

Vannie

Swann series, prequel

by Ryan Schow, ...

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Sexy Bitch

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The green and white cab pulled to a stop in front of the Audi dealership on South Van Ness. It was mid-morning, cool outside but not crisp or foggy like San Francisco could sometimes be this time of year. The passenger handed the driver a fifty, smiled and told him to keep the change. She then strolled inside the dealership where she was met by a nice looking salesman in a pinstripe Armani suit.

“Welcome to Audi,” the salesman said, looking the girl over in a quick breathless glance. Momentarily caught off guard by her looks, he swallowed hard and said, “Can I help you? With a car or something?”

The girl who looked like she wasn’t a day over twenty carried herself more like a woman than a girl. She wore a body-snug black dress made of t-shirt material with a three quarter length arm, the hem just above the knee and the black Michael Kors ankle boots with the four inch stilettos. She was a girl on the verge of looking like a sophisticated woman.

“I’m here to see you,” the girl said, her voice whimsical—almost like a song—her head tilting ever so slightly in a look that had the salesman’s heart skipping gears.

He’d spent his entire career around pretty women, powerful women, sexy women, but this girl...she was something different.

Something unique.

“Okay then,” he said, working to suppress the thrill charging through him at the mere sight of her, “how can I help you?”

“I’m here on behalf of my employer, a dreadfully successful woman who can’t seem to dodge the limelight, until it comes to buying a car. That’s where I come in. I’m her checkbook, her decision maker, her overpaid errand girl.”

“Okay,” he replied. “Is your boss an Audi owner now?”

The girl appeased him, genially, smiling but unblinking. What the salesman mistook for eye-contact was something else entirely. Her gaze was a weight upon him he felt but wasn’t sure was real.

Unbeknownst to him, the girl’s powerful mind was sifting through the spongy folds of his brain, fingering past the information stored inside, searching his memory banks for common ground, or at least that one perfect way to do what she was about to do, which was steal a car.

“My client owns the R8,” she said, her voice velvet edged and refined, “but she’s having a hard time getting in and out of it lately.”

“The R8 *is* a sports car.”

“My employer used to be hot and fit and very single. Now she’s rich and married and she’s got a fat ass and lower back problems from her fake, oversized tits. Watching her collapse herself enough to wedge her way into her sports car, it’s like her boobs and her belly can’t stop fighting against each other.”

She said this like there weren’t more important things to fret over in the world, like crooked politicians, weaponized mosquitos, wet leprosy or disenfranchised celebrities with eating disorders, drug problems and the sudden appearance of cellulite on their thighs or butts or wherever.

“Rich people problems,” the salesman joked, a slight smirk on his face.

“That’s for sure,” the girl answered with a polite laugh, not telling him she was wildly rich herself. “Listen, I need to choose a car and get on the road as soon as possible. She’s lunching with Danielle today, so she’s wanting to get this done before noon.”

He swallowed hard, past some gigantic lump in his throat.

“Danielle Steele?” he asked.

“Is there another Danielle?” she said, as if...

“I guess not,” he said.

What she wasn’t telling him was *there was no employer, no Danielle Steele, no car to buy*. There never was. The brunette with big chocolate brown eyes and shiny hair pulled into a pony-tail, she was no one’s employee, no one’s errand girl.

Not now.

Not ever.

“So I think you should show me the silver S5 out front,” she told him.

Even though her sparkling eyes were on him and she could engage in easy, effortless conversation, even though to him she looked perfectly present, her psychic feelers were burrowing deep inside his brain. They were sifting through old thoughts and memories. Touching upon current thoughts and impressions. Silently, diligently, she worked her way through the details of his past and present, finding that which felt most critical: his most recent list of clients.

“Have you ever driven the S5?” he asked.

“No,” she lied.

“You’ll like it,” he told her. “Follow me.” She fell into step behind him. “In case you don’t know,” he said over his shoulder, “the S5 is a V8 and it sounds the way you’d expect a car to sound when it steps on the dicks of every other car around. Plus it’s fast.”

The girl found his bold claim delightfully inappropriate. She graced him with a smile and a polite laugh in return. To him, she looked to be ten years his junior. What he didn’t know, though—what he *couldn’t* know—was she was older than him by nearly one hundred years.

The salesman held the door as they walked out onto the lot. She breezed past him, the scent of her perfume light and delicate and lingering in the air around her.

Out front, facing the street and parked among the other Audi’s on display, the salesman showed her the silver S5.

"I'm so sorry," he said, "I forgot to introduce myself..."

"Templeton Whatley," she replied. "Although your friends call you *Fancy T* on account of your impeccable taste in both clothing and wine."

"Yes," he said, charmed by the idea that she already knew of him. "And you are?"

"Anxious to take this beast out for a spin."

The sports coupe was buffed and polished to a high shine, the metallic silver paint shimmering hypnotic against the late morning sun's reflection. To say the car was dripping with European elegance was an understatement. The Audi S5 was sexy AF and ballsy, the exact car you'd drive if you were an independent woman with all the money in the world and only yourself to impress.

"I think she'll like this one," the girl said as she opened the door and slid gracefully inside.

"Sounds like your employer has good taste."

Shading her eyes against the sun, the girl looked up at him and said, "Templeton, darling, you don't know a thing about her. What you need to know is this is *my* choice for her, so you should be telling me that *I* have good taste."

Her candor caught him by surprise. He opened his mouth to stumble over his words, but she saved him from sounding meek.

"At this point," she interrupted, her voice purely seductive, a generous smile appearing on her face, "you should be getting me the key, shouldn't you?"

Looking sheepish, he relented. "I'll need a copy of your license and insurance."

From her clutch, she withdrew the documents and handed them over. He took them and went inside. Her smile fell away. It dropped off her face like deadweight. She checked her watch, closed her eyes, telepathically reached further out—beyond the city—for the child and her overbearing mother.

They were miles away, in Palo Alto. They were getting ready to leave the house for the child's appointment. The mother was pressing her daughter to hurry up, but the daughter was making things difficult for her mother, which she did often and took great pleasure in.

Templeton emerged from the building and said, "I think they made an error on your insurance. It says it's good from June 2017 to June 2018. But that's like three years away."

"You never asked how I knew you," she said, taking her license and insurance back. "Why I came to see you specifically."

"Curiosity has been getting the best of me," he admitted.

"You sold a Phantom Black S8 to a man named Bill Ridley a few months ago. He's my father."

The way the lies fell off her tongue so effortlessly, it was an art form she'd perfected decades ago. An art form she appreciated immensely. Even to this day. Of course it helped that she'd been in his head, in his thoughts, digging around.

It helped that she had "inside information."

Nodding, he said, "Oh yeah, Bill... that makes sense." She smiled, then he smiled, and then he said, "Do you feel comfortable maneuvering the car out of there? Our lot's a bit crowded."

She put on her seatbelt, looked up and said, "I'll pretend you didn't say that." She held out her hand and said, "Key?"

Looking uncertain, suspecting *something*, he moved to hand her the key, then paused, like he shouldn't.

"Maybe I should move it for you, just in case."

"I'm not some damsel in distress," she teased. "I know how to drive." She gave a little snap to her finger and reluctantly he handed her the key.

"Scoot back, give me room," she said, shooing him backwards. "Then jump in, I have an unforgiving schedule and right now you're making me late."

She shut the door then started the car which roared to life with a hearty, orgasmic hum. She dropped the tranny in reverse and eased out of the spot, not bumping the cars on either side of her, although it was indeed tight quarters. Templeton walked around the other side to get in, but when he reached for the handle, he found it locked.

She cracked the passenger window a couple of inches and said, "I'll bring it back in one piece. Like I said, my employer values her anonymity."

"I'll have to go with you though," he said, losing the confident, almost cocky demeanor guys like Fancy T needed when selling high end metal. He quickly added: "For insurance purposes, of course."

"My father took my mother to lunch in the S8 and you didn't go with them. Like you won't be going with me. Don't worry though, I'm a responsible driver. And I'm insured."

At that point, the way she was thinking, it was Plan A or Plan B. Plan A was him letting her go; Plan B was her taking more forceful measures, and then going.

Either plan, the car was hers now.

Suspicion streaking across his face, Templeton stood back and reached for his cell phone.

Okay, she thought, looks like it's going to be Plan A and a half.

With a single, focused thought, she fried the phone's inner circuitry so he couldn't call anyone. Not his boss, not the police, not his demanding girlfriend. Fancy T looked at his iPhone funny when it wouldn't turn on, then he glanced up at her, perplexed.

"I'll be back in an hour," she said. "If my employer approves, I'll return with a cashier's check, and if not I'll be back with a case of Dow's Vintage Port for your time and trouble."

His breath caught at the mention of the wine, and he forgot about his misbehaving phone and how he feared she might be trying to hustle him.

"What year?" he asked, his right hand suddenly trembling, his heart losing rhythm for a few restless beats. Before anything, he considered himself a wine connoisseur. And the Dow's Vintage Port? He'd just about kill for a bottle right now, much less an entire case.

"I'd bring you a case of the twenty-eleven's."

He gasped ever so slightly.

"For real? This isn't a joke?"

"It's the best red 2014 has to offer, is it not?"

"At eighty dollars a bottle, it is."

"My employer is worth nearly a billion dollars, Templeton. Money is something she throws around to remind people of their place in her life."

"Which is?"

“Under her nose,” she said. “Or under her foot if she thinks you’re shit.”

Giving a little wave and a disarming grin, she slid the car in sport mode and drove off, leaving him standing by himself in her rear view mirror. In the passenger side window, the dealer’s MSRP was a long piece of paper obstructing her view. One hand on the wheel and one on the gear shift, she used her mind—her enhanced telekinetic powers—to separate the paper from the factory glue holding it to the window. The paper slowly peeled away, giving her perfect visibility as she navigated through San Francisco, a bustling city with which she had a rich history.

Her head was a tangle of memories. There was betrayal, former friends, loved ones gone, and a trail of death she fought to keep out of her immediate thoughts. Then there was the one memory she didn’t want. The memory of an insatiable beast of a man who took something precious from her best friend. It happened just a few miles from there. He was hell incarnate. An immortal stain who slayed dozens of innocent people just to prove a point.

To hell with him.

She fought to push the horrors from her head since technically they hadn’t happened yet. Not now. Not in this timeline.

She turned on the radio, found a hard rock station, spun the volume knob. Metallica was cranking out a loud, wicked set, which sounded righteous through the Bang and Olufsen sound system. Grinning, immersed in the relentless grind of the bass guitar, she buried the accelerator and the big V8 roared.

This perfect looking girl with the killer body and the seductive looks of a goddess, she’d slipped into this timeline for one reason and one reason only: to see the girl.

Savannah Van Duyn.

Oh how she marveled at this child! She tempered her smile, but not on purpose. It just happened. A frown fought the smile and sort of held her in the uncomfortable in-between. She was a mix of delight and concern, and suddenly nervous.

How would she feel when she laid eyes on the girl? Would she be able to look in her eyes and see it—the planet’s future, the fate of the world?

Billions died.

Billions more might die.

When the girl in the Audi thought of the child, of Savannah, of who she was and who she would become, she shook with an involuntary shiver. The truth was impossible to ignore. One day the child would either change the world, or she would completely destroy it.

At this point, the odds of a scorched earth scenario were pretty much fifty/fifty. Well, she thought, maybe not *that* good.

It was more like seventy/thirty, but with the odds leaning the wrong way.

There is No Better Me

The thing about a Bentley is, for a car, it costs a gosh damn fortune when you're talking about something you use to get from point A to point B. I mean *honestly*. And my mother? She's massively overpriced as well. To say she's ostentatious is the understatement of the century. I swear, she's always getting on me for every little thing having to do with my extra weight and my unfortunate looks. Sometimes I get down on my knees before God and pray my father will trade her in for a newer model. A better, more nurturing model. She's the reason I'm now in my teens and on prescription drugs. The reason I'm going... well, where I'm going. To the head doctor. The shrink. *Again*.

What an outrageous drag.

"You look cute," Margaret says. Margaret is allegedly the thing that birthed me. She's my... oh, God, I can't believe I'm about to admit this before demanding DNA tests... she's my mother.

"If I look cute," I grumble, "then the moon is made of cheese." I wish Margaret wouldn't say nice things when she knows that I know how she *really* feels about me.

What I'm wearing today, it's not cute as much as it's comfortable. And strategic. Basically I'm wearing a white floppy hat in the car to hide my face easier. It would be so cute on someone better looking than me. And the long grey cotton dress I'm wearing this morning (the same dress I always wear to therapy), it's how I can best sit in front of others for prolonged periods of time without obsessing over my belly fat. Basically, the soft cotton doesn't squash my mess of a body as bad as everything else I own. Plus long dresses stretch me out, make me not look as pudgy as I really am.

"Are you nervous?" she asks. "Is that why you're being so quiet?"

She glances over at me. I don't look at her. My bobble-head eyes won't find hers; they won't give her that satisfaction. Besides, I don't do eye-contact. It's overrated. Well, unless I'm talking with Netty, a mouthy little blonde and my best friend. I wish I was with her right now rather than heading to some new therapist with Margaret.

Netty's Russian born name is Anetka, but this isn't the Soviet Union, and her mother (who's also Russian) believes if you're going to live in America, you'd best embrace the culture. The reason Anetka goes by Netty is because her mother's always saying she should do the best she can to not be the sore thumb that sticks out. She says anonymity is safety.

That's hilarious considering the way the Feds are unearthing everything to do with her husband these days. Netty's father. He's about as anonymous as the Pope.

And Netty?

She isn't a sore thumb until she opens her mouth and unloads on you in Russian. It's hilarious to watch. But she can be really sweet, too. Nowadays, I think of her in two parts: my very best friend and occasionally my bodyguard. Netty's father is as Russian as her mother, Irenka, and though I think Netty embellishes a bit when she tells me about how maybe he was connected to the mob, it's really fascinating. She's so serious. I don't think she even weighs a

hundred pounds, but the way she talks, trust me when I tell you, you don't want to get on her bad side.

Where she uses her heritage to survive, I use sarcasm. It's practically artistic. We all have our swords and shields. We all dress ourselves in fancy armor. At least us short, chubby, non-consequentials do.

My armor is to not be seen as best as I can, and to crack jokes at my own expense when circumstances require it. For the most part, this works. Not good. But it works.

So we're heading to my new therapist's office for my own brand of therapy, but it's kinda crazy how all I can do right now is feel sorry for Netty. Her father might be going to prison. That's what Netty says. She says he's been crushing the weights and boxing at the club five times a week. At this point, even I think *he* thinks he's going to prison. Netty says something about embezzling from his clients. I say whatever. When you live the affluent lifestyle that is our Silicon Valley ecosystem, you're always finding the shysters.

Maybe he's one of them; maybe he's not. When it comes to friendship, he gets a pass.

If this therapist isn't as officious as all the others, maybe I'll give Netty her business card. She should have someone other than me and her mother to talk to about her problems.

Slender brown fingers snap in front of my face, drawing me out of my reverie. Frowning, I shrug away from them. Margaret and her freaking manicured claws.

"Hello, I'm talking to you," Margaret says, still snapping, kind of laughing in a light-hearted sort of way. Like we're mother and daughter, and we like each other.

Just to be clear, we are, but we don't.

I shove her impolite fingers out of my face and say, "Of course I'm nervous. How'd you like to go spill your guts to a stranger who's going to look at you like you're gosh damn nuts anyway? Plus, I feel uncomfortable in this dress. It used to fit better."

"You had two ice cream bars last night, so maybe you just need to poop."

"That's gross."

"I'm just saying," she chides.

When I look at her, I'm thinking her joking with me about my weight and my private evacuation procedures is the same as joking with a burn victim about her scars.

"Your dress is suitable for the occasion," she says.

"Can we not go this morning? I'm already not wanting to do therapy anymore."

"It's good for you."

"No, Margaret," I say, folding my arms over my tummy rolls, "it's good for you."

She just looks at me. My gorgeous mother with her big sunglasses, her perfect brown skin, those shimmering eyes the paparazzi knows how to photograph just right these days. Some pictures show her looking fresh; other times she looks bombed out of her mind on uppers, downers and any number of prescribed drugs she gets from her underground network of doctors.

"You'll feel better when you're there."

"I feel great right now," I say, sarcastic. "Amazing actually."

This comes out sounding deadpan because the truth is I almost never feel good. Margaret says that won't change much when I get older, that we just learn how to cope with the shittiness of life better. Plus the drugs are always improving.

"Sane people don't need shrinks," I say.

"That's not true."

"I don't need to see the shrink as much as I need a high colonic, or better diet pills."

There's a snarkiness to my tone that's totally on point. For all the times I've had to go to new therapists, I'm well versed in trying to get out of it.

"It's a process," she tells me.

No kidding.

We roll up to a red light, come to a complete stop, and she looks at me, like I should get it already and by not understanding, it's totally putting her out.

"I know, Margaret," I say, rolling my eyes. "I get it. Therapy's a place for me to be heard."

"Your mental health isn't cheap, Vannie. You should take it serious. And maybe be a little more appreciative for all the things we do for you."

"I know I should feel special that you're paying hundreds of dollars for an hour of me having an audience of one, but I have to say, this would be a lot cheaper and easier for us both if you'd just be a better mother and start listening to your daughter more." Looking up I say, "The light's green."

Behind us, someone honks. Eyes back on the road, we resume our trek through town.

"I listen to you," she says, almost like it's an afterthought.

This is her mouth on autopilot. It's her not taking responsibility for herself or her actions. My therapist would call it an unconscious impulse. *Guh...* therapist. Saying "my therapist" sounds like I have just one when really this will be number nine.

Well, nine and counting, if you want to split hairs.

"You don't listen to me," I say, hypnotized by the buttery-smooth ride in the Bentley and the Palo Alto scenery. Last night's drugs, they're burning off. I think maybe I'm starting to feel the grit of life scraping at me from beneath the soft haze I've been floating in. "You listen to Taylor Swift, and Madonna. You listen to The Cure. Someday, you'll listen to me, too."

"You think I'm a bad mother."

"I *know* you're a bad mother. I keep waiting for you to know that, too."

She waves her hand at me like it's no biggie, then looks over at a guy in a convertible red Ferrari with great hair and eyes that are zeroed in on her. When he sees me looking at him, he frowns and turns away from us both. I pull my hat low over my face thinking anonymity truly is safety.

"What did you say, honey?" Margaret asks, totally oblivious.

"Nothing."

Gosh, I'm being rude right now. I'm so sorry. My name is Savannah Van Duyn and this gorgeous Latina she-creature sitting next to me on some of the most expensive leather east of Dubai is Margaret. Technically she's my mother, but to me she's just Monster.

The monster loves all her expensive things. She loves her big house, her country club, her three hundred thousand dollar Bentley. Having a billionaire lifestyle like ours, for her it's validation for her being, well... *her*. She's my father's trophy wife, and this is her trophy life. Well, except for me and my father. Neither of us are especially easy on the eyes. I'm no supermodel. I'm not even the right weight for my height. But my father is ridiculously rich and popular and some kind of a world figure, so whatever. It doesn't matter that he's a sort of goofy looking white guy.

The point is, thinking of Margaret gets my insides in a tussle.

I can't stand her.

It's okay... you can say it: that sounded bad. Me saying that, it sounded like some ungrateful douchebaggery coming from a spoiled brat. But I'm not ungrateful. I swear. I just feel things inside me unzipping. Like I might be coming unhinged.

Margaret sometimes reminds me she grew me in her belly for nine months then shat me out of her vagina for like fourteen hellish hours in a hospital bed of all places. She says this like I should feel sad for her. Or apologize.

Then she tells me I turned her peach into a prune.

Yeah... it's like that.

Life is me taking the blame for everything wrong with her. The worst part is she can't see how empty I am without her love. Can't she appreciate me the way I am?

I crack the window a little, breathe the fresh air and try to smile. I can feel it, though. All the little things that are wrong with me. How that soft haze has burned off completely. All that remains is the grit of my life. Outside, my eyes watch the passing scenery with that thousand yard stare you see in the eyes of the abused, the forgotten, the dead.

All I'm thinking is eighteen can't come fast enough. Me turning eighteen and being able to leave home?—oh God, that day feels *millennia* away.

Thinking about leaving home, it's the dream that hangs on the far edge of possibility. The dream that's light years away to a creature like me.

The monster signals right, then pulls into the parking lot of an upscale Palo Alto strip mall. My stomach plunges. Did I tell you I hate shrinks?

Oh yeah, I wasn't exaggerating.

Turning my pudgy body to face the monster, I lay my eyes on her, use my entire demeanor to beg. My sad puppy dog eyes are pleading, watery wet and dying for clemency. I blink twice, lower my chin and give her that look. I know I'm wanting the impossible, but at this point, all I'm thinking is *please, let's just leave!* All I'm thinking is, if she makes me do this again, I swear to Jesus I'm going to emancipate. I can do it. I really can.

Note to self: Google "emancipate from my parents" when I get home.

If I decide to divorce my parents, the judge would want me to prove the monster was an asshole or something. Ha! That'd be easy. All I have to do is point to Margaret's giant "Wall of Fame." It's this wall in her exercise room and it's literally

blanketed by photos of all her paparazzi shots. The judge, if he saw that, he'd lift an eyebrow.

Most normal people would.

"Now when you're in there," Margaret tells me, like it's my first day of school, "I want you to be as honest as you can. The thing about a therapist is, unless you tell her you're going to commit a crime or kill yourself, she can't tell anyone anything. By law. So just be honest. And try to have some fun."

Is this her way of ignoring me? By telling me to try to have fun? WTF?

Seriously... *WTF*?

My expression falls flat and I'm like, "This isn't a music concert, Margaret. It's not a stroll through the mall on a Saturday afternoon. I'm going to meet with some uptight lady who thinks I'm the screwed up one here. She's going to treat you like you're a saint trying to help me because I'm the one with the problem. But I'm not. I don't have problems as much as you have problems."

"You tried to cut off your ear," the monster says, real freaking gentle so I get the point.

I draw a deep breath so I don't erupt. I count to ten. There's fire in my eyes and she's seeing it. Thinking my bad attitude justifies my therapy.

Every time I point the finger at her, she flips me the psycho card and I still haven't figured out a decent rebuttal. So I tried to cut off my own ear, so what? Van Gogh did the same thing and look how many people loved him!

My beating heart screams in frustration; my beating heart mourns that patience and understanding that will never be there for me.

"If you want my time with my multitude of therapists to be more productive," I tell her, "you should join me. She'll ask about you anyway. They always do."

"And what will you say this time?" she asks, shutting off the car.

"That you suck as a mother and you're putting all your eggs in the wrong basket."

She rolls her eyes and says, "What does *that* mean?"

"It means you're the problem, Margaret, and fixing me isn't going to fix everything wrong with you. Why don't you go in and get your own therapy and I'll just sit here and look fat in your pretty car."

"Don't be silly."

"I'm not leaving the car."

"Get out."

I cross my arms. "No."

Right now, we're parked in the parking lot outside the therapist's office. We're just sitting here like an old married couple, irritating each other, jostling for position perhaps. She blows out a sigh, looks at me like I'm such a sad case, and I am.

I really, really am.

She shrugs out of her seatbelt, turns and stares at me. Like a total weak sauce mustard mouth, I turn away. If this was a staring contest, I'd be the loser.

I am a loser.

I say, "Just please go check her out, make sure she's not a crackpot or something. Because if she smells like a heavy smoker, or if she's wearing too much perfume, I'm not staying."

“Fine. I’ll be right back.”

“Leave me the keys,” I say.

“Why?”

“Would you leave a dog in the car without a/c?”

She frowns. Really makes a production of it. I hold out my hand, but she starts the car by remote and shuts the door, taking the keys with her.

Ugh!

As I watch her walk away—as I marvel at her amazing, exercised body, her perfect hair and her runway model walk—I’m thinking when she comes out to fetch me, I’m going to be *long gone*. It’ll be like Thelma and Louise, but without Brad Pitt or Louise. It really blows that there aren’t any decent cliffs to drive off of in Silicon Valley. This place, it’s just a bunch of presumptive buttholes thinking therapy is the gateway to a better you.

Here’s a newsflash, a little blast of truth not worth arguing over—*there is no better me*.

3

So I’m sitting in the car, thinking of a dozen excuses to not go in to whatever crackpot Margaret has set me up with when this gorgeous, ice silver Audi rolls up like a freaking rock star to a Vegas nightclub. There’s a girl behind the wheel. A girl so beautiful my heart practically stops beating for a good second or two.

She parks in the parking lot not twenty feet away. Gets out of her car. Shuts the door and leans against it. Then she just looks in my direction through big black glasses. No, she looks *right at me*. If I was into the whole lesbian phase of my youth, I’d want the shit out of this girl right now. I look away, embarrassed. Then back.

She’s still looking. Smiling now. I remind myself to breathe. To not stare at strangers because it’s rude.

Opening my cell phone, I peruse my horoscope, then blanch when it starts to tell me about my love life, how I’ll meet someone who will either bring me closer to myself, or open a chasm of adoration that will last for many years. Guess I’m going to be closer to myself.

These apps suck.

I look up and the brunette girl with the dark Jackie-O glasses and the Audi, she’s still looking at me. WTF? Then she’s looking at the office Margaret went into, then back at me. Again. I think she wants me to come talk to her.

Um... *hell no*.

My fingers creep below the glass to the door, make sure the locks are...well, locked. There will be no kidnapping of fat girls today.

Twisted Pigeon

Margaret strolls into the office of Dr. Tiffany Oaken, PhD, and the woman's office is drenched in high-brow elegance. Then again, at five hundred an hour and being booked out two months in advance, if her office was anything short of spectacular, she would've turned and walked out.

The psychologist was ready for her. And her bright, understanding eyes? Blue eyes that were both professional and inquisitive? They were looking around in delicate glances for Vannie. Dr. Oaken looked like she shouldn't be fazed by anything, but her expression was saying, where is my client? That's how it was.

"Hi, Dr. Oaken," Margaret says, "I'm Margaret Van Duyn."

She shook Margaret's hand and said, "Is Savannah with you?"

Her hand was warm and moisturized, her nails tastefully done in a sophisticated brick red. Margaret hated it when professional women smiled really bright while flashing overly pretentious nails. Talk about not dressing the part! A woman's hands said so much about her, and Dr. Oaken's were tastefully done, classy even.

"Vannie's in the car."

"And will she be joining us?" Dr. Oaken inquired.

"Yes. But first I wanted to talk to you. I understand the whole doctor/client privilege thing, and how you're bound to it and all, but my daughter's a special case."

Dr. Oaken shifted from one foot to the other, her eyes losing that little bit of shine. An eyebrow raised, but her lips stayed perfectly shut and her ears wide open.

"I would like to come in with Vannie and be a part of her... therapy, but I don't want my presence to keep her from opening up."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"When I come to pick her up, if you had a copy of your notes on your desk, something I could have that she wouldn't know about, I'm thinking that will help me better understand her. Ultimately, it might help me to better relate to her."

She looked at Margaret like she was some sort of twisted pigeon. A real shady creature. Margaret brushed it off.

"If you know about doctor/patient confidentiality, then you'll know I'm bound by it both morally and ethically. People in my profession take that sort of thing seriously."

"Yes, of course. But aren't you supposed to always work with your patient's best interests in mind?"

"Within the scope of the law, yes," she said.

"A law is only broken when it's proven to have been broken in a court of law, is it not?" Margaret asked, seriously toeing the line. Dr. Oaken didn't answer, so she continued. "Let's just say as I'm writing you a check for your services, your coffee gets spilled and you rush off to get something to clean it up with. Let's just say a copy of your notes were there, and then they weren't. You'd still have the original, but then I'd have a fighting chance at getting through to my daughter."

"And what would be in place of the copy of my notes?" Dr. Oaken asked.

"An envelope?"

"What would be in that envelope?"

“Ten pictures of Benjamin Franklin.”

She scoffed. “Do you really think I’d compromise my ethics for a thousand dollars?”

“She’s just a little fat girl with social anxiety disorder,” Margaret said, like she couldn’t believe she had to stoop this far for half a page of notes.

Now she really *did* feel like a twisted pigeon.

Dr. Oaken, with her reasonable nails, her pointed-straight bust and her Nordstrom’s skirt and blouse, she was acting like Margaret’s suggestion was incredulous. Then again, the woman wasn’t exactly raising her voice or planting her hands on her hips. She wasn’t acting offended the way she should act if she were, in fact, affronted by the suggestion.

When Margaret’s husband, Atticus, told her everyone was for sale for the right price, she changed the way she dealt with people. Not just certain people... *everyone*. She marveled at how so many of them were willing to sell their soul for pennies on the dollar.

It was baffling, actually.

“Two grand, and you bring your own coffee to spill,” Dr. Oaken finally said.

The tension of their negotiations lessened and Margaret felt her chest loosen. The woman’s charming smile, however, remained. It was clear Dr. Oaken wasn’t done with her.

“You need to know this is a one-time thing,” Dr. Oaken continued. “In other words, if I’m ever asked about this transaction in a court of law, I’ll say my report went missing, but you didn’t book another session, so I was never able to confront you. And let’s be clear, you won’t book another session.”

“No one will ever ask you anything,” Margaret assured her.

“Go get your daughter, Mrs. Van Duyn. And your envelope. You’re cutting into our hour.”

The Spilling of the Guts

1

So I’m sitting in the driver’s seat with my pulse pounding in my throat and I’m right about to put the Bentley in gear and speed off when the monster comes walking out. She’s waving me in and I’m thinking, *go—put the car in gear and just leave!* My mind is racing and I’m seriously thinking, *go, go, go!*

But I don’t because I’m a big fat chicken. And the girl in the Audi...she’s still there. Like it’s not creepy or anything. Maybe she’s waiting for someone. An older man. A married man she kisses and gropes in the parking lot of strip malls because that’s what hot chicks do these days—break up marriages for the D and enough money to buy righteous cars and not work.

To hell with her.

Margaret walks up and she’s looking at me funny, sitting in the driver’s seat like I am, and all I can think about is how I don’t have the girl-balls to flee. It’s a self-confidence thing. If I told you my broken mind is chock full of self-loathing and

insecurity, would you really be surprised? Would anyone? If you knew Margaret they way *I know* Margaret, you might understand my chicken-shittedness, my unwavering cowardice.

Begrudgingly, I crawl out of the car, shut the door, watch the monster click the remote and kill the engine.

“Why were you sitting in the driver’s seat?” she asks me.

I shrug my shoulders, glance at Audi girl.

A second later the car locks and it looks like I’m doing therapy today. In those ten or so steps between me and the monster, I decide I’m going to give this new therapist everything she wants. With the other therapists, I was a locked vault. Totally unwilling to do anything other than be obstinate and snarky when confronted with the hard truths of my charmed life. So today, I decide, I’m going to change things up.

Today I’m going to spill my guts.

You see, what I’ve learned with these f*ckers (yep, I’m gonna censor that word because it’s an ugly word, but it totally fits for the way I’m feeling, so deal with it already!) is that they expect you to *not* tell them the truth. If they can work diligently to pry something from you in the first session, if they can really start to “establish trust,” then they can drag out your therapy for years.

That’s the key to a solid business model. Long term profitability. Economic stability. If you take a moment to monetize your own therapy, if you trace the math to its inevitable conclusion, a good therapist can bilk you for tens of thousands of dollars. That’s not how all of them work, but in my zip code, we’re all just rich parasites tapped into each other’s blood supply. So today I’m going to get all better in this session whether this therapist wench likes it or not.

Maybe that’ll teach the monster. Maybe she’ll drop the whole “therapy-as-a-means-of-healing” sort of fantasy.

“Just be honest,” Margaret says as she’s walking me into the shrink’s office. There’s nothing like last minute advice. Especially if it sucks.

I look back at Audi girl, who gives a little wave, then put her out of my mind enough to say, “Oh, don’t you worry your little black heart over me, Margaret.”

“Stop calling me that,” Margaret harsh-whispers as we walk inside to the fresh smelling, upscale office. My first thought is, who decorated this place? My God, the décor is over the top! The more I look at it the more I realize it’s cozy without being off-putting, if such a thing were possible.

If I told you Dr. Tiffany Oaken was drop dead gorgeous, I’d bet the farm it wouldn’t mean dick-all to you. It means everything to me. A girl like me, a sore sight for eyes if ever there was one, I’m a classic case of “justified depression.” And a woman like Dr. Oaken? She won’t get me. This beautiful woman never saw an ugly day in her life until she met me.

Empathetic eyes appraise me. Her hand goes out, offering to take mine, and she says, “Savannah, I’m Dr. Oaken, but you can call me Tiffany if you’d like.”

I reach out and shake her outstretched hand.

“You bet, Tiffany,” I say, my dour face going all fake-happy and syrupy. She flinches just enough for me to see. Good. Having to fake high-energy politeness is the real me.

See? Honest already.

Looking at how sensible yet impeccably she's dressed, how faultless her Bloomingdale's office is, it wouldn't surprise me if this woman was a pillar in the life coach community. On closer study, she has that beautiful, self-important look. The look you get when you're really good at what you do and you know everyone knows it. My father sometimes gets that look. Margaret gets that look around everyone she meets. It's the look you have when you know you're right and you're ready to show someone like me how doing things *your* way will help *me* not be such a wet mess all the time.

Good luck with that fancy pants.

Tiffany and I walk inside her office, leaving Margaret to rot on her own. Tiffany closes the door and asks if I want water. I tell her no, that my bladder's already stretched from the coffee and I'm not all that anxious to spring a leak on her gorgeous couch.

"Do you know why you're here to see me today?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply. "Do you?"

She smiles at me the way you'd smile at a hard case. Don't mind me, Tiffany, I'm an old hand at this sort of thing. I can be so congenial while lacing my responses with antagonistic overtones. It's one of my superpowers.

"Of course," she says.

"I have social anxiety disorder, my father is super busy with his multi-billion dollar escapades and the monster—I mean, my mother—she's a case study in poor parenting. But I'm not deflecting. This is about me, right?"

"It is."

Here's where I regurgitate everything I know about therapy so I can just skip over what might be her big intro.

"This is my safe space to talk about my feelings, and since you're bound by moral and ethical agreements, I can pretty much trust you won't tell Margaret about our conversations. Am I hitting the nail on the head here?"

"You're not new to therapy," she says.

"If I had some therapy that worked, I'd be new to *that*. I'm curious, Tiffany, what makes you different from any other Stanford educated shrink-in-a-box?"

She laughs and it's a warming sound. Not a pissed-off laugh. Not an offended laugh. I don't even smile because the truth is, I really want to know how she's different.

"Actually I'm a Harvard educated shrink-in-a-box," she says.

"Congratulations."

"If it'll make you feel better, I can provide you with a list of accolades longer than you are tall."

"Well I have a list of problems longer than your list of accolades, if that lets you know where I stand on the matter. I need help, Tiffany. Not a list of your credentials."

She's smiling again. Not laughing this time, because maybe I'm going to be a tough case with a bevy of intellectually-based self-deprecation after all.

"Fair enough."

"Do you want to know about my mother?"

"No," she says.

"Really? Because you people always want to know about my mother."

“You people?”

“You know what I mean,” I say, unapologetic.

“Let’s start someplace new. Why don’t you tell me what makes you the young woman you are today.”

Okay, I have to admit, I kinda like that she referred to me as a young woman.

Taking a deep breath, I say, “My looks and weight for starters.”

“What about them?”

“Look at you, then look at me, and then tell me you’d switch bodies and I’d tell you you’re full of crap.”

“I’m pretty, I know. Prettier than you’ll ever be and that’s somehow a strike against me.”

“It is.”

“Let’s talk about your face.”

“It’s like my father’s face. He’s not a handsome man the same way guys like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg aren’t handsome men. He’s smart and hyper-successful and a total techy, but his genes are responsible for my unfortunate looks. And this body... Jesus God, don’t even get me started on that!”

“So you’ve defined yourself by your body, is that it?”

“No, Margaret defines me by my body. And the paparazzi defines me by my body. Have you seen the tabloids lately? Every time I look like some lumpy wildebeest, some motherfu—, some horrible member of the paparazzi is there to get his ungracious snaps.”

“I’ve seen the tabloids. I see what they’re doing to you.”

“Then you know about my tits.”

“Of course.”

2

Wow, this “being honest” thing is so much better than lying, hiding, redirecting. It’s like every time some head doctor wants to know what makes me who I am, telling a lie seems prudent. But it’s so much work to support and protect that lie! Yet now, today—every time I tell the truth—it’s like I’m punching someone in the balls and it feels deliciously gratifying.

“So you know these sad little things are uneven,” I say, cupping these calamitous little breasts of mine. “My nipples, too. And it didn’t help that the tabloids put different sized cover-up stars over them to really hammer this point home.”

“So you have different looking breasts, so what?”

My mouth falls open and I just stare at her. She’s a woman. She should get the whole my-breasts-equal-my-self-worth thing I’ve got going on here. Can’t she see I’m not holding back? I knew she wouldn’t get it. They never do.

“Look, Savannah, you may not know this because you’re young, but there are a lot of women who have contrasting breasts and nipples.”

“But not you,” I challenge.

“Me included.”

“Ha, right!”

“It’s true,” she says, her eyes full of understanding, and sympathy.

I can’t help but shift in my chair. “If you’ve got uneven nipples, then I’ve got a dick and three big balls.” She laughs. But she doesn’t recant her statement. “Wait a minute,” I say. “Are you for real?”

She starts to unbutton her blouse, and I start to sweat. I expected her to brush me off as being difficult and rude, but now she’s really doing it.

Could she really be telling me the truth?

“I’m prepared to show you if you don’t believe me,” she says, her fingers pausing over the third button down. “All I need is your consent.”

“This is you establishing trust, right?”

“No, this is me saying I understand from a personal perspective.”

“Fine, I believe you,” I say, the words rushing forward. “You understand.”

“Yes, but do you really?”

“Maybe,” I say, gulping, looking at her super sexy bra and her pushed-together cleavage. Two things I’ll never have. “I don’t know. You have my consent, I guess.”

She undoes three more buttons, reaches behind her to undo her bra and I stop her. I can’t have her do this. If she wants me to trust her, and not just use her to get back at Margaret, then maybe I will.

“I believe you. Seriously, I don’t want to see your boobs.”

She pauses, looks at me. She’s dead serious.

“Is it possible,” she asks, buttoning back up, “that those people you perceive as being perfect, or at the very least more attractive than you, have flaws of their own? Things they think define them?”

“Even if one of your nipples is the size of a dime and the other is a silver dollar, your breasts would still be better than mine. Plus you have the whole package and I’m just rolled beef in a cotton midi slip dress.”

“First off, don’t do that in here, and second, I paid a lot of money for my implants,” she says. “They *should* look amazing.”

I can’t believe she’s telling me these things, but for whatever reason, it’s making me trust her a little more. And how she’s not taking my crap at all?—I think I might like her.

“My father won’t let me get implants until I’m of age.”

“Would that fix you inside?” she asks.

I have to think about this for a second. “Probably not.”

“So it’s more than just a physical thing?”

“Margaret is beautiful, and the paparazzi loves her, but they use me against her. Margaret says it’s their way of keeping her from being too perfect.”

“And is she right?”

Sadly, she is.

“Yes.”

“The quickest way to unhappiness is to become obsessed with all the little things you can’t change. You can’t change your body, right?” I shrug my shoulders, but I’m paying attention. “And your mother won’t denigrate her body to suit yours, right?”

“Nope,” I say with a half-snort at the idea of it.

“So understand this is you having your own unique set of issues. If you can’t change it, move on.”

“That’s easier said than done.”

“Of course it is, but you won’t even try, will you?”

“Probably not,” I admit.

“You said it’s easier said than done. Is it because I’m good looking and successful and in most cases—whatever I say—it’s more right than what you’re thinking?”

OMG. She’s right. I just sit here, silenced, paying attention.

“When your parents hooked up, when they made you, was that something you could control?”

“No.”

“You can’t shove yourself back up into your mother’s womb and hit the reset button, right?”

“That’s a nasty visual,” I say, trying not to laugh.

“It’s still true, though.”

“Yes.”

“So do you want to get on with your life, or do you want to stay stuck in your depression?”

“Do I really need to answer that?”

“Did you try to cut off your ear?” she asks, the first signs of compassion reaching her voice.

“You know I did.”

“Why?”

“Why does anyone try to cut off their ear?”

She just sits there, eyes on me, mouth completely shut, waiting...

I remember Margaret saying I should be honest when she knew I wouldn’t. Before I started this, I remember thinking I’d do something she wouldn’t expect of me. If the therapist says I’m perfectly healthy, then maybe Margaret will finally understand she’s the problem.

“The mix of drugs was an issue. It made me feel psychotic.”

“Your mother left me a list of the drugs you’re on.”

“How does that help anyone?” I ask.

“Why won’t you try to help yourself?” she asks.

Being perfectly blunt, being one hundred percent honest, I say, “I like my depression a little bit. It’s all I have.”

3

When I admit to liking my depression, she stares at me, like she can’t believe what she heard. This, my most honest admission. Um, can I please get a blue ribbon or something here? I really feel like I’m taking first place in the “best patient ever” contest.

“You like your depression?” she asks, just to be clear.

“I just said that.”

“Why is that? And don’t generalize. Really think about it for a second.”

I do. Then it hits me. Something that hadn't occurred to me before now. "It gives Margaret a reason to pay attention to me. To always want to help me, even though I kind of hate it."

"So if you weren't depressed, what would your mother say to you?"

"First off," I say, "please stop calling her that. She's not a mother, not a mom...she's Margaret. Just Margaret."

"Okay."

"If I wasn't depressed, if I was happy, Margaret would find a way to bring me back down. She'd stop trying to help me and instead she'd make me feel bad for not being depressed. I mean, look at me. I *should* be depressed. At least, that's what she'd say. In her mind, to be overweight and happy at the same time, well that would be reprehensible. Then naturally, she'd start me on the same path as her. I'm not anxious to walk a minute in her footsteps."

"And that is?"

"Plastic surgery, of course."

Tiffany draws a deep breath in through her perfect nostrils. She's digesting this bit of truth and it's telling her plenty. Wait a minute, didn't she say she wouldn't ask me about Margaret? Apparently it always goes back to her. But it's not just that. As bad as things are with the monster, they're worse almost everywhere else.

"Do you want plastic surgery?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"I've spent half my life watching Margaret recover from everything from eyelid lifts to breast implants to vaginal rejuvenation. She once said I destroyed her pussy during childbirth. She was shit-housed and stumbling around the living room when she said it."

"Is that how she said it or are you embellishing?"

"She used the P-word, I swear. That was years ago and I still don't know what to think."

Tiffany's face barely moves. It's the same face someone makes when they hear about someone beating their kids, or some douche-knuckle kicking his cat in a fit of rage that had nothing to do with the cat.

"Are you afraid of pain?" she asks.

"I'm a realist."

"If you told Margaret you didn't want to do plastic surgery, what would she say?"

I shrug my shoulders.

"You'd have to live with who you are, right? What you look like? The way the press abuses you, Margaret couldn't take that, could she?"

"No."

"She can't stand the idea of not being able to fix you."

Holy Toledo! I sit up, my eyes clearing instantly. "You know something, Tiffany? I think you might actually get me."

"Sort of."

She's seeing I'm not the problem.

"Tell me about your friends," she says.

"Friend. As in one. Netty. She's my best friend."

“Why is that?”

“Um, because she doesn’t care what I look like. I mean, she does. It’s just...well I feel safe around her, knowing she’s not judging me. At least, not out loud. The way she projects strength... it’s like there’s not a lot that rattles her.”

“What about your classmates?”

“There’s this real piece of work, Jacob Brantley. He’s the worst. The things he says about me,” I say, surprised at the hurt welling up past my defenses. Whoa. Wait a second. I try to finish my sentence, but my eyes grow damp all the sudden and this lump in my throat, it’s like I swallowed a freaking hippopotamus.

“There we go,” she says, like she found it: that thing that makes me who I am.

Maybe she did. Maybe this is me finally finding the real me. Or maybe it’s just cramps. Who knows? All I know is I’m supposed to start my period next week so mentally I’m feeling too sharp and too soft and dissatisfied with everything and everyone.

“I... I... had a... crush—”

These eyes of mine, they’re forsaking me. The dam bursts and now they’re dripping like an open faucet. I wipe my eyes, cough out an embarrassed laugh, then feel my chest jump beneath an unexpected sob. I’m too sad to be embarrassed right now. Tiffany gets up, comes over and sits beside me.

“Can I give you a hug?” she asks.

“That’s not appropriate,” I say, sniffing.

“I know.”

“I guess so,” I answer, and she pulls me into a hug.

4

I have to say, at first, it’s weird, but then I find myself wanting to melt into her. This woman I didn’t know thirty minutes ago is now giving me the only warmth I’ve felt in forever. When she lets go and moves out of my space, I sit up and act like her hugging me is no biggie when it’s a very big biggie.

“This boy hurt you,” she says.

“He’s proof my taste in boys is too big for this ugly face and this gross body.”

“What kinds of things does he say?”

“He makes fun of me all the time. At school and online. It’s like a cruel game he can’t stop playing.”

She just shakes her head, like pieces of the puzzle are coming together. Which is good, because I’m doing something I’ve never done before with one of Margaret’s shrinks, and that’s laying it all out. Being totally transparent.

“Will you do something for me?” she asks. I nod, because I’m worried my voice will fail me. “I want you to take the next few minutes and think back to something that made you really happy. A moment, a person, perhaps even a specific situation. This should be a moment when you felt unbound from the burdens of family, school, your blistering views of yourself and your life. When you have that moment in your mind, I want you to describe it to me.”

“What if I’ve never felt something like that?”

“You have, Savannah,” she says with the kind of tender encouragement I’ve never felt from family. “It’s in there somewhere. You just have to find it.”

A few minutes later I do, and it surprises me that I ever felt anything like this at all.

“I saw this poster once, in San Francisco. Down at the Warf in one of those tourist shops. It was beautiful. And haunting. It was cold and gray and forlorn, but somehow free, you know?”

I’m back there, in that poster shop, seeing that blown up photo and I’m totally immersed in the day. Describing what that photo did to me, how it impacted me, it’s too hard to put into words. For some reason I force myself to try.

“There was something about that photo that got inside me and made me...it made me *ache* for something new. A new life. The moment where I was happiest, that was when I believed maybe it was possible. That one day I... I could be *her*.”

“Tell me about this poster,” she says.

“It was a photo of this girl in a grayish-green summer skirt and a white tank top. She was skinny and relaxed, and she had long brown hair that was half braided and half untied. This girl, or woman maybe, she was in this yellow field against cloudy gray skies leaning her back against an old Chevy with her arm laid on the hood. It was one of those classic cars you see old guys driving from time to time. But not nice, you know? Really weathered. The car’s headlights and fog lights, they were busted out. All the glass scraped away so the lights looked like empty eye sockets. And the sky blue color of the car was just patches of rust and dull paint. But the girl?” I say, feeling myself *feeling* again. My mouth breaks into a smile that surprises me, one that stays for a fleeting moment. “Oh, the girl...she was *free*. She had her head tilted back like she didn’t have a care in the world. No one to come along and crush her spirit. Nothing to gobble up her untouched soul. I still don’t know if she had her face tilted into the wind or if she was seeing God, but it didn’t matter. She was feeling things I couldn’t. Being ways I’d never been. I remember studying her, thinking she was pretty, thinking right then I would give anything to look like her. To feel as uninhibited as her. To be her. Old people are always going on about the past being simpler times. That poster made me feel like maybe I understood what they were talking about because that’s how that photo looked. It looked simple. It gave me a moment of hope.”

“But our times aren’t simple, are they? And this world we live in, this plastic existence, it’s overflowing with pretense.”

“It is.”

“Can I make a leap? And please tell me if I’m spot on or way off, okay?”

I nod.

“Your family is rich. You have most everything you’ve ever wanted materially, but your mother being beautiful is a slap in your face because you’ll never be beautiful like her unless you go through years of plastic surgery and you’re not ready for that yet.”

All the sudden she could be a hypnotist because I’m mesmerized by the truths in her words, so dizzy with focus because, again, she’s hitting the nail on the head.

“And your father, he’s got it easy because in a man’s world, you don’t have to be good looking to get the girl. You just have to have a lot of money and he does.”

“Yeah,” I say, my eyes starting to water again.

“Your parents both have what they need to make them happy, but you don’t have what you need to make *you* happy and they don’t get that.”

My breath is suddenly sitting so high in my throat I can barely breathe. What’s happening here? I’m never this emotional in therapy. Not some sloppy baby that cracks so easily. But here I am, being honest and it stings because this perfect stranger is seeing me where neither my father nor the monster can.

“Girls get ahead using their good looks, their fitness bodies, their sexuality, and you have none of that.”

I shake my head, no.

“You really want to be with this boy, Jacob, but he reminds you that you’re not good enough for him. And you want acceptance from Margaret because without that you’ll never get her love, but she won’t accept you.” I can’t even speak at this point. “So what’s the answer, Savannah?”

Clearing my throat, I say, “More drugs.”

5

Tiffany snorts out a little disappointed huff, shaking her head back and forth, not realizing I’m reverting to sarcasm, the last bastion of hope.

“You think I’m missing the point, Tiffany, but really I’m just trying to explain. The monster’s got me on drugs. It’s how she fixes me when people like you can’t. This is her answer for me and what I’m trying to tell you is that I really don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Well I won’t be prescribing you any drugs,” she says.

“But you won’t give me a fix either, will you?”

“Of course I will,” she says, “but you won’t like it.”

“Go ahead then, give it your best shot.”

I’m wiping my eyes, realizing I like this woman and I really think she might be able to help me. Or maybe she won’t. Maybe this is my best chance at help and it won’t be enough and I’ll eventually go psychomatic, which is what people call you when you go from zero to bat-shit crazy in one second flat. If you’re wondering, that’s how it starts—that’s how people sometimes get it in their heads that cutting off an ear will solve *everything*.

“The fix is psychological, it’s not going to be physical. It won’t be a fix that involves pills or diets or future boob jobs.”

“Okay...”

“In your head, you want something to be a certain way, but it won’t be that way. You won’t ever be a man who controls his destiny based on his net worth, and you’ll never be as pretty as your mother, so your happiness has to come from somewhere else. Somewhere inside you. The minute you realize you can’t rely on others or outside circumstances to fulfill you is the minute you can really start to adjust your perspective on life. And you *must* adjust it. Obsessing over things you can’t change... in part this fuels your social anxiety disorder. You know others expect more of you, and you know you’ll always disappoint them. And boys? Contrary to popular belief, boys change their minds about girls all the time. It

wouldn't surprise me if later in life this Jacob character takes a different kind of interest in you."

"Now you're just blowing sunshine up my ass," I say, even though I'm feeling better.

"Maybe a little," she says, giving me a reassuring smile, "but I've seen stranger things. The point is, you aren't going to find the happiness you want in the external world, so you'll have to go internal. Find one thing you love and immerse yourself in that."

"I love ice cream," I admit.

Anything coffee flavored with bits of shaved chocolate, that's the kind of thing I devour without delay. I swear, when I'm putting away a pint of Häagen-Dazs ice cream, sometimes I have to remind myself to breathe.

"Will that help you later in life or not?" she asks.

"Not."

"Then find something that will help you that you enjoy doing, or at least something that won't hurt you, and then do that. That's where you can indulge. And try your best to ignore the Jacob Brantley's of the world. He sounds like a turd in the punchbowl anyway."

Laughing and wiping my eyes, I say, "He is."

"So ignore him, and all the kids who tease you, and the paparazzi."

"Just be a shut-in?"

"For now. But while you're alone, when you have that perfect stillness, I want you to think of that girl in that poster, how free she was, and I want you to stay in that emotional place for as long as you can. Really feel the feeling of it. Really suffuse yourself in all the emotions you found that day. Then, when you're feeling good and you're feeling ready, venture out into the world on your terms. You'll never be that girl in that photo, but that doesn't mean you can't feel the way you imagine she was feeling when the picture was taken."

"What about you?"

"What about me?" she asks.

"Can I see you again?" These are five words I've never said to a shrink.

"I'm afraid not," she tells me with a sad face.

"What? Why not?"

How is she going to bilk my parents for tens of thousands of dollars if she's giving me all the good stuff now and unwilling to cement it in with a multitude of follow-up sessions?

"It's the agreement I made with the monster," she says. Her referring to Margaret as the monster must mean the monster did something to offend her. "I didn't have time for you today because I'm booked that tight, but she found a way anyway."

"She can't book out later? I mean, I can wait a month."

"I don't like your mother very much."

I huff out a sigh. Margaret, *that buzzkill*. She's always finding ways to disappoint me. The one shrink I finally find who treats me the way I want to be treated and the monster finds a way to completely ruin that, too.

"I don't like her very much either," I say.

"She's flawed."

“That’s the understatement of the century.”

Our time is interrupted by a light knock on the door. This prompts Tiffany to glance over at the clock. It’s time. Wow. I can’t believe our time is up already!

Margaret walks in and the fresh air suddenly feels fartified with her mixed energy. I hate feeling like this, but then again, if I loved the monster and if she loved me back, I really wouldn’t need therapy.

6

Tiffany walks over to her desk, sits down behind it; Margaret sets her cup of coffee on Tiffany’s desk and takes her checkbook from her purse to pay. I remain seated on the couch, thinking. Really digesting what Tiffany said. In my subconscious brain, I hear Margaret talking low to Tiffany, and though I hear what’s being said, I don’t focus on it.

“Don’t bother spilling your coffee,” Tiffany says to the monster. It’s not a warning as much as it’s a statement. Like some sort of stern directive, or something.

“I bought this coffee for the sole purpose of spilling it,” Margaret says.

“I’ve got no notes for you today.”

My eyes clear at the exchange going on between them, and I see Margaret holding an envelope that looks thick with something.

“What do you mean you don’t have notes?” Margaret asks.

“I never take notes until after the client has left. But since Savannah won’t be coming back, there’s no use in having notes anyway.”

Margaret stands up straight, looks down at the woman. I can’t help frowning. Margaret puts away her checkbook and I’m thinking, what the hell is going on here?

“It’s five hundred for the hour,” Tiffany says.

For a long moment the women just stare at each other and finally Margaret opens the envelop, pulls out five bills and hands them over.

“I won’t see your daughter again until I see you first,” Tiffany says. “That’s a better deal than what you offered before. And more than generous from my vantage point.”

“Well *that’s* not going to happen,” the monster says. In my mind, I’m thinking, Tiffany knows. She knows I’m not the problem. That the monster’s the one with the broken, broken brain. Turning to me, red faced with pursed lips, Margaret says, “Let’s go, Vannie.”

Triple Caramel Chunk

1

There’s a lightness inside me that lasts for about five minutes. In the car, the monster says, “I have a line on this doctor who says he’s got a line on a new drug

that will neither counteract nor upset the balance of your existing meds. He says it's being developed specifically for the kinds of problems you have."

"Which are?"

"Numerous."

Yawning, writing her off, I say, "What did you tell him I'm on?" The way I say it, it's like I need a nap. Or less powerful drugs. Or maybe a lot more coffee.

"I only mentioned the Zoloft, but I told him I'm not all that excited about the Zoloft, so we'll be talking about maybe Paroxetine or Sertraline."

"Margaret," I say, practically beside myself, "Sertraline is Zoloft."

"Oh, yeah. Anyway, he's thinking he can hit the right balance, so I'm pretty excited about this guy."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Judy from the club is... *friends* with this doctor's friend, who's also a doctor out of the city—"

"Judy's having an affair?" I ask.

Waving her hand dismissively, not taking her eyes off the road, she says, "The point is, we have a new source. In this day and age, your health and your good looks are a direct measure of who you know, and now we know this guy, so who the hell cares who's been in Judy's vagina's anyway?"

All I ever do anymore is shrug my shoulders. It's easier than talking. Especially when you have nothing to say.

"So how was Dr. Oaken?"

"She's the best we've seen so far, but you went and f*cked that up, so what does it really matter?"

The monster jumps and fires me a look. "Don't use that word in the car!"

"Would you rather I wait until we're home to use it?"

I feel a new kind of haze coming on. Something to cover up the rough texture that is my life. It's not drug-induced. Not yet. Maybe it's just me coping. The thing about not caring about anyone or anything is, if you're really committed to it, it can safeguard your feelings. And it might just save your life.

Me dropping f-bombs on Margaret, it's me showing her I don't care. It's me putting up my guard.

The truth is, she hates that word. She uses it a lot, but she hates it coming out of my mouth. I guess I don't blame her. It's such an ugly word. Then again, I'm an ugly child facing some ugly truths about myself, so why shouldn't my speech mirror my struggles?

"No matter where you are," the monster says, "you don't say that word. At all." When I refuse to acknowledge her, she says, "So what did you learn about yourself today?"

"That a lot of my social anxiety comes from Jacob Brantley, this boy from school."

"That's great," she says, chipper like she really means it. She's only being like this because it means she's not the biggest problem in my life, even though she knows she is.

"I'm thinking of asking dad to have him killed."

The way I say it is deadpan. With the straightest face ever. She laughs until she realizes I'm being serious. Jacob was my first crush, the first boy I ever really

gushed over, and now the only way I can live is if he doesn't. Or maybe the emotion will pass.

Yeah, it'll probably pass.

"Your father would never do such a thing," she says. "And therapy is not meant to foster homicidal feelings, so maybe Dr. Oaken *wasn't* the best you've seen."

"What was that envelop all about, Margaret?"

"What envelope?"

"The one you tried to give Tiffany. The one with all the money in it."

"Nothing. Mind your own business. And stop thinking your dad can fix everything. If you want someone dead, save that for your prayers tonight. Here in the real world, you can't just have people killed to solve your problems."

"So dad won't do it?"

"Jesus, Vannie, are you even hearing yourself?"

"I am. That's why I have a Plan B."

"Which is?"

"Netty's dad. He's probably going to prison anyway."

"He's not going to kill this boy for you."

"You don't know that."

"Is this just about the boy at school? This Jacob kid?"

"It's about school altogether."

Margaret laughs it off, never realizing how bothered I really am about my life. She's always telling me it's a "phase" I'm going through. One I'll grow out of soon. And when she blows me off with words like "selfish" and "teenage angst," I swear I feel my heart doing sit-ups.

"The good thing about school," she says, "is eventually it's over."

"So is your life if you want to look at it like that."

"Well if it's any consolation," she says, missing the point completely, "the only people who like high school are the popular kids, and everyone knows they all grow up to be assholes anyway."

I look at her funny. She looks back to me and I say, "You've got problems, Margaret."

"Yeah?" she says. "Well so do you." We drive most of the way home in silence, then she says, "What should we do for dinner?"

What I want to say is "Ben & Jerry's Triple Caramel Chunk ice cream with mini chocolate chip cookies," but what I say instead is something too healthy and far too boring for me to repeat. And Margaret? She's suddenly excited that I'm making "smart eating choices." It all fits in with her hoping I'll grow up to be someone else one day. Someone better than this.

Someone better than me.

Angel With Forgotten Wings

The girl pulled up to the house in Palo Alto, slowing at the driveway. It was dark outside. Night. Beyond midnight, actually—into the morning. Everyone was asleep.

She walked up to the front door, put her hand on it, disengaged the lock with her mind, with her “hard earned gift.” A gift given to her with blood, sweat, tears and death. Inside the house, it was quiet. Everything still. Even the air was a cozy seventy-two degrees.

Upstairs, she found her: Savannah.

She walked to the bed, sat beside her. Looked at her. Tears boiled in her eyes—warm, wet, the weight of them sitting heavy on her soul. These tears were big like you’d think of the universe as big. Larger than crocodile tears. She brushed them away, fought to slow her clamoring heart.

Her eyes adjusted to the light. Her ears heard everything. The slightly stuffed nose. The way the child’s breath went in and out of her mouth and nose together, not in unison. She even smelled the freshly showered scent of the child and it shoved weakness through her bones.

Carefully, she leaned forward and brushed Savannah’s hair away from her face. Her fingers, the backs of them, they drifted over a hot cheek, touched the soft skin of her arm, her wrist. Savannah stirred, as if sensing something, but nothing enough to pull her from the dream she was having.

A quick peek inside her mind showed the girl Savannah’s dream. It was about Netty. They were laughing together at school, talking about boys they’d never get, lives they’d never have.

Savannah’s eyes creaked open.

“It’s okay,” the girl whispered. “You’re safe.”

“Audi girl,” Savannah managed to say, her eyes sticky with sleep, the pulse in her neck throbbing hard against the skin, her body paralyzed with fear.

“You don’t need to be scared. I’m more than a friend. And I’m not here to hurt you, or take you. I’m only here to tell you something.”

The tears were prickling the backs of her eyes now—full, fearful, threatening to flood.

“Wh-what do you want to t-tell me?”

She reached out, took Savannah’s hand and said, “It’s going to be okay, sweetheart. Your life. You.”

“You don’t know that,” Savannah said, low, fragments of her fear attempting to dissolve.

Curiosity was getting the best of her.

“You will one day grow up to be beautiful, and talented,” she continued. “Boys will like you, girls will want to be your friend, and you’re going to fall in love with a boy whose heart will literally break a hundred times for you.”

“Are you sure you have the right house?” Savannah asked, totally serious. “Because I’m not that girl. I won’t ever be that girl.”

She laughed, a melodious laugh Savannah found curious.

“It’s different, seeing this side of you, hearing your sense of humor, how even though you use it as a coping mechanism, you’re really funny.”

“How do you know about me?”

“I do because I do.”

“That makes no sense.”

“The world makes no sense, Savannah, and that will be your journey, to navigate the unknown for longer than you think while caught in some unbelievable circumstances. But you will bless the world with your grace and beauty, even if it doesn’t always seem like it.”

“Are you an angel?”

“In a way.”

“Where are your wings?”

“I left them in the car,” the girl joked.

“Do you really know me?” Savannah asked, almost like she couldn’t believe it.

“Better than you think,” the girl replied. “Come give me a hug.”

She couldn’t take it anymore. This child, she was so starved for love, for acceptance. If she could open up her heart and pour all her love into Savannah, she would, but there was a demon she’d trapped inside her, a wicked soul so foul and hateful, she refused to wake him now, here. This demon... it couldn’t know about this child—where she lived or who she was.

“You’re not going to hurt me?” Savannah asked.

“I promise.”

Savannah moved forward, hesitant, but only after a few whispered words of reassurance were placed delicately inside the child’s head. Savannah’s body against hers, this was an emotion like nothing she’d ever experienced before. Her heart was exploding with love, so much so it felt broken as she thought about what lie ahead for her. So broken, in fact, that she started to cry. It took an act of God to keep her from sobbing.

When Savannah let go, the girl wiped her eyes and said, “Lay down, sweetheart, this is just a dream.”

“It is?”

“Lay down, close your eyes. Know you are loved, watched over, protected.”

She laid down, closed her eyes, fought the pull of sleep upon her. She wanted to open her eyes, to check and see if this lovely stranger in her room was real or just a figment of her imagination, but the girl used her mind to sync up with Savannah’s mind enough to keep her eyelids closed.

After awhile, Savannah’s breathing deepened, grew louder, fell into a rhythm.

Leaning forward, she kissed the child gently, lightly on the lips and said, “You’re going to kick this world right in the nuts, girl. You just don’t know it yet.”

2

The girl with the black dress, the sexy shoes, the perfectly f*cked up life—the only life she could ever imagine having—she crossed the street and reached for the Audi’s door when the flashing lights caught her eye.

The cops found the stolen Audi.

Great.

She opened the door and got in as two police cruisers screeched to a stop with the lights flashing red and blue. They were blocking her escape. Not that it mattered. One of the cops, he got out of the car, gun drawn and crouched behind a door in a shooter’s stance.

“Get out of the car with your hands on your head! NOW!”

The other cop in the other unit shined his spotlight on her. She shielded her eyes, then popped something into her mouth. Something marble shaped.

The cops, they were yelling at her to get out of the car, but the girl’s eyes glazed over, almost like she was comatose for a second, then they cleared. The faintest of smiles tipped the corners of her mouth skyward. Then, just like that, there was a violent explosion inside the car that blew out the windshield, the side windows and the Audi’s driver’s side door.

Both cops hit the deck.

When they got up, seeing no fire and having no explanation for the explosion, they eased up to the ruined Audi, stressed out, afraid, and found it empty.

“No way,” one cop said to the other. They traded concerned looks.

The girl... she was just gone.

