

STILL MISSING

CHEVY STEVENS

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SESSION ONE

You know, Doc, you're not the first shrink I've seen since I got back. The one my family doctor recommended right after I came home was a real prize. The guy actually tried to act like he didn't know who I was, but that was a pile of crap—you'd have to be deaf and blind not to. Hell, it seems like every time I turn around another asshole with a camera is jumping out of the bushes. But before all this shit went down? Most of the world had never heard of Vancouver Island, let alone Clayton Falls. Now mention the island to someone and I'm willing to bet the first thing out of their mouth will be, "Isn't that where that lady Realtor was abducted?"

Even the guy's office was a turnoff—black leather couches, plastic plants, glass and chrome desk. Way to make your patients feel comfortable, buddy. And of course everything was perfectly lined up on the desk. His teeth were the only damn thing crooked in his office, and if you ask me, there's

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something a little strange about a guy who needs to line up everything on his desk but doesn't get his teeth fixed.

Right away he asked me about my mom, and then he actually tried to make me draw the color of my feelings with crayons and a sketch pad. When I said he must be kidding, he told me I was resisting my feelings and needed to "embrace the process." Well, screw him and his process. I only lasted two sessions. Spent most of the time wondering if I should kill him or myself.

So it's taken me until December—four months since I got home—to even try this therapy stuff again. I'd almost resigned myself to just staying screwed up, but the idea of living the rest of my life feeling this way . . . Your writing on your Web site was sort of funny, for a shrink, and you looked kind—nice teeth, by the way. Even better, you don't have a bunch of letters that mean God only knows what after your name. I don't want the biggest and the best. That just means a bigger ego and an even bigger bill. I don't even mind driving an hour and half to get here. Gets me out of Clayton Falls, and so far I haven't found any reporters hiding in my backseat.

But don't get me wrong, just because you look like someone's grandmother—you should be knitting, not taking notes—doesn't mean I like being here. And telling me to call you Nadine? Not sure what that's all about, but let me guess. I have your first name so now I'm supposed to feel like we're buddies and it's okay for me to tell you stuff I don't want to remember, let alone talk about? Sorry, I'm not paying you to be my friend, so if it's all the same to you I'll just stick with Doc.

And while we're getting shit straight here, let's lay down some ground rules before we start this joyride. If we're going

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to do this, it's going to be done my way. That means no questions from you. Not even one sneaky little "How did you feel when . . ." I'll tell the story from the beginning, and when I'm interested in hearing what *you* have to say, I'll let you know.

Oh, and in case you were wondering? No, I wasn't always such a bitch.

I dozed in bed a little longer than usual that first Sunday morning in August while my golden retriever, Emma, snored in my ear. I didn't get many moments to indulge. I was working my ass off that month going after a waterfront condo development. For Clayton Falls, a hundred-unit complex is a big deal, and it was down to me and another Realtor. I didn't know who my competition was, but the developer had called me on Friday to tell me they were impressed with my presentation and would let me know in a few days. I was so close to the big time I could already taste the champagne. I'd actually only tried the stuff once at a wedding and ended up switching it for a beer—nothing says class like a girl in a satin bridesmaid dress swilling beer out of the bottle—but I was convinced this deal would transform me into a sophisticated businesswoman. Sort of a water-into-wine thing. Or in this case, beer into champagne.

After a week of rain it was finally sunny, and warm enough for me to wear my favorite suit. It was pale yellow and made from the softest material. I loved how it made my eyes look hazel instead of a boring brown. I generally avoid skirts because at only a hiccup over five feet I look like a midget in them, but something about the cut of this one made my legs look longer. I even decided to wear heels. I'd just had my hair

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trimmed so it swung against my jawline perfectly, and after a last-minute inspection in my hall mirror for any gray hairs—I was only thirty-two last year, but with black hair those suckers show up fast—I gave myself a whistle, kissed Emma good-bye (some people touch wood, I touch dog), and headed out.

The only thing I had to do that day was host an open house. It would've been nice to have the day off, but the owners were anxious to sell. They were a nice German couple and the wife baked me Bavarian chocolate cake, so I didn't mind spending a few hours to keep them happy.

My boyfriend, Luke, was coming over for dinner after he was done work at his Italian restaurant. He'd had a late shift the night before, so I sent him a can't-wait-to-see-you-later e-mail. Well, first I tried to send him one of those e-mail card things he was always sending me, but all the choices were cutesy—kissing bunnies, kissing frogs, kissing squirrels—so I settled on a simple e-mail. He knew I was more of a show than tell kind of girl, but lately I'd been so focused on the waterfront deal I hadn't shown the poor guy much of anything, and God knows he deserved better. Not that he ever complained, even when I had to cancel at the last minute a couple of times.

My cell phone rang while I was struggling to shove the last open house sign into my trunk without getting dirt on my suit. On the off chance it was the developer, I grabbed the phone out of my purse.

“Are you at home?” *Hi to you too, Mom.*

“I'm just leaving for the open house—”

“So you're still doing that today? Val mentioned she hadn't seen many of your signs lately.”

“You were talking to Aunt Val?” Every couple of months

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Mom had a fight with her sister and was “never speaking to her again.”

“First she invites me to lunch like she didn’t just completely insult me last week, but two can play that game, then before we’ve even ordered she just has to tell me your cousin sold a waterfront listing. Can you believe Val’s flying over to Vancouver tomorrow just to go shopping with her for new clothes on Robson Street? *Designer* clothes.” Nice one, Aunt Val. I struggled not to laugh.

“Good for Tamara, but she looks great in anything.” I hadn’t actually seen my cousin in person since she’d moved to the mainland right after high school, but Aunt Val was always e-mailing just-look-what-my-amazing-kids-are-up-to-now photos.

“I told Val you have some nice things too. You’re just . . . conservative.”

“Mom, I have *lots* of nice clothes, but I—”

I stopped myself. She was baiting me, and Mom isn’t the catch-and-release type. Last thing I wanted to do was spend ten minutes debating appropriate business attire with a woman who wears four-inch heels and a dress to get the mail. Sure as hell wasn’t any point. Mom may be small, barely five feet, but I was the one always falling short.

“Before I forget,” I said, “can you drop off my cappuccino maker later?”

She was quiet for a moment, then said, “You want it *today*?”

“That’s why I asked, Mom.”

“Because I *just* invited some of the ladies in the park over for coffee tomorrow. Your timing is perfect, as usual.”

“Oh, crap, sorry, Mom, but Luke’s coming over and I want to make him a cappuccino with breakfast. I thought you were going to buy one, you just wanted to try mine?”

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“We were, but your stepdad and I are a little behind right now. I’ll just have to call the girls this afternoon and explain.”

Great, now I felt like a jerk.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll get it next week or something.”

“Thanks, Annie Bear.” Now I was Annie Bear.

“You’re welcome, but I still need it—” She hung up.

I groaned and shoved the phone back in my purse. The woman never let me finish a goddamn sentence if it wasn’t something she wanted to hear.

At the corner gas station, I stopped to grab a coffee and a couple of magazines. My mom loves trashy magazines, but I only buy them to give me something to do if no one comes in to an open house. One of them had a picture of some poor missing woman on the cover. I looked at her smiling face and thought: She used to be just a girl living her life, and now everyone thinks they know all about her.

The open house was a little slow. I guess most people were taking advantage of the good weather—like I should have been. About ten minutes before it ended I started packing up my stuff. When I went outside to put some flyers in my trunk, a newer light-tan-colored van pulled in and parked right behind my car. An older guy, maybe mid-forties, walked toward me with a smile on his face.

“Shoot, you’re packing up. Serves me right—saving the best for last. Would it be a huge inconvenience if I had a quick look around?”

For a second I considered telling him it was too late. A part of me just wanted to go home, and I still had to get some

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stuff from the grocery store, but as I hesitated he put his hands on his hips, stepped back a couple of feet, and surveyed the front of the house.

“Wow!”

I looked him over. His khakis were perfectly pressed, and I liked that. Fluffing my clothes in the dryer is my version of ironing. His running shoes were glaringly white, and he was wearing a baseball hat with the logo of a local golf course on the brim. His lightweight beige coat sported the same logo over his heart. If he belonged to the club, he had money behind him. Open houses usually attract neighbors or people out on Sunday drives, but when I glanced at his van I could see our real estate magazine sitting on the dash. What the hell, a few more minutes wouldn't kill me.

I gave him a big smile and said, “Of course I don't mind, that's what I'm here for. My name's Annie O'Sullivan.”

I held out my hand, and as he came toward me to shake it, he stumbled on the flagstone path. To stop himself from falling to his knees, he braced his hands on the ground, ass up. I reached for him but he jumped to his feet in seconds, laughing and brushing the dirt from his hands.

“Oh, my God—I'm so sorry. Are you okay?”

Large blue eyes set in an open face were bright with amusement. Laugh lines radiated from the corners, leaked into flushed cheeks, and were commas to a wide grin of straight white teeth. It was one of the most genuine smiles I'd seen in a long time, and a face you just had to smile back at.

He bowed theatrically and said, “I certainly know how to make an entrance, don't I? Allow me to introduce myself, I'm David.”

I dropped into a quick curtsy and said, “Nice to make your acquaintance, David.”

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We both laughed, and he said, “I really do appreciate this, and I promise I won’t take up too much of your time.”

“Don’t worry about it—look around as long as you want.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m sure you can’t wait to go and enjoy the weather. I’ll make it quick.”

Man, was it ever nice to meet a prospective buyer who treated a Realtor with consideration. Usually they act like they’re doing us a favor.

I took him inside and chatted him up about the house, which was your typical West Coast style with vaulted ceilings, cedar siding, and a killer ocean view. He made such enthusiastic comments as he trailed behind me, it was like I was seeing the house for the first time too, and I found myself eager to point out features.

“The ad said the house is only two years old but it didn’t mention the builder,” he said.

“They’re a local firm, Corbett Construction. It’s still under warranty for a couple more years—which goes with the house, of course.”

“That’s great, you can never be too careful with some of these builders. You just can’t trust people these days.”

“When did you say you wanted to move by?”

“I didn’t, but I’m flexible. When I find what I’m looking for I’ll know.” I glanced back at him and he smiled.

“If you need a mortgage broker, I can give you some names.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be buying with cash.” Better and better. “Does it have a fenced backyard?” he said. “I have a dog.”

“Oh, I love dogs—what kind?”

“A golden retriever, purebred, and he needs a lot of room to move around.”

“I totally understand, I have a golden too, and she’s a handful if she doesn’t get enough exercise.” I opened the sliding

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glass door to show him the cedar fencing. “So what’s your dog’s name?”

In the second that I waited for him to answer, I realized he was too close behind me. Something hard pressed into my lower back.

I tried to turn around, but he grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked my head back so fast and so painfully I thought a piece of my scalp would tear off. My heart slammed against my rib cage, and blood roared in my head. I willed my legs to kick out, run—to do something, anything—but I couldn’t make them move.

“Yes, Annie, that’s a gun, so please listen carefully. I’m going to let go of your hair and you’re going to remain calm while we take a walk out to my van. And I want you to keep that pretty smile on your face while we do that, okay?”

“I—I can’t—” *I can’t breathe.*

Voice low and calm against my ear, he said, “Take a deep breath, Annie.”

I sucked in a lungful.

“Let it out nice and easy.”

I exhaled slowly.

“Again.” The room came back into focus.

“Good girl.” He released my hair.

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I could feel the gun grinding into my spine as he used it to push me forward. He urged me out the front door and down the steps, humming a little melody. While we walked to his van, he whispered into my ear.

“Relax, Annie. Just pay attention to what I tell you and we won’t have any problems. Don’t forget to keep smiling.” As we moved farther from the house I looked around—somebody had to be seeing this—but no one was in sight. I’d never

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noticed how many trees surrounded the house or that both of the neighboring homes faced away.

“I’m so glad the sun came out for us. It’s a lovely day for a drive, don’t you agree?”

He’s got a gun and he’s talking about *the weather*?

“Annie, I asked you a question.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what, Annie?”

“It’s a nice day for a drive.” Like two neighbors having a conversation over the fence. I kept thinking, this guy can’t be doing this in broad daylight. It’s an open house, for God’s sake, I have a sign at the end of the driveway, and a car is going to pull up any minute.

We were at the van.

“Open the door, Annie.” I didn’t move. He pressed the gun to my lower back. I opened the door.

“Now get in.” The gun pressed harder. I got in and he closed the door.

As he began to walk away, I yanked the door handle and pushed the automatic lock repeatedly, but something was wrong. I rammed my shoulder into the door. *Open, GODDAMMIT!*

He crossed in front of the van.

I pounded the locks, the power window button, tugged at the handle. His door opened and I turned around. In his hand was a keyless entry remote.

He held it up and smiled.

As he backed down the driveway and I watched the house get smaller, I couldn’t believe what was happening. He wasn’t real. None of this was real. At the end of the driveway he paused for a second, checking for traffic. My lawn sign ad-

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vertising the open house was missing. I glanced into the back of the van and there it was, along with the two I'd placed at the end of the street.

Then it hit me. This wasn't random. He must have read the ad and checked out the street.

He chose me.

"So, how did the open house go?"

Fine, until he came along.

Could I pull the keys out of the ignition? Or at least press the unlock button on the remote and throw myself out the door before he grabbed me? I slowly reached out with my left hand, keeping it low—

His hand landed on my shoulder, and his fingers curled over my collarbone.

"I'm trying to ask about your day, Annie. You're not usually so rude."

I stared at him.

"The open house?"

"It was . . . it was slow."

"You must have been happy when I came by, then!"

He gave me that smile I'd found so genuine. As he waited for me to respond, his smile began to droop and his grip tightened.

"Yes, yes, it was nice to see someone."

The smile was back. He rubbed me on the shoulder where his hand had been, then cupped my cheek.

"Just try to relax and enjoy the sun, you look so stressed out lately." When he faced the road again, he gripped the steering wheel with one hand and rested the other on my thigh. "You're going to like it there."

"Where? Where are you taking me?"

He began to hum.

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After a while he turned down a little side road and parked. I had no idea where we were. He shut off the van, turned to me, and smiled like we were on a date.

“Not much longer now.”

He got out, walked around the front of the van, then opened my door. I hesitated for a second. He cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows. I got out.

He put an arm around my shoulder, the gun in his other hand, and we walked to the back of the van.

He inhaled deeply. “Mmmm, smell that air. Incredible.”

Everything was so quiet, that hot summer afternoon kind of quiet when you can hear a dragonfly buzzing ten feet from you. We passed a huge huckleberry bush close to the van, its berries almost ripe. I started bawling and shaking so hard I could barely walk. He wrapped both of his hands around the upper part of my arms, holding me up. We were still walking, but I couldn’t feel my legs.

He took his hands away for a moment and opened up the van’s back doors. I started running. He grabbed the back of my hair, spun me around to face him, and pulled me up by my hair until my toes grazed the ground. I tried to kick him in the legs, but he was a good foot taller and easily held me away from him. The pain was excruciating. All I could do was kick at the air and pound my fists on his arm. I screamed as loud as I could.

He slapped his free hand over my mouth and said, “Now, why did you go do something silly like that?”

I clung to the arm that held me in the air and tried to hoist my body up, to take away the pressure from my scalp.

“Let’s try this again. I’m going to let you go, and you’re going to get inside and lie down on your stomach.”

He lowered his arm slowly until my feet touched the

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ground. One of my high heels had fallen off when I tried to kick him, so I was off balance and stumbled backward. The van's bumper hit the back of my knees, and I landed on my ass in the van. A gray blanket was spread out on the floor. I sat there and stared out at him, shaking so hard my teeth chattered. The sun was bright behind his head, turning his face dark and outlining him in light.

He pushed me hard on the shoulders, pressed me onto my back, and said, "Roll over."

"Wait—can we just talk for a minute?" He smiled at me like I was a puppy chewing on his shoelaces. "Why are you doing this?" I said. "Do you want money? If we go back and get my purse, I can give you my PIN number for my bank card—there's a few thousand in my account. And my credit cards, they have really high limits." He continued to smile at me.

"If we just talk, I know we can work something out. I can—"

"I don't need your money, Annie." He reached for the gun, now tucked into his waistband. "I didn't want to have to use this, but—"

"Stop!" I threw my hands out in front of me. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by it, I just don't know what you want. Is it . . . is it sex? Is that what you want?"

"What did I ask you to do?"

"You . . . asked me to roll over."

He raised an eyebrow.

"That's it? You just want me to roll over? What are you going to do to me if I roll over?"

"I've asked you nicely two times now." His hand caressed the gun.

I rolled over.

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“I don’t understand why you’re doing this.” My voice cracked. Damn. I had to stay calm. “Have we met before?”

He was behind me, one hand on the middle of my back, pinning me down.

“I’m sorry if I did something to offend you, David. I really am. Just tell me how I can make it up to you, okay? There has to be some way. . . .”

I shut up and listened. I could hear small sounds behind me, could tell he was doing something back there, preparing for something. I waited for the click of the gun being cocked. My body shook with terror. Was this it for me? My life was going to end with me face down in the back of a van? I felt a needle stab into the back of my thigh. I flinched and tried to reach back to touch it. Fire crawled up my leg.

Before we wrap this session up, Doc, I think it’s only fair I fill you in on something—if I’m going to climb aboard the no-bullshit train, I should ride it to the end of the line. When I said I was screwed up, I actually meant royally fucked. The I-sleep-in-my-closet-every-night kind of fucked.

It was tricky as hell when I first got home and was staying in my old bedroom at my mom’s, slipped out in the morning so no one knew. Now that I’m back in my old place, some shit is easier since I can control all the variables. But I won’t set foot in a building unless I know where the exits are. It’s a damn good thing you’re on the ground floor. I wouldn’t be sitting here if your office was any higher than I can jump.

Night . . . well, night’s the worst. I can’t have any people around. What if they unlocked a door? What if they left a window open? If I wasn’t already waltzing with crazy, then

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running around checking everything while trying not to let anybody see what I'm doing would guarantee me a dance.

When I first got home, I thought if I could just find one person who felt the same as me . . . Dumbass that I am, I looked for a support group. Turns out there's no such thing as SAAMA, no Some Asshole Abducted Me Anonymous, online or off. Anyway, the whole concept of anonymity is bullshit when you've been on magazine covers, front pages, and talk shows. Even if I did track down a group, I'm willing to bet one of its wonderfully sympathetic members would be cashing in on my shit as soon as she walked out the door. Sell my pain to some tabloid and get herself a cruise or a plasma TV.

Not to mention, I hate talking to strangers about this stuff, especially reporters, who get it ass backward often as not. But you'd be surprised how much some of the magazines and TV shows are willing to pay for an interview. I didn't want the money but they keep offering it, and hell, I need it. It's not like I could keep doing real estate. What good is a Realtor who's scared to be alone with a strange man?

Sometimes I go back to the day I was abducted—replaying my actions up until the open house scene by scene, like a never-ending horror movie where you can't stop the girl from answering the door or walking into the deserted building—and I remember the cover of that magazine in the store. So weird to think that now some other woman is looking at my picture, thinking she knows all about me.

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