**More Therapy**

by edithdick

**Prologue**

There were no cars on the street. I was standing outside at night, all alone. I didn’t know where I was, but something was out there, in the darkness. I started running away from whatever it was. I could hear it. Chasing me just out of sight. There were trees lined along the sides of the road. Where was I?

I kept running, but it was getting closer. I realized that it was a dog. It began barking at me. Within the barks, I heard my name “Annie”. Somehow, I knew its name too. “Sophie”. What did it want with me? I thought I was done running from this dog.

I kept running, but Sophie was getting closer and closer. The street led to a large building. The door was locked. Sophie was getting closer. Closer.

Sophie was growling about 10 feet from me as I managed to get the door open. Once inside, I shut the door and press my body against it. Sophie started scratching the door. \*scratch-scratch-scratch\*. I could feel her weight pressing against it, like she was trying to break it down.

I ran deeper into the building. More doors. Into the darkness, I kept running. Another door, and then another. Sophie was in the building. I could hear her barking a couple of rooms away. One more door opened. I ran into a large room and then stopped. This felt familiar. Where was I?

Suddenly, the lights came up. I was on a large wooden stage. I could hear howls of laughter coming from the audience. They began chanting “SLUT-SLUT-SLUT-SLUT”. I wanted them to shut up. Sophie had to be getting closer, but I couldn’t hear her anymore because of the audience.

Then I looked down and froze. I was standing on stage of my high school auditorium buck assed naked. Everyone I knew was there, laughing at me and chanting “SLUT-SLUT-SLUT”.

I tried to scream, but nothing came out. Turning, I could see that Sophie was on stage with me, barking and growling. The crowd fell silent as the dog slowly walked toward me. Backing away, I didn’t dare look away from the dog. I was naked, and if it bit me, I knew I would die.

I didn’t know what to do, but I just kept backing away from this dog. All of a sudden, I hit a wall. It wasn’t a wall, it was… glancing back, “Craig!” I yelled. My brother was behind me. He would protect me. He always protects me.

“Help me, please!” I told him. I tried moving around so I was shielded by my enormous brother. Then he grabbed my arms, holding me in place in front of him. He spun me around. Sophie was very close. She was still growling and snarling at me.

The crowd was still there, but now they were chanting “CRAIG-CRAIG-CRAIG!”.

Sophie was snarling, her teeth bared. Then she crouched down and then leapt toward me.

“AHHHHHH!!!!!” I screamed as I woke up in my own bed, covered in sweat. I turned the light on and looked around the room. Getting up, I had to check my closet and under the bed. There was no dog, of course. There was never a dog. It was just me. My clothes chafed a bit. As usual, I was wearing my regular clothes under my pajamas. Can’t be too careful, after all.

It still didn’t help with the dreams though. No matter how many sets of clothes I wore to bed, I always ended up naked when I fell asleep. It had been almost a year since my night of torture with my brother’s friends. In that time, I had been through three different therapists. They tried medicating me, shock therapy, aversion therapy. Nothing helped.

Each time I would feel like I was starting to get better, some more pictures would emerge of me running around the streets naked, acting like a dog, or doing some other crazy thing. Craig was always there to hunt down the people spreading the pics and beat them to a pulp if they didn’t delete them. Now he was headed to college, and I would have to go back to school without my big brother looking out for me. No wonder I was freaking out and having these horrible dreams.

All I could do at that point was lie there the rest of the night and wait for the sun to come up. My alarm was set at 7:00 AM, but I got out of bed by 6:50 and went to the bathroom. After brushing my teeth, I ran the shower for 10 minutes without getting in. Then I wrapped a towel around my dry head and went downstairs to pretend to eat breakfast with my parents.

Arriving in the kitchen, my dad was sipping on a cup of coffee while he browsed through the newspaper. My mom was sitting next to him with a plate full of eggs, bacon, and a slice of toast. I slid into my normal chair across from my mom.

“Good morning, Annie. Did you sleep any better last night?” My mom asked, cheerfully.

“I think so mom.” I told her without making eye contact.

“More nightmares?” she asked, a hint of worry in her voice.

“Maybe a small one.” I told her.

“Well, go ahead and get dressed after breakfast. You’re going out with me today.” She told me.

“Mom, I don’t…” I began but she cut me off.

“Too bad. You have an appointment today with Dr. Crowe. So, you are getting dressed and coming with me.” she said firmly.

“Another therapist? What good will it do?” I whined.

“Dr. Crowe comes highly recommended. Plus, she is the last doctor in our area that will accept our insurance. Besides, sitting at home all day is just making you worse. So, you are going.”

I sighed. There was no arguing with her anyway. She always made me do as I was told, no matter what I thought about it. But also, she was right. Me sitting at home all the time was not helping. And with Craig gone, I needed to do something, or I don’t know why would happen to me once school started.

Whatever appetite I had disappeared and was replaced by worry. I knew in a little while; I would have to leave the house. I don’t know what I was afraid of exactly, but I was terrified!

I managed to nibble on a bit of toast and washed it down with orange juice. If I didn’t do at least that much, she would have tried force feeding me. My dad didn’t say a word, but when I managed to make eye contact with him, he seemed more worried than my mom.

A short time later, my mom and I arrived at a small two-story medical office building. The elevator was broken, so we took the stairs to the second floor, suite 205. The brown carpet looked stained, and the hallway smelled a bit musty. I didn’t like this place.

We walked into the waiting room. There was a woman and a small boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old sitting on the couch by the window. In the center of the room was a coffee table with some outdated magazines and across from the couch were two worn leather chairs. At the far end of the room with a registration desk with a plump woman who looked to be in her 50’s sitting behind if. I took a seat while my mom checked us in.

My mom stayed at the registration desk for ten minutes or so, filling out paperwork. By the time she finished and sat down next to me, I was reading an article in one of the fashion magazines. The magazine had articles covering the fall/winter fashion trends from 2021. I was mostly interested in how to get more layers of clothes on without looking bulky or fat.

After a while, the door to the office opened and a girl who looked a couple of years younger than me came out. She had been crying. She didn’t make eye contact with anyone in the room, but instead just headed straight toward the door and left. Her mom and brother quietly followed her out. I wondered if that was how I looked since the ordeal.

Standing in the doorway to the office was a thin woman who was probably in her late 30’s with large glasses and had long red hair that swept over her left shoulder and was pinned in the back. She was wearing black slacks, a powder-blue blowse and a cardigan vest that was buttoned in the front.

“Mrs. Conner?” She asked my mom.

My mom stood and made her way across the room with her hand extended. “Hi Dr. Crowe. We spoke on the phone. This is Annie.” My mom gestured to me to come. Reluctantly, I got up and shook Dr. Crowe’s hand as well.

“It’s nice to meet you, Annie. Won’t you both come in?” She asked.

We both entered her office, and she closed the door behind us before taking her seat. Her office was set up like the waiting room, minus the coffee table and one of the chairs. We both sat on the couch and she took her seat in the chair.

“As I told you on the phone.” My mom began. “Annie has been having a hard time dealing with a traumatic experience she had out on Catalina Island last summer.”

Dr. Crow nodded but didn’t interrupt. I hated reliving this, and my mom didn’t even know the worst of the details. Craig knew most of them, but I kept the very worst parts even from him. My mom only knew that I had been hypnotized and ended up naked on a trip to the island. That and that I woke up from the hypnosis halfway through the trip and had to pretend to be okay with being naked for the rest of the day. She had no idea about those two awful girls who tried to convince me I was their pet dog.

“…when it was all over, she had some sort of nervous breakdown and threw out almost all of her clothes.” My mom sounded exasperated by the time she had finished telling the story. “Since then, she barely sleeps or eats or \*SNIF SNIF\* bathes.”

During the entire telling of the story, Dr. Crowe didn’t interrupt her even once. I could only sit there, staring at the floor and listen to my nightmare being repeated to yet another therapist. Just hearing about it felt humiliating to me. Part of me wanted to scream and run away, but then I would be alone and that was even more terrifying than listening to a story I already knew.

When my mom finished speaking, Dr. Crowe nodded and asked, “Is that everything?”

“Isn’t that enough?” My mom demanded. “She’s been through so much and isn’t able to cope with any of it.”

“I wasn’t judging, I just wanted to make sure that you have finished with the story.” My mom nodded her understanding and let her guard down a bit.

“If I were to judge, though, I think that you are catastrophizing this situation and making it harder for Annie to cope with this.” Dr. Crowe told her.

For the first time since entering the office, I took my eyes off the floor.

“How dare you!” My mom told Dr. Crowe. “How dare you say that I am harming my child. I do everything for her and try to make her as comfortable as I possibly can!”

“Please don’t misunderstand me. I believe that you love your daughter and want to do everything you can to help her.” Dr. Crowe said. My mom seemed to brace for the ‘but’ that was certain to follow that sentence. “Annie is shut down right now, and your love is creating a safe space for her to hide in.”

I really thought that my mom was going to keep arguing, but she didn’t. Instead, her shoulders seemed to shrink, and her head went down a bit. “I know… I know that I am protecting her from having to face the reality of that day. It’s my fault she can’t get over this.”

“No.” Dr. Crowe told her. “You are using the tools in your toolbox to help comfort your daughter. I believe you have worked hard to be a good mom. But you are using the wrong tools for this job.”

My mom listened and nodded. This was the first time one of the therapists she brought me to actually got HER to listen. I had to admit that I was impressed with that.

“Do you think you can help her?” my mom asked.

“Honestly, that’s up to Annie. I’d like to see her twice per week, starting out.” Dr. Crowe told her.

“I need to check with my insurance. They may only cover weekly visits.” my mom cautioned.

“If that’s the case, maybe we can work something else out.” Dr. Crowe said.

“Such as?”

“Well, Becky has been asking for some time off to tend to her sick mother. If Annie were to fill in for her, say once per week, she and I could discuss things over lunch. I wouldn’t need to bill you for it or anything.” She said.

My mom considered it for a minute before turning to me. “What do you think?”

I looked at each of them and asked, “Who’s Becky?”

“My receptionist, dear.” Dr. Crowe said with a smile. “You would just need to sit out at the registration desk and help my patients get checked in. Do you think you could do that?”

“Can we do it at my house?” I asked. They both laughed, as if I had told a funny joke or something.

“No, dear. We need to get you out of your comfort zone. You’ll never get better by hiding under your blankets.” Dr. Crowe said warmly. When she smiled at me, somehow the room felt a little brighter. “Can you be her on Thursday?”

Both of them were now looking at me. My mom, as patient as I’ve ever seen her and Dr. Crowe. For some reason, I really didn’t want to disappoint either of these women. “I’ll do it.”

“Wonderful!” my mom said. At that point, our hour was up, and we headed back home. My mom was so excited that I actually agreed to be out of the house one day each week, she offered to take me out for ice cream on the way home. Of course, I agreed. I may be a recluse, but I’m a recluse who loves double fudge chocolate!

That night, my nightmares were worse than normal. They always were when Craig wasn’t in them. This time, I was running around naked in broad daylight. Instead of Sophie trying to catch me, I was running after her while all of my classmates ran after me. Several times they caught me, but Sophie showed up and they all played with her while I ran away. This dream scared me more, because instead of waking up in a panic, I woke up thinking I was a bad girl for being on the bed.

It took me a few minutes to realize that I was still Annie. I got up and put on a second set of pajamas and went back to bed. Not that I could sleep after that.

Wednesday came and went. More nightmares. More running away in my dreams. More fighting off this urge to run around my neighborhood naked and chase squirrels or some nonsense. It always came down to me either running away from Sophie, who was trying to kill me, or me chasing after Sophie for protection.

My mom came into my room Thursday morning before my alarm went off. She opened the curtain and let the summer sunshine fill my bedroom. “Time to get up, Annie. You have a big day today.”

“Ten more minutes mom! Please?” I said, pretending that I had been sleeping.

“Not today, dear. And no pretending to take a shower. You can’t go in on your first day of work smelling like a goat.” She told me firmly.

I did shower. At least once per week. I wore my bathing suit, but I did wash myself. I just didn’t like the idea of standing around naked waiting for someone to come in and take me away again.

She was right though. I did smell pretty bad. Maybe it was a bit more than a week since my last shower. I grabbed my one-piece and headed to the bathroom. Slipping out of my pajamas and other clothes, I closed my eyes as I took my bra and panties off. I kept them closed until the bathing suit was securely snug on my body, and I was not showing any naughty bits. Even alone, I didn’t like seeing my body.

I brushed my teeth before getting into the shower. The hot water did feel good on my skin. I washed my hair and soaped up my arms and legs the best I could. Pulling the bathing suit out a little, I let water run down my body in the front and back. No soap, but it would have to do. Then I got out and toweled myself off before changing back into my normal clothes. I hung the wet bathing suit in the shower and put the rest into the hamper.

After breakfast, my dad told me, “Let’s go.”

I looked at my dad, and then at my mom and then back at my dad. Finally, my mom told me, “It’s on his way to work. You’ll be fine.”

“You’re no going to be there?” I asked in a panic. I heard a knocking and realized that my trembling body was shaking the table.

“Annie, you’re going to be fine. You won’t be alone. Dr. Crowe will be there with you, remember?” my mom tried to assure me. “Now get going.”

I was sobbing by the time I got to my dad’s car. “Daddy, please don’t make me.”

“Annie, you know I won’t let anyone hurt you, right?” my dad said is his most tender voice.

“Ya-ya-yeah, but…” I tried telling him that someone already hurt me, but I couldn't get the words out.

“Honey, I promise you, I will get you safe to the care of your doctor. You are going to be fine.” He said.

“O-okay, daddy. \*SNIFF\*” was all I could manage.

“Daddy loves you.” He told me. For a while, we both sat in his car, him looking at me and me looking at the dashboard. Finally, he asked, “Are you ready to go up?”

“Daddy, I don’t want to go up by myself.” I sobbed.

He nodded before getting out of the car. In a few seconds he had walked around to the passenger side and opened my door. “I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you, daddy.” I told him.

We walked up to Dr Crowe’s office together. When we got to the waiting room, Dr. Crowe was sitting on the couch. She stood and met us at the door.

“Hello, Sheila.” My dad said to her.

“Hi Frank.” Dr. Crowe responded with a smile and a warm hug. “I see you brought Annie up for her first day of work.”

I was a bit shocked. How did these two know each other? I was certain that my mom had met her for the first time just two days ago. I didn’t say anything though.

“You can set your things behind the counter, dear. I will show you what to do in a sec.” Dr. Crowe told me.

I looked, but there was no way to get to that side of the registration desk from the waiting room. I could see behind the was a door that seemed to lead into Dr. Crowe’s office. I followed my instinct and went through the door to her office, made a U turn and arrived at my workstation in a second. There I set my backpack down. It had a book for me to read in case I got bored, plus a lunch my mom had packed for me.

My dad and Dr. Crowe talked for a few more minutes before he left. I tried paying attention, but couldn’t decipher what they were talking about or how long they had known one another. After he left, Dr. Crowe joined me at the registration desk.

Dr. Crowe showed me her appointment book. She told me how to check people in when they arrived and how to make new appointments before they left. There was also a stack of forms to fill out for new patients, but she told me I shouldn’t need to worry about those today, since everyone on her schedule was an existing patient. All of the patients she was to see today already had their folder pulled out and ready. She told me in the future, I would be responsible for pulling them out, but since it was my first day, she went ahead and get it set up for me.

She waited with me making idle small talk until the first patient arrived. “How do you know my dad?” I asked, cautiously.

“You’ll have to ask him that story. I’m afraid I can’t say anything.” Dr. Crowe said.

Suddenly, I heard the doorknob turn as the first patient arrived. That turned out to be a boy from my school who was a year younger than me. His name was Jacob, and he arrived with his mom. I had her sign him in since she was his guardian. Then the sign in sheet went into his folder and I handed it to Dr. Crowe.

“It’s good to see you again, Jacob.” Dr. Crowe told the boy. She then smiled at Jacob’s mom who was already headed to the couch to wait for her son to finish. Dr. Crowe and Jacob disappeared into her office, as she shut the door. Mrs. Conway fiddled with her phone while she waited. I pulled out my book and began reading, as there wasn’t much else to do, and Mrs. Conway didn’t seem interested in chatting with me.

After about 45 minutes, another patient, Mr. Fredrickson, according to the scheduling book, showed up. I signed him in, and he waited for Jacob to finish. Soon, Jacob came out and Mr. Fredrickson went in.

Another hour passed, and another patient showed up and replaced the one who left. This was a woman in her 30’s named Ms. Clayton. After Mr. Fredrickson left, I noticed it.

The next patient on the schedule was named Craig Bowman. That is my brother. But he couldn’t be here, he is out of town with his friends! He is supposed to be, anyway.

Maybe it’s a coincidence. He can’t be the only Craig Bowman in the world. Maybe it was someone else. Then I started thinking about how Dr. Crowe knew my father. Did my dad meet her because my brother was seeing her? Why did Craig need a therapist? How long has he been seeing her? Why didn’t he tell me?

All these questions kept rolling through my head. I realized that this whole morning I wasn’t nervous. I had been sitting behind this desk, reading my book, and doing short interactions with the other patients. I didn’t feel threatened, and I did not panic. As soon as I saw my brother’s name on the schedule, I was freaking out. He left 3 weeks ago to go on a road-trip with his friends before he had to go to school. How can he be here?

The hour passed so slowly as I kept worrying about my brother. He is Craig. He doesn’t need therapy! Nobody is stronger than him.

“Annie?” Craig’s voice came from the other side of the registration desk. “What are you doing here?”

I was so caught up in worry that I didn’t hear the door open. “What am I doing here? What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be out traveling with your friends?"

“I…” Craig hesitated. He genuinely looked nervous talking to me. “I had to come to this last appointment.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were seeing a therapist?” I asked. “How long?”

“It’s personal. I’ve been seeing Dr. Crowe for the past 9 months, ever since I started getting into too many fights at school.” He told me.

“Well after I get off work, you are going to tell me everything that happened! I mean it.” I demanded.

“I can’t. I’m leaving. For real this time. I need to get to school so I can meet up with the team. We have our first practice tomorrow.” He said. Craig really sounded sad talking to me.

Dr. Crowe’s office door opened, and Ms. Clayton walked out followed by Dr. Crowe. After Ms. Clayton left, Dr. Crowe stood in the waiting room, next to Craig. She glanced at him, but then spoke to me. “Now that you’re both here, why don’t the three of us go have a chat.”

She then locked the door and motioned for us to follow her into her office. Craig followed her, but I had to use the other door to get back there.

We sat on the couch across from Dr. Crowe. “Annie, Craig has been coming to see me for a while now. Do you know when it started?”

“He said for the past nine months, because he was getting into fights at school.” I repeated.

“And do you know what he was fighting about?” She asked.

I looked at my brother, but for some reason his eyes were glued to the floor and his face was turning bright red. “There were naked pictures of me leaked around out school.” I told her. “Every time someone would start spreading them around, Craig and his friends would hunt them down and make sure they were deleted.”

Dr. Crowe nodded. “That’s part of it. Do you know where the pictures came from?”

This time Craig spoke, “No!” followed by a much softer, “please.”

“Craig, she must know. She’ll never be healed if she doesn’t know the truth.” Dr. Crowe told him, patiently.

After a moment, Craig nodded and began to sob, softly. Dr. Crowe looked at me expectantly. I had no choice, so I just told her everything that had happened. Even the parts that I never told Craig about.

“Honestly, I think had my mom been the one who took me to therapy that day, everything would have been a lot different…”

I spoke for a long time. At one point, she interrupted and asked Craig to tell his side of it, but most of it was my story, not his. By the time I had finished speaking, Craig and I were both crying and comforting one another.