

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.