



THE GOLDEN COUPLE

'An utterly
compelling,
spellbinding read'

LISA JEWELL

Perfection is deceiving . . .

Greer
HENDRICKS

Sarah
PEKKANEN

**THE
GOLDEN
COUPLE**

GREER HENDRICKS

AND

SARAH PEKKANEN

MACMILLAN

Contents

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE: AVERY

CHAPTER TWO: MARISSA

CHAPTER THREE: AVERY

CHAPTER FOUR: MARISSA

CHAPTER FIVE: AVERY

CHAPTER SIX: MARISSA

CHAPTER SEVEN: AVERY

CHAPTER EIGHT: MARISSA

CHAPTER NINE: AVERY

CHAPTER TEN: MARISSA

CHAPTER ELEVEN: AVERY

CHAPTER TWELVE: MARISSA

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: AVERY

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: MARISSA

PART TWO

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: AVERY

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: MARISSA

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: AVERY

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: MARISSA

CHAPTER NINETEEN: AVERY

CHAPTER TWENTY: MARISSA

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: AVERY
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: MARISSA
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: AVERY
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: MARISSA
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: AVERY
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: MARISSA
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: AVERY
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: MARISSA
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: AVERY
CHAPTER THIRTY: MARISSA
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: AVERY

PART THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: AVERY
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: MARISSA
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR: AVERY
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE: MARISSA
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX: AVERY
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN: MARISSA
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT: AVERY
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE: MARISSA
CHAPTER FORTY: AVERY
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE: MARISSA
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO: AVERY
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE: MARISSA
CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR: AVERY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

You Are Not Alone

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.”