



PRINTER'S DEVIL REVIEW

Kate Racculia. *Natalie Takes the Elevator.*
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Natalie Takes the Elevator

ALL THESE YEARS, VIOLA HAS BEEN WAITING IN THE ELEVATOR. Natalie knows this is impossible—or at least highly improbable—and yet it’s true: when the doors part, Viola Fabian, the woman herself, is standing inside the small tarnished-brass box as if she’s been locked within for the past twenty years, whiling away the hours since 1977 until Natalie arrived with a wish to descend. Every detail is as Natalie remembers. The low ponytail, which was mostly white even in Viola’s mid-twenties when Natalie first knew her, is now the color of paper. The exquisite gray wool suit could be the exact same if the lapels were only a bit wider. The frozen blue eyes and the sloping reddish brows—proof that Viola has, at some point, been something other than a white witch—and the mouth, painted the dark red of old blood, are still poised for a glare, a doubting arch, a comment that had once had the power to stake Natalie through the heart.

Natalie’s body moves her forward, across the threshold from the dim ninth-floor hallway of the Bellweather Hotel into the ancient elevator car. She stands beside the woman who killed her, and the doors seal them inside together.

In 1969, the summer she was ten, Natalie Wink began to dream of Paul McCartney. It was never the same dream, but Paul was frequently there, wearing his shiny blue uniform and neat Sergeant Pepper moustache—on the prow of a sinking ship, swimming through the black of space, or bounding through a field of high gold grass like she imagined grew in the middle of the country. Natalie was born in California, in a small town outside San Francisco, so her best ideas of what happened beyond her immediate world came from the maps in social studies textbooks: maps that denoted each state’s primary products with cartoon hieroglyphs that made Natalie imagine a titanic oil derrick dominating all of Dallas, gargantuan bundles of wheat stacked neatly throughout Kansas, and one lone, enormous dairy cow terrorizing northern Wisconsin. California had a mammoth orange infestation, but that was south of Natalie; all she had to worry about (well, there was plenty to worry

about, but all she had to worry about when it came to the threat of regional agriculture) were gargantuan grapes, and Natalie liked grapes.

The first Paul McCartney dream happened on that Fourth of July, when her uncle brought over sparklers that burned green and her parents, proud owners of a brand new hi-fi, played records all night long. She may have heard it before then, but it was the first time she truly listened to “Penny Lane.” When no one was watching, she reset the needle to the beginning of the song and played it and played it and played it until her mother’s college roommate said that if she heard that fucking song one more time, she was going to leave and take the pot with her. It didn’t matter. “Penny Lane” played on in Natalie’s head. It was, to Natalie, a thing of impossible, addictive beauty, and the trumpet solos—which she would later learn, to her delight, were played on something called a piccolo trumpet—were the most perfect sounds she had ever heard.

Beyond being a worried and hesitant child, Natalie held a preternaturally rigid conception of right and wrong, good and evil. At ten, she believed in absolute moral categories, that there were heroes and villains and devils and angels, like equal and opposite reactions of the soul. That trumpet solo—clear as a clockwork bell, racing up and down and sideways—was pure. Natalie liked to think of herself as pure, as a hero. She was not like her older brother Trevor, who had been dropped off late at night twice by the police; she was not like their neighbor Hank Howler, who kicked Ralph, the Winks’s black lab, when he didn’t think anyone was looking. Natalie did not get in trouble; Natalie did not hurt anyone or any thing. She had a good and a true soul, and the perfect trumpet in “Penny Lane” made her hum like a tuning fork.

She put herself to bed that night. Her parents and their friends were still in the backyard, laughing a little too loud, their voices wreathing Natalie with the comfort of their nearness. She brushed her teeth and her long red ponytail and slipped between her covers. She heard Ralph turning and turning and finally settling onto the pink braided rug at her bedside. Natalie drifted away as the trumpet played.

And then there was Paul McCartney, sitting next to her at the picnic table on the lawn outside. It was nighttime (at least it felt like it was still tonight), but they were alone. It was so quiet she could hear the rustling of his uniform, the silvery fringe and pink braid on his epaulets flopping against his arms with a satisfying heaviness.

“Penny Lane” began to play softly, from no turntable that Natalie could see, and Paul McCartney sang to her on the mossy picnic table in her own backyard. He sang casually, conversationally, like a friend leaning in to tell her a secret, about bankers and firemen and nurses selling poppies and things she didn’t understand but wanted to. And when the trumpet solo began, Natalie was astonished to find something small and round and

metal pressed to her lips, her fingertips dancing on cool flat pearls and her lungs filling and pressing air out in a voice that was clear and bright as crystal.

For the first time in her life, she knew how it felt to be perfect.

She woke up early the next morning and ran into her parents' bedroom and announced—to their intensely hung-over confusion—that she was going to play the trumpet. Starting now.



Viola Fabian even *smells* the same. Natalie has compartmentalized so many things about her that she's begun to forget some of the less upsetting, purely sensory details. "Compartmentalize"—that's Natalie's therapist talking, Doctor Call-Me-Danny; he drops fruity things like "compartmentalize" and "emotional distance" and "avoidance behavior" every third word. At any rate, the memories are all still there and floating up from the cold storage of her subconscious. Viola smells like lavender and coffee. Every inhalation is steeped in it.

Natalie is suddenly sure she is going to cry.

"Which floor?" Viola asks.

Her voice—Natalie blinks and just as suddenly knows the tears will not come, thank God—her voice sounds different: smaller, more human. How can that be, when everything else is precisely the same? Unless it's Natalie's own ears that have changed.

"Lobby," she replies with a small croak that turns into a cough. "Thank you."

Viola, also going to the lobby, has already pressed L and settles back to the middle of the car. She sniffs. She looks at her watch. She does normal things for someone riding in an elevator to do. Natalie thinks she might be staring, but she doesn't care and couldn't control herself anyway if she did. Of all the places she thought she would see Viola Fabian again one day, casually riding in an elevator at a high school music festival and retreat in the Middle of Nowhere, New York, is not one of them. On the news, as either victim or perpetrator (both were entirely likely)—that was where she would reappear. Perhaps in the newspaper, in a picture accompanying an obituary. Possibly in her casket, should Natalie be compelled to attend her funeral to confirm that she is, in fact, dead.

Natalie takes a risk.

"Here for the festival?" she asks.

Viola looks straight ahead. "Yes," is all she says.

"So am I. Chaperone. I have two students attending, chorus and orchestra, both seniors." She swallows, feels she is talking too much. "And I guess there's going to be a big storm this weekend?" Conversation about the weather—especially impending snow, when

in upstate New York—is an elevator staple. “I’m just happy I got us here safe and sound, though I hope we can get home again. Did you travel very far?”

“Everywhere is far from this Godforsaken armpit.”

Natalie bites back a smile. Classic Viola. Then she frowns, bruised. This, she imagines Doctor Call-Me-Danny would say, is a complex emotion.

How do you not recognize me? How do you not know me?



The first time Natalie Wink met Viola Fabian, one was twelve and the other twenty-four; one was a student, one a teacher; one was awestruck and one was jealous. This is what Doctor Danny, the past twelve months, has been telling Natalie over and over again was the simple truth of the matter. Natalie, who was there, knows it’s sort of half the truth, that it contains pieces of truth—gnawed on, mangled, and turned inside-out but, she supposes, truth in essence.

Natalie took up the trumpet in the fall of 1969 when she entered fourth grade. By middle school, her band director told her parents there was little more he could do to guide her passion and talent, but he *could* recommend a name for private lessons. He’d seen a young female student from the conservatory play a trumpet concerto to a standing ovation and recently heard she was looking for pupils. Natalie’s family was still living outside the city at the time, and the drive to San Francisco to meet with this student and discuss the possibility of lessons would always be etched in her brain: how the rolling brown hills gave way to long blocks of pastel-colored houses, to city stoplights and street corners and crowds of people. Her teacher was among them. Viola Fabian, with her perfectly musical name, could be any one of them.

Viola met with Natalie and her parents in one of the practice studios at the conservatory. They compared calendars, discussed fees. Natalie, trumpet case on her lap, hugged it close out of excitement more than apprehension; she wanted to show this strange and beautiful young woman—younger than her parents! and obviously so much cooler—how talented she was. How similar they were. She believed music was her future the way that she believed in breathing. It was hard-wired, a brand on her soul, so essential to her being that she never thought of it as a choice.

Viola asked Natalie’s parents to leave them for a moment. “Having our parents around makes us that much more nervous when we’re playing for a new audience,” she said, and winked at Natalie. The practice room, sound-proofed and close, felt like a secret clubhouse, and the two of them felt like sisters: Viola the wise older, Natalie the precocious younger. Viola asked her to run through her scales: major, minor, and chromatic; and Natalie did.



She asked her to play a prepared solo, beginning to end, and Natalie did. Viola handed her a sheet of handwritten music to sight-read, and Natalie did. Natalie knew she hadn't performed perfectly—sight-reading was her Achilles' heel—but she also knew she'd performed well. Very well, she thought; she'd felt herself lift and swell on the high carrying notes, clap like a bell on the short ones, and scamper around the eights and sixteenths with electricity. Through it all, Viola had said nothing beyond an instruction or a question. She had paced the small room (which felt smaller and smaller as time went on), winding the end of her red-and-white streaked ponytail around her index finger, her brow furrowed, her lips pursed.

Natalie laid her trumpet across her lap and waited, hopeful.

Viola smiled at her and said, "You were sloppy on all of your scales, but especially the full chromatic, which was pretty goddamn awful. Your pitch was off on measures eight through twenty-two in the solo. I don't understand why you thought the grace notes leading into bar F were optional; you apparently think you know better than the composer and I can emphatically confirm you do not. You cannot sight-read. Overall, your attack was weak, your intonation thin, your technique laughable. You are not ever going to be great, but if you would like to try to be good, I might be the only person who can help you. Learn this," she said, offering a sheaf of music. "All of it. By next Tuesday."

Again, Viola Fabian smiled—and Natalie was too young, too dumbstruck, and too hungry for validation to realize that it was a smile of malice.



How many things had to happen, how many decisions, left turns instead of right, for them to meet again like this? Natalie is dizzy with the sheer coincidence of it all—for them to have last seen each other on the other side of the country in California, on a June evening in 1977, and for them now to be sharing an elevator car in upstate New York, descending with excruciating slowness through the ancient belly of a hotel that time forgot? She squeezes her eyes shut. Twenty years of her life have passed since that sweltering day, since her graduation party—twenty years. She feels the weight of what those twenty years might have been, could have been, if she'd turned left instead of right. She sags inside.

She licks her lips. She knows, at least, how *she* got here. From California she went to college—in Indiana, to a sprawling state university, where she studied music theory, composition and performance. Then she met her husband, Barry, at her first job, when he was subbing for the chemistry teacher. What was that teacher's name? Natalie struggles but can't recall. She does remember that a substitute was needed because the regular chemistry



teacher had accidentally set his beard on fire during a classroom demonstration. So for her to be here in this elevator, in small part, a man whose face is a blur and whose name is a mystery had to turn the gas jet up a smidge too high on an otherwise normal day in the mid-1980s. *Oh life. You think you're so funny.*

Then she and Barry were married and moved to—where was it first? First to Chicago, because neither of them had ever been there. Then to Ann Arbor, because they heard it was lovely, and a little part of both of them missed college. Then to Minneapolis, to one half of the Twin Cities, because Natalie was restless again and Barry refused to move any place with a cost of living higher than anywhere they'd been before. He had family in St. Cloud and suggested Minneapolis, she knew, because he wanted children and wanted to be close to his parents and brothers and sisters when that happened. “When that happened” was how Barry talked about procreation, as though it were as eventual as their next birthdays, their thinning hair and wrinkling hands, their deaths. Natalie didn't have the heart to tell him that the act of having a child—of conceiving, carrying, delivering, rearing—was something she could no longer even imagine.

This was chiefly the result of being a teacher. All the time they were moving, she and Barry were teaching in public and private schools, the children of the wealthy, the super-wealthy, the poor and the destitute, the comfortable and the aspiring. But in every school and every ensemble she conducted, Natalie always had the same students. The same jerkoff percussionists who found it hilarious to ditch lessons and waste time in rehearsals. The same meek little third flutes, barely passing enough breath through their instruments to make them whistle. And the same wunderkinds, bright and bright-eyed, born bursting with talent, who she tutored and praised and who always left her for something better. To them she was a yearbook signature, barely a souvenir, and she had come to resent all the hours of her life she'd given without hope of return. So it was too late now for kids, for her, even though biologically it wasn't; she was only (ha) going to be forty in the spring. It was just that she had already raised hundreds of children and didn't have the strength to raise another, one of her own—who would leave as surely as all the others, who would take what was left of her heart and everything else.

“What district are you from?” Viola's voice startles her.

She swallows, her throat dry. “Ruby Falls. Way upstate. A northern backwater armpit.” She and Viola had always spoken the same language.

“How long have you been teaching there?”

“Not long,” Natalie says, and thinks: the break-in. The break-in is the last thing that happened to bring her here. That was why they left Minneapolis, after all—because a man broke into their little house on Stratford Street with the tilting mailbox and the green shutters. Not just a man. An *intruder*. And he didn't just break in—he broke in, and then

Natalie Wink Wilson shot him in the leg and he died. That she has killed someone has become a perfectly normal thing for her to think about herself, on the same level as where she went to college and how she met her husband. *The man I killed is the last thing that brought me here.* She feels nothing in particular when she thinks about it. But then she has felt very little at all, about anything, since she shot him.

One of the last clear emotions she remembers feeling is angry, so angry, when she and Barry had talked about what they were going to do next—after the man was buried and the lawyers had said their piece and it was clear nothing was going to happen, other than Natalie being written up in the *Star-Tribune* as a heroic homeowner. When Barry calmly, all things considered, pointed out that running away would solve nothing, she had shouted at him, screamed, really. WE ARE LEAVING. WE ARE GOING SOMEWHERE ELSE. So they did.

This, then, is somewhere else. In this elevator with Viola Fabian is somewhere else—another world in another time, from another era of her life. *How the hell did you get here, Viola?* she wants to ask. *How many left-instead-of-right turns led you here? How many places did you teach, how many men did you marry, how many children have you and haven't you had, how many people have you shot?* Her cheeks feel warm and she flushes, her anger like a wave of nausea, because she cannot imagine that Viola Fabian's road to this elevator was anywhere near as disappointing, or as much of a waste of a life.

And where is the justice in that?

The car gives a little wobble—Natalie hates this creepy old place, and its creepy old machinery—and the moment of unsteadiness jostles her mind. She starts. She remembers. She remembers the gun in her jacket pocket.



She has forgotten how it feels to believe in things like justice—things like right and wrong, and good and evil, heroes and villains. Viola Fabian cured her of that.

Viola taught her that she was never as good as she thought she was, or wanted to be. That the only way to avoid embarrassing herself was to do exactly as instructed. That every time Viola called Natalie lazy, or stupid, or an uptight little bitch, she deserved it—it was good for her to stay humble. Or she was just kidding, God, could you *be* more humorless? Lighten up.

And Natalie believed her and loved her, for years, and this was why: Viola Fabian made Natalie better. She made Natalie *brilliant*. At school, Natalie jumped to first chair in every ensemble, then tried out for the local youth orchestra and made first chair trumpet there, too; at fourteen, she was the youngest in the whole section. She entered solo competitions and won. She auditioned for adult-level concerto competitions and placed. Every single



thing Natalie attempted musically, she excelled at; and every single time someone praised her for her accomplishments, she was sure to shyly mention that it was nothing, that it was all thanks to her mentor, Viola Fabian. Natalie was too caught up, too genuinely thrilled by her developing abilities to question Viola's motives or methods. It wasn't until she was a senior on the edge of high school graduation that she realized she was truly afraid of letting Viola down, that this fear had conditioned her, and, worst of all, that for years she had only been playing for one reason: to keep Viola Fabian happy.

She'd been at a youth orchestra rehearsal, on a break, sipping a Coke in the lobby of the local high school that allowed them use of its auditorium for Sunday afternoon rehearsals. One of the oboists was sitting on the lobby floor working on a double reed, shaving the edges down with a flat blade. It happened in half a second. She heard the knife clatter to the floor; she turned and saw the kid's white face and wet, red thumb; and then the kid, who looked too young to even be in high school, burst into hysterical tears.

"What did I do? What did I just do?" He was talking to himself; he didn't even see Natalie. Blood was pumping out of his thumb, polka-dotted the hallway linoleum, and he was draining from white to transparent. "Oh my God, I need this thumb. I need this thumb. I need this thumb."

Natalie laughed at him. She too was stunned white, but he was just so funny, sitting there in his striped T-shirt that was a little too tight, bleeding and blabbering. He was fine—it turned out he didn't even need stitches—but he made Natalie think. What would she do if, say, her front teeth got knocked out and she couldn't hold a decent embouchure? What if *she* lost a finger or two and couldn't reach the keys or hold her trumpet aloft? Lying in bed late at night, with Ralph the (very senior, by now) black lab fast asleep on the pink braided rug at her bedside, Natalie Wink realized the first emotion she would feel upon being unable to ever play the trumpet again was relief. Stomach-dropping, heart-stopping, soul-soothing *relief*.

She saw Paul McCartney, heard the rustle of blue satin. She heard "Penny Lane," cheerful and mysterious, promising a wider, brighter world. She tried to feel how that first dream had made her feel, when the act of playing music had seemed her perfect preordained right. But music felt like none of those things now. She couldn't even remember well enough to pretend.

It was Viola Fabian's fault.

She lived with this knowledge for several months. She played her spring concerts and was fêted as a graduating senior. She actually graduated from high school, and it all passed by quickly and without much fanfare, until her parents threw a graduation party for her on a too-hot June night. Natalie, who didn't particularly want a party in the first place, gamely threw on a sundress, stole a beer from the refrigerator in the garage, and was two bottles

in when Viola arrived. Natalie would spend the summer rationalizing that what happened next happened because she had been drinking. But that wasn't true. It happened because Viola had broken her heart.

Wearing her uniform of gray suit, pumps and power ponytail, Viola looked like a court clerk dispatched to serve the party with a summons. Natalie had been going to her weekly lessons like everything was normal, had betrayed no irritation toward her mentor for poisoning her pure love of music, so there was no reason for Viola to suspect she was unwelcome. But here, in the backyard strung with pink and purple paper lanterns, in the house where Paul McCartney sang to Natalie in her dreams, Natalie watched her brilliant and cruel big sister from across the lawn and wanted her to die. To actually die—to leave the earth, without forwarding address, forever. She was ashamed to have borne Viola's cruelty and considered it kindness, humiliated by the understanding that all the awards and accolades were a celebration of something sick and wrong between them, something twisted. She had fallen for it. She had been so desperate to please, so thirsty for success, she'd put her soul in hock to a woman—oh God, Natalie could see it—to a woman who wasn't half as talented as she was. Or as talented as Natalie might once have been, before Viola bled her dry and turned her into a performing monkey.

She hid in the house, in her room. She watched the sun set on her friends and relatives in the backyard while she drank more beer, feeling righteously wounded and utterly sorry for herself. The party sounded like a success—she heard laughter, loud talking, shouts. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine how she would tell her parents she didn't want to continue with Viola, that all the years they'd financed her private lessons they'd been subsidizing an emotional sadist. *Listen to yourself, Natalie. You're being melodramatic. Histrionic.* Viola was mean, Viola was a bitch; but Natalie had allowed Viola to get away with it. And she, Natalie, would have to—she could—she was going to college in the fall. That was a natural cutoff, wasn't it? Couldn't this all just go away by itself?

There was a light thump on her door and when Natalie turned, there was Viola, letting herself in, the villainess coming to gloat. She looked like she didn't want anything in the world but to eat Natalie's heart.

“*There* you are. Everybody's missing you down there.” She leaned against Natalie's dresser, her eyes skimming the beads and knickknacks and plastic idols of Natalie's childhood. “But *of course* you're up here, hiding in your room like a spoiled little brat.”

Natalie didn't say anything. She sat on the edge of her bed and wished that Ralph the black lab were with her, Ralph who loved her just because he loved her.

“Your father tells me you're going to Indiana.” Viola sniffed. “I was surprised you didn't tell me yourself. What gives? You've been so *quiet* lately. We haven't talked in months, really, Natalie—is everything okay? Are you afraid about graduating, going off to college?”

Jesus, Viola was sitting on the bed next to her, trying to be kind. Next she was going to ask to brush her hair. Braid it. “Maybe you’re feeling a little, oh, a little *anxiety* that there’s an awful lot of competition out there...that maybe your best years *are* behind you?”

Natalie closed her eyes. The beer bottle in her hand was empty and her stomach too full. She sloshed.

Viola’s arm circled around her back, giving her a squeeze. “Your best years are behind you, kiddo,” she said in a voice slicked with kindness. “That’s the way it is. Sure, you’ll go on, you’ll go to school. You’ll learn how to write and how to teach, and you’ll probably teach but you won’t write, and you certainly won’t compose anything worth remembering. Then you’ll marry someone and have children and you’ll say you played the trumpet in school but you won’t have actually picked it up in years. You’ll get rid of it. You’ll sell it, and you won’t be happy but you won’t quite be able to put your finger on why. Unless you remember this conversation with your old friend Viola, and how she tried to make you something great but you chose differently.”

Natalie broke without thinking. The bottle was a club in her fist. She swung back. Viola raised her hands to protect herself and Natalie slammed the bottle against the meat of Viola’s forearm. She knew she hadn’t broken the skin but she also knew it was going to leave a beautiful black bruise, huge and swollen, because Natalie had felt the bone ring, low like a giant brass bell. Elated now, feeling as if she had planted a flag on the moon, Natalie lifted the bottle again and this time Viola was too stunned, too slow. This time, Natalie swung hard and smashed her on her temple, right near the hairline.

Viola made a noise, short and shocked. Closed her eyes, brought her hands up to cover her face. She tilted. She swayed on the edge of the bed like a dizzy child. Natalie watched a tear of blood well, bright as a jewel, on Viola’s head.

Natalie dropped the bottle on her pink braided rug. She didn’t think she would learn anything worse from Viola Fabian than that she was a puppet, an instrument to be played. But there, in her room on the night of her graduation party, she learned that she was not a hero. Viola was not a villain. They were somewhere in between and nowhere at all, both of them alike.



The gun in Natalie’s jacket is the gun that killed the man in her house. She brought it with her to the festival on impulse, tucking it in her luggage between her sweaters and skirts and shampoo and conditioner in their little travel size bottles. While packing, it drifted into her mind—as it often did, unbidden and horrible—accompanied by a simple thought: *I might need that*. If she had asked herself why, for what possible reason could a



chaperone at a weekend retreat for student musicians need the protection of a handgun, she would not have had an answer. Not then and not now, other than as a kind of insurance against that which could not be anticipated. It was so easy to bring it. It's innocuous, small and surprisingly light, a very popular handgun, according to Barry, among casual gun- and home-owners. And women. She made a point not to know too much about it, which she now concedes was very stupid and could be the main reason why a man she did not know is dead. Barry will miss it if he happens to check the safe in the den, but Barry is spending the weekend with Kevin and Lou, playing poker, watching football, maybe crossing into Canada for the casinos. She doubts he will even look.

She does not have a permit to carry it. She carried it out of her home and out of her hotel room just the same; she was too afraid to leave it on its own, and too afraid to leave herself alone without it.

But Natalie is not going to kill Viola Fabian. Natalie, almost forty, exhausted and afraid, traumatized and more than slightly bitter, is never going to kill anyone ever again, even if she feels like it and even if they deserve it. However, it might—it might feel good to *frighten* Viola. To gently remove the gun from the inside pocket of her wrinkled-from-the-drive blazer and ask if Viola thinks she looks familiar. *Do you remember what happened the last time we met?* She would casually press the red emergency stop button on the door panel and the car would jolt, stop, and she would face Viola, that heartless sociopath, cornering her in the rear of this tiny elevator car—this car that smells like old shoes and dust and a faint whiff of ammonia from the housekeeping carts that are pushed on and off every day.

Yes. That would feel very good indeed. The hairs on the back of Natalie's neck stand up like spikes because this is a very insane thought she is having—Doctor Danny would probably say that it is “willfully destructive and pointlessly violent,” and for once Natalie would agree. But it is a thought that feels good, and Natalie is a fan of feeling anything at all these days, good, bad, or insane. She senses a real smile pushing up from deep inside, from the bottom of her stomach, and it bursts onto her face with something like a tiny laugh.

The elevator has reached the lobby. The doors open.

Too late. Natalie is more disappointed than she would like to admit. There is no pretense of politely summarizing their elevator conversation—no hollow chat about enjoying the festival or that perhaps they'll see each other at dinner, which will begin in a few short hours. Viola Fabian moves quickly to be the first off. She glances back over her shoulder and looks straight through her former pupil, pinning her to the back of the car.

“Get over yourself, Natalie,” she says. 🌸