

THE CAGED SESSION

Opening Scene (Rough Draft – Screenplay Style)

INT. CLINIC STAIRWELL / FOYER – DAY

A narrow stairwell—just wide enough for two people to pass shoulder to shoulder.

MARA KELLS (40s) climbs slowly, wincing at each step. The ache in her heel flashes across her face.

She *hates* these stairs. The building is old, the risers uneven. Her plantar fasciitis makes every step feel like a punishment.

Still, she recognizes the need for this outlet—and today, she can't stop the tremor in her hand.

INT. WAITING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

She lowers herself into a fake green leather chair trimmed with brass pins. The air smells faintly of disinfectant and old coffee. Her right foot taps, then her left, then both in restless sync with the wall clock.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

54 minutes—an hour. Years in the field have taught her the rhythm of therapy time like a sixth sense.

She sets down the magazine as the door opens.

DR. LEIGH BRENNER (50s) peers out, calm and professional.

LEIGH

Give me a second, Mara.

Of course she would. Professional courtesy between colleagues.

A moment later, the door opens again. Mara rises, slipping inside.

INT. DR. BRENNER'S OFFICE – CONTINUOUS

Mara takes the twin couch—the one she hates. Too soft, too forgiving. Brenner sits across in her usual wooden chair, straight-backed, posture perfect.

LEIGH

So, Mara... what brings you in today?

It's not often you ask for a mid-week session.

Mara hesitates. Her hands tremble.

Leigh notices—leans forward.

LEIGH (gently)

What is it, Mara?

MARA

I think I've lost my ability to feel empathy. At all.

Leigh studies her, surprised.

LEIGH

That's... a big statement.

You've worked in trauma recovery your whole life, and I've never seen you falter—not once.

So... why now?

Mara exhales, jaw tight.

MARA

I've got a new client, and I can't fathom how to treat him.

Statistically, I should have had one years ago... maybe it would've been easier then. Or better if I never had.

LEIGH

Tell me about him.

MARA

He's my first straight male survivor.

Intelligent. Physically imposing but—strangely—likable.

Polite. Kind, even.

He was sold into trafficking at six. Held until he was nine.

Now he's trying to understand why he—his words—"feels like such a slut, and such an angry man."

She stops. Silence stretches.

Leigh doesn't fill it.

MARA (quieter)

Normally, I feel things before clients do—

a tightening in my chest, a kind of mirror ache.

Now there's nothing.

Words land, but they don't *reach*.

It's like listening through glass.

Leigh waits. She's good at that—at letting quiet work.

MARA (CONT'D)

I've tried everything—breath work, supervision, distance.
None of it helps.
It's not disgust or fear.
It's... a void.

LEIGH

A void toward what?

MARA

Toward this one.
The stories, the affect—it should break me a little.
Instead, I find myself evaluating, analyzing, even judging.
And that's not who I am.
It's not who I want to be.

LEIGH

You said *this one*. You've had others like it?

MARA

Not like this.
The others—different dynamics.
Sometimes the clients carried the same wounds I've seen a thousand times,
and I could trace every scar, every trigger.
But this—this is new.
It doesn't fit any pattern.
I keep reaching for empathy and find only static.

Her hands shake again; she presses them between her knees.

LEIGH

When did you first notice it?

MARA

Second session.
I caught myself thinking maybe the story wasn't as tragic as it sounded—
that maybe it was performance.
And the moment that thought appeared, I wanted to vomit.
Because that's not objectivity; that's corrosion.

Leigh gives her a moment, then speaks softly.

LEIGH

After years of hearing what people are capable of,
you start building reflexes you don't even notice.

The mind protects itself.
Especially when most of what you've heard has come from... certain offenders.

Mara lets out a small, bitter laugh.

MARA

So it's overlap. Contamination.
I spend years listening to what people have done,
an **INT. DR. BRENNER'S OFFICE – DAY**

The silence holds for a moment after Mara's last words.

LEIGH

Something like that.

Leigh watches her closely, thoughtful.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

You keep saying *this one*.
You haven't used a name, or even a pronoun.
Why is that?

Mara stiffens, caught off guard.

MARA

Because saying it out loud makes it harder to ignore what's really bothering me.
It's a—
(*she stops, swallows hard*)
It's a straight male survivor.
First one I've ever had.

She exhales like she's been holding that in for days.

MARA (CONT'D)

I've worked with gay men before. With kids, with teens.
That was never the problem.
But this—
(*shakes her head*)
This is different.

Leigh tilts her head slightly, listening.

MARA (CONT'D)

He's intelligent. Courteous.
Even charming in that careful, deliberate way that comes from learning manners as armor.
And on paper, I should feel something for that.

Empathy. Compassion. Relief that someone like that is seeking help.
But I don't.

LEIGH

What do you feel instead?

MARA

Nothing—or worse.

Skepticism.

Every time he opens his mouth, I start thinking:

You're too put-together, too polite. What's your angle?

Then he talks about drinking too much, losing his temper at “idiots,”
how he gets aggressive with men who challenge him—
and part of me starts building a case against him.

Leigh sits very still.

MARA (CONT'D)

He's never hurt anyone.

No record, no violence in the reports.

But he carries himself like someone who *could*.

And I hate that I notice it.

I hate that I'm waiting for the file to catch up to the feeling.

Her voice cracks slightly.

MARA (CONT'D)

Then I go home and think, *Jesus, Mara, you just profiled a victim.*

I'm supposed to help him figure out why he's angry and reckless and terrified of intimacy—
and all I can think is, *You probably forced yourself on women once, didn't you?*

Then I catch it—

(she presses her fingers to her temple)

—and it makes me sick.

Because I know better.

There's no proof, no pattern, nothing.

Just fatigue.

Just assumption.

Leigh doesn't interrupt.

She lets the confession settle, heavy and human.

LEIGH (quietly)

After years of hearing what people are capable of,
your mind starts to connect dots that don't belong together.

It's protection, not cruelty.

But it's still dangerous if it goes unchecked.

Mara nods slowly, blinking back frustration.

MARA

So what do I do?

If the only thing I can feel is the urge to not feel anything at all?

Leigh considers, then sets her notebook aside.

LEIGH

Let's start with understanding why your mind built that wall.

There's a framework that might help.

Have you ever heard of the *Alpha Assessment of Survivors*?

d now I can't separate one voice from another.

MARA

Yes.

But that model was debunked—Mech disproved it in the seventies.

Captive-wolf behavior doesn't translate to humans.

Why bring it up?

Leigh scrolls through her phone, a small, knowing smile.

LEIGH

Because someone revisited it recently.

There's a paper—*The Caged Mind*.

It connects those same captive-animal dominance traits
to human trauma responses.

It's not about hierarchy anymore; it's about confinement.

Here—read this.

She passes her phone across the table.

Mara reads silently.

*"When a human endures psychological captivity—
abuse, neglect, unpredictability—
they may develop compensatory dominance behaviors:
control, hyper-vigilance, performative confidence.
These are not natural traits but learned survival strategies."*

Mara lowers the phone slowly.

MARA

So what—now we're saying everyone who lashes out,
everyone who controls, everyone who manipulates—

they're just scared?
Just victims of circumstance?
I'm supposed to *feel for that*?

LEIGH

No.
Some people are just cruel.
Some are cowards who hide behind their own pain.
We both know that.
I'm not asking you to absolve them.

Leigh leans forward, voice soft but exact.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

I'm asking you to look at what's in front of you—
the one person asking for help—
and the part of you that's too tired to give it.

Mara holds her gaze, defensive but listening.

MARA

So now I'm the one in captivity?

LEIGH

Maybe not chains.
But exhaustion is its own cage.
Fifteen years of hearing atrocities,
sitting across from cruelty and pretending to stay whole—
your empathy's not gone, Mara.
It's just pacing behind bars it built to survive.

That lands.
Mara swallows hard, blinks fast.

MARA

And if that's true... how do I let it out?
I can't just flip a switch and feel compassion again.

Leigh takes her phone back, scrolls to another passage.

LEIGH

Listen to this—

*"If clinicians can recognize pseudo-dominance patterns
as captivity responses—even in themselves—
early intervention becomes possible."*

*The goal is not to excuse behavior,
but to restore connection where fear has taken its place."*

She looks up.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

That's the work.

Not forgiving the abusers—

forgiving yourself for being human in proximity to them.

Mara exhales, something uncoils in her shoulders.

MARA

So this—this bias—

isn't hate, it's defense.

LEIGH

Exactly.

Your mind learned to brace before you even walked in the room.

Every time you met another story, it tightened the bars a little more.

Until one day, empathy couldn't squeeze through.

Mara nods slowly, absorbing it.

MARA

You know what's terrifying?

That makes perfect sense.

And I hate that it does.

LEIGH

You don't have to like the truth to start healing from it.

You just have to stop fighting it.

They sit in silence a moment.

The wall clock ticks softly.

MARA

You think I can find it again—empathy?

For him? For anyone?

LEIGH

I think it's already there.

It's the reason you're sitting here.

If you truly didn't care,

you wouldn't be this desperate to feel something.

Mara nods, eyes wet but steady.

MARA

Then I guess I start by opening the door.

Leigh smiles gently.

LEIGH

Exactly.

One hinge at a time.

(beat)

You know, Mara, the reason you're trembling right now—
that isn't weakness.

That's fatigue.

The kind that lives in your bones after years of holding everyone else's grief.

You're not here because you failed.

You're here because you're *seeking solutions*.

And that's what professionals do.

Mara lets out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

When you're exhausted, it's harder to find those solutions.

Because exhaustion blurs the edges—

it pulls you into the middle of the problem

until you can't see what's you and what's everything you've absorbed.

She sits forward, her tone a mix of conviction and warmth.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

Someone once told me something that stuck:

"You can never find the solution to a problem
if you're enveloped in it.

You have to step outside of it—

twenty thousand feet up—

and look at it without panic, without defense."

(beat)

Sometimes dissociation isn't failure, Mara.

It's survival.

It's the body's way of saying,

'Let me get some distance so I can see the shape of this thing.'

That's what you did today.

Mara listens—quiet, thoughtful.
Leigh’s voice lowers, more personal now.

LEIGH (CONT’D)

Your animal brain recognized danger—not from a person, but from collapse.
And it reached for help.
Just like your client is doing with you.
That’s not disconnection.
That’s instinct.
That’s hope still working under the fatigue.

Mara blinks, tears gathering but not falling.
A long, trembling exhale escapes her lips.

MARA

So the trembling means... I still care.

LEIGH

Exactly.
It means you’re alive enough to shake.

Mara nods slowly.
The clock ticks again—steady, forgiving.

LEIGH (CONT’D)

You don’t need to fix everything tonight.
You just need to rest enough
to start seeing it from altitude.

Mara smiles faintly through the exhaustion.
She wipes her face, steadies her breath.

MARA

Altitude sounds nice.

LEIGH

It’s quieter up there.
You’ll remember what empathy sounds like.

Silence again, but this one feels lighter—less like absence, more like calm.
The blinds sway, and light falls across the room in soft, open stripes.

Fade out.

MARA

So the trembling means... I still care.

LEIGH

Exactly.

It means you're alive enough to shake.

Leigh gives her a small smile, then studies her quietly for a moment.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

Let's look at this from a few other perspectives, Mara.

Why else does the body shake uncontrollably?

Mara thinks, brow furrowed, hands still trembling in her lap.

MARA

Well... when it's cold.

It's how the body increases movement—
to keep from freezing to death.

(beat)

When you're terrified, it's the same thing—
the body trying to push you to move,
to get away from whatever's threatening you.

And sometimes—

(she glances at her hands)

—it's just when the nerves are shot.

When the system's overloaded
and all that's left is static bouncing around the wires.

Leigh nods approvingly.

LEIGH

And what do all those have in common?

Mara leans back, thinking it through. Then it lands.

MARA

They're all fear responses.

Ways the body tries to survive.

The animal brain trying to make me move—
to live.

Leigh watches her closely.

There's a flicker of relief in her eyes; Mara's starting to connect it herself.

LEIGH

Exactly.

It's not weakness. It's signal.

You're trembling because your body thinks it's still in danger—even though you're safe enough to start healing.

Mara lets that sink in.

The fight between intellect and instinct finally eases.

MARA

So maybe that paper wasn't wrong after all.

The one you showed me—*The Caged Mind*.

Maybe we really are what it says—
animals reacting to captivity.

(beat)

Because isn't that what we actually are, Leigh?
Animals on the same planet,
trying to survive the cages we build for ourselves.

Leigh smiles softly, proud of her, not patronizing.

LEIGH

That's the point, Mara.

The closer you get to understanding the animal,
the closer you get to freeing the human.

The clock ticks quietly behind them.

This time, neither of them minds the sound.

It's no longer counting down the session—
it's marking the pulse of something alive.

Fade out.

INT. DR. BRENNER'S OFFICE – LATE AFTERNOON

Mara sits at the window.

The view is pure Boston: a plain red-brick wall, scuffed, stoic, and unbothered.

The kind of wall that's been there 150 years—like most things here—still standing, unimpressed.

MARA

You know, for a city that's always rebuilding,

Boston never changes the bricks.

Same wall, same view, same rust line from the rain pipe.

Leigh glances up from her notes, faint smile.

LEIGH

You sound like a woman who's been sitting in the same office too long.

MARA

Maybe.

Or maybe I'm realizing I'm the same way—
same bricks, same structure—just weathered differently.

(beat)

Empathy's been my fuel for years.
Every story of abuse—fuel.
Every survivor—fire.
Each one gave me something to burn.
I thought if I could keep that flame going, I could keep saving people.
Turns out, fire's greedy—it eats the house too.

She stares at the glass, her reflection split by light.

MARA (CONT'D)

But this one... this client—
he broke every model I've ever built in my head.
He's articulate, intelligent, physically overwhelming.
He's polite, respectful—
everything that should make it easy to care.
But the second he talks, I freeze.

Her voice lowers, admitting something heavier.

MARA (CONT'D)

I know the statistics—one in six men.
I've known them for years.
But knowing and *believing* are different.
I just never imagined someone like him could fit inside that number.
He's too... large.
Too in control.
It doesn't compute that someone like that could be victimized.
I keep looking for the predator in him because that's what I was trained to expect.

(beat)

And then I hate myself for it.
Because he isn't that.
He's broken in ways that don't show until he talks about control.

And it hits me—he's angry because he doesn't know how to be anything else.
And I'm angry because I assumed he never had to learn.

Leigh leans forward, tone quiet, deliberate.

LEIGH

That's empathy coming back online, Mara.
It doesn't slip in quietly—it crashes the system.

Mara nods, eyes glassy.

MARA

He wasn't always the giant sitting across from me.
He was once a child.
Once innocent.

Her voice cracks. Tears come, soft and quiet.

MARA (CONT'D)

And I can't unsee it now.
Every time he talks, I see that child sitting where he is.
And it hurts more than I expected.

LEIGH

That's what real empathy does.
It hurts before it heals.

(beat)

LEIGH (CONT'D)

You said something earlier—about fire eating the house.
Let's talk about rebuilding.
Because you're not burnt out, Mara—you're just burnt *through*.
Now you get to decide what to build on the ashes.

MARA

And if I build the same thing again?

LEIGH

Then you'll rebuild smarter.
Stronger materials, better exits.

Leigh gestures toward the window.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

You see that wall?

Same bricks for a century and a half,
but look how it catches the light differently every hour.
Nothing changed but perspective.

Mara smiles faintly through the tears.

MARA

Same old bricks. Different light.

LEIGH

Exactly.

That's the work now—learning to see the familiar without reliving the pain.

Mara exhales slowly.

MARA

Empathy without fire.

That sounds impossible.

LEIGH

Not impossible—just practiced.

Control doesn't kill empathy; it protects it.

You've spent fifteen years bleeding for others.

Now you learn how to keep your blood in your body and still care.

Mara chuckles softly, drained but lighter.

MARA

You make it sound easy.

LEIGH

It's not.

But neither is surviving—and you've done that perfectly well.

A comfortable silence settles.

Leigh glances at the clock—still time left, but no rush.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

So what do you do when you leave here?

MARA

Call the client.

Let him know I'm staying the course.

LEIGH

Good. No apology, no over-explaining.
Just show up better.

MARA

And after that?
Sleep.
The kind where you don't dream about anyone else's pain.

Leigh nods, smiling.

LEIGH

Boston bricks and sleep—both durable investments.

They share a laugh—quiet, real.

MARA

You ever think these walls could talk?

LEIGH

They'd bill for overtime.

Both women laugh again, the tension fully broken

Mara sits silently at the window, her words still hanging in the air.
Her breath trembles but the sobs are quiet now.

Leigh rises, crosses to the credenza, and pulls a small box of tissues.
She doesn't hand them over immediately—she sets them on the table between them,
a small gesture of respect that says: *You decide when you're ready.*

Mara takes one, nods faintly, eyes still wet.

LEIGH

You know what you just did there?
You disassociated.

Mara blinks, confused but listening.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

When you focused on that wall—those bricks—
you gave yourself distance.
And from that distance came perspective.
You weren't avoiding; you were observing.
That's how you found your answer.

Mara lets out a shaky breath, half laugh, half sigh.

MARA

So, staring at a hundred-year-old wall counts as therapy now?

LEIGH

In this office, absolutely.

Especially when the wall fights back.

They share a brief, knowing smile.

Leigh leans back, her tone shifting—measured, thoughtful.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

That paper I showed you—*The Caged Mind*—
the author did a podcast a while back.

They asked him what advice he'd give a survivor
who's too tired to keep showing up for themselves.

Mara tilts her head, curious despite the exhaustion.

MARA

What did he say?

LEIGH

He said:

*"There will be days you don't want to get out of bed.
Days you dread digging through the memories.
Days you curse the sun for rising again.
But go to therapy anyway.
Because sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel
isn't a train—
sometimes it's the opening."*

Leigh pauses, letting the words settle.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

I thought about that when you walked in today.
Your body was forcing you to survive—shaking, bracing,
trying to control every system it could
because it didn't trust you to rest.

Mara looks down at her hands.

They're still now, but she can feel the echo in her bones.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

That's the same control your client talks about, isn't it?

Drinking, aggression, over-managing every variable.
It's the nervous system trying to do the therapist's job.
Only difference is—his story made him that way.
Yours made you this way.

Mara stares, realization hitting her in real time.

MARA

We're the same response—different origins.
He controls to survive.
I control to help.
Either way, we both end up shaking.

LEIGH

Exactly.
Empathy doesn't mean merging—it means recognizing the rhyme.
You don't have to feel his pain to understand the pattern.

Mara wipes the corner of her eye, laughs softly through the tears.

MARA

I hate that that makes sense.

LEIGH

It's supposed to.
Therapy's the art of uncomfortable sense-making.

She smiles—a half-smirk that breaks the weight in the room.
Leigh sits back, posture perfect again, but her tone softens.

LEIGH (CONT'D)

You know, when you first came in here shaking,
I thought about how many therapists never ask themselves
what their bodies are trying to say.
You did.
And that's the difference between fatigue and awareness.
One collapses you.
The other recalibrates you.

Mara nods, quiet.

MARA

So, shaking wasn't weakness—it was signal.

LEIGH

Exactly.

And now that you've listened,
you can start teaching your body something new.

A silence follows—this one warm, balanced.
The wall outside catches late-afternoon light,
turning the red bricks almost gold.

Mara notices, smiles faintly.

MARA

Same old wall. Different light.

LEIGH

You're catching on.

The two women share the kind of silence that therapists call *productive*.
Not the end—just the pause before everything starts making sense.