



I'm going to kill the damn blackbird sitting on my windowsill, chirping and squeaking at the top of its lungs. It's hopping back and forth, wings spread and flapping, but has zero intention of taking off.

The point is it can fly away whenever it wants. And it knows it can. It stops chirping, turns its tiny head, and looks at me. Smiling for sure.

Smug bastard.

I pick up my pillow and lob it at the window. It crashes against the glass then plops on to my window ledge, catching a pile of books as it dies a deflated death on my bedroom floor.

The blackbird is unperturbed, but it pales into insignificance as my eyes home in on my copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Its corner is now ever so slightly out of line with the five books beneath it.

It's the Reader's Choice Edition. Two hundred and twenty-eight pages exactly. Just like the five books under it. To the left is another pile of six books. They all have two

hundred and seventy-two pages. The book on top of that pile is *Pride and Prejudice*, the Dover Thrift Edition.

‘Norah,’ Mom bellows up the stairs. ‘If you don’t get your butt down here in the next ten seconds, I’m cancelling the internet service.’ I’ve been testing her patience for the last twenty minutes.

‘I still have stomach ache,’ I call back. There’s a pause, and I think maybe she’s giving up on the idea of making me go outside.

‘I don’t care if you have bubonic plague.’ Pause. Inhale courage. Exhale guilt. ‘If you’re not down these stairs in the next eight seconds, you can kiss your internet connection goodbye.’ Her voice cracks, but wow, she’s really taking this whole ‘tough love’ approach seriously. I don’t think she’s an enabler, but ever since she watched Doctor Motivator and his know-nothing special on mental health, she’s been grappling with her conscience.

I surrender.

To her, at least. I look back at the books, see a crumbling tower, a broken wall. Dr Reeves is in my head, telling me to test myself, telling me to leave the discombobulated book as it is and observe how the world does not collapse around me.

I huff, climb off the bed, pick up my pillow, and place it back where it belongs. It’s one of four. They all sit angled, diamond shapes, on top of my military-smooth bed sheets.

Neck hot, fingers tapping thighs, six beats each, I leave the room.

But before I hit the stairs, that tiny corner, no longer in line with the other five books, is consuming me. Like that song you heard but can’t quite remember the name of. Or

that actor you've seen in another film but can't for the life of you recall which one. The thought is a fungus, a black mould rotting my brain. I ache. My teeth itch.

I stand at the top of the stairs, close my eyes, and try to make my mind go blank.

*Don't go back. Don't go back. You don't need to go back. Clear your mind.*

Here's the thing. The blankness in my mind turns into a piece of white paper, the white paper reminds me of books, and then I'm thinking about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* again. *Fuck.*

I march back to my room, push the book into its rightful position, and then hate myself.

The blackbird catches my eye. It hasn't budged. Bet it knew I would be back. I slam my fist into the window and shout, 'Boo!' It shrieks and takes to the skies. I smile. Throw it a sarcastic five-fingered sayonara wave. It's a small but satisfying victory.

Then I see a boy through my window. He's stopped halfway up the garden path and is looking at me like I've lost my mind. He's carrying a box labelled *Bedroom*. I take note of bulging biceps testing the durability of his shirt-sleeves.

New neighbours.

Why has he stopped? Am I supposed to smile? Wave? Throw him a thumbs up? I feel like an idiot.

It's awkward; we're both just staring at each other until a woman in a floaty summer dress sails by. He's distracted, so I slip away.

Like a giant in cast-iron shoes, I make my way down the stairs. Eleven steps, so I have to take the last one twice.

I have this thing about even numbers.

You don't have to take the last one twice, Dr Reeves would say.

But I do, I'd tell her. Then she'd ask me why, and I would say, as I always do, Because that's the way my mind works.