

GREER HENDRICKS
& SARAH PEKKANEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
OF *THE WIFE BETWEEN US*

AN
ANONYMOUS
GIRL

A NOVEL

THE
FIRST
THREE
CHAPTERS

AN
ANONYMOUS
GIRL

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AN
ANONYMOUS
GIRL

GREER HENDRICKS

AND

SARAH PEKKANEN

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

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PART ONE

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You're Invited: Seeking women aged 18 to 32 to participate in a study on ethics and morality conducted by a preeminent NYC psychiatrist. Generous compensation. Anonymity guaranteed. Call for more details.

It's easy to judge other people's choices. The mother with a grocery cart full of Froot Loops and Double Stuf Oreos who yells at her child. The driver of an expensive convertible who cuts off a slower vehicle. The woman in the quiet coffee shop who yaks on her cell phone. The husband who cheats on his wife.

But what if you knew the mother had lost her job that day?

What if the driver had promised his son he'd make it to his school play, but his boss had insisted he attend a last-minute meeting?

What if the woman in the coffee shop had just received a phone call from the love of her life, a man who'd broken her heart?

And what if the cheater's wife habitually turned her back on his touch?

Perhaps you would also make a snap judgment about a woman who decides to reveal her innermost secrets to a stranger for money. But suspend your assumptions, at least for now.

We all have reasons for our actions. Even if we hide the reason from those who think they know us best. Even if the reasons are so deeply buried we can't recognize them ourselves.

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CHAPTER ONE

Friday, November 16

A LOT OF WOMEN want the world to see them a certain way. It's my job to create those transformations, one forty-five minute session at a time.

My clients seem different when I've finished helping them. They grow more confident, radiant. Happier, even.

But I can only offer a temporary fix. People invariably revert to their former selves.

True change requires more than the tools I wield.

It's twenty to six on a Friday evening. Rush hour. It's also when someone often wants to look like the best version of themselves, so I consistently block this time out of my personal schedule.

When the subway doors open at Astor Place, I'm the first one out, my right arm aching from the weight of my black makeup case as it always does by the end of a long day.

I swing my case directly behind me so it'll fit through the narrow passageway—it's my fifth trip through the turnstiles today alone, and my routine is automatic—then I hurry up the stairs.

When I reach the street, I dig into the pocket of my leather jacket and pull out my phone. I tap it to open my schedule, which is updated at

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least once a day by BeautyBuzz. I provide the hours I can work, and my appointments are texted to me.

My final booking today is near Eighth Street and University Place. It's for ninety minutes, which means it's a double—two clients. I have the address, names, and a contact phone number. But I have no idea who will be waiting for me when I knock on a door.

I don't fear strangers, though. I've learned more harm can come from familiar faces.

I memorize the exact location, then stride down the street, skirting the garbage that has spilled from a toppled bin. A shopkeeper pulls a security grate over his storefront, the loud metal rattling into place. A trio of students, backpacks slung over their shoulders, jostle each other playfully as I pass them.

I'm two blocks from my destination when my phone rings. Caller ID shows it's my mom.

I let it ring once as I stare at the little circular photo of my smiling mother.

I'll see her in five days, when I go home for Thanksgiving, I tell myself.

But I can't let it go.

Guilt is always the heaviest thing I carry.

"Hey, Mom. Everything okay?" I ask.

"Everything's fine, honey. Just checking in."

I can picture her in the kitchen in the suburban Philadelphia home where I grew up. She's stirring gravy on the stove—they eat early, and Friday's menu is always pot roast and mashed potatoes—then unscrewing the top on a bottle of Zinfandel in preparation for the single glass she indulges in on weekend nights.

There are yellow curtains dressing the small window above the sink, and a dish towel looped through the stove handle with the words *Just roll with it* superimposed over an image of a rolling pin. The flowered wallpaper is peeling at the seams and a dent marks the bottom of the fridge from where my father kicked it after the Eagles lost in the playoffs.

Dinner will be ready when my dad walks through the door from his job as an insurance salesman. My mother will greet him with a quick

kiss. They will call my sister, Becky, to the table, and help her cut her meat.

“Becky zipped up her jacket this morning,” my mother says. “Without any help.”

Becky is twenty-two, six years younger than me.

“That’s fantastic,” I say.

Sometimes I wish I lived closer so I could help my parents. Other times, I’m ashamed at how grateful I am that I don’t.

“Hey, can I call you back?” I continue. “I’m just running in to work.”

“Oh, did you get hired for another show?”

I hesitate. Mom’s voice is more animated now.

I can’t tell her the truth, so I blurt out the words: “Yeah, it’s just a little production. There probably won’t even be much press about it. But the makeup is super elaborate, really unconventional.”

“I’m really proud of you,” my mom says. “I can’t wait to hear all about it next week.”

I feel like she wants to add something more, but even though I haven’t quite reached my destination—a student housing complex at NYU—I end the call.

“Give Becky a kiss. I love you.”

My rules for any job kick in even before I arrive.

I evaluate my clients the moment I see them—I notice eyebrows that would look better darkened, or a nose that needs shading to appear slimmer—but I know my customers are sizing me up, too.

The first rule: my unofficial uniform. I wear all black, which eliminates the need to coordinate a new outfit every morning. It also sends a message of subtle authority. I choose comfortable, machine-washable layers that will look as fresh at seven P.M. as they do at seven A.M.

Since personal space vanishes when you’re doing someone’s makeup, my nails are short and buffed, my breath is minty, and my curls are swept up in a low twist. I never deviate from this standard.

I rub Germ-X on my hands and pop an Altoid in my mouth before I ring the buzzer for Apartment 6D. I’m five minutes early. Another rule.

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I take the elevator to the sixth floor, then follow the sound of loud music—Katy Perry’s “Roar”—down the hallway and meet my clients. One is in a bathrobe, and the other wears a T-shirt and boxers. I can smell the evidence of their last beauty treatment—the chemicals used to highlight blond streaks into the hair of the girl named Mandy, and the nail varnish drying on the hands Taylor is waving through the air.

“Where are you going tonight?” I ask. A party will likely have stronger lighting than a club; a dinner date will require a subtle touch.

“Lit,” Taylor says.

At my blank look, she adds: “It’s in the Meatpacking District. Drake was just there last night.”

“Cool,” I say.

I wind through the items scattered across the floor—an umbrella, a crumpled gray sweater, a backpack—then move aside the Skinny Pop popcorn and half-empty cans of Red Bull on the low coffee table so I can set down my case. I unlatch it and the sides fold out like an accordion to reveal tray upon tray of makeup and brushes.

“What kind of look are we going for?”

Some makeup artists dive in, trying to cram as many clients as possible into a day. I take the extra time I’ve built into my schedule to ask a few questions. Just because one woman wants a smokey eye and a naked mouth doesn’t mean another isn’t envisioning a bold red lip and only a swipe of mascara. Investing in those early minutes saves me time on the backend.

But I also trust my instincts and observations. When these girls say they want a sexy, beachy look, I know they really want to resemble Gigi Hadid, who is on the cover of the magazine splayed across the love seat.

“So what are you majoring in?” I ask.

“Communications. We both want to go into PR.” Mandy sounds bored, like I’m an annoying adult asking her what she wants to be when she grows up.

“Sounds interesting,” I say as I pull a straight-back chair into the strongest light, directly under the ceiling fixture.

I start with Taylor. I have forty-five minutes to create the vision she wants to see in the mirror.

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“You have amazing skin,” I say. Another rule: Find a feature to compliment on every client. In Taylor’s case, this isn’t difficult.

“Thanks,” she says, not lifting her gaze from her phone. She begins a running commentary on her Instagram feed: “Does anyone really want to see another picture of cupcakes?” “Jules and Brian are so in love, it’s gross.” “Inspirational sunset, got it . . . glad you’re having a rocking Friday night on your balcony.”

As I work, the girls’ chatter fades into background noise, like the drone of a hair dryer or city traffic. I lose myself in the strokes of different foundations I’ve applied to Taylor’s jawline so I can match her skin tone flawlessly, and in the swirl of copper and sandy hues I blend on my hand to bring out the gold flecks in her eyes.

I’m brushing bronzer onto her cheeks when her cell phone rings.

Taylor stops tapping hearts and holds up her phone: “Private number. Should I get it?”

“Yes!” Mandy says. “It could be Justin.”

Taylor wrinkles her nose. “Who answers their phone on a Friday night, though? He can leave a message.”

A few moments later, she touches the speakerphone button and a man’s voice fills the room:

“This is Ben Quick, Dr. Shields’s assistant. I’m confirming your appointments this weekend, for tomorrow and Sunday from eight to ten A.M. The location again is Hunter Hall, Room 214. I’ll meet you in the lobby and take you up.”

Taylor rolls her eyes and I pull back my mascara wand.

“Can you keep your face still, please?” I ask.

“Sorry. Was I out of my mind, Mandy? I’m going to be way too hungover to get up early tomorrow.”

“Just blow it off.”

“Yeah. But it’s five hundred bucks. That’s, like, a couple sweaters from rag & bone.”

These words break my concentration; five hundred is what I make for ten jobs.

“Gah. Forget it. I’m not going to set an alarm to go to some dumb questionnaire,” Taylor says.

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Must be nice, I think, looking at the sweater crumpled in the corner. Then I can't help myself: "A questionnaire?"

Taylor shrugs. "Some psych professor needs students for a survey."

I wonder what sort of questions are on the survey. Maybe it's like a Myers-Briggs personality test.

I step back and study Taylor's face. She's classically pretty, with an enviable bone structure. She didn't need the full forty-five-minute treatment.

"Since you're going to be out late, I'll line your lips before I apply gloss," I say. "That way the color will last."

I pull out my favorite lip gloss with the BeautyBuzz logo on the tube and smooth it along Taylor's full lips. After I finish, Taylor gets up to go look in the bathroom mirror, trailed by Mandy. "Wow," I hear Taylor say. "She's really good. Let's take a selfie."

"I need my makeup first!"

I begin to put away the cosmetics I used for Taylor and consider what I will need for Mandy when I notice Taylor has left her phone on the chair.

My rocking Friday night will consist of walking my little mixed terrier, Leo, and washing the makeup out of my brushes—after I take the bus home to my tiny studio on the Lower East Side. I'm so wiped out that I'll probably be in bed before Taylor and Mandy order their first cocktails at the club.

I look down at the phone again.

Then I glance at the bathroom door. It's partly closed.

I bet Taylor won't even bother to return the call to cancel her appointment.

"I need to buy the highlighter she used," Taylor is saying.

Five hundred dollars would help a lot with my rent this month.

I already know my schedule for tomorrow. My first job doesn't begin until noon.

"I'm going to have her do my eyes kind of dramatic," Mandy says. "I wonder if she has false lashes with her."

Hunter Hall from eight to ten A.M.—I remember that part. But what was the name of the doctor and his assistant?

It's not even like I make a decision to do it; one second I'm staring at the phone and the next, it's in my hand. Less than a minute has passed; it hasn't locked out yet. Still, I need to look down to navigate to the voice mail screen, but that means taking my eyes off the bathroom door.

I jab at the screen to play the most recent message, then press the phone tightly to my ear.

The bathroom door moves and Mandy starts to walk out. I spin around, feeling my heartbeat erupt. I won't be able to replace the phone without her seeing me.

Ben Quick.

I can pretend it fell off the chair, I think wildly. I'll tell Taylor I just picked it up.

"Wait, Mand!"

Dr. Shields's assistant . . . eight to ten A.M. . . .

"Should I make her try a darker lip color?"

Come on, I think, willing the message to play faster.

Hunter Hall, Room 214.

"Maybe," Mandy says.

I'll meet you in the lob—

I hang up and drop the phone back onto the chair just as Taylor takes her first step into the room.

Did she leave it faceup or facedown? But before there's time to try and remember, Taylor is beside me.

She stares down at her phone and my stomach clenches. I've messed up. Now I recall that she left it with the screen facing down on the chair. I put it back the wrong way.

I swallow hard, trying to think of an excuse.

"Hey," she says.

I drag my eyes up to meet hers.

"Love it. But can you try a darker lip gloss?"

She flops back onto the chair and I slowly exhale.

I re-do her lips twice—first making them berry, then reverting to the original shade, all the while steadying my right elbow with my left palm so my shaking fingers don't ruin the lines—and by the time I'm finished, my pulse has returned to normal.

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When I leave the apartment with a distracted “Thank you” from the girls instead of a tip, my decision is confirmed.

I set the alarm on my phone for 7:15 A.M.

Saturday, November 17

The next morning, I review my plan carefully.

Sometimes an impulsive decision can change the course of your life.

I don’t want that to happen again.

I wait outside Hunter Hall, peering in the direction of Taylor’s apartment. It’s cloudy and the air is thick and gray, so for a moment I mistake another young woman rushing in my direction for her. But it’s just someone out for a jog. When it’s five minutes past eight and it appears that Taylor is still asleep, I enter the lobby, where a guy in khakis and a blue button-down shirt is checking his watch.

“Sorry I’m late!” I call.

“Taylor?” he says. “I’m Ben Quick.”

I’d correctly gambled on the assumption that Taylor wouldn’t phone to cancel.

“Taylor is sick, so she asked me to come and do the questionnaire instead. I’m Jessica. Jessica Farris.”

“Oh.” Ben blinks. He looks me up and down, examining me more carefully.

I’ve traded my ankle boots for Converse high tops and slung a black nylon backpack over one shoulder. I figure it won’t hurt if I look like a student.

“Can you hang on a second?” he finally says. “I need to check with Dr. Shields.”

“Sure.” I aim for the slightly bored tone Taylor used last night.

The worst thing that’ll happen is he’ll tell me I can’t participate, I remind myself. No big deal; I’ll just grab a bagel and take Leo for a long walk.

Ben steps aside and pulls out his cell phone. I want to listen to his side of the conversation, but his voice is muted.

Then he walks over to me. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight,” I respond truthfully.

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I sneak a glance at the entrance to make sure Taylor isn't going to saunter in at the last minute.

"You currently reside in New York?" Ben asks.

I nod.

Ben has two more questions for me: "Where else have you lived? Anywhere outside the United States?"

I shake my head. "Just Pennsylvania. That's where I grew up."

"Okay," Ben says, putting his phone away. "Dr. Shields says you can participate in the study. First, I need to get your full name, address, and social security number. Can I see some ID?"

I shift my backpack into my hand and dig through it until I find my wallet, then I hand him my driver's license.

He snaps a picture, then takes down the rest of my information. "I can Venmo you the payment tomorrow at the conclusion of your session if you have an account."

"I do," I say. "Taylor told me it's five hundred dollars, right?"

He nods. "I'm going to text all this to Dr. Shields, then I'll take you upstairs to the room."

Could it possibly be this simple?

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday, November 17

YOU AREN'T THE SUBJECT who was expected to show up this morning.

Still, you meet the demographic criteria of the study and the slot would otherwise be wasted, so my assistant Ben escorts you to Room 214. The testing space is large and rectangular, filled with windows along the eastern-facing side. Three rows of desks and chairs line the shiny linoleum floor. At the front of the room is a SMART Board, its screen blank. High on the back wall is an old-fashioned round clock. It could be any classroom in any college campus in any city.

Except for one thing: You are the only person here.

This venue has been selected because there is little to distract you, facilitating your ability to concentrate on the task ahead.

Ben explains that your instructions will appear on the computer that is being provided for your use. Then he closes the door.

The room is silent.

A laptop waits on a desk in the first row. It is already open. Your footsteps echo across the expanse of the floor as you walk toward it.

You ease into the seat, pulling it up to the desk. The metal leg of your chair grates against the linoleum.

A message is visible on the screen:

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Subject 52: Thank you for your participation in Dr. Shields's morality and ethics research project. By entering this study, you agree to be bound by confidentiality. You must not discuss it with anyone.

There are no right or wrong answers. It is essential that you are honest and give your first, instinctive response. Your explanations should be thorough. You will not be permitted to move on to the next question until the prior one is completed.

A five-minute warning will be issued before the conclusion of your two hours.

Press the *Return* key when you are ready to begin.

Do you have any idea of what to expect?

You bring your finger to the *Return* key, but instead of touching it, your hand hovers over the keyboard. You are not alone in your hesitation. Some of the fifty-one subjects before you exhibited varying degrees of uncertainty, too.

It can be frightening to become acquainted with parts of yourself that you don't like to admit exist.

Finally, you press the key.

You wait, watching the blinking cursor. Your hazel eyes are wide.

When the first question blooms on the screen, you flinch.

Perhaps it feels strange to have someone probing intimate parts of your psyche in such a sterile setting, without disclosing why the information is so valuable. It is natural to shy away from feelings of vulnerability, but you will need to surrender to this process if it is to be successful.

Remember the rules: Be open and truthful, and avoid pivoting away from any embarrassment or pain these questions provoke.

If this initial query, which is relatively mild, unsettles you, then you might be one of the women who wash out of the study. Some subjects don't return. This test isn't for everyone.

You continue to stare at the question.

Maybe your instincts are telling you to leave without even starting.

You wouldn't be the first.

But you lift your hands to the keyboard again, and you begin to type.

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CHAPTER THREE

Saturday, November 17

AS I STARE AT THE LAPTOP in the unnaturally quiet classroom, I feel kind of anxious. The instructions say there are no wrong answers, but won't my responses to a morality test reveal a lot about my character?

The room is cold, and I wonder if that is deliberate, to keep me alert. I can almost hear phantom noises—the rustle of papers, the thud of feet against the hard floors, the jostling and joking of students.

I touch the return key with my index finger and wait for the first question.

Could you tell a lie without feeling guilt?

I jerk back.

This wasn't what I expected when Taylor mentioned the study with a dismissive flip of her hand. I guess I didn't anticipate being asked to write about myself; for some reason, I assumed this would be a multiple choice or yes/no survey. To be confronted with a question that feels so personal, as if Dr. Shields already knows too much about me, as if he knows I lied about Taylor . . . well, it rattles me more than a little.

I give myself a mental shake and lift my fingers to the keyboard.

There are many types of lies. I could write about lies of omission or huge, life-changing ones—the kind I know too well—but I choose a safer course.

Sure, I type. I'm a makeup artist, but not one of the ones you've read about. I don't work on models or movie stars. I get Upper East Side teenagers ready for prom, and their moms ready for fancy benefits. I do weddings and bat mitzvahs, too. So yeah, I could tell a high-strung mother that she could still be carded, or convince an insecure sixteen-year-old that I didn't even notice her pimple. Especially because they're more likely to give me a nice tip if I flatter them.

I hit *Enter*, not knowing if this is the kind of response the professor wants. But I guess I'm doing it right, because the second question appears quickly.

Describe a time in your life when you cheated.

Whoa. That feels like a presumption.

But maybe everybody has cheated, even if just at a game of Monopoly when they were little. I think about it a bit, then type: *In the fourth grade, I cheated on a test. Sally Jenkins was the best speller in the class, and when I looked up and chewed on the pink rubbery eraser of my pencil, trying to remember if "tomorrow" had one "r" or two, I caught sight of her paper.*

Turns out it was two r's. I wrote the word and mentally thanked Sally when I got an A.

I press *Return*.

Funny how those details came back to me, even though I haven't thought about Sally in years. We graduated from high school together, but I missed our last few reunions, so I have no idea how she turned out. Probably two or three kids, a part-time job, a house near her parents. That's what happened to most of the girls I grew up with.

The next question hasn't materialized yet. I tap the *Return* key again. Nothing.

I wonder if there's a glitch in the program. I'm about to go poke my head out the door to see if Ben is nearby, but then letters begin to appear on my screen, one by one.

Like someone is typing them in real time.

Subject 52, you need to dig deeper.

My body gives a sudden start. I can't help looking around. The flimsy plastic blinds on the windows are pulled up, but there isn't anyone outside on this drab, gloomy day. The lawn and sidewalk are deserted. There's another building across the quad, but it's impossible to tell if anyone is in it.

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Logically, I know I'm alone. It just feels like someone close to me is whispering.

I look back at the laptop. There's another message:

Was that really your first, instinctual answer?

I almost gasp. How does Dr. Shields know?

I abruptly push back my chair and start to stand up. Then I get how he figured it out; it must have been my hesitation before I started typing. Dr. Shields realized I rejected my initial thought and chose a safer response. I pull my chair back toward the computer and exhale slowly.

Another instruction creeps across the page:

Go beyond the superficial.

It was crazy to think Dr. Shields could know what I'm thinking, I tell myself. Being in this room is obviously playing with my mind. It wouldn't feel as weird if other people were around.

After a brief pause, the second question reappears on the screen.

Describe a time in your life when you cheated.

Okay, I think. You want the messy truth about my life? I can dig a little deeper.

Is it cheating if you are just an accessory in the act? I write.

I wait for a response. But the only movement on my screen is the blinking cursor. I continue typing.

Sometimes I hook up with guys I don't know all that well. Or maybe it's more like I don't want to know them all that well.

Nothing. I keep going.

My job has taught me to carefully evaluate people when I first meet them. But in my personal life, especially after a drink or two, I can deliberately dial back the focus.

There was a bass player I met a few months ago. I went back to his place. It was obvious a woman lived there but I didn't ask him about it. I told myself she was just a roommate. Is it wrong that I put on blinders?

I press *Return* and wonder how my confession will land. My best friend, Lizzie, knows about some of my one-night stands, but I never told her about seeing the bottles of perfume and the pink razor in the bathroom that night. She also doesn't know about their frequency. I guess I don't want her to judge me.

Letter by letter, a single word forms on my computer screen:

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Better.

For a second, I'm glad I'm getting the hang of the test.

Then I realize a complete stranger is reading my confessions about my sex life. Ben seemed professional, with his crisp oxford shirt and horn-rimmed glasses, but what do I really know about this psychiatrist and his study?

Maybe it's just being *called* a morality and ethics survey. It could be anything.

How do I know the guy is even a psychiatry professor at NYU? Taylor doesn't seem like the type to verify details. She's a beautiful young woman, and maybe that's why she was invited to participate.

Before I can decide what to do, the next question appears:

Would you cancel plans with a friend for a better offer?

My shoulders untense. This query seems completely innocuous, like something Lizzie might ask me if she were seeking advice.

If Dr. Shields were planning something creepy, he wouldn't have set this whole thing up in a university classroom. Plus, he didn't ask about my sex life, I remind myself. I'm the one who offered it up.

I answer the question: *Of course, because my jobs aren't regular. I have weeks when I'm swamped. I sometimes do seven or eight clients a day, ricocheting around Manhattan. But then I can go a few days when I only get a couple of call times. Turning away work isn't an option for me.*

I'm about to hit the *Return* key when I realize Dr. Shields won't be satisfied by what I wrote. I follow his instructions and dig deeper.

I got my first job in a sandwich shop when I was fifteen. I left college after two years because I couldn't take it. Even with financial aid, I had to waitress three nights a week and get student loans. I hated being in debt. The constant worry about whether my ATM receipt would show a negative balance, the way I'd have to sneak a sandwich to take home when I left work . . .

I'm doing a little better now. But I don't have a cushion like my best friend, Lizzie. Her parents send her a check every month. Mine are pretty broke, and my sister has special needs. So sometimes, yeah, I might need to cancel plans with a friend. I have to take care of myself financially. Because when it comes down to it, I've only got myself to rely on.

I stare at my final line.

I wonder if I sound whiny. I hope Dr. Shields gets what I'm trying

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to say: My life isn't perfect, but whose is? The hand I've been dealt could be worse.

I'm not used to expressing myself like this. Writing about hidden thoughts is like washing off makeup and seeing a bare face.

I answer a few more, including: *Would you ever read a spouse's/significant other's text messages?*

If I thought he was cheating, sure I would, I type. I've never been married, though, or lived with anyone. I've only had a couple of sort-of serious boyfriends, and I never had reason to doubt them.

By the time I've finished the sixth question, I feel different than I have in a while. I'm keyed up, like I've had an extra cup of coffee, but I'm not jittery or anxious anymore. I'm super-focused. I've completely lost track of time, too. I could have been in this classroom for forty-five minutes, or for twice that length.

I've just finished writing about something I would never be able to tell my parents—how I secretly pay some of Becky's medical bills—when letters begin to surface on my screen again.

That must be difficult for you.

I read the message a second time, more slowly. I'm surprised by the comfort Dr. Shields's kind words give me.

I lean back in my chair, feeling the hard metal press into the space between my shoulder blades, and try to imagine what Dr. Shields looks like. I picture him as a heavyset man with a gray beard. He's thoughtful and compassionate. He's probably heard it all. He isn't judging me.

It is difficult, I think. I blink rapidly a few times.

I find myself typing, Thank you.

No one has ever wanted to know so much about me before; most people are satisfied with the sort of superficial chatter that Dr. Shields doesn't like.

Maybe the secrets I've been holding are a bigger deal than I thought, because telling Dr. Shields about them makes me feel lighter.

I lean forward slightly and fiddle with the trio of silver rings on my index finger as I wait for the next question.

It seems to take a few moments longer than the last ones to appear.

Then it does.

Have you ever deeply hurt someone you care about?

I almost gasp.

I read it twice. I can't help glancing at the door, even though I know no one is peering in through the glass pane at the top.

Five hundred dollars, I think. It doesn't seem like such easy money anymore.

I don't want to hesitate too long. Dr. Shields will know I'm evading something.

Unfortunately, yes, I type, trying to buy myself some time. I twist one of my curls around my finger, then type some more. *When I first came to New York, there was this guy I liked, and a friend of mine had a crush on him, too. He asked me out—*

I stop. Telling that story isn't a big deal. It isn't what Dr. Shields wants.

I slowly backspace over the letters.

I've been honest, like I agreed when I accepted the terms at the start of the study. But now I think about making something up.

Dr. Shields might know if I didn't tell the truth.

And I wonder . . . what would it feel like if I did?

Sometimes I think I've hurt everyone I've ever loved.

I want to type the words so badly. I imagine Dr. Shields nodding sympathetically, encouraging me to continue. Maybe if I told him what I did, he'd write something comforting again.

My throat tightens. I swipe my hand across my eyes.

If I had the courage, I'd start by explaining to Dr. Shields that I'd taken care of Becky all summer while my parents were at work; that I'd been pretty responsible even though I was only thirteen at the time. Becky could be annoying—she was always barging into my room when I had friends over, borrowing my stuff, and trying to follow me around—but I loved her.

Love her, I think. I still love her.

It just hurts to be around her.

I still haven't written a single word when Ben knocks on the door and tells me I have five minutes left.

I lift my hands and slowly type, *Yes, and I'd give anything to undo it.*

Before I can rethink the words, I hit the *Enter* key.

I stare at the computer screen, but Dr. Shields doesn't write anything in return.

—1
—0
—+1

The cursor seems to throb like a heartbeat; it's mesmerizing. My eyes begin to burn.

If Dr. Shields typed something to me right now, if he asked me to continue, and said it was okay for me to go over my allotted time, I'd do it. I'd let it all out; I'd tell him everything.

My breathing grows shallow.

I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, waiting for someone to tell me to jump.

I keep staring at the screen, knowing I've only got a minute or so left.

The screen is still blank except for the blinking cursor. But words suddenly begin to pulse in my mind, in time with the cursor: *Tell me. Tell me.*

When Ben opens the door, I have trouble dragging my gaze away from the screen to nod at him.

I twist around and slowly pull my coat off the back of my chair and pick up my backpack. I look at the computer one last time, but it's still blank.

The minute I stand up, a wave of exhaustion envelops me. I'm completely depleted. My limbs feel heavy and fog invades my brain. All I want to do is go home and crawl under the covers with Leo.

Ben stands just outside the doorway, looking down at an iPad. I catch a glimpse of Taylor's name at the top, followed by three female names below it. Everyone has secrets. I wonder if they'll reveal theirs.

"I'll see you tomorrow at eight," Ben says as we begin to descend the stairs to the lobby. It's an effort to keep up with him.

"Okay," I say. I grip the rail and focus on the steps so I don't miss one.

When we reach the bottom, I pause. "Um, I have a question. Exactly what kind of survey is this?"

Ben looks a little irritated. He's kind of fussy, with his shiny loafers and fancy stylus. "It's a comprehensive study on morality and ethics in the twenty-first century. Dr. Shields is evaluating hundreds of subjects in preparation for a major academic paper."

Then he looks past me, toward the next woman waiting in the lobby: "Jeannine?"

I walk outside, zipping my leather jacket. I pause, needing to get my bearings, then I turn and begin to head toward my apartment.

-1—
0—
+1—

All the people around me seem to be engaged in ordinary activities: A few women with brightly colored yoga mats enter the studio on the corner. Two guys holding hands stroll past me. A kid zipping by on a scooter is chased by his father, who shouts, “Slow down, buddy!”

Two hours ago, I wouldn’t have looked twice at any of them. But now it’s disorienting to be back in the noisy, bustling world.

I head to my apartment, pausing at a stoplight when I reach the corner. It’s cold, and I reach into my pockets for my gloves. As I put them on, I notice the clear polish I’d applied to my fingernails only yesterday is chipped and peeling.

I must’ve been scraping at it while thinking about whether I should answer that last question.

I shiver and cross my arms over my chest. I feel like I’m coming down with a bug. I have four clients today, and I have no idea how I’m going to summon the energy to haul my case around the city and make small talk.

I wonder if the survey will continue where it left off when I return to the classroom tomorrow. Or maybe Dr. Shields will let me skip that last question and give me a new one.

I turn the final corner and my apartment building comes into view. I unlock the main door, tugging it hard behind me until I hear the latch click into place. I drag myself up the four flights of stairs and unlock my door, then collapse onto my futon. Leo jumps up and curls next to me; sometimes he seems to sense when I need comfort. I adopted him almost on a whim a couple of years ago when I stopped in to an animal shelter to look at the cats. He wasn’t barking or whining. He was just sitting in his cage, looking at me, like he’d been waiting for me to show up.

I set the alarm on my phone to ring in an hour, then rest my head on his small, warm body.

As I lie there, I begin to wonder if it was worth it. I wasn’t prepared for how intense the experience would be, or how many different emotions would engulf me.

I roll onto my side and close my heavy eyes, telling myself that I’ll feel better once I’ve rested.

I don’t know what could happen tomorrow, what new things Dr.

—-1
—0
—+1

Shields will ask. No one is forcing me to do this, I remind myself. I could pretend I overslept. Or I could pull a Taylor and simply not show up.

I don't have to go back, I think right before I sink into oblivion.

But I know I'm only lying to myself.

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