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Hendricks

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

Sarah

Pekkanen

**THE
GOLDEN
COUPLE**

A NOVEL



THE GOLDEN COUPLE

GREER HENDRICKS

AND

SARAH PEKKANEN



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For Jen Enderlin

PART
ONE

Ten sessions might not seem like nearly enough time to solve complex therapeutic issues, but according to Avery Chambers, her unique brand of intensive short-term counseling changes lives. Her highly controversial process, which some decry as dangerous, is predicated on amplifying core universal emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, and happiness. By pinpointing her client’s root issue, and using it as a lightning rod to draw in these emotions at high levels, she can slay the demons that plague people, Chambers claims. Among the success stories she lists are clients who have overcome phobias, left emotionally abusive relationships, and changed up their jobs and cities. Each of her ten sessions has a specific title, and they always follow the same order, but when pressed to reveal more details, Chambers demurs. “If my clients know what to expect, my process won’t be as effective. I’ll only tell you this: it always starts with The Confession.”

—Excerpt from “D.C.’s Maverick Therapist” profile, copyright *The Washington Post Magazine*

CHAPTER ONE

AVERY

I NEVER KNOW what to expect when I open my door to new clients.

The preliminary phone call only reveals so much. In this case, it came from a woman who introduced herself as Marissa Bishop.

My marriage is in trouble, she began. I need to talk to my husband about something, but it's a bit complicated. I thought if we came in together—

I'd cut her off there.

I don't want any bias to color my perception before we meet. Plus, the initial communication is for scheduling and security screening only. The actual work doesn't start until the first of our ten sessions. Still, I gleaned a fair amount of information about Marissa Bishop during our brief conversation: She has money, since she didn't balk at my fee. She's polished and well-spoken, using complete sentences rather than the fragments and fillers people often rely upon in spoken communication. And she's nervous; her voice wavered.

The doorbell chimes, indicating the Bishops' arrival, a few minutes late for our 7:00 P.M. appointment at my home office.

Are evenings okay? My husband works long hours; he has a demanding schedule.

If I decide to work with them, this lack of punctuality won't happen again. I send a quick text to the man I'm seeing later tonight: **8:30 works. Do you have any limes?** I set my phone to silent mode, then tuck the bottle of expensive tequila a client brought me earlier today into my tote bag. Therapists aren't supposed to accept gifts from clients. But I'm not one to follow the rules.

I'm also no longer a therapist; I lost my license five months ago.

I rise and walk to my front door, peering through the peephole before I

pull it open. Marissa and Matthew glide across the threshold as if they're accustomed to making an entrance.

They're tall and sleek; their blond hair and classic features a perfect match. He's in a business suit and an overcoat that looks like cashmere. She wears a camel-colored cape that falls to the top of her high-heeled boots.

"Welcome. I'm Avery Chambers." I reach out a hand.

His grasp is strong and dry. "Matthew Bishop," he replies. I take in his square chin, light blue eyes, and broad shoulders.

Then I turn to his wife. I inhale a light floral perfume as I lean forward to shake Marissa's delicate hand. Her fingers are ice-cold.

"Sorry we're a little late. There was traffic," she says as her eyes skitter away from mine.

I lead them to my first-floor office, closing the door behind us. Matthew helps his wife off with her cape before he removes his overcoat, hanging them on the wood-and-brass standing coatrack, then takes a seat on the couch. A confident man, assured of his place in the world.

They're not touching, but they sit close enough together that it would be easy for them to do so. They don't look like a couple in trouble. But appearances are often misleading.

I pick up a fresh yellow legal pad and pen and claim my usual chair, directly across from them. My home office is uncluttered and comfortable, with a few ficus trees, a deep bay window, and colorful abstract prints on the walls. Back when I worked in a building with other therapists, many of them displayed family photos on their desks, turned inward so as not to distract their patients. My desk was then, and is now, bare.

I start the session the way I always do: "What brings you here tonight?"

Marissa wrings her hands, the large diamond on her ring catching the overhead light. Her flawless skin is pale.

"I thought—" She coughs, as if her throat is tight. This isn't easy for her.

"Would you like some water?"

She manages a smile. "Do you have anything stronger?"

She's joking, but I make a quick decision and stand up and retrieve my tote bag. "Tequila?" I hold up the blue-and-white-patterned bottle.

Matthew looks surprised, but recovers quickly. "I would've gotten here

earlier if I'd known you were serving Clase Azul Reposado." His pronunciation is flawless.

I take three of the little plastic cups from my watercooler and fill each with a generous shot.

"Cheers." I tilt up my cup. A familiar, welcome heat fills the back of my throat as I reclaim my seat.

Marissa sips hers; she looks more like a white-wine kind of woman. But Matthew tosses his back easily.

"We're here to talk about Bennett, our son," Matthew says. He looks at his wife.

I don't betray my surprise, even though Marissa didn't mention a child in her initial phone call.

She reaches for her husband's hand. "Actually, sweetheart, that isn't exactly why we're here. I need to tell you something." Her voice quavers again.

The shift in the room is palpable; it's as if the temperature plummets.

Here it comes: The Confession.

I wait for it as Matthew stiffens, his features hardening. He doesn't blink as he stares at Marissa. "What's going on?"

His wife blindsided him. She lured him to me on false pretenses. Not the best way to begin our work, but maybe it was the only way to get him here.

"I've wanted to tell you this for a while. I just didn't know how." A tear rolls down her cheek. "I broke your trust, and I'm so sorry."

He pulls his hand away roughly. "Cut to the chase, Marissa."

She swallows hard. "I slept with someone," she blurts. "Just once. But —"

"Who?" Matthew's question cuts like a knife through the air.

She covers her flat stomach with her hands, as if she feels its blade.

This won't be the first time I've helped a couple through an infidelity. Back when I was a licensed therapist—instead of a consultant, which is my title now—I saw iterations of it nearly every week: the wife who had an affair with a coworker, the husband who cheated with a neighbor, the fiancé who had a fling with an old girlfriend. But something about Marissa's revelation feels different.

Or maybe it's Matthew's reaction.

Typically, spouses experience shock when confronted with news such

as this. Anger doesn't descend until later.

Matthew's rage is immediately palpable, though. His hands clench into fists, the plastic cup crumpling in his grasp.

"It wasn't anyone you know," Marissa whispers. "Just a man I met at Pinnacle Studio."

"What?" Color floods his cheeks. "You fucked a guy from the gym?"

She bows her head, as if she feels she deserves his coarse language.

I lean forward. It's time for me to reenter this scene. "Matthew, I know how hard it must be for you to hear this."

He whirls to look at me with blazing eyes. I lean closer to him, meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

"Really? You *know*?" He spits out the words. "Were you in on this, helping her set me up to get me here?"

I lift up my hands. I'm not going to give him an answer, but I can absorb his rage. I've dealt with angrier men than him.

Marissa raises her head. "Matthew, she didn't know why we were coming. And I was scared that if I told you at home—"

She doesn't finish her sentence. My eyes drift to the mangled cup in his hand and wonder if Matthew's emotional outbursts are ever accompanied by physical ones.

Matthew stands, towering over his wife. She stares up at him beseechingly.

Their body language speaks volumes: she's frightened.

What I need to find out is if she's scared of losing her husband or scared of *him*.

I rise unhurriedly to my feet. I don't shout, but my tone carries force. "Do you love your wife?"

Matthew turns to look at me. His face is twisted; too many emotions are tangled up in his expression for me to determine which one is now dominant.

He doesn't answer my question. I maintain eye contact. With men such as Matthew, it's important to demonstrate assertiveness.

"If you love your wife"—I enunciate every word—"then please sit back down. I can get you through this."

He hovers, on the brink of a decision. I could say more to sway him. I could let him know I've worked with many couples who've endured far worse issues than infidelity. I could tell him about my success rate, which

is even higher now that I've shed the constraints of traditional therapy and created a new method, one that's all my own.

But I don't. I wait him out.

"I don't see how talking about bullshit like my issues with my father and my dreams can help us get through this," he says.

If I had to lay down odds on whether he'll storm back out through the door, I'd put them at fifty-fifty.

"Matthew," Marissa begs. "Avery's not like that. Please, give this a chance."

He exhales, his rigid shoulders softening. Then he plants himself on the couch, as far from his wife as possible.

I reclaim my seat as well.

What Matthew doesn't know is that I've just made a decision, too. The Bishops intrigue me; I'm going to take them on.

"Here's how this will go. You have ten sessions." Knowing the time frame for our work together is essential for a client. What they can't know is my agenda.

In my process, each session has a title, beginning with The Confession, then cycling through Disruption, Escalation, Revelation, Devastation, Confrontation, Exposure, The Test, Reconciliation, and concluding with Promises.

"You cannot skip our sessions or be late. No traffic excuses or last-minute deadlines. In between our appointments, you can talk about your son, your careers, the weather—really anything. But it's best if this space remains pure, so I recommend avoiding discussing what will come up here. I also suggest you don't reveal information about our time together to anyone else while our sessions are ongoing."

Marissa nods eagerly. I take Matthew's stony silence for acquiescence.

There's a hitch in my energy, which I'm careful to mask. All couples have secrets. The Bishops are no exception. There's more than just infidelity here. Marissa's cheating is a symptom, not the source of their fundamental breakdown.

Twelve minutes ago, they breezed into my office—glamorous, affluent, enviable. The golden couple. Now the underlying tarnishes they've never allowed the public to see are already beginning to show.

It's going to get a lot uglier soon.

"When do we start?" Marissa asks.

“We already have.”

CHAPTER TWO

MARISSA

MARISSA FEELS AS IF she and Matthew have hurtled off a cliff. They're in free fall. She just spoke the terrible words out loud: *I slept with someone.*

On the drive to Avery Chambers's office in Cleveland Park, D.C., Marissa almost suggested canceling the session. She knew Matthew wouldn't have minded. It had been her idea to schedule the meeting, which she insinuated was to talk about their eight-year-old son, Bennett, who had been bullied by a classmate last year.

Marissa reached out to Avery after reading an article in *The Washington Post Magazine* that described Avery's unconventional "anti-therapy." The profile contained biographical details about the forty-one-year-old: she grew up in Chicago, attended Northwestern, is an avid runner, and loves to travel to off-the-beaten-path destinations. Several of her former clients were interviewed—"She literally saved my life," one proclaimed—and so were a few detractors, including the head of the American Psychological Association, who was quoted as saying, "Avery Chambers does not represent or uphold the sacred tenets of our profession." An accompanying photo revealed the silhouette of a woman with a tumble of long hair looking out a window.

In person, Avery is more attractive and stylish than Marissa expected, with her radiant olive skin and full lips. She wears a belted green suede dress and three-inch heels that make her almost as tall as Marissa, and a stack of gold bangles adorns her right wrist. Avery doesn't wear a wedding band. Marissa wonders if this matters. Would it be better if Avery had a husband? Would that enable her to more effectively understand the nuances of a complicated marriage?

And certainly Marissa and Matthew's union is complicated. A decade into their marriage, Matthew, a partner in a D.C. law firm, spends more

evenings at business events than by her side. Marissa feels lost in a constant swirl of activities: running her boutique, Coco; cooking delicious but nutritious meals for her family; staying trim and fit enough to slide into the pair of faded Levi's cutoffs she's had since high school; and serving on the auction committee at Bennett's private school.

Avery's voice pulls Marissa into the present. "You need to answer four questions, Marissa. Keep it short. One: Have you ever cheated on Matthew before?"

"No! Never!"

Her whole body is shaking; she's freezing. Normally Matthew would notice and wrap an arm around her or offer her his suit jacket. She desperately wants to stand up and walk past her husband to get her cape, but it feels perilous to enter his space now. He's blazing with fury; he's the heat to her ice.

"Two." Avery must sit in that chair day after day, absorbing sordid and sad stories. She's in the epicenter of the rage and pain and disgust ricocheting around the room; it seems impossible that she's immune to it. Yet she looks utterly calm, and invincible. "Will it ever happen again?"

"No, I promise."

Avery nods. "Three: Is it truly over with the other man?"

"Yes," Marissa whispers. The moment carries a solemnity; it has the feel of a vow. Matthew finally turns to look at her. There's a sheen in his eyes, just as there was on their wedding day when she walked down the aisle, in a cream silk dress with a long train, past two hundred guests.

Avery is studying both of them intently, Marissa realizes. What is she thinking?

The silence stretches out.

"What's the fourth question?" Marissa finally asks.

"That's for Matthew to decide. But not right now. Matthew, when you leave here, I'd like you to think about the essential information you need to know in order to move on."

He nods, just once. But it already feels like progress.

Coming here was a good decision. Avery's no-nonsense approach suits Matthew's personality. He likes charts and precise plans; he's a cut-to-the-chase kind of guy. Back when Bennett was being bullied, Marissa tried talking to the other child's parents. Matthew hired a boxing coach to teach their then second-grader how to throw an uppercut.

“Let’s go back to happier times.” Avery jots something on her notepad. “Tell me about one of your favorite moments together, Marissa.”

There are so many for Marissa to choose from, whole albums of memories. She selects one of the glossy snapshots: “Just last year, Matthew and I were invited to a black-tie dinner at the Kennedy Center. It was magical. We hired a car and driver and danced all night. He looked so handsome. It was because of his work on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund that we went—”

Avery cuts her off. “That’s an Instagram post. Give me something real.”

Marissa flinches. In those few words, Avery has cut to the core of what their marriage has become: curated moments served up in public, while in private the emptiness between them slowly expands.

Matthew hasn’t seemed bothered that their conversations have become more about to-do lists than ideas or feelings, or that their hands no longer find each other during long drives, entwining atop the gearshift. She can’t even remember how long ago Matthew began getting out of their bed as soon as the alarm sounded in the morning, instead of reaching for her.

“Something real,” Marissa repeats. She feels as if she were about to fail a final exam. Then she closes her eyes and it comes to her.

A snowstorm blanketing the city; her and Matthew at home. Baby Bennett napping. Matthew building a fire, while she makes mugs of hot chocolate spiked with rum. The two of them sitting on a chenille blanket playing Scrabble, then abandoning the game to make love.

“It wasn’t rum. It was Grand Marnier,” Matthew says when she finishes. His voice is still hard, but have its edges softened just a little?

Avery leans closer to Matthew. “Now I want a memory from you. I want you to recall some incredible sex you had. Something really steamy.”

Marissa lowers her eyes, her cheeks flushing, wondering which moment Matthew will pick. He might not play along. But if he does, will he share the same recollection that bloomed in her mind? That trip to St. Barts when they snuck into the outdoor cabana in the middle of the afternoon, their bodies slick with suntan lotion and sweat. The taste of salt and coconut on his skin. They hadn’t had raw, passionate sex like that in a while. Years, truthfully.

Matthew squeezes the crumpled plastic cup in his hand again, making a loud crackling sound. “I can’t think about any good times with Marissa

right now.”

Avery stands up and retrieves a trash basket from behind her desk. “Let’s get rid of those cups.” As she returns to her chair, Avery continues, “And I’m not talking about Marissa.”

Marissa’s head snaps up in time to catch a smile playing on the edge of Avery’s lips. “I want you to tell me about the greatest sex you had with another woman.”

“Are you serious?” Matthew asks.

“Yes. Your mind is being flooded with ugly images right now. You’re imagining your wife with another man. So let’s have her think about you with another woman.”

Matthew is doing it; Marissa can tell by the way his gaze grows unfocused. She bets she knows exactly whom Matthew is thinking about: Natalie, the woman he dated for a year during college and still maintains a friendship with. Natalie’s young daughter attends the same private school as Bennett, and Natalie is the cochair of the auction committee; she is impossible for Marissa to avoid.

However, when Matthew speaks, he shares a different memory. “Okay, fine. I was a first-year law student and this hot TA approached me in the library. I was in the stacks and she snuck up behind me and slid her arms around my waist, under my sweatshirt. We ended up in her apartment.... We did it three times that night. It’s still my record.” Matthew pauses. “Do you really want me to go on?”

Naturally Matthew would boil it down to numbers, to a record. He is highly competitive.

And for a moment, so is she. She feels like the runner-up.

She’s never heard this story before. So she and Matthew both kept secrets, she thinks.

Avery taps her pen on her pad and seems to make a decision. “Marissa, would you step out for a few minutes? There’s a chair just outside the door where you can sit.”

Marissa hesitates, then rises. This appointment is nothing like what she expected. Leaving the two of them alone feels dangerous.

As Marissa exits Avery’s office, she glances back at her husband, but he isn’t looking her way.

The wide, wood-planked hallway contains a single upholstered chair, next to a table holding a Mission-style lamp and vase of red tulips. Marissa

is too agitated to sit. She moves closer to the door. She can hear the low rumble of Matthew's voice, but she can't make out a single word.

Avery could be asking him anything. Nothing seems out of bounds for her. *Losing my license was the best thing to ever happen to me—and to my clients*, Avery was quoted as saying in the *Post* article. Marissa stares at the door. If she pressed her ear against it, just for a minute ...

Then a thought strikes her: there could be a video camera somewhere. It would be humiliating to be caught.

Finally, she pulls out her phone and taps a message to Bennett's babysitter: **All okay? If Bennett wants a brownie, he can have one. I snuck black beans into them so they're secretly healthy.:-)**

Just as she finishes, the door to Avery's office opens. Marissa quickly tucks her phone into her bag.

"The sitter." Marissa's unsure why she feels the need to explain her actions.

"Come back in."

Marissa studies Matthew's face as she reenters the room. It reveals nothing.

"A lot of times people confess an infidelity because they can't stand the guilt." Avery's tone isn't judgmental or forgiving; she's matter-of-fact. "They do it to ease their own conscience. Is that why you brought your husband here?"

Marissa thinks carefully about her answer, making sure it is truthful: "I wanted to tell Matthew because it was the right thing to do."

Avery raises an eyebrow. "You two are going to have to put in a lot of work."

Marissa nods eagerly. "I'll do anything." Beside her on the couch, Matthew is as still as a stone. Marissa wonders if Avery thinks they need more fixing than the average couple with an infidelity issue.

Avery asks a few more questions about major stresses they've experienced. Marissa describes the two miscarriages she suffered before having Bennett, and the failed fertility treatments they endured afterward. Matthew talks about the death of his mother to leukemia five years earlier. Marissa debates mentioning the deep rift between Matthew and his father—a successful D.C. lobbyist—but she decides not to risk bringing up another upsetting topic.

Avery rises. "Thursday, same time?"

Matthew pulls out his iPhone and frowns at the screen. “I’ve got a client dinner. Getting here will be a pain in—”

“No problem,” Avery says smoothly. “Where do you live?”

“Chevy Chase,” Marissa replies. “Just over the D.C. line.”

“I’ll come to you. Nine P.M.?”

Matthew blinks in surprise. “Fine.”

Marissa isn’t getting a vote in this, she realizes, even though she’ll be the one cleaning up after dinner, and making sure Bennett is asleep early, and figuring out logistics such as where they’ll sit and whether it’s appropriate to serve drinks or food.

“Keep Monday and Thursday evenings at seven P.M. free for the next few weeks,” Avery instructs them.

Avery already seems to know how to handle Matthew; he’s nodding, responding to her succinct instructions.

Which means Avery probably also has a strategy for managing her, Marissa thinks.

CHAPTER THREE

AVERY

THE SKY IS PITCH-BLACK as I veer left onto Connecticut Avenue and head toward home, reaching for the bottle of water in my cup holder to rinse the sour taste of tequila from my mouth. The D.C. roads are quieter at this time of night—or technically, early morning—with just a few people straggling in and out of the bars and restaurants that line either side of the street. Most residents are asleep—including Derrick, the man I just left.

His scent lingers on my skin. Derrick's cologne is too woody for my taste. If I were planning to have a long-term relationship with him, I might give him a bottle of my favorite brand. But neither of us is looking for a commitment. Still, the hours I just spent with him are among the most pleasurable I've passed all week.

At twenty-six, Derrick has retained the powerful physique and athleticism that earned him a full scholarship to the University of Maryland, where he served as a tight end on an undefeated team. Unlike a lot of good but not great college ballplayers, Derrick never labored under the illusion that he'd turn pro. After graduation, he found a job with a company that sells state-of-the-art security systems, ones that are much more expensive and comprehensive than those typically purchased by homeowners.

I met him fairly recently, when he came to my house to install mine.

My phone buzzes with an incoming text just as I reach my Cleveland Park neighborhood. I don't dig into my purse to read it. It could be Derrick checking to see if I've made it home safely, or my stepdaughter, Lana, who has a fickle relationship with time. It could also be my mother, letting me know she's extending her stay at the south-Indian ashram where she's been ensconced for the past two months. I finish off the water in my bottle and turn onto my street.