

ASPHYXIA

by

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FADE IN:

INT. APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DAY

Dawn. The early morning light bleeds through an open window. White gossamer curtains like ghosts form shapes that vanish in the wind. Particles of snow on the windowpane. Cold. Quiet. Deathly calm.

An alarm clock breaks the silence. A digital wrist watch. Beep. Beep. Beep...

The watch's owner is lying on the bed. VANCE ANSELM, 20s. Ruggedly handsome, unshaven, in rumpled clothes. Right eye swollen and bruised. He gasps awake as if from a nightmare. Looks at his watch: 7:00 a.m. 12/25. Christmas.

Vance looks around stupid with sleep, orienting himself. Turns to see, lying beside him on the bed:

A GIRL

A leather belt forms a noose around her neck. Her lifeless eyes stare into the distance. Tongue lolls out. Skin as white as marble. She is clearly dead.

Vance leaps out of bed and stares at the body.

Then, a KNOCK at the front door.

INT. APARTMENT ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Vance moves to the front door. Rights a MINIATURE CHRISTMAS TREE that has fallen over on the floor. Opens the door to see TWO DETECTIVES. An attractive woman in her late 20s (WINFREY) and a grizzled cowboy in his 60s, ALVIN BARNES.

BARNES

Doctor Anselm? I'm Sergeant Barnes.
And this here is Detective Winfrey.
Mind if we come in?

INT./EXT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY (DECEMBER 15)

Ten days earlier. Vance exits his car. No bruises. Walks toward the Psych Ward. He sees another doctor. EMILY SWANSON. Female, 50s. Conservative, precise, matter-of-fact - and slightly harried at the moment. Vance catches up with her as she reaches the building's entrance.

VANCE

Dr. Swanson?

She turns to him and drops her keys. He picks them up and hands them to her.

VANCE (CONT'D)

I'm Vance Anselm.

(explaining)

Fresh meat.

SWANSON

Ah, yes. You're from medicine.

(Vance nods)

We don't get many of your kind on our service. Welcome.

He opens the door for her and they enter the building.

Note: The following exchange takes place rapidly as the two physicians travel down the hall, up the elevator, and to the 4th floor.

SWANSON (CONT'D)

You'll find psychiatry to be very different from what you're used to, and our service is not what you'd call the norm. We deal with the homeless, indigent, and forgotten here at Broughten, Dr. Anselm.

(beat)

If you want proof that God exists, you won't find it here.

VANCE

I'm not looking for God.

SWANSON

Hmmm. Already found Him?

VANCE

Not exactly. I'm an atheist.

SWANSON

I see.

(moving on)

What is your prior experience in psychiatry - other than the six-week rotation you presumably fulfilled as a medical student?

VANCE

None. Well, that's not entirely true.

(MORE)

VANCE (CONT'D)

There was a couple weeks, back when I was a fourth year. I worked at an outpatient clinic.

SWANSON

Encounter anything of interest?

VANCE

Not really. Depressed housewives mostly.

SWANSON

Well, the women you'll see here are not exactly "housewife" types, if there is such a thing. No, the girls on our ward...

(thinks)

You're familiar with the phrase "wolf in sheep's clothing"?

VANCE

I been called that myself once or twice, so I should fit right in.

They arrive at the fourth floor. We get the feeling that Vance is being too glib for Swanson's liking. She adopts a sterner tone as they walk along the long hall.

SWANSON

You are not to reveal your personal history to these patients. You are not their friend. These women appear vulnerable but when you least expect it, you're ensnared. If you are uncomfortable for any reason, alert me immediately, and I'll arrange for a transfer of care. Do I make myself clear?

Vance nods.

VANCE

(remembering)

Oh and just so you know, I'll only be here part time. I still have my duties to fulfill in clinic.

They arrive at the gated entrance to the ward.

SWANSON

I have a question. Psychiatry is an elective. You didn't have to take it. Few internists do. Why you?

A pause, then:

VANCE

If you want the truth, I thought it'd be cush.

(explains)

I need a strong letter of rec. I'm transferring programs, you see.

SWANSON

Yes. Well...while I'm sorry to disillusion you as to the relative..."cushiness"...of the days to come, I do appreciate your honesty.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - CONTINUOUS

We are in a room overlooking the psychiatric ward. DR. SWANSON greets the NURSES who sit over their charts. They notice Vance as he enters.

SWANSON

(to nurses)

Girls, this is Dr. Anselm. He's...what was the term you used, Vance? Ah yes, fresh meat.

Vance winks at them and they smile back.

Then the doors burst open down below and we see MANDOLIN SNOW being hauled into the ward by four ARMED GUARDS. Screaming bloody murder. AN ORDERLY follows them in and injects something in her arm which instantly calms her down.

Vance appears over Swanson's shoulder and as they watch this:

VANCE

(re: Mandolin)

Whaddya think? PCP?

A nurse answers Vance's question:

NURSE

No. Her drug screen was clean. But she sure is a live wire.

(hands Swanson the patient's chart)

(MORE)

NURSE (CONT'D)

Her name is Mandolin Snow. Age 21.
Found down by a friend after
attempting death by strangulation -
she has the ring around her neck to
prove it. Brought in against her
will when she refused to contract
for safety. No known psychiatric
history, no prior medical
history...

They watch as Mandolin comes to life again, kicks one of the
guards in the groin, and resumes struggling for freedom.

VANCE

How can a girl who hardly weighs a
hundred pounds have the strength of
four grown men and not be on
something? She know karate?

SWANSON

Go ask her.

INT. PATIENT'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Mandolin is sitting on the bed. She wears a straitjacket. A
SECURITY GUARD stands by the door. Vance enters the room and
looks around.

VANCE

(breaking the ice)

Gee whiz, wouldya get a load of
these digs! For a few cents extra
we may be able to upgrade you to a
room with padded walls.

His attempt at humor is ignored. She doesn't even look at
him.

He pulls a chair up by the bed and sits.

VANCE (CONT'D)

Sorry. Poor taste. Lemme start
over.

(clears throat)

My name is Dr. Anselm, Miss--

But Mandolin still won't look at him. Her eyes don't leave
the security guard.

VANCE (CONT'D)

(following her gaze)

The guard has gotta stay, I'm
afraid.

(MORE)

VANCE (CONT'D)

That is, unless you promise you won't attack me. Because I saw you with the men out there, so you better keep your word, or else I might as well just run for cover this minute. We have a deal?

She nods.

VANCE (CONT'D)

And, if you promise not to hurt yourself, I might be able to persuade this nice gentleman to remove the jacket you've got on.

GUARD

I'm afraid I can't do that, doctor.

We hear Dr. Swanson's voice over the intercom:

SWANSON (O.S.)

Mr. Jeffries, you may remove the patient's restraints.

Vance looks up at the room's camera, an inconspicuous unit mounted in the corner above the door. He didn't expect to be watched and doesn't know how he feels about this but nevertheless nods his thanks to Dr. Swanson.

Meanwhile the guard removes the straitjacket and exits the room. Vance is now alone with his patient.

VANCE

Now, would you like to talk about why you tried to kill yourself?

MANDOLIN

(looking at overhead camera)

Eeny, meeny, miny...No.

(beat; to Vance)

I like your eyes. They green or brown?

VANCE

(taken off guard)

Thank you. Greenish brown. Hazel. I just call 'em the color of mud.

Mandolin smiles, charmed. Overhead, the camera makes a sound.

VANCE (CONT'D)

As I was saying, Ms. Snow. It is Ms. Snow, isn't it?

MANDOLIN

I'd like some medicine to help me sleep. Been having nightmares.

VANCE

Would you like to tell me about these nightmares?

MANDOLIN

No, I'd like my medicine.

VANCE

We'll get to that shortly.

MANDOLIN

Now.

VANCE

First, I have a few questions for you.

MANDOLIN

Later.

VANCE

Could you at least verify your name for me? Just want to make sure I didn't wander into the wrong room.

Mandolin repositions herself on the bed, crosses and recrosses her legs. Fine and delicate and milk-white. We get a glimpse of her panties. Vance catches himself looking. She catches him too.

VANCE (CONT'D)

I need to verify that you can follow simple directives, so if you could please tell me your name.

MANDOLIN

(leans forward; in a whisper)

I'll be whoever you want me to be. Now get me my pills!

Vance sighs. He gets up and presses the button to be buzzed out. Round One goes to the patient.

INT. WARD - CONTINUOUS

As he exits the room he sees Dr. Swanson come out of her office.

SWANSON

You need to find out why she tried
to kill herself.

VANCE

You saw me. I tried. Couldn't even
get her to say her name.

SWANSON

Well, keep trying.

INT. CLINIC - NEXT DAY (DECEMBER 16)

Vance seated in the physician area at a computer, looking
over Mandolin's electronic medical record. Beside him sits
his friend and fellow resident CHARLIE (20s, teddy bearish).

CHARLIE

(re: chart)

New patient of yours?

(Vance nods; Charlie
reads:)

Insomnia, drug-seeking, fatigue,
anxiety...

VANCE

She's been to the ED over a dozen
times, and yet there's no record of
it in her chart.

CHARLIE

Medical records are kept separate
from psych. Patient privacy, or
some shit.

(beat)

What are you doing in clinic
anyway? You should be at home
asleep, like, two hours ago.

VANCE

(yawns)

Scheduling mix-up I guess.

As Vance collects his things and moves off:

CHARLIE

It's not bad enough to work us 80
hours a week, 30 hours at a
stretch. Now they're making you
come in on your day off? Slave
labor, is what we're dealing with
here. Sweat shops!

INT. EXAM ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Vance enters. Seated on the exam table is his patient, MS. MCKINLEY, 50s.

VANCE

Morning, Ms. McKinley. Second time this week.

MS. MCKINLEY

That's because you forgot to refill my pain medication.

VANCE

Vicodin 5 mg?

MS. MCKINLEY

Would you do me a favor and up the dose to 7.5? Five is no longer doing it for me.

VANCE

I was going to suggest a drug holiday.

MS. MCKINLEY

A what?

VANCE

A time-out. No more medication.

MS. MCKINLEY

I've been on pain pills since my knee gave out 15 years ago.

VANCE

Ms. McKinley, long term use of pain relievers causes constipation--

MS. MCKINLEY

I take a laxative.

VANCE

--suppresses the immune system--

MS. MCKINLEY

I got a flu shot. The nurse was just in here a minute ago.

VANCE

--and causes a paradoxical hyperalgesia, meaning after a time taking opioids can cause you to experience your pain more acutely.

MS. MCKINLEY
Which is why I'm asking you to
increase the dose!

Vance bites his lip, unnerved.

INT. CLINIC - MOMENTS LATER

Ms. McKinley stomps out of the exam room, looks back at Vance angrily.

MS. MCKINLEY
Screw you, buster!

The program director, DR. MOSBY, watches her go and looks sternly at Vance. Motions him into his office.

INT. DR. MOSBY'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Dr. Mosby (50s) scowls over his desk at Vance. In the process of Vance's midterm evaluation.

MOSBY
(reading file)
"Difficulty following directives...
Often dozes off at morning
rounds...Inappropriate relations
with staff"...I don't wanna even go
into that one...
(beat)
The hell's the matter with you,
son?!

VANCE
I'm tired. I haven't slept in 36
hours. It's cold. I'm not even
supposed to be here, so...
(stands)
Can I go now?

MOSBY
Sit down!
(Vance sits)
We've all done our time. Residency
is not easy. Nobody says it is. But
you need to be more of a patient
advocate.

VANCE

(considers this)

You want me to give patients what they want or what I think they need?

MOSBY

What you think is of no relevance to me. You're still in training. It's what your superiors say that counts. You'll follow directives - at least for as long as you're with us.

Vance looks at him questioningly.

MOSBY (CONT'D)

Yes, I am aware of your desire to leave our program.

VANCE

(explaining)

I'm tired of bringing my work home with me. The stuff I see on the wards, I can't just turn it off when I leave the hospital. It doesn't let go of me.

MOSBY

(mocking)

I'm sorry the practice of medicine doesn't suit your sensitive nature.

Vance doesn't reply.

MOSBY (CONT'D)

You think anesthesiology will be any different?

VANCE

I dunno. I just know that I'm not happy where I'm at.

MOSBY

(conciliatory)

Anselm, I won't deny that you've got natural talent, good instincts. But you're reckless and irresponsible. And soon you could be out of a job, if you're lucky.

VANCE

What is that supposed to mean?

MOSBY

As a physician, you're entrusted with other people's lives. You make a mistake, there could be very serious consequences. Fatal ones.

Vance grunts and stands to leave.

MOSBY (CONT'D)

You can't escape yourself, Anselm. Wherever you go, there you are. Do you get me?

VANCE

What I get, with all due respect, sir, is I'll never get back these last two minutes of my life. Time well wasted, I guess.

MOSBY

You're treading on thin ice, Anselm.

(beat)

Now get outta here!

But Vance is already gone.

INT. AUDITORIUM - GRAND ROUNDS - LATER

A roomful of residents, some in scrubs, others in white coats, listens to Dr. Swanson give a lecture on physician burnout.

SWANSON

At the start of residency, you're excited about being a doctor. Making a little money, finally able to start paying off those loans. The weather is nice and life couldn't get sunnier...

Vance passes the auditorium and sees sitting in the back row a pretty medical student, HEATHER. He enters and sits next to her.

SWANSON (CONT'D)

But as the months progress, and the work piles up, what happens? Enthusiasm wanes, and you get the midterm slump, which is where we are now...

Vance takes a silver dollar out of his pocket and spins it on the table. He looks at Heather.

VANCE
Heads or tails?

HEATHER
Pardon?

VANCE
The coin. Heads or tails.

HEATHER
Tails.

The coin comes to a rest on tails.

VANCE
Your lucky day. You get to, uh,
allow me to take you out on a date.

HEATHER
Wouldn't that make it your lucky
day?
(Vance smiles)
I'm not that easy. Two out of
three.

Vance spins the coin again.

HEATHER (CONT'D)
Tails.

It's tails again.

VANCE
I'm Vance.

HEATHER
I know who you are.

VANCE
Wanna get out of here?

HEATHER
Can't. My mother would never let me
hear the end of it.

Heather looks up at the stage at Dr. Swanson, who happens to be her mom. Vance gets up and leaves as Swanson finishes the presentation.

SWANSON
Remember, it will get sunny again,
so stick it out.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Vance drags himself into his unfurnished apartment. A few boxes lie around, still unpacked. He checks the messages on an answering machine, hears his sister's voice.

LIZZY (O.S.)
Hey mister, it's your sister.
Couldn't reach you on your cell so
I thought I'd try you at home--

He skips the message, too tired to focus. Walks past a trash can overflowing with Chinese take-out cartons and into his bedroom and closes the door.

INT. BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING (DECEMBER 17)

Vance awakens atop an air mattress, a copy of the novel Venus in Furs spread open across his chest. He squints at the morning sunlight, steps over an open box of half-eaten pizza and past a large pile of dirty laundry and ducks away from dress shirts hanging from a pull-up bar in the door's frame to enter the bathroom.

INT. APARTMENT CORRIDOR - DAY

About an hour later. Vance exits his apartment showered and shaved and smoking a cigarette. He passes his neighbor, MRS. STIGLITZ, 50s. In her bathrobe and curlers as always. She eyes him disapprovingly.

MRS. STIGLITZ
This is a no-smoking establishment.

VANCE
(chipper)
Morning to you too, Mrs. Stiglitz.
Love the hair!

MRS. STIGLITZ
You'll be hearing from the manager!

INT./EXT. VARIOUS PLACES IN THE CITY - DAY/NIGHT (MONTAGE)

This is Vance on his day off:

1. He's at the mall sucking on an oversized soda and browsing the magazine racks, grabs a swimsuit issue.
2. Now he's in line at the movie theater, flirting with a pair of GIRLS. He arrives at the CASHIER and requests a single ticket.
3. Now he's at Washington Park, seated on a bench overlooking the lake. He's reading a book. There's snow on the grass, but it's sunny out, and he looks out onto the glassy water and breathes in deep. A moment of peace.
4. It's evening and he's strutting along the boulevard, bundled up against the cold. He passes a classy bar, sees EXECUTIVE TYPES, OLDER WOMEN. They smile at him. He looks away. Not interested.
5. He walks up to Crazy Jax, a nightclub/stripclub type place. Neon lights. Music thumping inside. Sees two GIRLS enter, follows them in, handing the BURLY DOORMAN cash as he does.
6. Inside, Vance is getting a lap dance from a STRIPPER. She has shiny black hair in a bob cut. He sips on his drink and looks up at her. Pretty smashed.
7. He exits the club and sees a group of KIDS by the entrance. He makes his way over to them, weaving a bit.

DEALER

How much you want?

VANCE

Twenty spot. You got any cats?

DEALER

Yeah. I got Ivory Wave, Ocean Bliss...

VANCE

Gimme some of that.

Vance pays the guy and pockets the drugs.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Vance is now back at his apartment. The white powder is arrayed in two rows on the kitchen counter. He snorts a line in each nostril, waits a moment for the high to kick in. Then, he starts the ritual:

He takes off his belt from around his waist, and we are about to see how Vance spends his private time.

Now he is standing against the bathroom door, his belt cinched around his neck and slid under the door frame.

As he bends his knees the leather noose gets tighter, cutting off airflow. He starts to masturbate. As he climaxes, his eyes roll back into his head and he loses consciousness, falls back against the door which opens with the weight of his body and releases the belt/noose.

He lands on the bathroom rug. His head falls against a pillow positioned there expressly for that purpose.

The name for this practice is auto-erotic asphyxiation.

And Vance is rather good at it.

LATER

Vance gasps to life on the bathroom floor.

EXT. PARK - PRE-DAWN (DECEMBER 18)

Vance is jogging through the snow before dawn. The oily blackness of night meets the stark white snow beneath his feet. The crunch of each step. Hot air bursting in plumes from his lips.

INT. APARTMENT - MORNING

Vance enters his apartment fresh from his jog, sees a package has been slid under his door. It's been there since yesterday, but this is the first he's noticed it. He opens it. A record album: Amy Winehouse's Back to Black.

Also in the package is a small photograph of his sister, LIZZY (16, blonde, and pretty as a peach). On the back of the photograph is written: "I love you, Lizzy."

Vance sets the record on the kitchen counter, picks up the phone and calls his sister. She answers on the first ring.

Note: As they talk, he slips out of his running clothes, into his dress clothes and grabs a Pop Tart from the cupboard which by the end of the conversation he has devoured.

LIZZY (O.S.)

Mister! Yay!

VANCE

(on phone)

Hey kiddo.

LIZZY
What took you so long?

VANCE
Well, ya know, there's this thing
called being a doctor...

LIZZY
(thick New York accent)
It's not enough you move halfway
across the country, and now you're
emotionally unavailable?

VANCE
(laughs)
Okay mom. How are things on the
home front?

LIZZY
Mom and dad are driving me crazy,
what else is new? Dad got laid off
again.

VANCE
I'll send some money.

LIZZY
You should send yourself.

VANCE
Ah, Lizzy, you know I can't.

LIZZY
Come on, mister! It's Christmas!

VANCE
I'm not spending my one day off on
an airplane. I need to catch up on
some Z's.

LIZZY
Then I'll come visit you. I'm
almost done with finals.

VANCE
Are you listening to me, Liz? I
said I need me some sleep.

LIZZY
I bet you haven't even bought a
real bed yet, have you?
(silence)
You seein' anybody?

VANCE

Hey, you know you're the only girl
I've ever loved, right?

LIZZY

Aw, isn't he sweeeeeet!

VANCE

I gotta go. Don't come. I'll call.

EXT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - GARDEN - DAY

A quad with gravel paths and benches. Patients, accompanied by guards, walk around among the flowers and shrubs.

Vance is slouched on a bench going over paperwork. He looks up from his papers to see Mandolin and her GUARD. She stops and stands before him.

VANCE

Well hello.

MANDOLIN

Hi.

VANCE

I was just about to pay you a
visit.

(to guard)

I'll be happy to see Ms. Snow back
to her room.

The guard leaves. Mandolin sits next to him.

VANCE (CONT'D)

It is Ms. Snow, isn't it? Because I
wasn't able to verify that the
other day.

(she nods)

Glad you're feeling more
communicative. How's it going?

She points to her chest, pouts.

MANDOLIN

I think something is wrong with my
heart.

VANCE

What seems to be the problem?

MANDOLIN

It's beating really fast. Thump-thump.

Vance takes the stethoscope from around his neck and places it against her breast, listens to her heart.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

See what I mean? Thump-thump.

VANCE

Yes...It is faster than your resting rate, but you've been walking, so that's to be expected. Here, have a listen.

MANDOLIN

Really?

VANCE

Sure.

He inserts the earbuds into her ears. As she listens to her heart, she smiles.

VANCE (CONT'D)

Soothing, right? It's like placing a ticking clock in a puppy's bed. Works every time.

He slings the stethoscope back around his neck.

MANDOLIN

Do you mind if I hear yours?

VANCE

My heart? Oh no, I can't let you do that.

MANDOLIN

Why not?

VANCE

I don't have a heart.

(she frowns)

Truth is, we mustn't forget who is the doctor and who is the patient around here.

Vance looks over to see Dr. Swanson watching them.

VANCE (CONT'D)
 (standing, all business)
 I think it's time I take you back
 to your room, Ms. Snow.

MANDOLIN
 We can't talk there. They're
 listening.

VANCE
 Who is?

MANDOLIN
 The others.

VANCE
 Are you hearing voices?

MANDOLIN
 No, you big dummy. The other
 doctors.

VANCE
 (slightly embarrassed)
 Yes. I almost forgot. The walls
 have ears.

He looks back over in Swanson's direction but she has
 vanished.

MANDOLIN
 (continuing)
 I don't want anyone else to hear
 what I have to say, and neither do
 you.

VANCE
 Why would I mind?

MANDOLIN
 I know you.

VANCE
 Yes, I saw you in the emergency
 department. I meant to bring that
 up in our first meeting, but we
 never did get much past hello.

MANDOLIN
 That's not what I meant.
 (in a singsong voice)
 Someone likes to party.

VANCE
Excuse me?

MANDOLIN
(perhaps a bit too loudly)
Crazy Jax.

Vance sits back down, looks at her but says nothing.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)
You didn't deny it. I'm impressed.

VANCE
Do you work at--

MANDOLIN
Go on and say it. Crazy Jax.

VANCE
Well, do you?

Before Mandolin can reply, A NURSE approaches.

NURSE
Dr. Swanson would like a word with
you. If you'd like I can show Ms.
Snow back to her room.

VANCE
No that's quite all right. Please
let Dr. Swanson know I'll be with
her in just a minute.

The nurse nods and moves off.

VANCE (CONT'D)
Come along now, Ms. Snow.

As Vance attempts to help her to her feet:

MANDOLIN
(takes his hand;
desperately)
You gotta help me. I need to get
out of this place. The inmates--

VANCE
Not inmates, Ms. Snow. Patients,
that's what you're called. Now come
along.

He attempts to take her arm but she moves away. Now he is
worried about a scene.

MANDOLIN

I gotta get outta here before they
rub off on me.

(thinks about it)

You think craziness is contagious?

VANCE

(amused)

I've often wondered about that
myself.

(explains as though to a
child)

Ms. Snow, in order for me to
discharge you from the ward, you
need to help me understand what
brought you in here in the first
place. Why did you try and hurt
yourself?

MANDOLIN

If I tell you, you have to promise
me you'll keep it a secret.

VANCE

A secret.

MANDOLIN

Yes.

VANCE

I can't promise not to divulge
information until I know what it is
you'd have me conceal.

MANDOLIN

Fine. You win. I didn't strangle
myself. It was my boyfriend.

VANCE

Your boyfriend tried to kill you?

MANDOLIN

Ex boyfriend. And no. Things just
got a little out of hand. We were
having sex. You understand.

She looks at the red welt on Vance's neck. Suddenly self-
conscious, Vance pulls his white coat up over his collar.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Please, mister. Help me get outta
here!

VANCE

I'll do what I can, but on one condition:

(mock serious)

You stop calling me mister.

(gentler now)

You remind me of my kid sister.

They share a smile.

INT. PHYSICIAN'S ROOM - LATER

A group of medical professionals sits around a table. This includes physicians, nursing staff, a psychologist (DR. TED HUMPHRIES), a pharmacologist (DR. HUGH LANGER), residents, and medical students.

They are assembled for morning rounds, in which they discuss each patient on the service. It's a collaborative effort, with participants shouting out suggestions as the occasion arises.

SWANSON

Let's return to our old friend,
Mandolin Snow. Dr. Anselm?

Vance, who had been writing, looks up.

VANCE

I had the opportunity to speak at length with the patient today.

NURSE

We are all aware of the fact.

Laughter.

VANCE

(continuing)

She denies suicidal ideation, contracts for safety. And she promises it won't happen again. Her vital signs are stable. Nothing abnormal on physical exam.

SWANSON

Assessment?

VANCE

I'm thinking personality disorder. Histrionic. Borderline. Probably a little of both.

SWANSON

Agreed.

VANCE

And as is characteristic for
borderline histrionics, I believe
her suicide attempt was a cry for
help, nothing more.

SWANSON

What's your plan?

VANCE

Discharge.

The others start to grumble.

VANCE (CONT'D)

(over them)

Let her go home. What's the use in
keeping her here?

SWANSON

(looking around room)

Let's hear from the peanut
gallery. Anyone?

The psychologist speaks up:

HUMPHRIES

(to Swanson)

We'd do best to keep her in obs at
least a few more days. Make sure
the whole good patient act is
legitimate. If there's an
underlying psychosis, it's bound to
resurface by then.

VANCE

There's nothing there. I examined
the patient thoroughly.

HUMPHRIES

(mocking)

And you've been here what, two
days?

SWANSON

Easy, Ted.

HUMPHRIES

Come on, Emily. We've been burnt on
this before. Send 'em off just so
they can try it again.

(MORE)

HUMPHRIES (CONT'D)

And if she does, and is successful,
it's on our heads.

A beat. The pharmacologist chimes in.

LANGER

(to Swanson)

And why hasn't she been put on an
antipsychotic? She's been here
three days.

VANCE

Two days, and what good would an
antipsychotic do? She denies
hallucinations, delusions. There's
no evidence of schizophrenia or
other psychotic disorder.

LANGER

At least start her on an
antidepressant.

(to nurse)

Paxil 20 milligrams, QAM.

VANCE

No! She's my patient and...Most
psychotropics have side effects
worse than the symptoms they
purport to treat. Extrapiramidal
changes, Parkinson-like immobility,
distonias, dyskinesias...or if you
prefer to hear it in the patient's
own words...

(reading from his pad)

Sluggishness. Weight gain. Brain
fog...

LANGER

Without medication, Dr. Anselm,
these patients would be a danger to
themselves and to others.

VANCE

I'm not trying to change the
system. I couldn't even if I tried.
But I won't sit by quietly while a
young girl gets committed to
prescriptive medication for life.

LANGER

Who said anything about the rest of
her life? We're just trying to make
sure she doesn't leave here and...

He makes the throat slash gesture.

VANCE

Have you been listening to a word I said?! She won't try and kill herself again! She gave me her word.

HUMPHRIES

Oh, her word, huh? What makes you think you can believe anything she says?

Vance doesn't have an answer for this one. Swanson lets the silence weigh heavily before speaking:

SWANSON

All right, boys. That's enough swordplay for one day.
(to nurse)
Anything on your end?

NURSE

We got another admit scheduled to arrive after lunch. We sure could use the bed.

SWANSON

Done.
(to Vance)
Send her home with a prescription for Paxil. Whether she fills it is up to her. Let's move on.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY

From a window looking out on the patient pick-up area, Vance watches Mandolin walk to the car, a gray Datsun. She is accompanied by a friend who we see from the back - same general height and build, shiny black hair in a bob cut. Her name, we'll learn, is TASHA.

Mandolin turns and looks back through the window at Vance, then gets in the car. Dr. Swanson appears behind Vance.

SWANSON

Good job in there. You held your ground against the big boys.

VANCE

Thanks. Wasn't easy.

SWANSON
For an aspiring anesthesiologist,
you sure are anti-drug.

VANCE
I'm just trying to be a patient
advocate, is all.

As they watch Mandolin drive away:

SWANSON
Be careful where you do your
business.

VANCE
You're not implying--

SWANSON
I meant my daughter.

VANCE
(sheepish)
Yes, ma'am.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Vance drives by Crazy Jax. The place is deserted out front.
He drives away.

INT. APARTMENT CORRIDOR - NEXT DAY (DECEMBER 19)

Vance exits his apartment smoking a cigarette. He passes Mrs.
Stiglitz who glares at him as usual.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

A group of twenty or so residents listens to a pharmacology
lecture. Vance sits beside Charlie at the back of the room.
He's dozing off as the PRESENTER (40s) drones on.

PRESENTER
In the 1970's chemists introduced
an oxygen atom to the side chain of
an amphetamine, creating a chemical
more potent than the purest speed,
and with hallucinogenic properties.
Thus was born a new breed of
designer drug known as bath salts.

Vance perks up at the mention of the name.

PRESENTER (CONT'D)
 These drugs don't come up on
 standard toxicology screens, making
 them very hard to detect...

Vance's phone rings. The caller ID says: SUPER.

VANCE
 (on phone; wary)
 Yeah.

SUPER (O.S.)
 Vance? It's Rudy. Listen I've got a
 girl here asking to be let into
 your apartment. Says she's your kid
 sister.

VANCE
 (brightening)
 No kidding! Put her on.

SUPER
 Just a minute.
 (beat)
 She ain't around. Musta stepped
 outside. Would you like for me to
 have her call you back?

VANCE
 It's all right. Go ahead and let
 her in. Tell her I'll be there as
 soon as I get off work.

SUPER
 (perfunctory)
 Oh, and by the way, smoking is
 forbidden. Mrs. Stiglitz wanted me
 to remind you of that.

We finally see the super at his desk. He's smoking a fat
 cigar.

SUPER (CONT'D)
 I told her I'd make it my first
 priority.

He chuckles, takes a puff, hangs up.

Back to Vance, who has not missed a beat of the presentation.

PRESENTER

...produces a high similar to cocaine, but of far greater potency, causing pleasure, exhilaration, and a sense of supreme wellbeing.

Vance interrupts the presenter.

VANCE

Are you cautioning or encouraging us?

Laughter. Then:

VANCE (CONT'D)

Maybe drug companies should bottle up these bath salts and sell 'em as a superior alternative to Adderall in the treatment of ADHD.

More laughter.

PRESENTER

There is nothing to joke about here. I'm talking about extreme violence. Hypersexuality. Dissociative states. Blackouts lasting hours, days even. And because the drug permanently activates the nerves it acts upon, you can never turn it off. There's no escape. Like a nightmare that will not end.

The presenter turns back to Vance, but he's gone.

INT. APARTMENT - EVENING

Vance enters the apartment. Amy Winehouse's "You Know I'm No Good" plays on the turntable.

VANCE

(calling out)

Lizzy? Have you eaten? I figured we could go out for some Chinese.

(to himself)

After I kill you for coming to visit me when I told you no...

He sets his things down and walks through the apartment. The place looks much cleaner: trash has been emptied, kitchen sink is clean, etc.

VANCE (CONT'D)

You cleaned up! You didn't have to do that. You're forgiven!

He enters the bedroom to see Mandolin. She wears one of his rumpled dress shirts and is sitting on the floor reading Venus in Furs. He freezes in the doorway, speechless.

MANDOLIN

(nonchalant)

I brought dinner.

INT. APARTMENT - LATER

They are seated on the living room carpet facing one another. Chinese food. Candles. Music. They eat in silence for a while. Vance is tense, in uncharted territory.

VANCE

I could get in a whole mess of trouble if people found out about this.

MANDOLIN

About what? It's not like we're doing anything naughty. Not yet.

VANCE

They don't want us seeing patients outside the hospital, not like this.

MANDOLIN

I'm not your patient any more. That's gotta make some difference.

VANCE

Maybe, but I'd have a hard time convincing the ethics committee of the relevance of a candlelit dinner with a former patient of mine who insinuated her way into my apartment by lying to my landlord. Highly irregular.

(beat)

Pass me the hot sauce.

She does.

MANDOLIN

You don't look like a guy who plays by the rules, or cares about what other people think.

VANCE

Sure I do, if those other people
are in a position of authority over
me. I could lose my job.

MANDOLIN

Not if nobody finds out. It'll be
our little secret.

VANCE

(more to himself)
And the secrets keep piling up...

MANDOLIN

What's that supposed to mean?

VANCE

If I'd documented what you told me,
that your boyfriend had a hand
in...whatever it was that went on
between you two...they'da
questioned him, probably put you in
a domestic violence shelter, I
don't know.

MANDOLIN

I told you, it was nothing like
that. I wanted Max to do what he
did. I asked for it.

VANCE

(suddenly tired)
I don't wanna hear anything more
about it. Point is, now I feel
responsible for you, but my ass is
on the line here.
(beat)
Pass me a soda, willya?

She crawls across the floor and hands it to him. Beneath the
dress shirt she's got on we see she is wearing only panties.

MANDOLIN

Can't I stay just one night. Pretty
please with cherries?

She looks at him seductively, still on her hands and knees.

VANCE

Okay. But just one night.

She kisses his cheek.

VANCE (CONT'D)
Don't do that.

She sits back down.

VANCE (CONT'D)
Take the bedroom. There's an extra set of sheets in the hall closet.

MANDOLIN
That's okay. I'm sure you don't have kooties...

VANCE
(stands; impatient)
I have to get up early, so I'll be saying good night.

Mandolin starts to clean up.

VANCE (CONT'D)
Leave it. I'll take care of it in the morning.

She stands to face him, gets on her tiptoes to better look into his eyes. They start to move to the music playing in the background. Just a slow sway. Mandolin stares into his eyes. Waits for him to initiate. The room is pregnant with tension.

Finally, she turns and enters the bedroom. The door closes and Vance exhales. His will didn't fail him.

INT. APARTMENT - ONE HOUR LATER

Vance is arranging a sleeping bag on the living room floor. He gets in, gets comfortable, pushes a take-out box away from his face. The only light in the room comes from the moon shining through the window.

Then, the sound of footsteps padding across the room. Vance turns and props himself up on his elbows, sees:

Mandolin standing over him. Letting him regard her body in the moonlight.

MANDOLIN
Can I borrow some of your body heat? I'm cold, brrrrr.

She kneels down next to him. Vance starts to protest, but she puts her finger to his lips.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Shhhh. Just for a little while. Our secret.

Vance moves over and lets Mandolin enter the sleeping bag. She snuggles up to him, rests her head on his chest.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Your heart is beating really fast. You like to play it cool, but now I know you're as excited as I am.

We see Mandolin's hand beneath the sleeping bag as it slides down over his groin. His breathing grows more rapid. Then, her head disappears beneath the covers as she performs fellatio. Vance climaxes.

INT. APARTMENT - NEXT MORNING

Early morning light seeps through the window. Mandolin is alone in the sleeping bag, still snoozing. Vance stands over her. Showered. Fixing his necktie. Looking at her, how beautiful she is, and peaceful. He quietly exits.

INT. CLINIC - DAY

Vance is at the computer when Charlie sits down next to him.

CHARLIE

How is your sister liking D-town?

Vance looks at him blankly, revealing nothing.

INT. APARTMENT - EVENING

Vance returns to the apartment to find the front door open. His path is blocked as a MOVER enters from the opposite way carrying a CANDELABRA, heavy and wrought iron. He follows the man in and finds that his apartment has been furnished.

Specifically: a plant, a painting, some dishes and cookware, coffee table, a full-length mirror, a rug, chair, love seat, possibly a small writing desk.

Mandolin is in a corner of the room placing Vance's medical books atop a new bookshelf. She instructs the movers where to place the candelabra.

MANDOLIN

(to movers, the perfect housewife)
(MORE)

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

I figured a nice strong candle holder would go good in here since, you know, we just love candles...

She sees Vance.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Oh, hi hon. Welcome home. How do you like what I did with the place?

Vance is, understandably, speechless.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

(speaks rapidly, a bit manic)

What? You didn't expect me to leave here with everything lying around in boxes screaming to be let loose, now did you? And when I started liberatin' stuff, I realized I had no place to put it, so that led to the bookshelf, and I got tired and had no place to sit, so the love seat came next, and on and on and now you're home and I'm finished.

As the movers prepare to leave, she thanks them and hands them a tip. They exit.

She takes Vance's hand and shows him around the place.

VANCE

I don't know what to say.

MANDOLIN

Don't you like it?

VANCE

I-I love it. You did in six hours what it took me as many months not to get to, and in much better style. Musta cost a fortune. What's the damage?

MANDOLIN

It's rude to ask how much a gift costs. Spoils all the fun.

VANCE

C'mon, how much did all this set you back?

MANDOLIN

If you must know, I kinda maxed out
the credit card.

VANCE

Of course you'll let me repay you.
Although on a resident's salary,
I'm afraid I'll have to do so in
installments.

MANDOLIN

(leading him along)

Come have a look at the bed.

Mandolin leads Vance into the bedroom and the door closes
behind them.

INT. BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING (DECEMBER 20)

Through the bedroom window we see that outside the sun has
broken through the clouds and melted the snow. It's 10 AM and
already the day is quite beautiful.

Vance and Mandolin lie in bed in a now fully-furnished
bedroom. She is asleep and bare-armed, curled up onto him. He
is awake and propped up on an elbow, studying her. On her
left breast, just below the collar bone, is a Gemini tatoo -
II - and on her right shoulder the gossamer tendrils of a
spider's web splay out in all directions.

Feeling his eyes on her, she awakens.

MANDOLIN

I feel so safe with you.

VANCE

It just occurred to me...We are
going about this all backwards.
Here we are in the sack, and we
haven't even gone on a proper date.

Her eyes widen in excitement and she leaps out of bed.

MANDOLIN

I'll get dressed! Only take me a
minute!

EXT. STREET - DAY

They walk hand-in-hand down the street. Mandolin is beaming.

INT. MALL - DAY

They are at the movie theater, reach the front of the line, and Vance asks for two tickets, pays cash.

INT. THEATER - DAY

They are watching a current romantic comedy. She rests her head on his shoulder.

INT. MALL - DAY

Now they're walking through the food court, holding hands. Across from them are a GROUP OF KIDS, shady-looking characters hanging over the balcony, the kind that are never up to any good. They look at Mandolin, recognizing her. She turns away from them.

VANCE
Friends of yours?

She shakes her head, but a darkness passes over her face. Shades from her former life.

MANDOLIN
Can we get outta here?

VANCE
Sure. Hungry?

MANDOLIN
(brightening)
Starved.

They walk into one of the restaurants.

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

They sit across from each other at a booth, finishing burgers and fries. Vance seems tired, restless. Perfunctory, like he'd rather not be there. He fusses with his cell phone. Mandolin notices.

MANDOLIN
(getting his attention)
Yoohoo.

Vance looks up, smiles distractedly, then signals for the check. The WAITER appears, places it on the table. Mandolin reaches for it but Vance is too quick for her.

VANCE

Oh no you don't. I'm a few thousand dollars in your debt. It's time I start paying you back.

MANDOLIN

We can dine and dash.

VANCE

Don't be ridiculous. We're not juvenile delinquents.

Vance hands his credit card to the waiter who moves off. Mandolin looks around, unnerved.

VANCE (CONT'D)

You okay?

The waiter returns.

WAITER

I'm sorry sir, but your card has been declined.

VANCE

That's absurd. There's nearly four thousand dollars in that account.

He begins thumbing through his wallet, then freezes, realizing, looks darkly at Mandolin.

VANCE (CONT'D)

Wait a minute...

Mandolin shrugs, caught.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - LATER

They drive in tense silence.

VANCE

I can't believe you stole my card...

MANDOLIN

I borrowed it, to buy you furniture. I thought you liked what I did with the place.

VANCE

I did, but...I do. But it's still wrong.

(MORE)

VANCE (CONT'D)

Are you familiar with the concept of ownership, or did you grow up in a commune?

His tone condescending. Mandolin starts to cry.

MANDOLIN

I have no place else to go. Please, if you'll let me stay just one more night. I promise I'll be gone in the morning.

VANCE

That's what you said last night.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Back at the apartment. Vance enters the bedroom, collapses onto the bed, tired and irritated. We can hear Mandolin in the living room. A moment later and Amy Winehouse's "You Know I'm No Good" starts to play.

Mandolin appears in the doorway. In her bra and panties. She begins dancing for Vance.

MANDOLIN

Is this what you like?

Vance becomes aroused, pulls her to him. He kisses her hard on the mouth, then rolls her over onto her stomach and mounts her. Pulls aside her panties. Enters her from behind. After a few vehement thrusts:

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Stick it in my ass!

Vance hesitates, then slides himself into her anus. Ejaculates inside her. Rolls over onto the bed. She snuggles up against him. He puts his arm around her, tucks her into him, and they fall asleep.

INT. APARTMENT - NEXT MORNING (DECEMBER 21)

Vance alone in bed. Awakened by the sound of his wristwatch alarm. It is 7:00 AM. He gets out of bed. Walks around the apartment. Mandolin is gone.

He returns to the bedroom, reaches onto the floor, grabs his pants and feels for his wallet. Finds it in his back pocket. Relieved that she is gone and missing her already, he drops back down on the bed.

INT./EXT. VANCE'S CAR/CRAZY JAX - NIGHT

Vance drives by Crazy Jax. He slows out front, sees Mandolin talking to a black-haired girl whose back is turned to us. Mandolin looks at him. Their eyes lock. Desire, longing, something feral in the look.

MAX, 30s, is standing nearby with a customer, notices the look they share and approaches Vance's Jeep.

MAX
(challenging)
Can I help you with something?

Vance returns the look for a long beat before he drives away.

INT. APARTMENT HALLWAY - NIGHT

Three in the morning. Vance stumbles along the hallway leading to his apartment. Arrives at his door. Sees Mandolin crouched down on the floor. She is sobbing. He pulls her up to him, and when her face comes into the light we see she's been badly beaten up.

MANDOLIN
He made me tell him where you
lived. He beat it outta me!

Vance looks at Stiglitz's apartment, expecting her to appear any minute.

VANCE
Shhh...Let's get you inside.

As he opens the door, Max appears from the shadows and charges into him, driving him through the apartment and into the far wall, his head slamming against the plaster.

Max drags Vance to the floor and begins wailing away, slamming Vance's head against the ground and pummeling him with his fists. Vance is no match for the bigger man, who outweighs him by a hundred pounds.

Now he's got his forearm pinned to Vance's windpipe, and he's bearing down with all his weight, suffocating him.

Suddenly the candelabra comes crashing down on Max. Vance kicks the bigger man off him, and Max rolls to the floor. Dazed. Eyes vacant, blinking into the light. Nose broken.

Then Mandolin comes down on Max's face with the candelabra a second time. Thwack! A third time. A fourth. Each time we hear the sloppy wet crunch of iron against flesh and bone.

When it is all over, Max lies still on the rug. Vance examines the body.

VANCE (CONT'D)

I think you killed him!

MANDOLIN

No shit!

She spits on Max, wipes her mouth. Vance continues staring at the dead man. Silence broken only by Vance's own fitful breathing.

Then, Mrs. Stiglitz's voice from outside the apartment:

MRS. STIGLITZ (O.S.)

Is everything all right in there?

VANCE

Everything's fine, Mrs. Stiglitz!

MRS. STIGLITZ (O.S.)

I heard a ruckus.

VANCE

Dropped some books, Mrs. Stiglitz.

MRS. STIGLITZ (O.S.)

A big ruckus.

VANCE

They were big books! Now go back to bed.

MRS. STIGLITZ (O.S.)

Are you sure--

VANCE

Good night!

We hear the door to Mrs. Stiglitz's apartment close. Another long moment of silence. This time Mandolin breaks it.

MANDOLIN

You got a cigarette?

Vance reaches into his jacket pocket and hands Mandolin a cigarette, which he lights for her. Then he lights one for himself.

VANCE

You know, this is a no-smoking facility.

MANDOLIN

Yeah, so I been told.

Mandolin sits down next to Vance and sets down the candelabra. They smoke in silence for a while.

VANCE

(in a daze)

I should call the police.

MANDOLIN

And tell them what?

VANCE

(thinks)

Someone broke into my apartment,
and...in self-defense...

MANDOLIN

Oh, so you're gonna say you killed
him? Because if you say I killed
him it's not self-defense, is it?

VANCE

I'll tell them you killed him to
save my life.

MANDOLIN

No. I hit him to save your life. I
killed him for being an asshole.

VANCE

I'll be sure to leave that detail
out. Now get me the phone.

Mandolin sees the phone on the floor and kicks it away.

MANDOLIN

For a doctor you're pretty freakin'
stupid, you know that? You really
wanna be involved in a murder?

VANCE

Manslaughter. I think that's what
they call this. It's a lesser
offense.

MANDOLIN

You haven't answered my question.
Do you?

VANCE

It's not exactly my life's dream,
no...But I'm already involved.

MANDOLIN

You want them to find out about you and Max? About you and me? Because they will. That's what they do. Dig it all up. And when they do, you can kiss your doctor life goodbye.

Vance thinks about this.

VANCE

What are you suggesting?

MANDOLIN

As I see it, there's only one thing for us to do.

They both look at Max, whose head is surrounded by a widening halo of blood.

INT. APARTMENT HALLWAY - NIGHT

They carry Max, who is now wrapped inside the rug, down the apartment hallway towards the stairwell. As they pass Mrs. Stiglitz's unit, she pops her head out and watches them.

MRS. STIGLITZ

Why are you throwing out a perfectly good rug?

VANCE

(inventing)

Wine stains. Impossible to remove.

MRS. STIGLITZ

Did you try seltzer water?

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

They exit the stairwell and lug the corpse across the street and hoist it into the adjacent apartment's dumpster. It's not easy, and after several unsuccessful attempts they get the rug up and over and into the trash.

Mandolin scurries back into the apartment. As Vance catches his breath, a SECURITY GUARD shines a flashlight in his face.

VANCE

Uhm, just out for a stroll.

INT. BEDROOM - DAYBREAK (DECEMBER 22)

Vance sits on the floor by the window looking outside at the dumpster across the street. He smokes nervously. We hear Mandolin in the bathroom. The faucet turns off, and she comes and sits next to him. She applies a cold compress to his face. Vance doesn't take his eyes off the dumpster.

VANCE

Maybe we shoulda taken him
somewhere. Like out into the woods.

MANDOLIN

It's practically morning. You wanna
be caught carryin' a corpse in
broad daylight? No. The dumpster
will get picked up and hauled off
someplace far away.

VANCE

They'll find the body...

MANDOLIN

(over him)

And they'll have no way of tracing
it back to us.

She steadies the compress over Vance's right eye.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Hold it there.

She takes his cigarette, smokes.

VANCE

Why didn't you tell me that guy was
your Max?

MANDOLIN

I thought you knew.

VANCE

We weren't exactly on a first name
basis.

MANDOLIN

What difference would it have made?

VANCE

If I'da known your boyfriend was my
drug dealer...

(thinks about it)

...I suppose no difference at all.

(MORE)

VANCE (CONT'D)

But I still wish you'da told me. I know practically nothing about you.

MANDOLIN

You really wanna hear? Not as a doctor but as a friend?

VANCE

Yeah. Okay.

MANDOLIN

I left home when I was fifteen. I got by, little of this little of that, but most of what I was doing...let's just say there wasn't much job security.

(laughs)

Then I met Max. We had fun. Things could get a little hairy sometimes, and I'd wind up in the emergency. You know, coming down. He'd make me stash the meds, and he'd sell them on the street. A dollar per milligram is what you can get for Vicodin. He liked to think otherwise, but Max was small time. Can't change who you are.

(beat)

Can you, Vance?

Vance watches as she takes the belt from around his waist and slides it around his neck.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

It was Max who turned me onto "gasping." Then the shit hit the fan and I blacked out and woke up in the nut house. Wasn't too much fun. But hey, that's how I met you. My silver lining.

She slides the belt through the buckle to form a noose. The scar on Vance's neck lines up perfectly with the belt buckle.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

If you're careful not to push it too far, it's the best high around. But you already know that.

By this time she has pulled out his sex and has begun massaging him, working his genitals between her fingers, as the belt gets tighter and tighter around his neck. Vance looks down at her hand, then up at her, unsure about relinquishing control.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

You gotta trust that I'll know when
to let up, when to let go. Do you
trust me?

He nods.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

(purring)

Just relax. Close your eyes,
concentrate on feeling good.

The veins in his neck bulge, his face reddens, his eyes open and dart around the room frantically, like a hunted animal. Then, as his body spasms in ejaculation, his eyes roll back into his head. He's in that magical place, where life and death converge in climax.

As she lets go of the noose, he sucks in a huge gasp of air. His whole body goes limp as he falls back into her arms.

INT. APARTMENT - MORNING

Vance wakes up. Groggy. Swollen. Alone on the carpet by the window. We can hear the shower running. He looks outside to see that the dumpster is empty. He sits back, relieved, unwinds the belt from around his neck.

He enters the bathroom expecting to find Mandolin in the shower, but the shower is empty. Through the steam, a HEART has been drawn in the fog on the mirror above the sink.

Vance enters the shower, sticks his face under the shower head. A moment later and Mandolin joins him. He turns to her and they kiss.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

That night. Vance lies asleep in bed, opens his eyes to find the bedside lamp is on, turns over to see Mandolin propped up on her elbow with her back to him. She turns to him.

MANDOLIN

Take a look at this.

Behind the night stand, a spider has formed a web. Mandolin holds in her hand a half-dead bug of some sort, mosquito maybe, or fly. She drops it on the web and they watch the spider scurry over and begin sucking the fly's blood.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)
She's growing fast. Already twice
the size she was when I found her.
It's all that blood...

Vance points to the corner of the web, at what appears to be
a cocoon or hive of some sort.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)
That's her egg.

VANCE
Where's the male?

MANDOLIN
They kill the males.

VANCE
I thought that was just black
widows.

MANDOLIN
No.

VANCE
Remind me to kill it in the
morning.

MANDOLIN
Like hell you will. She's our pet.
Our baby.

VANCE
Those eggs'll hatch and there'll be
a whole brood.

MANDOLIN
They won't bother us if we don't
bother them. She's grateful for the
food I give her. She'd never hurt
me.

VANCE
What about me?

MANDOLIN
You'll have to make friends. Offer
her something.

VANCE
I'll do no such thing. Come
tomorrow, she gets stomped.

Vance reaches over her and turns off the light. The rustling of sheets as he gets comfortable.

MANDOLIN

I can't sleep. You got anything we can take?

VANCE

No.

MANDOLIN

See about getting something? Ambien 10 mg. Extended release.

Vance's eyes open but he says nothing.

INT./EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY (DECEMBER 23)

As Vance exits his car in the open-air parking lot he runs into Charlie. They are both in a hurry and the conversation takes place as they walk to the building:

CHARLIE

Christ, man. What happened to your face?

VANCE

(thinks)

I've been up all night, nearly got beat to death, was an accessory to a murder, and after depositing the body in the nearest dumpster I almost choked to death while I orgasmed. You should try it sometime.

CHARLIE

Murder, or masturbation?

VANCE

Who said anything about masturbation?

They enter the building and move off in separate ways.

CHARLIE

You're burning the candle at both ends, buddy!

(to himself)

Wish I could join you.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - LATER

Dr. Swanson in her customary position overlooking the ward.
Vance enters. She turns to face him.

SWANSON
(re: bruises)
What happened to you?

VANCE
(lackluster)
Bar fight. You should see the other
guy. Yada yada.

SWANSON
Maybe you should take the day off,
see an ophthalmologist, or at least
get some sleep.

VANCE
I been having trouble sleeping.
Would it be too much to ask for you
to prescribe me something?

Swanson eyes him for a long moment. Then takes out her
prescription pad, writes.

SWANSON
(handing over
prescription)
Insomnia is a symptom of an
underlying condition. Stress,
fatigue, maybe even depression. If
there is anything you'd like to
talk about...
(sensing Vance's
hesitation)
...entirely off the record, of
course. It won't affect your
performance evaluation. Not in a
negative way. Might even help it.

Vance isn't interested.

VANCE
(re: prescription)
Thanks for the script.

As he turns to leave:

SWANSON
I've been thinking a lot about that
patient of yours, Mandolin Snow.

Vance stiffens at the name.

SWANSON (CONT'D)

I just hope we weren't too hasty in sending her home.

VANCE

What gives you that idea?

SWANSON

I dunno. Something was just off about the whole thing.

She looks at Vance, who gives away nothing.

SWANSON (CONT'D)

(sighs)

Maybe I'm second guessing myself. I get so busy, and sometimes I feel out of the loop. You need a street mentality to understand the streets. That's precisely what is left out of an Ivy League Education.

VANCE

I wouldn't know. I went to State.

SWANSON

I saw in her chart that you scheduled a follow-up with her in clinic. Did she keep her appointment with you?

This is Vance's chance to confide in someone, get the load off his chest, but he doesn't take it.

VANCE

No.

SWANSON

Shame. You could have helped her. She really took a liking to you.

VANCE

Yeah, real shame.

INT. APARTMENT HALLWAY - LATER

Vance walks towards his unit carrying the new prescription. We can hear music thumping from inside his apartment. He passes Mrs. Stiglitz, who shakes her head disapprovingly.

MRS. STIGLITZ
 Cops'll be here any minute and it
 serves you right for disturbin' the
 peace!

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Vance enters to find a party is in full swing. KIDS (late teens) are doing lines off the coffee table, jumping on the sofa, dancing, drinking. Mandolin dances with a SCRAWNY GUY. Vance grabs her by the arm. The scrawny guy tries to intervene.

SCRAWNY GUY
 Hey bud, back off.

VANCE
 (pushing the kid)
 You back off! Back the fuck out of
 here!

The kid shrugs and starts dancing with another girl.

VANCE (CONT'D)
 (to Mandolin)
 What the hell is going on?

MANDOLIN
 (smashed; over music)
 We're having a little party.
 Everything has been so tense
 lately. I figured the best thing to
 do was throw a bash. A shin-dig.
 A...real...hullaballoo.

She almost falls over on this last word. She's pretty drunk. Vance steadies her.

VANCE
 Hullaballoo's over.

The scrawny guy is by the turntable flipping through the collection of LPs, carelessly throwing aside those he's not interested in.

VANCE (CONT'D)
 (grabs the kid and shoves
 him toward the door)
 That's enough! Everyone out!

He turns off the music. Then, a KNOCK at the door. Vance runs over to the coffee table and begins sweeping drugs and plastic cups into the trash can with the sleeve of his white coat. Another KNOCK at the door, this one more insistent. The scrawny kid opens it to see two UNIFORMED POLICE OFFICERS.

OFFICER
(to kid)
Are you Vance Anselm?

VANCE
I am. I'm sorry officers, these miscreants were just leaving.

As the kids pile out, the officers step into the apartment and have a look around.

OFFICER
I need to see some identification.

Vance shows the officer his driver's license.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
(incredulous)
You are a doctor?

VANCE
Yes.

OFFICER
Serving alcohol to minors could cost you your medical license.

VANCE
I don't have a medical license, not yet, but I understand completely. A, uh, friend had some, uh, guests over while I was out and...this is what I came back to.

OFFICER
(looking around place,
which is a real mess)
I don't envy you.
(hands back ID)
You've been warned. No loud parties. And start hanging out with people your own age.

The officers leave. Vance is now alone with Mandolin.

MANDOLIN
I'll clean up.

VANCE

I wish you would just leave!

Vance enters the bedroom.

MANDOLIN

Oh yeah? Where should I go? To the cops maybe? Is that what you want? For me to tell them all about what you did?

A beat, then he comes back out to argue with her.

VANCE

What I did? Try what we did. What you persuaded me to do.

MANDOLIN

You're a grown man. It's not like I twisted your arm.

VANCE

I should have called them when I had the chance.

MANDOLIN

Well, you still can. If you hurry, you might catch 'em before they reach their car. Go ahead. Tell them all about how you watched me club a guy to death. Little ole me. See if they buy it! Haha! While you're at it, tell 'em where we hid the body.

VANCE

I was trying to protect you.

MANDOLIN

And I killed Max to save your ass, so we're even.

Vance heads back to the bedroom, slams the door.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

That's real mature! Run away from your problems. Real fucking mature!

Mandolin looks around, confused, unsure, supremely alone. Grabs a packet of cigarette, shakes it out - empty. Takes a bottle of vodka and takes a long swig.

Then she takes a breath, puts on a plastic smile, and turns back on the music. She begins dancing alone.

The music is fast, but she's dancing slow and dreamy, watching herself in the mirror, totally off beat, but she doesn't care, she'll be damned if anyone tries to spoil her good time.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Vance lies on the bed dozing. Dark. Quiet. The door opens. Mandolin enters the room, followed by another girl, Tasha - Mandolin's build, black hair in a bob cut. Silhouetted. The only light streams in the room from the living area.

MANDOLIN

(leads girl over to bed)

Vance, I want you to meet Tasha.

Vance props himself up on his elbows. Mandolin pushes him back on the bed.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

I think you'll like her. She's just like me.

Tasha comes forward and straddles Vance, begins kissing his neck as Mandolin strokes her hair. Vance puts his arms around Tasha and rolls over and onto her. He begins kissing her as Mandolin undresses him. The three have sex.

INT. APARTMENT - NEXT MORNING (DECEMBER 24)

Vance awakens in bed. Tasha is gone. He peels Mandolin off him, gets out of bed.

LATER

Vance showering.

LATER

He's doing his tie in front of the full-length bedroom mirror, watches Mandolin in bed still asleep.

LATER

Now he's walking through the apartment. The place is still a mess. The prescription meds are gone. As he moves to the door, he grabs his white coat off the counter, knocking down Mandolin's purse. Picks it up. Her ID falls out. He examines the ID. The name is Mandolin Snow but the picture is of someone else.

Mandolin appears in the doorway. Vance returns the ID to her purse.

VANCE
You seen my car keys?

She slowly shakes her head.

VANCE (CONT'D)
I'm late for work. We need to talk.

She yawns, goes back to the bedroom. He grabs his bicycle and exits.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Vance riding his bike down Colorado Avenue, fighting the cold. It's gray and wet and dreary.

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Vance approaches the hospital building, reaches for his hospital badge. But it is missing from its usual position on his coat pocket. Heather appears behind him.

HEATHER
Need some help?

Vance smiles and moves aside to allow Heather to scan her own badge. We hear a beep and the locks disengage. He opens the door for her and follows her inside.

INT. HOSPITAL COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Vance sits across from Heather over coffee at a window booth. Outside is a view of the parking lot. They sip their drinks and look at each other, sharing a silence that is not in the least bit uncomfortable.

HEATHER
All that work to get my number and then you decide not to call me.

VANCE
(innocent)
What...

HEATHER
I've never seen it done that way before.

VANCE

Would you have preferred the opposite approach?

HEATHER

So you're saying that because it took you six days to ask me for coffee, you're actually more interested than if you'd called me sooner?

VANCE

(flirting)
Could be. Yeah.

HEATHER

Is this some sort of reverse psychology you're working?

VANCE

No head games here. Just been real busy.

(trying to keep upbeat)
So, you're in your fourth year, huh? You must be applying to residency programs right about now.

HEATHER

I must be.

VANCE

What's it gonna be? Psych?

HEATHER

Psych is for head cases and nut jobs. Isn't my mother teaching you anything?

VANCE

I was trying to forget that Dr. Swanson is your mother.

HEATHER

Is that why you didn't call?

Vance smiles. Looks outside to see Mandolin standing in the parking lot. Sullenly watching them. He blinks. A truck drives in front of her, and by the time it has passed, she has vanished.

Heather notices Vance's preoccupation.

HEATHER (CONT'D)

Is something wrong?

Vance shakes his head and makes an effort to smile.

HEATHER (CONT'D)

(continuing)

Anyway, I'm not sure what I want to specialize in, only that I plan on staying in the city.

VANCE

You like it here?

HEATHER

It's where I grew up. It's home.

VANCE

It's cold.

HEATHER

A good thing, if you like to ski.

VANCE

I don't.

HEATHER

You can't knock it if you've never tried. Though you do seem more like the snowboarding type.

VANCE

Okay.

HEATHER

What are you doing for Christmas? Got any plans?

Vance shakes his head.

HEATHER (CONT'D)

I'm having a party. Did you get the invitation I sent you?

VANCE

I haven't checked my mail in a while.

HEATHER

Well then I'm glad I asked. Never assume. That's one of the rules of relationships--

VANCE

(playful)

Is that what this is?

(MORE)

VANCE (CONT'D)

Is that what we're doing here right now, having a relationship? Are we relating?

HEATHER

(not letting him off the hook)

--Because if I had assumed you had gotten my invitation and been so discourteous as not to RSVP, we probably wouldn't be sitting here right now.

VANCE

(joking)

Discourteous, huh? Not rude or impolite, but discourteous. I musta really screwed up, for you to get all multisyllabic on me...

HEATHER

(going on; not to be deterred)

You see it's the little things. Little things make the world go round. Little things turn into big things.

VANCE

Do they now?

HEATHER

They could.

A pause. They share a look.

HEATHER (CONT'D)

You should come. Be fun.

EXT. PARKING LOT - LATER

Vance is unchaining his bike from the rack when he sees Heather drive by. She waves. Vance waves back but his smile fades when he sees, on the passenger side door of Heather's car, in big letters, the word SLUT has been ferociously keyed.

Vance takes out his smart phone, goes online and searches the Internet for Mandolin Snow. A Facebook page pops up with a Mandolin Snow that looks like the girl Vance saw pictured on the ID that morning back at his apartment. Vance calls the number listed on the Facebook page.

VANCE
 (on phone)
 Is this Mandolin Snow?

WOMAN'S VOICE
 Speaking.

VANCE
 (inventing)
 Ms. Snow, I'm from the medical records department here at University Hospital. I'm just inquiring on your recent stay with us. Just, um, making sure your medical needs were met?

WOMAN'S VOICE
 I've never been to a University Hospital.

VANCE
 Oh...I see. You mean to say you've never visited Colorado?

WOMAN'S VOICE
 Been there once. Last year. For a job interview.

VANCE
 I see.

WOMAN'S VOICE
 My purse was stolen.

VANCE
 I'm sorry...

WOMAN'S VOICE
 Yeah, me too...They never did catch the jerk. And I didn't even get the job.

Vance thinks, then:

VANCE
 You may have been a victim of identity theft, Ms. Snow. You'll have to call the police. I'm sorry to inform you of this, but I can't say any more. Bye now.

He hangs up.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Mandolin is in the process of decorating a miniature Christmas tree she has placed on the coffee table. She is fixing the top ornament - a snow angel - when Vance enters with his bike.

MANDOLIN

(playing housewife)

Hi, hon. I'm baking a cake, in case you're hungry. Oh, and the mail was beginning to pile up downstairs, so I brought it in.

Vance finds the stack of mail on the counter and begins to sort through it. He's working up to saying something.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

My friends are having a party tonight--

VANCE

(cutting her off)

Have fun.

MANDOLIN

I was hoping you'd go with me. Be my date.

VANCE

I can't. I've made other plans.

Mandolin comes over to him, tries to embrace him but he pulls away.

VANCE (CONT'D)

We need to talk.

MANDOLIN

(innocent)

About what?

VANCE

About what you did to my colleague's car.

Mandolin's sweetness morphs into a look of disgust.

MANDOLIN

Colleague? Is that some fancy way of saying you're fucking her?

VANCE

So you admit it was you?

MANDOLIN

I'll admit it if you admit you're
fucking her.

VANCE

No.

MANDOLIN

Then no.

VANCE

I saw you.

MANDOLIN

It wasn't me. Been home all day.

VANCE

I don't believe you. It was you.
You looked right at us.

MANDOLIN

Musta been someone who looked like
me. You know what they say -
everybody has a twin.

He finds his car key beneath some papers on the counter,
examines it for flecks of paint. Holds it up to her.

VANCE

What'd I tell you?!

MANDOLIN

You should get your breaks fixed. I
almost rear ended--

VANCE

(over her)

Admit what you did. You scrawled
the word "slut" along the side of
her car.

MANDOLIN

Well, isn't she?

Enraged, and before he even knows what he's doing, Vance
slaps her. Whap! She recovers more quickly than we'd expect,
and surprises us when she says:

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Hit me again.

He slaps her a second time. Bam!

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Again!

A third time he slaps her. Crack!

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Harder! Hit me harder!

Vance's hand comes up a fourth time and freezes midair.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

(goads him)

What, you're not man enough to give
a girl what she wants?

Vance lowers his hand. She starts to cry.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

Vance, don't you love me? Vance? Do
you love me Vance?

VANCE

I-I don't even know who you are.

MANDOLIN

I told you - I'll be whoever you
want me to be.

VANCE

It's over. I'm done playing this
game. I want you out of here.

MANDOLIN

(sarcastic)

Do we have to go through this
again? You want me to go to the
police?

Vance hesitates.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

God I wish you'd change your tune.

VANCE

Know what I wish? I wish I'd never
even met you.

This hurts. Mandolin looks down, a bit crestfallen.

Vance looks over Mandolin's shoulder and outside the window
to see that down below a taxi cab has just pulled into the
parking lot. His sister, LIZZY, exits the passenger side. The
DRIVER helps her unload her suitcase from the trunk.

Vance collects his things and moves to the door, turns back to Mandolin.

VANCE (CONT'D)

When I come back, I want you out of here. I don't care where you go, or who you tell about what happened, just be gone. And don't come back.

He says these words without emotion and because of this the speech is all the more hurtful.

VANCE (CONT'D)

I mean it.

MANDOLIN

(quiet, tearful)

I know.

Vance exits. On the ground is Heather's Christmas party invitation. It had fallen out when Vance gathered up the mail. Mandolin picks it up, examines it, goes to the window to see:

Vance and Lizzy embracing by his car. Lizzy's back is to the building, so all we see is blonde hair and her cute figure. Vance opens the passenger seat door and lets Lizzy in. He runs around to the driver's side, enters.

As he pulls out, Lizzy looks out the window and up at Mandolin. She smiles the way you would at a total stranger. Mandolin returns her smile with a cold glare.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - MOMENTS LATER

Vance and Lizzy drive. Vance is preoccupied but tries to be pleasant as Lizzy chats away, telling him all about her trip, updating him on mom and dad, etc. Her words come to us muffled. Then Vance turns to her, says nothing, just soaks her in with his eyes. Lizzy stops mid-sentence.

LIZZY

What?

He takes her hand.

VANCE

It's good you're here, sis.
Sometimes I don't realize how much
I miss you till...
(breaks off; emotional)
I'm just really glad you came.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

We're on a quiet residential street. In front of a house. One story. Decorated with Christmas lights. Whose various rooms boast floor to ceiling windows, affording a view of inside.

Three rooms can be seen. The first room is the kitchen, to the right is the dining area, followed by the living room. Heather's Christmas party is in progress.

We take the view of someone watching the house from the outside, looking in. We are looking into the kitchen, where a group of medical residents and students stands around the kitchen island, talking, having drinks, laughing. Vance stands next to his sister. Puts his arm around her and hugs her to him.

Then we move to the dining room, and in a time lapse the guests are now seated at a long wooden table, eating Christmas dinner. We see them hold their glasses up in a toast, then dig into the turkey, stuffing, etc. Vance is telling a story. Lizzy chimes in at the right time, finishing his sentences the way only a sister can. For the first time since we met him, Vance seems genuinely happy.

Now we are in the living room and the group is gathered around a piano, singing Christmas carols. Lizzy plays, and Vance jumps in mid-song to accompany her in a duet.

We move farther right to the Christmas tree, and now they are around the tree, opening presents. Heather places a Santa Claus hat on Vance's head. Vance hands Lizzy a gift. She opens it. It is a red sweater. She puts it on, hugs her brother. We move back left to the front door:

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - LATER

The front door opens and the guests file out and head to their cars. Merry, flushed from drink, Vance makes his way over to his car, with his sister on his arm. As he reaches the street, Heather calls from the front door.

HEATHER (O.S.)
You forgot something!

She holds out Vance's Santa Claus hat. Vance runs to her and stoops to let Heather place it atop his head. She does this with her right hand. In her other hand appears a MISTLETOE, which she holds over them. Lizzy watches from the street as Vance kisses Heather.

From offscreen comes the sound of a car accelerating toward us.

Its headlights are off, and it's barreling toward Lizzy at full speed. Just as she turns to see the car it slams into her, sending her catapulting over the hood and over the car. We hear the sickeningly wet thud of flesh and bone as she collides with the pavement.

Vance runs over to his sister, sees her sprawled on the concrete at a very eccentric angle:

HEATHER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Call 911! Somebody call 911!

INT. AMBULANCE (MOVING) - NIGHT

Vance sits by his sister, who is hooked up to life support. She wears a cervical collar to protect her spine. Tubes going into her arms, oxygen mask around her face, paramedics fussing over her. He's holding her hand and fighting back tears.

INT. INTENSIVE CARE - NIGHT

Vance waits in the waiting room. Heather sits next to him. Above them the wall clock reads 4:00 AM.

HEATHER
Have you called your parents?

VANCE
Not until I know how bad it is.

HEATHER
They should be here. What if there's not much time?

VANCE
Don't talk like that. She has to make it...
(quietly)
...or I'll never forgive myself.

HEATHER
Vance, it was an accident. Whoever hit her--

VANCE
There are no such things as accidents! Don't you see?

Then, A SURGEON comes out of the OR. Vance stands and meets him in the middle of the room.

SURGEON

Our preliminary assessment reveals a contused hip, a punctured lung, several broken ribs and an occipital hematoma, in addition to numerous contusions, lacerations - that's what we know so far.

VANCE

Has she regained consciousness?

SURGEON

(a grim shake of his head)
You've had a rough night, Dr. Anselm. I suggest you get yourself home. Get some rest.

Vance appears reluctant to go, but Heather nods in agreement with the doctor's words.

VANCE

You promise you'll call me with any news?

SURGEON

(nods)
The moment there is any change, for better or for worse.

VANCE

Take good care of my sister, Doc.

SURGEON

I'll do all I can.

Vance lets Heather lead him out of the waiting room. The surgeon watches them go a moment before heading back to the OR.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY (DECEMBER 25)

Vance sits on the floor with a half-empty bottle of whisky, staring at the cellular phone between his legs. Then, he starts crying, first in a whimper, and then an outright sob. He takes a slug of booze, picks up a handheld mirror on which is a line of drugs, is about to snort the white powder, when:

Outside, the sound of a car entering the parking lot. He looks out to see it's the gray Datsun. Mandolin exits the passenger seat and runs toward the apartment. The car sits idling, exhaust spurting in heavy plumes.

He snorts the drugs and stands facing the door.

A moment later, and the front door opens, revealing Mandolin. Still wearing last night's party dress.

MANDOLIN

I forgot my Christmas tree.

As she walks past him he grabs her by the arm, pulls her to him.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

What's wrong, hon? You look like you been cryin'.

VANCE

How could you do this?

MANDOLIN

I warned you about fucking other girls without my permission, didn't I?

VANCE

She-was-my-sister.

A beat. Then:

MANDOLIN

Oooops.

Vance releases her, lets this sink in. She goes over to the tree, and with her back to him busies herself disconnecting lights, preening it, etc.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

She okay?

Vance can hardly contain himself.

VANCE

Okay? No she's not okay. How could you do such a thing?!

She turns to him.

MANDOLIN

I watched you, and the way you looked at her, the way you held her to you, I wished it was me you were holding. But it could never be me, could it? It never coulda been, and never will be. So I...

(suddenly sullen)

I messed up. I'm messed up. You know what I think?

(MORE)

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

I think it woulda been better if I
was never even born. That's what I
think. Fuck this life. I'm over it.

She takes the whisky from the floor, puts it to her lips, and
drains it. Then she takes her Christmas tree and walks to the
door.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

So I guess this is goodbye.
(pause)
Unless...

Vance doesn't respond. She goes back to him.

MANDOLIN (CONT'D)

How 'bout it, Vance?

She drops the tree and it falls between them. As Roy
Orbison's "Crying" begins:

A moment, then Vance's hand slides around Mandolin's waist,
holding her to him. He sweeps her up into his arms and
carries her towards the bedroom.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY (DECEMBER 25 - PRESENT)

We are back in the present. Vance wakes up next to Mandolin's
dead body, as we saw in the first scene.

Jumps out of bed. Stares at her.

A KNOCK at the door.

INT. FRONT DOOR - MORNING

Vance opens the door to see the two detectives, Winfrey and
Barnes. He moves aside to let them in.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The detectives are seated rather uncomfortably on a love
seat. Vance across from them. On the table between them sit
three mugs of coffee. Barnes does most of the talking.

BARNES

So...how's doctoring coming along?

VANCE

I beg your pardon?

BARNES
You know, the medical profession.
You are a doctor, or do I have the
wrong...
(reads notes)
...Vance Anselm?

VANCE
I am a medical resident, yes. First
year.

BARNES
There's a name for you first years,
ain't there?

VANCE
(nods)
We're called interns.

BARNES
They call 'em rookies in my line of
work.

He looks at Winfrey, who glares back at him, gets up and
strolls around the room.

BARNES (CONT'D)
And don't they call you residents
because you live in the hospital -
as in reside there?

VANCE
It does seem that way sometimes.

BARNES
How do you like it? Medicine, I
mean.

VANCE
(shrugs)
It's a living.

BARNES
What made you want to become a
doctor?

VANCE
I suppose I wanted to help people.

BARNES
I'd have liked to become a doctor,
but my grades weren't what you'd
call stellar. I got ADD.

VANCE
Sergeant isn't all that bad.

BARNES
It's a living.
(chuckles)

VANCE
(checks watch)
Do you mind telling me what this is
about?

BARNES
Oh yes. Of course. Excuse me for
injecting a little humor into the
mix. It's pretty grim work
otherwise, what we do. Not unlike
what I imagine hospital life to be,
surrounded by all them ailments.
Only in my case, folks ain't sick.
They're dead.

VANCE
(getting it)
You're from Homicide?

BARNES
(nods)
Detective Winfrey and I are
investigating the death of an
individual by the name of Max
Pacheco. Are you acquainted with
Max?

Vance thinks about it for a moment.

VANCE
I can't say that I am.

BARNES
Is that a no?

VANCE
I don't recognize the name.
Pacheco, did you say?

BARNES
Maybe this'll jog your memory.

Barnes extracts a photo of Max lying dead in a pile of dirt,
his body in the early stages of decay. Vance winces at the
image.

BARNES (CONT'D)

Max turned up at a local landfill not three days ago. He didn't just mosey on over there and decide to drop dead. Someone killed him, blunt instrument to the side of the head, three blows, maybe four. Dumped his body into a garbage can somewhere in the vicinity.

WINFREY (O.S.)

Specifically within a three mile radius of this apartment.

Vance turns to look at Winfrey, who is by the mantel. She holds the candelabra in her hand, tests its weight, caresses its edges.

VANCE

What makes you think Max and I--

BARNES

An ex girlfriend of his. Went by the name of Mandolin Snow. She was a patient of yours.

Vance glances toward his room. It's quick, just a fraction of a second, but Barnes catches it, follows his gaze.

BARNES (CONT'D)

Dr. Anselm?

INT. EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Vance walks through a bustling emergency ward, sees Mandolin seated alone atop a hospital bed. She wears a hospital gown and is waiting to be examined. She stares at him through heavily shadowed eyelids. Small and fragile and forlorn, like a wounded dove.

INT. LIVING ROOM - PRESENT

VANCE

I recall treating her, yes.

BARNES

What do you recall exactly?

VANCE

She was an attempted suicide. In and out of the hospital in a couple days. I don't know what else to tell you.

BARNES

You get a lot of those types in medicine? Quick ins and outs?

VANCE

A few, I guess.

BARNES

Like police work. And marriage.

(chuckles)

Winfrey wouldn't know, she's still single. Ain't that right, Detective?

Winfrey now stands in the corner of the room, where a PAINTING hangs crookedly. It is of a landscape shabbily rendered.

She rights the painting, and as she steps back to look at it, it falls off the wall, revealing a crater-like indentation in the plaster, from where Vance's head was slammed against the wall.

She runs her finger along the crater's edges, which are tinged slightly red, from dried blood. She looks at Vance. He meets her gaze.

A long silence. Barnes breaks it.

BARNES (CONT'D)

Looks to me like an unstoppable force met an immovable object.

Winfrey replaces the painting on the wall. Then continues walking around the room.

BARNES (CONT'D)

What happens?

VANCE

What happens what?

BARNES

What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object? Come on, you're the scientist. Indulge me.

VANCE
 (swallowing)
 It's a paradox.

BARNES
 Come again?

VANCE
 Neither exists, so I wouldn't know.

BARNES
 Me neither, but stay out of the
 freakin' way!
 (chuckles at his joke,
 then serious)
 What was the nature of your
 relationship with Miss Snow, other
 than her being your patient?

VANCE
 I don't get what you mean.

BARNES
 I'm just trying to connect the dots
 here. Our man Max shows up dead,
 Ms. Snow dated Max, you treated Ms.
 Snow. You get where I'm headed.

VANCE
 If you mean were we intimate, I'll
 quote the American Psychiatric
 Association by saying that sexual
 relationships with either current
 or former patients are
 categorically prohibited.

Barnes looks at him long and hard. Vance doesn't look away.

BARNES
 Are you a psychiatrist?

VANCE
 No. But I treated Ms. Snow for a
 psychiatric condition.

BARNES
 Maybe she said something about Max
 to you?

Vance does not reply.

BARNES (CONT'D)

While you may strive to preserve doctor/patient confidentiality, we could confiscate her medical records.

VANCE

There is nothing in her chart that would be of relevance to your case.

BARNES

Fair enough. But are you withholding information that wouldn't be in her chart because it's not medically related?

VANCE

Why don't you ask Ms. Snow?

WINFREY (O.S.)

(from behind Vance)

We would, if we could find her.

BARNES

Hasn't been seen since the day you discharged her from the loony bin...

(checks notes)

...ten days ago.

A long pause. Just as Vance is about to say something, the PHONE RINGS. It comes from the bedroom.

VANCE

I have to take that. Could we continue this interrogation--

BARNES

(correcting)

Conversation. That's all we're doing here.

VANCE

Yes, well, could we continue this some other time?

BARNES

I look forward to it.

(as he rises:)

Oh, and Merry Christmas.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Vance reaches the bedroom and answers the phone. As he talks he stands over the bed looking down at Mandolin's corpse.

SURGEON'S VOICE

Dr. Anselm, we are wheeling your sister out of surgery right now. You'll be happy to know she has regained consciousness.

VANCE

I'll be right there.

Vance hangs up, then goes into the living room to see that the detectives have left, returns to the bedroom, goes over to the body, removes the belt from around her neck, puts it around his waist, drapes a sheet over Mandolin and leaves the room.

INT. INTENSIVE CARE UNIT - PATIENT'S ROOM - DAY

Vance sits by his sister's bed. We are outside the room, watching him. She is attached to the ventilator and can't speak, so he's doing all the talking.

Vance's PARENTS enter the room, he stands to hug his mother and shake his father's hand. His mother goes to the bedside and strokes her daughter's hair as Vance stands talking to his father.

A nurse comes in with paper plates filled with turkey and gravy, hands them to the family. A bittersweet Christmas.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Vance again stands over the body, thinking about his next step. He sits down by the bed, pulls down the sheet and looks at Mandolin. Her eyes are still open. He reaches out and closes her eyes, exhales.

INT. APARTMENT HALLWAY - NIGHT

We watch as Vance drags Mandolin's body - which is now wrapped in bedding - down the apartment hallway towards the sign marked EXIT.

EXT. OUTDOOR PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Vance loads the body into the back of his Jeep.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - NIGHT

Vance driving through the city.

EXT. WASHINGTON PARK - NIGHT

Winding bicycle lanes, snow-covered grass, tall trees, and the lake.

Vance pulls into the parking area, then reverses and backs into a parking space. Looks to see that nobody is around.

He removes Mandolin's body from the car and drags her to the lake, through the mud and snow. He slips a couple times.

He reaches the water. Covered by a thin layer of ice. He rolls Mandolin's body into the lake. Watches Mandolin disappear beneath the surface. Her eyes open again. Stare at us as she sinks.

Vance returns to his car. Sees the gray Datsun. Parked facing him. His pace quickens. The Datsun's headlights come on and the car accelerates towards him. He jumps out of the way, rolls on the pavement, gashes his elbow against the curb. The car speeds off.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Vance asleep in bed. His eyes open and he sees a dark form standing over him. Blurry. A fuzzy shadow. He feels for his glasses on the night stand and turns on the bedside lamp. Looks around the room but the room is empty.

INT. APARTMENT - NEXT MORNING

Vance awakens, feels something crawling on his skin, looks down to see DOZENS OF BABY SPIDERS. Scurrying in all directions over his abdomen. He jumps out of bed. Hears the shower running. Moves to the bathroom. Water running. Filled with steam. No one around. And on the bathroom mirror, a HEART traced in the fog.

INT. APARTMENT - EVENING

Vance comes home from work in a shirt and tie. The turntable is playing. Roy Orbison's "Only the Lonely." He looks around the room, checks the bedroom. Nobody there.

He goes back to the living room. Now the sink faucet is running.

He turns off the faucet, then turns off the turntable. He looks in the glass over the sink to see it has become fogged, and in the fog, another heart.

He takes a kitchen towel, reaches over the sink and begins wiping down the glass. As he does this, the end of his tie falls into the garbage disposal, about an inch or two in.

Then suddenly, the garbage disposal comes on. It catches Vance by the tie, sucking him down. His head slams onto the counter and he is pinned to the sink. The disposal blades are stuck, the motor running on high, and Vance is pinned there helpless, choking.

He tries to reach over and turn off the switch but can't make it. Tries to loosen the tie, but it is too tight. He's suffocating now.

His eyes scan the counter and he finds a butter knife. Uses the dull blade to saw the tie off his neck. Cuts into the skin of his neck a few times before he is able to release himself from the noose.

Gasping, he falls back onto the kitchen floor.

INT. SUPER'S OFFICE - NEXT DAY

Vance sits across from the super. He wears a new tie, and a bandage on his neck.

VANCE

How do I go about getting out of my lease?

SUPER

(considers)

Well...there is a penalty for early termination. With six months left on your contract, it won't be cheap.

VANCE

I'll throw in the furniture.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Vance carries a cardboard box filled with his possessions up the steps of a brick apartment. He looks over his shoulder before ringing the bell. Charlie appears at the door, lets him in.

EXT. SKI RESORT - DAY

Vance comes down the slopes on a snowboard. He's shaky, almost loses his balance. Not bad for his first time. He stops in front of HEATHER, who waits for him on her skis. She claps, encouraging him. They walk to the lift.

EXT. SKI LIFT - MOMENTS LATER

He is looking away, somber.

HEATHER

You okay?

VANCE

I appreciate you taking me here, I really do. And I don't want to spoil it, but I can't go on pretending everything's fine.

HEATHER

What's the matter, Vance?

VANCE

I can't talk about it. I...I should get back.

They arrive at the top of the hill and Vance gets off.

INT. CHARLIE'S PLACE - DAY

We are in Charlie's son's bedroom. Vance unpacks his things. We see the contents of the cardboard box: his turntable, records, and some articles of clothing, not much else.

VANCE

Which one should I take, top or bottom bunk?

CHARLIE

Billy likes to alternate, so...

Vance throws his things on the bottom bunk.

VANCE

Thanks for letting me stay here.

CHARLIE

(light humor)

Hey we could use help with the rent. Resident's salary and all.

Vance takes his belt off, looks at it darkly. Stuffs it in his bag and stuffs his bag beneath the bed. Sits down and looks at Charlie, who can see that something is on his mind.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

What is it, man? You all right?

VANCE

The morning after the accident, I went home and started drinking and...doing some other stuff. I was going out of my mind waiting for the doctor to call, like some caged animal! And then she comes home.

CHARLIE

Who?

VANCE

(continuing)

If I had any doubt in my mind, any doubt whatsoever that she ran Lizzy down, she obliterated it, man. I was going out of my freakin' mind, Charlie.

CHARLIE

What are you talking about, man? You're not making any sense.

VANCE

I think I suffered a blackout or somethin'. Last thing I remember, she's about to leave my place. And I'm about to let her walk out of my life, scot-free into the sunset. Sunrise. It was daybreak, I remember that. I thought, no way. No freakin' way I'm letting her get away with it. This is my sister. You gotta understand, man. At the time Lizzy was still in a coma. I thought it was much more serious than it turned out to be. Anyway, the next I know, I wake up, and there she is by my side, dead as a doornail.

A beat. Vance looks at Charlie, helpless.

CHARLIE

You should have told me this before I agreed to let you stay in my six-year-old son's room, man.

Then, Charlie breaks out laughing. It's clear he doesn't believe him. Just another one of their elaborate inside jokes.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
Fucking joker, you!

He exits, leaving Vance alone.

VANCE
(to himself)
Are you listening to me? I think I
may have m-m-murdered her.

INT. CLINIC - DAY

Vance follows a female patient out of an exam room. As she passes the program director, Dr. Mosby:

PATIENT
Quite a resident you have there,
Dr. Mosby. Best I've seen in all
the years I been coming to this
clinic. Really sensitive to my
needs.

Vance reluctantly accepts the compliment. He doesn't look too hot. Not just his beat-up face, but he looks queasy and sweaty, tired and achy. It's been a day since his last fix, and he's starting to experience withdrawals.

Dr. Mosby motions Vance over to him.

MOSBY
Congratulations, son.

Vance looks blankly at him.

MOSBY (CONT'D)
You haven't heard? You have been
accepted into anesthesiology out in
sunny Southern California. You got
your wish. Now you can go someplace
warm, peddle all the drugs you
want. Just another cog in the
machine. Making money for the pharm
companies. Congratulations.
(pats him on the back)
We'll be sad to see you go. Not
really. Maybe a little.

Mosby pats him one more time, a bit harder, causing Vance to vomit a little into his sleeve. He runs to the bathroom.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Vance vomits into the sink. His hands are shaky as he tries to clean up the mess. He takes out a small clear plastic bag of white powder, thinks about it.

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

Vance exits his vehicle to find the word WHORE scrawled on the side of his car. Looks around the parking lot, which is pretty empty. Sees across the street a GIRL. Hard to make out her features. Same height and weight as Mandolin. Same blonde hair. Staring at him. Cross-traffic resumes, and when it abates, she is gone.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC WARD - DAY

Swanson is at a table going over charts when Vance enters.

SWANSON

Hey you. I thought yesterday was your last day with us.

VANCE

I wanted to come by and thank you personally. Your evaluation was...very generous.

SWANSON

Nonsense. You earned every word of it, down to the last superlative. I got to watch you mature as a physician during your time here. I will be sorry to see you go. Though I trust you won't go very far.

VANCE

They want me in California.

Dr. Swanson looks at him for a long moment.

SWANSON

Don't you go breaking my little girl's heart. I'm speaking not as your attending but as a mother when I say that.

Vance lowers his eyes, clearly at a loss.

SWANSON (CONT'D)

(beat)

Have you been sleeping any better?

VANCE
 (frowning)
 I was hoping we could talk, you
 know, off the record?

Swanson gestures to a chair and Vance sits.

VANCE (CONT'D)
 I don't know how to put this...But
 lately I been seeing stuff.

SWANSON
 What kind of "stuff"?

VANCE
 Stuff that isn't there.

A pause.

SWANSON
 Sleep meds can cause
 hallucinations. I'd say cut back on
 the Ambien.

VANCE
 I haven't been taking any Ambien
 and these are not hallucinations.
 These are...Dr. Swanson, do you
 believe in ghosts?

INT. CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Vance has a book in his lap entitled The Unguarded Realm, and he's skimming it as he's driving, turns it over to see a picture of the author. MADAME TROUSSEAU is an older lady with dyed black hair and too much face paint.

As he divides his attention between the book in his hand and the highway ahead, he pulls onto a one-way street, going the wrong way. He drops his phone, swerves to avert an oncoming car. Winds up stalled on someone's front lawn.

Frazzled, withdrawing, sleep deprived...

The homeowner comes out of the house and Vance reverses back onto the street, spins around and pulls onto a side street, which leaves him directly in front of Washington Park.

He pulls into the lot, parks facing the lake. The view of the lake is obscured by a garbage truck. Its drivers are taking their lunch break on the park bench.

Vance dials the author's number and waits.

MADAME'S VOICE
 (husky, European)
 Hello?

VANCE
 (on phone)
 Ms. Trousseau? This is Vance
 Anselm. I'm a colleague of Dr.
 Swanson's. Emily Swanson?

MADAME'S VOICE
 Ah yes, Emily. Old friend. What can
 I do for you?

VANCE
 Dr. Swanson said you might be able
 to help me. You see, there's been
 a...well, someone I know has died
 recently, and...I don't know how to
 say this without sounding
 ridiculous...

MADAME'S VOICE
 You feel you are being haunted by
 the ghost of that someone.

VANCE
 Yes. Well, possibly. I don't know.
 That's why...Ms. Trousseau, I was
 hoping you might be able to shed
 some light on the subject.

MADAME'S VOICE
 Does this person have a name?

VANCE
 Mandolin. Mandolin Snow.

MADAME'S VOICE
 And did Ms. Snow die suddenly?

VANCE
 Yes.

MADAME'S VOICE
 And was she the victim in some way?
 Accident? Murder?

VANCE
 Yes.

MADAME'S VOICE

I have documented numerous cases of visitations involving those taken from this world suddenly. Have you read my book?

VANCE

I have it here with me. Look, if I'm being...visited... how do I make it stop?

MADAME'S VOICE

I'm assuming that you were involved in some way with the death of Ms. Snow?

VANCE

I may have been.

MADAME'S VOICE

Were you the perpetrator?

VANCE

I...

He falters.

MADAME'S VOICE

You must make amends. That is the only way to put her soul to rest. If you do not, then God help you.

VANCE

(quietly)

What if...I don't believe in God?

MADAME'S VOICE

There is a power higher than the law of man, Dr. Anselm. Whether you choose to believe in it or not. And if you do not atone for what you've done, you can be certain that you will be judged thereby, be it in this life or the next.

Just then, the garbage truck in front of Vance pulls away, and we see behind it:

THE LAKE

The lake has been cordoned off and the authorities are pulling Mandolin's body out of the water. The eyes are black sockets, skin blue and bloated, hair matted. And then, a fish wiggles out of the mouth.

VANCE

(on phone)

I have to go. Thank you for your time.

Vance hangs up, starts his engine and as he puts it in reverse he looks in the rearview mirror, sees the gray Datsun parked behind him, facing his car.

He exits his car and marches over to the Datsun. He sees in the driver's seat the SCRAWNY GUY from an earlier scene. The guy has been rolling a marijuana cigarette and when Vance knocks on the window he jumps and the contents spill onto his lap. He rolls down the window.

VANCE (CONT'D)

What the hell, man! You been following me?

SCRAWNY GUY

No! I was just...She--

He points in the direction of the lake.

VANCE

What? Say it! She's gone, man. Tryin' to scare me won't bring her back.

SCRAWNY GUY

I'm not...I'm just...the driver.

VANCE

You tried to run me down the other day. I know it was you.

SCRAWNY GUY

It wasn't me, man. It was her!

He points again in the direction of the lake.

Vance is equal parts afraid and enraged. He slaps the guy hard across the face.

VANCE

Get outta here. And if I catch you tailing me again, I'll kick your ass to...kingdom come!

The guy laughs nervously.

VANCE (CONT'D)

Did you run down my sister? Do you want me to call the cops?

SCRAWNY GUY

Yeah right, man. Like you'd even think of going to the cops. After what you did?

Before Vance can react the guy puts his car into gear and as he peels away:

SCRAWNY GUY (CONT'D)

That'd be suicide! You hear me? Suicide!

Vance stares after the guy, feeling powerless. In a ridiculous gesture, he flicks the car off.

He returns to his car. Sees approaching him from the lake, Sergeant Barnes. Vance enters his car, but his feet are wet and he slips on the mat. Its edge slides forward and almost over the gas pedal. He puts the car in reverse. Barnes starts running over.

BARNES

Dr. Anselm! I'd like a word with you!

Vance peels out of the parking lot and onto the street. He looks down at his phone. He has missed a call - from Heather. His eyes scan the other numbers on his call log. He slows to a light, sees that on 12/25 at precisely 5:30 AM a call had been placed from his phone.

12/25. 5:30 AM. About the time he had blacked out.

A car honks from behind him and he accelerates through the intersection. Dials the number listed. He goes faster, faster, veering in and out of traffic. Dodging garbage trucks. Guns the gas to just get through the intersection. Going faster now.

Vance looks down to see that the floor mat is stuck over the gas pedal. Pumps the gas to free the pedal but only goes faster. He pumps the brake again, but this just causes the car to swerve. He's going faster, faster...

In the back seat, a phone rings.

He freezes, looks into the rearview mirror to see:

MANDOLIN'S FACE

Staring back at him from the back seat. As he turns to look at her he swerves into the parked lane, where he smashes into a garbage truck.

Metal crunching. Glass shattering. His face slams into the windshield, cracking it. Blood splatters.

Silence. Stillness.

Then:

Heather comes running out of her apartment, looks into the car, sees Vance, and goes over to the driver's side, where she opens the door and peels Vance off the windshield.

She takes his bloodied head in her hands and tries to open his mouth, to maintain his airway. Comes away with a tooth that had lodged in his tongue. She starts to cry, rocks Vance back and forth.

The sound of SIRENS approaching.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - DAY

We see Lizzy accompanied by a PHYSICAL THERAPIST. She has made great strides in her recovery since the accident of several days before. We follow her as she walks on crutches across the screen down the hall...

Just as Vance is wheeled into surgery. A flurry of excitement, paramedics shouting, doctors conferring...

Vance's body disappears behind the doors of the operating room.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

One week later.

"Get well" cards, flowers, balloons. Among them, "Happy New Year."

Vance lies in his hospital bed sleeping. His face heavily bandaged. Slits for eyes. Jaw wired shut. The room is dark. Outside, rain and thunder.

At the window, a NURSE stands looking out. We see her in profile. Young. Black hair in a bob. She turns down the blinds.

Suddenly, violently, she yanks down on the cord, pulling it off the blinds.

Vance awakens. Looks over at her as she turns to him. Tasha. She moves towards him, cord in hand. Vance struggles to move.

Limbs fastened to the bed with restraints. A muffled sound through the wire apparatus immobilizing his jaw.

Tasha stands before Vance. Reaches up and removes the black wig, revealing blonde hair which falls in undulating waves.

Lightning strikes. In the stark flash of light we see:

Tasha is Mandolin.

Or, who Vance had thought was Mandolin.

She moves behind Vance and winds the cord around his neck, choking him. Vance struggling. Trapped. Gasping. He kicks, first vehemently, then his movements become slower and slower until they are barely perceptible. A moment now, and lights out forever...

Then, from behind Tasha, a VASE filled with flowers. Crashing down on Tasha's head. She topples to the floor. The glass shatters and releases the flowers in a glorious cascade atop Vance's bed. Vance looks over. His sister, Lizzy. She has saved his life. She puts her arms around her brother and embraces him. The first time since her accident.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAYS LATER

Vance still in bed. Face still bandaged, but his jaw is no longer wired shut.

Sergeant Barnes seated next to the bed, pen and paper in hand. Vance has just finished his confession. Barnes stops writing but doesn't put down his pen.

BARNES

You're leaving out the most important part. How'd she die?

VANCE

I told you. It's all blank. It's like I wasn't even there.

BARNES

You expect me to believe that?

VANCE

Don't you think I wanna know what happened just as badly as you? This is my life. It's like I lost time...

Barnes knows he has pushed Vance as far as he can, and he's satisfied.

BARNES

Coroner's report came back. Not much there.

(beat)

I gotta say...nothing tells me this wasn't accidental. Hell, it may have even been her own doing.

(shakes head ruefully)

Poor Mandolin Snow...

VANCE

Not even her real name.

BARNES

Don't you think I know it?

(flips through his note pad)

Natalie and Natasha Fontana. Born in Greeley, just outside of town. Real shithole. Anyway, mom skips out on 'em early on, leaves 'em with their deadbeat dad, who liked to give it to 'em rough. After years of all kinds of abuse, the girls fought back. Shot their father. And their father's girlfriend, after she walked in on 'em. At the time it wasn't proved. The weapon was registered to Mr. Fontana, and there'd been numerous reports of domestic disputes involving him and his gal pal, so they called it a murder/suicide and closed the books.

(puts pad away)

This happened a couple years back. It was all over the papers, locals mostly. Anyway, they got sent away to foster homes. Different ones, in case they wanted to get together and, you know, perpetrate another alleged double homicide.

(chuckles)

Not too long afterwards, they ran away. Natalie, our Mandolin Snow, came out here first, followed by her baby sister by seven minutes, Natasha. Tasha, as she prefers to be called.

(beat)

I know this 'cause I just spoke to her in the other room, where she's being treated for that whack upside the head your sister dealt her.

VANCE

So Natalie and Natasha were twins...

BARNES

Yessir. Fraternal, maternal, I dunno. Which one is identical? Anyway, despite being the younger of the two, Tasha was the alpha. Masterminded her father's murder, shot the girlfriend too. I got her to confess to the whole shebang. Not to mention she was the one driving the car that struck your sister. And now that we got her for attempted murder - of you - I guess you could say she'll spend the rest of her life as property of the state.

A pause as Vance considers this.

VANCE

(wistfully)

And she never even had a chance.

BARNES

Come again?

VANCE

Look, Sarge. I know my opinion doesn't carry much weight, seeing as how I'm the prime suspect in the death of a girl, but I don't want to press any charges, not in her sister's trying to kill me - which I understand completely, in light of what I, uh, mighta done. And I'm sure Lizzy feels the same way. Going to jail for life is just as bad as dying - at least to me it is.

(beat)

What I'm trying to say is, I'll take Tasha's place in the penitentiary, if mine isn't secured already. Can't you see I'm just trying to make good!

Barnes stares at him, unsure what to make of this. It's ridiculous, but there's a strange logic behind it.

BARNES

I seen a lot of killers in my day.
Put a lot of people behind bars. I
don't much care for jail, what it
represents.

A NURSE comes in, gets Vance to take his afternoon meds, then
leaves.

BARNES (CONT'D)

But sometimes people need to be
locked up. And sometimes they need
to be set free. And then there's
you. You go to jail, your doctor
days are over. A lot of people you
coulda helped don't get it. Nah,
jail ain't for you. You been
punished enough already. You'll be
reminded of that every time you
look in the mirror.

Reflexively Vance touches his face above the bandages. He
doesn't know how he'll look, but one thing's for certain: he
will never be the same.

BARNES (CONT'D)

(continuing)

But I can't just set you free
neither, can I? That just wouldn't
make no sense.

VANCE

(after a pause)

I've been thinking about that
riddle. You know, what happens when
an irresistible force meets an
impervious object?

BARNES

Ah, the paradox. You figure it out
yet?

VANCE

No, but you're right. It's best to
stay out of the freakin' way.

The two men share a smile.

VANCE (CONT'D)

I'm an addict, Sarge. An addict
like me oughta steer clear of
medical specialties with such easy
access to drugs.

BARNES
Like anesthesiology.

VANCE
Correct.

BARNES
When did you start using?

VANCE
Med school, if you can believe it.
Pills got passed around like candy.
Once I made honor roll, I was
hooked. But it's a pricey habit,
and they sell stronger stuff on the
streets, and for a whole lot
cheaper too.

(thinks about it)
I suppose it's the drugs that led
to the aberrant sex, one follows
the other, so by stayin' clear of
one, I'll be doing away with both.
I know I need help. And I intend to
get it, right away.

BARNES
That's what I needed to hear.
(beat)
'Course, it ain't up to me.

VANCE
But...I thought...all this...

BARNES
Just my opinion.
(holds up his hands)
Take it up with the DA. He's the
one you'll need to convince.
(remembering)
Oh, and...

He reaches into his coat and pulls out Vance's hospital
badge.

BARNES (CONT'D)
They found this on the girl, Tasha.
If they ever let you back into the
doctorin' business, you come find
me.
(looking Vance in the eye)
I'll be around.

Barnes rises, puts on his cowboy hat, and leaves.

Vance in bed, still reeling.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NEXT DAY

Vance wheels himself into Tasha's room. The bandage has been removed from his jaw but covers the upper half of his face.

He's now at her bed. Her head is wrapped in gauze. Her face turned towards the window. Eyes swollen, distant.

VANCE

(quietly)

Tasha? My name is Vance. I'm so sorry for what happened to your sister, M-M-...Natalie. I'd like to say it was my fault...or if it was an accident...but I don't know what happened. But you do. I know you do. I know she called you before she...I need to know what she told you.

Tasha lies still, unresponsive. Vance shakes her shoulder.

VANCE (CONT'D)

Please. Tell me what was said!

Still no response. Vance taps her wrist. Shrinks back. Her skin is cold. He reaches out and turns her chin towards him. She is limp. Her eyes lifeless. In her hand, an empty bottle of prescription pills. The pills that Dr. Swanson prescribed...for him!

VANCE (CONT'D)

(calling out)

Nurse! Nurse!

The nurses enter the room and rush past him, attempt to revive the girl. No use. She's gone.

EXT. HOSPITAL - SUNSET

Some time later.

Vance is wheeled out of the hospital by Heather. The bandages have been removed and we see his new face for the first time. While still handsome, it has lost some of its natural elasticity on the left side due to nerve damage. The mask-like quality gives him a dignified if somber appearance.

Outside we see the sun setting over the mountains. Glorious orange and gold, like burning embers.

Vance and Heather are met at the entrance by Lizzy and the three move away from us and into the sun.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

The door opens as Vance carries Mandolin into the bedroom. The night of her death. He lays her on the bed, gets on his knees over her. Kisses her between the legs. She groans in ecstasy. Then, he removes his belt from around his waist.

VANCE

Do you trust me?

Fear in her eyes, like a hunted animal caught in a trap. Nevertheless Mandolin nods, yes. As the noose goes taut around her neck. A beat, and then Mandolin's hand slides up and over Vance's hand, and the noose gets tighter and together they pull.

We hold on their hands, clasped, fingers entwined, and then move back and out of the room as the door closes and we:

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END