

Native Tigers of Tucson

Charlie was parked outside the sprawling, ranch-style house on Cholla Way belonging to none other than Winnie Darrow, the Tucson Tiger Mom herself. From where she sat in her car, she had a clean view into the open-plan living space broken up by the granite-topped island against which Winnie leaned as she spoke into her phone held out in front of her.

“Hi, gals,” Winnie said in a lilting tone Charlie refused to believe was her natural speaking voice. “Thanks for taking some time for me today.”

“No problem,” said Miriam Huey, founder and operational manager of DBI Consultants, from a small office in Key West. “How is life in the desert?”

“Each day makes new memories,” Winnie said. It was surreal how the woman spoke in soundbites ready-made for her online platforms without acknowledging that no human being actually spoke like that.

“Charlie just moved closer to your neck of the woods,” Miriam said.

“Is that so? How are you liking Arizona?” Winnie asked.

“I’m making memories too,” Charlie said with the hope that Winnie heard how ridiculous those words sounded spoken aloud. “I got tired of the swampy heat in Florida, so I traded it in for the dry heat of the desert. Although, I didn’t expect it to be this hot, but the locals tell me things will cool off in the next couple of weeks.”

Winnie chewed at the cuticle of a finger on her left hand. “They’re right. Just hang in there a bit longer and you’ll see.” Did the Tucson Tiger Mom have any other disgusting habits her millions of followers should know about? Maybe she swallowed mouthfuls of her own balled hair or worked out in the same unwashed yoga pants—like the black number with the aqua accents at her thighs she wore right now—which gave her yet another yeast infection.

“I hope so,” Charlie said. The woman scrunched her face like she needed to sneeze, but Charlie prayed to no god in particular for Winnie Darrow to retch up a slimy, bile-slicked hairball onto her fancy phone held by her fancy manicured fingers. Instead, she lifted the phone out of the way and sneezed into empty space.

“God bless you,” Miriam said with clear emphasis on “God.”

“Goodness. Thank you,” Winnie said. “That’s one of the trade-offs down here. The dry air can do a number on the respiratory system from time to time.”

“I know,” Charlie said, “and my allergies have gone haywire.” She waited for the advice about local honey she knew Winnie would give.

“You know what you should do? Find yourself some local honey from a farmer’s market and start eating that. It’s the best thing you can do for yourself.”

The suggestion came straight from one of the links Charlie had posted from the Tucson Tiger Mom’s official account. It encapsulated everything Winnie’s digital brand aspired to be. Honest, helpful, and wholesome. Charlie had served as lead on the Darrow account for eighteen

months and had, in that time, immersed herself in the honest, helpful, wholesome things of the Tiger Mom's world that were then fed to her dead-eyed sycophant followers like bleeding meat to zoo animals. A year and a half of Charlie's anonymous life spent building the Tucson Tiger Mom platform one diaper-changing strategy or faith-based platitude at a time.

"Thank you," Charlie said. "I'll try that."

"You won't regret it. Trust me, you'll be feeling brand new in no time at all."

"I'll hold you to that," Charlie said through a forced laugh as Winnie pushed away from the island then fussed over the tail of her shirt that had snagged on some craggy outcropping that shouldn't have existed on the smooth countertop.

"Winnie, we won't take up much of your time today," Miriam said. "We just want to review some data from last month and then talk about where we're going next."

"Sounds great," Winnie said. Never had a name, not even one so cloying as Winnie, ever been more apt for a person. The woman didn't speak; she whinnied like a hoofed herd animal.

Charlie didn't bother paying attention to what Miriam said as she prattled on about metrics and analytics. After all, Charlie herself had produced those metrics and conducted those analytics. She understood better than anyone, including Winnie, Winnie's cultural penetration and social visibility. She'd been the primary architect of the swelling legacy of this woman who sought to "Be a good Christian, good mother, and good wife—in that order." Charlie had even written that line; Winnie just owned the trademark.

Winnie Darrow, the self-anointed Tucson Tiger Mom, was nothing more than a charlatan, and her godly, homespun performances which leveraged her children as the "inspiration" for her own selfish "ferocious parenting" that was nothing more than a product peddled on social media, in television appearances, through book tours, and via corporate sponsorships had succeeded in

winning her a filthy kind of fame and fortune. Charlie was agog that no one else saw her for what she was. That could be changed though. Winnie Darrow for years had put together a careful construct of what she wanted the world to believe she was as a person and as a mother. DBI—Digital Branding and Imaging—and Charlie herself had played a crucial role in the creation of that construct. But Charlie had the access, and now she had the video, to stand the Tucson Tiger Mom before all those millions of slavering fans and, in the shining light of the Internet where history was preserved in perpetuity for one-click access, deconstruct her for all to see.

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After the conference call, Charlie did not linger. She drove to her own temporary home at an apartment complex in a charmless part of Tucson where nothing, not even the infrastructure, aged well in the stripping sunshine. The asphalt, super-heated in the September day before re-solidifying during the short night when it felt like the land itself rushed to suture its wounds, buckled in great, yawning faults, and each time she steered her car into one of the cracks—because they could not all be avoided—the violent, rattling punch shivered through the rubber of the tires and transferred deep into the steel of the frame.

The complex was a degraded edifice stacked three stories high around a central courtyard dotted with patchy grass and the unloved, plastic toys that children didn't bother to bring in after playing with them. A modern hospital with its own on-site pharmacy was two blocks to the north, and the majority of tenants at Charlie's complex were patients straining to afford the medical services that kept them alive even as they could not afford to stay where those services were rendered. Charlie felt surrounded by sickness, but the impermanent nature of the inhabitants themselves allowed her to rent on a week-to-week basis—no deposit or lease agreement needed.

She walked into her apartment and locked the door behind her, ensuring the deadbolt slid flush with a comforting click. Key West had a vagrancy she'd calloused to long ago. The detritus drug paraphernalia, the strewn bottles of liquor and cheap cans of beer which perfumed the salty air of the island with a touch of something boozy—these were as much a part of the place as the sand and the sea. Tucson, however, watched with wild eyes. Charlie knew nothing of Arizona beyond the folk tales of the gunners, both chivalrous and villainous, who'd brought the land to heel. The unease she felt whenever she had to venture into the city—she felt stalked almost everywhere she went—was the legacy, she decided, of this place's feral birth and rabid upbringing. It made the city feel somehow hungrier, more desperate.

But the Tiger Mom called Tucson home, so Charlie followed now that she had the means to burn down the careful life Winnie had built. Charlie considered literal fire for a time, but she worried arson would only make a martyr of a woman who already had more than enough acolytes. Besides, a fire, no matter how voracious, went cold with time, leaving behind a scar of ash that might seed future growth. Once undone, Winnie could not be allowed any chance, no matter how small, to be remade. Charlie did not need a match, kindling, or accelerant; she had the video.

Charlie stepped around the half dozen boxes she hadn't bothered to unpack. She'd found a flimsy desk and small sitting chair—stained by mysteries she did not want to solve—at a nearby thrift store. Her Internet connection was strong, and her overclocked laptop processed with a cold efficiency. In those few things she had everything she needed. She keyed in her double-redundant login credentials to prove she belonged then accessed the file Piper had sent tagged with "My perfect mom." Charlie didn't know why the girl turned on her mother, but she didn't care about any of the details or motivations. As she had done each night since first

receiving the video more than three months ago, Charlie, with a bubbling flutter of electric anticipation, pressed play.

The screen fills with the round face of Piper Darrow, thirteen years old and firstborn of the Tiger Mom's kits, turning her face first left then right behind pouting, pursed lips. She punches in a command for a filter that dots her cheeks with red-pink freckles and a curling head of unnatural orange hair. From off camera, a woman's voice says something unintelligible which elicits no reaction from Piper. Instead, she changes filters to wear sloping rainbow locks that frame her sparkling face before ramping up and off her shoulders. The woman's voice amplifies both in volume and irritation, and this time the camera picks up her ungarbled words.

"That behavior is unacceptable, and I will stand for it. Do you understand?" The tone is flatter and the cadence sharper, but the woman sounds like Winnie. Piper stabs at the screen, and the orientation shifts from third-person to first. The girl is no longer the star on screen; she is the documentarian behind the camera. Her first shot in her new role establishes the scene. Piper sits in the back of a tall, stretching vehicle—the kind that has a level of utility matched only by the boredom generated by driving the thing. In front of her is an empty, unused row. In the driver's seat is the Tiger Mom herself turned to the right and framed up in the shot. In the passenger seat is the youngest of the brood—six-year-old Jarvis—who focuses on something in his lap. Winnie, undeterred, continues her harangue. "You think there won't be consequences, young man, but there will be. Hey, you look at me when I'm talking to you."

What happens next takes mere seconds. The boy, his limp hair somewhere between bronze and blonde, turns to his mother with a disarming nonchalance and spits on her. Winnie flinches back, though whether from shock or disgust it is not clear. Afterwards, she is still—utterly unmoving—for a measurable moment long enough to let Jarvis return his focus to his lap.

Winnie blurs on camera as she reaches across the vehicle's center console and grabs her six-year-old son by the left arm. She pulls him close to her face by yanking him from his seat, and Jarvis yelps a piercing shriek that jars the camera as Piper flinches at the sound. The scream is throttled, however, when she clamps her free hand around his throat and holds him in place.

“You will behave when I tell you to behave,” Winnie says to her youngest son, nose tip to nose tip, as her bloodless knuckles stand out from the hand still squeezing his arm. “You will do what I tell you to do. And you will never, ever spit on me again. Do you understand me?” Jarvis' entire face leaks fluids, but he doesn't say a word. He can't. “Do you understand me?” Winnie asks again, shaking him by the arm and throat in each of her grips, and Jarvis manages a nod dripping with snot. “Good,” she says and shoves him back into his seat. His small right hand first finds his wounded neck then moves to his arm at the very place she grabbed and covers the skin like a bandage. Facing front with his head down, his crying is too soft to be heard all the way in the back where Piper still operates the camera, or it is possible his voice box is simply unable to produce sound. But his little boy frame shudders with each of his huffing sobs. His hand continues holding his arm as the picture freezes at the video's end.

Charlie sat back from the still frame. She could think of no way to make the video any better than just as it was. The Tucson Tiger Mom yanking then choking her youngest, most vulnerable child. What else could it be called other than abuse? That scream of his. The audio file of it played in her head over and over again. She could not turn it off, but she didn't want to. It would be the soundtrack to the crumbling of Winnie Darrow's empire. Charlie had exerted a preternatural patience in sitting on the video as long as she had while the id in her head shouted to post it now-now-now always now. She'd come close to indulging—the tantalizing fruit so sweet and so close—but had resisted day after day, week after week so that it would be perfect,

and Florida would not have been perfect. She wanted to live in it until the fire she started burned close enough to warm the skin on her shining face.

Charlie reoriented herself at her laptop and put her fingers to the keyboard. She used her access to the Tucson Tiger Mom's official account to navigate to video upload. She selected the correct file and clicked it into place. Now she just needed the right title to burst it out to all those Tiger Mom groupies desperate to be made just that much closer to the good Christian, good mother, good wife Winnie Darrow inspired them to be. Charlie smiled into the blue light of her radiating screen as her fingers flashed through the appropriate keystrokes. The perfect video deserved the perfect title. "This Tiger Mom Isn't Afraid to Use Her Claws!" Charlie clicked one final button and the video posted. She waited for the fire to catch.

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Charlie sat in the living room she'd only ever seen from her car. She admitted only to herself it was a lovely and comfortable place to be. The sectional couch cradled her while offering enough support to keep her in place. The conditioned air, which arrived in silence like light waves, cooled her skin without chilling it. Permeating the space she shared with Miriam, flown in from Florida to triage her company's most important account, and Winnie, hollowed face the color of souring cream cultured through sleep deprivation and her new role as a pariah, was the subtle scent of stemmed cherries and an herbaceous note taken from some pine-rich forested place.

"I don't understand, Miriam," Winnie said. She leveled no accusations through either her words or her tone. More than anything else, the woman sounded tired. "How did these hackers get into my account?"

“We’re not sure. I know that isn’t the answer you want to hear. It isn’t the one I want to give. But we’re working on it. We’re going to get better answers very soon. Right now, though, I think we need to focus on containing this as best we can.”

If Miriam felt panic—and she should; the undoing of the Tucson Tiger Mom would be the undoing of her business too—she showed none of it. Her timbre did not wobble. Her posture did not wilt. Miriam led in a time of crisis with her head up and eyes forward. But for all her cocksure body language and swift if unhelpful answers to the questions at hand, she was foolish to believe there was a way to contain this. There wasn’t even anything left to contain.

The video had been active for six total minutes three days ago, and that had been more than enough time for others to capture the images and repost them across the Internet. Dozens of national media outlets had already picked up the story. Five separate corporate sponsors, from a line of women’s activewear to a slate of gluten-free snacks derived from chick peas and marketed to parents who had children with food intolerances, had dissolved their relationships with Winnie instantaneously. Her books had been pulled from the three largest online retailers, and the market-share leader of the brick and mortar chains announced it would do the same at all locations. Even the Tucson police department put out a notice of a potential investigation of child abuse. Amidst this conflagration, Miriam spoke of containment unaware she was an oxpecker sitting atop a black rhino that had already been poached.

“Charlie?” Miriam said. “Tell Winnie what you’ve been working on.”

Winnie looked to her over a rich, dark-wood coffee table adorned with a yellow-orange blown-glass sculpture that reminded Charlie of a puffer-jellyfish hybrid. Winnie’s small, elfish face maintained a placid expectancy from underneath her mouse-brown hair she let fall in straight, tired lines to her shoulders.

“Your accounts are still locked down. If nothing else, no one is getting into them again. But we don’t want your silence on social media to go on too long. It’s already too late to get out in front of this, but we can’t let it get away from us either.” Charlie embraced her role as symbiotic bird atop the spreading mass of dead animal—its precious horn cut off and carried away for a grisly trophy long ago. She had expected to find more delight in it, however.

“Okay,” Winnie said. “How should we go about this?”

“I’ve brainstormed a few ideas already that I want to go over with you. Whatever it is we ultimately decide, though, you must take responsibility for your actions and come across as remorseful. Maybe even disgusted at yourself.”

“That won’t be difficult,” Winnie said. “That’s exactly how I feel.” Why was she reacting like this? Had that one video broken her brash ferocity that had served as her brand’s keystone from the beginning? Charlie’s anxiety flared; this was not the version of the Tiger Mom she wanted to burn down.

“Mom?” The small voice came from the edge of the hallway where it met the open living room. Piper Darrow had been crying; her cheeks gave her away. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, sweetie,” Winnie said. “Everything is fine. Miriam and Charlie are just helping to make sure of that.”

“Are you going to go to jail?” the girl asked.

“No, baby girl. Of course not. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Because I was reading something.” Piper held up her phone, candy-coated in a gummy pink case, and cried anew. Whatever she had read, and from wherever she had read it, remained a secret lost to her sobs.

Winnie moved from her seat to hold her daughter and soothe her with what comfort she could. “Don’t listen to any of that,” Winnie said. “People will say anything for a little attention. You know how they are.” It occurred to Charlie that Piper likely knew exactly that. For years she’d grown up in a digital world where a citizen’s value was determined by the crypto-currency of likes, shares, favorites, and follows. The girl’s arms, deboned and limp, dangled at her sides, but she managed a nod against her mother’s chest. “Would you do me a favor and go check on your brother? He has been much too quiet.”

“Okay,” Piper said as she twisted her head out of her mother’s hold to look at Charlie. The young girl’s face would sharpen in the coming years, but even now it was clear she belonged to Winnie; she was her mother’s daughter though favored with richer, more robust hair. The eyes were different too. Sturdier. Possessed of a longer memory. Charlie offered a small smile at her in return, but it melted under the girl’s stare.

Miriam’s phone, failing to read the room, piped a jaunty tune that left the older woman clamoring to silence it. She fumbled with the device for a few insufferable beats before, at last, finding the right button to accept the call. She excused herself out the front door while Piper doubled-back down the hallway to see about Jarvis. Charlie hoped his arm didn’t hurt him anymore.

“I can’t remember,” Winnie said as she sat down again across from Charlie. They were the only two left in the room. “Do you have any kids of your own?”

“None,” Charlie said.

Winnie nodded. She cried far differently than her daughter. There came no sobs, no flushing of blood to the face. The tears ran in lines parallel to her hair, but her voice didn’t so much as tremble. “Most days are a blessing,” she said. “A few of them are a curse. Convincing

your daughter you're not going to get locked up for abusing her little brother? That goes in the curse category." Winnie managed a meager laugh, but it died a quick death in the earthy-sweet air between them. "Did I just lie to my daughter, Charlie?"

Nothing about this was perfect. At first, Charlie had reveled in the data-stream carrying along the outraged, pious indignation of all those good Christians, good mothers, and good wives—in that order—who roared with all the rage their posts and profiles could manage. The virulent name-calling, the immediate mobilization for boycotts of all physical and digital products attached to the Tucson Tiger Mom, and all those domesticated women turning savage enough to rend Winnie Darrow apart piece by meaty piece had been a glorious display. For a day or so anyhow. But long after she was a carcass, they kept coming to the kill. These people—safe and faceless behind innocuous, suburban user names—fed to the point of bursting only to purge and feed some more. Between bites they howled like pack predators, shrieked like rabbits. Winnie should be unplugged, should be arrested, should have her arm ripped out of the socket and her throat crushed so she could see how much she liked it. She should be ashamed and she should be abused. Her sponsorships should be revoked and her kids should be taken away because she was evil. Because she was vile. Because she was sick, sick, sick. Charlie said nothing and let it unfold on-screen. Some talking head in a smart pantsuit whose name she did not know heaped praise on the hacker or hackers who had shown the world who, and what, Winnie Darrow really was. That marked the end to Charlie's reveling even as she assured herself the woman was getting what she deserved. But today, sitting in a homey if somewhat needlessly spacious living room in the heart of the tiger's lair, Charlie wondered for the first time if she did. And Piper and Jarvis? Were they also getting what they deserved?

She came to the left side of the Tucson Tiger Mom, now declawed and defanged. Charlie sat at an angle to place her right hand on Winnie's left shoulder. "Listen. The only crime you committed was in losing your patience for a moment, and that's no crime at all. You didn't do anything that any other mother wouldn't do. You're just a mom after all, right?"

"Right." Winnie nodded and sniffed. "Except I'm not supposed to be. I'm supposed to be the Tucson Tiger Mom, and she doesn't lose her patience with her six-year-old son. She certainly doesn't lay hands on—" She shook her head, and the silence dove deep enough for Charlie to hear the rhythmic click of the analogue clock, mounted above the decorative fireplace, she hadn't noticed before. "She certainly doesn't abuse him like that." Charlie moved her hand to the meaty part of Winnie's arm—the same part little Jarvis had been jerked by with such violence. She held on with the gentlest of grips. "Daniel and I have been separated for half a year now."

"Oh," Charlie said. "I didn't know." She didn't know why, but that was the most startling thing Winnie Darrow could have told her in that moment.

"Nobody does. I mean, the kids do obviously. It's not like we could hide it from them."

"No, probably not."

"It hasn't been easy for either of them. That day in the car, I'd taken them to the new touch tank at the aquarium. It's hard to negotiate their age difference sometimes. Finding something for the both of them to enjoy is almost impossible. But I thought the touch tank might be an exception. If I'm honest, I also thought I could get some really good pictures for the platform. Good mother, right?" Nothing in her dry smile spoke of happiness, but she made the grimacing effort anyhow. "Piper was over it before we even parked. And Jarvis? He was at his worst. Pushing other kids out of the way, handling all the starfish and things way too roughly.

We lasted ten minutes, and I'm sure everyone else there thought that was probably nine minutes too long."

A surly gust of wind speckled the large living room windows with flecks of desert debris that plinked against the glass. Miriam paced back and forth outside and gesticulated with her free hand. Her calm had left her. Her fingers flexed at the end of a snapping wrist bringing weight to the words she spoke into the phone.

Winnie lifted her nose toward the woman in the window. "We can't let her find out," she said.

"Trust me," Charlie said. "A trip to the touch tank is least of that woman's worries right now."

"No, I mean we can't let her find out that you were the one who posted the video."

Charlie took her hands off of Winnie. A sudden headache from the saccharine sweetness in the room—perhaps there was an unlit candle somewhere Charlie couldn't see—settled behind her ears and pulsed down the muscles of her neck. "I didn't," she managed to say with all the conviction of a cub's first mewl.

Winnie wore a half grin from the right side of her mouth. "You know," she said, "this mom gig isn't all pictures and posts. I do talk with my daughter from time to time. Admittedly, it's rare. She's thirteen, so she hates me. I'm also the reason her father left, so she extra hates me right now. Still, we live in the same house, so we're bound to talk once in a while."

"Winnie, I don't—"

Charlie could not get away, and when Winnie put her hand on her knee, she could not talk either. "I spent most of last night crying and asking God to hurt you like you hurt me. I'm not proud of it, but it happened. The only reason I was able to get any rest at all is because once I

calmed down, He showed me the obvious truth. My daughter didn't do this to me. You didn't do this to me. I did. I lied when I said Jarvis was at his worst that day at the aquarium. He's just a little boy who is confused and angry because his dad isn't around. I was the one who was at their worst. My very worst. You saw it on that video, and now everyone else has too."

"I'm sorry," Charlie said, and she was, and that sickened her. Sorrow for Winnie Darrow put the taste of stomach acid on her tongue. "I think we need to tell Miriam."

Winnie shrugged. "That will just get you fired."

"I know."

"What good will that do?" Winnie asked. "It won't undo what's been done. It will just eliminate the one person who can actually help me."

"Help you," Charlie said.

"I know we can't put this genie back in its bottle, but all I want is to make sure my kids are healthy and happy and know that their mom isn't a monster. We can do that, right Charlie? It's not too much I'm asking for."

What Winnie Darrow was did not matter. All that did was what label the citizens of the digital world pinned to her. Charlie knew that, and Winnie herself would learn. She had been the Tucson Tiger Mom because everyone had agreed she was. Now, however, they agreed she was something altogether different. Some fires could not be snuffed; they had to be left to burn themselves out.

"Of course not," Charlie said, clapping her hand over Winnie's. It wasn't lying to the woman that gutted Charlie; it was the fact that she lied for her. "I'll get Miriam and then we'll figure this out together."

Winnie Darrow smiled, sniffed, and wiped at her eyes. "Thank you," she said.

Charlie opened the front door and leaned out to wave down Miriam. The breeze came up then died again like the earth spun too fast and had to brake to correct. She wondered if these were the right conditions to birth twisting dust devils she'd heard were common in the wilder parts of Arizona. She hoped to see one for herself before she left. There would be none on this stretch of Cholla Way though. No devils lived here. No tigers either. Not anymore.