sister yet." Ethan nodded. "I'm not saying no, just need some time to consider which case would make the most sense for me. Which one would help you the most?"

"Of course," Ethan said, quickly. "I understand either way. I'm just happy you're working with Mei. Truly."

They said their goodbyes and Nathan started his Mercedes, watching Ethan climb into the cab of his truck. Both options created very unique possibilities for Nathan and for his treatment plan. But which one made the most sense?

CHAPTER 3 - CHOICE POINT

The Decision

PATH ONE: Sierra

"Ethan's sister could act as a counterweight to Mei."

Taking on Ethan's sister as a client presented a lot of unique possibilities. He could try different methods with her, weigh those results against Mei's and ultimately prove his revolutionary treatment at a more rapid pace.

PATH TWO: Ethan

"Ethan said he had his own issues to work through. That could be useful in guiding Mei while at the same time keeping Ethan at bay."

He didn't work with many male patients. Most of Nathan's work had always been with the female in the relationship, he preferred it that way. Still, seeing Ethan could unlock a lot of doors that were previously closed. Not only could he ensure Ethan didn't stumble onto something damning but he could use it as a way to have Ethan help lower Mei's guard even quicker.

PATH THREE: Decline them both

"He was on the verge of scientific greatness. He wasn't worried about client count."

While taking on another patient would be great for his expenses, that was never what this was about. He needed to stay solely focused on Mei. She was the one who would be the key to his redemption. Everything else was just noise.

He should take on Sierra - Ethan's sister could act as a counterweight to Mei.

He should take on Ethan - This could be useful in guiding Mei while at the same time keeping Ethan at bay

He should decline them both - He was on the verge of scientific greatness. He wasn't worried about client count.

57 votes total

[Insider] The Therapist Ch. 04

Hey Friends! Hope everyone is enjoying the start of the month. I was hoping to get this one to you last week, but I took a vacation instead :)

My plan is to get the first 3 chapters out to Supporters in the next day or two. It won't have any major changes, just grammar and stuff while giving them a chance to see the progress we've made so far.

I would love to hear what everyone thinks of the story so far. Not just if you're enjoying it (but that too, obviously), but also your thoughts on the voting, choices etc. I know when we started this, people had a multitude of concerns, ranging from "all the choices will only be focused on the sex" to "Seeing the results will lessen the experience for me." I've been mindful of those as I've written this and I want to be sure I'm hitting the mark and not going too far the other direction with it.

Anyway, hope you enjoy! Window to Temptation should be out soon.

Nathan set his coffee down and scrubbed GH-02 back to the beginning. He'd already watched it twice this morning.

On screen, Grace walked into his Jacksonville office for her second session. She wore a similar blouse to the week before, carried the same nervous energy. But the details told a different story. She smiled at Nathan as soon as she came in. He hadn't noticed it then, but looking back now, he could already see the hunger in her eyes. She chose the cushion closest to his chair, and when she crossed her legs, her knee pointed toward him. On the surface, these were small, unconscious adjustments. But the reality was that a week after their first session, her body was still carrying the conditioning.

He scrubbed forward. They talked the first ten minutes about her home life, her life on the island. Her legs uncrossed at the eight-minute mark, the first mention of The Father. He paused it there, rewound thirty seconds and played it again.

Nathan: When you talk about your life on the island, it almost sounds pleasant. How do you remember your captor treating you?

Grace: He wasn't my captor. He saved me. I know people say The Father drugged us, but he saved me. He loved me.

Nathan leaned closer. Her pulse was racing, her legs opened a fraction of an inch. He looked through his notes, he'd missed that before. He'd been so careless. The video continued:

Nathan: If he loved you then why did he run? Why not stay and answer for the things he was accused of?

On screen, Grace became visibly agitated. Her legs snapped shut, her fingernails digging into her leg. Nathan quickly switched gears and suggested another round of hypnosis. Grace had barely resisted the first time, and in this session she dropped into the trance without any friction. Once she was under, he reframed his question about The Father. Grace was quick to describe what he'd done to her in great detail. Nathan watched as her body responded in kind. Her cheeks flushed, her dress rode up.

She'd been referred to him because Grace wasn't able to be intimate with her husband, the trauma of what happened seemed to be blocking it. But watching her body respond to memories of The Father, Nathan realized the block wasn't damaged wiring. It was misdirected wiring. Her arousal was intact, just anchored to the wrong man.

The solution was simple. He just needed to guide her back to moments when she felt desired, let her body remember what it felt like, then gently redirect that response toward appropriate targets. Someone who cared for her, who she trusted. Of course, he'd never specified Thomas by name. Doing so would only slow him down.

At the time, he'd called it a breakthrough. His methods were accelerating her progress beyond anything traditional therapy could achieve. Her shame response was diminishing. Her physical inhibitions were dropping. Every metric he'd designed confirmed it.

Nathan paused the feed. Ran his fingers through the scruff on his jaw.

Every metric had been wrong.

He'd been measuring the body. He should have been measuring the mind. Grace's physical compliance had outpaced her psychological understanding by weeks. Her body learned to respond to him while her conscious mind stayed locked behind the same walls he thought he'd already torn down. She obeyed in the office and then walked into her life unable to reconcile what her body had done with what her brain could remember. The gap widened every session. By Session 5, she was dressing differently, flirting without realizing it, touching herself in ways she'd never done before. But there was no psychological foundation to hold the changes.

That's what broke her. It wasn't his methods. It was the sequencing.

He minimized Grace and pulled up MM-01. Mei on the couch, last session. He didn't need to rewatch the whole thing. He'd studied it enough to know the timestamps by heart. He scrubbed to eighteen minutes and switched to the bookshelf camera.

"I want you to take off your shirt."

The REM activity. The curled fingers. The three-second freeze before she pulled the fabric over her head. He'd flagged all of this last week. What he hadn't done was compare it against Grace's equivalent moment. Now he realized, Grace didn't have an equivalent moment. Grace never hesitated.

His throat tightened as he watched Mei's bra come into view on screen. The plain white cotton mixed with the dark skin beneath. Watching it in real time, he wasn't able to appreciate it the way he could now. Her nipple was already hardened and pressing against the fabric in a hard peak, but it was the smaller details that held him captive now. The faint, uneven bumps scattered around the darker circle beneath the fabric. The subtle texture of her areola revealed in whispers and shadows. The slight tremble in her stomach as she stood there. Her collarbone stood out sharply against her small frame. Delicate and fragile. A shallow hollow at the base of her throat that fluttered with each swallow. He could see her pulse there, quick and betraying.

His hand drifted to his thigh. He'd been reliving that moment all week, but now watching it again... He pulled his hand back just as it slid across his rigid outline. He needed to stay focused.

Mei was different. Her subconscious fought his commands, processed them through whatever remained of her resistance, and only complied after some internal negotiation he couldn't see. Her body obeyed, but it obeyed reluctantly, under protest from somewhere deeper.

And that was why the conditioning decayed so quickly. He should have been the one buying Ethan a beer, had he not been so forthcoming about Mei and her... eagerness that first night followed by her shutting down in the days that followed. The residual would be there, the low-grade arousal when Ethan looked at her, but it would be slow. If he was going to make this work, he needed to work on her physiological foundation.

He closed both feeds and leaned back in his chair. The morning light was starting to press through the blinds, thin stripes of light hitting his legal pad as he released a breath of air.

The difference wasn't willpower. Mei wasn't stronger than Grace. The difference was foundation. Grace had arrived pre-demolished. The island, the childhood abuse, the years of being used. She was already broken by the time she sat on Nathan's couch. If anything, he held her together much longer than what should have been possible. The conditioning took hold fast because it met no friction, and it held because Grace had no intact framework to reject it.

Mei's framework was intact. Damaged, buried under years of her mother's voice, but structurally sound. Her shame wasn't the result of someone destroying her. It was a wall someone had built around something that was still alive. And that was the reason he wouldn't fail again.

His mouth went dry. He could almost see the version of Mei that existed before her mother's conditioning took hold. The girl with a wild side who brought home college boyfriends. The one who'd been loud enough to get caught. That woman was still in there, locked away. He was going to set her free.

Nathan stood and crossed to the diploma wall. He swung the frame aside and opened the safe. Eight drives sat in their row. His fingers moved across them, his eyes closed as the rush washed over him. He lingered on MM-01.

When he closed the safe, he glanced at the clock. Still twelve hours until Mei's session. He gritted his teeth. He needed to find something to do to pass the time now that he had a plan in place. Ethan would follow an hour later. That visit didn't excite him as much, but it was a means to an end. Taking him as a client meant Nathan would have eyes on both sides of the marriage. What Mei wouldn't tell him, Ethan would.

He sat back down and opened a blank document. Session 2 would be an excavation, not an escalation. A memory she had hidden away, before all of the shame her mother instilled in her. He knew it existed. He just needed to find it.

Mei wiped down the whiteboard as her second-graders filed out for recess. This week had been merciful compared to the last. Spirit week was fun, but the kids were significantly more focused now that they weren't trying to play with each other's accessories. She uncapped a dry-erase marker and started outlining tomorrow's lesson on condensation, the sleeve of her olive green button-down rolling past her wrist as she wrote.

She'd paired it with dark slacks and flats. Her hair was down today, tucked behind one ear. It was a little more casual than she normally dressed, but she'd rationalized to herself that after the antics of last week, she deserved it.

The past week of her life had been, eventful to say the least. After meeting with Dr. Coleman last week things just seemed different. She wasn't even entirely sure he was the reason for the change, it was simply just a point of reference for her. It'd started with her night of passion with Ethan, the confidence that seemed to come out of nowhere. Then smaller things. The smile she'd get when she caught Ethan looking at her, instead of crossing her arms and looking away self-consciously. The urge was still there but not as overwhelming as it once was.

"Mrs. Morrison."

Mei turned. Mr. Johnson leaned against the doorframe of her classroom, coffee in hand. He taught PE but didn't look like the stereotype. He looked more like a runner than a traditional jock, tall and lanky like he belonged in a bank more than a classroom. He'd been at the school longer than Mei, and knew everyone by name. Everyone had nothing but kind words to say about him. His outgoing confidence reminded Mei a lot of Ethan.

"Hey, Mr. Johnson."

"I told you. It's Jack, please."

"Right, Jack." She fought the urge to look away.

"Anyway, I was just returning Marcus's inhaler. That kid is always leaving it in the gym." He set it on the desk by the door and glanced at the whiteboard. "Lin really likes her apples, huh?"

A laugh escaped Mei before she could stop it. "Whoever created two-step word problems deserves a special place in hell."

Jack barked out a laugh that made heat creep up her neck. "That's funny, Mei. I didn't know you had it in ya." His gaze traveled over her. "New shirt? The green's a good color on you."

There it was. The thing Jack did. Not aggressive, not inappropriate. Just a half-step past what she felt was professional and delivered with enough ease to make it seem innocent. She'd been deflecting these moments for two years. She'd just smile and turn back to whatever she was doing.

She started the turn. Her gaze dropped to the marker in her hand, her shoulders beginning their familiar curl inward. And then she stopped.

"Thanks, Mr... um, Jack." Her eyes met his. The smile on her face still there. She wasn't sure where the reaction came from. But it occurred to her she didn't hate the way the compliment made her feel.

Even Jack looked surprised, like he'd gotten used to the deflection too. "Sure thing." He raised his coffee mug to her, his eyes traveling over her one last time. "Well, I'll see you around."

Then he was gone, his footsteps fading down the hallway toward the gym.

Mei stood there for a moment, marker still in hand, the whiteboard half-finished behind her. She waited for the heat in her cheeks to turn to shame. For her mother's voice to arrive with the appropriate word for a married woman who smiled when another man paid her a compliment, but it never came.

She turned back to the board and finished writing tomorrow's lesson. By the time the kids filed back in from recess, the moment had already dissolved into the ordinary rhythm of her day and she'd all but forgotten about it.

She had a session with Nathan that evening. She was looking forward to it, though she couldn't say exactly why. Something about the quiet in her head the night that she came home after her first appointment.

She capped the marker and reached for her coffee, the faintest trace of warmth still sitting below her collarbone.

The doorbell rang at exactly seven. Like before, Nathan watched her from his office as she said goodbye to Ethan and made the quick walk to his house. She seemed less hesitant this time, hands at her sides instead of fidgeting with her shirt.

After waiting approximately three seconds after the bell rang, he opened the door and greeted Mei with a warm smile. She wore a green button-down and jeans. Every inch of her was still covered like before, yet seemed slightly less guarded.

"Mei. Please, come in." He stepped to the side to let her pass, giving Ethan a friendly wave in the process.

"Thank you, Dr. Coleman." She stepped past him with the slightest hesitation. The smell of vanilla passing over him as she moved through the doorway.

"Call me Nathan, please." He touched her arm gently and felt her tense. "This way."

He guided her to the office and she sat on the same middle cushion with no deliberation.

Nathan took his seat behind the desk. "It's been a week since the last time we spoke. How have you been feeling?"

"Good." She nodded, her thumbs trying to burrow a hole into her jeans. "Better than I expected."

"Tell me about that."

Her gaze drifted toward the window, where the last of the evening light pressed through the shutters in thin gold bars. "Things just feel lighter? Like there's less noise up here." She tapped her temple then tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "That probably sounds dumb."

"It doesn't sound dumb at all." He picked up his notepad. "Have things improved with Ethan?"

Color rose in her cheeks. "I think so... We've been closer."

Nathan waited. She knew what he was asking. Silence was a tool. Most people couldn't stand more than six seconds of it.

Mei lasted four. "We were... intimate." She smoothed her palms against her jeans. "That night, after our session." She focused on the Zen garden at the edge of his desk, refusing to reach his gaze. "It was different than usual."

"Different how?"

"I was more..." She searched for a word that wouldn't make her blush harder. "Present. Like I wasn't in my head the whole time."

"Did that make it more enjoyable for you?"

"Yes." Barely above a whisper. Then she gave a slight laugh. "He seemed surprised by it."

"Surprised?"

"Like he didn't know what came over me."

"That's great, Mei. That's real progress." He let the validation land before pressing. "Do you think that surprise and you not being in your head added to your enjoyment?"

She nodded, still not looking at him.

"Was there a moment where you felt like you were in control?"

Her lips parted. The color in her cheeks deepened from pink to crimson and she shifted on the couch, crossing her legs. Nathan watched the reaction cascade through her body.

"I was on top." She said it to the Zen garden. "I've never... we don't usually do that."

"How did it make you feel?"

"Scared." She paused for a moment then added: "But good. Like I was someone else."

"Someone else, or someone you used to be?"

Her gaze snapped to his. Her mouth opened, then closed. Her arms crossed over her chest. She was holding something back. He could see it in the way her jaw tightened, the way the pulse in her neck picked up.

"I don't know." Her voice had gone flat. "It just felt different. That's all."

She was lying. Protecting herself from a memory she didn't want to see. That night with Ethan had triggered something. It was possible she didn't even know what it was, at least not consciously, but Nathan was determined to find out.

"Mei." He set down the notepad. "I want you to remember this is a safe space."

She nodded like she understood, but her eyes were darting back and forth focused on the floor. Her pulse was still racing.

"I think this might be a good time to try the relaxation technique again. Would you be comfortable with that?"

Relief flooded her features. "Yes. Please." She seemed to realize how quickly she answered. Her eyes locked onto Nathan's. "I just mean... it helped last time." She uncrossed her arms. "I liked how quiet everything got."

"Good. I'm glad to hear you find it beneficial." He stood and dimmed the lights, leaving just the desk lamp. The warm glow softened the room, catching the edges of the bookshelves and the face of the clock on the wall. Mei was already lying back on the sofa. "Same as before. Focus on your breathing. In through your nose, hold, out through your mouth."

Her chest rose and fell. He watched her shoulders drop on the second exhale.

"Now find the clock. Watch the second hand. Each tick you feel yourself getting heavier. More relaxed."

Her gaze fixed on the clock face. Her blinks slowed, each one lasting longer than the last.

"Your arms are heavy. Your legs are heavy. You're sinking into the couch and it feels good. Safe. Let your eyes close when they're ready."

Her lids drooped on the third pass of the second hand and surrendered on the fifth. Nathan made a note wanting to compare the speed of it with last session. Her breathing deepened, her hands went slack in her lap. Nathan checked the bookshelf camera. The angle was perfect.

"Can you hear me, Mei?"

A small nod. Her head had tilted to one side, exposing the soft line of her throat.

"Good. When I count to three, you're going to sink deeper. One... two... three."

Her body sank deeper into the cushion. Her lips parted and he could see the tension leave her jaw.

"I want to go back to what we were talking about before. You told me that being on top of Ethan felt like being someone you used to be." He kept his voice low. "I want you to think about that. Not Ethan. Before him. A time when you felt that same way. When the voices were quiet and you felt confident."

Her brow furrowed. Beneath her closed lids, he could see the movement. Her subconscious was searching, sorting through memories, bumping up against walls. Whatever it was, her subconscious wanted it to stay buried.

"It's okay. You're safe here. Nothing you say will be judged. You're carefree, happy. Let the memory come."

Her fingers twitched in her lap. Her breathing changed, faster now, shallow. A tremor that ran through her shoulders and disappeared.

"Kyle." The name came out soft. "His name was Kyle."

"Tell me about Kyle."

"We dated for almost a year in college. Before Ethan." Her voice was dreamy. Her fingers seemed to still on her lap as the memory finally took form. "He had an apartment off campus. We would go there sometimes and... fool around."

Nathan's cock began to stir. "That sounds like pretty normal college stuff. Nothing to be ashamed of." Mei nodded, her tongue wetting her lips.

"On this occasion his roommate was supposed to be gone for the weekend."

"What happened?"

"We were... together." The flush from earlier returned, creeping up her neck and spreading across her cheeks. But under the trance, there was no shame attached to it. Just the memory in its raw and unfiltered form. "I was on top of him. Like with Ethan but..." She chewed on her lip. "Different."

"Different how?"

"I... I wasn't worried about what people would think of me." A pause, and the faintest curl of a smile. "I was loud. Louder than I probably should have been. But..." Her fingers floated to the top of her shirt like she was hot. "He kept saying how hot it was, how he wanted everyone to hear how... how turned on I was."

Nathan leaned forward in his chair. He'd set his notepad down without realizing it. "How did that make you feel?"

"Like..." Her smile widened, still with her eyes closed. Her hips shifted against the cushion, a movement so slight he almost missed it. "Like I was the sexiest girl in the world."

Nathan's grip tightened on the armrest. Her arousal was visible now. He watched the rapid pulse in her throat, the way her thighs had pressed together. He forced his voice to stay even.

"What..." He coughed. "What else do you remember about that moment?"

"The door."

"What door?"

"His roommate's door. It was open. Not all the way. Just..." She held her thumb and index finger a few inches apart, though her eyes stayed closed. "I noticed it while we were... while I was on top of him."

"Did you stop?"

"No." The word came out immediately. No hesitation, no processing time. "I didn't want to stop."

"Why not?"

Her breathing had changed. Deeper, slower. Her tongue traced her lower lip, her fingers curling around the hem of her shirt like she may rip it off at any second.

"I knew no one was in there, not really." She swallowed. "But the thought that someone might be watching. Might be able to hear me. It made everything..." Her fingers curled into the fabric of her shirt, her hips lifting off the sofa.

Nathan didn't hear the end of what she'd said. His hands ached from gripping the armrests. He could see the arousal written across her body. The tight peaks of her nipples pressing against the thin fabric of her shirt, the way her thighs kept pressing together and releasing, the flush that had turned her skin a deep rose from her cheeks to her chest. His cock strained against his slacks, and he had to bite down on the inside of his cheek to keep his voice steady.

Show me.

The words sat on his tongue like a lit match. He could tell her to recreate it. To show him what the roommate would have seen. Her hands would lift the hem of her shirt without hesitation, she would lift it over her head and—

The sequencing. Remember the fucking sequencing.

He released a slow breath through his nose. Unclenched his jaw. Loosened his grip on the armrests one finger at a time.

The desire would be stronger for having been denied. By making her sit with the arousal, by letting the memory burn without release, he was planting something deeper than any command could reach. Her body would carry this feeling out of the office and into her life, searching for the resolution he'd deliberately withheld. She wouldn't understand why she felt restless tonight, why her skin felt electric, why she kept thinking about being watched. But her body would know. And it would seek out what it needed on its own.

"Mei." His voice was unsteady and the palm of his hand pressed against his cock making him jump. "What you just described. It's perfectly normal. In fact, it's expected for a woman your age to have those kind of feelings. Your mother was wrong about you. It doesn't make you cheap." He measured each word, letting them sink beneath the trance. Her body flinched when he mentioned the word cheap. A micro reaction set up by years of conditioning. "What you felt that night with Kyle wasn't shameful. It was powerful. It's the real you before you were taught to hide yourself."

Her chin dipped in a small nod.

"Your mother took this from you. She had no right to. The woman you were that night, the one who didn't care who was watching. She's still in you. She never left."

Mei's body tossed and turned on the sofa like she was having a bad dream.

"Being seen is not a punishment. It's a gift you give yourself. When you feel someone's eyes on you and your body responds I want you to remember this. The electricity belongs to you. The desire is yours. You deserve to be seen, Mei." He paused, watching her body respond to each word. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good." He sat back, putting distance between them. His cock was straining against his pants and he adjusted himself as quietly as he could. "You did beautifully today, Mei. I'm going to start counting you back now."

He brought her out slowly. Five to one, each number lifting her closer to the surface. When her eyes opened, she blinked several times, her gaze unfocused, like she was looking at the room through water.

"How do you feel?"

She sat up slowly and her hand moved to her collarbone, fingers pressing against the flushed skin, then drifted lower before she caught herself.

She laughed breathlessly. "Wow."

"How do you feel?"

"I don't know. Good?" She pressed her palms against her cheeks. "That was... intense."

"You did beautiful work today."

She looked at him, a crease forming between her brows. "We... we talked about Kyle."

"We did."

"I haven't thought about him in years." She rubbed her arms like she had a chill despite the warmth of the room. "I don't really remember the details, but..." She tried to find the right word. It felt good to talk about him."

"You were very brave. You shared some things that took real courage."

"I did?" She almost laughed. "I don't feel very brave."

"Trust me." He stood and offered her a hand. "How are the voices?"

"Just one voice," she said with a laugh, taking his hand as he helped her to her feet. "And it's good. Quiet."

"Good. Same time next week?"

"Yes." She smoothed her shirt and pushed her hair behind her ear. "Thank you, Nathan."

He smiled.

"Dr. Coleman. Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's fine." He smiled. "We've built a lot of trust. Nathan is fine. And you don't have to thank me, Mei. You're the one doing all the work."

He walked her to the door and watched her cross the lawn. Ethan was on the porch, probably waiting to debrief with her quickly before his appointment. He pulled her into a tight hug and Nathan watched as Mei pressed her body into her husband not caring who was watching.

Nathan closed the door and returned to the office. Exhibitionism, not the thing he expected to uncover today, but that's what was great about his profession, he never really knew what to expect. His hand drifted to his thigh as he thought about the state Mei was in just inches from him. There was enough time. He stopped an inch from the rigid outline straining against his slacks. He would watch the playback later when he had more time.

Ethan would be here in forty-five minutes. Nathan still needed to review his notes, despite how difficult that was at the moment. He straightened his desk and turned the lighting back up. Ethan needed to be handled completely differently than Mei. He had the power to either destroy everything Nathan had been building, or crank it up to ten.

It would all start to come together soon.

Ethan was waiting on the porch when she got home. He pulled her into a hug and she pressed into him without thinking, her arms circling his waist, her cheek pressed firmly against his chest.

"How'd it go?" His chin rested on the top of her head.

"Good." She pulled back enough to look at him. "Really good."

"Yeah?" He searched her face with that boyish eagerness she loved.

She rose on her toes and kissed him. Ethan tensed, clearly not expecting the public display of affection and his hands tightened on her waist. Mei held the kiss, even considered slipping her tongue past her lips, but she thought better of it and instead leaned into his frame, her lips firmly pressed against his.

When she pulled away, his ears were pink. "Wow. What's gotten into you?" He looked past her at Nathan's house. He'd already gone back inside and Ethan could see movement inside his office. What had they discussed that had Mei suddenly kissing him in broad daylight?

"Do I need a reason to kiss my husband?" She laughed and tugged at his arm. "Come on. I'll make you some tea before your appointment."

They went inside and Mei filled the kettle while Ethan leaned against the counter. He was telling her a story about a frustrating client who wanted their logo changed for what must have been the sixth time. She tried to focus on his words, but her body had an energy to it, a warmth that had been spreading through her since coming out of the deep relaxation at Dr. Coleman's. She handed him a mug, biting her lip as her fingers made contact with his. Did she have time to drag him upstairs before his appointment?

"Mei, can you hand me the honey?"

"Yeah, sorry." She realized she'd been staring.

"You sure you're alright? You seem spacey again. Did he hypnotize you again? Do you remember anything?"

"Of course." She gave her best smile. "I'm just relaxed. It's nothing to worry about. I promise."

He was worried about her. It was cute. He was always trying to protect her, making sure she was alright. She didn't thank him enough for that. She'd thank him properly tonight when he got back. Her face grew warmer and she nearly laughed out loud. Thank God he couldn't read her thoughts.

"I guess I should head over," he said, glancing at the clock. He kissed her forehead and grabbed his jacket. "I'll see you in an hour." Then he was gone. Mei watched him through the window as he walked across the lawn to Dr. Coleman's house, knocked on the door then went inside. She took another sip of her tea and tried to figure out what to do with herself while he was gone.

She wandered upstairs without a particular reason. The bedroom door was open, the bed made. She walked past the dresser and caught her reflection in the mirror, then stopped.

The woman looking back at her barely looked like Mei. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair messy from when she hugged Ethan. She ran her fingers through it trying to tame it the best she could. Her shirt was wrinkled, probably from lying on the couch. Without thinking about it, she began to unbutton the shirt to replace it with a new one.

After the top two buttons were undone, she paused. Her fingertips ran across her exposed collarbone and she drew in air. *What are you doing?* The warmth she'd felt earlier intensified as another button slipped free. The white of her bra was showing. Her nails slid across her caramel flesh parting the fabric another inch.

She thought about Kyle. About that night in his apartment and how happy she felt. The exhilaration of that night washed over her. Goosebumps covered her skin, and before she realized it, the other buttons of her shirt were undone.

She shrugged it off. The fabric slid down her arms and landed in a pile at her feet and she stood there in her bra and slacks looking at herself in the mirror. Her cheeks were burning and she bit her lip, fighting the urge to snatch the shirt off the floor and put it back on.

It's just you. No one's watching.

But that didn't stop her from reliving that night. She glanced at her bedroom door, her breath growing more rapid. As she turned back toward the mirror she saw herself not through her eyes but through Kyle's, Ethan's.

She reached behind her back and unclasped the bra. There was a moment of hesitation, where she held the cups up to her chest, feeling ridiculous. Then she heard Kyle's voice in her ear telling her how sexy she looked, how perfect her body was. She let it fall to the floor.

Her nipples were already taut. She stared at them a moment before instinctively crossing her arms and hugging herself. She stood like that for a few seconds, her heart hammering, staring at the woman in the mirror who was standing topless in her bedroom for no reason at all. Then, slowly, she let her arms drop.

Okay. That's not so bad. You did this all the time when you were younger. Why are you so afraid to now?

She turned slightly. Looked at herself from the side. She honestly couldn't remember why she'd stopped looking at herself like this in the mirror. She knew her mom never approved of it, didn't think it was very lady-like. But that voice had gone silent. Dr. Coleman had said she deserved this. Deserved to be seen. Releasing a shaky breath, she ran a hand down her stomach, feeling the warmth of her own skin, and a shiver chased her fingers.

Her pants came next. She undid the button, her hands only shaking slightly, and pushed them down along with her underwear before she could talk herself out of it. She stepped out of them and kicked them toward the closet. She stood naked in front of the mirror, fully exposed, and she could feel every nerve in her body firing at once, the faintest voice in the back of her head screaming for her to cover up.

She looked different than she remembered. Older, obviously. Fuller in places she hadn't been in college. Her gaze traveled downward and landed on the dark triangle of hair between her legs. She'd let it grow back over the years. In college, with Kyle, she'd kept it trimmed to a thin strip. After her mother caught them, she'd stopped. Not just grooming, she'd stopped looking at herself, started believing that sex wasn't about enjoyment, it was about duty. About keeping a future husband satisfied, nothing more.

Her gaze drifted to the window. The blinds were open. Outside, the sky had gone dark, and the only light she could see was the warm glow from Nathan's office across the lawn. Ethan was over there right now. Sitting on the same couch, talking to Nathan.

She imagined him glancing out the window. Seeing the light on in their bedroom. Seeing her silhouette through the glass, standing there with nothing on, and the thought hit her between her legs like a fist. She steadied herself against the dresser, her breath catching, a gasp escaping her mouth. *Jesus.* It was the same electricity from Kyle's apartment. The cracked door, the possibility. But this time it was Ethan's eyes she imagined, watching her from across the lawn, both of them so close, and the thought of being visible to anyone in that house made her skin flush from her chest to her thighs.

Her legs were trembling. She turned from the mirror and crossed to the bed, pulling back the comforter as she climbed in. The sheets were cool against her bare skin and she lay on her back, her hair fanning across Ethan's pillow. She stared at the ceiling for a moment, her chest

rising and falling, trying to talk herself into stopping. Into pulling the covers up and going downstairs and starting dinner like a normal person.

Her thighs fell open, and she gasped as the cool air found her arousal. She was already glistening, even more turned on than she initially realized. Her hands trembled as they moved down her body. She'd touched herself countless times before in college, but this felt different. More charged, like she was rediscovering herself for the first time.

She closed her eyes and she was back in Kyle's apartment. On top of him. His hands on her hips, his voice telling her she was the sexiest girl he'd ever seen. The door cracked open. The thrill of it. She hadn't cared who heard her that night. She'd been loud and alive and completely unashamed.

Her right hand slid down her stomach. Her fingers trailed through the coarse hair between her legs and she flinched at her own touch. She was so sensitive. A sigh left her lips as her juices coated her finger.

"Ohhh—" Her finger swept across her clit and her free hand flew to her mouth. She lay there for a second, breathing hard, her finger stilled on her swollen nub as she slowly lowered her hand from her mouth and placed it back on the mattress.

She circled her clit again, slow, testing, and this time when the moan came she didn't hold it back. It was louder than she'd ever been with Ethan. Not as loud as she'd been with Kyle, not yet, but close. She wondered if the sound could carry through the open window, across the lawn, through the walls of Nathan's office. The thought should have made her stop. Her fingers pressed harder instead, dipping between her folds.

"Yesss, mmm." Her hand moved to her breast, squeezing the bare skin. Her thumb found her nipple. The dual stimulation made her back arch off the bed, the sound of the springs carrying through the window.

She turned her head and pressed it deeper into Ethan's pillow, inhaling. His shampoo, his deodorant, the faintly salty scent of him washed over her, adding to the fantasy. She imagined his weight on top of her, his breath on her neck, his eyes looking down at her body, seeing her hunger and fueling her desire. Her hips rolled against her own hand and she let out a desperate whimper.

"You feel so good, baby." The words were for Ethan, words she'd never spoken to him. She could hear Kyle in her ear, telling her how good her body looked, how good it felt. Words that would have made her die of shame a week ago, but now she clung to them like a life force.

A second finger slipped inside her, and her walls clamped down on it. "Ahhhh." She could feel the orgasm building, coiling heat from deep within her desperate to get out. Her fingers moved faster, her breath coming in ragged gasps. She was making sounds she'd never made as she chased the orgasm that was building impossibly huge.

She spread her legs wider, her feet pressing into the mattress, her knees falling open. The air hit the slick heat between her thighs and she gasped at the exposure. She was completely open, completely visible, even if the only eyes in the room were her own. The fingers inside her curled, her palm grinding against her clit as her hips found a rhythm that made the headboard tap softly against the wall.

The briefest thought that she was being too loud whispered in her mind. The house was empty, but the window was open. Her own sounds filled the room. It was terrifying and electric. She didn't want to stop.

She thought about eyes on her. Ethan's eyes. Watching her like this. Seeing her hand between her legs, hearing the sounds she was making, knowing that his wife could look like this. Her body pulsed at the thought, wet squelching noises coming from between her legs.

"Yes. Ohhh... Ohhh... Mmmppphhh."

The orgasm broke over her like a wave. It was sudden, consuming, a flood of heat that started between her legs and rolled upward through her stomach and chest until she cried out, her back arching, her free hand fisting the sheets, her thighs clamping around her wrist. She rode it out with her eyes squeezed shut, her hips jerking, aftershocks pulsing through her in diminishing waves until she finally went still.

She lay there breathing. Staring at the ceiling. Her body was trembling, her skin damp with sweat, and the room smelled like sex. A laugh bubbled out of her.

What just happened?

She didn't have an answer. She just knew that she'd done something she'd never done before, not since she'd been married, not... like that. She lay there for another minute, letting her heart rate settle, feeling the cool air on her naked body, her gaze fixated on the window.

The front door closing jarred her awake. She must have fallen asleep. She was still naked, her clothes still scattered across the room.

"Mei?" Ethan's voice rang out from the living room. She stifled a giggle and jolted from the bed, quickly gathering her discarded clothing and rushing into the bathroom to turn on the shower.

The bar off the motel lobby was barely that. It housed three tables in a small space, and three more at the bar. Grace pushed through the door, the smell of grease and fried food hitting her instantly as she draped her backpack around the first barstool and took a seat. Unzipping it, she pulled out old maps, handwritten notes, and dozens of flyers that looked like something from a missing persons file.

She ordered a burger and a Coke. No alcohol. The Seroquel didn't mix well with it, and the last thing she needed was to have a bad reaction when she was in an unfamiliar place. The bartender, a woman in her fifties with reading glasses on a chain, just nodded without trying to make conversation. Grace appreciated that.

Three days of traveling the California coastline had produced zero results. Three days of driving between small coastal towns, talking to strangers on the street, walking into clinics with a photo on her phone and a story she'd rehearsed. *I'm looking for a friend. He relocated from Florida. He may be in trouble. Have you seen him?* Most people didn't even bother looking up. The few that did said they'd never seen him. She knew it was a long shot, but right now it was all she had to work with.

She'd checked over a dozen different practices, all opened within the last year. None of them were Nathan.

The room upstairs told the whole story. She'd pinned a map of Northern California to the wall above the desk and it was covered in her handwriting. Red circles around towns that fit the profile she'd created. Small coastal cities that had an above average amount of rain. Black X marks through the ones she'd already visited. Printouts of newly opened therapy practices spread across every surface, each one crossed through with notes in the margins. It wasn't pretty, but it was progress, and it kept her busy.

California was almost done. One more town tomorrow, and then she needed to go home to regroup.

The burger arrived. She ate with one hand, the other flipping through her notebook. A list of towns in Oregon she'd compiled before the trip. She'd do her research now, check in with Dr. Waverly, refill her prescriptions. Then she could plan the next trip. Oregon first, then Washington if she needed to. She didn't think she'd need to go as far north as Canada. Winters up there would be too cold, Nathan hated the cold.

"Looks like you've got a project going."

Grace's hand tightened around her pen. A man had taken the stool two down from hers, a plate of nachos and a beer in front of him. Late forties, graying at the temples, wearing a jacket that looked like it had spent a week in a suitcase. He gestured at her notebook with his fork, a half-smile on his face. Alarm bells were already going off in Grace's head.

"Something like that." She closed the notebook.

"I hear you. I've been on the road since six this morning." He nodded to the large set of keys next to him. "Drove up from Sacramento. You'd think after twenty years I'd be used to it."

He's trying to establish a rapport. He wants you to trust him so you let your guard down.

She gave a tight smile and picked up her burger, taking a larger bite than necessary so she wouldn't be expected to respond.

"I deliver medical supplies up and down the coast." He clearly didn't mind carrying the conversation. "Glamorous, right?" He smiled as Grace swallowed. "Where you from?"

He timed the question perfectly. He's done this before.

The thought arrived before she could stop it. Not a thought, exactly. More like a translation she couldn't control.

"Florida." She took another bite so she wouldn't have to elaborate.

"Long way from home." He smiled and his eyes crinkled at the corners. They were pale. Light blue, almost gray in the dim bar light, and for one terrible second they weren't his eyes at all. They were Nathan's. Watching her across his desk with that warm, careful expression that made her skin prickle with need.

Her burger slipped from her fingers, clattering onto her plate. The bar contracted around her, the sounds collapsing inward. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

It's not him. Those aren't his eyes. Just breathe.

"You alright?" The man's brow furrowed.

"Fine." She opened her eyes and looked back at her plate. "Just a long couple of days."

He tried once more. Something about a fishing trip, while he was in town. Grace heard the words but focused her energy on finishing her food. *He's trying to get you to lower your guard. He's just going to take advantage of you, just like everyone else.*

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Grace forced the last of her burger into her mouth. She could feel her shoulders climbing toward her ears, her jaw tightening. The rational part of her brain, the part Dr. Waverly had spent months trying to fix, was telling her this man was harmless. He was bored and lonely and making conversation because the alternative was staring at a baseball game he didn't care about.

"Well." He wiped his hands on his napkin and stood. "It was nice talking to you. Safe travels."

His hand landed on her shoulder. Light, brief, reflexive. The kind of gesture a thousand men made a thousand times a day without thinking about it.

Grace's stool screeched against the floor as she jerked away from him. The sound cut through the bar like a gunshot. Her bag toppled off, papers spilling across the floor. Maps, printouts, photos.

"Don't touch me." Her voice was loud enough that she heard a couple people startle. "I know what you're... don't fucking touch me." Her hands went to her hair, tears welling in her eyes.

The man's face went blank. His hands came up, palms out. "Whoa. Hey. I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"You think I don't know what you're doing? You think I can't see—" Her voice cracked and she could hear how she sounded. Could hear the pitch climbing, the words tumbling over each other. She sounded exactly like the person the newspapers described. Unhinged. Obsessive. Unstable.

The bartender had stopped wiping the counter. A couple at a table near the window stared. Every set of eyes in the room was on her, and Grace's skin lit up like a circuit board. Heat rushed across her chest, her neck, her face. She was being watched. Every nerve in her body fired at once and it was wrong, it was all wrong because part of what she felt wasn't just panic.

"Whoa, hey, I didn't mean anything by it. I'm... I'm married." He said it gently, like he was talking to a frightened animal. "I was just being friendly is all. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"I..." Grace blinked back the tears, her eyes trying to focus on the ring on his hand. "I'm sorry." She was already reaching for her bag, shoving the printouts in without folding them. A page slipped free and she grabbed at it, her fingers clumsy, uncooperative. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... I have to go."

She left cash on the bar without counting it. She could feel his eyes on her back as she walked toward the exit and every step was an exercise in not running.

The hallway to her room was narrow and smelled like mildew. Each step back felt like a mile and her legs would give out at any moment. When she reached the door, it took two tries to get the key card to work. Then she pushed through the door, and locked both the deadbolt and the chain behind her.

She sank to the floor, her back against the cool metal of the door, her knees pulled to her chest. Her hands found her hair, fingers twisting into the strands at her temples, pulling just enough to

feel the tension in her scalp. She held it there, her breath coming in short bursts, her eyes fixed on the carpet between her feet.

He was just being nice. God, you're so fucking stupid.

She knew that. Some part of her had known it the entire time. But knowing didn't help. Knowing didn't stop her body from reading every man who spoke to her as a threat, every casual touch as the opening move of something manipulative. Every time she'd let her guard down she'd gotten hurt. The Father, Thomas, but Nathan... He was the biggest offender of all. Nathan took away her ability to trust her own judgment. To sit in a bar and let a stranger be a stranger.

Her fingers released her hair. She pressed her palms flat against the carpet and breathed. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. The way Dr. Waverly had taught her, not Nathan. His methods usually ended with her clothes on his floor.

She reached into her bag and found the pill case. Popped the Trazodone and swallowed it dry, grimacing at the chalk. Dr. Waverly had told her to take it if she had an episode. This qualified.

The trembling slowed after a few minutes. She pulled herself off the floor and sat at the desk. Uncapped the thick black marker. On the map, she dragged it through another red circle on the California coastline in one long, deliberate stroke. The ink bled through the paper, leaving a dark smear on the desk beneath.

She had one more town to check tomorrow. Fort Bragg. Then she'd drive back home, meet with Dr. Waverly on Thursday, refill the prescriptions that were running low. She'd sit in Waverly's office and talk about her progress and the breathing exercises and she would not mention the search. She would not mention Nathan. She would not mention what just happened in the bar.

Then she'd start planning Oregon.

CHAPTER 4 - CHOICE POINT

Nathan glanced at the clock. Ethan would be here in less than ten minutes. He held the drive in his hand, turning it over as his thumb tracing the fresh Sharpie ink. MM-02. She was getting closer. Today had been a breakthrough. The memory of Kyle, the exhibitionism, Nathan hadn't expect it, but it was there and it was real. Now, how he handled Ethan would shape the rest.

The Decision

PATH ONE: THE INFORMANT

"Ethan can't help himself. The man doesn't have a filter. All I have to do is point him in the right direction and he'll tell me everything I need to know."

The beauty of Ethan Morrison was that he didn't know how to keep his mouth shut. A beer at Murphy's and the man had spilled every detail of his sex life without Nathan asking twice. Put him on a couch in a clinical setting and he'd hand over the entire playbook.

That was the play. Keep the sessions focused on Ethan's feelings. His frustrations, his desires, his anxieties about Mei. Let him talk. Let him describe what she did last night, what she wore to bed, how she responded when he touched her. Every detail would be a data point, a way to

measure how the conditioning was manifesting when Nathan wasn't in the room. What was sticking. What was decaying. Where to push next.

The homework would be simple. Behavioral reinforcement wrapped in marital advice. Tell Mei how sexy she looks. Let her know you see the effort she's putting in. After every session with Mei, Ethan would go home and water the seed Nathan had planted without realizing it.

Patience. Discipline. Let the work speak for itself.

PATH TWO: THE ACCOMPLICE

"Ethan doesn't just want Mei to enjoy sex. He wants others to see how good he has it. That's a fantasy I can work with."

The sex tape wasn't really just about a tape. Nathan had known that since Murphy's. What Ethan wanted was for others to see exactly what he got to enjoy every night. Almost every couple he'd worked with who made a sex tape, the husband always shared it with someone.

Ethan wanted his wife to be noticed. Nathan could help with that and give Ethan a role in her corruption in the process.

It would start with small things. Mei's self-image is tied to how she presents herself. She hides behind oversized clothes because her mother taught her that visibility was shameful. You can help undo that. Take her shopping. Pick out something she wouldn't choose for herself, nothing aggressive, just something that fits her body instead of hiding it. When she tries it on, tell her what you see. Be specific. Tell her she looks sexy. Use the word. She needs to hear it from you.

Ethan would light up. He'd probably go home and immediately take her shopping. He'd start encouraging her to show off. A new dress. A lower neckline. A compliment in front of friends that made Mei blush but didn't make her run.

And Mei would respond, because Nathan's conditioning had already loosened the architecture. She'd start dressing differently and believe it was for her husband. Ethan would believe he was helping. Both of them crediting each other for changes Nathan had engineered.

PATH THREE: THE ARCHITECT

"Why settle for one subject when I can reshape both?"

Nathan had watched Ethan follow his lead from the moment they met. The man deferred to authority instinctively. Always asking for approval, seeking validation. He was suggestible by nature.

Once Ethan was under, Nathan would start with the foundation. Map his fantasy life. The sex tape was the surface. It wasn't about making a tape with Mei, it was about the need to watch.

Nathan would find that thread and pull.

Session by session, he'd reshape the architecture. The tape would evolve. Filming would become sharing. Mei performing for a camera would become Mei performing for an audience. An abstract audience would sharpen into a specific one. A man they both trusted.

And when it was time, when every pathway in Mei's mind and every condition in Ethan's psychology pointed to the same inevitable conclusion, Mei would come to Nathan believing it was her choice. Ethan would watch believing it was his fantasy.

PATH ONE: THE INFORMANT - Ethan will be a mole that will help Mei's programming without even realizing it

PATH TWO: THE ACCOMPLICE - Ethan didn't just want to make a video he wanted to show his wife off.

PATH THREE: THE ARCHITECT - The video Ethan wants is about his need to watch his wife.

49 votes total

[Insider] The Therapist Ch. 05

Hey Friends! Hope everyone is having a great week. I'm pretty excited for this chapter. As always, it ran a little longer than I intended, but I'm pretty happy with how it turned out. Lots of character development in this one and threads (mainly from your votes) starting to come together.

I'll likely post a poll in the coming days to get a beat on how everyone is enjoying the story, the pace, etc.

Next up is EP. Let me know what you think. Enjoy!

"There's only two more sessions left before my birthday. Think we'll make it?" Ethan sat in the middle of the sofa, his left leg crossed on top of the right, both arms outstretched and resting on the back of the cushions.

"We're here to discuss you right now, Ethan. Not Mei."

"Right. Sorry." Ethan's arms dropped into his lap. "I just... yeah. You're right. Sorry."

"No reason to be sorry." Nathan set his notepad on the arm of his chair and leaned back. "The tape seems to mean a lot to you. Why don't you tell me about that."

The office looked different than the last time Ethan was in there. The blinds were open, letting fresh sunlight pour into the room. He shifted on the sofa, trying to find an angle where he could see his house. He wondered what Mei was up to. She probably went back to cleaning up, just trying to kill time until he got home. His gaze went to the Zen garden on the desk. From this angle he could see small rake marks in the sand. He almost laughed at the image of Nathan sitting at his desk raking it.

"You seem distracted," Nathan noted, bringing him back to reality.

"No. Just um... know where to start, honestly." His left leg came to rest on the floor. "I feel kind of stupid being here."

"Why's that?"

"Because I know there are people out there with real problems and I'm just a guy who wants to make a sex tape with his wife." He gave a nervous laugh. "Your diploma's a little crooked." He pointed toward the wall.

Nathan studied him. This wasn't the same Ethan who he met in his front yard, or the one he had beers with at Murphy's. The self-reflection seemed to rattle him in a way Nathan didn't expect. He ran his palm through his beard, ignoring the comment about the diploma.

"You feel guilty being here. Why is that?"

Ethan finally made eye contact with Nathan. "Shouldn't I just be happy that I have Mei? Like I have this beautiful wife who loves me, who wants to... have sex with me. That should be enough, right? Why should I get to decide what she's comfortable with?"

"Can I push back on something?" Nathan asked.

"Sure."

"You said 'who am I to decide what she should be comfortable with.' But wanting intimacy with your wife isn't deciding anything for her. It's a desire. And desires aren't demands unless you make them demands." He held Ethan's gaze. "Have you demanded anything from Mei?"

"No. I mean, I asked her to try therapy, but I told her if she didn't like it after one session she didn't have to go back."

"And she came back."

"Yeah." His brow creased like he was trying to work out where Nathan was going with this. "She did."

"So you made a request, she had the freedom to decline, and she chose to continue. That doesn't sound like you decided anything for her. You had a perfectly valid concern about your intimacy as a couple. You voiced it and she responded. That's healthy."

Ethan's shoulders dropped an inch. The tension along his jaw released. Nathan almost smiled. It never got old, watching someone give themselves permission to want what they already wanted. All you had to do was say it back to them in a voice that sounded like authority.

Ethan nodded slowly. His knee had stopped bouncing. "I never really thought about it that way."

"Most people don't." Nathan picked up his notepad. "So back to the tape. You never answered my question. Let's talk about what it actually means to you."

Ethan straightened and let out a deep breath. The nerves were still there, but he pushed them aside.

"It's not even really about the tape itself," Ethan started. "I mean, it is. But it's more like..." He trailed off, his hand making a circular motion in the air like he was trying to grab the right word. "Proof? That sounds weird. Not proof like evidence. More like... a version of us that can't be taken away."

"Taken away?"

"Like, I want to be able to look back at it. At her. See her enjoying herself, see her face. She's always in her head about stuff and if she can just let that go..." He shifted on the couch, a flush creeping up his neck. "I think about what happened after that first session. I know you don't want the details, but if you could have seen her that night." He closed his eyes, picturing it. "I relive that moment over and over. I want that but... not in my head."

Nathan leaned forward. He very much wanted to hear the details of that night. He shifted in his chair. It would all come in time.

Nathan cleared his throat. "It's less about making the tape and more about watching it back."

"Yeah. Exactly."

"Tell me more about that. When you imagine the tape exists and you're watching it, what are you picturing?"

Ethan's face flushed. His gaze drifted toward the window, then came back. "It's um... it's like I said. I see her... Mei. She's got this look of pleasure on her face and..." He looked down at his feet. "She's moaning. Like, really into it."

Nathan wrote a single word on his notepad: *watching*.

"So what excites you most isn't the act itself." He nodded slowly, feeding the answer to Ethan. "It's watching Mei experience pleasure."

"Yeah." Ethan smiled. "That's exactly it."

Nathan underlined the word.

"Let me ask you something related." He clicked his pen twice. "When it comes to visual stimulation like porn, what do you gravitate to?"

The shift couldn't have been more obvious. Ethan's posture tightened. His arms crossed, then uncrossed, like he couldn't decide where to put them. Nathan bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning. The man loved to overshare when it came to his wife, his sex life. But the second he touched on something remotely taboo Ethan completely clammed up.

"I don't really... I mean, I used to. In college. Everyone did." He forced a laugh. "But I kind of stopped."

"When did you stop?"

"I don't know. After Mei and I got serious, I guess. She was already dealing with so much stuff around sex, and I didn't want to..." He trailed off. His thumbs circling each other. "I didn't want her to feel like she wasn't enough."

"So you stopped watching because of Mei's relationship with sex." Nathan sat up in a more authoritative posture. "Let me ask you a different question."

Ethan nodded happy for the change of subject.

"In this video you plan to make with Mei. What's your plan exactly?"

"I just told you I want to see her—"

"No, I understand why you want to make it, but my question is how."

Ethan turned his head, still not understanding the question.

"You're going to need to think about things like where to put the camera, what positions you both like coupled with what will actually look good when played back." He paused as he watched Ethan finally catch up to what he was saying. "Meanwhile, the second I bring up porn you get all self-conscious and admit you haven't watched it in years."

Ethan slipped further into the couch, hoping it would eat him alive.

"I'm not judging you." Nathan offered a warm smile. "But it's something you should think about. How can you direct something that requires a vocabulary you haven't developed because you've been avoiding the material."

"So... what, you want me to watch porn?"

"See," Nathan smiled. "Therapy isn't all bad." They shared a laugh before he continued. "I want you to spend some time before our next session thinking about what you find visually compelling. You don't have to call it porn if that word makes you uncomfortable. But most men

your age have a sense of what they respond to. Their likes and dislikes. It's okay to develop that awareness." He shrugged. "Just observe your response. Don't judge it."

"That's it?" Ethan looked almost relieved. "Just... watch stuff and think about it?"

"That's it. Think of it as preparation. You're asking Mei to be vulnerable on camera. The least you can do is understand your own visual landscape first."

Ethan nodded. It made sense. He was actually surprised he hadn't thought about it himself. This was a logical step toward the thing he already wanted.

"Let me ask you something else. Totally different direction." Nathan's gaze turned toward the clock on the wall. Fifteen minutes left.

"Sure."

"Have you and Mei ever talked about past relationships? Sexual partners before each other?"

"Not really." His jaw tightened as he ran his palms over the front of his pants. "I mean, I know she dated in college. We both did. But we didn't see the point in getting into anything specific. She's pretty private when it comes to that kind of stuff."

"Does that bother you?"

"I don't... huh." His gaze went to Nathan. "I never really thought about it. I guess I figured it wasn't my business. Should it?"

"Not at all. That's a respectful instinct." Nathan nodded. "But it can also be healthy for couples to understand each other's full history. Not the details necessarily, but often times we carry things from those experiences into the current relationship." He shrugged. "It helps to understand what those things are."

Ethan was leaning forward now, his elbows on his knees. "You think I should ask her about it?"

Nathan glanced at the clock again. "That's a conversation for when you're both ready. Not yet." He closed his notepad and stood. "We're at time."

Ethan rose from the couch and extended his hand. "Thanks, Nathan. This was... I didn't know what to expect, but this was good."

"You did well." Nathan shook his hand.

"Can I um... can I ask you something else real quick?"

"Sure."

"Mei's first session she mentioned you hypnotized her. I guess I'm just curious why we didn't do that."

"Not all patients are the same, Ethan. Mei had a lot of trouble opening up. We used deep relaxation to help with you." He cupped his shoulder. "You my friend, have no issues opening up."

"Yeah. Definitely." Ethan pulled on his jacket with an embarrassed chuckle. "Thanks again for agreeing to see me. I'll get started on that um... homework."

Nathan smiled and walked him to the door. Mei wasn't anywhere to be seen. His gaze drifted toward the upstairs window. He needed to see her footage.

It had been four days since her session with Dr. Coleman, and her mind was still mostly quiet. She noticed it most in the mornings when she would stand in front of the closet trying to decide what to wear. Today it was an emerald green wrap dress she'd bought last year for a work conference but decided not to wear. The tag was still on it when she pulled it from the hanger. When she tried it on at the store Ethan went on and on about how good she looked in it. She wasn't so sure, but when he said he was going to grab an associate to get their opinion she quickly agreed to buy it to save herself the embarrassment.

Today she'd cut the tag off the dress and told herself she'd give it a chance. Looking at herself in the mirror, she didn't hate it. The hem hung down to her ankles keeping her completely covered. The neckline dipped a little lower than she would have liked, the 'v' showing off more collarbone than she was used to. It tied at her hip, and was loose enough to not make her feel self-conscious, but fit her body in a way that still made her look like a woman. She'd paired it with flats and small white-gold earrings Ethan had given her for their anniversary.

She smiled at herself in the mirror. She looked good, professional. She tucked her hair behind her ear and grabbed her clutch.

As she walked toward the front of the small brick building of Rapid Springs Elementary she watched the buses dropping off students, the kids laughing and rushing toward the door. She'd been a teacher here for three years now. She loved her job, loved the kids, even if they made her want to pull her hair out every time they found a new trend they thought was funny and brought it to school.

"Satan's spawn." Rachel, Mei's closest friend here, said as she caught up with her.

"They're not that bad."

Rachel started at Rapid Springs the same year as Mei. They were around the same age and hit it off almost immediately. Rachel taught fifth grade math and unlike Mei she had no problem speaking her mind. It was one of the qualities Mei found most endearing.

"Just wait." Rachel laughed and hooked her arm in Mei's. "You get to deal with them when they're young and sweet. Once they get to me their hormones are all out of whack and they feed off your fear."

"Oh stop it. You love them." Mei tugged her arm, laughing.

"I love having summers off. Cruise season is the perfect time to find some sugar daddy who doesn't want kids and can let me quit my job." She held the front door to the building open as Mei walked through still snickering. "Speaking of, you seem different."

Heat colored Mei's cheeks. "Oh, just a new dress. Well, not new, but I haven't worn it yet."

Rachel took a step back giving Mei a more critical eye. "No, it's not that." She held Mei's gaze for a second longer. "You seem more... confident. I like it."

The bell rang before Mei could formulate a response. "Gotta run," Rachel said, pulling her into a quick hug. "Find me at lunch we can talk more."

They parted ways and Mei spent the next three hours replaying Rachel's words in her head. She didn't feel more confident. If anything, she was slightly embarrassed that Rachel noticed anything different at all. She was happy to spend the rest of the morning talking to second graders who asked questions like "what does purple smell like" instead of commenting on her wardrobe or personality.

The lunch bell rang a few minutes after twelve and Mei walked her students down the hall toward the cafeteria. The smell of burnt cheese and tomatoes told her they were having grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch, and she was happy to have packed. She walked to the teacher's lounge where Rachel sat with her back to her with two other teachers, Dana and Lisa.

Mei grabbed her lunch from the fridge, a salad with vinaigrette dressing, and took the open seat next to Rachel.

"Cute dress," Lisa said, causing Mei to blush as she mixed in the dressing.

"Right? It looks good on her, doesn't it? I was just telling her this morning she seemed more confident."

The table nodded in agreement and Mei had a sudden urge to go eat burnt grilled cheese with her students.

"So," Dana chimed in. "Parent-teacher conferences next week. Who's dreading it?"

"I already have three emails from Marcus's mom." Mei smiled, grateful for the change of topic. "She sent an email the same day letters went home."

Lisa shook her head slowly, still chewing.

"At least Marcus's mom just wants to talk." Dana leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "You know Connor Bailey's dad? Divorced, always shows up in a polo that lets his chest hair hang out?"

"You mean porn-stash?" Rachel chimed in with a smirk.

"That's the one. Last year during conferences he waited until the other parents left and asked me if I wanted to grab dinner sometime." Her fork waved in the air as she animated the conversation.

Mei's eyes went wide. "No."

"Hand to God. Told me I seemed like I could use some company." Dana reached for her drink. "Sir, this is an elementary school."

Mei was laughing hard enough that she had to cover her mouth. She couldn't imagine the horror of having a parent ask her out. She'd likely just quit on the spot and tell Ethan they needed to move.

"What did you say?" Mei managed.

"I told him I was pretty sure my cat provided better company than he could provide."

The table erupted. Mei wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, still giggling. It was nice to be able to laugh like this. She usually kept a pretty tight leash at work and had forgotten how fun her colleagues could be.

"Mei, you have a bit of a creeper in your class too right? Jimmy Davis' dad?" Rachel pointed at her with the fork. "The one who stares?"

The laughter cooled. Mei nodded, her smile thinning. "He's not... I mean, he's never said anything like that. He just looks at me a certain way during conferences and it makes my skin crawl."

"Girl." Dana reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "You want me to sit in? I've been working on my death stare. I think I have it mastered."

She crossed her arms and pinched her eyebrows together. She looked more like a menacing Disney princess than anything remotely terrifying, and Mei nearly spit her water out.

"I might take you up on that."

The door swung open and Jack Johnson stepped in. Mei couldn't help but notice the way his t-shirt seemed to strain against his arms. His eyes met hers and she quickly looked back down at her salad as his gym shoes squeaked across the linoleum and stopped in front of their table.

"Ladies." He held up a clipboard. "Quick interruption. Daddy-Daughter dance is in three weeks and I'm putting together a committee. Need help with decorations, music, the whole thing." He sat the clipboard on the table. "Any volunteers? There's going to be pizza."

"Good pizza?" Rachel asked not impressed.

"For you," his smile grew, "I'll spring for Papa Johns."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Fine. But only because I like their dipping sauce."

"That's what I like to hear." He jotted something on the clipboard, then looked at Mei. "Mei, you've got to help me out."

She stared a hole through her salad, pushing the lettuce around.

"Last year was just Baby Shark on a loop and I swear if I have to watch one more dad try to do the macarena I might die."

Mei couldn't stop herself from laughing. Her hand flew to her mouth and she looked up at Jack, his green eyes sparkling in the florescent light.

"I don't know I um—"

"Come on, don't make me beg." He gave his best puppy-dog eyes. "I still have some self-respect." He started to kneel.

"Fine fine, just," she giggled. "Get off the floor."

"That's my girl." He winked at her and quickly scribbled her name down. "Thank you, ladies. This is already looking like it won't be the worst dance in school history." His gaze held Mei's a second longer before he spun around and left the room.

"Oh, he's into you." Rachel said the second the door closed behind Jack.

"Me?" A flush started at her neck and climbed. "He was just being nice. I don't know—"

"Girl, you're as red as a tomato," Dana joined in.

Mei buried her face in her hands.

"He's cute. He's got that whole dad bad former athlete thing going for him." Lisa nudged her leg under the table.

"Oh my God, Stop." Mei pressed her palms against her cheeks. They were burning. "He's like that with everyone. He was just being funny."

"Oh he was being funny alright." Dana speared a crouton. "But only for you."

"I'm married, Dana. He knows that."

The three friends exchanged a startled look. The outburst was unexpected. Dana's grin softened. She raised both hands.

"I know you are, honey. We're just teasing."

"I know. Sorry." Mei sipped her water. "I just... We're just friends."

The conversation moved on. Lisa mentioned a student struggling with performance anxiety. Dana circled back to conference prep. Mei listened, injected herself into the conversation when needed, but her mind was elsewhere. Not so much on Jack but on the observations her friends had made. Rachel mentioned she seemed more confident, Dana suggested Jack was flirting with her. She didn't see any of it. Was she giving off some type of signal she wasn't aware of?

The bell rang and chairs scraped back. Mei gathered her things and dumped her salad container in the trash. Rachel caught her arm in the hallway before they split toward their classrooms.

"Hey. You know we were just messing with you, right?"

"I know." Mei smiled but looked toward the floor. "I'm fine."

Rachel studied her for a second. She knew there was more going on, but also knew her friend enough to know not to push too hard. "Okay. Text me later?"

"Yeah."

Rachel squeezed her arm and headed down the hall. Mei watched her go, then turned toward her own classroom, her dress swishing against her leg. Her phone buzzed in her purse before she reached her room.

Ethan: *Sierra's coming down Friday for game night. Her and James are going through it again. That ok?*

Poor Sierra. Mei wished she lived closer. They always had so much fun when they were together, but the only time she seemed to visit anymore was when there was something going on with her husband.

Of course. Tell her she can stay the night if she needs to. We can play Ticket to Ride. =)

She pocketed the phone and slipped back into her classroom just as the first wave of kids came barreling through the door. As she settled behind her desk, her mind drifted for just a moment.

She could ask Sierra what to wear for this school dance. If Mei was going to be dragged into it she might as well look the part.

The house was too quiet.

Mei had left for school two hours ago. Ethan had spent the first hour answering emails from a client who kept flip-flopping on how they wanted their logo to look. He spent the second pretending he wasn't thinking about what Nathan had asked him to do. Part of him was hoping he'd get another client email, something to give him an excuse to not do it.

He shook his head. When had he started feeling like a teenager afraid of being caught? There was nothing unusual about watching porn, everyone did it. *Did Mei?* He realized he'd never actually asked her. But the thought of it seemed so unrealistic. Mei could barely talk about sex at all. The idea of her watching porn was so far fetched he thought it impossible. He ignored the spike of his pulse.

When it was clear there would be no other distractions, he closed his work laptop and opened his personal one. He typed three letters into the search bar, then deleted them. Stood up and walked to the front door, ensuring it was locked.

He sat back down and opened the browser again. This time he clicked the little mask icon for incognito mode. He went to his company website, then closed the tab and ensured it didn't show up in his history. He checked a third time before deciding it was safe.

He started to type: POR, then stopped. The living room blinds were open. The street was empty, but it was entirely possible the mailman would come around soon. He deleted the entry on his browser, stood and quickly shut then blinds.

When he returned to the couch he let out a nervous laugh. There was a time in college when he would walk around campus with this stuff playing on his phone. Now, he was ensuring the house was locked up tighter than Fort Knox before opening the browser.

The site loaded with the subtlety of a fireworks show. Thumbnails filled the screen and he actually jumped. He turned the brightness down two notches and his hand hovered over the trackpad as his eyes scanned the categories along the top of the page.

He clicked on something at random. A short clip, just something to get the gears flowing and—

"OH GOD, YES. FUCK ME HAR—"

Ethan slammed the laptop shut. The woman's voice had exploded through the speakers like a bomb going off in his living room, her moans mixing with the sharp clap of skin against skin loud enough to rattle the windows. He sat frozen, heart hammering, eyes darting to the front door expecting Nathan to come over any minute and congratulate him on a job well done.

He sat there for a full thirty seconds before reopening the laptop, turning the volume down to almost silent, and pressing play again.

It was exactly like he remembered. The woman on screen was blonde, her arms full of tattoos. She was currently screaming at her lover to fuck her harder, to which he gleefully did even going so far as to slap her ass as he thrust into her. Ethan rolled his eyes unable to see the appeal and closed it.

He tried another. Better quality. A brunette and a man on a white bed, the camera positioned at the foot of the mattress. They were already past the foreplay, as she began to ride him.

"Fuck that feels good," the woman moaned as she arched her back, her nails digging into her lover's chest.

Ethan felt himself stir. The position was hot. He imagined Mei after her first session with Nathan. She had climbed on top of him that night. His breath grew rapid, and Ethan shifted on the sofa. The camera angle wasn't great, he could only see her back, her hips move. But her hair was dark like Mei's and that made it easier to get into.

His hand slid to the front of his shorts and he squeezed without really thinking about it. The woman on screen let out another moan, her head tilting back slightly.

"You going to cum for me? Are you going to fill me with your cum?"

That broke the spell. Ethan paused the video. Between the poor angle of the camera and the terrible acting, women didn't really sound like that, he was completely put off. He pressed the back button on the browser determined to find something that worked.

He stared at the search bar. Typed: *petite asian young*

The results loaded and his stomach flipped. Rows of thumbnails, women with dark hair and small frames. He scrolled past the first several. His hand paused midway down the screen. The thumbnail showed a woman in her mid-twenties with dark hair who didn't look too far off from Mei.

The video seemed to be from a camera off to the side of the bed. The woman was on her hands and knees giving Ethan a perfect view of her entire body. She was naked, her chest just large enough to sway as she sank onto the bed. The man behind her was smiling, his hands already on her hips, his clothes nowhere to be seen. Mei had never tried that position with him. She always preferred missionary, always wanted him close, face to face, and he'd never pushed.

But this woman arched into it. Her fingers twisting into the sheets as the man pulled her into him.

"Ahhh." Her moans with light, not theatrical like the other videos and the camera seemed to pick it up perfectly. Ethan's hand slipped into his shorts as the couple on screen started to really get into it.

Ethan watched her face. He noticed the way her mouth would open in a silent scream as she pushed herself back into her lover. Her tongue would slide past her lips a low hum escaping from her throat as the man behind her grunted.

"Yessss," the woman moaned, her eyes rolling to the back of her head. The camera was close enough that Ethan could see the muscles in her back tighten with each push. The faintest sheen of sweat along her spine.

He stroked himself slowly, his eyes locked on the screen. His mind had gone quiet. No more thinking about angles or framing or preparation. Just the warmth of his hand and the sounds she was making and the way her body moved. He was hard enough that it ached.

The man changed his pace to something slower and deeper. The woman dropped to her forearms and pressed her face into the mattress, a muffled cry escaping into the sheets. Ethan's grip tightened. His hips shifted, pressing into his own hand, his breathing shallow now.

Would Mei ever agree to this?

The thought slipped through before he could stop it. His wife in that same position. On her hands and knees. The sounds the woman was making were more like Mei and it was impossible for him not to make the connection.

His hand didn't stop.

On screen, the woman rose back up on her hands. Her right arm disappeared beneath her body. The camera wasn't able to capture all of it, but Ethan knew exactly what she was doing. His hand moved faster watching the woman's fingers work between her legs while her lover took her from behind.

"Yessss, yes, don't stop." Her whispers were getting louder, more desperate.

Ethan's hand moved faster. The heat in his stomach was coiling tighter, his thighs tensing. Her words mixed with the wet sound of her fingers and the rhythm of the man behind her. Her back arched sharply and she cried out.

Has Mei already done something like this?

"Fuck—" His body locked. The orgasm slammed through him before he was ready, his hips bucking off the couch as his hand clenched and his jaw clamped shut. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Wave after wave crashing through him while the video played on, the woman still moaning, still touching herself, the sounds layering over the aftershocks until he finally went still.

He sat there. Chest heaving. Hand still wrapped around himself. The video was still playing but he wasn't watching anymore. He was staring at the ceiling, trying to reassemble the sequence of what just happened.

It had hit so fast he couldn't separate the strands. The video, Mei, the thought of her doing... that. It all collapsed into one white-hot second that sent him into orbit.

He pulled his hand free and stumbled into the kitchen, rinsing them in the sink. He left his hands under the running water for longer than needed trying to replay exactly what he liked.

But the thing that kept surfacing wasn't the angle or the sounds. It was that last thought. The one right before he came. *Has Mei already done something like this?* He didn't even know where it came from. She looked like Mei and his brain just... went there. Mei on her hands and knees. Mei making those sounds. With someone who wasn't him. It landed in his head half a second before he finished and now he couldn't untangle the two.

He shut the water off and stood there dripping on the tile. No. It wasn't that. It was the camera. The way it was positioned to catch everything without getting in the way. Her face, her body, the sounds. All of it felt real because of where the camera was. That's what did it. He was a visual guy. He responded to composition. That's all it was.

The side angle. That was the key. The other videos had been shot from above or from the foot of the bed, and both felt distant in a way that lost the intimacy. But that last one, the camera off to

the side, you could see everything. Her face, her body, the way she moved, the sounds she was making. If he set up a tripod on Mei's side of the bed, maybe chest height, he could make that work.

The position was the harder question. She'd never gone for anything other than missionary or her on top. But her sessions with Nathan seemed to be working. She seemed less in her head. Maybe he would wait until after her next session. That seemed to be when she was her calmest. He could reschedule his session with Nathan, use that time to try to set the mood.

A plan began to form in his head as he dried his hands. Suddenly the idea of making a sex tape with his wife didn't feel like such a longshot.

Here's the 3-2 pitch to Cole Young.

Ethan sat in the bed of his truck, drinking an IPA as the game played on the radio. It was unseasonably warm for April in Washington. The sun had just started to set when Nathan emerged from his house, a glass of wine in his hand. Ethan gave a cheerful wave as his friend and therapist made the short walk over.

"You know the game is on TV, right?" Nathan stood next to the truck and they both grimaced as Cole went down swinging.

"Too nice of a night to be inside." He nodded toward the house where Mei kneeled in front of one of the planters, a large sun hat on, and pulled weeds. "Besides, Mei had some stuff to do out here. Thought I'd join her. You follow baseball?"

"Grew up a Marlins fan and going to games with my dad." He paused, taking a drink of his wine. "But I'd love to see T-Mobile Park sometime. I've heard good things."

"We should go sometime. My job always has tickets they are giving away. I can grab some."

Nathan's mouth opened to respond then closed. He scratched his beard for a few seconds like he was considering the offer.

"Yeah. That could be fun."

A silver Lexus turned onto Harborview Lane and pulled into the driveway behind Ethan's truck. Ethan smiled, jumping down from the tailgate as Sierra stepped out of the car. Her sunglasses were pushed up, pulling her blonde hair back off her face. She wore a pair of jeans, a Ramones t-shirt and a fitted jacket. She was already scanning the yard when her eyes landed on Ethan.

"How's my favorite baby brother?" She walked over to him with a smile and pulled him into a long hug.

"I'm your only brother," he said, releasing the hug.

"Which makes you the de-fact-o favorite." The smile was still plastered on her face and Ethan knew it was a lie.

"Hi, I'm—"

"Holy shit. You're Nathan Coleman." Sierra's eyes went wide.

"I am."

"I have your books. Your TED talk was inspirational you're... sorry, I'm totally fan-girling, aren't I?"

Nathan laughed, setting his wine glass on the bed of the truck. "It's always nice to meet a fan. Ethan mentioned he had a sister." He shook her hand, his gaze never leaving her brown eyes. "Never mentioned she was so well read, though."

Sierra blushed slightly and turned to Ethan. "I like him already."

Mei stood from the porch, removing her gardening gloves, and walked across the lawn to meet them.

"How was the drive?" She reached out touching Sierra's arm.

Sierra responded by pulling Mei into a hug. "It was fine. Sorry I didn't make it sooner."

Mei returned the hug, looking briefly at Ethan with a look of concern, before the older woman released her.

Ethan clapped his hands. "Alright. We were actually about to set up for game night." He looked at Nathan. "You want to join us?"

Nathan glanced at Mei, then back to Ethan. "I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Not at all. But you should know, Mei gets pretty competitive when it comes to Ticket to Ride."

Nathan glanced at Mei. She smiled, then quickly turned around and headed back toward the house without a word.

"Then I'd be happy to."

They headed inside. Sierra fell into step beside Nathan, her hands shoved in her jacket pockets. "So, Nathan. What's a best-selling author from Florida doing in a place like Harmony?"

"Big cities are great for publicity and trying to make a name for yourself, but it can be exhausting when you're just trying to lead a normal life." He held the door open for her. "Plus the humidity down there is brutal. What about you? You strike me as someone in design, or maybe marketing?"

"Oh, so close." She smiled as she stepped past him. "I actually have my own podcast."

"I've never really gotten into those, I have to admit. I'm old fashioned. Still prefer to get my news from the television."

"Okay grandpa. You sure it's not past your bedtime?"

Nathan nearly spat his wine, he laughed so hard. "Oh, I think we're going to get along just fine."

They gathered around the dining room as Mei went to the kitchen to wash up. Ethan grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge, offering one first to Sierra who accepted then Nathan who declined, citing the wine glass still in his hand.

"Lovely house you have here, Ethan." Nathan looked around the room admiring the photos on the wall and the Chinese Knick-knacks on the shelves.

"Thanks. Mei deserve all the credit though. She spent weeks deciding on color palettes and furniture."

"It wasn't that bad." Mei appeared in the entry-way. She had a glass of wine in her hand, her eyes trained on the rim.

"Well it's lovely." Nathan turned his attention to Sierra, allowing Mei an opportunity to calm her nerves. "Ethan mentioned you live out of town?"

"Bellingham. About two hours north." She took a sip of beer. "My husband James and I moved up there a few years ago for his work."

"More like dragged her up there," Ethan corrected, cracking his beer, "and then—"

"Ethan." Sierra didn't raise her voice, but her look was stern. "If we're going to start telling stories I'm sure Nathan would love to hear about the time you cried watching *The Notebook*."

Nathan's lips pressed together, fighting a smile. Ethan focused on his beer.

"Sorry," Sierra said to Nathan. "He was born without a filter. I tried to convince my parents he was switched at birth."

"No apology needed." Nathan took a drink of his wine. "But for what it's worth, I'm a much better listener than I am a board game player." He looked over at Ethan. "I cried too."

"See?" Ethan pointed at Nathan. "It's normal."

Mei pulled out Ticket to Ride and started sorting the cards. "Does everyone know how to play?" She kept her eyes on the cards, her voice low.

For the next hour the four talked and played like they'd been friends their whole lives. After Nathan finished his wine, he switched to an IPA, something Ethan seemed to take as a personal victory. Sierra was the obvious competitor at the table, making the table louder and keeping everyone engaged. She blocked Ethan's route to Denver with all the vigor you'd expect from a sibling rivalry.

Nathan remained quiet for the most part. He was examining Mei as much as his cards. It was good to see her engaging. He made a mental note that while her eye contact was minimal she wasn't shying away from conversations, and in a few instances even initiating it herself.

The conversation drifted from one topic to another and it wasn't until the game was nearly over that James was brought up again. Ethan was ready for it. He knew it was the real reason for her visit. He wanted to help her. To make her see that she was too good for the guy, but she was more stubborn than she'd admit.

"What is it your husband does?" Nathan asked as he planned his next route.

"He's the CTO for a small tech startup." Her grip tightened on her can as she took a long drink.

"He's been real dedicated to his job since that new assistant started," Ethan mumbled, unable to help himself.

Sierra shot him a glare. "It's probably not as bad as I make it sound." Her voice said she didn't believe her own lie. "He's just been working late a lot recently." She looked to Nathan. "Which is a totally normal thing, right?"

Nathan nodded. "It can be. Have you asked him about it?"

Ethan laughed and Sierra tried to murder him with her eyes.

"I have." She placed a route without looking up. "But when I ask about it he gets defensive. And then I push, and then I'm paranoid, and then we don't talk for three days." She chugged her beer. "The man could look me in the eye during a hurricane and tell me it's sunny."

Ethan's jaw tightened. He'd heard this before.

"How long has it been like that?" Nathan asked. He'd stopped looking at the board and looked at Sierra directly.

"On and off for a couple of years. It actually got better for a while after I read your book." She raised her beer to him. "The intimacy stuff improved. But the trust..." She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe I am paranoid."

"Do you believe that?"

"Some days." She finished her drink. "Most days I think something's off and I just can't prove it."

"Trust your gut, Sierra." He held her gaze. "In my experience when something feels off, it usually is."

Sierra's eyes held his, tears starting to well in them. "Thanks." Her mouth curved up slightly. "You have no idea how bad I needed to hear someone say that."

"I probably have some idea," he said with the faintest smile trying to lighten the mood.

Sierra laughed and wiped her eye. "Okay, someone talk now, please."

"Oh," Mei said, taking a large drink of wine. "I got talked into chaperoning this dance at school. A daddy-daughter thing."

Sierra's eyes went wide. She spun toward Ethan. "Oh my God. Baby brother is finally taking his lady to a proper dance."

"Actually," Ethan looked at Mei. "This is the first I'm hearing about it."

"It's not—" Mei's cheeks flushed. "It's not a big deal. They were asking for volunteers and the table I was at with Rachel and some of the other girls sort of got nominated."

"Well, I love it." Sierra was already grinning. "Any idea what you're going to wear?"

"I don't know. That's actually..." Mei looked back down at her wine. "I was hoping you might have ideas."

"Are you comfortable going to that?" Ethan reached out putting his hand on her leg. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"Yeah... no. I mean..." She reached down taking Ethan's hand, her gaze drifting to Nathan. "I think I'll be okay." She turned back toward Sierra. "But nothing too... you know."

"I got you, girl." Sierra pulled out her phone. "Hot but conservative. I can make this work."

"Oh, God," Mei groaned, finishing the rest of her wine.

"I'm glad to hear you're putting yourself out there a little, Mei." Nathan smiled, his eyes flicking to Ethan.

"Thanks, D... Nathan." She met his eyes for just a moment, then looked back down at her cards.

The game never got finished. Sierra checked her phone and sighed. "I should head back before it gets too late." She stood and pulled Mei into a hug. "Thank you for this. I'll text you tomorrow with some dress ideas."

She turned to Nathan. "Thank you. For listening. You're annoyingly good at it."

"It was my pleasure. I hope we see each other again soon," Nathan said, standing with her.

"Oh, don't threaten me with a good time." Her eyes sparkled as she held his gaze.

Nathan grabbed his empty wine glass from the table. "I should head out too. Thank you both for this. I can't remember the last time I had an evening this enjoyable."

Ethan walked them to the door. He watched them cross the yard in the same direction before splitting. He closed the door and found Mei already heading toward the stairs.

"Save the mess for tomorrow. "She bit her lip. "Let's go to bed."

Ethan couldn't lock up fast enough.

CHAPTER 5 — CHOICE POINT

The highway was dark and empty. Sierra merged onto I-5 with her window cracked, allowing the air to cool her cheeks. The stereo picked up where she'd left it on the drive down.

"—and when detectives finally pulled the phone records, they found seventeen calls to the same number in the forty-eight hours before she disappeared. None of them had been flagged during the initial investigation." A second of silence. Then: "Next time on Dead Air, Sierra sits down with the victim's sister, who says the warning signs were there from the beginning, everyone just chose to look the other way. That's next Tuesday, wherever you get your podcasts."

She reached for the dial and switched it off. She wasn't in the mood to work right now. For the first time in a long time she was happy. She drove in silence for a minute, replaying the nights events. Nathan was cute, charming, single, and most of all he paid attention to her when she talked.

She couldn't stop smiling.

The Decision

PATH ONE: THE WIFE

"He was right. I should trust my gut. I need to give James one more chance to make things right."

Every conversation with James always went the same way. She would accuse him of having an affair, he would get mad, and they would argue. If she wanted to make this work she needed to let him talk. She would go home and instead of accusing James she would just explain how she was feeling, give him a chance to come clean. If he could do that, then maybe they could move past it, start fresh.

PATH TWO: THE PODCASTER

"As charming as Nathan was, her BS detector was going off the charts. Something about his story just wasn't adding up."

She knew herself well enough to know her brain wouldn't shut off until she did her research. She would go home, do a quick google search on him, maybe scan his social media pages. No one moves to the other side of the country just because they don't like the weather. He was hiding something and she would find it.

PATH THREE: THE WOMAN

"James is cheating on me. He has been for years. Nathan is the first man to make me feel like maybe I should turn the tables."

It took less than a minute to find his Facebook account. It looked like he hadn't been active in awhile, but people never really delete their apps. She could send him a message. Tell him how much fun she had, how she'd like to see him again. There was a spot about half way between Bellingham and Harmony. She'd be free next week if he wanted to get to know her better.

Path One: Sierra should try one last time to work things out with her husband

Path Two: Something isn't adding up. Sierra should put her investigative skills to good use

Path Three: Sierra and Nathan had a real connection. She's lonely and he's single

42 votes total

Hey friends! Hope you're all having a good week. This chapter is a bit of an oddball, while also being one of my favorites so far in the story. I had about four scenes planned for this, then before I knew it, scene one had become three scenes and the word count hit about 7k (classic, I know).

All that said, this chapter doesn't have a choice point. My plan is to shift gears for a minute to work on Window then as soon as that gets out, I'll work on the new chapter with all of the choices I had planned.

Can't wait to hear what you think. Enjoy!

Nathan stood in front of the bathroom mirror, tilting his head to examine the gray threading through his beard. He'd let it grow longer than usual over the past two weeks. The scruff had become part of his new persona. It made him look distinguished, more approachable. But the gray was a different story. It aged him in ways he wasn't ready to accept. He ran the trimmer along his jawline, cleaning up the edges without taking too much off, ensuring most of the silver was gone by the time he set it down.

His phone buzzed on the counter. Sierra.

They'd been chatting regularly for three days, ever since game night at Ethan's. She'd reached out on Facebook first, a message so direct he wasn't sure how to respond at first: *Had a great time tonight. Perhaps we can do it again, just the two of us. Out of town away from distractions. Wanna grab a drink sometime?*

Nathan had drafted a response shutting the entire thing down. She was married. She was Ethan's sister. Nothing good could come from it. He'd stared at that draft for ten minutes before deleting it character by character.

Because she was Ethan's sister. She was another angle into the Morrison family, another thread he could pull when trying to determine how to unlock Mei's potential. Sierra was close with Mei, and even closer to Ethan. She could volunteer information without realizing it. Help guide the couple into Nathan's web without him ever getting directly involved.

He drafted a new response. He loved getting to know her. He had no idea Ethan's sister could be so fun. He'd love to get a drink sometime.

Sometime was today. Nathan grabbed a tie from his closet as he opened the message.

Sierra: *still on for tonight?*

Nathan: *Looking forward to it. Made us a reservation at Larkspur. 7pm?*

He walked back to the mirror, knotting the tie.

Sierra: *That's cute. But this isn't the 70s. There's a bar next door to the hotel. Pine Street Tap. I'll meet you there at 7.*

Nathan stared at the screen, pulling his tie loose as he clicked his tongue in irritation. Did she have any idea the hassle he had to go through to make that reservation?

Nathan: *Ok. See ya soon.*

Pine Street Tap sat wedged between the hotel and a Seven Eleven. He almost walked right past. The sign was nothing more than a faded plaque above the green door. The windows were covered with so much dirt and pollen he couldn't see inside.

Nathan pulled the door open and the floor grabbed his dress shoes on the first step. His nose crinkled as each step emanated a suction-like noise that he could make out over the soft classic rock playing behind the bar. Three televisions hung above the bar. Two were showing the Mariners game, the other jeopardy.

He found her at the far end of the bar. Jeans, a white halter top that left her shoulders bare and dipped low enough between her breasts that he couldn't not look. She'd taken her leather jacket off and draped it over the stool beside her. Her hair was down, tucked behind one ear. She was already nursing a drink, eyes glued to the TV behind the bar.

He was overdressed. He scanned the room trying to gauge how many people were watching him, wondering if he got lost and wandered in off the streets. He was starting to think the same thing.

"There you are." Sierra had spun in her chair, looking at him. "I was starting to think you were going to stand me up."

Nathan gave up the thought of retreating back into the sunlight and let the door swing shut behind him. "It's two minutes past seven."

"So, you admit you're late." She stood and met him half way, wrapping her arms around his neck in a hug. Nathan's body went stiff as her chest pressed into his. "Not a good start for where you think this night is headed," she whispered, before releasing the hug and seeing his face red in embarrassment.

"Interesting wardrobe choice." She laughed over her shoulder as she went back to the bar.

"I may have gravely misunderstood the vibe."

"This will help." She slid a bottle of Bud Light his way. "But you need to catch up. I'm already on my second one."

Nathan nodded and settled into the open chair next to her. He sipped the beer slowly, watching her from the corner of his eye. He wasn't used to being on his back foot. He needed to recalibrate. He was here for a reason. Sierra and Mei seemed close when he saw them together. She'd known Ethan his entire life. If he could get her talking about them he'd have a gold mine of information. He wanted to know what Ethan was like before he met Mei. How much of his identity he'd lost to his marriage that Nathan may be able to leverage. All he had to do was guide the conversation there without her noticing.

"So, game night. Is that something the three of you do a lot?"

Sierra turned to him, the bottle pressed to her lips. "Not as much as we used to. You know how it goes. Adulting gets in the way. And with..." she took another sip, "my home situation it's not always easy to find the time."

Nathan let his shoulders drop. "Yeah. I'm sure that's hard. Your husband—"

"Shot!" She flagged the bartender down. "My friend here will have a shot of Jack."

"I will?"

Sierra grinned. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. We're playing a game. Every time one of us brings up James they have to take a shot."

"That feels like something you should have mentioned."

"Oops."

Nathan noticed a small dimple on her right cheek when she smiled. Her focus stayed on the television, but her smile never faded. As the bartender returned with his shot, he studied her. A drinking game designed to not talk about her husband. He'd had patients do the same thing but with humor. She was already talking again before he finished the drink and he let the thought pass.

"So," Sierra said, turning to him. "Tell me a secret about yourself." Her knee brushed against his.

"A secret?"

"Yeah," her eyes got big like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You know, something not a lot of people know about you."

"I um..."

"I'll go first." She rolled her eyes. "When I watched your TED talk on 'The Secret to Desire' I was so blown away by it that I put you on my list." Her eyes locked with Nathan's, sparkling with mischief.

"Your list? I don't under—"

"You know, my hall pass list."

Nathan's face went red and Sierra nearly spit out her beer. "I'm sorry, what?"

"My celebrity hall pass list." She said it with the slightest hint of a laugh. "You know, the list of people you're technically allowed to sleep with because the odds of it happening are so astronomically low that it doesn't count." She took a sip of her beer. "Ryan Reynolds is number one but don't tell him that. Then the Trivago guy, then you."

"You put me behind the Trivago guy?"

"Are you kidding?" She finished the rest of her beer. "Have you seen his jawline?"

Nathan couldn't hold back his laugh. He shook his head in disbelief. Who was this woman and why did she have him so off his game?

"But don't take it too hard." She leaned into him, her chest pressing against his arm. "You're here and he's not. You've officially moved from fantasy to candidate."

"Well I'm honored to make the leap." He finished his beer and put his hand on her knee. He wasn't sure if he'd ever had this much fun on a first date before. If this even counted as a

date. "But you know, just because you give yourself this fictitious pass. It doesn't eliminate the guilt."

Sierra studied him for a long moment, her smile cracking. Then she turned to the bartender and held up a finger.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting you another shot." The bartender was already pouring the Jack.

"I didn't even say James."

The smile returned to her lips.

"Oh come on. That doesn't count."

She shrugged. "You were heading that direction and you know it." She ordered a round for herself. "Look. I know what this is. I know what I'm doing. I'm not going to mope around feeling guilty. Lord knows James doesn't give a shit." She threw back her shot.

He picked up the shot and knocked it back. The whiskey burned a trail down his throat and he winced, setting the glass upside down on the bar.

"Happy?"

"Thrilled." She popped a peanut from the bowl between them into her mouth. "Okay, now you still owe me a secret. And don't give me something boring like you're afraid of heights. I want a real one."

Nathan considered her. The easy thing would be to fabricate something charming and forgettable. A story about getting lost in a foreign country or a childhood fear he'd outgrown. That's what he'd give a client.

"I can't cook." It was an honest answer. "Like, at all. I own two cookbooks and a set of pans that have never been used. I eat takeout almost every night. At first it was just because I worked long hours and didn't find the time. Then I realized, I just kind of suck at it."

Sierra's expression softened. "Aww that's actually really sad. Some of the best meals I've had in life have been home cooked." Another round of beer appeared in front of them. "When we were kids, my mom used to make Chicken and Dumplings from scratch. Ethan would absolutely rave about them." She paused, reliving the memory. "Just before she passed, she taught me how to make them. The first time I tried making them for James..." Nathan's eyebrows lifted. "Shit."

She raised her hand for a shot. Nathan considered telling her not to worry about it. It was the first real thing she'd said to him all night and he wanted to dig into it. But he knew that would only make her dig her heels in more.

She took the shot unceremoniously. "Anyway, maybe I can cook for you one day."

Nathan didn't say anything. The offer hung in the air between them, casual enough to brush off but warm enough that he held his breath without realizing it. She'd just accidentally mentioned her husband's name on a date with another man and now she was offering to cook for him. Somewhere in the back of his mind he noted how easily she'd gone from her

mother's recipe to Ethan's childhood to her own marriage. All of it threaded together, all of it offered up without a second thought.

He'd tried to get Ethan to talk about his mother once and noted how quickly he pivoted, like he was guarding a sacred memory. Sierra gave it away without thinking twice. There was a history there that could help him. For now, he'd let the moment pass, but he filed it away for later.

"Speaking of dinner, has Mei ever... Are you watching Jeopardy?" He looked up from his beer to find Sierra's attention had drifted to the third television above the bar. Not the Mariners game. Jeopardy. She was leaning forward on her stool, her eyes narrowed at the screen like a student during an exam, her beer momentarily forgotten on the bar in front of her.

"What is the Battle of Antietam." She said it under her breath, barely loud enough to hear over the music. The answer flipped on the screen. She was right.

"Sorry," she laughed, her cheeks coloring. "What about Mei?"

Nathan opened his mouth to speak, then looked back at the TV, the question he'd had completely lost. "Did you ask them to put Jeopardy on?"

"I may have made a suggestion when I got here." She shrugged one shoulder and took a sip, not the least bit apologetic. "The bartender was accommodating."

He studied her for a second. She'd gotten here before him, changed the channel, ordered beers for both of them, and picked the seats. The woman had staged the entire evening before he walked through the door. Part of him wanted to be annoyed by it, but the other part, the part that kept surprising him tonight, found it genuinely impressive.

The next clue appeared on screen. American Presidents. Nathan leaned forward, squinting at the blue text, and the answer came to him just fast enough. "Who is James K. Polk."

Sierra turned to him slowly, her bottle half raised to her lips. "Oh. Okay then." She set the bottle down and squared her shoulders toward the screen. "Game on."

They went at it for two full rounds, their voices climbing over each other as clues appeared and vanished. Sierra was fast. Crazy fast. She rattled off dates and names like she'd been studying them for years. Nathan held his own in science and geography, managing to pull ahead when a World Geography category appeared and he named the capital of Mongolia before the contestant on screen could buzz in. Sierra's jaw dropped and she punched his arm hard enough that he actually rubbed the spot afterward.

"Ulaanbaatar? How the hell do you know that?"

"Some of us still read books."

"You're such an asshole." But the grin on her face betrayed her.

A Famous Crimes category appeared and Sierra sat up on her stool completely locked in. She answered the first clue, something about an unsolved murder in the 1940s, before Nathan had even finished reading it. The second was about a killing spree in the Midwest in the fifties and she got that one too, rattling off the name of the killer with a confidence that made Nathan turn and stare at her.

"How do you know that?"

"How do you not? Weren't you like a teenager back then?" She clinked her bottle against his without breaking eye contact.

Nathan shook his head, laughing in spite of himself. The age jokes were relentless and he was starting to suspect she'd been workshopping them long before tonight. He didn't have a comeback. He didn't even have a guess on the next clue. Sierra answered it before the host finished. The Seahawks jersey two stools down actually clapped.

Sierra drained the last of her beer and set it on the bar. She waved the bartender over and made a small check-writing gesture in the air.

"Loser pays" She said it without looking at him.

"We tied." He was already reaching for his wallet.

"We absolutely did not tie." She held up her fingers and started counting. "Antietam, Missouri Compromise, Black Dahlia, Starkweather—"

"The Antietam one doesn't count. I wasn't even playing yet."

"It does." The bartender set the check between them and Sierra slid it across the bar toward Nathan with one finger. "Don't be a sore loser, Doc."

Nathan looked at the check. Looked at Sierra. Her chin was tilted up, her arms crossed, every inch of her daring him to keep arguing.

He pulled out his card and paid.

The lobby of the hotel was empty save for a kid behind the front desk who didn't look up from his phone. Sierra already had the room key out. She crossed to the elevator and hit the button, kicking her shoes off before the doors even opened. She dangled them from two fingers and turned to Nathan with a look that dared him to comment.

He didn't. He was too busy trying to figure out when he'd lost control of this evening. Not at the bar. He'd never had it there. Maybe when he deleted the draft turning her down. Maybe when he pulled the tie loose in the mirror. He'd walked into Pine Street Tap with a plan. Drinks, conversation, strategic rapport building. Get close to Sierra, mine her for information about Ethan and Mei. Now, all he could think about was how good her ass looked in those jeans. How he'd been half hard since she hugged him, and most of all what was going to be waiting for him when they got to the room.

"You're quiet She leaned against the back wall, studying him.

"Just thinking."

"About?"

He smirked.

"Don't make me walk back to the bar and order you another shot."

The elevator doors opened before he could retort and he followed her down the hall, her shoes still swinging from her fingers. She stopped at the room, slid the keycard, and bumped the door open with her hip.

The room was exactly what he'd expected when she'd told him she had gotten a room at a Holiday Inn. The walls were a weird off white color, the window looked out across the parking lot, and the only picture on the wall was of a lighthouse that looked like it could have been purchased at any home decor store.

Sierra tossed her shoes onto the floor, and her jacket onto the desk. She spun around to look at Nathan and cocked her hip.

"Well," she said, taking a hesitant step toward him, her first hesitation of the night. "Are you going to make a move, or do I need to do everything myself?"

Nathan took a step forward, his hand sliding across her hip as he tried to gain control of the situation. "Are you sure—"

She kissed him, hard. Her hand slid from his shirt to the back of his neck, pulling him down to her. He groaned into the kiss, his tongue wrestling hers as his hand slid to her ass.

"Okay then," he said, his eyes flashing dark. He kissed her harder. His teeth caught her lower lip and she responded by grinding her hips forward into him. His cock was straining against his pants. He pushed into her, and felt her roll her hips in response. His hand slid up her back and under her shirt as all pretenses faded.

He'd gone into the night telling himself to take it slow. Build the rapport. Feel her out before making any kind of move. But Sierra had blown past every speed limit he'd set since the night started. She was a woman on a mission, and he was more than happy to oblige. If her goal was to feel something, he could certainly accommodate that.

Nathan broke the kiss and spun her around at a dizzying speed. His lips were on her neck, his hands reaching around to unclasp the button of her jeans as he took control. He sucked in a breath as her pants slid down her thighs, her heart-shaped ass framed by a black thong. His teeth brushed her neck, causing her to sigh as he pushed gently between her shoulder blades, making her bend over the bed.

But Sierra wasn't going to let go of her control that easily. She caught herself on the bed, then shifted her weight, spinning away from his grip and causing him to stumble forward. She used his momentum against him, pushing him the rest of the way onto the bed with a laugh.

"Let's get you more comfortable, doc." She climbed on top of him, straddling his legs as she lifted the halter top over her head. The pressure made him suck air through his teeth.

Her chest sprang free, larger than the top had let on. Her black lace bra barely contained her chest and Nathan pulsed against his slacks at the thought of what was under the lace. Her skin was flawless, flushed slightly from her arousal. Tan lines peeked out from the cup of her bra, the rest of her body perfectly sun-kissed.

"Ohhh. Someone's excited." She ground her hips into him, letting him know she felt his arousal. She leaned forward, her fingers finding the buttons of his shirt. "Now, are you done asking me if I'm okay." She undid another button. "If I'm okay." Her lips went to his chest. "If

I want to talk about it." Another button undone, her kisses getting lower. "Or do you need more proof that this is what I want?"

Nathan stared at the ceiling as her mouth moved past his navel. He'd had women undress him before. Plenty of them. But it was never like this. His hips lifted as Sierra's breath ghosted through the fabric of his pants. He had completely lost control of the situation, but his body certainly wasn't complaining.

The sound of his belt sliding through the loops filled his ears and Nathan's hands when to Sierra's hair. He half expected her to swat them away, but she purred in satisfaction as she popped the button of his pants free.

"Mmm. Now that's more like it." She wrapped her hand around his base, her free hand already tugging his pants the rest of the way down as she took a kneeling position at the foot of the bed. Her gaze held his as her tongue flicked from her mouth and with agonizing slowness she ran it along the base of his shaft.

Her smile grew as she opened her mouth and, in what felt like slow motion, closed her lips around the tip of him.

"Ahhh." Nathan's breath caught. She held there for a moment, her tongue circling slowly, her eyes still locked on his. Then she took him deeper and his hand tightened in her hair.

"Fuck." He said it quietly, almost to himself. Her mouth was warm and wet as she took him deeper. Her hand continued to work the base of his cock, twisting her hand gently while her lips worked the rest. She was enjoying herself, and he could tell by the soft hum that vibrated through him every time she took him to the back of her throat.

His head sank deeper into the mattress. The tension he'd been carrying all night, the constant recalibrating, the mental chess match of trying to stay one step ahead of a woman who refused to be predicted, all of it was bleeding out of him with every pass of her tongue. His fingers loosened in her hair, no longer gripping but resting as he stopped trying to fight for control.

Sierra pulled back until just the tip rested on her lower lip. She kissed it once, almost playfully, then took him deep again in one smooth motion that made his hips jerk off the mattress.

"Mmm." The sound came from somewhere in her chest. She pulled back slowly, a string of saliva connecting her lips to him, and wrapped her hand around his shaft. She stroked him while she caught her breath, her thumb dragging across the sensitive underside, her cheek resting against his inner thigh.

"You taste good. Do you like how my mouth feels?" Her nails moved to his sack, rolling it in her hand. "Am I doing it right?"

He wasn't sure if she was being playful or self-conscious, but before he could answer, her mouth returned to his shaft, causing him to groan.

Her pace quickened. Her grip tighter, the sounds getting wetter and more urgent. Nathan's thighs tensed. His stomach muscles contracted and the heat building at the base of his spine was coiling to a point. His hand tightened in her hair and his hips started moving on

their own, shallow thrusts pushing him deeper into her mouth. She let him. Her hands went to his thighs, steadying herself, and a muffled moan escaped around him.

"Jesus, Sierra." He thrust again, deeper, and she took it, her nails digging into his legs.

She pulled off him.

The sudden absence of her mouth made his whole body clench. His cock twitched against his stomach, slick and throbbing, and he nearly reached for her before catching himself. Sierra was already on her feet at the foot of the bed.

"That was only the appetizer." Her voice had a seductive edge to it as she shoved her jeans the rest of the way down her legs and stepped out of them. "I'm going to fuck you now." She hooked her thumb into the thong and pulled it down in one motion, flicking it off her ankle.

The weight of the bed shifted before Nathan's brain caught up with what she was saying. Her lips brushed across his stomach, then his throat. Her bare skin dragged against his and he could feel the heat coming off her in waves. She kissed him, slower this time, her tongue sliding against his as she settled her weight over his hips.

Then she rose up on her knees to position him and Nathan's gaze dropped between her legs.

She was completely smooth. Like she shaved specifically for this occasion. Nathan's cock pulsed at the thought of it. She was glistening, her arousal visible in the low light. Her lips were swollen and flushed, slick with want, and when she reached between them to wrap her hand around his cock the movement spread her open enough that he could see exactly how wet she was.

Nathan exhaled hard. His hands went to her thighs, his thumbs pressing into the soft skin of her inner legs. She grinned, teasing him. She held herself above him, the head of his cock pressing against her entrance, her wetness coating the tip as she watched his face.

His hips rose, but she moved with them, always just a breath away. "Are you experiencing impulse control, doc?" She laughed at the role reversal, allowing his cock to glide across her lips before holding it at her entrance.

His grip tightened on her thighs. "Fuck."

She held there one more second. "With pleasure." Then she dropped her hips and took all of him at once.

They both exhaled at the same time. A sound that nearly made Nathan cum immediately. Sierra's eyes squeezed shut, her mouth falling open as she adjusted to the full length of him. He could feel her squeezing him, accepting his length. Her nails dug into his chest.

She was tight. Impossibly tight. The wet heat of her wrapped around every inch of him and for a few seconds neither of them moved. Just the sound of their breathing and the air conditioner rattling near the window.

Sierra moved first. She lifted her hips slowly, testing the angle, finding what she wanted. She braced her palms on his chest and raised until just the tip remained inside her, then sank back down in a long stroke that made them both groan. She did it again. And again.

Each time a little faster, each time pulling a different sound out of him as she built her rhythm.

"God, you feel good." She said it with her eyes still closed, her head tilting back. Her bottom lip was in her mouth, her hips rotating as her nails dug into Nathan's chest.

Nathan watched her move above him, getting lost in it. Her stomach flexed with each roll, the muscles in her thighs tightening as she lifted and dropped. Her bra was still on and her breasts strained against the lace with every motion, threatening to spill free. He reached up and slid his fingers under the strap on her left shoulder, dragging it down her arm. She opened her eyes long enough to look at him, as if for a moment she forgot he was even there, then pulled her arm free.

He sat up against the headboard beneath her. The shift in angle made her gasp, driving him deeper, and her arms wrapped around his neck to steady herself. He reached behind her back and unclasped the bra with one hand. It fell between them and he tossed it aside without looking.

Her breasts were perfect. Full and warm, her nipples hard as diamonds as she rode him. He took one in his hand, his thumb rolling across the stiff peak, and Sierra hissed through her teeth.

"Mmm, yes." Her hips stuttered for the first time. She leaned into his touch, her pace slowing but never stopping. He leaned up, sucking her nipple between his lips.

"Fuck, Nathan." Her voice had dropped an octave. She was grinding against him now instead of riding, her clit pressed against his pelvis, desperate for friction. He could feel her wetness coating him where their bodies met.

His free hand slid down her back and gripped her ass, pulling her forward and down onto him with each stroke.

"Mmm." She leaned forward, her forehead dropping to his shoulder. "Is that how you like it?" She slammed back into him, her ass rippling.

"No." He grabbed her ass and rolled her off him. "This is."

Sierra hit the mattress on her back with a gasp. Before she could react he was over her, one hand pinning her hip to the bed, the other hooking under her knee and pushing it toward her chest. He drove into her in one stroke.

"Ohhhh fuck." Her eyes went wide, her hands flying to his shoulders. Nathan felt her clench around him, his thrust fast and hard as her body tried to keep up.

He didn't ease into it. She'd taken control from him all night and he poured his frustration into it. The bed bounced off the wall with each powerful stroke, drowning out the 'ah, ah, ah' from Sierra. Her legs wrapped around his body, her ankles locking.

"You've been running your mouth all night." He said it low, against her ear, his hips never slowing. "Still want to call me an old man?"

Sierra let out a breathless laugh that broke into a moan. "And you loved every—ahh—every second of it."

He thrust harder, determined to wipe the smirk off her face. His hand slid from her ass to the back of her thigh, pushing her leg higher, opening her wider.

"Jesus. Right there." She was panting now. "Ohhh fuck, don't stop."

He obliged. He grabbed her wrist and pinned it above her head, driving deeper. Sierra's mouth fell open. Her back arched off the bed. A triumphant smirk landed on Nathan's face. Her hands threaded through his hair, her brow pinching together as he drove deeper and her gasps filled the air.

Then her eyes opened. Even pinned beneath him, even breathless, she looked up at him with the same cockiness she'd displayed all night.

His smirk faltered.

Sierra's hand slid from his hair to the side of his face. Her thumb traced his jaw. "You're cute."

It was said with such tenderness that Nathan slowed. He leaned down pressing his lips to hers.

Her hips bucked. Not hard, but enough. Her free wrist twisted out of his grip and her legs unlocked from behind his back. She used the space to shift her weight beneath him and Nathan, didn't react fast enough. She hooked her leg around his and rolled them.

She settled on top of him, palms flat on his chest, breathing hard. Her hair hung around her face. She didn't move. Just sat there with him buried inside her, watching him with that same look.

"I'm not so easy to control." She rolled her hips once, slow, and Nathan gasped. "Now, stop being a sore loser."

She sat up straight, her hands sliding from his chest to her own body as she rode him. Her fingers traced up her stomach, between her breasts, and into her hair, lifting it off her neck as she rolled her hips in a slow motion. Her eyes were half-closed, her lips parted, and Nathan couldn't look away. Not just her body, but the way she moved, her confidence.

He watched her as his cock pulsed inside her. The muscles in her stomach flexed with each roll, bringing out a soft moan as she clenched around him. She was the most confident woman he'd ever been inside of, and the thought made his fingers dig into her thighs. He couldn't read her. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he was with someone he couldn't read, and his body responded before his brain caught up.

He grabbed her hips and shifted, causing her eyes to go wide as she wrapped her arms around his neck and he stood.

"What are you—"

Sierra's back slammed into the wall hard enough to rattle the lighthouse painting. The air left her lungs in a half grunt, half moan, her shoulder blades pressing into the drywall, her fingers digging into his shoulders to anchor herself.

"Fuck—" The word came out broken. Her ankles locked behind his back, her thighs squeezing his ribs. He thrust again, harder, and her nails raked down his arms leaving hot lines in their wake.

The angle was different here. Deeper. Every stroke pinned her between his body and the wall with nowhere to retreat, and the sounds she made changed. The laughter was gone, replaced by raw grunts and moans as Nathan fucked her with as much force as he could muster. Her hand found the back of his head and pulled his mouth to her neck. He bit down and she hissed through her teeth, her hips rolling forward to meet him.

"God, you feel—" She couldn't finish the sentence. He didn't let her. His hand slid from her hip to the underside of her thigh, hiking her higher, changing the angle just enough that her whole body jerked.

"Ugggnh." Her breathing had changed, urgent now, like she couldn't get enough air.. "Don't stop. Ohhh fuck. I'm gonna—"

He didn't. The wall shook with each thrust. Her fingers twisted in his hair. Nathan could feel her tightening around him, her thighs trembling against his sides. She was close and fighting it. He could tell by the way she kept trying to slow her breathing and failing. She didn't want to give it to him this easily.

He pressed his forehead to hers. Her eyes were barely open, dark and glassy. "That's it." He lifted onto her toes driving deeper. "Cum for me." He pressed his lips to hers and gave one more powerful push.

Her head turned, breaking the kiss. "Ohhhh. Fffffffuck. Yes. Yesssss." Her body locked. Her legs clamped around him so hard his knees almost buckled. Her mouth found his shoulder and she bit down, muffling the sounds pouring out of her as the orgasm ripped through her. He held her there, her body pulsing around him, her weight trembling in his arms.

For a long moment neither of them moved. Just the sound of her breathing against his neck and the air conditioner rattling near the window.

Sierra's legs slowly unlocked. She lowered her feet to the floor, unsteady, one hand on the wall to catch herself. Her chest was heaving, her cheeks flushed all the way down to her collarbones.

"Fuck," she whispered, then looked up at Nathan through her lashes. "Now, your turn." She pressed her hands against his chest and pushed.

Nathan's calves hit the edge of the bed and he sat down hard. Before he could recover she was already climbing over him. But she didn't face him. This time, she turned, swinging one leg over his hips, planting both feet on the mattress on either side of his thighs. She reached between her legs, found him, and sank down in one slow stroke.

Nathan's head dropped back. "Jesus."

The angle was devastating. She had her feet under her, knees bent, and she used every bit of that leverage.

The view was even better. Nathan gasped as he watched her take him. Her pussy stretching around him, the grip tightening as she rose up before slamming back down. He could see

the muscles in her back flexing, the dimples just above her ass, the sheen of sweat along her spine.

"Sierra—" His thighs tensed as his hand went to her ass, gripping it as she moved. His stomach contracted. The heat that had been building at the base of his spine was coiling past the point of return.

"Mmhmm. Fuck you feel so good." She didn't slow down. If anything, she bore down harder, tightening around him with each stroke. Her hand reached back and found his thigh, her nails pressing into the muscle. "Cum for me, Nathan." Her voice was softer now. "I want to feel it."

Something about the way she said it, mixed with the way her walls continued to pulse around him, sent him over the edge. His hips started moving on their own, thrusting up to meet her. She matched him, their rhythm syncing.

"Ahhh Fuck— I'm—" His cock pulsed inside.

"Mmmm," she moaned as pulse after pulse emptied inside her.

They stayed like that until the trembling stopped. Both of them fighting to catch their breath.

Sierra was the first to move. She rolled off the bed and walked to the bathroom, pausing at the door. "Anyone tell you that you have control issues?" She smirked, shutting the bathroom door before he could retaliate.

She came back already stepping into her jeans. She found her bra in the sheets, hooked it, pulled the halter top over her head. Nathan watched her get dressed with a smile on his face. He didn't have enough time to take in her body initially, but watching her now, she was even more stunning than he first thought.

"That was fun." She said, bouncing into her jeans and breaking his train of thought.

"It was." He sat up from the bed, not bothering to cover up.

She checked her phone. Whatever she saw tightened her jaw for half a second before she pocketed it without responding. Probably her husband.

"You know," Nathan said, walking toward her, "this was probably the most fun I've had in a long time."

She smiled, leaning up to kiss his cheek. "Probably because you don't spend enough time watching jeopardy."

"It was a tie," he said with a laugh.

"I guess I can give you a chance in the future to redeem yourself." She shrugged her jacket onto her shoulders. "I need to get home. Goodnight, Nathan." Then she was gone.

Nathan sat there for another minute listening to the air conditioner rattle. He could smell her on the pillow next to him. The sweat, the slight floral scent he couldn't quite place. Maybe dew or melon. He looked at the clock. It was just after eight.

He considered staying. Driving home in the morning, sleeping in a bed that still smelled like her. The thought was appealing in a way that made him uneasy. There was no advantage to staying. He'd gotten what he came for and then some. Staying would just be... staying.

He got up, walked to the bathroom, and turned sideways in the mirror. Four red lines ran across his back. The deepest one was still raised. He traced it with his finger and smiled, shaking his head. She was not what he expected.

He thought about how the night transformed. Her picking the bar, the way she took control of every aspect of it. He logged it as her being someone who needed to control every aspect of the night. He recognized it easily enough since he had the same tendencies. But then there were other parts. Her asking if she was doing it right, wanting to know she made him feel good. That screamed validation-seeking.

He splashed water on his face. He was overanalyzing it. They'd had fun. She was sharp, competitive, and incredible in bed. He didn't need to crack her open. He had more than enough on his plate to try to diagnose someone who wasn't his patient.

He looked at his reflection. Water dripped from his jaw into the sink.

Mei's session was tomorrow evening. He still needed to rewatch the footage from her last session before then. He'd seen her at game night, the way she interacted with Sierra. She held contact with Nathan when they talked. The conditioning still seemed to be holding. He could build on that tomorrow. His cock began to swell as he thought about what that meant.

He walked out of the bathroom and grabbed his pants. He needed to drive home tonight and put together a plan.

[Insider] The Therapist Ch. 07

Hey friends! Chapter 7 of The Therapist has arrived. This is mostly a setup chapter, but the choices at the end are going to really help to shape the rest of the story (even though they may not seem like that at first). Nathan's control is starting to slip, Ethan's birthday is fast approaching, and Mei is starting to come out of her shell. Lots of exciting things in the chapters ahead. I can't wait to hear what you think and see what path you take!

"—and I don't know, man, I hadn't thought about her in probably a year." Ethan was leaned forward on the couch, his elbows on his knees, trying to keep his left leg from shaking. "But then there are things that trigger her and I'm right back there again. I don't want to make it sound like I don't love my mom. I do."

Nathan's phone buzzed on the desk.

He didn't mean to look. It was reflex. His date, if you could even call it that, was two days ago and he and Sierra had been texting almost nonstop like a couple of teenagers. The screen lit up with her name on it and he couldn't stop the smirk from appearing on his face.

There was an image attached to the message. His screen was locked, so he couldn't make out what it was but the preview made his imagination run.

Sierra: *Thinking maybe I should wear...*

"—does that make sense?"

"It does." Nathan dragged his gaze off the phone. His notepad was open on his lap but he hadn't written anything in at least two minutes. He realized Ethan was staring at him.

"You alright?"

"Yeah." He grabbed his phone and pushed it into his desk drawer. In the over twenty years of being a therapist he'd never had a patient think he was uninterested. He needed to get his head on straight and stop acting like a boy with a crush.

"I apologize, Ethan. That was unprofessional of me." He sat up in his chair, inching forward. "You were sharing something important and I let myself get distracted. That's on me."

"It's okay."

"It's not okay. I assure you it won't happen again" He picked the notepad back up. "I actually wanted to circle back to something from last session. Do you mind if we shift gears?"

Ethan shrugged. "Sure."

"Our last session I'd given you some homework. How's that going?"

The color drained out of Ethan's face and then came back in a rush. He sank half an inch deeper into the couch. "It's, uh. Yeah. It's going."

Nathan grinned, hoping to put Ethan at ease. He let the silence sit, waiting for Ethan to get comfortable enough to continue.

"I um... I did it the day after our last session." Ethan's voice dropped. "Then again over the weekend and um..." He looked toward his feet, shifting one in front of the other. "Today while Mei was at work."

"You seem embarrassed. Why is that?"

"I don't know." He chewed on his lip. "It just... it feels wrong now. Different."

"Different how?"

Ethan ran his hands over his face. "Can we go back to talking about my mom?"

"Ethan, you have just over a week, one more session, before your birthday." Nathan took a note about Ethan being uncomfortable. "If you can't talk about sex then how do you expect Mei to be able to give you what you want?"

Ethan let out a long breath. "It's just that... That first time I told myself I was doing it, because you know, you told me to. So I was looking for different things focusing on the angles."

Nathan nodded. "And now?"

Ethan looked around the office, avoiding Nathan's gaze. "I just... I find videos that... excite me..." He trailed off.

"What kind of videos are that?"

Ethan closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose. "They all kind of looked like her. The women." He gave a short, embarrassed laugh. "Which, I mean, that makes sense, right? That's my type. That's who I married. I think I was just... getting something that reminded me of her because she wasn't home."

Nathan clicked his pen. "That's one way to look at it, yeah." He ran his hand through his scruff. His phone buzzed inside the desk and his jaw tightened, reminding him to stay focused. "Are you replacing the actresses with Mei when you watch? Is it her you're seeing?"

Ethan's thumb started circling his opposite palm. "I...I guess so, yeah."

"And then men? Do you replace them too?"

Nathan kept his face neutral as Ethan's eyes went wide. Of course he didn't replace the men, no one did. He was just in the moment.

"I... guess not." His eyes darted around the room like he'd just admitted to a crime. "Is that bad? Should I be?"

"Not at all." Nathan gave him the warmest smile in his arsenal. "It's actually very common, Ethan. Wanting to see your wife the way other people see her, wanting her to be desired. It's a healthy instinct."

Ethan's shoulders dropped. "I wasn't... I mean... Is that what I was doing?"

Nathan shrugged casually like it wasn't him that came to that conclusion. "You tell me?" He leaned forward, suddenly laser focused, forgetting all about the phone in his desk. "Is there more to the tape than you're telling yourself?"

"I... I think about the tape a lot." He was talking faster now, completely bypassing the filter. "I think about watching it back. I told you that already. But I didn't... I don't know. I didn't realize that was connected to anything."

"It's all connected. You're developing a clearer picture of what you want. That's the whole point of this. But you need to talk to Mei about it."

"I don't know how to start that conversation."

"Start it tonight. After her session." He'd said it too fast. He saw the way Ethan looked at him. He needed to stay level headed. "Nothing heavy, just open the door. She may surprise you."

Ethan nodded slowly. "Okay. I... I think I found a position, an angle that would work. Maybe I can ask her about it."

"I think that's a great idea." Nathan stood and set the notepad on the desk. "We're at time."

Ethan rose, still processing, and offered his hand. Nathan shook it.

"Thanks, Nathan. This was... yeah. A lot to think about."

"That's the idea."

He walked Ethan to the door. The moment he was across the threshold, Nathan rushed back to his desk and retrieved his phone.

Sierra: Thinking maybe I should wear this the next time we get together. It's not too obvious what happened, right? ;)

On screen Sierra was wearing a low cut shirt,, her chest practically spilling from it. A large bruise was formed on the top of her left breast. Nathan licked his lips, his arousal beginning to grow.

Nathan: I doubt your husband would approve.

She responded almost immediately.

Sierra: You owe me a shot. I'm collecting on it this weekend. Hope you're prepared for an unforgettable night.

Nathan laughed and shook his head. She didn't even ask if he was free this weekend, she was just assuming he would drop everything to see her. The worst part of all, she was right.

The Chevron station was only a couple of blocks from Grace's apartment. She'd eaten at the Subway there more times than she cared to admit. It wasn't the most glamorous job in the world, but she would save on gas and get a little bit of income filtering in.

She studied herself in the bathroom mirror, five minutes before her interview. The light above her flickered, but she could see enough of herself to tell she looked mostly put together. Her brown hair was pulled up into a bun, her shirt had a collar. The blazer was from Goodwill but it fit her shoulders and that was the only thing that mattered. She could pass for someone who had her life together.

"You've got this," she said to the woman in the mirror. She went through the checklist of things Dr. Waverly had told her: firm handshake, lots of eye contact, smile. That last one was going to be the biggest challenge, but she could do it. She had to.

She took a deep breath as she approached the counter. A teenager was at the register, and barely looked up to acknowledged her. She cleared her throat.

"I have an interview. With Megan?"

"Yeah, hold on." The kid disappeared into the back.

A woman in her early thirties came out a moment later, black polo, Subway visor, a clipboard already in her hand. She gave Grace a smile.

"Grace? I'm Megan. Come on back, we'll use the office."

The office barely had enough room for two people. Grace sat in a folding chair, her knees nearly touching Megan's. Grace extended her hand awkwardly before she sat. She'd nearly blown the very first step.

"So." Megan flipped through the application as she sat down. "Thanks for coming in. I'll just ask you a few questions and we'll see if this is a good fit, sound good?"

"Sounds great."

"We'll start with an easy one." Megan was still smiling, Grace couldn't help but think it was somehow permanently plastered on her face. How could someone have so much to smile about?

"Why Subway?"

Because it's close to home. Because they don't run background checks. Because everyone here is probably just as fucked up as me. She didn't say any of that. Instead, she gave her best attempt at a smile. She even managed to show a few teeth.

"I like the structure. Everything is very, um, clinical. I find I work best in that type of environment."

Megan nodded and made a note. Grace wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but the head nod felt positive so she tried to smile a little more.

The next ten minutes were more of the same. Megan asked about her availability during the week, whether she could handle a register, whether she'd ever worked food service before. Grace had rehearsed every answer. She'd worked a coffee shop in college. She was a fast learner. She got along with people. She kept her voice level, her eye contact steady, and her hands still. Dr. Waverly would be proud.

"Okay, last thing." Megan closed the application. "How soon can you start?"

"Pretty soon. I mean, week after next for sure. The only thing is—" Grace felt her throat tighten but she kept going, she'd practiced this part too. "I have some family stuff that might require me to take a few days. Not long. Maybe a week, tops. I need to go to Oregon. I've been taking care of my father and his health isn't great, so if anything happens—"

"Oh." The smile wasn't permanently plastered on Megan's face. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you." Grace had said it so many times it came out clean. Somewhere in her chest, her father had been dying for nine years now. Long before she ever met Nathan, before The Island.

"So the thing is, we're really looking for someone who can start right away." Megan's tone had changed and Grace felt a wave of panic wash over her. "We had someone walk out last week and I'm covering a lot of their shifts myself. I really need someone who can start immediately."

"Oh." Her leg began to bounce. She didn't want to put off finding Nathan. The longer he was out there... She had to find him. Had to make him fix her. She still had enough in her savings account to cover rent a few more months. She could figure something out.

"And I totally get the family stuff, I do. My mom went through something similar a couple years ago. But for this role, I just—"

"I understand," Grace said, her tone sharp.

Megan nodded, almost apologetic. She asked a couple more questions after that, but it obvious to both of them the interview was over. Grace just hoped Dr. Waverly wouldn't be too upset.

Grace sat in the Camry for a long time before she turned the key. She was so close. Her hands shook lightly as she gripped the wheel. There was another restaurant not too far away, maybe she could try there. Or there was always gig work. The money was trash, but she could make it stretch if she needed to. Oregon was going to cost her gas, two nights in a motel, food.

She started the car. She'd talk to Dr. Waverly about it.

The podcast picked up where she'd left off. A woman's voice, mid-sentence, somewhere in the middle of a story about a man who'd volunteered at a youth center for fifteen years then just disappeared without a trace. Grace caught the last of it as she backed out of the space.

"—his clothes were still in the dresser, all of his belongings seemingly untouched. So where did he go? And why did it take investigators almost a full week before gaining access to his apartment? We'll get into that next week and so much more, on *Dead Air*."

Grace reached for the volume knob and turned it down. She was always fascinated by true crime pod casts. This one especially. There was something in the way the woman put her questions together that always made Grace feel, for about forty-five minutes a week, like there were still people in the world who knew how to look at things head-on. Grace imagined that in another life she would do that. Be the woman who investigated and gave a voice to the voiceless, instead of just being another victim.

She merged onto the road and pointed the car toward home.

Nathan was in the middle of responding to a gif that Sierra had sent when he heard the knock on the door. He glanced at the clock, it was five minutes until seven. Mei was early, that was good news. It meant she was eager. The bad news, was that he hadn't gone through any of her file like he'd intended.

He closed his phone without responding, tossed it in his desk drawer and then slammed it shut.

"Mei. Please, come in," he said as he opened the door, stepping aside with a smile.

She walked past him in a pair of blue jeans and a plain gray t-shirt. Her hair was down, and the faintest hint of perfume wafted through the air as she passed.

He watched her as she made her way to his office, sitting on the couch with a certain familiarity that made him warm with anticipation. Her legs sat apart, relaxed enough that it was the first thing he noticed.

"How was your week?" He settled into the chair across from her and picked up the notepad, his gaze flickering to the camera on the bookcase.

"Good." She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "Really good, actually." She held his gaze. "The voice that's usually there has been silent all week." She paused, her hands coming to rest on her lap. "Even when Ethan and I are... when we make love."

Color climbed her throat but her eyes never wavered. He held her gaze for a fraction of a second to see if the shame or embarrassment would force her to look away. When she didn't, he gave her an encouraging smile.

"That's great news, Mei." He wrote *unprompted disclosure. Sustained eye contact* on the page. "I'm glad you're able to identify the change and name it."

Her face lit up as she sat a little straighter on the couch.

"You seemed more relaxed at game night as well." He allowed his gaze to travel her body. It wouldn't be much longer now "I loved getting to see that side of you."

Her cheeks went a shade darker. "I had fun."

"And has Ethan noticed the change? Has it increased your intimacy?"

She bit her lip. He knew he was pushing her boundaries, but he'd been impressed with how much she'd already volunteered. He couldn't help but want to see how far he could extend it.

"It..." She finally broke eye contact, her gaze shifting to her hands as she rubbed them across her jeans. "Yes. It's been more... frequent. We..." she laughed and shook her head. "We keep the lights on now. Ethan likes it when he can look at me."

Nathan shifted in his chair.

"And what about you? Do you like the idea of being watched?"

Her eyes went big and her hands balled into fists. The vein in her neck was pulsing. He waited for her to shut down. That's what the body language said. Her shoulders drew in, her chin tucked. He'd seen it a hundred times.

Then her knees drifted apart another inch and she squirmed. He'd been wrong. She wasn't about to shut it down. She was aroused.

"I um..." She looked up through her lashes, like she was afraid of being caught. "Maybe we can try the meditation technique again? It's easy to talk about this when I'm... You know."

"You're doing great, Mei." Nathan kept his voice low, not wanting to frighten her. "But a big part of this is going to be you learning to deal with these types of conversations without hypnosis. Let's try a different topic."

She nodded and released a shaky breath, thankful for the reprieve. She wasn't going to get one.

"Ethan's birthday is in ten days." He sat forward. "Have the two of you talked any more about the tape?"

Her body conformed to the sofa as she slid down it. Her gaze now on the floor.

"Not really, no."

"What's your biggest worry about the tape?"

She slid her feet along the carpet. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well," he sat back, running his hand along his jaw as the hair scratched his palm. "Are you worried he's going to show people? Worried he won't like it?" He watched her body language as he rattled off each possibility, while she sat statue-like. "Afraid of how you'll perform?" She flinched.

Mei's eyes stayed on the carpet. Her jaw worked like she wasn't sure how or even if she could answer. Nathan let the silence sit. He'd struck a nerve and he wasn't going to let her rush away from it.

"What if..." Her voice was small and Nathan had to strain to hear her. "What if he doesn't like the video as much as he thinks he will."

The response wasn't what Nathan had expected. He struggled to keep his face neutral.

"That fear isn't about the tape, Mei. You've spent a considerable amount of time trying to make yourself invisible. You kept the lights off with you and Ethan were intimate. You dress conservatively in public. It's only natural that the thought of being looked at in the most intimate way possible is going to scare you."

Her brow pinched, trying to understand Nathan's meaning. He pushed on, leaving her off balance.

"You mentioned a dance for work during game night. Have you found something to wear?"

Mei looked up, blinking several times as she tried to catch up. She was still trying to piece together the last thing he said.

"Sierra's been texting me about it—"

Her name caused Nathan's pulse to tick up. His eyes darted toward the closed drawer. She was probably texting him right now. Whether it was another picture that would get his blood pumping or a sly remark that would make him bristle was anyone's guess. He blinked, he couldn't think about that right now. Not with Mei sitting just a few feet away from him.

"...She's sent a few dresses but they've all been..." She paused realizing that she was about to say the exact thing Nathan had said was the problem.

"I'm not suggesting you wear something that makes you uncomfortable." Nathan smiled, seeing her catch herself. "I have an idea." He pushed away from his desk.

"Okay."

"Everything we've done in here has been in a controlled environment." He gestured loosely at the space between them. "And you've done great. But it's all happening in a vacuum."

"Okay..."

"I'd like to take you dress shopping."

"You... what?" Her arms came up across her stomach.

"It's called exposure therapy. I want you to try on a few dresses, talk to a saleswoman, move around in clothes that feel a little outside your usual. Nothing extreme. I just want you to feel what it's like when strangers look at you and nothing bad happens."

"Like, right now?"

"Right now."

"I don't... I mean... I'm not dressed to go shopping."

"You're dressed fine, Mei. That's the point."

She wasn't entirely convinced. He could see it. She was chewing lightly on the inside of her cheek, trying to think of why this was a bad idea.

"What about Ethan?"

"What about him?"

"He's going to wonder where I am."

"Then text him. Tell him exactly what we're doing. That's part of the exercise too. You don't have to hide it, because there's nothing to hide. If you'd feel better having him know, I think you should."

She was quiet. Her hands rested on her jeans, no longer moving. She looked at the Zen garden for a long second. Then she looked at her phone in her hand, and he watched her decide.

"Okay."

Nathan stood before she could find a reason to take it back. The notepad went to the desk. The drawer with his phone in it stayed right where it was, and he still didn't look at it.

"I'll grab my keys."

The drive took less than fifteen minutes. The store sat in a strip mall, tucked between a shoe store and Bath & Body Works. Mei ran her fingers along the seam of her jeans. This was going to be fun. She smiled as Nathan held the door open for her, a bell chiming above them.

"After you."

The shop was smaller on the inside. She looked around, a hint of vanilla hitting her nose as she walked along the edge of the store. There were two other people in the store. The woman behind the register who looked to be in her late thirties, and a boy, no older than twenty, near the back folding shirts.

She walked toward the back of the store where the dresses hung. Nathan stayed a few steps behind her, his hands in his pockets, a casual observer.

"Can I help you find something?" The boy asked.

"Oh, um. I'm just looking for a dress. There's a school dance coming up and I need something to wear."

The boy smiled, his gaze sliding over her. "Certainly. Is it formal or more casual?"

He was already walking toward a rack in the center of the building.

"Casual. It's for a group of second-graders."

"Oh." He paused mid-step, then turned to the left toward a rack of dresses closer to the back. Mei glanced at the rack he'd started toward before pivoting. They were long and glittery. The necklines were low, leaving very little to the imagination. Mei shuddered, heat creeping up her spine as she looked away.

"Here we go. This red one, would look great on you." He held up the dress for Mei.

The fabric looked like it was made to stick to your body. The neckline was modest, though a little too low for Mei's liking. She studied it, chewing on her lip as she ran her fingers along the fabric. Her arms would be bare, and the back of the dress was open to the middle of her back.

"Oh, I don't know that's really my..." Mei started. But as she met his eyes, the rest of her sentence evaporated. The clerk wasn't looking at the dress. He was looking at her. His polite smile had melted into something distinctly flirtatious. As the realization that she was being admired finally clicked into place, a deep, fiery crimson spread across her face.

Nathan hadn't said a word. He was pretending to look at a display of scarves, giving her space. She was grateful and also, somewhat annoyed. He had dragged her here without giving her time to change or prepare. Now she was being ogled by a teenager. The thought sent butterflies fluttering about her stomach. She ignored them.

"How about this one." She looked away from the clerk, her hand resting on a black dress with a high neckline and a long flowing hem. It was a bit more her style. Still modest, but it was a little more fitted through the waist.

Nathan turned. His eyes moved across the dress on its hanger as the associate put the red one back on the rack.

"Good. Try it on."

The fitting room was small and clean. She hung the dress, undressed and folded her clothes onto the bench. She caught herself in the mirror in her bra and underwear before she reached for the dress and realized she was smiling. The flush from out front hadn't fully gone. Her cheeks were still warm. She glanced down at herself. She adjusted her breasts, moving the cup around slightly to make her chest look fuller.

Stop it. She shook her head and reached for the dress.

It was a teenager. A bored kid at his after-school job who'd flirt with anything that walked through the door. It didn't mean anything.

She pulled the dress on faster than was needed. The black fabric slid over her head and settled against her body. There was a zipper on the side that she slid up and then smoothed the front and looked in the mirror.

Her smile was gone. The dress looked okay. It looked like everything else she wore. Her mother would have approved. She wasn't sure why that bothered her tonight when it never had before.

She reached for the dressing room door and stopped. She wanted to smile, to feel that rush she felt when the clerk pulled off the red dress. Her tongue pressed against her cheek as she looked at herself in the mirror, her heart pounding in her chest. Then she reached over and pulled the zipper down.

She opened the door a crack. Her eyes darting around. The saleswoman from up front walked by and Mei breathed a sigh of relief.

"All good, hon?"

"Could I — " Mei's voice caught. She tried again. "Could I see that red one? The one the boy showed me earlier?"

"You bet." The woman smiled warmly and Mei quickly shut the door before anyone else could see her.

She sat down on the bench staring at her folded clothes, refusing to look at herself in the mirror. There was a knock on the door seconds later. She opened it quickly, taking the dress from the woman's hand.

The fabric was heavier than the black dress. Just holding it made fire blaze beneath her skin. She let it fall over her head. As expected, the fabric clung to her every curve. She reached behind for the zipper and her fingers found skin where she'd expected fabric. She'd forgotten about the low cut in the back. Her shoulder blades were bare, the cold air causing goosebumps to pimple her skin.

She got the zipper up and with a shaky breath turned to face the mirror.

The neckline was higher than she'd feared. Her collarbones were covered. The cap sleeves sat neat on her shoulders. She ground her teeth as she examined it further. The fabric hugged her chest, her breasts clearly defined. She wondered if she'd be able to wear a bra with it and her nipples hardened in response. She turned slightly and caught the line of her own bare back in the mirror. She pressed her thighs together and turned away, opening the door before she could change her mind.

"Oh, honey." The female clerk's hand came up to her chest. "Look at you."

Mei stepped into the hallway. Bare feet on thin carpet.

"You're going to turn every head in that room, I'm telling you." She nodded to Nathan, sitting next to her. His eyes were wide, and he'd gone still. "Your husband certainly agrees."

Nathan didn't correct her.

He didn't say anything for a second. Mei watched him, waiting for his reaction. His hands were at his sides, but she watched as his gaze traveled over her body. First at her hips, then her chest. He wet his lips.

Mei felt heat pooling low in her stomach. She stopped breathing as a faint pulse began to grow between her legs. Her throat constricted. She tore her eyes away, meaning to look to the floor.

Instead, they crawled across his body. Her knees nearly buckled as she saw the unmistakable hardness between his legs. Was that because of her?

"It's a beautiful dress, Mei."

She heard the words, and knew it was Nathan's voice. But she didn't dare look up. Her eyes stayed trained to the floor as she quickly retreated back to the dressing room.

The moment she got the door latched she pressed her back to it. Her chest was rising and falling too fast. She pressed her palm flat against her sternum like she could slow it from the outside.

She looked up.

She barely recognized herself. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair had slipped loose on one side, and her mouth was open just enough for her breath to move through it. She kept waiting for her mother's voice. To call her a whore, to tell her to cover up. That proper women don't get reactions like that from men who aren't their husband. Nothing came. Just her, and the dress, and the way she was looking at herself.

Her breathing slowed. Her eyes moved across herself the way Nathan's had. Her hips, her chest, her throat. The pulse between her legs intensified. A small part of her, one she would never talk about, wanted to go back out there. Wanted to see his reaction again.

She tore her eyes away and reached for the zipper. Her hands were shaking now. She needed to get home. She needed Ethan. She needed his hands on her, his mouth on her, she needed him inside her.

She gasped at the thought, at how loud it had been, and yanked her shirt over her head before the woman in the mirror could answer back.

CHAPTER 7 — CHOICE POINT

The drive home was quiet. Nathan had made idle conversation for the first five minutes, but Mei barely heard him. Her responses were short, clipped. The red dress sat in a garment bag behind her seat. The presence of it setting her blood to lava. She couldn't remember that last time she was this aroused. She didn't dare look at Nathan, afraid of where her gaze may land, or worse, what it might do to her. She just needed to get home.

Fueled by guilt, arousal, and confusion she practically bursts through her front door.

The Decision

PATH ONE: THE SURROGATE

"I don't know what came over me. I just needed him."

Mei doesn't give Ethan a chance to speak. The second she comes in the door she pushes him onto the sofa and takes him. She doesn't bother with the lights, or the blinds. She rides him hard and fast, her eyes locked on his. She tries not to think about Nathan, about how he looked at her, about how his body reacted to seeing her. It's the most aggressive sex of their marriage, driven by a hunger Mei doesn't mention.

PATH TWO: THE STAR

"You want to see me? Tell me how."

She pulls him upstairs, discarding clothes before he can get a word out. In the bedroom, Ethan finds his voice. He tells her about the position he wants to try and how it will help the video if they make it. Mei doesn't even hesitate, she asks how he wants her? She poses on her hands and knees, feeding off the look he's giving her, the same look Nathan had.

PATH THREE: THE CRACKED DOOR

"I want him to find me like this."

The arousal doesn't have anywhere to go. Mei walks past Ethan in the kitchen, says she needs a minute, and goes upstairs alone. In the bedroom, she undresses completely and thinks, for the first time in years, about Kyle's apartment. The roommate's door cracked open. She lies back on the bed and works herself with two fingers, listening for Ethan's footsteps on the stairs. Every creak of the floorboards downstairs makes her wetter. She wants him to find her like this. To watch her cum.

Mei rides Ethan

20%

Mei poses for Ethan

22%

Mei wants Ethan to watch

58%

45 votes total

[Insider] The Therapist Ch. 08

Hey Friends! This one is long overdue. Chapter 8 is here and it looks like Mei is coming out of her shell. Thanks for all the DMs, votes, and conversations leading up to this one. It was a lot of fun talking to all of you.

Up next, is most likely the next chapter of Window, then EP shortly after that. I have a few other things I'm working on as well. Keeping those a little close to the chest for now, but I think you'll be excited.

As always, this is an alpha. Can't wait to hear your thoughts!

The front door had barely shut behind her before Mei was on the stairs. She didn't take her shoes off, didn't put down the garment bag.

Ethan was at the stove when the door shut, a wooden spoon at his lips like he was tasting something. She was halfway up the steps when he called out.

"You're back. How'd it go?"

"Good." Her voice cracked. "I was... Give me a second." Her hand shook as she grabbed the railing. The image of Nathan's arousal was still fresh in her mind. She could still picture the way his body reacted, and worse, the way her body reacted.

The hallway was dark and her pulse was loud, as she pushed the bedroom door open with her shoulder because her hands were full of the garment bag. She hung it on the hook on the back of the door then started to swing the door shut and stopped halfway.

Ethan would be up soon. He always followed her upstairs when he thought something was wrong, and something was definitely wrong.

She sat on the edge of the bed and balled the blanket into her hands, breathing through her nose. The cotton between her legs was so wet she could feel it against her skin every time she shifted and the pressure of just sitting upright was making her dizzy.

The memory of the dress shop came flooding back. The dress wasn't even that revealing, not really, just tight around her chest and hips. But Nathan... She wet her lips and took another controlled breath.

His arousal was evident the second she looked at his pants. He didn't try to hide it, he wasn't embarrassed by it at all, and yet she... She shifted on the bed, her underwear was soaked.

This wasn't right. She shouldn't be this excited about another man looking at her about... Her gaze drifted to the partially open door. "Ethan will be up soon," she repeated to herself, biting her lip.

She stood so abruptly she got light headed. Her shirt came off over her head and hit the floor. Her bra followed. She stepped out of her jeans without unbuttoning them all the way and she nearly tripped getting them off.

She stood there for a second in just her underwear. Her fingers brushed the cotton, making her sigh as she pulled them down. As expected, they were damp, warm, clinging to her sex.

She sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the door, listening for Ethan's footsteps. She laid back slowly, her mind drifting back to Kyle's, to the room mate who was gone but let his door open. The thought of getting caught excited her, sent a jolt of electricity straight to her core, like nothing she'd ever experienced.

Her fingers ghosted over her skin. Her touch feather-light as it rolled over her chest. Her eyes stayed open, knowing what would happen if she closed them. She could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall, the bark of a dog somewhere in the distance. *Ethan will be up soon.*

The clock ticked.

Her fingers traced a slow circle around her left nipple. Just the pad of one finger, barely making contact. Her breath caught anyway. She did it again, giving in to the sensation. She rolled the nipple between her thumb and forefinger and her hips lifted off the mattress.

"Ahhhh."

The moan was loud, unfiltered. She wasn't sure if it was intentional or not. She dropped her head back against the comforter and stared at the ceiling fan.

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe he was going to give her the time she needed and wait downstairs. The stairs creaked and she gasped, her entire palm closing around her breast. What would he think if he saw her like this? How would he react?

With Kyle she'd imagined the roommate standing in the dark behind the cracked door. Her eyes would catch his and she'd notice the movement of his hand. She'd gasp and Kyle would think it was because of him. He'd fuck her harder, ask if she liked that. She'd moan yes, her eyes never leaving the roommate's, watching him touch himself watching her.

Her eyes had closed without her realizing it.

Her free hand drifted down her stomach. Her hips were already shifting on the bed and the cool air against the wet between her thighs was almost worse than being touched. She wasn't sure she was going to make it.

Her fingers slid down and she gasped at her own touch, her back arching halfway off the mattress before she could stop it. She was so wet her hand slipped against her without traction and she had to slow down, gentle herself. The slick sound of her own arousal filled the room and her hips bucked at the noise of it.

The image of Kyle began to blur.

She squeezed her eyes tighter and tried to hold him there. The mouth at her ear was still there but the breath was warmer now, the stubble closer, the voice murmuring against her temple wasn't a college boy's voice—

Your husband certainly agrees.

"Ohhhh." She pressed her thighs together around her own hand.

The hand sliding up the inside of her thigh wasn't Kyle's. Nathan was the weight on the mattress beside her. Nathan was the breath at her neck.

Her fingers paused and her eyes flew open.

Her chest was rising and falling too fast and there was a roar in her ears and she stared at the ceiling and tried to figure out exactly what happened. The floorboard creaked and she gasped, turning her head.

Ethan was in the doorway.

The breath went out of her in one long exhale and she didn't reach for the sheet. She didn't move her hand. She lay there and looked at her husband through the inch of space she'd left for him and the panic in her chest broke apart into something else, something warmer, something like relief.

He was here.

The door hid most of his body, but she could see his face, the arousal in his eyes. She watched his eyes slide down her body to her bare chest, her stomach.

She didn't move her hand. She let him see it. She chewed on her lip as she slowly slid her fingers out of herself and brought them up across her stomach, glistening, and let her thighs fall open another inch.

Ethan's throat worked as the door creaked open another inch. She moaned gently as his hand moved to the front of his pants. He was hard.

He'd been standing there long enough to be that hard and the realization lit every nerve ending in her body. She caught her lower lip between her teeth. She looked back up at his face. She held his eyes for one full second and then she let her gaze drop again, deliberate this time, as his cock sprang free and his hand wrapped around it.

She bit her lip harder, looking back up at him. She closed her eyes.

Downstairs, Ethan was still at the stove. He had made his mother's chicken and dumplings while Mei was at her session with Nathan. His plan was simple. The last couple of times she'd come back from therapy she'd seemed more receptive to sex. After dinner he was going to bring up his birthday present, just like Nathan had suggested. Now that he had some... experience with different angles he hoped she'd be receptive to trying something new.

However, when Mei came home today she seemed off. She crashed through the door barely saying hello to him before she started upstairs. Her cheeks were flushed and she was breathing like she'd sprinted from the car. She'd told him that Nathan was taking her to a store for some type of exposure therapy and whatever happened there must have been even worse than she thought

He'd given her the minute she'd asked for, and then another two, but he still hadn't heard any movement upstairs. He worried Nathan had pushed her too hard with their outing. Maybe today wasn't the day to bring up the sex tape. He gave the dumplings another taste, then put the heat on low and went upstairs to make sure she was alright.

Something seemed off the second he hit the stairs. A sound from the upstairs bedroom that sounded like a moan. His heart hit his throat. His laptop was upstairs. Did he forget to close a page? Had Mei discovered he was watching porn and was angry?

His pace quickened as he climbed the stairs to the bedroom. The door wasn't shut all the way. He took a deep breath, preparing for the worst as he looked inside the gap to try to gauge his wife's anger.

What he saw took his breath away. Mei wasn't angry at all, and his laptop was nowhere in sight. Mei was on her back on the bed, and she was completely naked. Her right hand was between her legs. He could see how wet she was from where he was standing, her fingers slick with desire as her left hand teased her nipple.

It was the most erotic thing Ethan had ever seen. In all their years together he'd never seen Mei touch herself. He'd barely seen her body when he touched her. He wanted to ask her what had her so worked up, what she was thinking about behind her closed eyes, but his body was frozen in place.

"Ohhhh." Her thighs clamped around her hand and her hips lifted from the mattress. This was hotter than any video he'd found on the internet. His cock was so hard it hurt as it pressed against his zipper.

He stood there with his hand still on the doorframe and tried to figure out why he wasn't going to her. That was the thing he should be doing. He'd had a hundred fantasies about walking in on his wife like this and every one of them ended the same way, with him walking over to her and putting his mouth on her and finishing what she'd started. He could picture walking over to the bed, slipping between her thighs, so close he could smell her arousal. Then the look on her face when she realized he was there and the way she'd open for him. He didn't move.

What he wanted, weirdly, was to keep standing right where he was. He wanted to keep watching her, seeing the way she let herself go when she didn't know he was there. He wanted to hear the sounds she made without him.

Her hand stopped, her head turning as her eyes fluttered open meeting his.

He gasped, expecting her eyes to go wide and then grab for the covers. He felt the urge to apologize. Did she think he was spying on her? She was going to think he was a pervert, a creep who sneaks up on his wife in her own house.

Slowly, watching him watch her, she slid her fingers out of herself and dragged them up across her stomach. They left a wet line. Her thighs fell open another inch.

His hand drifted to the front of his pants and she bit her lip and smiled.

For a second neither of them moved. He was standing in the doorway, his zipper undone, his hand wrapped around his manhood. Her mouth opened in a silent moan as she watched her husband touch himself to her. What she was doing excited him. Not only that, he wasn't ashamed of her, he didn't think less of her at all. His gaze was dark and filled with lust. She'd never seen that look on him before. In fact, the only other time she'd seen that look was less than an hour ago, on Nathan.

Her fingers moved despite the thought. "Ohhhh." Her eyes fluttered closed. "Oh, fuck."

She was wetter than before. Whatever she'd lost to the interruption had come back doubled and her clit was so swollen she barely had to circle it before her hips were rolling against her hand again.

The fantasy from all those years ago was now right here, ready made, standing in the doorway. Her husband watching her. Her husband stroking himself watching her. Her walls clenched around her fingers.

"Yesssss." Her tongue slipped past her lips. The fantasy continued to play out behind her eyes. Ethan was stroking himself, watching her as she rolled her hips, chasing her release.

Then, the fantasy shifted, just slightly. It wasn't Ethan in the doorway anymore it was Nathan.

Her fingers stuttered, but didn't slow down. She squeezed her eyes tighter and tried to push Nathan out and put Ethan back in. Her clit throbbed as she tried to picture Ethan's jeans, the black t-shirt he was wearing.

It's beautiful, Mei

"Ohhh, god." Her hips bucked off the mattress. She pinched her nipple so hard it hurt.

Nathan was watching her. She wasn't in the dressing room, he wasn't commenting on what she was wearing. He was commenting on her body, on the way she brought herself closer to orgasm.

"Ugggnnnh." Her brow stitched closer together. Her orgasm was so close. She rolled her head, two fingers pushing so deep inside her she could hear the wet sound of flesh on flesh. She could see the outline of Nathan's cock, hard against his leg. She didn't mean to look, but she couldn't tear her eyes. It pulsed with need as he took her body. Her thumb pressed over her clit and she nearly came unglued.

She opened her eyes.

He was right there. Her husband. Ethan. He was leaned against the doorframe with his shoulder pressed into the wood and his hand was wrapped around his cock and stroking himself. His hand was moving fast, and she could see the slickness forming around the crown. His cock was flushed dark and slick at the tip and there was a string of precum hanging from his fingers.

She slowed her fingers, watching his face. His jaw was clenched tight, his lower lip between his lips. His eyes were pinned on her hand between her thighs, and his strokes slowed to match hers. He wanted this. She could see it on his face. He was timing his release to hers.

Her thighs trembled. The sight of him should have been everything she needed to push her over the edge. But no matter how hard she tried, her eyes fluttered closed.

She didn't mean to. She couldn't keep them open. The orgasm was rolling up the backs of her thighs and her brain wanted the dark, and Nathan was right there waiting.

He hadn't even waited this time. He was on the bed beside her, his weight on the mattress beside her hip, his stubble against her temple, his mouth at her ear. She didn't fight him. She knew she should and she didn't. There wasn't time. Her body was already climbing toward the edge and trying to push him out would mean stopping and she couldn't stop, she physically couldn't stop, her hand was working too fast and her hips were too high off the bed and her clit was throbbing against her fingers and Nathan was the weight beside her and Nathan was the breath at her ear and Nathan was the hand sliding up her thigh—

This is how you should feel when others see you like this. It should be freeing.

Her mouth opened in a silent scream. She couldn't place when he'd said that to her, but it felt so vivid.

She moaned into the comforter.

His hand was on her waist now. *You look perfect, Mei. You want this, don't you?*

"Ohhhh fuck. Oh—"

She was too far gone to try to push him out. She let him stay, her gaze falling to the hard shape between his legs. She let his hand be the one on her thigh. The heat of his rippling through her body and making her toes curl. Was Ethan still at the door watching? Would he be able to forgive her? *Cum for me, Mei.* His hand joined hers between her thighs—

"Unnh— unh— unhhhhh—"

Her thighs clamped around her hand. Her hips jerked off the bed in a stuttering rhythm she couldn't control. Nathan disappeared from her thoughts like a ghost, her vision going white as her face flushed and her orgasm crashed over her like a tsunami. An intense warmth spread out from her core and covered every inch of her body as she collapsed onto the bed.

The wave kept rolling. She was still cumming when she opened her eyes.

Ethan was watching her. His hand was moving faster, his face flushed dark, his mouth open, his shoulder braced against the doorframe like he needed it to hold himself up. The sight of him there, her husband, about to explode from watching her, sent another pulse through her that stretched the orgasm even longer. She was still pulsing around her own fingers when his eyes locked on hers.

"Fuck — Mei that was —"

He couldn't finish his thought as his body seized and thick white ropes erupted from his cock.

She watched as his shoulders began to shake and his head tipped back against the doorframe. The aftershocks of her own orgasm pulsed in time with his and the guilt that had been waiting at the edges of her vision pulled back, retreated, dissolved into the warm wet pulsing of her body around her own hand.

They'd done this together. That's what she told herself. They'd done this together and that meant it was theirs.

He stayed in the doorway for a long moment, breathing hard, his chest rising and falling, his hand still wrapped around himself. Then he pushed off the frame.

He didn't say anything. He crawled up the bed and gathered her against his chest, his arm sliding under her shoulders, his palm splaying flat across her ribs, his forehead pressing to her temple. She was still trembling. He held her through it. His heart was hammering against her ear and his breath was ragged at her hairline and she let her cheek rest against the warm damp skin of his chest and closed her eyes again, just for a second, just to feel him there.

"That was the hottest thing I've ever seen," he said. His voice was wrecked. "I love you so much."

She smiled against him. He was right.

"Fuuuck," Sierra sighed, wiping the sweat from her forehead as she rolled onto her back. Her hair was spread across the pillow, her chest heaving. Her gaze fell to the photo just above the bed. The picture frame was crooked, tilted a few degrees to the right. She wondered if it had always been like that or was the bed banging against the wall the reason.

Nathan was on his back beside her, one arm draped across his eyes.

"You're number four, by the way."

He lifted the arm. "Number four what?"

"Guys I've fucked." She turned her head on the pillow to look at him. "Just so you know the kind of company you're keeping."

He laughed, shaking his head. "Good to know."

"I thought you should." She rolled onto her side and propped herself up on her elbow. The sheet slid down to her waist, exposing her chest. "Which is weird, because I know everything about you and nothing at the same time."

"You know I'm better than you at Jeopardy."

Sierra laughed so hard tears welled in her eyes. "Oh sweetie. You're lucky you're pretty." She smiled and wiped the tears away. "But I'm serious. I've read all your books, watched your TED talk..." She reached out, letting her fingers slide down his stomach. "Fucked you. But I don't really know you."

He looked at the ceiling. She could see the wheels turning in his head. His eyes were closed, and he breathed lightly through his nose. He had a smirk on his lips, one that made Sierra want to lean over and kiss the side of his mouth, but she restrained herself.

"What would you like to know." He kept his eyes closed.

"I don't know. What was your childhood like? Why'd you get into therapy?"

He opened his eyes. The smile faltered, turning into more of a scowl. He turned his head to face her, the deep blue of his eyes somehow warming despite the new look.

"My father was a drunk and used to beat me."

"Oh fuck. Nathan I'm—"

"It's fine, really." He smiled. "It's not that kind of story."

Sierra nodded unsure of how to respond.

"He was one of those old school guys. Men needed to be tough and he didn't see me as that." He shrugged like it was the most casual thing in the world. "Just before graduation, my mom finally worked up the nerve to leave him. After that I started seeing a therapist. It took a couple years but..." He ran his hand through his hair. "The work we did in that office. The difference he made in my life. I knew then what I wanted to do."

Sierra had been holding her breath without realizing it. She'd expected a story about after school specials or a friend helping him through a hard time. Had she known it was something so traumatic she wouldn't have asked it while they were both naked in bed.

"Jesus, Nathan. I had no idea." She leaned forward kissing the corner of his mouth she'd been watching.

"Don't be. I'm grateful in a way."

"Grateful?"

"Had I not gone through that who knows where my life would have ended up. Because of him I found my passion in life."

Her hand stayed on his chest. "Okay, lighter question. What kind of people end up on your couch? Other than my brother, of course. Do you get a bunch of sad lonely housewives?"

The smile returned to Nathan's face and he sat up in bed, pressing his back to the headrest. "All kind of people. Sad housewives included."

"Then you have to have a good story, right? Tell me one. What's one of the craziest cases you had." Her hand came up to his face and she ran her fingers through his beard, smiling when he leaned into it.

"I can't give you specifics obviously."

"Obviously."

"A few years ago in Florida I had a guy come in by himself because he wanted help convincing his wife to have a threesome."

"Of course. Why are all men the same?"

Nathan gave her a sly smile. "We'll come back to that one."

The way he said it made her heart race and her hand drop from his face to his lap.

"Anyway, it's pretty standard stuff. Most guys don't know how to bring it up without making their wives feel inadequate, so I started walking him through the conversation."

"Okay."

"Two sessions in, I realized he kept dodging when I'd ask who the third would be. Friend? Stranger? An app? He had something specific in mind and he wasn't telling me." Nathan shifted so he could look directly at her. "Eventually I just asked him. Who's in your head when you picture this? Who is it?"

"Oh no."

"His wife's sister."

"Get the fuck out of here."

"And before I could even respond, he says, and I want you to picture his face." Nathan shook his head. "He says, 'It'll be fine, doc. The girls won't be touching each other. So it's not weird.'"

Sierra slapped his leg so hard he jumped. "No way." She laughed so hard she fell onto her back. "There's no way he said that."

Nathan was chuckling. "Hand to God."

"Oh my god. Oh my god, I love him. I love him so much." She wiped her eyes. "That is the most Florida man story I think I've ever heard."

Nathan shrugged. "He thought he had a strong case."

"I'm sure he did." She caught her breath. Her hand had drifted down his stomach again. "What about couples? Like... do they ever come in after one of them has done something stupid to try to fix it?"

She'd asked it casually. She didn't realize until the words were out of her mouth that she was no longer joking.

Nathan's expression shifted. "Are you asking me to take you and James on as clients?"

"Oh my god, no." She laughed but it was thinner than the last one. "He'd never agree. I mean I don't want that either. I just..."

"It's okay to want to fix your marriage, Sierra."

"It wasn't that, really." She almost blushed. How could she make such a stupid comment. "I um... I was actually thinking about your last client in Florida. Grace Hart."

Nathan shifted on the bed. She felt his thigh tense.

"I remember the news when the story broke. There was talk that her husband was having an affair and that's why she..."

"That was speculation."

"Of course. I just mean..." She grabbed the comforter, pulling it over her chest. "There had to be signs right? That she was... you know, falling for you."

"Of course there was but I..." He paused. She could feel his heartbeat rising. "I can't really discuss that stuff with you."

"Of course. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset." His tone was sharp. "It was common transference."

Sierra nodded. She knew she should stop pressing, that this was a sore spot for Nathan. "Right." She couldn't help herself. "But you've written whole books on this. At some point you had to see it coming. Why not hand her off?"

"Because I didn't have the luxury of hindsight." He pulled the sheet from his body. "I need to shower and head out."

"Wait, wait. I'm sorry." She placed her hands on his hips, climbing on top of him and let the sheets fall from her body. "I didn't come here to fight with you. I do that enough at home."

She had a good thing going with Nathan. She wasn't sure why she was trying to sabotage it by making it something it wasn't. This was supposed to be fun, casual. She'd turned it into an interrogation.

She reached behind her body and found him half hard. She pressed her chest to his face and felt him inhale as she stroked him back to life. "This is what I can't get at home." She tilted her hips and took his full length, feeling him sigh against her skin.

The sound of screaming second graders drifted down the hall, as Mei pulled the classroom door halfway closed. The kids were building solar systems and the entire room smelled like tempera paint and glue. It was one of her favorite activities as a teacher, even if the kids got more paint on themselves than they did their planets

She knelt next to Marcus's table with a paintbrush in one hand and a Styrofoam ball impaled on a pencil in the other. Saturn. Marcus had insisted on glitter for the rings and was now in the process of applying enough of it to send Mei home looking like a vampire in the sunlight.

"Like this?" He stuck his hand into the pile of gold glitter on the paper plate between them and slammed it down onto the wet glue.

"Less, less, less. Just sprinkle it. Like pepper. Like you're a fancy chef on TV."

"I don't watch cooking shows."

She laughed and picked up a small amount to demonstrate what she meant.

He grinned at her, his front teeth still in the gap-stage, and pinched a more reasonable amount between his fingers. Mei wiped her palm down the front of her apron. The solar system was spread across six tables in various stages of disaster, Jupiter had rolled off Lily's desk twice, and Mason had colored all of Earth blue. She told herself he was trying to demonstrate the effects of global warming.

"Ms. Morrison, you forgot to comb your hair today."

She turned. Jimmy Davis had his Mars in one hand and was pointing at her with the other, loud enough that two other tables looked up. The boy was a menace. He was also, depending on the day, her favorite student, which she would never admit to anyone, including herself.

"Is it?" She reached up. The hair tie had slid down again, this always happened when she didn't let it dry fully before putting it up, and a whole loose section had come free at her crown. She'd done it in the parking lot, with her phone propped up against the steering wheel for a mirror, and apparently she hadn't done it well.

"Thanks for the update, Jimmy."

"You're welcome."

She pulled the tie out and started over. Her hair had been wet because she'd run out of time to dry it. Because, despite her concerns about being late for work Ethan had pulled her on top of him as soon as their alarm went off.

Her cheeks flushed and she walked to her desk to give herself a minute. She'd expected things with Ethan to be awkward after he'd walked in on her, a thought that still sent a pulse between her legs, but it had been the opposite. He'd been like a man possessed. They'd made love again last night before bed, and she was even the one to start it, then again this morning before either of them was fully awake. She was giving him what he'd always said he wanted.

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and turned, spotting Jack on the other side of the door.

"Kids, I'm going to step out into the hallway for a minute to talk to Mr. Johnson. Keep working on your planets."

When she stepped into the hallway Jack was leaning against the wall, one foot pressed against it. The t-shirt we wore was tight on his chest. His green eyes seemed to light up when she closed the door.

"Looks like it's been an interesting morning." His gaze held her as a smile grew on his lips and he pushed off the wall.

"Solar system."

"Ah. That explains this." He reached up his thumb brushing her cheek.

Mei inhaled sharply, her eyes went wide, but she didn't pull away as an electric current ran through her. Jack stepped back grinning with a splotch of blue paint on his thumb.

"Oh geez. That's probably been there all morning." Her face burned as Jack continued to stare into her eyes.

"I once again find myself in need of your services." He puffed out his lower lip and let his eyes pout.

"Not again," she laughed. Her eyes drifted to the wall behind him. A flyer hung on the wall reminding kids of parent-teacher conferences next week. Also known as hell week among the teachers. She looked back at Jack. "What is it now?"

"Well, as you know the dance is next month."

Mei nodded ignoring the butterflies in her stomach.

"I need help with a theme. I was thinking since you did so good with the music choice maybe..."

"You're impossible." She tsked her tongue.

"Guilty as charged." He hung his head in mock defeat.

She wasn't sure what it was about Jack. Despite the fact that she already had so much on her plate, she didn't mind adding one more to help him. She scratched her face as she thought about options. The school didn't have the kind of money where they could do anything elaborate. They could do a garden theme, but that had been done countless times over.

"It needs to be something simple," she said, more to herself than Jack, but he nodded in agreement.

"So, the met gala is out. Got it."

She giggled, not because of his funny, although it was funny. It made her think about the kids a few weeks ago. Stephanie came in singing some K-pop Demon Hunters song and within an hour the entire class was singing along, some even dancing next to their desks.

"Actually. That's a great idea."

"It is?" He ran his hand through his hair. "I'm not sure we have the budget for—"

"We could hang up fairy lights in the cafeteria. Get some flowers and... OH, do you think you could make like a makeshift gazebo?" She was talking faster. She could picture it now. Not the Met Gala, but a formal event that made the kids feel like their favorite celebrities all designed as a night under the stars.

"Yeah, I uh... I could probably make that work." He rubbed the back of his neck. What color are you thinking? Navy? White? Something like that?"

"White is perfect!" The vision popped in her head instantly. Fairy lights all around. A background with flowers scattered around a gazebo and Mei standing in front of it in her red dress. The kids would love it. They'd get to play dress up. Parents would appreciate the simplicity of it, and teachers would get to feel like actual adults.

"I actually just bought the perfect dress." She said it without thinking about it. Jack's eyes immediately lit up.

"Oh yeah? Let me see. Help me draw some inspiration."

Jack took the phone. He didn't zoom and he didn't scroll. He just looked. His pupils widened, the green going dark at the centers, and his gaze drifted from the screen to her, just for a second, like he was picturing it on her.

The flutter in her stomach intensified.

"That's... wow, Mei. You're going to look great."

"You think?"

"Of course." He handed the phone back, his fingers brushing hers. "You're going to be the prettiest girl at the ball."

"Then you better..." She laughed, looking down at her phone. "You better dress up too."

"It's a date then."

She didn't correct him.

The hallway went quiet. Jack was still smiling, waiting for her to laugh it off, to say *you wish* or *in your dreams* or any of the easy deflections she'd used on him for months. None of them came. Her hand was warm where his fingers had touched her. Her stomach was doing the same slow turn it had done last night when Ethan stood in the doorway. The same turn it had done in the dressing room.

"Ms. Morrison, I need to go to the bathroom."

Jimmy had peaked his head out of the door startling Mei. She turned to face him fully, her hands shaking.

"Oh... um..." She turned to look at Jack but he was already walking back down the hall.

"Ms. Morrison." Jimmy was tugging on her sleeve now. "I really have to go."

"Yes. Yes, sorry, sweetie. Go ahead." She held the door for him and watched him sprint down the hallway, then pressed her back against the cool metal of the doorframe.

Her heart was racing and she pressed her thighs together. The way he'd looked at her after seeing the photo was the same way Nathan had looked at the store. It was the same feeling that made her rush upstairs. She pushed off the doorframe before she could think about it anymore.

Solar systems. She had solar systems to finish.

The office was dark except for the laptop. Mei was paused on the couch, knees an inch apart, the moment just after he'd asked about the sex tape. Nathan took a sip of his bourbon, noting her posture. She was leaning forward slightly. She was more receptive to the idea of the tape than she realized.

He sat back in the chair and let out a breath. The notepad was open beside the keyboard. His notes from their outing to the dress store ran down the page. She wasn't just ready to make a sex tape with her husband. She was ready for her real transformation.

His mind drifted to last night. Sierra had asked about Grace. The timing of it bothered him. Why now? Did she know how close Mei was to making that transformation? Was it really because she was trying to get to know him or was there something else at play? He didn't like the blind spot he had for her. He'd let his guard down. But the sex was good, better than good. It was some of the best he'd ever had. The way she challenged him. How she refused to submit.

His grip around the glass of whiskey tightened as he took a longer drink.

The night had gone so well before that. She'd bought the story about his abusive father hook line and sinker. He should have tried to shed a few tears that would have sealed the deal and kept her from probing further.

He pressed play.

Mei's knees drifted further apart on screen. He'd missed that the first time. He paused it again and looked at his notes. She didn't correct the sales woman where she thought they were a couple. She didn't refuse the red dress. He shifted in his chair. Her body had reacted to his the moment she stepped out of the dressing room.

He adjusted himself. The entire car ride home she looked out the window and shifted in her seat. She couldn't be more ready. He was going to have her.

CHAPTER 8 — CHOICE POINT

The chessboard has been set. All the pieces are in place. The question is, which one will fall first?

The Decision

PATH ONE: THE NUMBER

"It's for the dance. That's all it is."

Mei has been getting closer to Jack. He's funny and good looking, and desperately incapable of putting a school dance together. He's already reached out to her twice. There's no doubt he'll need even more help. Mei should give him her number and let him know she's always available should he need her.

PATH TWO: THE PODCAST

"Why the hell was she so interested in Grace?"

Sierra came into Nathan's life like a bat out of hell. He'd built what he has because of how careful he's been. Sierra may have caught him off guard, but that was no excuse to not try to learn more about her. He needed to do a deep dive, figure out what made her tick, and just what exactly her podcast was all about.

PATH THREE: THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

"Ethan will get his sex tape, but it won't be the one he expected."

One session left before Ethan's birthday, and Nathan was done pulling punches. Mei had felt something in the dress shop. He'd watched it happen. And Ethan had taken to his training like a duck to water. The man didn't want to star in a sex tape with his wife. He wanted to be the man behind the camera. He just didn't know it yet. A little hypnosis, a few well-placed suggestions, and Ethan would walk out of that next session believing he'd come up with the idea himself.

PATH ONE: THE NUMBER - Mei should give Jack her number so they can text about the dance

PATH TWO: THE PODCAST - Nathan needs to find out exactly who Sierra is and what her podcast is all about

PATH THREE: THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR - Ethan doesn't want to star in Mei's sex tape. He wants to be behind the camera

46 votes total

The muffled roar of the cafeteria carried through the wall of the teachers' lounge, two hundred kids competing to see who could be the loudest while eating chicken nuggets. Every few seconds a shriek would cut above the rest and Mei would glance toward the door out of habit, half expecting someone to come running in with a bloody nose or a tray-related emergency. It hadn't happened yet, but the lunch hour was young.

Rachel dropped into the chair across from her and cracked open a La Croix. "I feel like I haven't talked to you in days. How was your weekend?"

"It was good." Mei stabbed a cherry tomato with her fork. "Ethan got tickets to the Mariners game on Saturday so we made a whole thing out of it. His sister came, and our neighbor Nathan." She ignore the flutter in her stomach, chewing the tomato. "I'm not really a baseball person but Ethan was in heaven. Him and Nathan were like two kids at a candy store."

"That's cute. I didn't know you guys were close with your neighbor."

Mei took a drink of sweet tea, suddenly feeling hot. "Ethan is, not me." She took a bite of salad, unsure why she sounded so defensive. "Ethan doesn't have a ton of guy friends around here and Nathan is just... easy to be around. Sierra took about a thousand photos and put them all over her Instagram." Mei shook her head, smiling.

Rachel laughed. "At least you got out of the house. My weekend was spent preparing for the arrival of Diane." She rolled her eyes and stole a crouton from Mei's plate. "Greg's mother is coming for a visit next month and she's already started sending texts about Thanksgiving, hoping to nail down a location." She lifted her hands and made air quotes.

"It's... a little early for all that. Isn't it?"

"You would think" Rachel took a sip of her La Croix. "Last year she complained that our house was too stuffy. Keep in mind, it's almost double the size of hers." She was building steam now, her hands getting involved. "And now she wants to have a conversation about—"

The lounge door opened and Jack walked through giving Mei a warm smile. He rushed over to the table, the sound of Rachel's voice fading to nothing as Mei watched him approach.

"Okay. Don't judge." He pulled out the chair next to Mei and sat down without being invited, spinning his phone around on the table so she could see the screen. "I know it doesn't look like much yet, but it's getting there."

The photo showed a wooden frame sitting in what looked like his garage. Two-by-fours and plywood, a few cross beams that weren't quite level. Painters' plastic was draped over the top resembling something like a ghost costume. Mei tilted her head.

"Is that the gazebo?"

"It will be." He swiped to another angle. Same structure, somehow worse from this direction.

"I'm thinking white paint, lattice on the sides, maybe wrap the fairy lights around the posts. But I keep second-guessing myself on the color and I figured you'd have an opinion."

"White is perfect. The warm lights will make it glow." She grabbed his phone to zoom in on the picture. Their fingers brushed and she sucked in air, dropping it to the table.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry." She pushed it toward Jack with the tip of her finger like it was on fire.

"You okay there, hun?" Rachel asked with a smirk on her face.

"It's fine. That thing is battle tested." He picked it up and scrolled to another picture. "I have hands like a snake when it comes to these things."

Mei failed to suppress her laughter.

"What do you think about space in front of it?" He pointed to the front of the structure. "should we do flowers? Or maybe some kind of streamers?"

"Streamers?" She looked at Rachel who rolled her eyes. "No, it has to be flowers. You really are bad at this." She smiled, as Jack dipped his head and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I tried to warn you," he said, leaning back in the chair and stretching his legs under the table.

"Here." She reached for her phone. "Just text me." She said it without even thinking about it. "It will be easier than you tracking me down between classes every time."

Jack held her gaze a moment longer than he should have. Something had shifted in the way he was looking at her, but she couldn't quite piece together what it was. "You sure?"

"Something tells me you're going to need the help," she said, unlocking it.

"I'll try not to blow you up too much." He handed the phone back and started toward the door.

"I'll believe it when I see it," she called after him, and he laughed without turning around.

The door closed and the lounge went quiet. Rachel was peeling the lid off a yogurt, her spoon already in hand, staring at Mei like she grew another head. Mei picked up her fork and pushed a piece of cucumber around the container.

"What?"

"Nothing." Rachel took a bite of her yogurt. She chewed it slowly, like she had all the time in the world. "I just don't think I've ever seen you give a man your phone number before. That's all."

"It's for the dance, Rach. This is the third time now that he's come to me with questions."

Rachel nodded, a half smile still on her lips. She scraped the side of her yogurt cup and took another bite before she spoke again. "Fair enough." She left the spoon in her mouth. "So, now that you have this new neighbor, are you and Ethan getting enough alone time together?"

Mei looked at Rachel, searching for whatever was behind the comment, but Rachel's face was neutral. She was already cleaning up her trash.

"Things with Ethan have never been better." Mei closed her salad container and stood to rinse it in the sink. "You know I would never—"

"Oh i know. That's not what I meant, I swear." She stood. "I just don't want to see anyone get the wrong idea is all."

Mei dried her hands on the paper towel and tossed it in the trash. Her and Rachel said their goodbyes and hugged. As she walked down the hall, Mei looked at her phone. Jack's contact was still on screen. A warmth spread low in her belly. She dismissed it and called Ethan to see how his day was going.

Ethan was propped against the headboard scrolling through his phone when Mei came out of the bathroom in one of his old t-shirts and a pair of cotton shorts. Her hair was damp from the shower and she smelled like coconut shampoo. She climbed into bed next to him and pulled the comforter up to her waist, reaching for the book on her nightstand. Something about a woman who moves to a small town and falls in love with a veterinarian. She'd been reading it for two weeks and he had no idea how far she'd gotten because every time she talked about it his eyes would glaze over.

He went back to his phone. He'd been looking at camera mounts for the better part of an hour, trying to figure out what kind of setup would work. His birthday was a few days away and the thought of it had been living in his chest since he woke up that morning. Nathan had told him to bring it up. He'd tried several times, but the closest he'd gotten was asking if she was planning to make it with him. When she told him yes, he was to dumbstruck to ask any follow-up questions. He added a tripod to his cart, looked over at Mei reading her book with the most innocent smile, and deleted it.

Mei's phone buzzed on the nightstand. She picked it up, read whatever was on the screen, and laughed so hard she almost snorted. Ethan watched her from the corner of his eye. Her smile was wide and she was shaking her head as she typed back.

"What's funny?"

"It's Jack." She was still typing, and didn't bother looking over. "You know, the PE teacher. I told you about him. He's just being goofy." She turned the phone so Ethan could see. On the screen was a giant balloon arch that said 'Harmony Falls Gaala'. Ethan turned his head confused.

"It's supposed to say Gala. Thank God he teaches PE and not English," Mei said with a giggle.

Ethan nodded, staring at the guy standing in front of the balloon arch. His green eyes sparkled as he stared at the camera. His arms were larger, or at least larger than Ethan's. His hair was disheveled in a way he knew Mei liked.

"I didn't know you two were texting." He handed the phone back to Mei, trying to ignore the fluttering of nerves in his stomach.

"It just started today." She shifted against the headboard, pulling her knees up. "He keeps needing help with stuff for the dance and it was easier than him cornering me in the hallway. I told you about him, at game night. He can't do anything by himself."

"Right. The daddy-daughter thing." He shifted in bed, the nervous flutter in his stomach turning into a full blown rumble. He wouldn't call it jealousy. He was never that guy. But there was something about the way Mei laughed when she saw his text. The way she lit up even now.

"Seems like you're having fun with it."

She looked at him. "With the dance?"

"Yeah."

"I am." Her expression softened. "Is that... I mean, is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay." He squeezed her knee through the covers. "I'm glad." He looked at the screen again. "I just didn't realize your date was so cute."

He didn't really mean it the way it sounded, but the second it left his mouth he expected Mei to shut down. Delete his number and say it wasn't like that. That wasn't what he wanted though. This was a side of her he'd never seen before, and he loved it. The confidence she'd been building since she started seeing Nathan was showing up everywhere now. The way she dressed, the way she carried herself, the way she looked people in the eye instead of at the floor. His wife was becoming the woman he always knew was in there. He didn't want to ruin that over something as stupid as being jealous over a text message.

"It's not a date." Mei rolled her eyes, but the smile was still on her face. She grabbed his shirt, pulling him over to her. "You're the only man for me Mr. Morrison." His hands hit the mattress on either side of her head and she wrapped her legs around his waist before he'd settled his weight. Her hips rolled up to meet his and even through his boxers and her shorts the heat coming off her was startling. She was grinding against him.

"Wow, someone's excited about something." Her fingers threaded through his hair. "What has you so worked up, mister? Thinking about your birthday?" Her fingers slid across her back, pulling his shirt up his back.

She was right. He was hard, painfully so. He hadn't even realized when it happened. His breath caught as her hands continued to roam his body. But it wasn't his birthday he was thinking about, at least not for the last few minutes. Her fingers dragged his shirt up his chest and he sat back long enough to pull it over his head.

When he came back down her lips were on his. Her legs tightened around him and she rocked her hips upward, pressing his cock against the soaked cotton of her shorts. The wetness was unmistakable. He could feel it through two layers of fabric, warm and slick, spreading with every roll of her hips.

His hand slid down her side and under the waistband of her shorts. His fingers pressed against her and his brain went blank. She was drenched. His fingers slid through her folds without traction, her arousal so thick it coated his hand in one pass. She gasped, her hips bucking into his touch, and he pulled back to look at her.

"God, Mei." He grabbed her hips and pulled her down harder. "You're so wet already."

She looked down at him. Cheeks flushed, eyes half-lidded. She rolled her body, pulling Ethan under her as her teeth nipped his ear.

"So?" She sat up fully, pressing her heat fully into his manhood and pulling off her shirt without a second thought. "Is this what you were thinking about? Is this how you want me for the video?" She bit her lip seductively, pressing her palms flat on his chest as she rolled her hips again.

His cock pulsed hard against her in response. She moaned at the feeling. He'd never seen her be the aggressor. He almost told her yes, just so he could hold onto the moment. But this may be the best chance he had to talk to her about the position he wanted. He just hoped it wouldn't freak her out too much.

"Well?" She ground down harder and his hands shot to her hips. "Is this what you've been thinking about?"

"Yes." It came out hoarse. "But I want to... Can you turn over?"

He held his breath as her facial expression changed. Her smile held, and her eye brows flicked up in surprise. Her hands trembled, just briefly, then she climbed off of him. The absence of her weight, her heat, made his cock twitch against his stomach. She turned away from him and lowered herself onto her hands and knees.

"Like this?" reaching back and pushing her shorts down. Then she kicked them off the end of the bed.

Ethan stopped breathing.

Her bare ass was right there. Her thighs were parted just enough that he could see her slit glistening between her legs, the dark patch of hair between her legs visibly damp. Her hands were flat on the bed, her chest pressing against the fabric of the comforter. It definitely seemed like she'd done this before, but he fought the urge to ask, not wanting to break the spell.

He'd watched this exact scene dozens of times now on his laptop. The same position, the same arch. But this was far more erotic. He could see everything. The fine hairs at the base of her spine standing on end, the goosebumps chasing across her skin, the way her fingers curled into the comforter waiting for him.

He stripped his boxers. His cock was aching, flushed dark, the tip already slick as he moved behind her. His hands found her hips and his thumbs pressed into the soft skin above her ass. She pushed back before he was ready, her body searching for him, and his cock slid through the wet heat between her thighs. Her arousal coated the length of him and they moaned in response.

He gripped the base of his shaft and pressed against her entrance. She pushed back into him, enveloping his entire length in a single stroke.

"Ohhh God." The sound tore out of her as he sank to the hilt, his hips flush against her ass. The wet heat of her wrapped around every inch of him and for a second he couldn't see. She was soaked. He'd bottomed out with almost no resistance, and the slick sound of their bodies meeting echoed in the quiet room.

Her head dropped between her arms and she moaned into the mattress. She'd been vocal before, but nothing quite like this. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd ever seen how so aroused. Her walls clamped around him, making his knees weak. The picture of the PE teacher flashing through his head then vanishing just as quickly.

He pulled back slowly, wanting to feel every inch of her. His shaft was coated in her arousal, her pussy gripping him, stretching around him, reluctant to release. The visual sent a bolt of heat through his gut that nearly ended everything. He thrust back in and she cried out, her back arching so sharply her shoulder blades pressed together.

"Ethan— oh god— You feel so good, baby."

A pulse of pride washed through him. The way she said his name made his cock pulse. He didn't know why he had that reaction. There was no reason to assume she was thinking of anyone else. But the confirmation made him crash into her faster and harder than he had planned.

If the added aggression bothered her, she didn't show it. She slammed back into him to meet every thrust, her ass hitting his pelvis with a wet slap that filled the room. He could hear her getting wetter. The obscene sound of his cock driving into her over and over, mixed with her moans was better than any move he'd watched.

"You feel so hard."

Her words nearly made him cum. He'd never heard her say anything like that before.

"Just like that. Ugggh." Her hand went to her chest, squeezing her nipple. "This is how you want me for your video?" She rolled her hips as she thrust into him. "Show me how hard you're going to take me."

He grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled. The leverage drove him deeper and her arms buckled. Her chest hit the mattress, changing the angle, and suddenly he was so deep inside her that he knew he wouldn't last much longer.

"Ah — ah — Ohhh — Oh God — don't stop —"

He could see everything from this angle. Her pussy taking him, stretched tight around his cock, her arousal smeared across both of them. The muscles in her back flexing with each impact. Her fingers twisted white-knuckled in the sheets above her head. It was exactly what the videos looked like and nothing like them at all because the videos didn't have her sounds, her smell, the way her body pulsed around him every time he bottomed out.

The heat was already past the point of return. His thighs were locking. His balls had drawn tight against his body and his stomach was clenching. He tried to slow down. Pulled almost all the way out, holding there, gripping her hip, his cock throbbing at her entrance.

"Ethan." Her hips rolled and bucked. "Please." She pushed back and the head of his cock slipped inside her.

He lost it.

Her grip was like velvet and the moment he slipped back into her slick heat her body gave out. His vision blurred as the orgasm ripped through him so fast his knees nearly gave out. He buried himself as deep as he could and held there. His cock pulsed inside her, emptying in thick waves, each throb sending another shock through his chest and stomach and thighs. A groan tore out of him with each blast.

"Yes.... yes... OHHHH!" Mei didn't stop. His orgasm seemed to spur her on, her hips working faster, chasing her own release.

"Fuck— I'm sorry— I didn't expect to—"

She looked over her shoulder, hair stuck to her face, cheeks flushed dark. He expected her to roll over. To tell him it was okay and his release was all she wanted.. Instead, she stayed exactly where she was and reached her right hand between her thighs.

His eyes went wide, and his cock flexed, still inside her, another drop of cum leaking out.

She found her clit with her fingers and the first touch made her whole body jerk. A shaky moan escaped her and Ethan felt her walls clench around her. Her fingers grazed the base of his cock as she touched herself. The overstimulation made him hiss through his teeth, but he didn't dare move.

Her hips shifted forward, chasing her fingers, and his softening cock slipped out making them both sigh. His eyes never left her body. He could see his cum trailing down the inside of her thigh, mixing with the slick mess already coating her skin. His absence only seemed to make her touch more urgent. Her fingertips pressing between her folds.

"Mmmpph. I'm so close. Keep... keep watching." Her eyes were shut tight, her brow pinched in concentration.

He was still on his knees behind her. He could see everything. Her hand working between her thighs, her fingers circling her swollen clit, the glistening mess of her arousal and his cum spread across her pussy and the insides of her legs. Her hips were rocking back against her own hand in a slow rhythm, her ass swaying with each movement, and every few seconds her walls would clench around nothing and she'd whimper into the mattress.

It looked exactly like the videos he'd watch, the angle was near identical. His brain overlapped the thoughts The women on his laptop. He'd envisioned them as Mei, and now here she was. In the exact same position, doing the exact same thing.

"Ohhhh God. Ohhh yesssss." Her movements were growing in urgency. She was close, he could see it.

His cock twitched. He was getting hard again. Despite having cum just minutes ago he was already swelling back to life. Mei's hips rolled faster. Two fingers slid inside herself and she gasped, her back arching, her free hand gripping the sheet. She fucked herself on her fingers, her palm grinding against her clit. He wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked slowly, watching her, his mouth dry.

The image shifted. The same angle from the videos, but the camera had moved. That wasn't right. He had moved. He was watching from somewhere else, from the camera, and someone else was behind her. Someone taller, broader through the shoulders. It was the man she'd been texting. The PE teacher, driving hard and fast into Mei as she moaned like a pornstar.

Ethan's hand froze on his cock. The image vanished so fast it left an afterburn. His heart hammered. He was kneeling on his own bed, behind his own wife, watching her touch herself, and for the briefest second the man behind her hadn't been him. His cock throbbed harder, causing him to squeeze himself.

His hand started moving again, faster, and he watched Mei's fingers disappear inside herself, watched her hips buck, watched the wet shine of her skin, and he couldn't have stopped stroking himself if the house was on fire.

"Ohhh god." Mei's voice was muffled against the mattress. Her hips were stuttering now, her fingers a blur between her thighs. "Oh ffff— ohhhh—"

Her whole body locked. Her thighs clamped together around her hand and her back arched so hard her head came off the mattress. Her hips jerked and her shoulders began to shake as her pressed deep inside her. Her walls pulling them as if they were a cock.

Ethan came for a second time.

This one caught him off guard. His stomach clenched and his cock pulsed. The first blast hitting the back of Mei's thigh, but she barely noticed, her body still writhing in bliss. The second blast was softer, and he felt the liquid mess coat his fingers. It was less than the first time but somehow more intense, almost painful, and his hand kept moving until the last throb faded and his arm gave out.

Mei's body had gone limp. She was flat on her stomach now, her face turned to the side, her eyes barely open. She was breathing in shattered pieces. Then she looked back at him over her shoulder. Her eyes widened, then crinkled.

"Did you just—" She pressed her face into the mattress, her shoulders shaking. "Oh my god, a second time?"

His face was on fire. "I didn't— I don't know how that—"

She rolled onto her side, not bothering to clean herself off, and looked at him with the biggest grin.

"I didn't know you liked watching me that much." She said it soft. Almost shy.

He didn't know what to say. His brain was still short-circuiting. He fell back onto the bed, exhaustion completely overwhelming him. Everything had happened so fast he wasn't exactly sure what made him cum again.

Mei didn't mind. She didn't need an answer. She turned herself around slowly, crawling over his body and lying on her chest. Her skin was hot and damp and she was still trembling faintly against him. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in and held on.

"I love you." She said it into his skin, already fading, her voice thick with sleep. "So much." Her fingers found his and laced through them and held. Within a minute her breathing had evened out and her weight had gone heavy and warm against him and she was somewhere far away.

The last of the buses had pulled away over an hour ago but the parking lot was full again. Parent-teacher conference night turned Rapid Springs into a different building after dark. Mei had wrapped up most of her conferences early. There was still twenty minutes left before the end of everyone's least favorite quarterly event, and there was still one parent she had yet to see. She'd kicked her flats off under the desk and was sitting cross-legged in her chair, her phone in her lap.

Mei: You better not have eaten all the dumplings before I get home.

Ethan: No promises. They're really good.

Mei: Save me at least two or you're sleeping on the couch.

Ethan: What if I save you three? What do I get then?

She bit her lip, heat climbing up her neck. They'd been like this all day. Mei wasn't even at work yet this morning with Ethan texted and admitted he was still thinking about last night. If she were being honest, neither could she. Her thighs still ached from the encounter. She was sore in the best possible way.

She glanced toward her closed door. The hallway was quiet. Her heart raced as she tapped on the camera app and her front facing camera appeared on the screen. Three months ago the thought of doing something like this would have made her die of embarrassment.

She unbuttoned the second button of her shirt, parting the fabric just enough to see the valley of her chest. She held her breath, smiled, then snapped the picture.

Mei: I expect three.

Ethan responded immediately.

Ethan: I just bought out the entire restaurant.

She laughed out loud, her hand flying to her mouth to try to muffle it. It was the exact response she needed. She started typing out a response when a tap came from the door. Mei gasped, looking up to see Jimmy Davis's dad walking through. He was still in his work clothes, the sleeves of his dress shirt cuffed to his forearms, his tie loosened at the collar. He always looked like he'd come straight from an office.

"Ms. Morrison. Sorry if I'm early. Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Oh um..." Her cheeks burned. "Not at all." She stood and met him at the small table she'd set up near the window, the one with the adult-sized chairs she'd borrowed from the library.

"Thanks for making the time. Jimmy is always such a bright spot for the class."

"I appreciate that. He tells me all the time that you're his favorite teacher." He reached out to shake her hand, his gaze drifting to the open collar of her shirt.

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. There wasn't any time to fix her shirt before he came in and now she was paying the consequences. She could probably make an excuse to turn back to her desk and quickly button back up. Instead she dropped into the seat across from him.

"Jimmy is the top reader in our class." She pointed to the corner behind her, now hyper aware of how her shirt parted with each movement. There was a picture of each kid on the wall in a cutout car. Jimmy's car was at least three lengths ahead of the person behind him. "He's completed six stories on his own and passed each of the comprehensive tests."

"I can't barely get the boy to turn off his video games at home." His gaze fell to her chest again and he sucked his bottom lip into his mouth. "I think that pretty well proves whatever you're doing here is working."

She shifted in her seat, crossing her legs. Her body was warm, and despite her usual disgust for the way the man was looking at her, there was a pleasant tingle spreading through her. She cleared her throat, muttering a thank you. Then casually crossed her arms over her chest.

The rest of the conversation was standard. She rushed through his math and science grades, talking a little faster than normal. When the meeting ended, she stood with him, walking him to the door in such a way that he wasn't afforded another look. He thanked her again and was out the door.

Mei sat down and put her hands flat on her desk. Her pulse was still elevated and the warmth between her legs hadn't fully faded. She stared at a crayon mark on the corner of her desk, pressing her knees together.

Grace's apartment had gotten smaller over the past few weeks. Not physically, but the walls seemed to close in a little more each evening, especially after the Subway interview fell through. The bank statement on the counter was still sealed. She didn't need to open it to know what was inside. Her rent was already past due. She didn't need another reminder of how little she had left.

Grace sat on the couch and ignored the mess around her as she scrolled through the Dead Air Instagram feed. She did this every few days. Their page was littered with pictures of 'the investigation process', with the occasional personal picture of Sierra sprinkled in. Probably to show she was "a real person". It was another way for Grace to live vicariously through Sierra. The evening meds had kicked in about twenty minutes ago so she slowed a little slower than normal. Sierra, had a way of looking directly into the camera in every photo, chin up, daring someone to look away. Grace never commented or liked a post. She just looked, the same way she used to look at the women on the news who'd survived something and come out the other side still standing.

A carousel post from the weekend. Sierra at a baseball game, beer raised, grin wide, her arm slung around another woman in a Mariners jersey. The caption read: *Dragged the fam to the game. We lost but the nachos made it worth it.* 🍷🍔

Grace scrolled past. She hated baseball. There were too many people and she didn't get the rules.

The next one was a reel about a cold case in Nevada. A family had gone missing after winning it big in a local casino. The photo showed a picture of a man in a baseball cap and sunglasses with a back over his arm. Something clicked, like her mind was still playing catch up. She scrolled back up to the baseball picture.

She scanned the picture again. Not of Sierra this time, but just behind her, just out of frame and slightly out of focus. A man half-turned toward the field, cap low on his forehead. The beard was different. She'd never been looking for a man with a beard, and for a second she thought she was just losing it. He could have been anyone.

Her vision narrowed. The hum of the refrigerator disappeared. The Trazodone was supposed to prevent this, the way her hearing collapsed to nothing but her own pulse in her ears, but this was different.

"No fucking way," she muttered to herself.

She zoomed in, taking a screenshot. The image went grainy but it didn't matter. The beard may have been new. But those eyes. She stared at them, her nipples growing hard as she ran her thumb across the screen. If he were half as smart as he thought he was then he would have worn sun glasses. She'd spent eleven months in a psychiatric facility because of those eyes.

"Found you."

She set her phone face-down on the sofa. The heels of her hands went to her eyes and she began to rock, her nails digging into the back of her scalp. She'd found him. She'd actually found him. She never thought this day would come. Everyone thought she was crazy. She took three deep breaths, just like Dr. Waverly always told her to do. Okay, she found him. Now what?

She picked her phone back up and pulled up Dead Air's website. It took forever to load, like the universe was mocking her. But she didn't care. She was right. She would prove to everyone she was right. She was telling the truth. The About page came up and she searched for contact info, production credits. Anything that would give an address. It sat on the bottom of the page. a P.O. box out of Bellingham, Washington.

Next, she pulled out her credit card app. She had about 1500 left before it was maxed out. That would cover the flight and a few days in a crappy hotel. She could find a way to stretch it. She always did.

Her hand was twitching. She needed a plan. But all she could think about was getting to Bellingham and finding Nathan. That was all that mattered. She pulled up her email and found Dr. Waverly. She made up a story about a friend in need in Washington. She promised to check in every few days, and assured the doctor that she had a fresh refill of meds that she would take every day.

She got up and walked to the map on the wall. She pulled a red circle from the pack on the counter and pressed it over Bellingham. Then she took her Seroquel and went to bed.

Ethan had rescheduled his session to yesterday, meaning Nathan had an extra hour to review Mei last session, MM-03. It was a shorter tape since they went on their shopping spree last week, but it still held valuable information. Her posture was relaxed, her legs slightly apart. He'd read the situation perfectly.

A knock broke his concentration. He glanced at the clock, it was ten til seven. He couldn't contain his smile. She was early. He closed the laptop and slid it into the desk drawer next to his phone. There wasn't enough time to return the drive back to the safe, but it didn't matter. He could do it later.

"Mei. Come in." He opened the door with a smile and stepped aside, catching the scent of her shampoo as she passed. She was wearing a fitted green blouse, the top button undone, and dark jeans. He led her into his office where she took her usual spot on the sofa, sitting back with a smile on her face.

She looked comfortable, relaxed. He took his seat behind his desk, and scribbled on his notepad. *Arrived early, casual clothing. Open posture. Unprompted eye contact.*

"I hope it's okay I'm early." Her palms were flat on her knees. No sign of nervousness.

"Of course. I was just preparing for our meeting." He sat back in his chair, placing the notepad on his knee. "How was your week?"

"It was good." Her smile was genuine. "The kids are nearly done building their solar system. It's one of my favorite projects to do every year." She laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Once they actually decide to keep the glitter focused on the planets the whole thing really comes together. You should see their faces the first time they come in and see the Solar System hanging, it really does make it worth it."

"That's great to hear." He made a note about her general happiness. "And things at home? I had a lot of fun with you and Ethan at the game. Thanks again for the invite."

"I'm glad you were able to come. I'm not much of a baseball fan. You did me a favor keeping Ethan company."

He nodded. She still hadn't broken eye contact, or fidgeted. He decided to push it, to see how the training was holding up.

"His birthday is in a couple of days." He paused, still no reaction. "Have you given more thought to his request?"

"I have. I told him I'd do it." Color climbed her throat but she didn't look away. "We've been... things have been really good between us. More frequent. More..." She searched for a word but still didn't look away. "Connected."

Ahead of schedule. He wrote it without looking down. The architecture was holding faster than projected. "You seem more relaxed tonight than I've seen you."

"I am." She sat straighter. "That's actually something I wanted to ask about."

He leaned forward. "Okay?"

Her gaze dropped to her hands. "I keep... The voice in the back of my head, my mother. I keep waiting for it to come back and it just doesn't."

"You expect it to?" He scratched his face. "I consider it great progress that it doesn't come when you're with Ethan."

"Yeah... I agree." Her fingers curled into her jeans. A nervous tick Nathan had picked up on during their first session. "But it doesn't seem to be there in other situations either."

"Something happened?" It was possible she was talking about last week at the dress shop, of course. But Nathan didn't think that was it. She was too comfortable when she first walked in for it to have been that.

She was quiet for a long time. Her jaw worked and her knees pressed together for the first time since she'd sat down.

"I... I had parent-teacher conferences." She picked at a thread on her jeans. "One of the dads came in. My shirt was... I'd unbuttoned it earlier. It doesn't matter why. But he kept looking at me." She squirmed in her seat. "At my chest. The entire meeting."

"And that made you uncomfortable?"

"That's the thing." Her voice dropped and Nathan leaned closer to hear it. "I should have been disgusted. He's a parent and he's married." She pressed her thighs together and her throat bobbed. "But I... I didn't hate it." Her hands came up and pressed against her cheeks. "Why didn't I hate it?"

There it was. The fault line. Nathan recognized it immediately, the moment the conditioning's success threatened to become visible to the subject. He'd seen it with Grace at roughly the same stage. The difference was pacing. Grace had panicked. Mei was frightened but present.

"The wall your mother built was never supposed to last forever, Mei." He leaned his face forward, making her eyes find his. "What you're feeling isn't wrong. Your body is learning to exist without a filter that was installed when you were a teenager. Of course it feels strange." He held her gaze. "A man found you attractive. It's okay to be flattered. For your body to react in kind."

Her hands dropped from her face. She exhaled, but the color stayed high on her neck.

"I want to try something." He stood and moved the chair aside. "Stand up for me."

She rose slowly, her hands finding each other at her waist.

"Turn around." He guided her with a gesture until she faced the back wall. The camera behind her blinked its red light just above eye level. "When Ethan hits record this weekend, every doubt you've been carrying is going to rush back at once. All of those emotions you're carrying right now, you'll carry then. I want you to practice sitting with that discomfort now, in a space where nothing is at stake."

She stared at the red light. Her breathing quickened.

"You were uncomfortable at the parent-teacher conference, because you didn't know what to think about your body's natural reaction."

She gave the slightest nod.

"You had a similar reaction in our last session, didn't you?" Her body went stiff, but he pressed on. "Let's talk about that night." He positioned himself at the edge of his desk, three feet behind her. "Walk me through what you were feeling when you went back into that dressing room."

Her head dipped. "My... my heart was going so fast I thought I was going to pass out. The dress was tight and I knew you could see..." She shifted her weight. "The saleswoman thought we

were a couple and then I saw your—" She stopped.

"My arousal." He stood, taking a step forward so she could sense him behind her. "You looked great and saw a man's natural reaction to that. Then what happened."

"I..." She shook her head, her thumbs sliding back and forth over each other. "I was aroused, and I wanted to get home... to Ethan."

"That's good, Mei" He reached out. His palm pressed flat between her shoulder blades. He could feel her heart hammering against his fingers through the thin cotton of the blouse. She inhaled sharply but she didn't step forward. "You see, you were still in completely control, despite the new feelings."

His hand slid down the fabric of her shirt, slowly. "What happened when you got home?" He'd taken another step forward, her words more of a whisper. Mei's eyes stayed focused on the red dot of the camera.

"I... I rushed upstairs."

Nathan's thumb slipped under the hem of her shirt. The slight contact of his skin or hers made her gasp.

"And... Did you make love to your husband?"

"We... No... Ethan and I didn't have sex."

His eyebrows lifted. He'd watched her practically sprint from his car. He'd assumed she was on Ethan the second she was in the door.

"I went upstairs and I..." Her eyes went to the floor. "I touched myself. Ethan wasn't even up there yet."

Nathan bit the inside of his cheek to stop from groaning. His cock stirred in his pants. "Look at the camera, Mei." Her head lifted. "You were reliving Kyle's apartment."

She nodded. He could feel the vibration of it through his palm.

"And then Ethan came upstairs." Her voice was higher. "He... he saw me and I thought he'd be angry or disgusted but he just... he just watched."

This time he couldn't keep from groaning. It was progress like he'd never dreamed. Not just Mei, but Ethan as well. His thumb traced a slow line across the small of her back and his cock strained against his slacks.

"He watched you." He practically whispered the word in her ear. "Just like you wanted. Like your fantasy."

"Y—Yes."

"That took courage, Mei. You should be proud of yourself." His breathing had changed and he heard her hear the catch, let the sound of his own arousal register. His hand gripped the bare skin of her hip. "What did you do when you realized he was watching?"

"I..." Her breathing was ragged. Nathan's grip tightened on her hip and she shuffled backward a half step. When she did they both gasped. The swell of his cock pressed into her jeans. "I didn't stop. Not until I..." Her hips shifted. Nathan wasn't sure if it was intentional or not, but the movement caused her to grind into her hardness for the briefest second. "I finished."

He held the position a second longer. Then he stepped back.

Cool air filled the space where his body had been and he heard the exhale leave her. He walked around the desk, adjusted himself without masking it, and sat.

"I think you're ready, Mei."

She turned from the camera. Her cheeks were flushed dark. She couldn't speak. He let her sit with it for a full ten seconds, then stood and walked to the door. She rose on unsteady legs and followed.

"I look forward to hearing how it went in our next session."

She crossed the lawn without looking back. Nathan watched until her door closed, then shut his own and locked it. The office was quiet. He stood with his hand on the knob, his erection straining against his slacks. He had to see the tape. To see if she had actually grinded against him, or if it was just movement.

CHAPTER 9 — CHOICE POINT

Ethan's birthday is days away. Mei has agreed to make a tape with him. The only question left: How will it turn out?

The Decision

PATH ONE: They both loved it

"It was everything I hoped it would be."

The camera is rolling and Mei isn't afraid. She's loud and responsive and everything Ethan had dreamed of. He knows exactly what he wants thanks to all his "research" and Mei gives him every bit of it. They share a climax neither of them are likely to forget.

PATH TWO: It's not what Ethan expected

"What the hell is wrong with me?"

It starts off great but halfway through Ethan goes soft. He grabs the camera off the tripod to buy himself time but the second the viewfinder is between them everything changes. Mei tells him it's okay and keeps going while he watches. He's harder than ever but doesn't want to join. She offers him a hand as she edges closer and they both finish harder than expected.

PATH THREE: Mei fakes it

"He'll never know the difference."

Mei wants to give Ethan his birthday more than anything. The camera starts rolling and she's fine at first. Then halfway through, her mother's voice slides back in for the first time in weeks. She can't get out of her own head and she knows how much this means to him. So she does something she's never done in their marriage. She fakes it.

The Therapist Ch. 10

Nathan stood in the kitchen doorway with a beer he wasn't drinking and watched his work walk across the living room.

Mei crossed the room carrying a platter of bruschetta, catching his gaze as she passed the kitchen island. She smiled at him and he tipped his beer toward her in response. A month ago she wouldn't have held eye contact with him for more than a second. Now she was the one initiating it. She was wearing a fitted black top with a neckline that cut straight across her collarbones, shoulders fully exposed. The skirt sat just above her knees, and when she bent to set the platter on the coffee table the fabric pulled tight across her ass. He took a drink of his beer and let his eyes stay. Was she wearing a thong?

The difference between her and Grace was staggering.

With Grace, she'd attached to him by session three. Every session after that was her actively trying to seduce him. By the fifth she'd worn a short skirt with nothing underneath, her legs open for the full hour, a playful smirk on her lips when Nathan noticed. They were sleeping together by session six. But the conditioning had only ever pointed in one direction. Grace bloomed for Nathan and no one else. Outside the office she was still largely caged, still anxious, still biting her nails in the parking lot before she came in. Her husband noticed some changes, small ones, but they were nothing compared to what she gave Nathan behind a closed door. She was a satellite locked in a single orbit, and everyone could see it. That visibility was what put him in front of a judge.

Mei was the corrected experiment.

He'd made the choice, difficult as it was, to keep his hands off her, and the results couldn't have been more different. After four sessions Mei wasn't just opening up for him. She was opening up for everyone. The clothes, the way she laughed without covering her mouth. The way she'd touched Ethan's waist as she passed him in the kitchen, her fingers dragging across the small of his back. She was wearing confidence the way other women wore perfume. It all just pointed to one thing. Nathan was really good at his job. That was the cover. That was the architecture working the way it was supposed to. To the outside world, Mei Morrison was simply a woman coming out of her shell.

But the cover was only half of it. He hadn't built all of this just so she could find herself. He'd built it so that when she did, the path led back to him. Every boundary she crossed in public made the private ones easier to reach. Every time she held a man's gaze or let someone see skin she would have hidden a month ago, it loosened the architecture a little more, widened the aperture, made the next escalation with Nathan feel like a natural extension of her own growth instead of what it actually was.

Grace had taught him what happened when the patient's entire world shrank to one man. Mei's world was expanding. She was blooming for her husband, more engaged with her coworkers at school. The expansion was deliberate. The more people she let see her, the less suspicious it would be when she let Nathan see more.

And what happened at the end of their last session was only the beginning. He was more sure of that than ever before.

He'd reviewed the office footage twice after she left last night, slowing the playback to quarter speed around the forty-two minute mark. The way she grinded into him was intentional. He'd paused it at the exact moment her eyes went glossy. She didn't stumble, like he'd originally considered. She'd angled her hips backward into him, shifted her weight to increase the pressure against his cock. The movement lasted less than two seconds, but the deliberateness was unmistakable. Her body had sought his. The only question left now was how could he build on it.

Of course, tonight would be a big step in that direction. It was Ethan's birthday. The big night. And if there were any doubt in his mind before that the couple was going to go through with it, that evaporated the second he saw them.

He'd considered slipping upstairs and planting a camera behind one of the picture frames in their bedroom. He wanted to see the real thing, not just hear some watered down version of it later. The thought lasted about as long as it took to dismiss. There were too many guests wandering in and out, too many variables. He'd just have to wait for Ethan's next session. Or, knowing Ethan, tomorrow afternoon when he would almost certainly invite Nathan out for drinks. The man gave up information the way other people made small talk, freely and without realizing what he was handing over.

"Can you believe they called up Garcia?" Ethan had appeared next to him, his gaze tracking Mei as she made small talk with someone in the front of the house.

"I'm not surprised. Their bullpen is a mess." Nathan took a drink of his beer as he watched Ethan fidget with the label.

"I guess, but he's still so green. I don't see him making a difference this year." He glanced at the clock, for what was at least the third time. "Man, can you believe how late it's already getting? I can't believe there's still so many people here."

"Relax." Nathan put his hand on Ethan's back. "Tonight will be fine. You're overthinking it."

"Oh... Yeah. I mean, it's not that. It's just..." Nathan's phone buzzed in his pocket and he tuned Ethan out.

Sierra: _Birthday parties make me horny. Is that weird?

He slid the phone back into his pocket without looking up. "Mei doesn't seem to be stressing too much about this. You shouldn't either. Enjoy the ride." He looked up and saw Sierra sitting on the sofa in the other room, working on a glass of wine. Her lips curled into the smallest smile when she caught Nathan looking.

Mei appeared at Ethan's side with a plate of food. "You need to eat. You've been running around like a maniac since the first guest arrived."

"I ate." He looked Mei over. "You look great tonight, by the way."

A blush colored her cheeks as she looked at Nathan.

His phone buzzed again.

Sierra: *I knew that would get your attention. You're such a perv.*

He smiled and started to type back a response.

"Looks like you're enjoying whoever that is."

Nathan looked up to see Ethan grinning. "Oh, it's nothing like that," he said, shoving the device back in his pocket as Mei gave him an inquisitive look.

An hour later the party had started to thin. Cake was served and happy birthday was sung. Soft music played over the speakers as Mei stood next to the door saying goodbye to an elderly couple from down the street. She closed the door with a sigh. Only her, Ethan, Nathan, and Sierra remained.

"That was fun." She closed her eyes and let out a breath. "But, hosting sure does take it out of you. I'm beat."

Nathan was pretty sure he saw her eyes cut toward the stairs and his cock began to swell.

"Before I go I wanted to tell you guys something, but you have to promise you won't let it kill the vibe," Sierra said, posting up beside the island.

"What's wrong?" Ethan asked, his eyes narrowing.

"You need to promise first," Sierra said, almost teasing.

"Fine. I promise. Now, out with it."

"He doesn't sound like he means it." She laughed, raising an eyebrow at Mei.

"Just tell him. You know how he gets." Mei stood next to Ethan on the other side of the island. She was close enough now that Nathan could smell her perfume and he had to stifle a groan.

"James and I are getting divorced. The papers are already being drawn up."

"Oh no." Mei brushed past Nathan, reaching out and taking her sister-in-law's hand. "I'm so sorry."

Ethan's mouth fell open. Nathan watched his face as it seemed to be unsure of what emotion it wanted to settle on. First his nose crinkled, then his eyebrows flared. Finally he landed on something that looked more like concern.

"Don't give me that look." Sierra sounded almost annoyed.

"I'm not..." He looked at Mei for support. "You should have told me sooner. Are you okay? What can I do?"

"I'm fine, really." She took a sip of wine. "I could only pretend he wasn't screwing his secretary for so long before I had to address it." She shrugged, then polished off the rest of her glass. "This is good news, honestly. It was a long time coming."

"I'm sorry, Sierra. That's a lot to carry alone."

She looked at him. For a moment, he worried that she was going to give him that playful smirk, or hint that there was something between them that would tip off Mei or Ethan.

"Thanks, Nathan." She carried her glass to the sink. "Now that that's out of the way. Mei, you never said what you got the birthday boy."

He watched her after that. She deflected Mei's concern, collected glasses, wouldn't sit still. She occupied a compartment in his head that his methodology didn't run in. No file, no protocol, no projected outcomes. That should have unsettled him more than it did.

Ethan and Mei gave each other panicked looks. It was hard to keep a straight face, but Nathan managed. His focus was on Mei, about how she would react to the question. To Nathan's surprise, she handled it perfectly.

"It's um..." Mei's blush deepened and she looked at Ethan for help. "It's private."

Sierra's eyes went from Mei's face to Ethan's and back. Nathan sipped his beer, unable to control his laughter any longer. The panic, the blush, Ethan suddenly very interested in the label of his beer. Nathan watched her put it together in about two seconds.

"Gross. That's my brother." Sierra feigned embarrassment as she grabbed her jacket. "Now I wish I would have ruined the mood."

Mei buried her face in her hands, but unlike before it was pure joy on her face. Ethan wrapped Sierra in a hug. "I'm serious, if you need anything—"

"I'm fine, really." She pulled back and looked at Nathan. "You might as well walk me to the door, doc. These two clearly want us gone."

Mei managed to curtail her embarrassment enough to give Sierra a hug and walk both her and Nathan to the door.

"Drive safe," Ethan said, with a laugh as Sierra hurried toward her car. Nathan hung back a second longer.

"Relax, have fun," Nathan said, cupping Ethan's shoulder. "Remember this is something that you're both going to watch down the line. You don't want to seem too eager."

The smile that was on Ethan's face slowly disappeared as he considered Nathan's words. He nodded in agreement and Nathan turned toward his house.

He was halfway to his front door when his phone buzzed. It was another picture from Sierra. This time it showed her bag. A pair of lace black panties hanging out of the side.

Sierra: *They aren't the only ones with plans tonight. I'll be at our spot. Don't keep me waiting.*

Pine Street Tap had become the regular meeting place for Sierra and Nathan. The beer selection was shit, and the black-and-white photos behind the bar suggested the place had not seen a makeover since World War II. Still, it was quiet.

Danny, the bartender, spotted Sierra the moment she came through the door. He gave her a friendly wave, wiped down two seats, grabbed a pair of Bud Lights from the cooler, and turned one of the TVs to Jeopardy.

"Something a little stronger today," Sierra said, sliding off her leather jacket as she looked up at the screen. "Who is Charles Manson?"

Two seconds later, the woman with bottle-cap glasses buzzed in and proved her right.

"How do you do that?" Danny asked as he reached for the whiskey.

"Come on. Famous cult leader who also wrote songs. Even you could have gotten that one."

Danny shrugged, poured her drink, and slid the glass across the bar. "You want to talk about it?"

"Manson? Not particularly. He's been talked to death." She gave him a sly smile.

Danny nodded, catching what she meant, then walked to the far end of the bar to check on his only other customer.

Sierra sat alone with her drink, watching the game play out above her for another twenty minutes before Nathan finally showed. The bell over the door gave a tired jangle, and Sierra looked over surprised that it was even darker outside than in here. She watched him scan the bar, taking a little longer than she would have liked to find her in their usual spot. Sierra lifted her glass in greeting as he crossed the room.

"I was starting to think you weren't going to show." She took a sip of whiskey as Nathan picked up the beer in front of him.

"You're impatient." His eyes dropped to her bag on the hook between them. The black lace was still hanging out of the zipper. She hadn't bothered to fix it.

"See something you like?" Her eyes sparkled as she watched Nathan.

"Just trying to figure out what you would have done if I didn't show up."

Her eyes drifted to Danny. "I would have figured something out."

The lighting wasn't great in the bar, but despite that she was pretty sure she saw his nose crinkle. He was different tonight, in a way she couldn't figure out. Normally, her banter would leave him flustered. When she'd messaged him at the party she was hoping he'd drop his phone in embarrassment, but he took it all in stride, like he was more focused on other things. She laughed at herself. She was pretty sure he would call that projecting.

"So." He turned the bottle in his hand. "How are you holding up? I knew things with James were bad, but..." He paused when she narrowed her eyes. "I just mean, I hope I didn't somehow—"

"You can relax, Nathan. I'm not trying to trick you into a relationship."

"That's not what I asked."

"Yeah it is. You just dressed it up." She held up her glass for Danny. "We both knew where this was going. James and I ran our course, it's as simple as that." She turned in her chair to look at him. "Now, do you really want to keep talking about my soon-to-be ex when I'm sitting here with no underwear on?"

Nathan didn't take the bait. Annoyingly, that was one of the things she liked about him. He studied her for a moment, his fingers sliding over the glass as condensation gathered around his grip. She could almost see the gears turning behind his eyes.

"If it were that simple," he said, "I don't think you would have made the announcement at your brother's birthday party."

"Oh, fuck you."

Danny set the fresh glass in front of her, eyebrows raised. Sierra ignored him and swirled the drink, watching the whiskey climb the sides instead of looking at Nathan.

"People get divorced, Nathan. It's a pretty common thing. I'd expect you of all people to know that."

"They do." He nodded. "And yes, I'm aware." He was doing that stupid thing with his voice. Trying to keep it neutral and calming. It took all of Sierra's willpower not to call him on it. "I'm just saying you dropped a bomb on your family and drove straight here. Most people would want to sit with that for a minute."

"Most people didn't spend years pretending they didn't know their husband was fucking someone from his office." She could feel the venom in her words. "I sat with it plenty. I sat with it while I cooked him dinner and I sat with it while I smiled at his work parties and I sat with it every time he came home smelling like her shampoo." She picked up her glass. "So forgive me if I'm not some broken mess of a girl who needs you to fix her."

She could feel him deciding whether to push harder or let her have it. The playfulness usually tucked behind his eyes had faded, replaced by something softer. It made her want to throw her drink in his face. It shouldn't have been this difficult. She had practically put up a neon sign that said hurry up and fuck me. How was he still finding a way to make this about her feelings?

"Okay." He picked up his beer.

Sierra let a breath out through her nose. "Thank you."

There was an awkward silence after that. They watched the TV together as a woman in a cardigan ran the Shakespeare category and Sierra got every answer but didn't announce any of them. Nathan missed the last clue and she didn't correct him. The whole vibe was off now.

Her phone buzzed against the bar. She picked it up. Her stomach dropped as she skimmed the message from her producer. Dead Air was down eighteen percent from last season. She could already see the conversation coming. The we-love-what-you're-doing-but meeting. The suggestion to pivot. She couldn't handle that. Not now, with everything that was going on. Dead Air was the one piece of good still left in her life. The thing she built from the ground up that no one else had a claim to.

"Everything okay?" Nathan asked, as the color drained from her face.

She picked up the whiskey and drained it without answering. Then set the glass down hard enough that Danny looked up from the register. She pulled two twenties from her wallet and slid them under the empty glass.

"This night is fucked." She grabbed her jacket off the back of the stool.

"Sierra." Nathan turned toward her. "If you want to talk—"

"No Nathan, I don't want to talk." Fire burned in her stomach. "What I wanted was to fuck, but you made it pretty clear you're not interested in that." She sounded exactly like James. "So I'm going to go before the universe decides to throw some other big fuck you at me." She bent down and grabbed her purse. "Sorry to make you drive out here for nothing."

Nathan's hand found her arm. His grip was light, barely there. She stood still for a second, looking at his fingers on her sleeve. Tears prickled the back of her eyes.

"When you're ready to talk. I'm here."

She pulled her arm free. Jacket on. Keys already in her fist. She was at the door before Danny's goodnight reached her and she raised a hand over her shoulder without turning around.

Ethan set the last of the wine glasses next to the sink and gave up on the kitchen. The dishwasher was already full, the counter was buried under paper plates, and the candles from his cake were still lying next to the knife where Mei had pulled them out one at a time. The whole downstairs smelled like frosting. It could all wait until morning.

He locked the front door and stood there with his hand on the deadbolt. Upstairs the shower was running. *You don't want to seem too eager.* Nathan's words replayed in his head. Upstairs the water had shutoff. He took a deep breath, desperately trying to calm his nerves. His gut twisted, his hands shaking. What if he was pushing her too hard? He shook the thought away. They'd talked about it. Mei had talked about it in therapy. For the last month, she'd been working on this for him. Nathan was right, he needed to enjoy it.

The bedroom was ready. It had been ready since before the party, if Ethan was being honest with himself. The tripod stood at the foot of the bed, his phone locked into place after several failed attempts, angled down the length of the mattress. He had checked the framing twice, stretching out across the comforter where Mei would be, making sure the shot caught both pillows without cutting anyone's head off. The bathroom door was still closed and he had to stop himself from knocking to see if she was okay. She would be out when she was ready.

He sat on the edge of the bed and wiped his palms on his boxers. His hands continued to shake, but it wasn't just nerves. It was the feeling he used to get on Christmas Eve as a kid, a current with nowhere to go. For a second he thought he was going to be sick. Why was he so nervous? He didn't have time to answer that question honestly as the bathroom door opened.

Mei stood in the doorway with a nervous smile. For a second Ethan forgot how to breathe.

The lingerie she was wearing was new. He didn't even know she'd gone shopping. His cock grew thick as he took in every detail. Black lace clung to her skin, accenting her complexion. Small, thin straps sat on her shoulders, dipping the fabric low across her chest. A small bow held the two cups together, the deep brown of her nipples sticking out under the sheer design. Beneath it, the fabric opened into a deep plunge down the center of her body, exposing a strip of bare skin from her breasts to her navel.

Ethan's grip tightened on the edge of the mattress.

"Wow, Mei... I... wow."

His gaze went to her legs. The sides rode high, making her legs look longer, and the narrow center disappeared between her thighs. He couldn't believe she was wearing something like this. What made it even more unbelievable was that she wasn't shying away from his gaze at all. If anything, she seemed to be encouraged by it.

His cock throbbed against his pants as he realized just how over dressed he was.

"So... you like it?"

He could tell she was trying to sound sexy, and she did, but there was also hesitation in her voice. He heard the tremor in it. One wrong word and she would retreat back into the bathroom, shut the door, and come out in one of his old T-shirts like this had never happened.

"It's perfect. You're perfect." He pulled his shirt over his head, wanting to match her level of undress.

"Let me," she said with a burst of confidence as she took a tentative step toward him.

Her eyes dropped to the tripod as she passed it. They lingered there for half a second, long enough for his pulse to kick. Then she looked back at him and kept coming. She pressed her hands against his chest and he sucked in a breath as her nails slid down his stomach causing his abs to tighten.

She tipped his face up and kissed him, slowly. Her thumb traced the waistline of his pants, and Ethan groaned in response. She took her time, her kiss growing in passion as the sound of his zipper being lowered sounded like a shotgun blast in his ears.

His hands moved to her back, sliding over the lace as he kissed her. The fabric felt delicate beneath his palms, almost fragile, and then there was hardly any of it at all. His fingers traced between her shoulder blades, following the thin straps down until they gave way to bare skin. His tongue pushed deep into her mouth as he cupped her ass, realizing there was no fabric there either. She was wearing a thong.

Heat punched through him so hard he had to break the kiss. For one dizzy second, he thought he might actually cum untouched. He pressed his forehead to hers, breathing hard, his hands still on her.

"I can't believe you... You're sure you're okay with this?"

"You always do so much for me." Her hands slid inside of his pants, pulling them down his thighs. "Happy birthday, baby."

She kissed him again before he could respond. Her fingers hooked into the waistband of his boxers and pulled them down. His cock sprang free and she wrapped her hand around the base without looking down. The contact made his entire body lock. He'd never know Mei to take this kind of command. She was owning the entire thing in a way he didn't think possible.

She backed toward the bed, pulling him with her. Precum gathered at his tip as he followed, half-drunk on the feel of her hand around him. He kicked his pants loose somewhere behind him and nearly tripped over his own feet. Mei tightened her grip, and somehow that was what steadied him.

She sat on the edge of the bed. "So, how do you want me?" Her voice dripped with sex-appeal. It sounded so much like the videos he'd been watching that he needed to do a double-take to make sure it was actually his wife in front of him.

He reached toward the phone on the tripod and tapped the screen. The display bloomed, the red timer appeared in the corner and started counting, and the two of them appeared under it, small and bright, the whole bed in frame.

"Hand and knees," he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. "I want to make sure I get our entire body in the video."

She hesitated for a moment. Her eyes flicked from Ethan to the phone and back again. Ethan worried he'd said too much. Then she smiled and crawled toward the center of the bed.

She was facing the headboard, the thin strip of the thong pulled taut between her thighs, the lace riding up her ribcage. Then she looked back at him over her shoulder with her bottom lip caught between her teeth. For a moment, all Ethan could do was stare. He wanted to watch her like this for hours. It was intoxicating.

"Now what?" Her gaze went to his cock as she shifted on the comforter.

He climbed onto the bed behind her. His hands sliding across her back, his gaze locked on her ass. It was even better than he'd imagined. His fingers traced the lace around her hips and she rocked back against him in response. The fabric was damp against him. He had barely touched her, and she was already wet.

Her hips kept moving, slow and needy, dragging him between her thighs through the lace. The head of his cock slid against the damp fabric, and she moaned softly, her shoulders dipping toward the mattress. Her head rolled from side to side as her hips bounced.

"Stop teasing me," she whispered, the words breaking Ethan from his trance.

The sight punched the air out of him. Mei was flushed and wet between her thighs, her body glistening in anticipation. Then his focus caught on something smaller. She had shaved. Her skin was smooth along her lips, with only a small dark triangle left above, visible when she shifted her hips and glanced back at him.

Ethan's grip tightened around the lace bunched in his hand.

She was watching him over her shoulder. Her face colored, but she didn't look away. "I didn't know how it would look with the..." She swallowed, her eyes flicking briefly toward the camera. "Outfit." She chewed on her lip nervously. "Do you like it?"

He didn't know how to respond. His cock pulsed in front of him and on instinct he tilted his hips forward. The head of his cock pressed against her entrance and his mouth fell open. Her body was a furnace. The wet heat consumed him as Mei rocked back into him, burying him to the hilt in one slow stroke.

"Ohhhhh." Her head dropped to the mattress and her fingers curled into the sheets. He held there for a second, the wet heat of her walls squeezing every inch. He could feel her adjusting around him, her body clenching and releasing, the sensation making his vision swim.

He pulled back slowly. His cock was slick with her, her pussy gripping him, reluctant to let go. He thrust back in and she cried out, her back arching.

"God, Ethan." She gripped the sheets tighter. "You feel so good."

She had never been much of a talker during sex. Last week, when he'd caught her touching herself, she'd surprised him with the things that came out of her mouth. He'd thought about those words every day since. But hearing her now, with his dick buried inside her, did something different to him. He threw his hips forward, bottoming out again.

"Ffff, yes, baby. Oh, just like that."

Her ass pushed back, meeting him stroke for stroke. The sound of their bodies colliding echoed through the room. The wet slapping of flesh on flesh. It was exactly like the videos. The thought slipped in before he could stop it, bringing a strange, uneasy heat with it. Mei rolled her hips, clenching around him from the inside, and his stomach tightened. Had she done this before?

The thought was insane. Then her head lifted, turning slightly to the side, and for one dizzy second, it looked like she was staring right at the camera.

"Mmmm, don't stop. Ohhhh God."

His eyes followed her gaze to the small screen. They were both in the picture perfectly. Mei's head was back down, her hips slamming into Ethan. She looked like a goddess with her dark hair spilled around her.

Ethan looked nothing like that. Sweat dripped from his forehead. His mouth hung open, his face tense and uncertain, like he didn't know where to look or what to do with his hands. Watching himself inside her should have turned him on. It did turn him on. But beneath that was a sick little twist of doubt that grew every time Mei took him deeper.

His cock registered the problem before his head could. A soft pulse, a retreat. The hard steel of him giving way by half an inch inside her. Not enough for Mei to notice, but enough for him to feel the world tilt.

It had happened once before, during his best-man speech. He'd looked up and seen three people recording him, and his mind had gone blank for what felt like an hour. This was the same thing. He just needed to get out of his head. Ethan grabbed the soft flesh of Mei's ass and pulled her back into him. The friction helped. So did the way her moan broke when he hit deeper. Her walls tightened around him, and his cock swelled inside her again, the brief softness disappearing beneath the heat of her body.

"You're so deep." Her voice was different now. Breathier, louder. She was about to cum.

His palms slid up her back, between her shoulder blades. Mei threw her head back, and his fingers caught in her hair. "Ohhhh ffff. Right there, baby. Don't stop."

The words became the only thing in his head. He tried to focus on Mei's body, on the warmth wrapped around him, on the way she tightened every time he pushed deep. But as her moans got louder, it stopped sounding like encouragement and more like a need. He glanced back at the camera. Mei's face was contorted in pleasure, her mouth open, her dark hair clinging to her cheek. But all Ethan saw was himself behind her. The terrified look on his face. The stiffness in his shoulders. The panic he couldn't hide. He pushed harder, desperate to give Mei what she craved, determined to find the exact angle she needed.

This time, he knew it was going to happen. The firmness slipped out of him in degrees, so slow at first he tried to pretend it wasn't real. He pushed deeper, gripped her ass harder, anything to force his body back into place, but the harder he tried, the worse it got. Mei's moan faltered. Her hips began to slow, then stopped altogether.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing. I'm good, I just..." His hands loosened on her hips. "Give me a minute."

She pulled forward and he slipped out of her, soft and slick against his own thigh. The loss of her heat hit him like cold water. She turned, rolled onto her back, her hair spreading across the pillow. She brushed his knee with her fingers. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. I just..." He looked at the camera, then moved off the bed. "I'm just going to check and make sure it's, um, getting everything."

Mei smiled, the leg closest to him falling open against the sheets. "Okay." Her fingers drifted down her stomach, her eyes still hazy with want. "I'll just be here..." Her touch found her clit, and her hips lifted off the bed. "Mmmm. Waiting."

Her free hand pushed the lace aside and found her nipple, rolling it between her fingers. Her eyes slammed shut, her tongue sliding over her top lip. She wasn't waiting for him. Her hips rocked against her own hand and every few seconds she let out a moan that made his cock twitch despite the softening.

Ethan stood beside the bed with one hand on the tripod, staring like he had forgotten why he'd gotten up in the first place. Mei didn't seem to notice. Or if she did, she didn't mind. Her fingers dipped between her legs, pulling a moan from her lips. Ethan watched, wide-eyed, as they slid from her parted folds, drenched, then danced over her clit.

His gaze went to the phone still in the tripod. On the screen, Mei looked better than any actress. The angle from the side of the bed caught the spread of her legs, the curve of her stomach, the tremble in her thighs every time she brushed against her swollen nub. Ethan barely existed in the shot now, just a shadow at the edge of the frame. And somehow that made it easier to breathe.

He unclipped the phone from the tripod.

Mei's eyes opened halfway when she heard the plastic snap loose, but she didn't stop touching herself. "Mmm," she sighed, watching him through heavy lids. "Coming back to join me?" Her lips curved into a smile as her gaze dropped to Ethan's cock, already starting to come back to life.

"In a second." His throat felt dry. "You look so perfect."

He held the phone in front of him and moved slowly along the side of the bed, watching the screen more than her. The image shifted with every step. Her knees in the foreground. The damp shine between her thighs. Her chest rising and falling between her fingertips. By the time he reached the head of the bed, he had a perfect angle down the length of her body. Her face flushed. Her eyes squeezed shut. The small triangle of hair matted above her pussy as her fingers plunged inside her.

Ethan swallowed, his cock hardening with each second he stayed behind the lens.

She must have sensed him there. Her eyes fluttered open. She looked right at the camera and licked her lips, her gaze filled with a hunger Ethan had never seen before. She pushed up on one elbow and reached for him. Her fingers wrapped around his shaft and pulled him toward her mouth. The first touch of her lips around the head of his cock nearly dropped him.

"Fuuuuck." His free hand grabbed the headboard. She took him deeper, her tongue flat against the underside, while her other hand kept working between her thighs. The vibration of her moan ran up through his shaft and echoed through his entire body. Her hips continued to rock, her orgasm building fast.

He looked at the screen. Her mouth was stretched around him. Her lips were slick as she hollowed her cheeks. A thought crept into the back of Ethan's mind that destroyed him. Other than his dick, Ethan wasn't in frame at all. The cock in her mouth could have belonged to anyone.

"Oh fuck. Mei, I'm—"

She didn't pull back. Her grip tightened at his base, twisting, stroking what her mouth couldn't reach. Her pace quickened and the wet sounds of her mouth and her fingers filled the room and his vision went white at the edges.

The orgasm hit so hard his legs buckled. He grabbed the headboard, his hips jerking forward as he pulsed into her mouth, wave after wave, his whole body shaking so hard the phone nearly slipped from his grip. She took it. Swallowed around him and kept going, her hand still working between her thighs, her lips still sealed around him, and the vibration of the moan she made against his cock sent another pulse through him that he felt in his teeth.

"Mmmnnnnph." She pulled off him with a gasp, her forehead pressing against his thigh, her breath ragged and hot on his skin. Her hips bucked off the mattress. Her fingers pressed deep and her thighs clamped together and her back arched so hard her shoulders lifted off the sheets. "Ohh—ohh fuck—fuuuck—" Her body went stiff. She rode through the orgasm with her face pressed against his thigh, one hand still locked between her legs, trembling through every last wave.

He stopped the recording and set the phone on the nightstand.

She rolled toward him. He dropped onto the bed and she crawled onto his chest, her hair damp and sticking to his skin, her breathing jagged. She was warm and trembling and she pressed her lips to his collarbone and left them there.

"Happy birthday."

Ethan pulled her tight and stared at the ceiling. She had only gone down on him a handful of times in their marriage, and she had never swallowed. He wanted to think about that. About the woman who looked into a camera and touched herself without flinching. The therapy was working. His eyes went to the phone on the nightstand. So why was the most exciting part of the night when he wasn't in the frame? He stared at the dark screen for a long time, then pulled the sheet over both of them and closed his eyes.

It had been four days since the bar and Nathan still hadn't heard from Sierra. He'd sent her a text the morning after, a joke about one of the contestants on Jeopardy, letting her know the door was open. She hadn't responded.

He'd replayed the bar conversation more times than he cared to admit. It was a classic case of displacement. Her marriage had failed and she wanted to bury it with sex and alcohol. He should have just let her. The drama was something he generally tried to avoid. Instead, he walked into it head first.

He checked his phone one more time. Nothing. He set it in the desk drawer and opened his notepad to a fresh page. Ethan was due in five minutes and Nathan could barely contain his excitement. Nathan had spent the better part of the morning reviewing all of Mei's footage. She'd come so far in the last month. Nathan had little doubt that she had made Ethan's birthday special. He ran his hand through his beard. How Ethan responded to that enthusiasm was another thing entirely.

The knock came two minutes early. Nathan opened the door and gave Ethan a smile and stepped aside. He didn't look like his usual happy-go-lucky self. There were bags under his eyes, and his usual smile was gone, replaced by a thin line as he gave Nathan a nod. He sat on the edge of the sofa, his back hunched forward.

"Thanks for squeezing me in a few days early." His knee started bouncing.

"Of course." Nathan closed the door and took his chair. He set the notepad on his thigh and clicked his pen. "How are you doing? Birthday recovery going okay?"

Ethan laughed, shaking his head. "Yeah. Yeah, it's good. Mei went all out with the food and everything. And Sierra's whole thing, the divorce..." He rubbed his palms on his jeans. "I should probably check in on her more. I knew things were bad but I didn't realize..." He trailed off.

"She'll be alright. Humans have an amazing ability to adapt and overcome." He watched Ethan nod. "And your sister seems to have a tremendous amount of tenacity based on the few times I've met her." He made sure to make it sound casual. The last thing he needed was Ethan getting suspicious. "Anyway. I suspect that isn't the real reason you're here." He shifted in his chair trying not to sound too eager. "How was the rest of the night? After we all left."

Ethan's knee stopped. Then it started again, faster. "It was good. Mei was incredible, honestly. She..." He paused like he was unsure how much to say.

Nathan let him go at his own pace.

"She bought lingerie." He sat back, smiling slightly. "I never thought I'd see the day." His voice picked up speed, the nervous energy building. "I honestly wasn't sure what to expect. But she was so... confident. Like, she was taking charge. I've never seen her like that. But then..." He trailed off and swallowed.

Nathan waited. Normally this was where Ethan kept going, offering up more than anyone asked for. But his mouth stayed shut and his thumb pressed into his opposite palm so hard the skin went white.

"It's okay. Take your time."

"It was great." His eyes went to the floor and he hunched back over, placing his elbows on his knees.

Nathan made a note. *Wall*. This was new. Whatever happened after the lingerie had shut him down completely.

"Ethan."

"I don't want to talk about it." He said it fast, almost angry. Then he caught himself and scrubbed his hands over his face. "Sorry. I didn't mean... It's just. Can we talk about something else for a minute?"

"Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know. Anything."

Nathan watched as his eyes darted from one spot on the floor to another. He'd expected this conversation to go a lot of different ways. But he never imagined it would shut Ethan down completely.

"She was perfect, Nathan." His voice was quiet now. "She did everything right. And I..." He stopped. His jaw worked but nothing came out. He pressed his palms flat over his eyes and tipped his head back against the couch. "Fuck."

"You don't have to tell me anything you're not ready to."

"I know. I just..." He dropped his hands and stared at the ceiling. "Can you put me under?"

Nathan kept his face still. "We talked about this before, Ethan. I'm not sure—"

"It worked with Mei, right? I just... I want to talk about this, but I just... I can't." He rubbed the back of his neck. "If you can just help me relax or whatever then... I don't know."

Nathan studied his friend. Of course he was going to put him under, he just didn't want to seem too eager. Ethan had always been weak-minded, he didn't think he needed hypnosis to get him to play his role in all of this, but if he wanted a nudge then Nathan would be happy to oblige.

"Alright. Lean back. Close your eyes."

He took him through the same process as Mei. He told Ethan to focus on his breathing. Then, it was the hands on the clock, watching the seconds tick. Ethan's body sank into the sofa, his eyes fighting to stay open.

"Can you hear me, Ethan?"

He nodded.

"Good. Now, I want you to go back to the bedroom. Mei is in the lingerie. You're on the bed. Tell me what happened." He glanced at the camera in the bookshelf.

"She did everything I asked. She got on all fours. It was like she was playing for the camera." His voice was flat and robotic. "She was so wet. She's loud. It was exactly like the women in the porn I watched."

"That's good." He kept his voice quiet. "What happens next?"

"I..." His body went rigid, his eyes starting to flutter. "I started to go soft."

"Deep breaths, Ethan. Everything is okay."

His shoulders started to relax. "I looked at the camera and it was like I couldn't get out of my own head. Like I couldn't focus on anything but that."

"That's okay." Nathan leaned forward, his pulse ticking up. "Sometimes we get so caught up in the idea of something, we don't think about how our body will react to it. What did you do when that happened?"

"I told her I was going to check the camera." His head lolled from side to side. "She said it was okay then rolled over and started touching herself."

Nathan's cock swelled. "And what did you do?"

"I picked up the phone... and just watched." His fingers twitched against his thigh. "I was hard again before I even looked at the screen."

Nathan shifted in his chair. He didn't bother writing it down. "So you got hard watching your wife touch herself. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But she shouldn't have needed to. I should have been the one to..." His face grimaced and for a moment Nathan worried he was going to pull out of it.

"Was she able to climax?"

"Yeah we... both did." Ethan's hands went still on his chest. "She took me in her mouth while she touched herself and..."

"Whatever you're struggling to say, I promise it sounds worse in your head than out loud."

"When I came, I was watching her on screen. I..." His breathing shifted. "My face wasn't in it."

Nathan couldn't help it. He adjusted himself. This was exactly how he'd hoped it would play out. Mei had come out of her shell. She was ready for so much more than Ethan could give her. It was only a matter of time now before her own subconscious told her that. And now, all Ethan needed was the slightest push.

"Let me repeat back to you what I heard, Ethan." He made a show of flipping through his notes for the camera. "You asked your wife to make a sex tape with you. She did and it was even more than you could imagine. In the end, you both orgasmed. So, you gave her exactly what she wanted and she gave you what you wanted. You just didn't expect it to happen the way it did."

"Yeah, but—"

"Ethan, listen to me." He dropped his voice lower, leaning forward. "What happened that night wasn't a failure. You and Mei connected in a way you never have before. She was confident. She was free. And you were the reason she felt safe enough to be that way." He paused. "The only thing that changed was your position. You stepped out of the frame and behind the camera, and everything worked. Your body was telling you what it wanted."

Ethan's breathing stayed even.

"Think about the videos you watched for your homework. The ones where the women looked like Mei. What excited you about those?"

"Watching them. Seeing them... let go."

"And with Mei. Would you say that you enjoyed seeing her let go?"

"Yes."

"Mei is becoming someone incredible. You've seen it. The way men look at her now, the way she carries herself. That excites you, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"It's okay that you want to watch her be desired." He eyed the camera. "Just because you're not in the frame, doesn't mean you can't both enjoy this side of her."

Nathan watched Ethan's mind work, fitting the pieces together in a way that mostly made sense.

"You mentioned you came watching the video of her taking you in her mouth. Did you imagine it was someone else?"

"I..."

Nathan held his breath.

"I'm not sure."

"Maybe the next step for the two of you is to bring someone else in. See how that affects your dynamic."

Ethan's fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt.

"It should be someone she trusts. Someone you feel safe with. Let her be this new version of herself. Show her that you can support her. That you can still desire her. Even if you're not in frame, so to speak."

Ethan's face changed, but he didn't speak.

"I'm going to bring you back out now, Ethan. I'll start counting backward. Then when you wake, you'll feel refreshed and calm. You'll remember that we talked about your anxiety, but now you have a plan and that eases your anxiety. Do you understand?"

He nodded. Nathan brought him up on a slow count of ten. Ethan blinked at the ceiling, then rubbed his eyes.

"That was..." He laughed. "I feel like I took a nap or something. How long was I out?"

"About forty minutes. That's normal."

Ethan reached for his phone and stared at the screen. "Forty minutes? Seriously?" He shook his head, still groggy. "I feel better though. Did we... I mean, we talked about it, right?"

"We did. It sound like you had a pretty incredible birthday." He grinned.

"Yeah," Ethan laughed. "I guess I did."

"We're actually out of time." Nathan gestured toward the clock. "But I'm glad you're feeling better."

Ethan nodded. "I can't believe it's already been..." He shook his head. "Thanks, man. I know you hear this a lot, but what you're doing for Mei and me. I can't put into words how grateful I am."

"Anytime."

CHAPTER 10 — CHOICE POINT

The Decision

PATH ONE: Mei finds her voice

Making the tape and helping Ethan fulfill his fantasy made Mei realize she wants to explore her own fantasy as well. She decides to open up to Ethan about her desire to be watched.

PATH TWO: Ethan wants to try something different

The hypnosis worked. Ethan can't stop thinking about the tape, about the moment his face left the frame, about how hard he came when the cock in Mei's mouth could have belonged to anyone. He needs to talk to Mei about it. But how do you tell your once shy conservative wife you want to watch her with someone else?

PATH THREE: The Breakthrough

Mei is ready. Her body wants to submit, even if her mind doesn't. Nathan will put her under again. Once he touches her, with her mind quiet her body will respond appropriately. Once she experiences it she'll crave him without hypnosis.