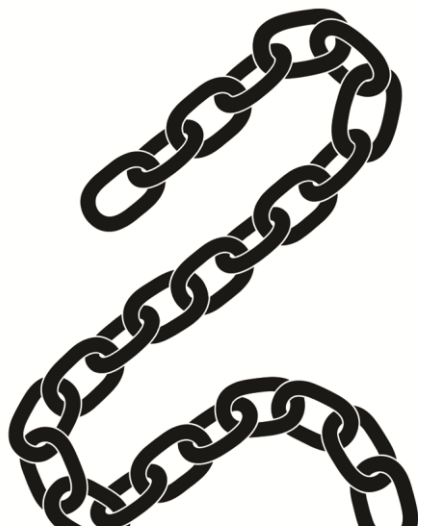




These Tears

N. von Wolf



Copyright © 2026 N. von Wolf
All rights reserved.

No part of this excerpt may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission of the author or publisher, except for brief quotations in reviews or articles.

This is a limited printed advanced excerpt from a work of fiction and is subject to change prior to final publication. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All trademarks mentioned are the property of their respective owners. The author and publisher are not affiliated with or sponsored by these owners.

Excerpt edition, May 2026
Published by: Independently Published

This excerpt is protected under applicable international and European copyright laws. Unauthorised duplication or distribution is prohibited.

This excerpt is written in British English and follows UK spelling and punctuation conventions.

For permissions, visit: www.nvonwolf.com

Cover and Vector Design by Author

Stock Photos:

Anete Lusina (anetelusina.com)

Evgenij (Pexels)

Suzi Hazel (Pexels).

Table of Contents

TRIGGER WARNINGS	1
CHAPTER ONE	4
CHAPTER TWO	18
THE AUTHOR	32
WHERE TO BUY	33

Trigger Warnings

Imprisonment,
Restraints,
Murder / patricide references,
Domestic violence,
Alcoholism,
Trauma,
Anxiety / panic,
Infidelity,
Emotional abuse,
Self-blame,
Unhealthy obsession / fixation,
Coercive sexual tension,
Explicit sexual dialogue,
Emotional manipulation,
Corruption / bribery,
Illness,
Self-destructive behaviour,
Abandonment fears,
Coercive control,
Forced proximity,
Possessiveness,
Drugging / sedation,
Abduction / kidnapping,
Loss of consciousness,
Captivity,
Isolation,
Forced domesticity,
Sexual assault references,
Child abuse,
Animal cruelty / animal death
(referenced),

Explicit sexual content,
Grooming dynamics,
Nudity,
Attempted escape,
Winter survival danger,
Threats of violence,
Confinement,
Punishment dynamics,
Cold / exposure,
Nightmares,
Surveillance / eavesdropping
tension,
Light BDSM,
Family dysfunction,
Alarm / chase tension,
Abuse backstory,
Family trauma,
Resentment,
Dubious consent dynamics,
Hostility,
Rough sexual content,
Aggressive sexual contact,
Emotional breakdown,
Trauma disclosure,
Psychological entanglement,
Re-abduction,
Survival peril,
Choking / throat grabbing,
Dominance dynamics,
Depression,
C-PTSD

ACT 1

"One must still have
chaos in oneself to
be able to give birth
to a dancing star."
~Nietzsche





~ 7 ~

THREE DOORS BETWEEN me and whatever poor sod sits on the other side with a sentence stapled to his name.

I flinch when the metal groans behind me as the first one shuts. I don't expect it to echo so loudly – as if the building is clearing its throat for the next part.

The corridor is long and overlit, all cream paint browned at the corners and scuffed to shoulder height. Linoleum gleams under thousands of reluctant footsteps. Doors sit at measured intervals, each with a narrow, armoured window that gives away nothing but shadow. The air smells of bleach and struggling radiators, but with something more human underneath you can't photograph without feeling first.

I've snapped shots of tombs that felt warmer than this. Stone remembers the hands that shaped it at least. These walls are trying to forget it. They've been made to erase, to look clean while reminding you exactly what the people inside are to the system: bodies to be moved, counted and contained.

Behind the last door, there's a man I'm supposed to... befriend? Support? Teach, or...?

The paperwork should have had *'self-destruction, with a volunteer badge'* in fine print.

My pulse is acting as if it's trying to outrun me.

I keep my face smooth, mouth set like I'm here by choice, like I'm not listening for the next groan of metal as if it's going to utter my name.

In all honesty, I've done worse. Procrastination scrambles my grey matter.

The guard beside me doesn't bother hiding his boredom. 'First time?'

I swallow back the unease, eyeing the cap with shielded disdain.

I'm not a fan of uniforms myself. They never helped my sister when she called them on her husband. Maybe it wasn't even the system, just the uniforms that landed at her doorstep, walking about like robots sputtering the lines of law while their thumbs twiddled.

'Is it that obvious?' I ask, already regretting the question. He shrugs. 'You look it.'

I wrinkle my nose at him. Lovely. Like lamb to slaughter.

Refocusing on my anxiety and the last door, I listen to it opening with a wet, mechanical sound like something out of a submarine movie.

It's colder in this area. No windows, just CCTV cameras and signs that warn off unauthorised items.

My eyes catch at the bottom of the list: *string, gum, hope* – though I might have made up that last one.

'Gum?' I hear myself say aloud as we pass through the checkpoint, where paint peels in small strips from the institutional green walls like old, forgotten scabs.

Mum's reprimand resurfaces in the back of my head – *easy on the sarcasm Leah*.

'They get creative around here,' says the guard escorting me, his badge crooked and his tone bone-dry. 'She's all yours, George.'

A barred gate groans open and out steps a man whose belly strains against his shirt. He moves slowly, as if urgency is a concept he'd stopped believing years ago; and with the weary confidence of someone who's worked here too long to care.

'Afternoon,' he says, his South London accent flattened by the stale heat of the corridor. It isn't his voice that makes

my face tighten, or even the cough that sounds bad enough to finish him on the next heave. It's the smell. Like vinegar and stale beer, familiar in the worst way.

I used to breathe that in every day as a teenager while my dad favoured the bottle. You don't forget an odour that could double as paint stripper.

His bloodshot eyes sweep over me in stark, clinical motions. My camera and purse were confiscated at the gate. I didn't mind them taking the purse. It's just weight and receipts and lipstick I hang on to but never reapply.

But the camera—

That isn't an object. It's a habit. A shield. The closest thing I have to emotional support that lets me banish my demons through the shutter. Without it, I feel stripped down to the parts of me I work hardest to keep zipped up, while standing in plain sight beneath fluorescent light.

I really *should* try therapy again.

Grunting inelegantly, the guard nods at me.

As I trail after him, jagged shadows slice across the corridor floor, and my nerves cinch tighter. Every step feels like a fresh entry in the ledger of my own stupidity.

My sister always said my devil-may-care approach to everything would get me hurt one day. I bet she didn't think the lighting would be fluorescent, the paint would be peeling, or that the devil would come in shackles.

A camera pegs me from the corner, blinking red as if to warn me off while I still have the chance.

But, like always, I simply readjust the – non-existent – strap on my shoulder, still nursing the little *no-gear-allowed* finger-wiggle the woman behind the bulletproof glass gave me at the gate.

Apparently, photographing trauma for a living doesn't qualify me to bring a lens into His Majesty's prison. Not even for this programme. Even though, grudgingly, it had been

the strongest reason for my application in the first place.

‘You’re in Visitor Room Seven,’ George mutters, pointing ahead. ‘He’s probably a long-timer. Restraints authorised. Don’t let the charm fool you.’

What does that mean?

My face must give me away, because George fills in the silence, telling me my new *best friend* behind the last door is on remand.

Even with the homework I’d done, that still lands wrong in my head. *Remand* is meant to be a temporary thing, not span seven years. That much time pre-trial isn’t exactly standard practice; it’s a timeline that suggests a case so tangled it’s become its own organism.

And that was one of the splinters that lodged under my skin when the Programme Coordinator slid a stack of profiles across the desk – options, on paper, as if people could be shortlisted like equipment.

I’d picked through them one by one, weighing offences and notes and risk ratings, until this file stopped reading like a case and started reading like a question.

I tell myself it wasn’t anything else – it wasn’t the way the light in the file photo caught his pale blue eyes and turned them almost translucent. Like something luminous trapped and writhing.

Restraints, George mentioned.

His crime had been so violent, the restraints need to be in place during visitations.

I file that somewhere between *cheater fiancée* and *emotional masochist*. Because what else would explain me signing up for a programme that pairs emotionally derailed civilians like me with inmates no one wants to be near?

Jesus Christ, I could’ve taken up fucking pottery when therapy shot blind.

Or just... disappeared quietly into Greenland with my

camera and Riesling.

Instead, I'm here – chasing ghosts in my black jeans and an AC/DC shirt I may have overgrown – because I wasn't sure what the dress code was for *meet your last mistake*.

A barred door clanks and sighs open, ushering me into a secure visitation room so barren that even my most optimistic creative gene retreats in horror.

Not only is there no paint over the raw, unwelcoming concrete, but the walls are stained in blotches that look suspiciously as if someone had tried to give the place a bit of medieval dungeon flair.

And in the middle – sits Elias Crane, his back to me, thick, black hair dragged back as if every rebellious curl has been bullied into obedience with a threat to come apart the moment he makes one wrong, human movement.

Something rattles then, and for a second I think it's the chain. Then I realise it's me – as I register the restraint spanning wrists to ankles, threaded through a steel ring bolted to the floor, my hand jerks towards the camera bag that isn't there. Pure muscle memory.

Pointless and irritating.

Restraints authorised. Don't let the charm fool you, the guard's words echo in my ears, suddenly. Seems like they really don't take chances with Crane.

I ease the panic out on the next breath, reminded – again – that no camera and no lens mean *no permission*. I'm on my own. With a head full of bad instincts.

Still. The glint of the chains as they catch the light against his alabaster skin—

It's a composition begging to be taken.

He sits hunched over the bolted desk while I cross the room with a superficial calm towards the opposite chair. The nearer I get, the more it feels as though the space has misjudged him – as if the measurements were drawn for an

average man and a giant was crammed in instead. His shoulders are broad enough to throw shadow across the entire table; his forearms heavy with the sort of muscle that comes from use, not vanity – hard, punishing, *earned*.

Old scars stripe his arms in thin, pale cuts like faded tally marks of some private war.

His hands are clasped loosely on the table top, wrists married by institutional steel, but there's no surrender in him. He isn't slumped so much as contained – wound tight and still, as if patience is just another way of holding a sharp edge.

As I sink into my seat, my gaze catches on the line of his jaw and the thick beard dusting it dark – enough to make him look dangerous, not enough to make him look unkempt. In fact, his face is one a person might trust right up until the moment reality decides otherwise.

And right now, those eyes – rimmed with thick fans of obsidian lashes – are fixed on his hands.

My finger twitches over the phantom camera bag again when the fluorescent light slicks across his hair.

He doesn't look up in the first few heartbeats we sit in silence. Just lets the quiet do its work.

'Afternoon, Mr Crane,' I try, because *good* feels like a lie in here.

My gaze betrays me immediately, tracking the aristocratic line of his nose and the firm mouth beneath it that seems as though entirely incapable of softness.

I hate that my artistic brain won't switch off. It notices structure first – angles, proportions, contrast. Even when it absolutely shouldn't.

Finally, he lifts his lashes. Slow. As if he's granting access. The blue comes with it.

No—

Not just blue. Clear, cold blue. Bright enough to look out

of place in this room.

The contrast hits like a small, private violence: the brutal geometry of his face set against something so lucid it reads more as *god* than *human*.

My stomach clenches as my mind supplies the reminder my body keeps trying to file away: those eyes belong to a man they have to chain to the floor.

My fingers itch. I have to insist on bringing my camera next time, because part of me is already framing the shots whether I like it or not.

Shadow against bone. Pale skin against steel.

The photographer in me is a beast that lives off instinct, but the rest of me is slower to follow.

He isn't just an image. He's a dangerous man, and I'm suddenly aware that observing him too closely might be its own kind of mistake.

He doesn't blink or offer any kind of smile – even just to ease my nerves. And suddenly the guard's comment rushes back clearer than it was earlier when I was just a bundle of anxiety and bad decisions made true. I do not appreciate my own sarcasm now that I'm past this point.

Somehow it feels as if Crane has stripped me down to negative space.

It's not a hard stare. It's not a warm stare. I don't know what it is.

'My name is Leandra Nottingham. Pleased to meet you,' I say, extending a hand—

Then I lock onto the chains and stop short.

Like a bloody idiot.

His gaze drops hawkishly to where my hand hovers, but he doesn't move. Just sits there with that deceptively relaxed posture, shoulders down.

Christ – the chains.

Of course. He can't shake my hand. He's practically

bolted down.

I let my fingers curl inwards, retracting with as much grace as I can salvage. But no sooner do I pull back than his stare climbs again. Up the length of my arm, almost like a physical thing, until those glacial eyes meet mine again and hold.

‘I apologise...’ I murmur, trying for *steady* – and failing.

Of all the bright ideas I’ve had in the past year, this one ranks top of the list – sitting across from a murderer. Trying to play this like a fucking Sunday tea party.

Clearing my throat, I take inventory of myself.

‘Call me Leah,’ I add, aiming for *casual* – grounding whatever this is in something warmer. More familiar. Sane.

He doesn’t motion or speak, but some of the static in the air eases.

But it could be just my imagination.

His body shifts, reclining into the unforgiving metal chair. Like a cliff-face tipping on its own weight. The creak is quiet but feels thunderous in the silence.

Then a breath falls out of him. Rasped, as if it had to scrape its way up. If he actually speaks, I imagine his voice would be husky. Weathered.

Glancing down at the clinical table between us, I shift in my own chair. My legs scrub faintly against the hard floor when I fire off my first question.

‘Are you unhappy with me being here?’ My tone is steadier than I feel.

Because *I* am – unhappy. With myself. With this whole bloody decision. With the desperation that had dragged me through the application, the damned vetting, the gate that had taken my camera. Anything to keep my mind off my life that’s been falling apart.

And now here I am, sitting across from him, pretending I know what I’m doing.

He still stares at me without a word.

Exhaling, I give him a humourless smile. 'We can sit in the quiet, too, if that's what you need?'

The only response is in his eyes, as they flick unhurriedly to my mouth, then back up again.

The silence bleeds, rebounds against the wall.

I start wondering how many snowsuits I'd need if I packed up tonight and moved to bloody Greenland instead of going on like this, looking for distractions from my own life. Ones that just might actually harm me.

'Leah,' he says.

My name. Just that.

And I was right – like the sound of burning logs in the dead of a winter night, his voice runs down my spine with all the gentleness of ash and ember.

'That's right,' I say, softer. Waiting.

But nothing else comes. And now I'm aware he hasn't blinked for another while. His intensity starts to scratch at my skin.

'My dad was incarcerated once,' I mutter, just to puncture the air.

There's a faint reaction when his breath snags, but he still makes no effort to move the conversation ahead.

'I won't pretend I know what it's like. I don't.' I lift one shoulder, eyes on the table. 'He was in for battery.'

I don't elaborate for a reason. Crane's file didn't hold any details on his crime, just that he was in for patricide.

I hardly remember the time my dad had been in prison because I was seven. The neighbour was a violent prick. Beat his wife, his kids. One day my dad caught him in the act and hit him back.

'He was in for two years. I visited on Sundays. I was happy to see it didn't change him.'

A breath.

‘I was scared it might.’

Elias Crane just stares and I’m uncertain if I’m boring him to death at this point.

The tips of my fingers find my engagement ring lodged close to my knuckles, and I start rolling it around.

This is a complete waste of time. I can’t take photos. He doesn’t talk—

Driven by adrenaline, I reposition myself with a soft thump against the backrest.

Then I cross my arms. Cross my legs.

And meet his stare dead-on.

‘I’m here to try and make your time here easier. To talk to you. Or just listen. You don’t have to like me, but I signed up and so did you. If you’ve changed your mind, I’d rather you open that pretty mouth of yours and say it so we can move on.’

He cocks a thick, dark brow. The corner of the said mouth jolts and an unexpected flare of warmth skims across my spine.

Thought that might jolt him a little.

I just didn’t expect the effects of his smile to jolt me right back.

‘Pretty mouth of mine?’ he echoes quietly. Then his gaze sharpens. ‘So you’re one of *those*.’

My brows lower until my lashes tickle over them. ‘One of what?’ I concede, unable to follow his logic.

He tilts his head a fraction, looking at me as if he’s tracing bone structure with a scalpel.

‘Romancing the reprehensible.’

Reprehensible?

So wordy.

‘I’m not here to romance you,’ I reply flatly, battling the smirk from springing out at his concealed eloquence. ‘You’re not my type.’ The lie makes him smile wider. ‘Chains and

charm cause heartburn.'

Just because I'm unable to process why my instincts appreciate his amusement – and those cheekbones – I say bitinglly, 'I'm surprised you know big words like that.'

And the smile's gone.

'Because I'm behind bars, I don't read?'

Angling my head slightly, I realise it's the first thing he'd given me: *'I read'*. I'd rather be talking about what got him to the point of snapping his own father's spine – but clearly, he wasn't going to let me close without a barbed wire between us. So I grab on to that fragile thread of information and hold fast.

The silence trickles slowly, the seed of that detail hovers between us until it takes root and the tension eases a notch.

'What are you reading now?' I ask, tone lower, less about control.

'Nothing.'

I hum at that, unsure if he's just deflecting or giving me an honest response.

'I could send a book to the staff for you, if you'd like.'

His head tilts, interest bursting like fireworks. 'Why?'

I match the angle. 'I'm thinking... if I give you more words, you might actually say some back to me instead of just stare.'

That twitch again – not quite a smile, but close enough. And it's genuine.

If it weren't for the inmate greys and the chain, if I'd seen him on a run in the park – handsome in that wrong-kind-of-right way – I'd probably have looked twice.

'What are you doing here, Leah?' he asks calmly, but pointedly. The cadence of his voice is warm, making my head spin with more questions.

I lift my shoulders, unsure whether I'm answering him or asking myself. They don't fall straight away, just let the truth

linger atop them for a second.

‘I like volunteering,’ I say. ‘The breath that sticks to my throat makes it sound rehearsed. ‘I’m a photographer,’ I add quickly, deciding that if I offer something of myself, he might offer something back. ‘I volunteer wherever I can find genuine emotion. I like to try and capture it.’

He lets out a dry sound that might pass as a chuckle, then pushes forward again. The cuffs scrape against the table’s edge.

I unfold my own arms to appear less defensive.

‘So you came to a *prison*. To find... *emotion*?’ he murmurs sardonically.

It would be hard to explain my entire purpose as an artist to him. Emotion isn’t just joy at a birth, or tears at a wedding, or grief at a funeral.

It’s everything. History. It’s what lingers in rooms long after people have gone. The charge left behind after an argument, the indent on the wall after a frustrated outburst. The stillness after a slammed door. It’s longing soaked into things – plaster, wood, clothes... people.

‘*Especially* in prison,’ I tell him, watching for any changes on his face. ‘Emotion’s what got you in here. It’s everywhere. It’s in the way those chains rest on your wrists.’ My gaze flicks to the glint of metal between us. ‘In the way you dodge my questions. The way you almost smile, but don’t.’

His expression almost softens. It could be my imagination because the change is so small.

But enough.

The tightness around his eyes loosens. His hands, which had been curled as if they expected a blow, open slightly. Shoulders shift down by a fraction.

We don’t speak. Just hold the silence between us like a stretched thread. Tenuous, but holding.

Then—

‘Guard!’ he calls. Calm. Without looking away from me. As if he’s decided I’ve had enough access to him for one day.

The locks at the far end of the room clank in quick succession, and a few seconds later, the door opens.

George’s red-veined eyes and sagging face emerge right after the belly pushes his belt through the door. He takes one look at Crane, then at me – blinking as if he’s trying to puzzle out what’s wrong.

I smile at them both as I begin to stand.

‘The lovely lady is leaving,’ Crane declares.

Nodding once, I try to keep it smooth and polite.

Boots steady on tile, a socially-acceptable smile on my face.

‘What’s the matter, Crane? Don’t like brunettes?’ The guard scoffs at him.

‘Not my type.’ Crane ruffles my feathers for the final time as my heels clack out of the room.

Walking out of the facility, I’m trying to categorise what I’m feeling.

I’m low because, on the surface, it *was* a waste of time. Maybe because I’ve come here with good intentions that were outright rejected and sneered upon.

The bitterness from past failures starts coagulating low in my throat.

But as I’m walking towards my Ford, I recognise something beneath the disappointment.

Crane hadn’t been indifferent. Guarded – sure. Defensive – definitely. But not indifferent.

He reacted to books. To being asked real questions. That was more than he’d probably meant to give me. Whether it was annoyance, instinct or something closer to nerves, I couldn’t yet tell.

As I slide into my car and turn the ignition, I glance at the camera bag on the passenger seat. My stomach knots. He

isn't a breakthrough. He's a challenge – and challenges have always been easier for me to focus on than my own life.

What unsettles me, however, is that I already want to go back. Not because I understand him.

But because I don't.

And because something in that room made me aware he noticed the addiction to corruption in me too. That should feel like a warning.

Instead?

It feels like a hook.

I've found a man who doesn't want to be understood – which means part of him already knows he could be. Despite the undercurrent of danger, a warning I want to ignore, but I'm not strong enough to.



~2~

'HOW'S THIS SUPPOSED to help, exactly?' Marina grumbles to my side.

Peering through the lens, I adjust the aperture until the bark blurs just enough to be there but not enough to steal focus as I lock onto the storm through the branches.

'Because it's the feeling right before something breaks,' I say. 'The sky wants to scream, the branch wants to snap, but neither has yet. It's a breath before the collapse.'

I'm almost certain he would understand it. Almost. A man who reads, who pays attention to words, might see what I meant without me having to spell it out.

Pressing the shutter, I watch the image freeze.

I've never had a thought like this cross my mind while working, but suddenly, I wish I were more like Marina. A photographer who finds beauty in soft things like laughter, sunlit fields – things that make the stomach flutter when hope fills it. All that fluffy stuff people write poems about.

But I never have.

I've always been drawn to darker things. What lingers after the impact – the silence, the damage, the shape grief leaves behind when no one is watching. That's what I know how to capture.

Pain leaves evidence. In the body. In choices. In the things people can't say aloud. Maybe that's why I trust it. Maybe that's why think he might.

And right now, it's the only thing I know how to offer him. Clouds and lightning.

I'm not giving him the darkness. I'm giving the clarity that lies at the end of it – one that feels both like relief and freedom. Or the closest thing to it.



‘Right,’ Marina disagrees. ‘I’m sure he won’t take one look at the dead bark and clouds and say you’re weird.’

I’ve taken that into account. ‘I’ll write in the back what I meant to say.’ I’m aware I don’t yet know Elias Crane well enough to gauge how he’ll take this, and that most people won’t see beyond the *bark* and the *clouds*. But if books are the one place he shows his teeth, I can start with art. Find the right quote, see if causes a change. Ride the next wave from there.

I’m not doing this just to get to know him, I’m doing it because I can’t stand silence for long; it starts to feel like failure too soon. I hate that my mind turns things into a challenge, hate even more that part of me wants a reaction simply to prove I can get one. But if I make him respond – even a little – maybe it helps with his boredom as much as it helps with the noise in my head.

She picks up a branch with a scowl and tosses it onto the sodden path, mud splashing her boots. Then, with her signature irritation, she tugs the cuffs of her bubble-gum pink jacket back into place.

‘Why are you trying so hard, anyway?’ she murmurs, glancing skywards as thunder growls somewhere beyond.

‘What do you mean?’ I blink at her, genuinely taken aback. She’s a photographer too – granted, one that does weddings and happy stuff, but still... I hadn’t expected this kind of cynicism from her. ‘It’s not just for my portfolio. It’s volunteer work. Why would I do it if I wasn’t all in?’

She’s shaking her head before I even get a chance to finish.

‘Because this isn’t one of the shelters, Leah. This is a prison. Proper dangerous men.’

I don’t deflect. I don’t defend him. But I also don’t apologise for the choice.

Most people wouldn’t think to volunteer at a prison – unless they were chasing redemption themselves. Or punishment. Or something else that’s broken – like I am. My best friend’s voicing what plenty think but never say.

Still, those inside the prison are there for a reason. And

Crane's reason, while scary, isn't enough to make me step back.

'The thing I keep chasing—I say aloud, keeping my eyes on the path because if I look at her, I'll have to admit she's right. 'The ones that end up in prison feel things deeply. Something powerful had to have driven them as far as to do something horrible.'

'Sure.' She crosses her arms as we start along the path skirting Burrator Reservoir.

The air smells of damp earth and woodsmoke, sharp against the back of my throat. Leaves skitter across the ground in gusts, bronze and blood-red under our rubber boots. Behind us, the lake lies still like a sheet of tarnished silver beneath the clouds.

'I don't want to undermine your art, I'm asking why you're driving nearly four hours for a man who kills people.'

'One person,' I correct. 'He killed *one* person.'

Marina snorts. 'Oh well then, it's grand! Let me just adjust my moral compass – only *one* body, folks! Worth the diesel!'

A chuckle escapes me.

The reasonable part of me agrees with her. Crane didn't seem to be satisfied having me there. But every time I think back on the way he sat slouched over the table, staring at his hands, calm and still – the more I think it wasn't because he was bored or annoyed.

He'd applied to the programme, after all.

Was it *me*, then? Was it just the fact that he didn't want *me* to be his civilian contact?

Rejection isn't a good feeling.

I trail its gloom along the path, staring at the tips of my navy boots until I stop and decide to capture this moment that bleeds through me.

The lens doesn't care that my boots are filthy. Or that they've taken me into that filth. Mud clings to the rubber in thick, dark smears. I can't help thinking of the silence he left me with.

I frame the shot low: boots in the corner, autumn leaves scattered around them, the whole thing heavier than it is.

Some of my pictures are for my own personal portfolio. And this one goes straight into it. It's more like proof that I was here, even if some people had already decided I didn't matter. Crane included, no matter how irrational that may be.

'My offer still stands,' Marina drags me out of the mental cave I'd slipped into.

When I lift my head, she's giving me that sad-eye thing that always makes the skin at my neck itch – as if I were a bruise she keeps checking for change of colour.

She's crouched over a single red wildflower that still battles the northern wind. Her camera fires off a series of clicks and she returns to staring at me.

Tugging at my woollen scarf to rid myself of the sensation, I raise my camera and take a picture of her face.

She raises her palms to shield herself, but she's too late. I've become very good at catching moments people don't mean to give me. Dark ones especially.

I'm also trying to avoid the topic, but that's beside the point.

Thunder grumbles again overhead, closer. I squint towards the battered clouds. 'Would you mind giving me a little more time to think on it? My head's not in a place for wedding photos.'

Definitely not wedding photos.

She'd asked me to work with her – shoot clients, edit portfolios. Marina and her fiancé run a cosy little studio at home in Crawley. And while Oswald helps out at his dad's dairy farm, he swings by to lend her a hand when she needs one.

It must feel amazing to know you can count on someone like that.

Shaking the cold from my fingers, I imagine it's the bite of jealousy I'm flinging away.

Ron and I were together for ten years. But I've never

stopped thinking that things shifted when he finished his degree in medicine and moved back home to Colchester.

Up until a few months ago, I'd forced myself to believe it had been the two hours of drive that put the cracks in everything, the weather that affected our proximity. And not something else. Not *someone* else.

When I finally moved to London, thinking we'd deal with the distance properly, he took a job at a nearby hospital and for a while the doubts quieted. Life just carried on.

Until it collapsed. Unto mud, coal and hellfire.

'It's been a year, Leah,' Marina reminds me.

She doesn't need to add to it.

That timeframe is saturated with too many echoes.

'What if I introduce you to someone? Oz has some nice friends.'

I roll my eyes hard enough to feel the sting. 'If you say the words *blind* and *date* in the same sentence, I will scream.'

'I just worry about you, love!' she calls, hurrying to catch up as I barrel down the footpath, eyeing my red Ford cruelly parked too far. 'You're a thirty-two-year-old beautiful, smart, talented woman! And you're acting like you're a sixty-year-old divorcee with no hope left!'

'I'm doing okay,' I urge, tugging my sleeves over my fists. 'I need to understand why I ignored what I ignored before I jump head-first into a relationship again.'

The silence that follows isn't hostile. If anything, it's a kind of truce – but I can hear her thoughts spinning like cogs, plotting my emotional rescue.

Then she halts abruptly and throws out a finger like a weapon. 'Listen here!' She's five-foot-one but built like a storm when the emotion takes her. I take another snapshot of her – finger and all. 'Your mum and dad are arseholes!'

I blink, lower the camera. My brows go up, but I don't argue.

'They should've backed you when you left Ronald – not spun it 'round like *you'd* done something wrong. Cheating's out

of order. Full stop! No excuses! If he wanted out, he should've ended it first, before he went and shagged that paediatric nurse!

It lances right through me. I know the truth, it's always there, sticking to the inside of my skull. But to hear it being said aloud is like being hit by a train.

Spinning on my heel, I make a beeline for the car, boots splashing over mud as if the sound might drown out the riot of memories in my head. I'm trying – failing, *hoping* – to banish the relentless surge pulled from the pits of my mind, all stirred by the texts I'd found on his phone. Words I can't unsee. Echoes I can't shut off.

Darting after me, Marina huffs and puffs, trying to match stride for stride.

And despite my heart threatening to grab onto the rising panic attack and ride it out to oblivion, I am well aware that she's right. Every word lands clean and justified. But none of it makes the weight in my chest any lighter.

'I must've done something to push him away.'

The thought comes too easily, which is probably the problem.

My parents taught me young that if someone leaves, you search yourself for the reason. And if Sartre's right and hell is other people, then maybe I've built my own cell and trapped both Ron and me inside it. So of course I'm already doing it with Crane after one meeting. As if every rejection has to mean there's something fundamentally wrong with me. As perceptive as he is, he'd probably locked onto that flaw and recoiled.

But is a woman's worth truly measured by how long someone stays around?

'As *if*!' Marina barks, hurling herself against the driver's door like a bodyguard. I suddenly imagine all my self-loathing and my faults crashing against her as she stands firmly against the onslaught. 'Some people are just fucking arseholes!'

I bite the inside of my cheek. Because the rational part of

me suddenly takes all those insecurities and flings them into the body of water stretching behind me.

‘Is that your new favourite word?’ I murmur through clenched teeth as I reach for the door handle beneath her armpit.

She frowns at me as though I’ve insulted her war cry. Then she softens just a touch. ‘You are worth it.’

I suck in a breath.

Hold it.

Have I said something aloud while spiralling into myself?

She says it casually, like it costs nothing.

But lands harder than she thinks. I really feel it for that brief moment. Then it slips again.

And that is *the* problem.

This is why I need more time – because when someone says something like that, I want it to *stick*. To root itself deep in the soil of my self-worth, not evaporate when it finds no purchase.

I need to find whatever piece of me still believes it’s true.

I don’t give up on Crane.

Week after week, I send him a photo. When they don’t come back, I convince myself he’s keeping them. I start watching for the postman more often than I should.

By week three, the programme coordinator leaves me a polite voicemail about appropriate boundaries.

By week five, I ignore the existence of the word *appropriate* altogether.

I trawl through eBooks for lines from old classics to write on the backs – little tests, really, to see whether anything gets through.

The branch-and-storm photo got Leonard Cohen’s *‘There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.’*

The week after, I dropped my teacup on the front porch while it still held tea. The spill fanned out in jagged tendrils,

and the morning fog licked around the edges as if it had been waiting to join the scene.

'I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become.' I infused Carl Jung's certainty and sent it to him.

There were other pieces too. Offerings. But no reply ever came. Not a word. Not even a note from the programme coordinator.

Then, finally, I mistook a fox for something monstrous in the woods near Burrator one day. It looked like some half-myth, half-reality. The way it held its ground in the bramble, all teeth and yellow stare as if it could afford to wait. It reminded me of Crane at that table. Afraid, but dangerous anyway.

So I decided it would be the last one – my final photo after two months of trying to breathe life into this effort.

Mary Shelley had the right words. Sharp enough to sting, but not enough to wound.

'The creature was silent again, looking at me with those lost, ancient eyes, full of rage I could almost taste.'

I wrote it on the back, pressed the photo into the envelope, and let go of another project that was meant to keep my mind off the self-pity.

And the next day, just after I decide not to flip off my laptop and the obscene price on a snowsuit, the postman drops a small white envelope through the slit in the door. Clean. Ordinary.

Except for the red stamp smeared halfway across the flap: *Checked by Mailroom Officer – HMP Stonebrook.*

I stare at it as it might burn through my fingers.

Excitement sparks inside me. Shamefully. I clutch the thing to my chest and hurry to my living room as though I've smuggled something forbidden.

Opening it carefully, reverently, I find a matte-finished photo inside. Of the fox – slightly warped at the corners the way photographs get when they're handled too often.

My stomach plummets. He returned it.

But when I flip it over, the breath stutters right back into me.

Beneath my line, in ink several shades darker, another sentence rolls out in impossibly neat cursive – practised, and out of place in the hands of a killer.

Old-world script almost. Slanted just so.

Not signed – doesn't need to be.

Where is this from?

That's all it says. But it's enough to break something loose inside me.

A smile pulls at my mouth.

He wrote back.

After all this time, he actually wrote back.

Maybe he kept the others, after all. Maybe he recognised the earlier quotes and didn't need to ask. Or maybe this one simply caught his attention in a different way.

Either way, he answered.

And now? I can't stop wondering why? *Why* this quote?

Does he think I compared him to a monster?

Lungs full of static, I tear through my drawers for a pen and paper, pages flying in every direction.

As I sit down, pen poised, heart in my throat, I let the rhythm of my finger-tapping against the barrel ground my logic.

Control the panic. Make a plan.

'The fish is circling the bait,' I whisper to the photo, eyes locked on his handwriting. Then, because my mind always has to make things uglier than they are, I think: *now what? How do I keep him talking?*

The address on the envelope goes first, allowing the curve of each letter to buy me time to think it through.

His name sits at the top like a curse and a challenge.

Drifting to the bookshelf, my gaze settles on the battered old Frankenstein volume wedged between two art books, its spine cracked and soft with years.

A smile pulls at my lips again as I start scribbling:

*'You can read it yourself.
I'll bring you the title,
if you give me your face.
The book will come with me – but only if you let me see you through
my lens.'*

It might backfire, I realise.

It might make him feel cornered like I'm trying to condition him into playing.

Scowling down at the note, I let my pen hover as if I could *will* the words to rearrange themselves into something safer.

I'm just about to crumple the paper when the front door creaks open and shuts with weight.

Snapping up, I see it straight away – my sister's eye, bruised purple beneath her fringe.

My lungs collapse in on themselves. Then heat floods my ribs.

Wordless, seething, I tuck the note into the envelope and rise, ready to go into battle – until I register the two suitcases dragging behind her, their wheels leaving faint wet trails on the floor.

The rage inside me loosens. Unknots. Turns into relief so fast it makes me dizzy.

'Oh, thank fuck!' I blurt, stumbling forward and throwing my arms around her as if I could anchor her there with the force of it.

She'd finally left the bastard.

Days later, I hear Anna calling my name from upstairs just as I hang the last photo on the string line in my basement to dry.

Yesterday we'd driven out to the coast so I could take more shots, but my head had barely been in it. The sea misted the lens more than once, but I didn't even curse. We took a few pictures that Anna labelled goofy and princess-pretty and called it a day. We'd both needed some time off from the world and the reality.

And as expected, she'd been thoroughly disappointed in

the way our parents had reacted – the usual blame shifting.

If it hadn't been for the shared physical features, I'd have given my right arm that they weren't our biological parents.

Examining the first photo, I test the clip that holds it aloft, giving it a small tug until I'm certain it feels secure. When I'm satisfied, I step back, arms crossed, the image already losing its hold on me.

I'm not entirely pleased with the batch – what had caught my eye, the details that urged me to press the shutter... now feel overshadowed by something else: it's been two days.

Two days since Crane's note arrived, and I still haven't found the right words to answer him.

For all my talk about emotion and art and layered intent, I can't string together one fucking sentence.

My mood had soured the entire time. Anna thinks it's because I'm angry at her soon-to-be-ex, Howard, and sure – I am. But mostly I've been stuck inside my own head, chewing on silence and possibility.

Climbing the fifteen concrete steps that separate the basement from the rest of her house, I make a decision: I'm going to finish the space. I'm going to stop this prison nonsense and get a little more hands-on. The projects I've applied for last month probably won't even send a single response, and if the representatives of bureaucracy do decide to grace me with their opinions, it probably won't be this year.

I'd been too cowardly to go for Greenland, so I'd sent applications to all of Scandinavia – different photography projects. But, as I trail the rugged concrete edges, I realise—

This is my house. The new life I've started without Ron. And it's been waiting covered in dust for way too long.

Over a year had already gone by since I'd bought this place. The basement was left half-done. Not out of laziness as much as refusal. To face the truth about Ron, why things ended, and how far I had let myself drift.

When the chemical scent from the developer trays finally thins and I emerge into the kitchen, Anna is already rifling

through the pile of mail the postman shoved through the slot.

‘There’s a sale on at IKEA,’ she announces, holding up the new catalogue. ‘You still need frames, right?’

‘Do I?’ I mutter, stepping towards the little cubby under the stairs where the house hides a cramped toilet and a miniature sink. Of course I do. I haven’t even had a chance to hang a single frame that does not contain something from the house viewing. The abstract artwork is definitely not my thing.

Scrubbing the residue of fixer from my hands, I hear her call out again: ‘Why’s there a letter from the Icelandic Environment Association and... Sámi Parliament of Norway?’

I suppress a groan.

Well, it appears like there *are* bureaucratic representatives that are actually doing their jobs somewhere in the world.

I hadn’t told her I’d applied for a visual arts grant in those countries. It had been a spontaneous, half-hearted attempt weeks ago driven by anger – at myself – for not daring to do what I’d always wanted.

‘Just... projects I applied to,’ I offer, drying my hands.

She huffs. ‘You’re going to Iceland? Do you hate heat now?’

I chuckle, towelling off – and promptly dropping the towel on the floor.

As I bend to retrieve it, she adds casually: ‘Who’s E. Crane?’

My head bangs hard against the underside of the stair frame. Stars burst across my vision. I welcome the pain. Because it slows me just enough to stop me from making a complete idiot of myself by rushing out and yanking the envelope from her fingers.

‘Stone...’ She squints, trying to make out the rest of the return address, but I manage to grab the letter before she gets to it. Scooping up the rest of the mail to hide my hyper-focused interest on it, I pick up the Norwegian administrative dread and pretend I’m more interested in that. ‘Just... projects,’ I murmur.

Not entirely a lie.

I rush out onto the cold porch, ignoring the rain that's starting to piss sideways in thin, needling gusts. Lowering myself on the rattan chair, the cushion sighs beneath me as I damn near squeal before tearing into Crane's envelope.

Inside is a single card that says: *'Deal.'*

I glare. My mind static-hums.

'What deal?' My fingers flip the card over, brows drawing tighter, but no merit to either.

Blank.

I check the inside the envelope again. Nothing.

And then it hits me like a cold shower – *my letter!*

I dart back into the kitchen, scrambling as I search for the scrap of paper I'd meant to *burn*, not *send!*

Anna peeks around the archway from the living room, chestnut hair fanning over the white wood, a cup of tea in one hand, her brows faintly furrowed. The other – somewhat darker – arches higher. She got them tinted this morning as a little well-earned self-love.

They look... aggressive, but to each their own. So does the smirk, if I'm honest. It's got a tremor under it.

'What are you looking for?' she asks, curious – somehow far too pleased with herself.

I do a double-take on that grin, suddenly feeling that creeping unease.

'There was a letter...' I mutter, glaring at the table. 'Next to the candles.'

I tap my index finger against the desk nervously.

'The one with the poem?' she asks.

Life drains out of me.

Her grin stretches wider. Entirely unapologetic.

'I sent it with the divorce papers,' she says, far too casually for the emotional arson she's just committed.

My lungs forget how to work, my ticker flatlines.

'So,' she adds, sweet as poison, 'are you going to tell me who E. Crane is, and why you're writing prison poetry to him?'

And now – I'm hyperventilating.

I've spent two days tearing my hair out over how not to scare him off – weighing every word like it might shatter him – when in reality the arrow had already been loosed, wobbling through the dark without my permission.

Then the realisation hits – he *didn't* reject it.

It settles somewhere between panic and thrill.

I jerk upright, all nerves and electricity, before bolting back down the basement stairs to grab my phone.

Because it looks like I need to get a hold of Rebecca – the programme coordinator – and explain why I'm requesting permission for a supervised shoot with an inmate.

Whether I'm ready or not.

My stomach drops even as my pulse kicks into overdrive.

Brilliant. Nothing says stable decision-making like requesting a photoshoot. In prison. I'll just... bring my own straitjacket while I'm at it.

The Author

N. von Wolf writes dark, sensual tales where ancient bloodlines, forbidden desires, and fate collide. Rooted in Eastern European lore, and shadowed by Nordic myth, her stories pulse with the power of old gods and the ache of immortal longing. By day, she leads as a Senior Technical Engineer; by night, she conjures worlds where love is a curse, a weapon, and sometimes – salvation.

You can connect with her via www.nvonwolf.com.

SEPTEMBER 2026

Hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *These Tears*.

Love what you read? Follow for updates and more:

www.facebook.com/vonwolffiction

www.goodreads.com/nvonwolf

www.instagram.com/vonwolffiction

www.tiktok.com/@n.von.wolf

www.amazon.co.uk/stores/N.-von-Wolf



Get it now:



eBook & Paperback

amazon

www.nvonwolf.com