

# Dream Guy

## Part 2

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I laid in bed on my side staring out the window. Derek and I hadn't said more than two words to each other since I ran home, away from Aiden. The confusing turmoil of suddenly knowing Aiden's name kept me up all night.

Maybe I was scared to dream again and discover something else about my life that made no sense. The sun wasn't even up yet and I knew this time I wouldn't fall back asleep. I looked at my phone and turned my alarm off. Derek was a light sleeper and it always agitated him to get woken up early on his days off.

Fridays had been the highlight of my week when Derek and I first started dating. I loved having him meet me for lunch at work and then rushing home to get ready for whatever fun plans Derek had concocted during his day off. In truth, those had fallen off slowly and then all together stopped by the time he had moved into my apartment. I told myself it wasn't a symptom of a bigger problem. This happened in most relationships. You can't stay on cloud nine forever. Eventually the routine of life replaces the excited butterflies of a new relationship.

Although what Derek was so busy with on Fridays had been a mystery to me. *It doesn't matter.* I didn't have time to dwell on what Derek did with his time instead of meeting me for lunch. I had bigger issues to focus on. Aiden was someone I knew in my dreams and I didn't understand how. I climbed out of bed and walked softly to the living room, grabbing my Mac on my way to the couch.

Charlie's adorable head popped up from his bed and he yawned before walking over and jumping on the couch next to me. My sweet boy could tell I was sad. He let me hug him and then walked in tight circles on the couch before laying his giant head down against my thigh.

"It's a good thing Derek is sleeping boy," I whispered. "You know he hates you getting up on the furniture."

Charlie wiggled deeper into the couch. I felt like it was an appropriate reaction to another rule Derek insisted was best for the apartment.

I smiled at my sweet boy and scratched his head gently while I used my free hand to search for anything that could help me figure out what my dreams meant. Most of what Google showed me in response to my query was too outrageous to warrant a click.

But then amongst the barrage of results, one line caught my eye. There was nothing flashy about the wording and maybe that's why it stood out. I clicked

on the link and was surprised that I was taken to Dr. Nora Spicer's webpage. Her site was organized and professional. She specialized in hypnotherapy. My insides churned. I couldn't believe I was even considering hypnotherapy as a *reasonable* option.

The title bar began scrolling slowly through a series of photos, first of the pretty receptionist smiling awkward for the camera while on the phone. A few seconds later the receptionist disappeared and Dr. Spicer's office took her place, then finally a picture of Dr. Spicer herself. She was pretty. Not in an obvious way. But something about her was appealing. The picture tried to scroll again but I tapped back to keep her there.

Without thinking I scrolled down and saw she had office hours today. Her office was on the other side of town in the medical district. I rubbed my eyes trying to relieve the pressure built up behind them from a night of exhaustion. I felt like I had been crying all night, but that wasn't possible. Nothing had happened to make me cry. I just felt crazy and frustrated. I jostled Charlie and he didn't move. Sighing heavily, I pushed him off me and tiptoed back to my bedroom.

I threw on half clean jeans I'd worn a few days ago and grabbed a t-shirt out of my top drawer. If I turned on the closet light I would wake up Derek for sure. I slid my feet into mules and went into my bathroom. I looked like hell. Dark circles under my eyes, red splotches on my cheeks and nose. Even my face looked like I had been crying. In an effort to hurry I washed my face and smeared on my moisturizer/ sunscreen combination. I skipped my other products, promising myself I would make up for it later this afternoon. I was going to call in sick today which didn't feel like a lie; I felt like garbage. Maybe they could file this as a mental health day.

I threw on a coat and kissed Charlie a million times before walking out the door and locking it. I tried calling Dr. Spicer's office while I was on my way, hoping to get an appointment. No one answered but I kept driving there anyway. The logical side of my mind argued I was being foolish and reckless, calling in sick to work just so I could hustle across town at the crack of dawn in search of hypnotherapy.

I had become completely unhinged. But what did I have to lose? Both Dr. Spicer's address and website suggested she was reputable. If I walked in and it felt sketchy I could just leave. I parked my car and walked quickly into the building. The empty foyer felt eerie. My phone said it was 7:30am. While I tried to figure out how to get to Dr. Spicer's office, I decided a facial and a pedicure would be a good backup plan if hypnotherapy turned out to be a joke.

At the very least I'd get a great dinner party story out of it. I searched the buildings directory and found Dr. Spicer's office was on the fifth floor. I took a deep breath and pushed forward.

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'Dr. Nora Spicer' was etched in black on the gold plate attached to her front office door. I stared at it, curious at her choice of name plate. Her name was printed in professional block font on the gold plate, but instead of using the same rectangle name plate as all the other professional offices lining the hall, her's was an ornate scroll design that made the plaque appear more like a middle school award than a sign announcing the location of her office.

Instead of doubting Dr. Spicer's mental competence I pushed the door open eager to meet the woman who was such a conundrum. I stepped inside the office and saw the receptionist hovering over a table in the back corner. I chewed on my lip nervously. I didn't want to interrupt her morning chores to get the office open, but I also didn't want to waste my time here if I couldn't get an appointment. Especially since rush hour would be hitting the freeways soon. If this was all a bust I hoped that I would at least be moving opposite the traffic so I could have an easy commute back home.

I walked over and tapped her shoulder. The poor woman jumped at my touch and then knocked over the diffuser she was refilling. She let out a cry of frustration.

"I'm so so sorry!" I exclaimed. "I didn't mean to scare you, I should have cleared my throat or something instead of tapping you like a creeper. Let me help." I looked around for paper towels or anything that could be used to clean up the water. "Please tell me you didn't spill the essential oils you were pouring."

She sighed, "No. Just the ones I had already put into the water. There's a bathroom around the corner. Can you grab a roll of paper towels while I pick up the diffuser from behind the table?"

"Yes! I'll be right back." I walked as fast as I could without running like a preschooler down the hall to clean up my mess. I came back and helped mop up the pretty smelling water. "I really am so sorry," I said again.

"It's not your fault. I'm clumsy even on my best days. Dr. Nora is really patient with me." The receptionist set everything right side up and then took the wet towels from my hands to throw them away.

I stood there awkwardly looking around for something to do while I waited for her to come back.

She carried a small pitcher of water back to the diffuser. "Are you here for an appointment? Are you Ms. Richter?"

"No. I ummm...I was actually hoping to get an appointment. Are you guys taking new clients, I mean umm, patients?" I realized I had no idea what to call myself in this situation.

She smiled understanding, "That makes sense. Ms. Richter isn't scheduled to be here until noon. She's a new patient and I haven't met her yet." The receptionist turned back to the diffuser and chuckled to herself about something. "I'm Kacy by the way."

I smiled nervously, "Meghan."

"Okay. All done." Kacy turned away from the diffuser and headed to her desk. She grinned happy like nothing had happened.

I followed her with my eyes and waited for Kacy to acknowledge I should approach her counter lest I cause her to do something else disastrous. "I'm sorry for just showing up. I tried to call a few times..." Actually I had called almost every five minutes on my way over here. Hopefully they didn't have a caller id system that counted how many times my number called. I would seem insane and obsessive.

"That's my fault. I usually get here at 7 but I overslept. I wasn't too worried about it because our first appointment isn't until 9am."

My heart plummeted. If their first appointment wasn't scheduled for another

hour, Dr. Spicer probably wasn't here. If I was her I would be enjoying my extra morning time at home. "Do you have anything available in the afternoon?"

"For today?" Kacy started typing and stared at her computer screen. She looked up at me, "You can come closer. I won't bite."

I laughed softly and stepped forward.

Kacy frowned, "I'm really sorry Meghan. Dr. Nora doesn't have anything available today. If someone cancels I can call you."

"Does that happen often?" I sounded hopeful, almost pleading.

Kacy's apologetic frown deepened. I knew the answer before her words came out. "No. Dr. Nora's patients love her and really look forward to their time with her. But you never know. Maybe someone else's emergency will give you the time slot you were hoping for."

I let out a disappointed sigh. I really wanted to have some answers about this now. Even if the hypnosis didn't work, maybe Dr. Spicer could just let me talk about what happened in a judgement free atmosphere.

Kacy seemed genuinely sad that she couldn't give me what I wanted. I forced a smile. "Thanks for trying Kacy."

"Here, write your number down on this and I'll call you. Do you want me to look at the schedule for next week?"

I shook my head no. "If I still need to come back I'll call and make the appointment over the phone." I had a sad feeling I wouldn't be back. I turned to leave as the office door swung open.

A tall woman with wild curly hair walked in talking a mile a minute while digging into her bag, "Kacy are you okay dear? I wanted to call but I can't find my phone, I think I left it at my house. I was eating breakfast with John this morning and I had this overwhelming pull in my gut that I needed to come in early today. I know we talked about the schedule yesterday but—" The woman I recognized from the website as Dr. Spicer looked up at Kacy and finally quit talking. She blinked trying to understand what I was doing standing in her reception area.

Kacy stood up to be seen better over the counter, "Dr. Nora this is Meghan. And yes, I'm great. I'll call your phone to see if John answers it." She smiled at

Dr. Spicer.

Dr. Spicer's head turned to the side like she was studying me, "Hi Meghan."

I smiled awkwardly and gave a little wave in response to her scrutiny.

The woman in front of me was a multitude of contrasts. She was dressed in professional navy slacks and heels but wore a loud, bold floral top. Her nails were short and manicured but her earrings were long and looked like they were made of wooden beads. For once a picture didn't do the person justice. I felt oddly calm standing in the same room as her. I also felt under-dressed in my college t-shirt and partly soiled jeans.

Dr. Spicer gave me a smile and walked around the corner toward the reception area. Kacy stood and walked over to meet her behind the wall. Probably to talk about why I was here without an appointment. I tucked the front of my shirt into my jeans hoping I looked more presentable. Kacy came back into view a moment later.

Her smile grew more pronounced and she leaned in to talk quietly even though it was only her and I in the room. "Meghan! Dr. Spicer says she's going to squeeze you in now! She never does this. I've never seen her take a new client without having a consultation first. I've worked with her for five years and that's never happened."

I blinked rapidly trying to understand Kacy. Dr. Spicer was breaking her own office policies for me. "Why would she do that?"

Kacy shrugged, "Dr. Nora trusts her instincts."

I didn't know what that meant but it seemed like Kacy did. And who cares because I was getting my wish and was hopefully on the verge of finding some answers.

Kacy sat back down in her chair, "Dr. Spicer needs a few minutes to get her room set up. Do you have your insurance card? I also have some papers for you to fill out."

I had forgotten this was a doctor's office. I passed Kacy my insurance card and driver's license and then took the clipboard.

Kacy took my cards and frowned, "Sorry. Your insurance company doesn't cover this. It kind of makes me angry that they deny our submissions. I've

already written them a letter trying to get them to add us to their network of providers.”

I felt a tinge of panic. I hadn't thought about how much this little experiment was going to cost. “How much is the appointment?”

“Without insurance it's...Hold on let me look it up. I don't know the number off the top of my head.” She clicked around for a few seconds, “\$148.92. I gave you the first time visit discount.” Kacy smiled and slid me back my insurance card and driver's license.

I cringed. That was expensive enough to hurt, but not impossible to afford. At this point there was no turning back, I wanted the woman's help. I passed Kacy my credit card and signed the receipt before taking my seat and filling out the health care questionnaire.

Ten minutes later Dr. Spicer came out to greet me. Her handshake was warm and soft, both gentle and strong. “Please follow me Meghan.” She looked over my head at Kacy, “Hold my calls please. And if John calls let him know I'm with a patient and I'll call him back later.”

I walked into the office I recognized from the picture on the website. There was classical music playing so softly I had to strain my ears to hear it. Everything was clean and inviting.

“Please take a seat Meghan.” Dr. Spicer gestured for me to sit on the sofa. “So, what brings you here to see me?”

I got the distinct impression Dr. Spicer was anxious to hear what I had to say. I could see why all her patients didn't want to miss a session. I suddenly felt special having her undivided attention. I wondered if she was always this eager to listen and help. The seconds ticked by and I finally said something, “I've never done this before.”

“Hypnosis?”

“Yes that, but therapy too. I've never felt like I needed to talk to anyone beyond a call to a girlfriend.”

She nodded, not taking offense, and waited for me to continue.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, “But I don't think I can talk to anyone about this. I think they would have me committed, or at the very least think I



had more than a couple screws loose.” Aiden’s face came into focus in my mind’s eye. I could talk to him about it and he would believe me. But talking to Aiden was out of the question. I dismissed it immediately.

“Well, I’m not going to suggest you go somewhere else for treatment.” Dr. Spicer’s voice was full of such conviction, as if she’d known me for years and cared deeply for me.

My heart felt safe. Everything about being in her presence made me feel at ease. I decided I could trust her with my anxiety. “I’ve been having dreams. Well at least I know I am but I’m not remembering them when I wake up.”

Dr. Spicer leaned forward, “If you don’t remember the dreams then how do you know you’re having them?”

“Because, ummm, something happened and then in that moment I realized where I remembered him from.”

“Him?”

“Aiden. I’ve dreamt about him. Or maybe I’m still dreaming about him and don’t remember. The first time I saw him in real life I felt thunder struck. And scared. We both recognized each other. He wasn’t upset like I was; he was happy. He kept insisting that we were together. I kept telling him he was crazy. That was two days ago.

“But then yesterday my boyfriend saw me talking with Aiden outside my building and he got upset. We had a fight because he didn’t believe me when I said I didn’t know Aiden. I told Derek where I recognized him from but he thinks I’m lying. We haven’t really talked to each other since.”

If Dr. Spicer was skeptical of my story so far she didn’t show it. She just waited patiently for me to continue.

I cleared my throat, “But after our fight he took my dog for a walk and I went running. I didn’t want to go running where Derek was. I wanted to be alone. So I tuned everything out with the help of my music and I just ran. Before I knew it I was in a place I didn’t recognize, but my body seemed to register that it was familiar. It was very disorienting.”

Dr. Spicer smiled like she understood something about my story. That made me feel better since none of it made sense to me. “Please, keep going Meghan.”

I nodded, "So that's when I saw the mystery guy again. I think the part that I feel most guilty about is that he's always so happy to see me. And this time I went to a place where he was instead of the other way around.

"He went on and on telling me all these personal things about my life and who I am and even about my family. Unless he's a hacker or something, I don't know how he knows that stuff. Plus, something inside tells me he's not lying. He doesn't seem crazy. Maybe that means I'm the crazy one."

Dr. Spicer frowned, "I don't like labels like that, but if it helps...You're not crazy. Please keep going."

I sucked in a deep breath, getting close to the craziest part, "So when I stormed off, still insisting that I didn't even know his name, he teased me about meeting up with him to go running again the next day. Well, I guess that would be today now. And I got mad - like really mad - that he would even assume I wanted to spend time with him."

Dr. Spicer hid a ghost of a smile and nodded for me to continue.

"Yeah, so I yelled at him, and in my yelling I said his name. And that's when I really felt like I'd lost my grip on reality. Because not only did I recognize him from maybe passing him on the street or something, but I actually knew his name. How could I know that if we've never met?"

This time Dr. Spicer didn't hide her smile.

I was stunned. "You believe me?"

"Oh yes Meghan. I believe you. Tell me, do you recognize me?" There was hope in her voice that confused me. "I've been dreaming about being your doctor for a month. Not every night, but at least once a week, sometimes more."

The same ringing in my ears and racing pulse came back, just like when I yelled Aiden's name. *What the hell was happening to me?*

Dr. Spicer looked alarmed, "I'm sorry Meghan I didn't mean to scare you. Please stay calm, take deep slow breaths. This is very confusing for me too. I feel like I've been helping you for a long time. You've shared so many details about your life with me. The start of your relationship with Aiden is one of those details."

Despite Dr. Spicer's instructions, I started hyperventilating. "I think I need to

lie down.”

“Here. Right there Meghan. Go ahead.” She reached behind her and grabbed the pillow from her own chair to put under my head.

As my head hit the pillow I felt a thin wave of relief. I recognized the scent on the pillow. I felt an inexplicable sense of déjà vu. Suddenly, a memory of me teasing Dr. Spicer about her laundry detergent made its way to the front of my mind. I thought I was going to pass out. Dr. Spicer’s voice sounded far away.

“Meghan! Meghan!” she called.

It didn’t matter. My eyes closed and I drifted off.

I awoke to a cold compress pressed against me and the sound of the same far away voice. I blinked my eyes open unsure what just happened. “Did I fall asleep?”

Dr. Spicer looked like a worried mother hen, “You fainted. I’m so sorry Meghan, I should have stayed quiet longer. I just really wanted to know if you knew me the way I remember knowing you.” Her voice was full of worry.

I started to sit up but held the compress in place. The cold felt good against my head after a night of no sleep and the discovery of another person that I apparently know only in my dreamland. “I’m okay Dr. Spicer.”

“Call me Nora.”

“Dr. Nora, I’m fine. I don’t know what happened, I’ve never fainted like that before.”

“I think your mind is trying to protect itself from the emotional overload you’re feeling. Kind of like a reboot for a computer.”

“So you know me too. What do we do about this? How come both you and Aiden know me and remember so much about me, but I don’t seem to remember either of you until my emotions boil over?”

Dr. Spicer smiled, “So you do remember me?”

“Once my head hit the pillow a memory of you came out of nowhere.”

She smiled at my answer then shrugged. “Everyone remembers dreams differently. No two are alike, just like your soul can never be replicated. Other people might have the same traits as you, but they’re not you. Aiden and I have theorized that perhaps his mind and my own use similar pathways to process

our dreams and that's why we retain the information better in our waking reality."

My mouth fell open and I set the cold compress down, "You know Aiden?"

"Only in my dreams, and only from the sessions you've brought him to. He's not my patient, you are."

"So why do I keep seeing you for sessions? How can I afford to keep seeing you? Am I getting a big promotion at work that I don't know about?" My words tumbled out before I realized I was hoping Dr. Spicer knew my future.

Dr. Spicer slapped her leg, annoyed, then stood up to write herself a note on her desk. "I'm sorry Meghan. In my excitement to see you standing there in the flesh I completely forgot to tell Kacy about our billing arrangement. You get a flat fee that's different from our standard billing codes." She looked away from the note back to me and pursed her lips, "And that's only because of your insistence."

"My insistence?"

Dr. Spicer smiled, "I don't want to charge you for our sessions. There's something special here that we're trying to discover together and it feels wrong to take your money. I'm learning just as much as you are."

Something like a mental puzzle piece clicked into place. Both the dream version of me and the conscious version were in complete agreement. "I'm not going to use your services for free Dr. Sp— I mean Dr. Nora."

"That's what I figured. So for you it's \$30.00 a session."

That seemed fair. It was much less than she deserved, but still something that I would have to pay attention to in my budget. "I can do that price. Especially if I want to come back again this week."

"Okay. We only have 20 minutes before my next appointment. I feel like there are a million things I want to talk with you about but we need to focus."

I bit my lip trying to concentrate. Dr. Nora was right. I had a million things flowing through my head, but above all else, I had to know more about Aiden. "I want more clarity on Aiden. I want to remember something about him the way I remembered you when I smelled this pillow. I want to see us together so that I know he's telling me the truth about our relationship. I know you told me

we were together, but I have to know for myself Dr. Nora.”

She nodded, “Okay I want you to lay back, clear your mind, and concentrate on the music.”

I started to protest that I couldn’t focus on music while I could barely hear it, but then Dr. Nora must have turned the volume up. I laid back and tried to clear my mind. It was easier when running or kick boxing, this felt like I was trying to fall asleep.

I heard Dr. Nora’s soothing voice filter through my thoughts. “Meghan I want you to relax your body. Starting with your toes and working your way up to your head. Each limb is weightless and floating.”

Obedying her was easier than I would have thought. I could feel myself melting into the couch and on the verge of sleep.

“Very good. Now Meghan, we’re going to go to a safe place together. I’ll be with you the whole time even if you can’t see me. At any point you can tell me you want to leave and we will. Do you understand?”

I couldn’t even nod. My entire body felt like jello.

“I need you to respond Meghan.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“After we leave this safe place you will remember everything that transpires. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“Great. Then let’s go. We’re in a beautiful area filled with soft light. Do you see the soft light Meghan?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“How does it feel?”

“It feels nice, kind of warm, but not hot.”

“Perfect. Now there’s a beautiful golden ball floating just above the ground. Do you see the ball?”

I gasped, “It looks like gold that’s been blown into glass. It’s beautiful. I want to touch it.”

“Pick up the ball Meghan.”

I did. It didn’t feel fragile even though it looked like it was made from thin

shimmery glass.

“What’s happening now?”

I held the ball out away from me sensing something should happen. I let it go expecting it to drop and bounce off the soft velvet floor. I gasped, “The ball is floating in the air.” It hovered over the ground in front of me as if it wanted to communicate. “I think it wants to talk.”

“Then listen and tell me what it says.”

I stared at the ball, curious as to how or why it would want to talk with me. The ball spun to the left half a turn and then back to the right like it was scanning my thoughts and memories. Even though the intrusion should have been scary, it wasn’t. I wanted the mysterious ball to have access to everything.

“What’s happening Meghan?”

“The ball is looking at everything in my life.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I still feel safe...It has questions.”

“Do you love Derek?” The ball asked from inside my mind.

I felt my head cock to the side in confusion, the way Charlie’s does when he doesn’t understand what I said.

When I didn’t answer right away, the ball grew bigger and hovered over me, “Do you love Derek?”

“I don’t know how to answer that question.”

The ball seemed agitated at my non-answer. It continued to grow wider until it was larger than the span of my outstretched arms. But this time it didn’t ask another question. Instead, it projected my memories on it’s shimmering surface.

I watched in awe. From this vantage point, I was viewing my interactions with Derek as a detached observer. Derek said “I love you” for the first time as if he had practiced it. We were in a restaurant and he made the pronouncement without emotion, like it was the next obvious step in our relationship, and he was a great guy for having realized it and taken action.

My own reaction was much more confusing. At first I was happy and I said the words back. But as the rest of the evening moved faster and faster across the screen with my face as the focal point, I could see I wasn’t happy. By the end of

the night I looked sick.

“I thought it was the Thai food that made me feel that way.”

The ball shifted scenes again. I saw Derek and I together, but this time we were at the airport. I was dropping him off for his business trip. He said ‘I love you’ to me like it was part of his standard routine. He used the same tone and cadence as if he’d just ordered a cup of coffee from a Starbucks barista.

It made me sad when I said the words back in the same emotionless way. “I know I’m saying the words, but based on what you’re showing me I don’t think I actually love Derek.”

The ball shrunk back to its original size. “Do you love Aiden?”

I spat back at the question, “I don’t know Aiden.”

The ball started expanding again, “Do you love Aiden?”

“How can I answer that when I don’t even remember being with him? I don’t know if I love Aiden! I have no memories of him.”

The ball continued to expand until it was the size of a movie screen.

I felt my knees grow weak. I wanted to fall to the ground at what I saw. There we were, Aiden and I, laughing and running together on the trail where I saw him yesterday. Charlie was off his leash running ahead of us. More than once Aiden had to apologize to other runners for Charlie blocking their path, but he didn’t get mad or leash him. Instead he would wink at me and tease me about how slow I was. I just laughed with him. I was glowing.

The scene changed again. Now we were arguing about my sister and the way she behaved at dinner. Even though I agreed, she was rude, I still wasn’t okay with the way he’d confronted her. He told me I was being ridiculous and he was always going to tell me what he was thinking. Even if it hurt my feelings. He insisted we were never going to change for the better if we couldn’t point out each other’s faults. I could see the anger and frustration in my face during our fight. But I didn’t ever consider leaving.

We weren’t in my apartment. It must have been his. The scene moved faster and faster. Soon we were apologizing to each other, then kissing. Then more kissing. I was about to get uncomfortable as the scene moved past PG-13, then the kissing stopped. Aiden pulled away from me and said good night. His good

night felt sad and conflicted. He wanted me to stay, for the scene to continue, but he knew my leaving was for the best.

I felt a longing in my chest at the sight of it. The shimmering surface of the ball transitioned, and another scene played. Aiden and I were standing in a long line waiting for coffee. I looked annoyed and kept glancing at my phone. I must have been late for something. I was dressed like I was headed to work. The person behind me bumped me, pushing me into Aiden. We accepted their apology but Aiden didn't release me. Instead he stared at me like I was a master piece hanging in an art gallery. He studied my face and looked mesmerized. "I love you," he whispered to me. "I love everything about you."

Tears spilled down my cheeks. I told him I loved him too. Then he picked me up and kissed me deeply in front of all those people in that long line.

The ball shrank back to it's normal size. "Do you love Aiden?"

"Yes," I cried. "I love him." I fell to the soft velvet ground and cried. "I don't feel safe. I want to go."

"Meghan open your eyes now!"

I blinked my eyes open, shocked that actual tears were streaming down my face. Dr. Nora helped me sit up and had a box of tissues and a bottle of water waiting for me. "What was that?" I hiccuped.

Dr. Nora's expression seemed somehow empathetic for my tears, while also triumphant. "That was a self-created imaginary reality."

"A what?" I chugged the bottle of water down, feeling parched.

"It's a trance where your imagination takes control. I guide you there and then give your imagination the freedom to design the space. That's why it felt so comfortable to you."

"So the beautiful gold ball made of indestructible sheer glass...?"

"Not real, but sounds awesome. It was just a vessel you created to show you the truth about your memories. Even in our best sessions in my dreams I don't remember anything quite like that happening."

I tapped my foot in thought, "I did feel really safe. And I did remember Aiden."

"I know. You told me everything that was happening. The questions you



perceived were coming from the ball were actually coming from me.”

“Really?” I was genuinely surprised. In the moment I had been certain the shimmering sphere was talking to me.

“Hypnosis is powerful because it allows the person to enter a dream like state but still retain enough consciousness to be in control. A common misconception is that a person entering hypnosis has no awareness because they’re completely unconscious. That’s not true. You’re still conscious, but without the distraction of the physical world, you’re able to connect with your unconscious mind. It’s the reason you’re able to sift through your emotional turmoil with freedom and clarity.

“Your conscious mind is always available should you need it in case the subject matter becomes overwhelming even in the unconscious state.”

A deep swell of gratitude filled my chest. “Thank you so much. You have no idea what this has meant to me. I feel like I have control over what’s been going on in my head again. I don’t understand it all, and we have so much we need to go through to figure out how and why we’re connected, but I have hope we can find the answers eventually.”

Dr. Nora looked like her own emotions might be threatening to spill over. “How did you find me? You didn’t have a clue who I was when you walked in here.”

“Early this morning I searched the internet for ‘help with interpreting dreams’. Most of what I found was garbage, but then I stumbled across your website. It stood out because it was so professional and didn’t seem crazy next to all of the other results.”

Her hand fluttered up over her heart, “I had Kacy update our site yesterday before going home. I wanted her to add ‘dream interpretation’ to our keywords so people could find our site easier. I also wanted her to add a blurb that advertised our experience in this specific area. I knew it would mean she would work a little later than usual, but we also didn’t have any clients scheduled for this morning. I tried to force her to stay home, but she’s stubborn and likes to get here before me so she can have everything ready for the day.

“I couldn’t shake the thought yesterday afternoon that maybe, if I was

dreaming about you, you were dreaming about me. You have no idea how many Meghan Alexanders there are on the internet.”

Dr. Nora had said something that reminded me of Aiden. *If they were dreaming about me then maybe I was dreaming about them.* And I had been. But for some reason my conscious mind had decided they needed to stay hidden. “Thank you again for today. I’ll schedule my next appointment with Kacy before I leave.”

“You’re not paying for the next four sessions. I know what my rate is, even with the first time discount.”

I smiled, knowing it was some of the best money I had ever spent. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Or tonight,” Dr. Nora laughed and waved goodbye.

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I drove home contemplating the memories my mind had conjured up on the surface of the golden ball. The contrast between my relationship with Derek and Aiden were mind blowing. And yet the longer I drove and the closer I got to my apartment the more torn I began to feel over ending our relationship. Everything I *saw* was still only one version of reality.

In *this* reality I was Derek’s girlfriend. And it felt wrong not to give Derek a chance to work on our relationship together. I gripped the steering wheel tighter as the turmoil between what I wanted to do and what I knew was right swirled and tightened in my chest. *Derek moved into my place a few weeks ago. I’m not breaking up with him for another guy that, in reality, I’ve barely met.*

The good floaty feeling I had in Dr. Nora’s office had completely evaporated. I guess it made sense that the feelings couldn’t stay permanently. I found an easy parking spot down the street across from my building. Since it was just before 10am on a Friday most everyone had already left for work. I spotted Derek’s car a little farther down. *Good. We can spend the entire day and night, if necessary, talking this out and getting to the bottom of what’s going on between us.*

There was no denying the distance that had developed between us. It was like we were separated by a maze whose walls had sprung up in the space between. We would tear that maze apart today. Right now.

I took the stairs two at a time, eager to make things right between us. Aiden would just have to stay locked away in my dreams; a possibility that never happened because of the choices I made before him.

I unlocked my front door, but some unexplained instinct told me to stay silent. I kept my hand on the door knob, waiting for my senses to tell me what was amiss. I zeroed in on Charlie's bed. He wasn't there. *Maybe Derek took him for a walk.* I looked to the left, confirming Charlie's leash was gone. But something was still wrong. Very wrong.

I stepped into the apartment and left the door wide open, in case I needed to run. I started looking around for any clues and then stopped mid-step. I felt a jolt of shock run through me, from the floor right up through the top of my head. Shoes I didn't recognize lay on the floor next to the small dining room table. A woman's shoes. It was the first in a trail of clothing that led toward my bedroom door. My heart was pounding so loud I was sure it would announce my approach.

I pushed open my bedroom door and stood paralyzed. A stranger was in my bed atop my boyfriend. I wanted to scream but couldn't. Instead I threw the woman's shoe as hard as I could at the wall above their heads. I hadn't even realized I'd picked it up. They both jumped with fright, snapping suddenly out of their focus on each other. When he finally saw me, Derek's eyes grew to the size of saucers. The woman pulled my sheets up to her neck and at least had the decency to look embarrassed. A picture of Derek and I on our third date was in a frame sitting on the nightstand next to her elbow. I walked over, picked it up, then threw it on the ground before I made a show of stomping on it. Then I walked out the room, numb.

As I walked away, the hussy in my bed muttered an apology and started quickly gathering her things. I told her to take the sheet that was wrapped around her with her when she left. I'd have to burn it all anyways. She gave a last pleading look to Derek before running out my open front door.

Derek was fumbling around, trying to pull his disgusting, cheating, lying pants back on. I wanted to burn those too. I suddenly understood crimes of passion. Derek was talking very fast but I wasn't actually listening to him. I

tuned out his words and looked around my apartment with clear eyes.

Everything he had brought into my home still felt like *his*. Not *ours*. All the rules about the furniture and his things were ridiculous in this new light. They were barriers. I had been 'accommodating' Derek and trying to allow him to be himself. I suddenly realized he'd never reciprocated.

"Damn it Meghan are you going to say anything?"

"Where the hell is my dog?" I resisted the urge to go to the kitchen and threaten him with a knife. If anything happened to Charlie while Derek was humping that other woman, I wasn't sure I'd have the ability to restrain myself. Hopefully the jury would understand.

"That's all you can think about right now? This is why I cheated. You never really focus on me! Compared to that dog, I don't feel loved by you!"

I threw my head back and laughed at his audacity, "Are you insane? There is no possible way that my love for my dog is the reason you cheated on me. You cheated because you're selfish, petty, insecure, and can't stomach the idea that you're never going to be the center of my world. Never. Not even before I saw that woman on top of you."

Derek's mouth pressed into a hard line as he considered his next salvo. "I've been cheating on you for months. The guilt has been killing me, but hearing you talk like this has made it so easy to sweep that guilt away."

I rolled my eyes, "You're such a liar. You've never felt guilty. Not true guilt. True guilt leads to a confession and a desire to rectify the situation. That was never going to happen!"

"I didn't mean for you to find out this way. You were supposed to be at work."

"Well at least I know why you quit coming to eat lunch with me on Fridays. Now, I'll ask you one more time before I actually do something crazy. Where is Charlie!?" I thundered.

Derek had the good sense to register the real danger he was in. "He's on a walk."

I narrowed my eyes.

"With a dog walker! I pay a dog walker to come and walk Charlie and take

him to the dog park for three hours on Fridays.”

“You’re disgusting. Get all your horrible useless things out of my apartment by this afternoon or I’m calling the police. I’m still the primary resident on the lease. You’re just an extra roommate.” I sent a silent prayer of thanks for my sister’s impossible insistence that I keep my controlling claim to the apartment.

Derek looked shocked, “You’re going to regret this and miss having me here with you.”

Suddenly my rage and anger took a back seat. I had clarity for the first time since walking through the front door. “No, Derek. I won’t regret kicking you out. And I won’t miss you. Not even a little. Because, the truth is, we never actually loved each other. I thought on my drive home we could work it out and repair our relationship, but it was never *real* to begin with.

“Us, here, living together was never real. You never really loved me. You only loved yourself. And I never actually loved you. I loved the idea of you. But the real you isn’t someone I could ever truly love. “

Derek’s pride looked like it had taken a punch to the face. He stormed off and slammed my bedroom door.

I opened it again and looked at him, “If anything of mine is vandalized or damaged while you clear your crap out I’m taking you to court. And don’t think for a second my sister won’t love the opportunity to represent me while she goes for your throat.”

I saw Derek register the weight of my threat. Part of me actually hoped he gave me a reason to let Rachael go after him. “I would never do that to you.”

I rolled my eyes at his forced sincerity. “Just like you would never bring another woman into my home and screw her in my bed, where I slept only hours ago? Spare me. Now, give me the dog walker’s number.”

Derek looked uncomfortable as he searched for his phone in my room. I went back into the living room and kicked it across the floor toward him. The phone skidded along, bumping into the bedroom door.

Derek glared at me as he bent down to retrieve it, “I thought you wanted us to be civil.” He typed away on his phone and a few seconds later mine chimed with the arrival of his text containing the dog walker’s info.

I watched Derek examine his precious newest, latest, and greatest iPhone to ensure I hadn't damaged it. He spent more time looking at that phone than he ever did me. "No, stupid. I want you to be civil. You forever lost my civility when you decided to bed a stranger in my apartment.

"Literally in my bed. Feel free to take the mattress with you on your way out." I would never be able to sleep on it again. As a matter of fact I couldn't stomach the sight of him. "I'm leaving. When I get back you better be gone or this is going to play out like a scene from every movie with a scorned woman. Your stuff will be in the street below the balcony and I won't stop until the police subdue me." I walked out the still open front door without looking back.

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I sat in my car with my forehead against the steering wheel. After a night of fitful sleep and a roller coaster session with Dr. Nora, I was on the verge of collapse. How could so much in my life get turned upside down so fast? I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to focus on what had to happen next.

I called the number for the dog walker. A woman named Deborah answered over a bunch of commotion in the back ground. She was definitely at the dog park. I explained to her who I was and that Derek would no longer be in charge of Charlie's care. I also let her know I would need to pay her for a few extra hours.

Deborah confirmed Derek had already paid her for Charlie's regular three hour routine. The word 'routine' caused me to momentarily see red. *All this time*. Deborah interrupted my dark thoughts by informing me she accepted cash, Pay Pal, or Venmo for the extra hours I wanted.

I hung up, contemplating what to do next. I could call Rachael, but I didn't have the energy to listen to her lecture me about what a loser Derek was, and how I should have had better sense in the first place. She would probably insist I call the police and have them send someone over to my apartment to keep an eye on him as he cleared his things out.

I was wired but exhausted. Without much thought, I started my car and decided to go for a drive. I needed to put some space between me and my apartment building. Every time I looked at it, knowing Derek was still inside, I

wanted to scream.

I forced my mind into neutral and just drove my car, on autopilot. Moments later I blinked back into reality in front of a building I didn't recognize. I looked around and realized I was in the business district. Most days it was packed, but somehow I had managed to find a free two hour parking spot. I started to gloat over my luck but reality came crashing back reminding me I didn't have any of that. *There's nothing lucky about my boyfriend cheating on me.* I was angry at Derek for being a coward and a cheater, but I was also angry with myself. How had I not noticed? I wasn't even sad he was moving out. *Why did I stay with him?*

Desperate for a distraction from my thoughts, I got out and walked, hoping to figure out what might have brought me to this place. I waited for the scary recognition followed by humming in my ears and the hammering of my heart beat, but nothing came. Instead I felt a pull from somewhere deep inside to go into the building to my right.

After debating with myself for a few seconds, I looked down at my phone and groaned. I still had a few hours to kill while Derek moved his sorry ass out of my place. I took a deep breath. *Worst case scenario someone tells me I don't belong and I apologize on my way out.* One thing was certain - today couldn't get any more insane. There was nothing to lose by going into the building and satisfying my curiosity.

I took another reassuring breath and let my mind go on autopilot again.

I felt like I was in a daze as I walked into an elevator amidst a group of people. I barely heard a man ask me which floor I needed. The number seven slipped out my mouth on its own. I still had no clue where my mind was taking me. The elevator chimed and the doors slid open.

I blinked rapidly as I stepped out and found myself inside a large bullpen with row upon row of cubicles. Everyone was on the phone or their computer. I turned left and walked slowly around the perimeter, feeling a powerful sense of *deja vu*. I turned another corner and stopped cold.

Aiden was sitting at his desk. He had dark circles under his eyes and his tie hung loose around his neck as though he had been pulling on it all morning. *I guess neither of us got any sleep last night.* He dropped his pen and pushed the

heels of his palms into his eyes before rubbing them.

My heart ached as I realized how exhausted he looked. As if he had sensed my presence, Aiden dropped his hands and turned around slowly. Then he saw me...we saw each other.

Aiden didn't move or say a word. He just stared at me. Almost like he was in pain or afraid. It tore at my heart to see him suffer.

Without another thought I walked over and launched myself into his arms. He barely had time to get to his feet. I kissed him deeply and didn't care who might be watching. He kissed me over my face and down my neck before finally pulling away and holding my face in his hands.

"I'm going insane," he whispered without breaking eye contact. "I can't tell what's a dream and what's real anymore. And the scary part is, I don't care."

"This is real," I whispered back. "I'm finally awake."

#

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