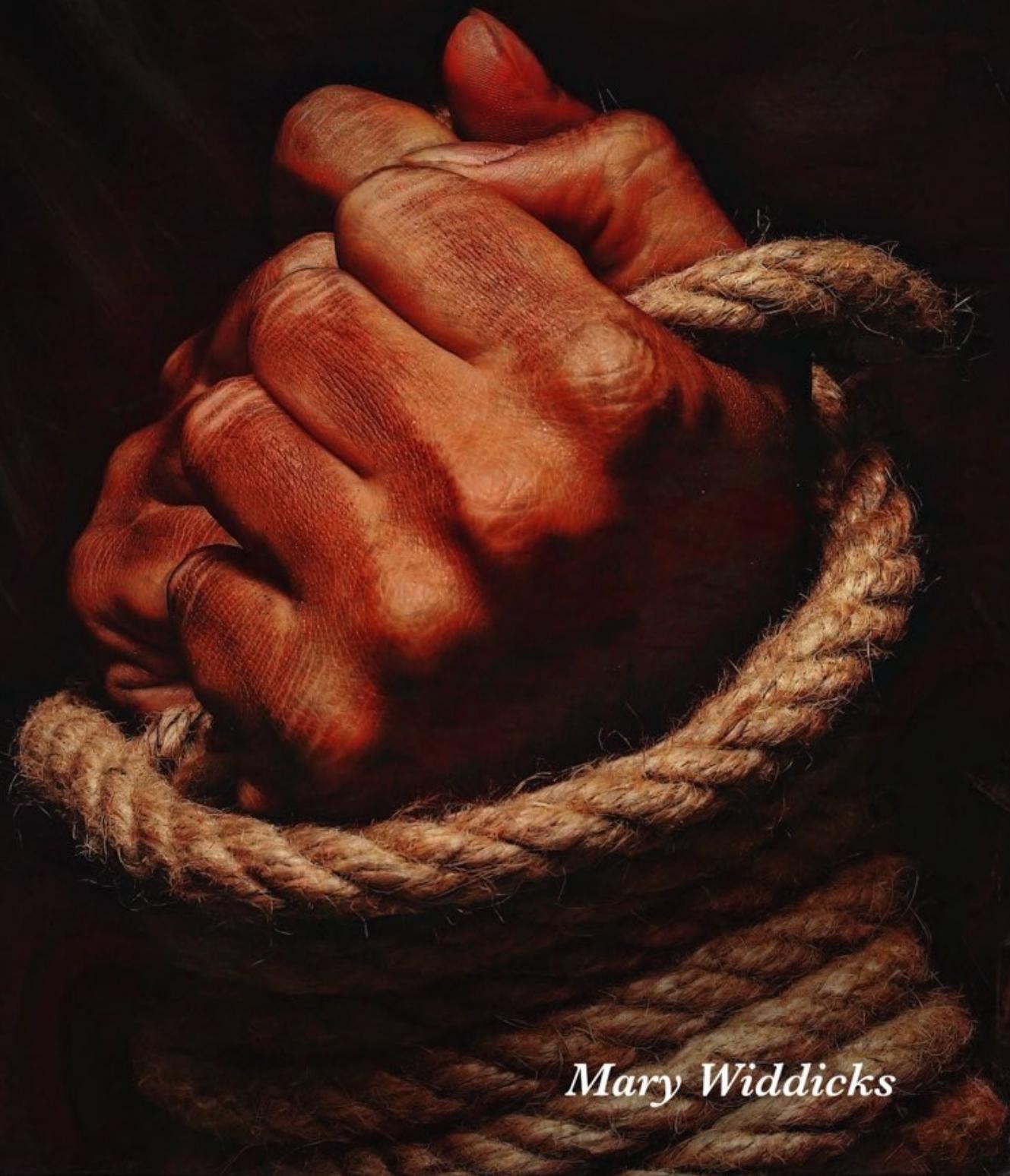


*"Emotional, eerie. . . and delightfully demented."*  
Best-selling author, Meghan O'Flynn

# a *mutual* addiction

a novel



Mary Widdicks

# A MUTUAL ADDICTION

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PREVIEW

MARY WIDDICKS



## INSOMNIA

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## **PRAISE FOR A MUTUAL ADDICTION**

“Emotional, eerie, and delightfully demented, *A Mutual Addiction* worms its way into your psyche and refuses to relent until the final breathtaking page.”

— **MEGHAN O’FLYNN, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF  
THE ASH PARK SERIES.**

“A twisted tale of love lost and obsession gained, *A Mutual Addiction* will appeal to fans of Mary Kubica and Karin Slaughter.”

— **WENDY HEARD, AUTHOR OF HUNTING  
ANNABELLE**

“Get ready to check your moral compass at the door for a few hours, and then prepare to be terrified of what you see in this compulsively readable book.”

— **TRACIE MARTIN, AUTHOR OF FOLLOW ME  
DOWN**

**I**

*It has been 3,684 days since the accident and as many nights since Cressida Dunhill last dreamed. Until the day she meets Vee, a water nymph of a girl who splashes color into Cressida's dull life. And that night, after ten years of emptiness, Cressida suddenly dreams again.*

*But for how long?*

*a mutual addiction is a haunting psychological journey that traces the fine line between morbid fascination and dangerous obsession, and offers an unsettling glimpse into the depths of desperation and how far someone is willing to go to protect their dreams.*



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## A MUTUAL ADDICTION PREVIEW

*“What I want is to be needed. What I need is to be indispensable to somebody. Who I need is somebody that will eat up all my free time, my ego, my attention. Somebody addicted to me. A mutual addiction.”*

— CHUCK PALAHNIUK, CHOKE

## CHAPTER 1

I t had been 3,684 days since groundskeepers lowered Max's body into the ground and as many nights since Cressida last dreamed. Ten years. Each time Cressida gasped her first breath in the morning it was like being pulled from the water, her lungs fighting for air, her body learning to live again. It was rebirth without the transformation, without the novelty. The doctors called it Aphantasia, but Cressida called it purgatory: slow, torturous emptiness.

The stiff leather of her wingback chair groaned as Cressida leaned forward to straighten a magazine on the coffee table in front of her. On the other side, Mr. Hamish drummed his thick fingers against the wooden arm of the couch. There was dirt ground under his nails that looked like it had been there for a decade. He could have been one of the men who buried Max that day, except, like most of her patients, he'd lived in Silverside all his life and Max had died thousands of miles away.

The clock on the office wall read 6:52 a.m. Cressida nodded her head in time with Hamish's thumping and sank into the mahogany leather, her eyelids as heavy as her thoughts. Sunlight streamed through the bay windows behind the sofa. Dawn was the only time of day when her

office was alight with color: the red wood of the couch, the gold lettering on the spines of her books, the auburn of Cressida's sleek, shoulder-length bob. Cressida tipped her face into the warmth. The beautiful view wavered and was replaced by Mr. Hamish's opaque silhouette rocking back and forth against the sofa.

He stopped pounding and raised a hand to his sandy beard. "What d'ya think it means, Dr. Dunhill?"

Cressida's eyes flicked to his face. "Which part, exactly?"

"The whole damn thing. It don't make no sense." His brown eyes narrowed into his tanned face. "I fall off my pa's crabbin' boat and at first I'm just in m'skivvies, but the water ain't cold. I'm swimmin' to shore when summit pulls me under. I take a swing, thinkin' it must be a fucking tiger  
—"

"A tiger?"

"Shark. And a big'un too."

Cressida nodded. "Go on."

"So I'm kickin' an' fightin' but I ain't felt nothin'. No teeth or nothin'. So I turn 'round and alls I see is this fluffy pink cloud." His eyes were wide enough to see the pale sclera around his irises, milky white and tinged with red. He'd been sleeping worse than usual lately. Usually the vivid dreams were merely a nuisance to the no-nonsense fisherman, a force to be reckoned with and healed by a doctor like a cancer, but today something was different. His hands shook in his lap.

The leather chair whimpered its excitement as Cressida selected a pen from the Mason jar on the tall end table beside her, straightening the container ever so slightly when she was done. For once, it might be worth taking notes. The pen was faded black metal, and heavy, with a silver band around the middle and a silver clip at the top. It

was the same pen she'd admired her first day in therapy, the one Max had used to describe Cressida in his notes: *angry, suicidal, alone.*

Cressida wrapped her fingers around the pen. The familiar contours of the instrument were comforting, a talisman of the power Max had passed on to her. He once used the pen to label Cressida, to literally define her, but now she was here and he wasn't.

Now the pen belonged to Cressida, and she wasn't angry anymore.

She scratched the worn pen across the notepad in her lap, the sound like white noise in her brain. Comforting and focusing. "So you're being pulled into the depths by a pink cloud?"

Hamish released his breath and it whistled through the straggly hairs above his top lip. "No. That's what I'm tryin' to tell ya. It was a dress. A big fluffy one like my wife wore at our weddin'."

"A dress?" Cressida's eyebrows peaked. Hamish didn't know how lucky he was to have unfettered access to his subconscious mind, to all the pieces of himself that were too overwhelming to process during the bright, waking hours. A life without dreams was like snow-blindness.

"Yeah. Is it a bad sign, Doc?" Hamish wrung his callused hands together and bounced his knee against the coffee table. The smell of perspiration and Pacific sea water filled the room like he'd squeezed it from his pores.

Cressida rolled the pen along the seam of her notebook. After weeks of banal, stress-induced insomnia, Mr. Hamish had finally presented a proper puzzle. Cressida's tired brain sputtered to life. "Dreams, Mr. Hamish, can mean a lot of things, and they aren't always the most obvious interpretation of events."

"What d'ya mean?"

“Dreams are often a backdoor to our consciousness. A filter through which we can deal with things that would otherwise be too scary. Like wearing special glasses to look at the sun during an eclipse.” Cressida’s voice trailed off. Interpreting dreams was a lot like piecing together a puzzle upside down. She loved the moment she was able to flip it over and reveal her handiwork to her patients.

Hamish shifted. “So you’re sayin’ it might not really be ‘bout me wearin’ a poofy dress?”

A smile pulled at the corners of Cressida’s mouth. “I’d say there’s a good chance that’s the case, Mr. Hamish.”

His hands dropped to his lap and he wiped the sour sweat onto his brown corduroys. “That’s good ‘cause my wife an’ me just found out last week that our oldest boy is gay. That’s about all the bad news I can handle.”

Cressida’s legs sagged beneath the notepad, upsetting the pen and sending it skittering to the floor. Such a splendidly intricate dream reduced to a paltry show of casual homophobia. Some veils were thinner than others. A cloud passed across the sun and the office dimmed again. Almost into obscurity. The promise of another day was gone.

“Then again,” Cressida said, “sometimes dreams are exactly what they seem.”

His face blanched. “What do ya mean?”

Cressida stared at the black pen that had settled onto the sea of beige carpet. The exhaustion crept back over her like the shadows across the office. It was all wrong, the pristine rug contrasted against the antiquated pen and Mr. Hamish’s muddy shoes bouncing behind it. It was going to be another day like all the rest. Cold, monotonous, and endless. Dreams belonged to those who felt the warmth of the sun, to those who occupied the land of the living. Death was the opposite of dreaming. Cressida was

something else entirely: too broken to dream and yet too human not to hope for more. It wasn't fair.

Hamish coughed into his sleeve and used it to wipe his nose. Along with the chill came the thoughts of Max. He moved with the shadows and the wind. Max would have hated Hamish the way Cressida hated the mud on the carpet, both blemishes on their otherwise orderly worlds. She glared at the pen. Hamish might be simple, but at least he wanted to change. They had that in common.

Cressida raised her eyes and pinched a half smile into place. "Well, obviously you're having some trouble accepting your son's sexuality and it's seeping into your subconscious. Maybe next week we should spend some time talking about why you feel that him being gay is dragging you down into the water."

Hamish coughed and the sound rattled in his lungs. "But it don't mean I'm queer too, then?"

Cressida squeezed her hands tight in her lap. All her patients wanted was a connection, just a small moment in a sea of anonymity when they could feel known. It was why they came to her. They couldn't make her flinch. That was her gift to them.

Cressida stood, and stepped around the table to lay a hand on his tense shoulder. "No, I think you're probably safe there." It had taken her years to appreciate the power of human touch to pull the desperate back from the edge. Max never taught her that.

A sigh of relief wafted past the edges of the magazines fanned out on the table behind them. His cooled breath stank of stale beer and cigarettes. *Everyone has their vice.* Her eyes dropped to the pen lying by her feet. She turned her back to the mess, but even as she bid the burly fisherman goodbye she could feel Max breathing down her neck.

When she finally closed the door between them, she bent forward and pressed her forehead against the polished wood, and her eyelids sagged. The restless nights had taken their toll on her sleep. The emptiness wasn't always so bad. There were times she felt almost normal, but the pain and the loss seemed to ebb and wain like the cycles of the moon. Lately it was all she could think about. She squeezed her eyes shut. Exhaustion was bleeding her dry and soon she would disappear completely.

But not today.

Cressida stalked back to the place where the pen had fallen to the carpet and stooped to pick it up.

"No, Max, not today." She laughed out loud at the absurdity of her own voice bouncing off the barren walls of an empty office, squatting beside an inanimate object, imagining it held a power her rational brain knew to be impossible. Ridiculous. If she couldn't rest soon, she might have to consider sleeping pills again. The pen was cold against her skin, and a chill ran down her spine as she recalled the first time she touched it. The night Max died.

The air in the car that night had been frigid and her breath had swirled from her open mouth like smoke from the jaws of a dragon. She hadn't even needed a pen at the time, but she had wanted it. And her heart had fluttered when she'd taken it from Max's pocket. Crouched now in her office, her pulse quickened again. Every sensation leading up to the moment she stole his pen lingered in her mind, crisp and new—and then nothing. Snow-blind.

Fast forward ten years and she was still lost, floating through life in a haze of sleep deprivation. And yet somehow she had washed up on the shores beneath a sand-blasted psychiatric facility the residents of Silverside, Oregon referred to as The Mermaid Asylum. Nestled

against the beach, the former inpatient psychiatric hospital was once home to a patient who believed she was a mermaid, complete with a seashell bra. She had tried to swim home to the mermaid kingdom one night, and her body had washed up on the beach behind the building, drowned.

The legend of The Mermaid Asylum hung over the town like a fog, but tragedy called people to the building like a siren. It was the kind of place Cressida might have ended up in another life. If it hadn't been for Max. Working there every day was almost like living in her very own, very vivid nightmare. And it was the main reason Cressida had chosen Silverside to start over. To search for the cure to her Aphantasia. The way back to the land of the living.

Cressida walked the pen back to its place on the side table beside her day planner. She wasn't feeling very hopeful that morning. She was still alone, apart from during her sessions. Only then did she feel the healing power that her profession had bestowed upon her. She was indispensable to her patients. Important. That was going to have to be enough. She could fix them even if she was beyond saving. Besides, she could think of no better place to disappear than an old mental institution turned psychology office.

Keys jangled on the other side of her office door. Must be the therapist across the hall. Dr. Roger Banks had housed his mental health practice in that same building for the last thirty years, almost as long as Cressida had been alive, and had lived in the apartment above for almost as long. Cressida had never been upstairs, but the peeling walls and creaking floors of the ground level were a reminder of the institution's checkered history. Roger's living arrangements seemed an unhealthy lack of boundaries between the personal and professional, but he

appeared largely unaffected.

A knock from the office door broke the silence, making her jump. "Just a minute, please."

Cressida quickly leafed through the moleskin appointment book. Her 7:00 a.m. was early. A new patient. Sparse notes in the margins gave almost no information about who was about to walk through the door: *29 year old Viola Marquis, paranoid?* The handwriting was Cressida's, but she couldn't remember speaking with the patient; it must have been another referral from Roger.

Cressida gripped the brass handle hard and swung open the door. "Sorry for the wait. Come on in."

Her limited notes had described the girl on the other side of the door as being twenty-nine, three years younger than Cressida, but this girl was dressed like a teenager. Her tie-dyed tank top and floor-length skirt billowed as she whisked into the room, giving the impression she had jeweled wings on her shoes. Cressida shut the door behind her and leaned her back against it as she watched the girl float toward the sofa.

The girl's skin was bronzed, and her eyes were haloed by the subtlest hints of creases, like she'd spent her short lifetime squinting out to sea. She plopped onto the pale sofa with a fluttering of emerald and ruby fabric. There was glitter all over her. On her eyes, in her short, blond hair, and spilling down the front of her low-cut top. She wasn't wearing a bra. This girl was not Cressida's typical clientele of rough townies and disenfranchised youths. She was raw and exposed like the fresh, pink skin that emerges after you pick an old scab.

Cressida concentrated on the feel of her long sleeves against her arms and tugged the concealing fabric over her wrists. She could hear Max's voice in her head. *You shouldn't pick scabs. It's how scars are formed.*

"Am I early?" The girl's voice was breathy like she'd run up a flight of stairs even though they were on the first floor. Her cheeks were flushed.

"No. You're right on time." Cressida took her seat in the leather chair opposite the girl and stared at the floor. There were tiny shards of glitter working their way into the carpet fibers, grinding down so deep that no vacuum could recover them. This was worse than the mud. Her heart thumped against her chest in a way that was distantly familiar and yet beyond her conscious recollection. Like hearing a lullaby from childhood. Max would not have approved.

Cressida reached for the table without taking her eyes from the girl and retrieved her pen. She was in control now. "Do you prefer Ms. Marquis or Viola?"

"Just Vee."

"Ok, Vee. Would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself?"

The girl pursed her lips to one side and shrugged her shoulders like a child. "There's not much to tell. I was born and raised here in Silverside. Just your average, boring, small-town girl."

"I'm sure that isn't true." Cressida followed the flickering glitter hovering around the girl like a crown. "What do you do for a living, Vee?"

"I teach part time at the local preschool and I've been helping out on my father's fishing boat most mornings to earn some extra cash."

"Commercial fishing? That sounds like a very unique vocation."

Vee scratched her nose with a long fingernail that must have made it very difficult to haul fishing nets out of the ocean. Raised on the wild sea, the girl was like a goddess cursed to walk the earth even though she had no idea how

to blend in. Practicality was not a priority for this girl. “Not around here it isn’t.”

“Okay. Then why don’t we start with why you’re here?”

The light from the rising sun cast a rainbow of shadows across the girl’s face. Cressida’s small office was a dreary ocean of sand and dirt, perpetually bland until this water nymph of a girl splashed so much color into every corner that it was almost blinding. She was the dawn on two legs.

Vee tucked her feet under her on the sofa, her shoes scraping against the rough fabric. “Well, like I said when I called the other doctor, my boyfriend thinks I’m paranoid, and I finally decided to call his bluff.” She giggled, and Cressida’s ears pricked. She was lying. Or he was an idiot. Someone who was paranoid would want to hide their emotions for fear that others might misinterpret them, or they might mask their fears with what they deemed the “correct” response. This girl was doing neither.

“Paranoid is a pretty strong word. What do you think?”

“I think he’s a liar and a fucking cheater.” Bingo. A flutter of excitement gripped Cressida’s stomach. She exhaled with as much control as she could muster. She counted the seconds between breaths. *One. Two. Three.*

Finally, Cressida inhaled again. “Then why come here? Why not just break up with him?”

Vee tipped her head as if that were a satisfactory response to the question. Clearly, the girl wanted Cressida to wonder about her, to yearn for more. Around here, people must have thought she materialized from another planet.

Cressida gripped Max’s pen hard, and she could feel him itching to darken the clean, white page of her notebook with thoughts about this girl: a diagnosis, a treatment, a judgment. Max was always logical. Always thinking. Cressida’s mind was no longer sticky and

sluggish. The promise of the dawn had finally delivered. This girl wasn't so easy to decrypt as Hamish had been. Vee was something new, and her dreams had yet to disclose her secrets. Cressida held her tongue and waited for Vee to tell her more, to reach out for that universal connection. Even the darkest mysteries eventually revealed themselves, the most willful eventually begged to submit.

Vee's eyes wandered the room as freely as her skirt had flowed when she'd entered the office. She was completely without restraint and yet totally in control. Her eyes danced from Cressida's face to the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and finally landed on a row of tattered books along the top shelf. Her eyebrows lifted. All the classics were there: Homer, Sophocles, Virgil. Shakespeare and Chaucer. The ancient volumes were the only literature among the shelves of crisp, new textbooks, diagnostic manuals, and academic journals: worn islands among a sea of the unsullied.

The girl stood from the couch and approached the wide shelves that spanned the wall of the office. Cressida's spine stiffened as Vee browsed the shelves, running her fingers along the tidy rows of journals and textbooks. Most patients barely glanced at Cressida's shelves, as if their contents were merely a backdrop before which to play out their fantasy of what therapy was supposed to be like. The books provided façade of safety and control that allowed her patients to see Cressida as she wanted to be perceived. She was a healer.

But Vee's fingers—searching, intimate, and violating—probed the illusion like no one had bothered before. It was as if Vee had walked her hands over each of Cressida's vertebra as well. Cressida wanted to stop her, wanted to shout at her to sit back down, but that wouldn't have been

professional. It wouldn't have been allowed. The excitement in Cressida's stomach soured and the air in the room tasted stale. The girl touched everything, leaving her oil, her skin, and her fucking glitter in her wake.

"You don't have any photos around." The girl spoke more to herself than to Cressida. Vee tipped a book away from the shelf and frowned at the cover. Not enough color, perhaps. Twenty-nine years old. This girl was more like a child.

Cressida spoke softly through gritted teeth. "This is a place of business." She folded her arms, sweat tickling the back of her neck, and hugged her shirt to her chest. "I like to keep it that way."

Cressida was not prepared, not in control. She was at the mercy of this impulsive girl, helplessly watching as Vee trapesed across her borders and dragged long hidden feelings along with her. Cressida's skin prickled with cold sweat. The Emptiness from earlier that morning might have been preferable to this.

Vee stretched onto her toes, pulled down a blue leather-bound copy of *The Aeneid* and flipped through the pages. Dust sprang from the thin paper as her fingers traced the words. Cressida sucked clean air into her lungs and held her breath. It had been years since she'd touched those particular books. Not even to clean.

Unable to part with the books completely, she'd laid them to rest on her highest shelves. Reminders of her past. Like Max's pen. Souvenirs were the closest thing she had to dreams, but now their filth invaded the room, trickling down from the ceiling like black snow. Cressida scratched deep trembling marks across the page with the tip of Max's pen. *Boundaries*.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a fan of the classics." Vee closed the book and curled around it on the sofa as if

she was lounging in her own living room. Her dirty feet rested on the sofa cushion, real sand meeting the sandy hue of the fabric.

Cressida's skin crawled. Cressida had never encountered a patient like Vee before, never been tested so mercilessly. Was this how Max had felt about her that first day in his office. Angry. Maybe Cressida had shaken Max the way this girl had unsettled her. Vee. What kind of name was that, anyway?

Cressida took a deep breath and focused on the task at hand. She tapped the back of the pen to the paper and with each thump she repeated two words. *No past. No present. No future. Just this.* Just Vee, the puzzle now scattered across the sofa. Calm shimmered over her like the glitter that emanated from the girl. She had come here for a reason, for a connection. Just like everyone else. She was nothing more than Hamish wrapped in glittery paper.

Cressida needed a way into her mind. Just a foothold. "What do you think the books imply?"

Vee ran her fingers along the gold embellishments on the front cover of the book. Her long nails scraped across the worn leather with a soft hiss. Cressida held her breath and the tension between them hung in the air like a poisonous fog. Vee finally met Cressida's gaze with savage eyes.

"That you're a fraud."

## CHAPTER 2

Blood rushed to Cressida face, hot and unwelcome. Her fist clenched around Max's pen, the silver clip gouging into her palm. Words rasped in Cressida's throat like they weren't hers. "Why would you say I was a fraud?"

"Because..." Vee's sapphire eyes met the cool grey of Cressida's and she wrinkled her nose, as if what she was about to say disgusted her. "Books like these are meant to be loved, not packed away on a shelf out of reach. And not surrounded by hard lines and sterile whites. Books aren't just things you own, they own you. Unless you're just completely full of shit and only display them to trick people into believing you're more sophisticated than you are."

Cressida clenched her jaw hard to keep her quivering chin from giving her away. Patients weren't supposed to see her flinch. Her breath came in shallow drags. She was overreacting. Surely, this girl was just another patient lashing out at their therapist instead of confronting her own problems. She couldn't know that Cressida's blood was pounding in her ears, that her skin was on fire, or how hard she worked to hide her disdain for those books. It had to be all in Cressida's mind. Max would have told her to get ahold of herself.

Cressida unclenched her fists and turned her palms to the ceiling. She rested the backs of her hands on her lap and willed calm through her body. Patients came to Cressida for her to reflect back at them like a mirror: one-way and impenetrable. They didn't want to know her, and she was happy to oblige. The relationship they craved was about relinquishing control and the thrill of not caring about anything or anyone but themselves. Just for a moment. This girl was no different. "You obviously feel very strongly about the books. Talk to me about how they make *you* feel."

"They make me feel like I shouldn't be here." Vee's eyes flashed but she made no move to leave.

"Why is that?"

Vee shrugged and crossed her feet on top of the coffee table, the coveted Virgil forgotten in her lap.

There was gum stuck to the bottom of her battered sandal. Cressida's eyes locked on several red hairs- her hairs- protruding from the smudge of flattened gum. Hair and glitter. Vee must have tracked it from across the carpet. And now she was sitting there waiting for Cressida to say something, to reclaim the power she seemed to have lost when Vee touched her books. Yet all Cressida could think about were those hairs on her carpet.

Cressida shook her head. "Tell me about your boyfriend. You said he thinks you're paranoid?"

"I'm not really in the mood to talk about it anymore."

Something had changed, as if Cressida had failed some unspoken test. Cressida leaned back against her leather chair. Her instincts were off with this girl. She scratched her temple with the back of Max's pen. Perhaps the lack of sleep had finally dulled her wits. "Well, that's up to you, but you must have come here looking for some kind of answers."

"Maybe I was just curious about this place." Vee nodded her head toward the sea, sensing its presence without seeing, as if even indoors she could feel it calling to her.

Disappointment bloomed in Cressida's gut like a relentless weed. Some people couldn't resist the spectacle of the asylum. Like children to the pied piper, they were drawn to its sorrow, to its grotesque grey spires jutting out from among the cheery seaside town like the horns of the Kraken. They'd make any excuse to get inside. Vee had seemed different, genuine, but maybe she was just another thrill seeker looking to cross an urban legend off her bucket list. Cressida sighed and placed the notebook on the side table on top of the moleskin planner and laid Max's pen over both. Dissapointed twice in one morning. What a day.

Vee watched quietly as Cressida slid the pen down to the center of the notebook until the angle between it and the top edge was precisely ninety degrees. Cressida coughed and sent a piece of glitter sparkling into the air between her and the girl, catching the morning light and then falling to the carpet beside the coffee table. Vee giggled.

That was enough.

Max wouldn't have allowed such behavior. Cressida had other patients who needed her time, who needed a real connection. Patients who needed *her*. Cressida stood, nearly toppling the leather chair behind her. The girl was mocking her, stealing her time, and violating her things. She stepped around the table to where Vee was sitting and without a word, held out her palm for Vee to return the book. Her fingers trembled in the air between them.

Vee smiled before handing it over, unfazed by Cressida's unprofessional reaction. Maybe even pleased.

There was a small gap between her front teeth. It was the kind of thing an orthodontist should have fixed, making her flawless. But on this girl it didn't seem like a flaw. Or maybe it was her flaws that made her so infuriating, and so fascinating.

The smell of dust, salt, and something sweet—maybe strawberries—filled the space around them, and Cressida turned away to keep from sneezing. She walked back to the shelf and stretched onto her toes. The girl had seemed so delicate as she drifted into the office, but she must have been tall because Cressida could barely reach the space left by the book without climbing onto the lowest shelf to hoist the volume back into its rightful place. Vee had made it seem so effortless.

Cressida's sleeve brushed the undisturbed surface and the white silk came away coated with dust as thick and dark as ash. She was overwhelmed with an urge to wash her hands. Her skin itched and Cressida wondered if the dust and glitter had invaded her pores. She jammed her hands into her pockets and turned back to the girl.

"So where were we?"

Vee was sitting further down the sofa from where she had been a moment before, her long, turquoise fingernails tapping against the wooden arm, exactly the way Hamish's had an hour earlier. Yet the two patients couldn't be more different. Hamish's constant and dependable presence had been replaced by Vee's fidgeting hands and darting eyes. Where he had yearned for Cressida to define him, to ground him in reality, Vee refused to conform. She was mesmerizing to watch like a traffic accident waiting to happen.

Cressida cocked her head to the side and regarded the girl with cool suspicion. Without breaking eye contact, Vee picked a piece of glitter from the sofa cushion and held it

on the pad of her finger, examining it for a moment before she blew it into the air and into oblivion.

"On second thought, I don't really feel like talking at all today." Vee's bare skin scraped against the bottom of the cushion, as if she hadn't shaved her legs in several days. Something in her demeanor had shifted like the wind and suddenly she couldn't get away from the office fast enough. Her skirt billowed as she glided across the room, running her hand along the soft leather of Cressida's empty chair on her way toward the door, moving it just enough to throw off the careful angles. A smile crept across the girl's face as Cressida's narrowed eyes tracked her across the room.

The protective wall of professionalism and restraint that Cressida had painstakingly assembled had turned to dust. She could have asked the girl to leave, but that would have meant admitting defeat, that this girl was somehow beyond her help. Every day since the accident, Cressida had battled to regain control, both of her professional days and her empty nights. The senselessness of it all made her head spin. But surely Vee wasn't here to toy with her. She was just a normal girl with an asshole for a boyfriend and a penchant for wearing too much body glitter. Not exactly the stuff of nightmares.

Cressida crossed the room to where the girl stood waiting by the door, as if she was asking permission to leave. Daring Cressida to take charge of the interaction. Perhaps she needed a reason to stay. "Your session just started. You're welcome to leave, but I'm going to have to bill you for the full hour."

Vee shrugged and scraped her long nails along the dry skin on the back of her hands. "I'll just tell my boyfriend it was his fault. Maybe he'll stop making wild accusations about my mental health if he sees the cost."

Money wasn't Vee's weakness, but everyone had one. Cressida needed more time to find Vee's. There had to be a way to nail her down. "Well, if that doesn't work, you're always welcome to make another appointment."

"I might do that." She reached for the door handle but paused before turning the brass knob. "One more thing. All your degrees and the plaque on your door list your name as Dr. C. Dunhill."

Cressida raised her eyebrows beneath the fringe of her straight bangs. "That's correct."

"What's your first name?"

"Cressida." She'd stopped advertising her first name because patients were spending the first fifteen minutes of their sessions questioning her about its origin or trying to impress her with their knowledge of Greek mythology.

Vee smiled and nodded her pixie head. "I get it now."

There it was again, the feeling that this girl could see right through her. It was dangerous and exhilarating, like getting caught naked in the shower. "What do you get?"

"They're your parents' books." Vee pointed at the bookshelf over Cressida's shoulder. To *that* shelf. "That's why they don't belong." She beamed and the sun glinted off her dangling earrings. Red, orange and yellow beads cascaded down her neck like lava from a volcano. They looked homemade. The kind of project doctors assign patients in mental institutions to keep their minds busy.

"The books were my mother's." Cressida brushed her hair behind her ear, wondering what her lobes would look like pierced. Her mother would never have stood for such a thing.

"I knew it! Cressida, from *Troilus and Cressida*." She sighed. "I wish I had a story behind my name, but I don't."

"Viola. You weren't named for the character in *Twelfth Night*?"

"Oh God, no. The closest my parents ever got to Shakespeare was a Mel Gibson movie. I think maybe my mom liked listening to string quartets or something, but they never told me. She died when I was a kid."

"Well, maybe it's better that you don't know. My mother was all about subtext, and sometimes it's better that stuff stays buried." Cressida's voice sounded far away, like she was speaking to Vee from another plane. Or maybe from a dream. The exhaustion pulled at her limbs and she leaned against the wall for stability.

"That must make for interesting Thanksgiving conversation."

"She's dead." Cressida bit down on her cheek. She was revealing too much, becoming a window rather than a mirror. Completely out of control. She reached around the girl and opened the door to the hallway.

Vee didn't budge. "That's too bad."

"Not really." A bead of sweat tickled the back of Cressida's knee. The sun had risen higher in the sky and was now blaring through the bay windows and casting a molten glare throughout the office. Only Vee's slender body was spared by Cressida's shadow looming into the foyer. "If you like Shakespearean names so much, why don't you go by Viola? Why Vee?"

"It just feels more...like me." Vee bobbed her shoulders again and disappeared into the hallway, her skirt flapping behind her.

Cressida shook her head. It was possible this girl was all for show. Bright swirls of color masking a blank canvas. Beyond even Cressida's power to save. Yet her mind raced with possibilities. Even now she hoped the girl would return and prove her wrong. The nervous energy drained from the room and trailed behind Vee toward the front door, swept up in her skirt. It didn't make any sense, but

Cressida's office felt emptier than usual now that the girl was gone. Emaciated. Hungry.

Cressida closed the office door and surveyed the room. Everything Vee had touched was askew, as if a tiny earthquake had shaken the room upon her arrival. Cressida's appointment book lay open on the side table, turned to the page for next week. She was sure she had not left it open. She walked around the back of the leather chair and turned the book around so she could read the words etched onto the page.

It wasn't Cressida's handwriting. It was larger, flowery and impractical, like the girl herself. There were loops in the V of Vee and it was written across the entire entry for next Friday. There was no room left for other appointments. No order. In a matter of minutes, Vee had left her mark on everything in Cressida's clean life. Reason would have her cancel the girl's next appointment, but her stomach lurched at the thought. There was no reason to see Vee again. Nothing to be gained. She hadn't asked Cressida for help, only taken what she wanted. Yet Cressida yearned for one more session. It wasn't logical. She'd allowed the girl and the glitter get under her skin.

Cressida ripped the page from the book and crumpled it to the floor. She paced the perimeter of the room, studying every object between the sofa and the office door. The Mason jar beside the planner was off center and the wingback chair was crooked, punching new holes in the Berber carpet. Cressida dropped to her knees in front of the heavy chair and repositioned it onto its usual dents. Then she fished the torn appointment page from beneath the chair, and flattened it against her hand. *There.* Everything was back to as it should be.

Still on her knees, she lowered her head to the cracked leather of her chair and breathed deep and low—as close

as she ever got to praying. Oxygen filled her lungs, deep and cool, and she felt her blood pressure return to normal. A break. She needed a break.

A soft knock on the door interrupted her respite. It was only 7:30 a.m. Too early for her next appointment. The knocking intensified until it echoed across the room. Her heart still thumped in her chest and the irritation flowed like fire in her veins. She didn't like surprises. Cressida dragged herself to her feet and opened the door to find Roger's red face smiling back at her with his horse teeth and wooly bear caterpillar eyebrows. He was wearing a Lycra top stretched across his wide chest and shorts that revealed the smooth muscles of his thighs. In one hand was a bike helmet and in the other a half-empty bottle of yellow Gatorade. Dr. Roger Banks believed cycling to town every day would make him live forever. He probably should have known better.

"Good morning, Doctor Banks."

"Miss Dunhill. For the hundredth time, please call me Roger." He sighed and scuffed his shoe across the threshold of Cressida's office. "I just wanted to check in and see how everything went with Miss Marquis this morning."

Cressida stepped back into her office. "Yes, thank you for referring her to me. She seems like a handful, but I'm hopeful I can get through to her."

A satisfied smirk oozed across Roger's face. "Wonderful. I thought she'd be a good fit for you."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

Roger grinned. "Because of her dreams."

"Dreams?"

"Yeah, when she called reception last week it was as if you were tailor-made for each other, given your unusual interest in dream analysis." His thin hair circled the bald

spot on the top of his head like a whirlpool, Charybdis on his scalp, waiting to swallow her.

The thought of the Greek myth reminded Cressida of Vee's observations about her books and her chest tightened. "Oh. Right."

Roger tapped his skull with a finger and laughed.

The muscles in Cressida's cheeks hardened. Vee hadn't mentioned anything about dreams during their short session. Perhaps there was more to the colorful creature than just glitter and pretense. Perhaps Vee wanted help after all. Perhaps she'd be back.

"Yes, she and I will have a lot to talk about at her appointment next week. Thank you again."

Roger's fingers lingered on the wooden frame beside his head, stopping Cressida from shutting the door and retreating back into her office. "Speaking of dreams, I saved an article for you the other day. From *Scientific American*."

She had a subscription to the same journal. Roger knew that because he picked up the mail each morning. Cressida frowned. "Which one?"

"About the role of dreams in forming memories. Seemed right up your alley." He winked.

She had read study after study about head trauma and memory loss, but not one of them could explain why the accident had affected her ability to dream. Cressida dragged her hand across her tired eyes, their lids as dry and thin as paper. There had to be a solution out there somewhere. "That sounds great. Thank you."

"Great. I've got it in my office somewhere." He turned sideways and held a hand out toward the hallway. "Care to join me?"

The familiar appeal of her worn sofa beckoned her, but curiosity and desperation urged her forward as it always

did. She couldn't end up lost in the oblivion of her dreamless sleep forever, trapped and terrified, waiting for someone to find her curled up in the back of a cave. She nodded as she stepped into the hallway and closed her office door behind her.

## CHAPTER 3

D r. Roger Banks's office was a mirror image of Cressida's. Their identical closets met at the back, and there were matching bookshelves and bay windows framing the room. Back when the asylum had housed anywhere from twenty to fifty patients, these two rooms had served as dormitories. It was difficult to imagine rows of cots lined up along the walls that were now stacked with books, but Roger had framed black and white pictures in the entryway: poster-sized images of scattered souls wandering the rooms in white robes and slippers feet.

Though structurally the rooms were twins, Roger's dusty shelves were filled with awkwardly piled books, grouped together without thought or form. Pieces of his life were scattered around his office like breadcrumbs. There were crooked photos of his him and his wife on the summits of mountains and one of his wife in her wedding gown, all luridly displayed for everyone to see. Stephen King novels lay sideways on top of past issues of *Psychology Today* magazines. There were food-stained cookbooks splayed on top of the upright diagnostic manuals and medical references. His journals weren't even in chronological order.

It was pandemonium.

Roger's grand oak desk was littered with papers and the remnants of yesterday's lunch. He gestured for Cressida to sit in the chair across the desk and then brushed past her on his way to his own seat. The back of his hand grazed her shoulder and she could feel the damp heat from his body through her shirt. Deflecting Roger's impotent advances was the last thing Cressida felt doing after the morning she'd had.

She sat down hard in the chair and crossed her legs. The half smile she'd plastered on her face as soon as she opened the door wavered slightly, but Roger wasn't paying attention. Without a word, he swept some of the sheets to the floor and squinted at the others.

"Ah, here it is." Roger flipped over a small stack clipped together with a pink paperclip, and slid it across the desk toward Cressida. His eyes followed her hands as she reached out to examine the article.

The paper was from two years ago, and only marginally related to her research. It was about memory retrieval through dreaming and had very little to say about the actual mechanism of dreams. As usual. Her heart sank.  
"Thanks—"

Roger coughed and leaned forward over the desk, so close she could smell coffee on his breath. "Listen, I know you value your autonomy, but we really should schedule that progress meeting we've been skirting around. I am supposed to be supervising you, after all."

Cressida forced a laugh from the depths of her gut. This was the real reason for his visit. So depressingly predictable. Brown and grey and bland like the rest of her life. Was this the best she could hope for her life? She'd successfully avoided Roger's attention for months, ever since he offered to drive her home after hours one night.

"I'm doing fine, really." She hovered over her chair, ready to leave.

"Well, you've been working here for a while now and we've never really had a discussion about how you feel you're fitting in at the practice." He raised his eyebrows at the chair, and waited for Cressida to return to her seat.

Cressida bit the inside of her lip and sat back down. "I think it's going well. The patients are engaging and I'm able to keep the early hours I prefer."

"Yes, the great thing about living in a fishing town is there are plenty of people up before the sun."

"I agree."

"I've heard only the best reports about your competence as a therapist." Roger loomed over the desk, appearing much larger than usual. His pupils were dilated making his already dark eyes appear black. "But aside from the patients, how are you finding Silverside?"

"I stay pretty busy at work."

"I've noticed that you are spending a lot of time in the office. I'm worried you might be fixating on your job in a way that isn't healthy."

Cressida inclined her head, but didn't respond. Her head throbbed.

Roger walked around the bulky desk and stood beside Cressida's chair, blocking her quickest route to the door. His thick, coarse arm hair was visible through his white shirt. "Everyone needs a friend. Even therapists."

"I'm fine. Really." Cressida's throat tightened around the words.

Roger curled his tongue over his teeth as he smiled. "Miss Dunhill, this isn't a test. This is about reaching out."

"I have friends." Cressida pulled the paper clip from the article in front of her and straightened the metal, running her fingertip over the sharp end. Max would have told her

to run.

Roger's hand fell against the back of her chair, inches from her ear. "You know, if you ever need anything you can always ask."

She was trapped. If Roger touched her, would she have the strength to jam the paper clip into his arm? He was taller than her, solid muscle deceptively hidden behind a layer of fat, but she was tough. And she had nothing to lose. "I don't think I need help."

Roger threw up his hands and laughed great chortles that reverberated in his chest. "No. I don't suppose you do." He retreated to the edge of his desk, his red face impassive.

The blood drained from Cressida's face and her body felt limp as though she'd sprung a leak. "I appreciate your concern, but I'm doing just fine."

"Just make sure you have something outside this place."

Outside was exactly where she wanted to be. She rose from the chair and bid him goodbye.

"Doctor Dunhill?" Roger called from behind her. "If you ever need anything, I'm right next door." He brought his fingers to his forehead and tipped an invisible hat toward her.

"I know," she said. "Thank you."

Cressida fled back into the hallway, her limbs as cold and numb as if they were made of gelatin. When she finally closed her office door between them, she bent forward and pressed her forehead against the polished wood, and her eyelids sagged. The restless nights had taken their toll on her sleep. Her anxiety was out of control. Roger wasn't dangerous. She was reading too much into his intentions. She squeezed her eyes shut. Exhaustion was bleeding her dry and soon she would disappear

completely.

But not today.

*Not today, Max.*

Instinctively she crossed the room and collapsed into her leather chair. She reached her arm toward the side table, searching for Max's pen. Her fingers anticipated the cool touch of the metal, but found only rough paper and smooth glass. *Where was it?* She sat up straight in her chair, the muscles in her back hardened to stone. The pen was all she had left of Max. It had to be there. It couldn't be lost. Her stomach flipped. She'd already lost everything. She couldn't lose Max too.

She couldn't be left all alone.

In the dreamless dark.

The chair creaked as she hovered over the table casting an ominous shadow across the glass top. Her notepad was there, open to the empty page decorated with Cressida's scribbling and the words *Viola Marquis* scrawled across the top. The day planner was tucked beside it, the crumpled page containing Vee's appointment jutting haphazardly out the side. But no pen. Cressida checked between the pages of the notebook, under her legs in the chair, and between cushion and the arms.

On all fours she scoured beneath the chair and the coffee table finding heaps of glitter but nothing larger. Cressida's heart rate sped against her chest, hammering blood through her veins until she could hear nothing else. She tore at the glitter stuck to the carpet as if Max's pen could be hidden somewhere beneath. Max's pen was gone, just like he was. Dry sobs racked her chest and she slumped to the floor. Her cheek itched against the fibrous carpet, Hamish's mud, and Vee's glitter. It was all she had left.

Outside, rain beat against the bay windows behind

Cressida, pulsing with the tidal winds, as if she was hearing the collective heartbeat of the small seaside town. The door rattled behind her and Cressida jumped to her feet. Her hands shook as she brushed glitter from her knees. The knocking was hurried, panicked, and she could see shadows pacing under the door. Someone was intent on seeing her.

Cressida pulled open the door to find Roger rubbing his knuckles and huffing from the exertion. His face was pale again and his eyes no longer opaque.

Not again. Cressida made no effort to shield him from her frustration. “What?”

“I’m sorry to bother you again, but I just received a call from St. Luke’s.” The creases beside his eyes deepened. “They need a consult on a young girl who’s refusing to cooperate with police. I don’t know the details, but I recognized the name. Sam Wolfe. She’s a patient of yours, isn’t she?”

The heat drained from Cressida’s face and cold sweat tingled at her scalp. Sam was in the hospital refusing to talk to the cops. *That bastard finally put her in the hospital.* “I have to go. Now.”

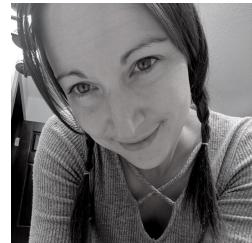
Roger nodded. “I’ll drive you.”

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## ABOUT MARY WIDDICKS



*Former cognitive psychologist turned suspense writer, Mary is a firm believer in strong, twisted female characters and unhappy endings. Her internet search history is not for the faint of heart.*

*As a freelance writer and humorist, Mary's [essays](#) have been featured on The Washington Post, Brain, Child Magazine, and Scary Mommy. She has also appeared on a Wisconsin Public Radio morning show discussing the psychology of parenting. Mary does not perform well at 5:30am.*

*Raised near Portland, Oregon, Mary now lives in central Illinois where the tallest thing for miles is corn. She shares a perpetually shrinking house with her three kids, two dogs, and two cats...and can usually be found writing under at least one of them at all times.*

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