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# **IS THIS A CRY FOR HELP?**

EMILY AUSTIN

**ATRIA** BOOKS

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## CHAPTER ONE

A patron is watching porn out loud. My job at the library requires I walk behind him to verify what kind of porn it is, and if it involves anything illegal, I get to call 911. If it doesn't, I'm not supposed to do anything.

I walk behind him discreetly. While pretending to adjust a book display about earthworms, I see the film stars three women who appear to be of consenting age. It's titled *Vintage Lesbian Cuckhold*, which I find curious. A cuckhold is the husband of an adulterous wife; however, this film has no

men cast, and it appears to have been taped on film stock from the 1970s. Same-sex marriage wasn't legalized anywhere at that time, so these women couldn't possibly be married. Therefore, it's impossible for this to be a true "cuckhold" film.

I also doubt, based on the performances, that any of the women are actually lesbians. I'm somewhat of a stickler for categorization. It bothers me when material is mislabeled. I care that things are marked and classified properly.

Several people are milling around the computers. A middle-aged woman. An elderly couple. A small pack of goth teens. Rather than speak directly to the man watching porn, I announce to the room, "Please remember to use headphones, or to mute your devices so you don't disrupt others. If you need headphones, come see me. I'm happy to lend you a pair."

The man mutes his porn, and I return to the reference desk, satisfied to have fulfilled the demands of my role. I eye the bouquet of yellow tulips my coworkers left by the computer. There's a note affixed to the vase. It says, WE MISSED YOU, DARCY.

My coworker Patty is manning the circulation desk nearby. She waves at me.

I smile at her. Today is my first day back at work. I was gone for two months because I had a mental breakdown.

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A child left a picture book titled *A Slug of a Different Color* on the floor. I flip through it and see it's about a slug who

was born on a horse farm. He tries to live like the horses. He samples their salt lick, grazes in their pastures, and attempts to whinny and neigh. He dreams about galloping through their trails—feeling branches comb through his coarse mane. Of course, he can't grow hair, run, or withstand salt or sunshine. He's a slug. He has no legs, but a moist, soft body that would dehydrate if salt came anywhere near his sensitive skin. It could kill him. He's also nocturnal, and thrives in humid, cool, dark spaces. Unless there's a magical element to this story, the slug will never become a horse, and he'll probably die if he keeps trying—

“Are you aware a pervert is watching adult films over there?”

I look up from the book. The medication I'm taking affects my eyesight, so I have to squint at the hazy woman.

“Are you aware a pervert is watching adult films over there?” she asks again, louder.

“Oh,” I say. “Yes. I am.”

She crosses her arms. “Why hasn't he been stopped?”

“Because you're allowed to watch adult films at the library.”

“Excuse me?”

“You're allowed to watch adult films at the library,” I say again.

This isn't my first rodeo when it comes to porn consumption here. I know the protocol. In my orientation, I distinctly remember being taught what to do in cases like this. After listening to monotonous employee onboarding about how to operate e-readers and request vacation leave, my ears perked

up when the subject of porn was broached. Furthermore, I doubt we've ever gone more than one month without someone watching porn here. This is a *public* library.

"I'd like to speak to someone in charge," she says.

I rub my eyes. "That'd be me at the moment, but if you'd prefer someone more senior, I can get you a form."

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UNABLE TO ATTEND DUE TO MEDICAL ISSUE. SRRORY.

I wrote this email two months ago. Prior to taking sick leave, I was in the middle of an interview process for a branch manager position. I sent this poorly written email to decline the invitation for a second interview. I have no recollection of writing it.

I dreaded returning to work today partly because I couldn't remember if I'd actually declined the interview. I'd convinced myself that I just didn't show up. My short-term memory is weak due to my recent mental health crisis. My therapist told me emotional overwhelm can make it hard to process and store new information.

I woke up several times last night worrying about this. I kept picturing emails with red flags, titled FOLLOW-UP ON MISSED INTERVIEW, and stern voicemails asking, "*Where are you?*"

Job applications generally follow a repeatable formula. I have strong pattern recognition, and I'm good at following procedures, so I have the skills to navigate a job interview process successfully. The wrench my mental breakdown threw into my application rattled me—not just because I wanted

the job, but also because it disrupted a process that I should have been able to complete. I am dysregulated when I try to follow steps, do what I'm supposed to do, learn the rules, and still manage to mess things up.

I'm relieved to see I sent this email. I wish I remembered I did. I might have slept better. Though it's bizarre I can't remember writing it.

I usually have a good memory. I rarely have to look up library policies or procedures. I know the steps to request an interlibrary loan, submit a supply order, or issue a new library card. I remember what I wore on my first day of second grade, cloud formations I saw one Christmas morning, and how the grout peeled around the bathroom tiles in the apartment I had when I was nineteen.

My boyfriend Ben lived there with me. I remember taking a shower the night we moved in. I took my clothes off, turned the tap on, and stood with my hand under the running water. The showerhead made this shrill, screaming sound while I waited for the water to get hot. It splattered on the floor of the bath, and my body involuntarily flinched when ricochets of cold drops pelted my skin. I cranked the tap to the hottest setting, waited several more minutes, but the water never turned hot.

It was like that the whole time we lived there. The water heated to the temperature of an abandoned cup of coffee, right at the point where it could still be stomached, but it was unpleasant. It always felt like someone else had just taken a long shower and drained the contents of the water heater tank.

I like taking showers so hot they turn my skin red. I want

to exit the room in a cloud of steam, like a boiled lobster. I want dermatologists to warn me, *This is bad for your skin*. I've read plumbers put apparatuses on faucets to prevent the water from scalding. I think it was set too cautiously in that apartment. In retrospect, it's strange I tolerated it for so long. These days, I would call someone to fix it. I would even fix it myself.

I used to be someone different. Around age twenty-three, I split in two like a cell. One version of me is frozen at twenty-three. She's a coy, dependent girl who doesn't really know herself and doesn't want to burden anyone. She's dating Ben. They plan to get married, adopt a goldendoodle, and have a baby. She wears uncomfortable clothing; shirts that cling to her abdomen, jeans she has to suck in to zip up. She speaks in a high pitch, laughs at jokes that aren't funny, follows rules, and apologizes too much. She endures lukewarm showers.

The other version is me now. I'm thirty-two. I'm a more honest, self-reliant person. I have a wife named Joy, two cats, and no desire to become a parent. All my clothing is loose-fitting and breathable. I speak in a lower, more natural pitch, and I don't laugh unless a joke is funny. I'm still inclined to follow rules, and I have an instinct to apologize too much, but I try to resist. My showers would boil a lobster.

A mirror faced the bathtub in that apartment. My reflection startled me the night we moved in. I didn't recognize myself. For a fleeting moment, I thought a strange naked lady was in our bathroom, gawking at me. The lighting in that room was harsh, like a doctor's office. I could see cellulite on

my thighs I wasn't aware of. A shadow cast under the pouch of my stomach. Lines where my body folded when sitting due to my ghoulish posture.

I missed the mirror in my last apartment. It was small and round and hung on the wall of my cramped, dimly lit bathroom. I could never see myself fully in it. The year prior, I still lived with my parents. I don't remember seeing myself in that bathroom mirror, but I do remember being rushed out by my mom, and always being afraid she might barge in. She didn't value privacy. I did my makeup in a compact mirror, looking only at small segments of my face at a time. One eye. My mouth. An eyebrow. I rarely saw myself completely.

I remember standing in that bathroom at nineteen, feeling the tepid water hit my fingertips, looking at my reflection as if I didn't occupy my own body. It was like I was looking at a strange drawing of an uncomfortable naked woman. It didn't feel like I was looking at myself.

I frowned at my reflection until I noticed a small black dot moving behind me. It was a spider. She was in the corner of the shower, where the ceiling met the tiled wall. She moved the way spiders do, unpredictably and scattered. Tilting my head up, I wondered what kind of spider she was. *What bugs did she eat? How did she get in?* After several moments of watching her, I wrapped myself in a towel and shouted, "Ben! There's a spider! Help!"

Ben rushed into the bathroom, grabbed a wad of toilet paper, and laughed at me for being scared. He crushed the spider's body into the ceiling, leaving a dark smudge that stayed there until I moved out. After he dropped her

remains in the toilet, he kissed me and said, "You're safe now, dove."

He always called me "dove." That was his pet name for me.

I looked down at the spider's crushed, floating body, and said, "You saved me." But the truth is, I was never truly afraid of that spider. I just felt compelled to pretend I was so I could play the part of a meek, frightened girl, and Ben the part of a strong, brave man.

After he left the bathroom, I stepped into the lukewarm shower and told myself it was fine.

I'm still staring at the email I wrote two months ago. I'm glad I wrote it, but I wish I'd dedicated the millisecond required to review my spelling before I hit send. This typo-riddled email suggests I'm an unreliable employee who cancels last-minute, and I'd sent it directly to my boss.

I close my eyes. I wish I could go back in time and undo all the stupid mistakes I've made.

Joy would probably assure me this email doesn't make me come off as unreliable. *You had a medical issue. Who would think badly of you for that?* She would say that this is just a job, and while I care about my job, it isn't my whole life. The grass is going to keep growing. The stars aren't going to burn out. At the end of the day, I'm standing here telling people to mute their porn. Nothing is so serious.

I bet Joy is wondering how my first day back is going. She sat up with me last night while I groaned about this interview that I couldn't remember declining, worrying about all the people and questions I might have to face. She listened to me spiral, reassured me everything would be all right, and

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joked that we could move away. Change our names. Live in a cave.

I should call her. I'm sure she'll be delighted to hear my morning has been fraught with weird men watching poorly labeled lesbian porn.

“Did you think someone was having sex?”

I'm calling Joy from the break room while I watch the white bean soup she made us for dinner last night revolve in the microwave.

“No, it was obviously porn. The actresses' performances were overly theatrical.” The microwave beeps. “I've had to deal with people hooking up in the stacks before, though. I've actually suggested we rearrange the shelves. There's a spot that's hidden where I've found multiple couples—”

“Is it always couples?”

I reach into the microwave to stir the soup, making sure to keep it away from my face. Sometimes soups heated in microwaves explode if you stick spoons in them haphazardly. Whenever I microwave liquids, or any food with a high water content, I'm cautious. I've had a few traumatic experiences. A reheated cup of coffee once severely burned one of my eyelids. Another time, I accidentally detonated a potato.

“What do you mean, *Is it always couples?*” I ask. “Are you wondering if I've ever found people having group sex in the library?”

She snorts. “No, no, I meant—”

“The answer is obviously no, and I think exhibitionist threesomes are rare, honey. That's got to be too much for most