

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

**MY  
BEST FRIEND  
AND I NEED  
THERAPY**



**CAMILLA EVERGREEN**

# MY BEST FRIEND AND I NEED THERAPY

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A SWEET, FORCED PROXIMITY ROM-COM

CAMILLA EVERGREEN

Best read after

*[How to Destroy Your Lifelong Bully](#)*

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# Reader Expectations

**Heat Level:** Fade-to-black, innuendos, some curses (four beavers needed houses and one hot fire fire), sensual description, mentions of sex

**Notable Tropes:** Friends to lovers, forced proximity, only one bed yet again, therapy! is therapy a trope? should be a trope, guy falls first

**Triggers:** Anorexia, bad parental relationships, violence, sadism and power plays, toxic behaviors, manipulation, delicate moral grayness, references to human trafficking situations, dark/irreverent humor (*not* in a religious context), mild non-sexual nudity, vomiting

**Style:** First person present, single POV

**Stress Level:** High

**Ending:** HFN

*Please don't ignore the warnings.*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

♥ PLEASE read this.

~~~~

The author (me, hi) enters a room, pulls out a chair, and sits down. Lacing her fingers together atop the table between you, she takes a deep breath, meets your eyes, and loses absolutely all of her air, deflating like a flailing tube man.

OKAY. Listen. I'm going to be transparent. From there, you can decide whether or not this story is for you. It is a DARK sweet rom-com, through and through. (Consider "sweet" in the sense of "no sex on page.") If you want SWEET SWEET rom-coms, check out my other books that aren't connected to *How to Destroy Your Lifelong Bully* (AKA the ones that don't have entire chapter-length author notes). I love writing tender sweethearts who only have tiny toxic bones in their bodies. The sweethearts you'll meet in this book have entire toxic skeletons. (No one is completely free of toxicity. It's just a fact. It's what you do with your toxic that matters, because—yeesh—we are broken messes, and I do opt for an element of realism within the very non-realistic.)

I've probably got some pretty unchecked audacity, but I've been working on that whole "writing what I want to write" thing, and these are the kinds of stories that appear alongside the ones that will give you diabetes. I can confirm that this is not the darkest story in existence. It doesn't even come close. It's probably fairly high on the darkness chart when it comes to the genre it's in, however.

So.

Enjoy these bajillion warnings in order to make sure you actually want to be here.

I believe reading should be enjoyable, so I refuse to blindside anyone or put anyone in a place where they aren't comfortable. Therefore, to the best of my abilities, I shall paint a picture of what you're getting into.

First things first, PLEASEEEEEEEEE do not take the following content to mean I condone any of the questionable behaviors displayed IN REAL LIFE. Repeat after me: red flags belong in fiction, where they are a pretty color. Not in reality, where they facilitate dangerous situations and emotional turmoil.

Secondly, I twist up morals into a huge mess of spaghetti. Wrong actions, well-meaning reasons, decent enough thought processes. If you aren't interested in questioning what you find acceptable as a human being, maybe nudge yourself back to the sweeter side of the tracks.

I know this kind of story won't be for everyone, but since I love it, I know someone else will, and those people are the only ones this story is for.

The male lead in this story displays sadistic behaviors, and he's not interested in correcting them, his dark humor, or the way he views the world. A relatively important thing to note is the fact he is fully aware of himself and how unacceptable his brain is. He keeps his less-palatable tendencies in check—unless his friends need him to act without guilt on their behalf. His grasp on reality is wobbly at best because he wasn't raised with access to those things called...hugs...I think. His perceptions aren't mainstream. His understanding of emotions is...poor.

If you don't like dark humor (like disrespectful mentions of stabbing, and arson, and taking candy from babies), you will not enjoy this story. If you don't like mean characters who maintain that capacity for meanness to the very last page, this is not your story. If you think that co-dependency (relying on someone else almost completely) is a big bad that you simply cannot be in the presence of, this just isn't the place you want to be.

**I care about your wellbeing. So I'm trying to be painfully transparent.**

These characters are clinically insane, guys. Sit with that thought a moment before you continue.

I cannot stress enough that I never intend to make fun of or undermine real, harrowing issues, but crass comments exist throughout, and they're likely disturbing to many readers, especially in this non-heavy-language and non-sex-on-page genre.

Speaking of non-sex-on-page, both the main characters in this story were sexually active prior to where this story begins. This means that unlike in most of my other stories, they don't treat "the act" as a big deal. (Be aware there is no "the act" occurring on- or off-page from the beginning to the end of this story. A couple moments look like they're about to fade to black, but that's simply because I am a menace. Sincerely, nothing happens until about twelve minutes after the last page.)

In the very first chapter, the male lead forces the female lead into a kiss. Consent is vital. (I'm making that clear up front because I want to make clear



that a lot of what happens in this story isn't meant to be *okay* or *right*.) Even though these characters have been friends forever, and they care for each other at a depth where if our female lead had said *no* or pushed away, life would have continued without scars, just...there's a running topic of force throughout this book that under any other circumstances, and probably even this one, is morally questionable.

Understand this is a story depicted in a *very* niche context and displayed through flawed and broken character mindsets. Unless the exact parameters in this story exist, *much of this story is not even remotely okay*.

(Note: our female lead is perfectly capable of standing up for herself and making her own decisions. This is a fact. She, in some shape or form, allows everything that transpires and has options. Please don't overlook that fact or the fact our male lead is aware of it.)

There are a ton of power plays, a couple breakdowns, vivid depictions of body dysmorphia and negative self-talk, violence, questionable ways of handling anorexia, and nowhere near enough therapy.

This is a rom-com, but some topics within are incredibly bleak (including mentions of crime syndicates that deal in human trafficking and an on-page run-in with a member).

There's a balance of dark and light in this world, two sides to everything, and I don't know why I play in both or swirl them together like coffee and creamer, but here we are.

The last thing I'd like to note here is this: if you struggle with body image, I hope the brighter message in this story reaches you and helps redefine your concepts of beauty. Your worth is immeasurable. A number cannot sum up your value (not even if that number is how many books you've read this year). Be proud of who you are, how you look, what you like, and if you've got a slice of darkness in you, manage where it goes, who it affects (whether that's yourself or others), and how to handle it so you can become the best version of yourself. The happiest version. The kindest, most authentic version.

Even if you're broken, so long as you've not been destroyed, you can pick up the pieces, fill them with gold, and become whole again.

I believe in you.

Topics remarkably NOT included: third-act breakup, miscommunication, surprise pregnancy, interrupted kisses.

Be kind to yourselves,

Camilla Evergreen

TL;DR: The content in this book may be offensive to many readers. These characters are very, very broken and unapologetic. The first chapter depicts the horrors of this entire story pretty well, so scan it before choosing whether or not to buy/read the rest. **Read responsibly.**

## PROLOGUE

♥ Hey, Siri. My best friend just kissed me, and I think I liked it??

~~~~

Sean's curse explodes in my ringing ears, then his mouth is on mine.

Disgust riots through my stomach, jerking nausea to the forefront. For the seventh time today, I shove it down. He smells like grease, like meat, like whatever oily junk food he was just shoving in his face.

What in the name of all things good in this world *is going on?*

A disgraceful whimper pulls from my chest as Sean presses my damp back against the cool siding of Quincy's pool house. It's her birthday (hurrah), and the sound of people splashing around in what is—honestly—a pitiful excuse for a pool battles the panicking confusion in my skull.

Sean slants his mouth against the seam of mine, tracing his fingers up my waist. I tense as he grazes my ribs, my flesh, my fat.

"No," he breathes into my mouth before planting his palm against the hollow plane of my stomach, which never seems hollow enough whenever I look in the mirror, whenever my mother looks at me. My screeching thoughts muffle when he deepens this random freaking kiss.

Honestly?

What the heck?

One moment, I'm casually taking a break from the rush of exhaustion being around so many people causes and telling *my best friend* that Mom's on me to get implants; the next thing I know, he's smashing his mouth into mine.

Revolted. Ew. Ew. E—

I gasp, shudder. My knees threaten to buckle, and whether that's because I've only had a sugar-free sparkling water today or...because...this kiss isn't...half bad?

Wait.

Holdddd way up.

His thumb swipes over my ribs, and his caress slips down to rest at my hip, right above the metal ring of my bikini. He twists the loop, and I'm totally lightheaded. Usually, I force myself to pretend I'm not, but right now, he's the only thing keeping me upright.

Planting my palms against the stucco building behind me, I ground myself in the gritty texture and hope it has enough friction to keep me standing.

Sean breaks what I am now (begrudgingly) considering a soul-altering kiss and wipes his mouth. Damp red curls, dark green eyes. The pool lights breaking up the midnight dark glint across his pale skin in this secluded corner of Quincy's backyard. Everyone here knows us. Did *anyone* see that?

The kind of gleam that turns my body into jelly overtakes bright, happy, idiotic Sean. His tongue flicks out against his bottom lip, tasting a lipstick smudge. *My* lipstick smudge. It's not his color.

He's an autumn. A true autumn. I'm a bright spring.

And why do I even care about that *right now*?

"What the—"

He cups my chin, settling his thumb against my lips, silencing me.

Ha ha.

I might scream.

Except then *everyone* will know what just happened over here. I need to clean his ugly face first.

"Les," he says, "let's get married."

My entire brain collapses on itself. I blink. My brows furrow. I mute the piercing sound that wants to fall out of me in favor of hissing, "*Are there drugs here, Sean?* You know Velspar doesn't let his friends do *drugs*. He's barely sanctioning alcohol since Little Miss Hart entered the picture."

"I'm not on drugs," he says, seriously, and his lids lower. The deep green of his eyes settles on my mouth, and my heart somersaults. "My father wants me to marry you."

Oh, well then, in that case.

I slap him. Or I *try* to slap him. Before my hand reaches his face, he catches my wrist and presses in closer. Tickling, he trails his thumb up against my palm and effortlessly keeps me from being able to pull out of his grip. My heart is pounding—foolish thing. It's just hungry.

"Sean Ulysses Montgomery. You let me hit you right this second, do you hear me?"

His eyes *roll*. Can you *believe it*? Leaning in, he kisses my jaw, nips my ear.

My breaths falter, quivering.

"We're getting married," he murmurs. "I've already bought a penthouse

over on the east side.”

“A *penthouse*?” It takes everything within me not to screech, which is probably why he kissed me before starting this insane conversation. Without incriminating evidence on him, I’d be screaming. Now, I can’t, because then everyone would know. “You dare think I’d ever live somewhere I have to pay *rent*?”

“I own the building.”

“Your *father* owns the building.” Geoffrey Montgomery owns just about every apartment-type complex in Pratt City. Or *manages*, rather. One of the Pratts themselves *owns* everything. When it comes to the elite, Sean stands among the underdogs, the servants, the submissives. He does what he’s told and is only at Velspar’s side because he does what he’s told *well*.

The man’s comic relief. He behaves himself. He never bothered to broach any risks concerning Velspar’s obsession with Colette, never once. Even though I knew the depth of what was going on between those morons, I still pushed limits now and again whenever I got too fed up.

Sean is plain *pathetic*.

Or so everyone thinks.

“I own it,” he murmurs into my neck, and all the strength goes out of my hand. “It’s my wedding present from dear old dad.”

*Wedding present. As in wedding to me present?* “You’re out of your mind.”

“Yes, but also no.”

“Get off me,” I grit.

The donkey rump nestles closer still, pulling his face away from my neck just far enough to catch my eye. This pain in my a—

“Give me one good reason why we shouldn’t get married,” he says.

I could laugh, but it would come out like a deranged shrieking siren, and—again—I want to avoid alerting every last one of our peers to the fact Sean and I have, ugh, *exchanged saliva*. Shoving the delirious response down, I say, “I outrank you.”

“Which is why my father wants me to marry you, but, consider this, I’m Velspar’s closest best friend since Reg is on thin ice with our doll. My position with him is better than yours, and what’s the only thing supporting your livelihood right now?”

“Um. A worldwide fashion em—”

“Your mother’s business? Which will fall into your sister’s hands?”

Because that sister of yours managed to be a carbon copy of the narcissist? And you?” He strokes my cheek, sending chills pouring down my spine. “You managed to look like your sperm donor. You can dye your hair, little one, but you can’t reconstruct your entire body.” He nearly growls, “I won’t allow it.”

His cruel words pierce straight to my heart, and I flutter my lashes to keep the tears at bay. My throat locks, choking everything I could say inside.

This is the side of Sean no one else ever gets to see. Just *me*. Because we’re *best friends*, and the whole lot of us are monsters, but we can’t be monstrous entirely alone. It would kill us from the inside out. I’m his person; he’s mine.

That in no way means I want to *marry* him. We aren’t like *that*.

Smooth and slick as the oil he stuffs himself with, Sean says, “Pretty girl. Don’t cry for me yet.” He tucks his thumb beneath my eye, and if he’s ruined more than just my lipstick *at all*, I’m going to lynch him. He rests his forehead against mine. “You okay?”

My eye twitches. “Obviously.”

“Cool.” He rubs the tip of his nose over mine, affectionate, innocent. Like mind-blowing kisses aren’t a thing he’s capable of.

Freaking Sean.

He continues, “Basically, you don’t have a choice. We are getting married. You’re moving in with me. You have two...no...tonight. It’s happening tonight. We’re going to leave this party, get your things, and go home. Also, even though you’re being so quiet right now in order to avoid letting anyone know what I just did, I am going to drag you out of here by your wrist in full view of everyone. For the lawls.” The most sadistic little twist of his lips stretches my lipstick smudge into a full curve. “I’ll have the stupidest smile on my face, and everyone will know exactly what happens next.”

“Disgusting,” I snip.

“Mm.” His bright teeth bare in a grin.

“I have, like, a thousand more reasons. No offense, but I don’t like you like *that*.”

“Uh-huh,” he notes, conversationally. “I don’t like you like *that* either, but then again, that’s because I don’t *like* you at all.” He brings my hand to his lips and kisses my fingers. “I love you.”

Man, I’d scratch his eyeballs out if I could. Pity I think if I take my other

hand off the wall behind me, I'll collapse. "What in the world is Velspar going to think if we're suddenly married?"

"We don't have to tell him we're married."

"If you drag me out of here, the rumors will get back to him."

"Rumors about dalliances and dating and hook ups. No one's going to assume we're married unless you wear a ring on the right finger in front of him."

My lip curls. "We're talking about *Velspar*. Million and one IQ? Weaseled half this city out from under his brother and parents? There's no way to keep anything from him. So what if *your* father wants this? What about *my* mother? What's she going to think? You're revolting scum. She barely likes looking at you."

"Isn't that all part of the fun? We show up at your house, tell her that you're moving out in order to live with me, and watch disgust pour over her skeletal features."

"She'll cut me off immediately," I hiss.

"Thank goodness your husband-to-be wants to spoil you. I've already got cards set up, cash set aside. You're welcome to overhaul the entire complex, starting with our penthouse. Just think about it for one second. Forget the part where it's me and—" He pitches his voice, making it mockingly feminine. "—ew, gross, I'm married to a slob." He strokes my straight blond hair as he returns his tone to that low, alluring murmur. "You'll still have your money. You'll be away from your mother. You can put your own style to use, carve your own path..."

The mere thought of *not* waking up in a household, starving, forcing my aching, tired limbs out of bed, putting on makeup to cover the bags under my eyes, and crawling downstairs to see if I'm allowed *anything* for breakfast or if either my family or my own head will talk me out of it...sounds...too good to be true.

It's like Sean is a wicked prince, come to lure me away into a fantasy realm that ultimately ends in my demise.

"Problem," I state. "I don't share."

His brows rise. "You'll have your own room. I'm not *that* much of a monster."

My jaw locks, and I grit, "I *mean*, cheating. If we get married, you can't, and I won't. Is this a *rest of our lives* thing? Are we going to be celibate for the—"

My voice muffles as he claims my lips again. This time, it's brief, but it hits me like an electric shock to my heart. "I don't know," he purrs after breaking the caress. "I think we've got enough chemistry to entertain ourselves forever after. Did you miss the part where I said *I love you*? I'm really not worried about the doing or not doing of sex. It's not remotely important right now. If we don't want to, okay. If we do, it'll be worth your precious time. I promise you that."

Deep breaths heave through my chest, and I focus blearily on the ground past Sean's dinosaur swim trunks. A puddle darkens the sidewalk he's standing on, water droplets streak down his legs to join it.

What in the name of all things good is going on...

"That's..." I barely breathe.

"Horrific? Disgusting? Revolting? Putrid? Disgraceful? Nauseating?" He drawls on, but I've stopped listening. My head's light and foggy, drunk on kisses I want to hate, clouded with what my Sean's saying to me.

Ew. Okay. Wait a second. *My Sean* sounds way too lovey. I don't mean it like *that*. I mean it like you think you know someone, you think you're safe from being the object of someone's less-than-sunshiny side's impulses, then—suddenly—that someone is pinning you to buildings and pulling no stops.

Sean's the submissive underdog at a glance. Beneath all that, he's manipulative and cruel. He's got a dark streak hidden behind his façade. He didn't start hanging around with a Pratt for status. Status was the cherry on top of the grotesque sundae. No, he likes the fire. The watching things burn. The power's fun, but the amusement from being close to the chaos is where he gets his high.

Not even Velspar—that emotionally-dense super computer—has figured the depth of this truth out. But then again, Velspar doesn't exactly do the whole *understanding relationships* thing. People are where I excel. People are what I'm good at. So I know this awful reality. And, in some ways, that's protected me from it.

Eventually, all protection runs out.

"You said you *didn't* like me like *that*," I note.

A laugh puffs in his chest, insulting. "Yeah, I don't like you *romantically*. I wouldn't say anything about the way I like you is *romantic*. That would be a little...concerning, right?"

"I'd say," I mutter. I lift my chin. "I'm not interested in playing your games to appease your father. I'm hopeful that I'll find s—"



“What? Someone sweet and loving who thinks the world of you and doesn’t want anything from you and somehow manages to make you believe you have worth? I hate to break it to you, little one. What you’re looking for is therapy, because *that* picture? That *person*? It’s supposed to be *you*. Until it is you, no one else is ever going to manage.” He wets his lips. “That said, however, I’m good at pretending. I can be whatever you think you need.”

“You’re being real cute right now, Sean. But let’s not *pretend* that you aren’t fully two sides of a twisted coin. There’s this *mess*, and the other. And neither is *pretending* except when one or the other wants to come out in the wrong place.”

“Marry. Me.”

“Suck. A. Frog.”

He snorts, and the darkness drops off to let sunshiny idiot out. It’s immediate proof that he’s *both sides* if ever I had doubts.

I did not.

Brilliant now, he says, “Come on, Les. Marrying your best friend. What could go wrong?”

“Many, many things.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

Deep forest eyes glittering, he echoes back, “Many, *many* things.”

I’m not saying that’s a common trend in our little friend group, but, yeah, yeah it is.

“Say yes,” he tells me, orders, whatever. It’s annoying because he’s still wearing bright, sloth-fight Sean’s giddy expression, not the *I planted the match so I could watch your house burn* Sean’s expression.

“You can’t force me to marry you. That’s messed up.”

“Can. Am. Yep, sure is.”

“No, *no*. You *literally* can’t force me to sign papers or do the whole *marriage* thing against my will. It’s impossible.”

“I could blackmail you, if you’d like?”

I scoff. “How polite. Thank you for offering. I have to decline.”

“Never been blackmailed before, have you, little one? That’s really not how it works.”

“Honestly? It’s the patronizing for me. I just don’t know how I won’t end up *murdering you in your sleep* if we start living together.” Sniffing, I pull my hand free from his grasp and push my hair over my ear.

Sean's brows rise. "You're really going to stand here and tell me that, if I bothered you so much, you wouldn't have carved my heart out with a rusty fork years ago? Wow. It's like you think I'm an idiot."

"I do. Regularly."

He laughs.

I like Sean's laugh. We're messed up to the nines, but there's very little in my life as comforting as Sean's laugh.

"So, marriage?" His gaze heats. "Liberty? The pursuit of happiness?"

Could have sworn what he's referencing came about in the event of political divorce, but okay. Chewing my cheek, I fix my attention on his eyes, pretend I can even begin to understand what he's thinking. Eyes are supposed to be the windows to the soul. But people like us? I wonder sometimes if we even have souls.

"Is this a *we'll stay married for five years, then split* kind of thing?"

"Nope. Forever, please." He lifts his hand, palm up, beckoning.

He is out of his mind.

My lips purse. "We'll tell my mother that I'm leaving because you've offered to be my sugar daddy. You can tell your father whatever you have to. As far as Velspar and the others know, you begged. On your knees. For me to move in with you. Because you're *sooo* worried about me. And that's *it*."

"Okay. But I also kissed you. Kissed you and begged."

"Gross, no."

"Gross, yes. If we're going to live together, we can't pretend there's nothing going on. Either we confess to benefits and guide the story ourselves, or we see how long people bother believing we're *just* 'roommates'."

"They'll believe it as long as we tell them to."

He kisses my cheek. "Your innocence is wholly enchanting. 'Yes'?" He wiggles his fingers.

I stare at his hand. No more being at my house, beneath the thumb of my mother. Still supported financially. Remaining in elite society. Remaining in a position of *power*. Rather, ascending further. Without my mother controlling me, by Sean's side, closer to Velspar...good things could happen.

The only thing stopping me right this very second is *ew, gross*. It's *Sean*. We are complete opposites. We clash like two different patterns in the same neon-on-neon outfit. Much too blinding. Much too busy, chaotic, a mess.

Do I really want *anyone* thinking that Sean and I are... Gag. And then there is the whole *no cheating* thing, which means either *we do gag* or we

maintain the lifestyle of a nun and a monk.

Freedom and power through an arranged marriage while getting used to a celibate lifestyle.

Or...continuing as I have been. Hating everything. Angry. Unsafe. Unloved. Unwanted.

I lift my hand, let it hover over his. “Here’s the deal: you’ve been secretly in love with me, you can’t stand the way my mother treats me, you kissed me and confessed and begged me to let you get me out of that situation and into a place where I can start up my *own* fashion empire, I am using you and not romantically inclined to do anything *but* use you, and we are *not* actually going to get married.”

“The paper signing is a deal-breaker.”

“I want a prenup that makes divorce painless and immediate. We’ll appease whatever political crap your father’s trying to pull until I’ve managed to build stability in my own right. Then it’s over. I ‘break your heart’ when I move into my own place. You put on a very convincing act of being sad. And none of this ever really happened. Also, as a bonus, I’ll forgive you for the random kisses.”

Thoughts ripple for several long moments, then Sean lifts his hand to mine, closing his warm fingers in a solid grip. “Very well. We’ll take care of the paperwork in a different city, so hopefully we’ll be off Velspar’s radar. I think he’s being kept fairly busy with our doll, though. He probably won’t even notice any lipstick stains you leave on me.”

“Don’t be vulgar.”

He brushes his thumb against his lip, over the smudge. “Is that what I’m being?”

Air fills my lungs, and I let the breath out slowly. “Stop it. You aren’t attractive. I barely like you outside of your personality.”

“You’re literally the cutest person I have ever met, Les.” He curses. “Ready to go, wife?”

“If you start calling me that, I’m pre-divorcing you before we even sign the papers.”

He turns, and the stupid melts over his face, brightening his eyes and smile until both are *blinding*. Neon-on-neon. A true and utter disaster. “*Little one* suits you better anyway.” He tugs me a step forward, and I almost trip into his damp t-shirt-clad back. “*Ready?*”

I roll my eyes. “*Ugh.*”

With that, he plows onward through the center of the party, grinning ear to obnoxious ear.

# CHAPTER 1

♥ Being pretty should be illegal if a. you are my best friend; and b. you are my husband. ~~~

*One week later*

“I hate your shirt,” I mutter, feet propped on my...legal husband’s lap. Beautiful women stream across my phone screen as I swipe through Instagram. Pretty. Pretty. Pause. That’s a bold outfit choice. Eyebrow raise. I hate it.

Sean glances down at his shirt, which is solid black and reads *THE BEST PART OF BEING VEGAN* above a pie chart with two sections in shades of green. *Being vegan* labels the tiny slice. *Telling people they’re murderers* labels the rest. “I think it’s clever, and it matches my eyes, doesn’t it?”

Infuriatingly, it does.

“It’s stupid.” Even *more* stupid because I can see him—bright-eyed and grinning—stabbing into a slab of steak at a restaurant while wearing it.

Sean snorts. He pats my bare foot, and I kick at him, so he grips my ankle and rubs deep into the muscles. Without looking at me, he kneads beneath the joint. “How do you walk on these? I could just about snap your little bones.”

And I could just about kick him where the sun don’t shine, but why list the things we aren’t going to do? I huff and splay out on our sectional sofa, staring at the chandelier. Sunlight pours from the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the wall beside the massive flat screen TV. Glistening cityscape as far as the eye can see stretches beyond the glass. At the press of a button, I can lower a screen that turns it middle-of-the-night dark up here. The style of our penthouse is modern, crisp, and I’ve been theming it in cool shades—blue, sea foam, hints of lilac.

My next steps will be ripping up the ash gray shag carpeting, replacing the granite counters in the kitchen, and repainting all the sheer white walls, but for now the furniture overhaul is enough. Already, it’s nothing like the black and red of my mother’s home, which makes it more *home* than that place ever was.

Marriage is...neat. I guess. It’s not entirely awful living with my best friend. He’s, well, *him*, but I can overlook his himness most of the time. Like,

you know, when he makes comments about breaking my ankles.

The hardest part is probably—

“I’m hungry.” Sean pushes my feet off his lap and stands, stretching his arms high above his head. A pale slice of muscular stomach reveals itself beneath his stupid shirt, and I don’t even know why I’m noticing.

I pour my attention back into my phone and scowl. “When aren’t you?”

“When I’m asleep.”

That must be nice. For some reason, I manage *being hungry* even in my sleep. When I can sleep. And since the *being hungry* keeps me from being able to sleep most of the time...yeah. Must be nice to sleep and not be hungry.

I swipe from picture to picture. Pretty. Pretty. Pretty. That lipstick doesn’t match. My eyes narrow. Is this a bad filter, or did she honestly think these shades paired with her obvious summer. Ew.

A bowl appears, and my nose scrunches as I follow the arm connected to it up to *Sean*. Merciless. His face is a mask of cold challenge, frosty *daring*.

Through gritted teeth, I hiss, “I’ve gained a pound and a half this week thanks to all these *stunts*. You told me that the meals you made were low carb and low calorie.”

“What’s a calorie?” he says, the jerk. He sets the little glass bowl in my lap, plucks his phone out of his pocket, and lifts it to his mouth. “Hey, Siri? What’s a calorie?” Plopping back onto the couch by my feet, he recites, “A calorie is a unit of energy...blah, blah, blah.” He stuffs a spoonful of his own vegetable, quinoa mix in his mouth, and some of the grains cling to his lips as he chews, swallows. Like it’s effortless. Like he can’t see labels and prices on every bite. Probably because the turd ripped every label off every item in this place and sharpied over the rest. “Why do you want low energy, Les? That seems counterproductive.”

“Because,” I snap, and I want nothing more than to throw the food on the floor. Except I can’t bring myself to do it.

For starters, *this entire week* has been exhausting in a plethora of ways. I moved out of my mother’s house. I’ve been staying up late researching all manner of business models and production costs for starting up a fashion empire. When I’m too tired to look at the numbers, I sketch designs on my tablet, hate them, and feel like sobbing. The physical and mental exertion is just...

It’s unbearable.

I am hungry. I have no energy. I'm constantly nauseous, and dizzy, and cold.

And freaking Sean—my *husband*—isn't being his happy-go-flippin'-lucky self, masticating away on greasy garbage then offering me some while laughing about how good it tastes. No, he's making *green smoothies*, and *fruit salads*, and *veggie platters*. And now this. This danged *quinoa bowl*. The portion's even petite, for frick's sake. It's a measly serving spoonful in a bowl a quarter the size of his.

It makes me want to cry my eyes out and scream.

"This is abuse," I snap. The whiplash between living with my family and *this* is severe enough to break my neck.

"Yep, I'm toxic as heck." He catches the grain on his lip with his thumb and licks it off. "Don't even have to try."

Is that what this is? *Not trying*? Not trying looks like cooking healthy meals, forbidding me from even seeing calorie contents, and...and...

I kick him in the shoulder I'm so mad.

He shovels another spoonful in his mouth, continuing to thumb through his phone. "Eat." His gaze skims words; he swipes onward. "People are going to say I don't feed you."

People are going to say I got *fat*.

"Your body needs something to run on. It's all good nutrients. Vitamins. Minerals. I even used pink salt over sea salt for added health benefits." He gets a notification and sets his spoon down in order to open it up and type out a reply. Voice soft, he says, "You've been working hard all week, Les. You're—" He curses. "—beautiful. And that has nothing to do with how much you weigh. We're literally meat sacks controlled by electric spaghetti. So feed the spaghetti, or tomorrow I'll make you spaghetti. With big, juicy meatballs. And loads and loads of cheese."

My mouth waters, so I shake my head, lift my spoon, and take a bite. It's just a little portion. No grease. No fat. This is fine, and I do need *something* to fuel me. This is fine. I take another bite.

"There's a good little girl," Sean murmurs, so I kick him again.



Three pounds. Nine days.

All the color's gone out of my cheeks as I turn sideways and look at my stomach in the mirror. Is it the same as it was before? I'm not sure. Three pounds *shouldn't* look like a lot, right? It just *shouldn't*. Normal people

fluctuate about five pounds up or down throughout the day. I'm just being paranoid because I've eaten *something* every single day since I got "married." I shouldn't be fluctuating. I always weigh myself at the same time every morning, before I've eaten anything, when I'm lightest.

Except for whenever Mother made me weigh myself and tell me to *do better* or *stop lying* if the numbers didn't match what I told her.

Will Mother be able to see these pounds the next time we meet at some event or another? Will my sister, Irene, say something about how I'm a disgrace to the Steele family name?

No. No, I'm being ridiculous. It'll be gone by then. I'll just fast for a couple days and get it off. Everything is fi—

My bedroom door slams open, and I jerk, dropping my blouse back over my midsection and looking at Sean. I swear at him. "What do you think you're doing? I could have been *changing*."

A goofy grin slips over his lips. "Like we haven't seen each other naked before."

I grimace. "We *haven't*?"

He saunters into my room, slips his hand around mine, and twirls me— for absolutely no reason. I don't even know why I let him. "Are you forgetting our wedding night? Such fitful bliss and passion, the likes of which this whole building has never seen."

I puff a dry breath, knowing full well we spent our entire "wedding" day and night unpacking my things while I insulted his furniture. "At times, your imagination astounds me."

"At least I have one." He lets my hand slip free from his fingers in favor of lifting my chin on the crook of his knuckle.

I hate not wearing heels. I hate being this much shorter than him. I hate that I'm not *model height* like Irene.

Still smiling, Sean murmurs, "Do I have to break your mirrors and throw your scale out the window, little one? Just tell me which pedestrian to aim for. It'll be *fun*."

"Sometimes, you're despicable."

"Only *sometimes*?" He hums. "I should try harder." Sniffing, he lets innocence melt back into his eyes as he taps a kiss to my forehead. "Shame I don't like effort. You ready to go? We shouldn't keep everyone waiting."

I give the mirror a final glance, hate the person staring back, and mutter, "Sure."



Sean handles the music and the singing off-key while I drive to Velspar's. One great thing about where I live now is the fact it's closer to his place than the Steele manor is. I suppose the need to show up unannounced in order to escape for precious hours is moot now, though.

A lot has changed. Really fast. I'm feeling stranded. Anxious. Guilty?

"Red light," Sean blurts into the blaring music, and my eyes refocus just in time for me to slam on the brakes.

My stomach lurches, and I blurt, "Sorry."

"Are you okay, Les?" Sean touches my shoulder while I take several deep breaths and battle the warm tickle in the back of my throat pressing nausea up my esophagus.

"I'm fine," I whisper as I contain myself. I'm not fine. I'm overwhelmed. I hate feeling out of control like this. Sweeping back my hair, I ease onto the gas when the light turns green. "Are we going to tell them that we're living together now?"

"They probably already know."

My heart lurches. "What? Why?"

"Because I already texted Velspar to let him know before he could hear the rumors from the press or our parents or the party?"

"What did you say?"

Sean sighs, deeply, lowers the music, and spends several minutes scrolling through his phone. "Ah. Here we go." He clears his throat and sets his free hand over his heart. "'Just so you know, I caved last night. I couldn't control myself. I said 'eff it' and kissed Les before telling her I needed her to move in with me. I begged her to stay in the Mountain Heights penthouse to get away from her awful family, if nothing else.' Blah, blah, blah. Mushy stuff. Can't live without her. I lie awake at night fantasizing about her sleeping across the hall. I can hardly believe she agreed. Et cetera. Et cetera."

"Please tell me you didn't actually write anything remotely that concerning."

"I wrote far worse things, Les. Far, far worse."

I groan as I turn down Velspar's street, pull up to his gate, and lower my window and sunglasses in order to put in the PIN. The wrought iron slides open, and I park my SUV out front. Standing to the side, I check my nail polish while Sean goes through his whole *this is the police* stint. Which he claims *never grows old*.

Sometimes, he's more obnoxious than anyone should have to deal with.

The red polish on my pinkie is chipping. If I were still living at home, Irene would have noticed by now.

I'd have fixed it.

The front door swings open, and Velspar's lips pull into a languid smile. He sweeps the way clear for us to enter, and something about the welcoming action eases the tight, burning sensation in my chest. Velspar's a lot of terrible things, but when he accepts you, you're safe. He's brilliant and untouchable. Once upon a time, a *very* long time ago, I thought I loved him.

As it turned out, what I really loved was the relief he offered. When you're with someone brilliant and untouchable, someone powerful, someone beautiful, things are just *better*.

Also, he's nothing remotely close to *nice*, but the man's the kindest person I know.

Yawning, he folds his arms, stupidly happy, like he's been living blissfully for the past few months with the girl of his nightmares, and he couldn't be a more content little masochist. Ugh. I love this for him. "How's the shacking up going?" he asks, and all my happy feelings shrivel up and die.

Sean throws an arm around my waist and tugs me against his side. "Beautiful."

Sneering, I shove him off me. "Gross. We are *not* shacking up. We are sharing a living space while I try to hunt down the kind of miracle you found when you threw your family the middle finger."

Velspar smiles, tenderly, perhaps fondly recalling all the subtle fingers he's tossed at his parents and brother along the way. "If there's anything I can help with, let me know."

I sniff. "Thanks. I will." Marching past him, I poke my head into the kitchen. "Where's my doll?"

"My doll is warming up in the studio with Kat and Reg," he says. Ever the possessive asshole.

I'm not even surprised the idiot refurbished a basement room into a recording studio for Colette. Put it right next to his home theater like a pretentious freak. If I had half the gall...

Clicking my way to the stairs, I locate the studio door and am the first one inside. Beyond glass in the live room, Colette beams at me, all warm spring days, flowers, and other pure, pretty crap. I can't help smiling back.

Okay, so I absolutely despised her once. Now if anyone hurts her, I'm

demolishing them with a two-by-four. She's light in our group of misfits and miscreants. Probably the closest thing we'll ever have to a moral compass. Blue eyes and blond hair and about thirty percent less murderous than our other recent addition, Kat.

Who is totally nurturing a thing for Reg.

Adorable.

Weird.

I watch their hands move in silent conversation off in the corner where they're sitting side-by-side on a bench. Reg's hulking body dwarfs her petite form. It's cute when her slender black fingers correct his tan sausage ones. Cuter still when he smiles like he's forgotten anyone else is here.

Tossing a look at Velspar when he sighs into a seat in front of the soundboard panel, I snap, "Is she just warming up, or do we get to hear the new song yet?"

Velspar lifts a pair of headphones out to me, and I take them. Pressing a button, he leans toward a mic and says, "Darling? Start at the top for me?"

My eyes roll. She'd do anything for him. Gross. Cute. Whatever. I put the headphones on, and my smile broadens as a steady beat starts. It's immediately addictive. Sean whistles, nodding along as he falls into the only other seat in front of the soundboard.

Rude.

*"Revenge is sweet; it's best served cold, and I don't care if you choke on it!"* Colette's voice fills my headphones, powerful and assertive. *"You broke me down. Guess now you know that I also know how to hit."*

Well.

Leaning a hip against the equipment, I scan Velspar, who's melted with his chin resting in the cradle of his fingers. His eyes belong to Colette. He's smitten as though she's not singing about vengeance and walloping him because the only thing he cares about is the fact she's singing about *him*.

Imagine being that addicted to another person.

Wow.

Sean points at him and mouths the word *whipped*. I nod, and my head goes a bit light.

I'm tired. I was so busy getting ready this morning, Sean didn't bother interrupting me with anything that seemed like breakfast. The expectation he's forced on my body these past few days leaves me feeling even worse than usual. I need to get the extra weight off, which means only water until

it's gone. I don't know how I'm going to make it.

I want to sit. But the only seat left means joining the bench with Kat and Reg. Ha. No, thank you. Nothing's worse than third-wheeling in *silence*.

Sean touches my arm, drawing my attention off the unlikeliest love birds, then he pats his lap. Eyes locked on mine, he mouths, *come here, wife*.

I am going to maim him. I cut a look at everyone, just to make sure no one saw, and discover a simple fact: we do not exist. Everyone is entranced by their own partner, so there's literally no harm in sitting on Sean's lap. This is my purely logical conclusion. I take my seat.

Muscular thighs, strong arms, warm flesh. It's just like when he pulled me on top of him in the limo three months ago. The incessant rage I felt then comes back as his arms snake around me, get me closer.

He can eat everything he wants, and it turns into pure *muscle*. Because he's a guy, it's allowed. Even if I worked to turn everything I eat into muscle, I'd still be disgusting. It isn't fair. It isn't fair at all.

He moves one muff off my ear, and his breath tickles my skin when he whispers, "Our doll's going to be doing concerts soon."

I nod again. "She's amazing." Talented. Loved. Beautiful even though her cheeks are round and she eats whatever she wants.

I'm jealous. Of Sean. Of Colette. Of Kat, and Reg, and Velspar. I'm jealous of the people who have people who look at them like they're something wonderful even though they aren't destroying themselves in order to achieve that right.

Lowering my head, I catch Sean's eye and freeze. His hand rests over my thigh, the chubbiest part of me, and his thumb strokes gentle motions through my skirt. Half-lidded eyes watch me. They slip from my eyes to my body, and their caress is achingly slow, breathlessly slow. He presses his lips together, wets them, and moves his attention back to the glass separating us from Colette as she hits final, impossible notes.

*Yeah, I don't like you romantically. I wouldn't say anything about the way I like you is romantic.*

If he doesn't like me *romantically*, what the heck was *that* just now?

He loves me, like friends do. I'm not him, so I don't really say those kinds of words, but that feeling is mutual. Romantic love between us would be concerning, like he said. Romantic love coming between good friends is always concerning. Even though he kisses me like we're soulmates, that's just a testament to the fact he's a good kisser.

I don't even think he's handsome.

...

Right?

When he's not being *ew*, he's...vaguely attractive. I guess. Not really. Maybe.

I stare at him while he watches Colette and try to sort through my thoughts.

He has a solid face shape, defined and prominently masculine. It helps that he's a true autumn, rather than a spring. I appreciate the warmth in his skin tone, the fact not a speck or freckle mars it. Forest-deep green eyes, mischievous and alluring. Soft, full lips, perfectly bowed.

And—oh my freaking...

Jerking my attention off him, I clench my jaw and stare at Colette, not actually seeing her. I somewhat register Velspar asking her to start a different song, but all I can hear is my heart pounding in my skull.

I find Sean attractive.

*I find Sean attractive.*

I already liked his personality. I mean, we're best friends. Of *course* I like his messed up personality. It's neat. Freaky. The kind of personality that will be laughing big one moment and breaking the wrist of someone who's hurt anyone important to him in the next. Without remorse. Or flinching.

It's a *very* comfortable, fierce personality. Like Velspar's, it makes me feel safe. There's comfort in having monsters who care about you.

Falling among the ranks of those *special* to them is an honor.

But I'm not *supposed* to find him attractive.

My ears are buzzing. My face might be going hot. Am I coming down with something? Or is this the price I pay for eating somewhat consistently for a little over a week and then skipping breakfast again?

A curse slithers into the forefront of my brain, leaving me gulping.

My sanity comes crashing down.

I forgot.

I forgot an ever-important detail that came into existence precisely nine days ago.

I do not just find my best friend *Sean* attractive. No. That would be disconcerting in its own right, but this situation is far worse.

He's not *just* my best friend right now. He's my *husband*.

I find my husband attractive.

And I have no idea what to do with that information at all.

## CHAPTER 2

♥ I know this boy is not full-naming me.

~~~~

During the entire drive back to that place...where I now live...and *share* with the man screeching Colette's demo CD in my car...I can't stop my attention from wandering to Sean's defined profile. His nose is a touch large from the side, but the jawline?

Holy frick.

That smooth jawline is the kind you just want to nibble.

This information infuriates me. *Offends* me. The fact it's in my head means *I want to nibble Sean's jaw*. When a sudden bout of nausea swims in my gut, I blame it entirely on the fact I am picturing when he kissed my jaw and nipped at my ear, not the fact I know I'm starving.

Actually, clinically, starving.

It's the price I pay to maintain the beauty standards I want.

Sean lowers the music so fast I fear he's heard my *he's handsome, actually handsome, and I want to bite him* thoughts. But he makes no note of them as he points. "Turn here!"

I'm so shaken I don't even look. I just squeal into the lot and obey when he directs me to a parking spot. Heaving great big, *he's not pretty, he's not pretty* breaths after I've stopped the car, I shoot him a scowl. "What do you think you're doing?"

He pops his seat belt and opens his door. "Getting lunch." Stepping out, he looks at me like he has never seen a stupider person, then adds, "Duh."

His door slams, and sometimes I abhor him. It is usually on the tail ends of abhorrence that I find myself adoring him, though. There's something about being with someone worse than you that makes you feel infinitely better. It's a horrible mentality to have: *at least* I don't enjoy watching kittens get run over by cars.

It's not exactly peak morals. But it's hard to shoot for *those* when you're almost always hungry, in pain, and tired. It's not impossible. But ask me if I have the bandwidth.

No.

I do not.

Lifting my attention to the strip mall, I attempt to locate the *food* Sean plans to grab and eat messily in my front seat. The cramped outdoor seating area of a quaint Italian restaurant rests beyond another row of cars and faded gray asphalt. Hanging baskets of overgrown plants line the awning.

Spaghetti.

With big, juicy meatballs.

And loads of cheese.

The saliva in my mouth eats away at my tongue, so I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before I turn to my back seat and wonder if I have flavored water in here. It's probably ninety degrees from sitting in the car in August, but if I pretend it's a fine herbal tea...

My door opens while I'm twisted, and a body leans over me, popping my seat belt. I face forward and come within an inch of Sean's mouth.

My brain turns off.

"I said *we're getting lunch*," he murmurs as my seat belt slowly retracts. His fingers graze my thigh, settle above my knee, and my breath catches.

"Don't use that tone with me," I whisper, voice weak, and I honestly meant to snap. It's hard to snap when you can't breathe.

His pinkie links under my skirt, skimming my bare skin as he cups my chin in his other hand. "Pretty girl," he murmurs.

Oh no. No, no, no.

I hate this.

I...hate that I don't hate this.

I wish I understood where all of *this* kind of attention were coming from.

"You know something?" he whispers, and I don't think I know anything, but I'd like to.

Barely swallowing, I try to find strength for my voice. It comes out wounded. "What?"

"Your eyes. They're the prettiest eyes I've ever seen. I don't think I could count the colors in them if I tried. They change shades with every different light that touches them. And your lashes?" His thumb outlines my cheekbone. "They're perfect and long and dark even without makeup. The most lovely shade of brown, just like your hair used to be. I've loved seeing you in the mornings, when you have nowhere to go and no reason to bother changing a damn thing." His hand falls from my face, finds mine, laces with my fingers. "My pretty little one."

In the very next instant, Sean beams, a million-watt bulb—the second



before the filament snaps when it's just a lightning strike brighter. He tugs my hand and gets me stumbling out of the car. Slamming the door behind me, he swirls the loop of my keys on his finger, leaving me wondering when in the world he secured them. He barely gives me a moment to get my bearings and stabilize myself on my five-inch heels.

A lesser woman would have fallen.

I only feel like retching.

Sean drags me into warm scents of garlic and herbs, and my entire body prickles cold, clammy. Swears congregate in my head.

I'll order a water. A water with lemon. It'll help make the weird sensations along my flesh go away, ease the gnawing ache. It'll—

“Booth for two, please,” Sean tells the host, and a waitress leads us to a back table, past a dormant fireplace. The woodsy atmosphere with fake vines crawling up every wall and literal rushing water features against false stone leaves me wondering why this place is crammed into a strip mall. It should have its own space. Lavish gardens surrounding the outdoor section. Live vines indoors. Real stone behind the waterfalls. A gardener on staff to primp every leaf.

Sean tucks me into the booth first, then pushes himself into the same side, trapping me against the brick wall.

My mouth opens, gapes, to protest, but his hand falls on my thigh, and a zip of *oh yes* that I *violently dislike* claps my mouth shut.

“Can I start you off with anything to drink?” the waitress asks, pulling a pen and pad from her black apron. I hate that I even like the uniforms. Clean and crisp and professional. This place needs to be on a bigger, better map. It has more potential than what a cramped strip mall can offer.

Maybe the food sucks.

That must be it.

The food sucks. I can get my lemon water and wrinkle my nose in peace.

“Two cherry limeades,” Sean says before I've gotten past the whole *hand on thigh* thing well enough to mention my water. Our waitress nods and mentions how she'll *be right back* while I am staring aghast at Sean. He catches my eye shortly after he's opened his menu—an evil thing with decadent pictures of carbs. “Their cherry limeades are really good.”

Biting my cheek, I stay quiet, drop my attention to his menu, try not to get lost in the picture of a chocolate cake.

It's just a drink. A little more substance than a lemon water is probably a

good idea right now. My body can run on the sugar for a bit, then maybe I'll crash into a nap.

I'm so tired.

Consumed with the weight of Sean's hand on my thigh, I let my head rest against his broad shoulder. He flips from pizzas to subs to pastas, and I give myself a moment to rest.

"Spinach and artichoke dip," Sean murmurs, thumb stroking the hem of my skirt, grazing my knee.

Mm. Spinach. Artichokes. *Dip* is concerning. Dip means cheese and calories and fat.

"With slices of toasted bread."

Bread is always on the bad list. Toasted bread with dip sounds incredible—but I haven't touched *cheese* or *bread* or anything remotely *incredible* since I cheated and had pizza three months ago. Going home after that wonderful night felt like a walk of shame. Mother knew. Irene knew. I could feel it. I berated myself for getting swept up in the moment, the thrill, the feeling of...what was that feeling?

It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced.

I miss it in ways I don't know how to explain.

The sound of glass against wood makes me open my eyes and stare at the faintly red-pink bubbling beverage now before me. The glass isn't plain. Slight indents decorate it, creating an elegant pattern, and I turn to look over the back of the booth at the rest of the restaurant. The large front windows still display a parking lot that pours down toward the highway. Cars rush by, in full view. Some horns even break up the classical music trickling through the speakers around me.

Why is anything here vaguely fancy?

The outrage.

While I'm grimacing, Sean orders half the menu.

"This place is *nice*," I mutter once the waitress leaves. Lifting my glass and ignoring the paper straw beside it, I take a sip. The fruity, exotic explosion slips down my throat and settles my stomach. The barest bit of relief. I will pretend the sugar isn't immense. Sugar burns up fast. I'll be more than tired after, but right now...it's just a drink.

Sean opens one end of his straw, punches the plastic out, and blows the wrapper across the table. "I thought you might like it."

"Watch it," I mutter into my next sip. "I get nervous whenever you're

overtly considerate.”

He lets his brows rise as he takes a long, slow sip.

I wish I were the soda.

Is that an acceptable thought? Nope, not at all. But I just had it.

When the urge to wet my lips overwhelms me, I realize he dragged me out of the car without my purse. I don't have my makeup or my compact. I don't even have my phone. Well, now I feel more trapped than before. Also, naked. Stark naked. My makeup's probably melting off my face. My lipstick is certainly on the rim of my glass, which means it's probably not even. Might even be feathering.

“Problem?” Sean asks, forest green eyes deepening several amused shades.

I scowl. “Don't you dare go dark on me, Sean Ulysses Montgomery.”

“Why? Because it makes you feel like I'm in your head, know every little thought, and am tormenting you on purpose, for my own enjoyment?”

*Exactly* that.

Ugh. He's a monster.

To further his wickedness, he says, “Your makeup's fine. You don't need your phone.”

“Your observation and assumption skills are criminal.” My tone bites. I take another sip, seeing only smudged lipstick that should be fixed.

“I do my best.”

I unwrap my silverware and bite the napkin until nothing else comes off, then I outline my lips until I feel more certain that I'm not a mess. It was only Velspar's house, so I didn't go over the top. Just a little concealer to fix the dark circles under my eyes, enough shadow to match my clothes, and lipstick to bring it all together. Just enough so everyone who isn't Sean wouldn't be violently worried about me.

Velspar cares too deeply. I hate hurting him.

Warm buttery scents hit me before the spinach artichoke dip arrives, and I chill through, skin prickling.

Sean thanks our waitress, because he's our cute boy who does stuff like *showing gratitude for the help*. I stare at the steaming bowl surrounded with thin slices of bread.

One is ok—

*Fat pig.*

I avert my eyes, swallow hard, and want to cry, so I school my features

into a hard, irritable mask instead. The worst part is I can't tell what voice the words in my head come in anymore. Once upon a time, I heard them like an echo. They *belonged* in Irene's or Mother's tone. Now? Now, it's terrible... because I think they're in *mine*.

"Les," Sean says.

"What?" I snap, clutching my soda, which I shouldn't be having either. I've gained *three pounds*. In less than two weeks. Three. I don't need sugar. I barely need lemon juice. It should be plain water, lest I ruin everything and let my body think that its *normal* is a higher average. It takes so much effort to get down, more than it takes to stay down. And the pain. The pain is awful, constant, throbbing.

"Look at me."

"I don't want to."

"Show me those pretty eyes, Leslie."

I clench my jaw and grit my teeth. "You're not full-naming me. That's illegal."

Sean chuckles; I love his laugh. I love it so much. It's so *pure*. My family never laughs like it's a joyful sound. Sean does. Even when he's laughing at someone else, the innocence in it almost invites them to join him.

He traces a finger around my ear, pinning my hair, and it tickles.

I glare at him.

His smile melts off his face, paving the way for concern so deep I want to scream. It's easier to be bratty and mean with everyone. Shoving plates and scoffing is easier in the group. That strong act doesn't fool Sean one bit, and knowing that almost makes it impossible to pretend.

A flickering spark of anger ignites in him as his expression goes hard. He takes my hand and makes me set my glass down. "You're hungry," he says.

I'd curse at him if I had the will. No crap I'm hungry, Sean. Try being me. Try being a girl in a world where *fat* is a curse word unless it refers to your breasts or butt. Try being raised by someone whose standard is *perfect* when you know—you *know*—you're flawed.

Fury barely restrained, Sean pulls the platter of cheese and bread closer, in reach. Then, with all the dark glory of some night-time god, he lifts his chin, looking down his nose at me. "Eat *something*. Or I'm going to kiss you."

"Y-you're *threatening* me?" *Me?* He is not serious. Also, um, sorry. Recent events are still being processed. I am not presently certain if a *kiss*

from this man is a “threat” or if it’s something like a...reward.

Ew. Ew, ew, ew. Gross. Gross, no. No, but maybe yes? But, wait, if I don’t eat now, is he going to see the *I kinda wouldn’t mind kissing your ugly (actually revoltingly handsome) face* written all over mine?

He combs his fingers through his curls, brows elevated, disdainful. “I like threatening people. I like the *squirming*. Squirming is cute. It’s a power thing, I know. I really should talk to Velspar about that therapist he’s seeing, if she’s got any slots open. Hey.” A faux light flicks on inside him. “Why don’t we *both* do that? We can get me sorted on the whole *gets a high off watching people squirm* thing and you sorted on the whole *committing slow suicide* thing.” He cups my face, stopping me from looking away. Intense, he holds my gaze, steals my breath, peers into my soul. “You get that, don’t you, Les? *That* is what’s going on. And, I’m very sorry, but you know how I am with the people who try to hurt my friends.” He presses his lips together, *furios*. His hand’s even trembling. “*Imagine how livid it makes me to watch someone try to kill one.*”

“How is everything ove—” Our waitress approaches, like they do, at the worst possible moment.

“We’re fine,” Sean snaps, and the woman jumps before scurrying away.

My swallow threatens to come back up. Weakly, I say, “You don’t get it. You don’t understand.”

“I know I don’t, little one. Let me say what I do understand: if a person doesn’t eat, they die. If a person doesn’t eat enough, they destroy their body from the inside out. You are constantly in pain, fighting nausea and dizziness, and telling yourself awful lies. You’re not happy. You’re not healthy. And, for what purpose? Power as achieved through unrealistic standards of beauty? Get your power another way. Reframe what *beauty* is. Because, honestly? I think it’s your laugh. I think it’s your eyes. I think it’s your smile, the way your brow furrows when you’re concentrating and fed up. It’s your cute disgust for when things don’t meet your standards, the superior distaste for when things that shouldn’t do. You’re—” He curses. “—stunning. I want you to be healthy.”

My lungs are quivering. “*Healthy* isn’t bread and cheese, Sean.”

“*Healthy* isn’t *too much* bread and cheese, Les. Food is fuel. Carbs and calories are energy. Fats are necessary.” His free hand reaches my waist, splays against my stomach.

I close my eyes, involuntarily sucking whatever I can in.

His lips graze my forehead. “Fat protects your organs.” His fingers press, gently digging. “You’re not protecting them at all.” He draws away, leaving me cold. When I open my eyes again, he’s spooned the smallest dollop of cheese onto the smallest cut of bread. Holding it out to me, he says, “Do your best friend a favor, and change that. Open up.”

My eyes flick between the morsel and his face. “You—”  
“Open. Up.”

Against all reason, I do as I’m told and bite when I should. It’s embarrassing and thrilling in messed up ways. I chew to the tune of *that’s my good little girl* and watch him finish the rest of the slice without looking off me once.

My face heats.

With a shaking hand, I pick up another small piece, drip the tiniest portion of dip on it, and bring it hesitantly to my lips.

Sean chuckles.

I *love* his laugh.

“Now you’re just begging for compliments,” he whispers into my hair. His smile wholly disarms. And I take another bite.

## CHAPTER 3

♥ If my best friend sees me naked, I will throw up for unrelated reasons.

~~~~

Arms folded, I glower at the spot in the bathroom where my scale *should* be. After lunch today—like an *actual* lunch, or eight, since I was picking off the half dozen meals Sean ordered like his cheap praises were a drug I needed to survive—I *have* to weigh myself.

But I can't.

And I'll give everyone exactly *one* guess as to why.

“*Sean!*” I holler, forgetting that I'm wearing exactly *two* towels because I just finished taking a shower.

Well, s—

The door opens without warning, and every uncovered inch of me goes tomato sauce red. Sean's eyes flick down from my towel turban to my towel wrap, then fix on my eyes. He bites into one of the leftover pizza slices from lunch, chews, and tilts his head.

If *he's* not making a big deal out of it, *I'm* not going to. I lift my chin as though I'm wearing a pantsuit and point at the floor where my scale is supposed to be. “Where'd you put it?”

He swallows his bite. “Told you this morning.”

“You did *not* throw it at a pedestrian.”

He smiles, fondly chipper.

I stomp my foot. “I need to check my weight.”

“You *need* to have dinner.” He dangles the rest of his pizza slice at me, and a mushroom falls onto the intricate pearl and gold tile floor. I want them to be *sea foam*. “Bite?” he asks.

“Revolting.” I shove past him, heading into my bedroom. Annoyingly, he's got the master bedroom with the joint bathroom. I have the room with the bathroom across the hall. Lifting my phone off my nightstand, I glare at the screen, at the Instagram notifications I'll have to get to later, and promptly do a search to see where I can get a new scale delivered by tomorrow morning.

Sean plucks my phone out of my hand and stuffs another bite of pizza in his mouth.

“Sean!” I shriek.

He puts his pizza a centimeter from my mouth, effectively shutting me up. I remember the taste from the half-bite I had this afternoon. Its delicious scent drifts into me. I am hungry again. Eating consistently means that aching cycle doesn’t die out now and again in favor of the hollow nothingness I’ve come to recognize as *safe* and *good*.

If I’m hungry, I’m not fat. If I’m hungry, my body is chipping away at the fat it wrongfully stored up. Hungry is good. Hungry means I’m doing something right.

Sean pops my phone in his pocket after a couple swipes I barely registered occurring. Taking another bite of his pizza, he says, “How mad are we if I just deleted your Instagram?”

My brain lags. I blink. My brow furrows. “You *what*?”

He steps back before I can wrap my fingers around his throat and *crush*. “Give me my phone back! You did *not*! I had *drafts* saved! That data deletes if you—” A furious inhale flares my nostrils, and my eye twitches as I lunge again.

Then. Suddenly. Horribly.

I am cold.

Sean blinks as the damp heat curled around me loosens and—

I pale, stiffening. My towel falls to the bedroom floor. For a frightful instant, I am mortified. But Sean just takes another bite of his pizza without so much as *glancing* down, so then I’m *livid*. Anger boils in my flesh until my clenched fists are shaking.

Licking his lips, he says, “You’re not allowed to get another scale. As your husband, I forbid it.”

“A—” My voice breaks, incensed, and I fight to level it while I stand, naked, in front of Sean. “As my *husband* who is in control of my current funds, you’re *forbidding* me from *buying something*?”

“I am.”

“You are *not* serious.”

He juts a lip. “This is a Christian household, dearest wife. You shan’t mar the sanctity with such secular articles.”

I am about to mar the sanctity of his face. “That is textbook abuse.”

“Yeah, well. I like to think of it as a textbook intervention. Helps me sleep at night.” His attention slides toward my standing mirror, and a chill skates down my spine. He whispers, “You’re next.”



Without thinking, I launch myself in front of my mirror and watch the *instant* I happen to also launch my bare body into Sean's direct line of sight.

His breath catches, mouth freezing on its way to take another bite. His pizza slice flops, and another mushroom falls onto my carpet. He exhales a curse.

He can see today's lunch, this past week's meals. I have nothing to hide behind. *Nothing*. He'll *get it* now. He'll get why I shouldn't have dinner tonight, why this afternoon was *not* okay. He'll understand and look at me with all the disgust my family always has.

I brace myself for either Sean's efforts at *nice* or his blatant, amused darkness; I do not at all know what to do when I get neither. He stares, long moments passing, then he jolts out of the trance and twists on his heel putting his back to me. A huge breath fills him. Something strained in his voice sends electric shocks through my nerves. "The only person who needs to be concerned with your weight is a doctor, Les. And with the way you treat yourself, it should be a doctor who doesn't even tell you the number. Calories, pounds, inches, they're all just numbers that don't need to be in your head right now. You're building the foundation for a business. Your brain needs energy to deal with numbers that actually matter. Get dressed. Come out and have dinner. I'm not asking." With that, he strides from my room.

Like he has any dang right.

Shakily, I get dressed and mull over whether I'm going to allow my brain to compute what just happened or if I'm going to shove it way back with other traumas too dastardly to behold. I haven't decided by the time I'm stepping out into the kitchen, expecting an array of heated leftovers full of carbs and cheese and oils.

Sean sits at the kitchen table, his tablet beside a plate overflowing with all the awful, delicious food from lunch. In the spot beside him, however, a sectioned plate with mixed vegetables, roasted potatoes, and something resembling a casserole rests. The closer I get, the easier it is to identify rice and broccoli, meat crumbles.

Tense, I say, "Beef is high i—"

"It's vegan."

Vegan beef?

"It *really* doesn't taste like the real stuff, but it's not bad. It's just not meat. Don't expect it to taste like meat. Like. Not even remotely."

I take a seat and look at him as he scrolls through text on his tablet, absently twirling chicken alfredo on his fork.

My hand can't reach my silverware before he says, "Sorry."

I touch the cool utensil and look back at him.

His cheeks match his hair, darkening until the true low-contrast characterization that helps indicate someone is an autumn gets severe. "That was my bad. I should have backspaced when I saw you in the bathroom." His jaw locks, a muscle in his cheek jumping. "I take things too far sometimes. Broken pieces in my head think it's funny. Then it's not. And I would never do anything to hurt you. Or embarrass you. Or humiliate you. None of the bad things. Not...not to you. So. I'm sorry."

My chest pinches, but I finally manage to lift my fork. More than that, I plant it in my plate, carving a bite out of the casserole and lifting it to my mouth. "Give me back my phone."

"No."

"Then I don't accept your apology."

"That's fine. Forgiveness is for the victim, not the offender. You're only hurting yourself." He fills his mouth with cheesy pasta, and my stomach growls, so I allow it the non-cheesy not-pasta in front of me. At least it's not the mess of calories on his plate... At least...

I am not trying to kill myself. Sean cares about me more than my family ever has. He wants this for me. And...and...he's doing everything he can to just *let me feed myself*. He knew I'd adamantly refuse if he tried to give me what he's having for a second time today. He knew I wouldn't eat a single thing if I saw my weight tonight. He probably knows I'm beating myself up about lunch. So he made me something else, something easier for me to talk myself into.

Tears well. My lips tremble as they wrap around another bite. I chew. It's amazing.

It's sure as heck not real meat, but I hardly remember what that tastes like, so I like it. It's good.

It's...

I sniffle, dropping my fork on my plate. Dragging a hand to my face, I cover my eyes. My stomach revolts. I fight the feeling.

"Hey," Sean murmurs. "Les." He touches my shoulder, and that's the final straw. My gut twists, turning over, and I bolt for the bathroom, falling on my knees in front of the toilet. Tears, snot, and vomit. I retch until it

burns, and I'm sobbing, and Sean is on the floor with me, holding my hair back, holding me close.

I cave in on myself, shaking, cold, aching. My insides feel bruised. So does my heart. Everything hurts. I'm not just ugly or a mess or fat or gross. I'm broken. Broken into tiny pieces. I have no idea who I'm even supposed to be.

Clutching Sean's shirt, I heave rocking wails that bridge on agonized screams. Hate floods out of me with nowhere to go, so it materializes in the way my nails fight through his shirt to pierce his flesh. He neither stops me nor hesitates to lift my body onto his lap. He cradles me and leans against the cabinet beside the toilet, rubbing my shoulder, cooing, "Shh." He kisses my forehead like I'm not the most disgusting thing in the world. His fingers comb through my hair. "It's only vegan beef. It's not *that* bad."

"Shut up!" I croak. Tears blur my vision, so I press my face against his chest, let all the gross things soak into his shirt. Weak now and hoarse, I whisper, "What is wrong with you?"

"You chose anger. I chose humor."

"What?" I lift my face, just so I can meet his eyes. I don't think I could stand if I tried. Everything's shaking and fragile.

Opening the cabinet beside us, he pulls out a washcloth then wipes my mouth and nose. Like I'm five. "As a coping mechanism. Reg acts out. I make bad jokes. You get upset. Velspar punishes himself. It's something his therapist told him, and he told me. Not all coping mechanisms are healthy, but we work with what we have available, what lets us feel okay in the moment." Nothing amused crosses his face. Rather, he looks somewhat... hopeless. "I don't know what else to say, Les. Right now, you won't believe any of the things in my head."

I manage a labored breath and work to loosen the way my nails pierce his shirt. Half-afraid, I ask, "What things?"

His lips part. He hesitates and looks elsewhere.

"*What things?*" I grit.

"You're beautiful," he whispers, and won't look at me. "It's okay. You are so beautiful. But that hardly matters and serves only as a means to torture me. You're smart, and you're clever, and you have an eye for lovely things, an appreciation for style in all its forms. You're kind—"

A scoff rips out of my chest. "I guess you're right. I don't believe you. That's pushing it a bit, isn't it?" Exhausted, I rest against him, shivering. "No

one would ever accuse me of being *kind*.”

He pulls a bath towel out of the cabinet and wraps it around me. “Sophomore year of high school. I found you in the gym locker room with Colette’s stuff.”

I grimace, burying my face down under the towel blanket. “You weren’t supposed to be in there.”

“Again, I was...*invited*.”

“Ew.” My eyes roll.

“Remember what you told me after we cleared that up?”

Maybe. I snip, “No.”

“I warned you to stop messing with Colette. And you said that stuff having to do with Colette got back to Velspar. I had no idea what you were talking about, so you waved one of her pads in my face.”

“Stop,” I whimper.

He doesn’t. “You said, ‘Look at these things. They’re so cheap they don’t have—’” He curses, because I cursed back then, because it was criminal. “‘—wings. I do this. It gets back to Velspar. He throws money at her or, hell, buys her whatever ones I tell him to outright.’ Then you muttered to yourself about how quality feminine hygiene products should be freely available at schools.” Sean’s chest moves as he releases a breath. “And I thought, ‘Dang, this girl’s beautiful. Who knows how beautiful she’d be if only she were allowed to show it.’”

“You’re making that up,” I mutter.

“I said you wouldn’t believe me. Your lack of belief doesn’t make it any less true.”

My throat hurts. I’m hungry. But everything hurts. I don’t want to throw up again. This is probably for the best, right? Now it’s like I didn’t actually mess up today.

Sean’s lips skim against my temple in a mindless caress. “I’m sorry. This is my fault. I put your nerves on high alert earlier.”

“Because you took my phone.”

A few moments pass, and Sean says, “Okay, we’ll go with that.”

Limply, I hit his chest. “Jerk.”

“If that makes me a jerk, you won’t like this next part.”

“What ne—”

He stands, so I cling, filling with dread as his every step brings me back out to the kitchen. I bury my face against him to keep my stomach from

flipping at the scent of food.

“Sean, please.” I fill my chest with the warm, cedar smell of his skin. “Please. I can’t.”

“Begging is absolutely not going to help you with me, Les,” he murmurs. “It just makes me want to kiss you. And you just puked. So...at least drink some water before you start tempting me.”

He puts me mercilessly back at the table where I stare at our neglected food while he prepares a glass of water. He places it directly in my hand, closing my shaking fingers around it.

I can’t move.

“Water has no calories. If you have to vomit again with nothing in your stomach, you’ll be in worse pain. Your mouth feels gross. Your throat stings from the acid. Y—”

“Okay,” I hiss and force the glass to my lips.

He takes his seat, and I feel his eyes on me as I slowly sip and rinse, washing the burn and grit away. When I’ve forced down half, I set it on the table, manage to take controlled breaths.

“Was my casserole honestly that bad? I spent several hours searching for recipes. I did my best.” Sean leans for my plate and cuts off a small bite with his fork, looking at the mixture. “I’ve not really cooked before now. I thought I was following the directions pretty well.”

The next twinge I feel is in my heart, and I hate it, because I’m not stupid. I know exactly what he’s doing. “That’s playing dirty,” I mutter, still weak. My voice isn’t nipping like normal. I’m exhausted. And instead of something akin to the vague approval Mother gave me whenever I ended up vomiting around her, Sean’s not going to let me move until I put what I lost back.

Resting his elbow against the table, Sean sets his chin in his palm and moves his fork toward my mouth. Brows dipping with fake distress, he says, “I worked ever so hard.”

“That’s your fork.” I glare at it.

“Ahh,” he drones, expression pure *ask me if I care*.

I don’t need to ask. I know he doesn’t. Sneering, or attempting to because everything still hurts, I lift my own fork. “I can feed myself.”

He stops nudging his fork closer to me. “Historical data implies otherwise.”

“You’re absolutely awful.”

He eats the bite himself after I’ve readied my own. He chews, smiles.

“This isn’t half-bad though, lack of cow murder and all.” Waking his tablet back up, he says, “If you had to decorate a lobby, what color would you paint the walls? Eggshell or cream?”

I force the food into my mouth, then all the way down, distracting myself with the question. “What sort of lobby? What kind of building?”

“Empty...tall?”

He’s impossible. “Just show me.”

The answer was *beige*.

## CHAPTER 4

♥ Well, this is toxic. I'm kind of into it though??

~~~~

My husband is a menace. Irrational. Unbearable.

Staring at the places where my full-length and my large vanity mirrors used to be, I ponder the unfathomable. He did this in the middle of the night. He stole my mirrors in the middle of the night so quietly I didn't even hear him come in.

I'm shaken by the audacity.

Startled by the commitment.

In awe of the fact I actually *slept* last night. Normally, the whole starvation thing keeps me in between wake and rest. Last night...I went to bed full.

And I'd *probably* be able to *see* that fact if someone hadn't *stolen my mirrors in the middle of the night*. He's like the damn Grinch. Except instead of Christmas, he's swiping *my patience*.

I stomp out of my bedroom and find *my husband* on the couch, feet propped, laptop resting on his thighs. He's looking serious, an expression that rarely ever exists between the *sunshine* and *midnight* personas. Studious click-clacking keys fill my head.

Folding my arms, I wait for him to notice me, make the first move—because I've no doubts he's seventeen ahead, and I'd like for it to at least be *sixteen* before I start screaming.

He doesn't look up. He references a notebook laying on the coffee table and types something else into his computer. He's missing glasses.

And a wife-beater tank top, because with this kind of domestic abuse, he's practically halfway there.

I clear my throat, obnoxiously.

His gaze skims up over the screen of his laptop, and a stupid flutter takes off in my chest when he smiles. It's not the innocent smile of a man who's hiding the fact he's just played a hilarious prank. It's the gentle, sweet smile of someone happy to see me. "Morning, little one." His gaze falls back to his laptop, and he hums. "Is it this late already?" He taps a couple things before closing his laptop and stretching as he stands.

Muscle.

No, bad, Leslie.

And yet my chastising myself makes him no less physically appealing. I hate it. *Ohhh*. Okay. I think I am beginning to understand Velspar's complicated issues of love/hate concerning Colette. Well, f—

“I'll make breakfast. Would you like to set up your things and work with me out here after we eat?”

I would prefer to stick my hand in a blender. “What did you do with my mirrors?”

“The mirrors? I got rid of them. They kept making weird faces at me.”

“*The* mirrors?” I blurt, turn, march. My mouth falls open when I step into the very bathroom I used *yesterday* and discover *the flipping mirror is missing*. A screech pours out of my lungs, and I stomp back into the living room, then the kitchen, because he's already getting started on breakfast. Throwing my hands up, I scream, “What is *wrong* with you? How am I going to do my makeup?”

He dumps frozen strawberries into the blender. “I didn't get rid of your fancy little mirrors.” The blender chugs, grinding the mixture of ingredients into a thick pink mass. “You can use those. Or not.” The blender chugs. “You're pretty without makeup.”

I am certifiably *not*. The bags under my eyes could fit two toy poodles. “I don't k—” Blender. I close my eyes, press my lips together, ask any listening deity for strength. “I don't know what yo—” Blender.

I stomp my way up to him, grab his hand, and pull it off the machine. Through gritted teeth, I hiss, “I don't know what you think you'r—”

Blender.

I whip my attention down to find his finger on the button.

He whispers, “I have two hands.”

Shrieking, I shove him away from the blender and put my body between him and it. “You can't *force* me to have a better body image, Sean! You're just being a menace and overturning *everything* I'm used to. The problems go deeper than seeing myself in a mirror, or counting calories, or struggling to *feed* myself. You can take drugs away from an addict, but you can't babysit them forever. If they don't fix their own brains and make their own decisions, nothing changes once you let up on the leash.”

“Then I won't.”

“What?”



“Let up on the leash. I won’t.” He steps into me, and I chill, shiver, freeze. Lifting a finger, he touches the base of my neck and skims his warm touch up to the tip of my chin. “I’ll keep the things that hurt you away from you forever. I’ll feed you each day, forever. I’ll babysit you for the rest of your life if that means ensuring it will be a long one where you aren’t suffering with your every breath against starvation. Sure, taking your drugs away doesn’t automatically fix your brain, but once the withdrawals calm down, you’ll have a better chance of doing that yourself.”

My heart stutters, hiccups. “Isn’t this kind of extreme?”

He puffs a laugh and gently sets me aside so he can reach the blender again. “Since when *aren’t* we extreme, Les? Honestly.” He pulses the mixture a few more times before popping the pitcher off and dividing the contents into two tall footed glasses.

The shade of pink is beautiful. It makes me want to change the kitchen into pale pinks and creams.

“How am I going to coordinate my outfits?”

“You don’t need to be wearing your clothes to tell that they match.”

“But I won’t know if they look good *on*.”

“I’ll tell you.”

“You’re—” I give his current pathetic jean and t-shirt ensemble a disgusted once-over. “—unreliable.”

He offers me a cup after stabbing the pink through with a large glass straw. “Ow, my feelings.”

I take the stupid smoothie.

He sucks soft pink up his own straw, watching me, waiting.

“*Ugh*,” I snap and lift my drink to my lips as I stomp toward the living room. It’s fruity and fresh, filling my mouth with bursts of tangy sweetness. I stop short and turn. “Why do you care so much! I’m not *actually* dying! Mother has lived like this *her whole life*. She’s *fine*. So what if it’s uncomfortable? That’s the price of beauty.”

Sean lets a long sigh out, rolling his eyes as he passes me. Pulling *my* phone out of his pocket, he says, “Here. I fixed it for you.”

“You...you what?”

He dangles it. “I *fixed* it. If you *unfix* it, I’ll take it away and fix it again. Change your password to something I don’t know, and I’ll confiscate it completely on account of bad behavior.”

My eye twitches.

I'm scared.

What in the world did he *do*?

After I take my phone back, he meanders to the couch and sits. Scratching his head, he rustles his curls and scans his notebook before popping his laptop open again.

Biting my cheek, I temper my nerves as I sit on the perpendicular side of our sectional sofa, set my smoothie down on the coffee table, and unlock my phone. My apps look the same. Instagram is still here.

Narrowing my eyes, I swipe to screen time.

Dread fills my chest.

Three full hours, from one a.m. to four, spent on Instagram.

I shoot Sean a look that he doesn't see because he's already focusing on his computer like he's capable of being mature and serious. Why is he even awake? Did he sleep at all?

In silent response, he stifles a yawn, and his clacking keys drift into the room as I open up the app.

Immediately, Colette's grinning face fills my feed. Velspar's hugging her from behind. Her eyes look at the camera, but his? His belong to her. It's the sweetest picture in the world, and it's a carousel, so I swipe through a couple other mushy, blushing, icky cuteness.

Next, a picture of fries held up to the sunset. What?

Brow furrowed, I check the account. Katina? I don't think I've ever seen a picture from Katina. But that doesn't really surprise me. This image hardly seems like it would entice the algorithm, and I'm following nearly a thousand accounts. She's also not building a social media presence like Colette is for her music.

Heh.

For a second there, I thought Sean had filled my feed with mediocre images of foo...

The next picture is of a plus-size model in a sunflower yellow bathing suit. Her luscious curls spill over her shoulders as she smiles at the camera. Everything about the image invokes brilliance. The lighting is perfect. Her makeup is flawless. The way her outfit complements her dark skin is—in a word—ravishing. The only problem, really, is the fact she's carrying *significant* weight. To put it kindly. I grimace. Okay, well, *that* and clearly she didn't touch anything up because her stretch marks are on clear display.

Bold move.

I'm jealous of her smile. How is she able to smile when *thousands* of people have seen the fact she's not perfect? I don't remember following her, but it doesn't say it's related content. I never get related content that looks like her.

With the next image, I flinch. This time, the woman isn't plus-size, but she's not *model* thin either.

Apprehension filters into my veins.

I swipe. And swipe. Beautiful smiling imperfect women. Dancing. Laughing. No filters. My skin prickles. I can't stop swiping. Stunning outfits. Enthralling makeup. Random pet cameos. A reel appears, and the woman's clear blue eyes make me freeze. Text runs beside her face, matching the silent movement of her lips. Apparently, Sean turned my phone sound off.

*Wrinkles or curves, acne or cellulite, you are beautiful exactly the way you feel right. It's not about weight, color, or shade. I promise, dear one, you are wonderfully made.*

I close my eyes. Take a breath. Once I've gathered my strength, I go to my profile. I'm following three hundred people, seven hundred less than I was before. And when I look at them, I only recognize Kat's and Colette's usernames. "What did you do?" I whisper.

Without looking up, Sean restates three simple words, "I. Fixed. It."

I'm so angry my voice shakes, and I can't bring myself to raise it. "I *needed* to follow who I was following for market research and *work*. How am I supposed to create a stable business if I don't track popular fashions?"

"You're still tracking popular fashions."

"No, I'm not. These accounts aren't—"

"Every single one has tens of thousands of followers. It's reliable to suggest their content resonates with people, and *people* will be your future market." He wets his lips and finally meets my eyes. "Les, I saw something last night while I was fixing things. I think it's kind of important for you to hear and understand, since you are working to set up a business in fashion and all that. Clothes are made for people, not people for clothes. You can be both beautiful and comfortable in your own skin. It's allowed. In case no one ever told you." His gaze returns to his computer. "In the end, makeup, accessories, and fabric serve to express who you are inside. That's all they're supposed to do. Create things conducive to *that* purpose."

It hurts to swallow, and I'm doing everything in my power to keep the tears beading in my eyes from falling. "You can't do this."

“Seems like I did, though,” he murmurs, squinting at his screen. He reaches for his notebook and cross references. His lips pinch.

“You *shouldn't*. I didn't leave my mother so someone else could take her place and impose their ideals on me.”

His gaze moves off his screen, then it drags to me. A ripple of concern snakes through my chest, pooling like vipers in my gut.

Sean kicks his legs off the couch and sets his open computer beside his smoothie. In two steps, he's standing in front of me. In another second, his hands are braced against the back of the couch, caging me where I'm seated. Lowly, he says, “So I'm no better than your mother?”

He's a thousand times better than my mother. But that's not a hard accomplishment. My mother is a cold, calculating woman who values perfection and profit and appearance over everything else. I don't think she's ever hugged me. Not once.

“I'm just imposing *ideals* on you?” His breath—minty and fruity—brushes my lips, making them part.

I wish I drank more of my smoothie. I am suddenly parched.

“Is that it?” he asks, the words quiet.

“Yes.” My answer comes out reedy and thin. A thread ready to snap at the next sign of tension.

And right here, right now, in this moment, *tension* is all there is.

He holds his hand between us. “In that case, you don't need your phone. If you don't like *ideals* being *imposed* on you, then you shouldn't be on social media. I don't know what you think scrolling through thousands upon thousands of pictures of women who only look the way they do because of extensive manipulation each day is, but *imposed ideals* certainly does come to mind. It's your mother's toxic environment or mine, little one. I'll admit to overstepping boundaries. I'll admit to force. I'll admit to being awful and monstrous and manipulative. I'll admit to just about any bad thing you want me to. But...” His eyes narrow, and his hand comes up to cradle my jaw. “... if you *ever* compare me to that woman again, I'm going to get very mad. There's a crucial difference between us. Tell me what it is, and I *might* forgive you.”

A crucial difference? There are a million differences. Perhaps a primary one is the fact if my mother were holding my face like this, her nails would be digging into my skin and I'd be terrified.

Right now, I'm not even a little scared, and it's not even a little painful.

I search Sean's eyes, the murderous dark green, the tinges of severe hurt buried deep within them. I dissect the *why* of that hurt, and the answer comes clear. "You care about me," I whisper.

"Immensely."

My nerves catch fire, and color rises to my cheeks. My gaze dips from his eyes to the firm line of his lips, and I can't jerk my attention back off. I swallow. He moves an inch closer, and my heart leaps. "Don't."

He stops. "Why?"

"I..." I can't think of a single reason. I signed a paper that says he's my husband. This place is spotless, and I haven't done a single dish since moving in, so he's not even a slob. If I let my mind drift, it finds its way to how he kissed me at Quincy's party two weeks ago...and... "We're friends."

"Best friends." The breath of the words touch my damp lips, cooling them.

"What if something goes wrong and we ruin that? I'm mad at you. Right this very second."

"You're mad at the world. I think it's because you're hungry."

Somehow, *for some reason*, that *peach* of a line makes me more mad. Glaring, I drag my attention off his mouth and to his eyes.

The second our gazes lock, he smiles. "I'll make it easy." His hand moves to my cheek, and his thumb grazes over the defined curve. "Close your eyes."

Obedying him is accepting whatever happens next, so pride rears and tells me not to. Pride must not understand wanting something more than saving face. He could use a hundred things against me if he wanted to. He knows my damage in intimate ways. He's got plenty to work with if he wants to tear me apart. Sean's personality is dreadfully tormenting, but he never wants to hurt, humiliate, or embarrass me.

He's quick to apologize. Quick to make sure I'm okay when he goes too far.

Out of everyone in the world, I think he cares about me the most.

I trust him. I want him.

Screw pride.

I close my eyes.

Sean touches a kiss to each corner, and the weight of his knee presses into the cushion beside my thigh. He cups my face in both hands, and feeds me a curse as he steals my breath. I reach for his clothes and grip a fistful of his shirt, stretching the fabric as I tangle and pull, beckoning him closer.

He obliges, murmuring foolish things like my name and yes and harsh curses, over and over.

My skin buzzes.

He kisses me until I can't breathe, then his warm mouth draws open trails of kisses down the column of my throat. My head falls back against the couch cushion, and I couldn't open my eyes if I wanted to. This is different than other hook ups. The desperation in this doesn't have to go so far to do what I always hope my flings might. I'm not waiting for something to break inside me and make me feel *pretty enough* because I am worth a single night.

Sean's made me *worth his time* for as long as we've known each other.

With him, it's not about *pretty*.

I'm just plain *enough*.

An embarrassing sound whimpers from my chest as he cups my waist, planting his warm palm against my pajama camisole. The thin fabric reveals every indent of his fingers, and I ground myself in their outline. I ground myself in his hands when they hook under my knees, lift me, and drop me on his lap as he falls back into the couch. Arms around me, he presses a scalding kiss to the dip between my collarbones. His damp tongue tastes. His fingers plunge into my hair and pull.

I lose all sense of existence. My head lolls, light in only the best ways, and I'm biting my lip when he nips me.

Hot breath hits me, then his mouth pulls away, leaving me frigid. Without his arms around me, I'd turn to ice. "Look at me," he says, voice rough, breaths hard.

Dragging my eyes open, I find him beneath me, watching me like...like I'm perfect.

His thumb paints across my bottom lip. Plump, tortured.

Dazed, he releases a tight breath. "I want what's best for you. I don't care if I get that the *right* way or not. I really don't. If you're tearing yourself apart, I'm not going to sit idly by and ask nicely for you to stop. I've tried that for too long, and it has all but killed me. I'm going to grab your hands, wrench the knife from your fingers, and force you to stop. Nothing is standing in the way of you going back home and giving your mother the *you were right* power trip she'd need to accept you back into her fold. But I'll be damned if I'm not clawing at your ankles in an effort to keep you." He lets his attention fall across my figure before his eyes close. "You're my wife, Leslie. Mine. No one else gets to have a hold on you." His fingers grip into

my thighs. “Just me.”

I let my forehead rest against his and spend a moment breathing him in. “What is this if it’s not romantic, Sean?”

“Desperate.” His thumbs hook in my pajama shorts. “Concerning.” He presses his lips together, and his fingers knead into my flesh. “I want to possess you. It’s nothing kind like *romance*. I adore you. I love you. I need you. I’ll do whatever it takes to watch you thrive.” He stares blankly off me. “You...get me. I need that. Everyone needs that.”

So I serve a purpose of emotional gratification, safety, or stability.

That’s...fine. I can live with that. Heaven knows I’ve lived with worse.

Kissing his jaw, I nibble until his fingers have locked into me so tight bruises wouldn’t surprise me.

He tilts his head for me, murmurs, “Good little girl.”

“Do you have to—”

“Yes.” His dark eyes cut to mine. He smiles.

I sigh. “This doesn’t change anything. You’re still...ew. Okay?”

“Weird preference, but whatever.”

My face heats. “I’m not saying I like the ew. It’s just... I... You...” I drop my gaze and search between us for words. I can’t find them, because I realize exactly how close we are, and the heat of his body rising to meet mine overwhelms me.

“You’re—” He swears. “—beautiful, little one.”

I quiver, and the heat beneath my skin heightens to a boil.

“Are you still a spring when your face is red like that?” he asks, skating his finger down my cheek.

“Shut up. That is not how it works.”

“Will you grow out your natural hair for me?”

“You want it to be mud brown?” I mutter.

“It’s more of a chestnut, isn’t it?”

Not according to my mother. Maybe I should stop worrying about things according to her. Maybe I should start only bothering with things pertaining to how I feel like this, right now, and all the moments after that might be like it.

“I also like green, if you prefer.” He coils a lock around his finger. “You could match my eyes.”

Green or brown, decisions, decisions. It’s like he thinks I don’t know what he’s doing. Juxtaposition works well on me. After all, I’ve been

comparing myself to others all my life, feeling somewhat better when I excel, feeling somewhat awful when I don't.

Give me two choices where the one you want for me isn't nearly as bad as the other, and I fall right into line.

Manipulation just rolls right off his tongue. A first language.

I brush my fingertips across his cheek, to his ear, and grow drunk on the way his eyes glaze.

Sean. Rowdy, messed up Sean. Always eating, laughing, plotting, pushing buttons, mocking, caring. My Sean.

I taste his lips. His hands climb to my hips, ready to bruise somewhere new. He clutches me, lets me lead, and when my tempo is slower than his, he grips his desperation into my flesh and bone. I don't know what I'm doing. I break away for a breath. "This never happened."

"Uh-huh."

"I mean it."

"Cold of you to think I'm capable of burning our bridge. If you regret whatever we do at some point and try to pull away from our friendship, I'll just gaslight the entire event out of existence until you're positive it was a dream."

It's probably wrong, but that comment pulls a barking laugh out of me. "You're scarier than Velspar."

His smile curls, simply dreadful, then he nips at my lip and whispers, "Shh. Tell no one."



## CHAPTER 5

♥ He did *not* just do that, and I did *not* just say that.

~~~~

“Les,” Sean drones the seventh time I leave my bedroom in an outfit that, this time, only *subtly* clashes. He’s not bothering to look up anymore as he sits on the couch in a puddle of torn pages, printed diagrams, and apparent irritation.

“What?” I fold my arms. “You’re my *mirror*. This is what I do in front of my *mirror*.”

“Liar,” he mutters, yawns, reaches for a sheet, scowls, reaches for a different one.

What in the world has he been doing these past few days, and has *any* of what he’s been doing *involved sleep*?

“I am going out with the girls today. I’ve let you and your little *stunt* slide, but *now* I am in desperate need of a mirror.”

“At least stop choosing outfits you’d never wear then. I don’t need to be tested on my ability to notice when clothes don’t work together. I’ve been *your* friend since kindergarten. I can name at least three variations of blue. I deserve an award. What’s...what’s five plus three?”

“Eight.” And he makes a fair point. Wait. “Did you just ask me to do basic math?”

His weary eyes narrow at me, and a glint of purple taints the sections beneath them. Yeesh. The man needs some concealer. I enjoyed doing Velspar’s makeup in high school. I should pick up Sean’s colors. Without answering, he looks back at his pages.

Fine, ignore me then.

I stomp into my bedroom and grab something else out of my closet. This time the blouse is frilly and white. It will conceal however many pounds I’ve gained because *ugh*.

This is fine. Totally fine. I’m completely fine.

I’m going out in public and don’t know how fat I look.

I snatch my red pencil skirt and—

A shriek pours out of my throat.

Two seconds pass, and Sean throws open my bedroom door like he’s not tired at all. He scans the room. “What?”

I suck in, tug on the zipper, go ice cold. “Sean...it...”

He curses. Dropping the tension in his shoulders, he marches to me, then *the man rips the zipper down so hard it breaks.*

Another shriek leaves me, and I cover my mouth. “This is one of my favorites! They’re *all* my favorites!” My voice pitches, higher and higher. “*I only grabbed my favorites when I left home!*”

“Where are you going with Kat and Colette?”

My lip trembles. “I...I don’t know. Probably the usual. A bookstore, because they’re nerds. And the mall.”

Sean cups my face, drawing my attention up to him and off the broken zipper of my *three hundred dollar* skirt. “Can you do something for me?” he asks in *that* voice—the smooth, alluring, honeyed one that you should never ever trust. It’s a precursor to stuff like *distract the teacher so I can put this frog in their water bottle.*

Oh, the poor teachers I’ve distracted.

Because *this* voice? It always works on me.

“What?” I snap.

“When you’re at the mall, I want you to buy all the clothes you like. But...don’t check the sizes.”

My lip curls. “How will I know what fits?”

“You can tell roughly when you hold something up to yourself. I promise. I don’t even know my size, and I’ve got an extravagant small, medium, large system to work with.”

“Well, yeah, but you’re an idiot.”

His cheeks round with a smile. It’s so bright his next words leave me gasping for air and stability, like the entire earth’s been pulled out from under me. “It’s for your own good, little one. Looking at the numbers is only going to hurt you. So don’t. Either way, you’ll need to get clothes that fit, because when you get back? The ones you have right now will be burned.”

“*What?*” I grip him by the collar of his shirt. “You rethink those words right now.”

“I don’t want to.”

“These are *thousands of dollars’* worth of clothes.”

He hums. “Donated then. I guess I shouldn’t be a monster. Even though fire is fun.”

“Sean—”

He cocks his head, looking toward my clock. “You’re going to be late.”

I whip my attention to the clock as well, and my stomach twists. My *full* stomach twists. Because Sean fed me an egg on toast this morning. And it was amazing. And I'm so *mad*. "Don't you *dare* hurt my clothes!"

"Better buy new ones."

"You can't even drive! You're on suspension for DUI! How are you going to donate them?"

"Reg'll help me."

Reg would help him. Reg will do anything if it means being noticed or included. Any attention—good or bad—is his drug. He'll take whatever he can get. He wouldn't even second guess Sean telling him to come by and help get rid of all my clothes. He'd just be happy Sean picked him over Velspar, who *wouldn't* do such a thing without more information and who would probably know that we've been kissing the second he enters our home.

A shudder works through me.

Like Sean can read my thoughts, he touches his mouth to mine in a gentle caress. "Are you going to cancel your plans and stop me?"

I *can't* cancel my plans with Kat and Colette. I'm terrified to lose my place in the group. I'm the third wheel. I don't even fluently speak their language. I'm certain they do things without me. If I cancel any invitations, they might stop including me altogether.

Cold brushes my *apparently* very fat stomach, and I gasp when Sean's mouth lands against the pudge. It's my uterus. Just my uterus. No matter what I do, I can't get rid of my uterus—even if Mother tried to make me.

Warmth spills right through me as Sean nips, kisses, hums a low sound into my skin.

I fight the hand holding up my blouse as my body burns. I'm a thousand percent sure I'm bloated. I must be bloated. Even though I'm on birth control and shouldn't have my period, I'm—

I suck in a breath, and the fight goes out of me. Sean loops an arm around my waist seconds before I think I'm going to fall. "Perfect," he whispers with another kiss. "Well." He touches his cold nose to me. "Getting there."

"W-what—"

He lets my shirt fall back down and dips me like we're dancing before crashing his lips to mine. My head spins, and I melt, gripping his shoulder for balance. I jerk away the second I remember myself. "*Stop*. I'm about to go out. Girls are *scary* if they sense romance. I can't look *kissed*."

Sighing, Sean rights me and pouts.

“Don’t give me that face.”

Like a wounded puppy, he droops. “I already miss you, Les.”

“Disgusting.”

“Get new clothes, for me.”

“Yeah, you could use some.” I fold my arms.

He locks a strand of my hair behind my ear. “You know what I mean.”

“Well, if my choices are get *fat lady* clothes or be naked...”

A light sparks through Sean’s eyes. “Wait, is that an option? Can I pick the second one?”

“Gross!” I shove him and plow into my closet, searching for something that still fits. Something with, gag, stretchy material? An elastic waistband? My hand is shaking as I look at the fabric Sean is going to get rid of while I’m gone.

He hugs me from behind and sets his hand over mine, guiding it to a pair of black slacks with flared cuffs. He closes my fingers around the hanger, pulls it free. “Also, have lunch.”

“They’ll say something if I actually eat.” They’ll probably already be able to tell I’ve actually been eating. Who knows how much I’ve gained now? I had bread this morning. Sean gave me a snack while I was working yesterday. A *snack*. Who even am I?

Sean’s hold around me solidifies. “Who cares what anyone else says? *I’m* telling you to do it.”

My eyes roll. “Pump the brakes on the control streak. You don’t own me.”

“We own each other. That’s *marriage*.”

“We are *only* married so that your father is happy enough to give you some space from his own controlling issues.”

“Control issues run in the family. Our kids are gonna have them.”

“Our—” I sputter, turn, find myself pressed right against his broad chest. Logic dies.

Children. With this man. I’ve never given starting a family a thought before. Kids ruin bodies. You have to eat enough, or they *die*. Little curly-headed babies with his green shades in their hazel eyes. Like me. Like him. Full of love we wouldn’t stamp out.

“I...” My gaze doesn’t pull from his for so many long moments. “...don’t know if I want kids.”

Sean’s smile drifts off his face. Heat swells in his cheeks, matching his

hair. A swallow bobs in his throat, and he drags his hand off me in favor of cupping his mouth. His wide eyes stick, shocked, and I realize what I've just done.

Ripping the slacks from him, I march out of the closet and slam the door, trapping him in there. "I'm changing! Don't you dare move." My face burns until I feel the heat stretch up my ears. Shoving the broken skirt off, I pull on the slacks, feel the elastic band at the back stretch, and do everything in my power to ignore it as I smooth the fabric against my thighs. Tight is sexy... right?

I don't know. I don't know what I'm doing. What I just did. This outfit matches. It looks nice. I need makeup, accessories, sanity.

Taking a fortifying breath, I pull open the drawers in my vanity that hold my jewelry. Nothing too flashy. It's *Kat and Colette*. They don't even accessorize. Ugh. What if Kat comes in a plain t-shirt again? She's from good money. Colette is supposed to be the one pulling *those* stunts. But she's always cute and fluffy in the nice little dresses I know Velspar buys for her like an idiotic sap. Ridiculous.

Sean knocks on my closet door.

"Yes, I'm changed!" I snap as I select a set of earrings and a chain bracelet with a single pink flower charm. Not wearing my red skirt means I can add a touch of pastel. Fun. It makes me feel better, somewhat.

Sean exits the closet. When I feel him step into the room, I pretend it doesn't steal everything in my lungs. I *know* I didn't seriously look at him and imply *anything* about a potential that *if* I *do* want kids someday, they might have his *stupid face*.

Big bright eyes. Pure liquid *evil* in their veins. My style. His laugh.

Fffffff.

I force myself to grab the makeup I'll be bringing with me. Turning, I stomp past him into the closet and select a clutch and a pair of shoes. On my way back out, I stab my finger into his chest. "If you *touch* my shoes or purses, I'll kill you in your sleep." If he ever *does* sleep anymore. I'm not sure. His face is still red with those purple bags under his eyes.

What a clashing, awful mess.

A grin splits out across his cheeks, warm, *loving*. "I'm not touching anything that is unaffected by your sweet little body getting the nutrition it needs and deserves."

My heart skips beats. A slew of curses sprinkle through my brain. Using

him as a brace, I put my heels on, then I turn to the door. “You’re despicable,” I snap before I march out, thinking he is probably anything but.

## CHAPTER 6

♥ I have body dysmorphia. The body I perceive is not the body I have. Everything is *fine*.  
~~~~

Hands fly, forming words at lightning speeds, as I exit my SUV and approach Katina and Colette, who are waiting for me in front of the mall Barnes and Noble. My chest is tight, but I ignore the feeling as I toss my hair and pretend I *like* the fact my heel clicks are interrupting.

Katina notices me first, and I don't know if I'll ever get used to her greeting me with a smile instead of an eye roll. Velspar's lucky. He still gets the finger. He doesn't have to rework his relationship with her like I do. He also already secretly knew how to sign, so he's not fumbling through learning an entire language like Sean and I are.

It's not as simple as lining up words the way I know they belong. It's upside down and backwards. Question words last. *Expressions* change meanings. The full-body workout makes my head ache.

Kat lifts her hands, and Colette translates for her. "You look great."

My brow furrows. "I always look great."

Colette glances at me, then back at Kat's hands, saying, "M-m-more th-an normal. D-d-did you, did you do something d-d-different?" Kat offers Colette an apologetic smile and a *sorry*, which I actually do know. Score. I am learning.

Colette scans me from head to toe, then something lights in her blue eyes.

Dread packs into my chest. *They know*. They know. I didn't stand a chance. It took five seconds for them to realize. *How much weight have I gained?*

"Are you wearing m—blush? You've got m-more color in your cheeks."

I probably look like a chipmunk. I roll my eyes and scoff. "Enough about me. They're going to run out of books, and I want to get new clothes before they go out of season."

Katina pops up and claps her hands. *Let's go!*

Colette laughs, glowing.

I shove off the sense that I'm invading and keep step behind them as we enter the bookstore. Scents of coffee and salted baked goods assault me as we pass the Starbucks, but...I grimace, casting a glare toward the earth-toned

cafe space. I ate breakfast. A whole breakfast. My stomach isn't screaming at me to *at least* get a watered-down chai for the minute caffeine. I've been *sleeping*.

My body feels a little weird, but it's somewhat better than I think I ever remember feeling.

Strange.

Once we stop near the romance section, Kat hands me a book, and I look down at the cover, finding a bare blue chest. Uh.

*You'll love it*, she signs, slow enough for me to pick up the words.

"Ssst-op trying to give, to give her p-porn." Colette puts the thing back.

Katina's hands whip, and I catch a couple words here and there.

Colette's lips pinch into a slight frown. "I am not repeating th-at."

Katina's brows rise, accusing, a clear *how dare you* without a single additional sign.

"You can text her, if you m-m—have to."

Kat apparently *does* have to. With a wild gleam in her brown eyes, she jerks out her phone and types out entire paragraphs. When my phone beeps, she fixes her brilliant, crazed gaze on me, and I laugh as I get it from my purse. "Should I be scared?"

"Yes," Colette says, already beaming at a pink cover with cartoon people sprawled across it.

**Kat:** It's a story about love surpassing bounds. He's a cute alien from a planet with a name I don't remember and you can't pronounce. She's just a little human girl, like small, very small. He loves it, and her. He's obsessed, actually. And she's all "no, don't" but actually "please, do."

I cough as Katina's message goes into more details of this intergalactic love affair. I never thought she was an innocent pink princess like Colette, but, um, dang. I reach for the book, and Kat fist pumps.

"Nooo." Colette's eyes go huge. She shoves her pink book toward me. "D-don't listen to her. Read th-ings like this."

Kat's expression deadpans, and she signs, *That has sex*.

Colette's mouth drops open. "It d-does not." Her gaze flicks to me, and she blurts, "She says this has sex."

"I caught that. I learned that word first. I didn't know if learning sign would open up the way for dalliances with cute mute boys, and I wanted to be prepared." I flip through the pages of the risqué book and hum. "So far, disappointed."



*Girl, same.*

Grinning, I let the book fall closed. “You win, Kat. I’m joining your dark side.”

Defeated, Colette translates a weak, “Yay, we have cookies.”

Cookies.

My attention drifts toward the cafe. I could get a cookie. I *could*. Sean would be proud of me if I did.

Pig.

My attention drops, and I shake the thought out of my head. I will eat when I have to, just so I can tell Sean I did. It would raise a giant flag if I mentioned wanting a cookie, anyway. Colette and Kat both know I don’t *eat*. I don’t know how I’m going to handle getting lunch with them, how I’m going to explain myself.

We meander the aisles, Colette and Katina rambling to me about the books they’ve read, the ones they want to, the fact Kat’s father isn’t letting her buy more than five books at a time now. It is, apparently, an injustice.

I nearly blurt that Sean is probably burning all the clothes I own right this second, and *that* is a *real* injustice, but I don’t. Because the questions that would arise are some I do not want to deal with. Also, girls don’t like it when you talk about yourself.

I want to keep these friendships. Not just because Colette basically controls Velspar and a falling out with her would mean excommunication. It’s...nice. Being here. With them. Seeing effort put out in order to include me. Hearing nothing about who is doing what with whom and ruining their reputation.

Kat is animated, taking up all kinds of space as she communicates with her whole body. Colette laughs loud, bright and excited to *be*. They don’t care about who’s or what’s. They’d rather rant about how someone in their favorite book series is being a darned idiot. Calling fake people idiots is the cruelest stuff that comes off their fingers or lips.

I want this?

Can I have this?

Is this okay?

“That’s so pretty, Les!” Colette chirps as I—ignoring the tag completely—scan a tight red dress. Who knows if it’ll fit. What if I try it on and need the next size up? I kind of want it so I can slip into it and seduce Sean, as punishment, for the fact he’s currently being literally the worst husband ever.

If it doesn't fit, is that just karma for my bad motivations?

I hum, disdained. We haven't gotten lunch yet. I'm getting hungry. The food court is right next door to this store... Am I actually going to put *food court* garbage in my body? Ha. As if. There's that one juice place, so I'll just get—

My stomach revolts at the idea of only having *liquid* for lunch. It has been spoiled now. I had it trained so well, and Sean broke me. Sean is unbearable.

Sean deserves punishment dresses.

Kat looks up from where she's considering a deep purple dress. She scans what I'm holding. *That's not pretty. That's sexy.*

"You think?" I ask, signing the words, because I'm pretty sure I know them, and practice is important. Giving effort where it's supplied is all part of maintaining relationships.

Colette's smile turns the smallest bit impish, for her, the angel. "Whose brains are you trying to m-m-melt?"

I bite my tongue before Sean's name slips out of my mouth. Lifting my nose, I say, "*Everyone's.*"

Colette laughs, and I trot my way into the dressing room behind us. A section of three full-length mirrors causes me to choke and freeze under the archway.

I...

A bout of nausea hits me square between the brows.

Someone taps my shoulder. Kat. *You okay?*

I'm bloated. My face. It's *wrong*. Why did they tell me I looked *good* earlier? Are they making fun of me? Kat's big brown eyes don't seem capable of *making fun of me* right now. She wears everything inside herself on her face, through her hands, in her body. And she's not ashamed of that.

I look awful.

Awful.

"I'm fine," I quip, harsher than I want unless they *are* making fun of me. Silently. With the words I don't completely know yet. If I were them, I'd be making fun of me. If I were them and I'd been as awful as I was to them throughout our childhood, I'd be doing worse than making fun of me. So much worse. And it wouldn't be anything less than I deserve.

Before I get carried away, I march into a dressing room. The mirror in there bombards me further. Shaking, I take my clothes off and see *everything*. Breakfasts. Lunches. Dinners. *Snacks*. My breaths panic until my chest is

heaving. It didn't occur to me before. Is my bra tighter? My flesh prickles. I haven't seen my full reflection for so many days.

Ripping the red dress off the hanger, I force myself into it, finding some small bit of comfort when the zipper pulls up all the way. It looks...

It fits.

It *fits*.

Collapsing onto the bench, I grab my phone.

**Leslie:** Sean. I'm having a panic attack.

He calls immediately, not even two seconds later, and—terrified—I pick up, lowering my volume as though someone might hear. I don't say a word.

Safe and gentle, he murmurs, "Hi, little one."

Oh. Oh, frick.

Tears bead in my eyes, and I look up, off the mirror, try to ground myself in the ceiling patterns. I can't let my tears fall and ruin my makeup, too. My makeup is all I have left. I register Colette laughing somewhere beyond the stall. She tells Katina that the purple dress makes her look like if a mean girl were a princess.

"Les?" Colette calls. "We're going to get Katina a d-dress th-at doesn't m-m-make her look like an evil queen. We'll be right b-back."

"Okay," I call, proud that my voice doesn't break. Once I'm almost positive they've left, I whisper, "I can't do this, Sean. I look...I look *horrible*."

"You don't."

My teeth grit. "I *do*. I'm bloated. This isn't right. I don't even *know* what's wrong with my face."

"Leslie." The patient, stern way he says my name almost calms me enough to take a full, deep breath. "You're in a transitional period. It's okay. Your body is readjusting itself to the fact it's actually getting food now. It's panicking in its own right, and it's wondering when you'll starve it again, so it's holding onto whatever it can."

"Why would you let me leave the house like this?" My voice trembles, shaking with anger and barely-restrained tears.

"Do you want the cruel truth, little one?"

"Tell me."

"You look so much better than you have for literal years."

"You're *lying*."

"I'm really not. There's actual color in your cheeks. Your eyes are more

awake, less sunken. You're not so gaunt in the face."

"Because I'm *fat* in the face," I hiss.

He hums, wholly unconcerned. "Little one. You've got body dysmorphia. You aren't seeing yourself correctly. Trust me. You've spent your life abused in horrible ways that have left your perception of reality and yourself severely disfigured. Do you believe I love you?"

I close my eyes. "I know you do, Sean. I know it."

"Then trust me. How have you been feeling lately, without full mirrors to remind you to look for flaws, with food in your stomach, without anyone sneering at you as though they have any right when they look like they belong in a Tim Burton movie?"

Apart from right now when all my nerves feel shot and my stomach is crying for a meal I don't think it should have if food turns me into the person I'm seeing in the mirror, I... "I'm sleeping through the night now," I whisper.

"Mhm."

"I feel off. Strange. But less...less dizzy."

"Yep. You're adjusting, but the fruits of recovery are there. Have you all had lunch yet?"

"No."

"When you do—"

"I don't think I can. Not without you. Please."

Sean's voice lowers, soothing, perfect, safe. "Little one, feed my wife. She's hungry. And she's lovely. And I will kiss every place she doubts deserves affection. I'll do it gladly. Just don't make her suffer. Not anymore."

I'm scared. I'm so scared that a brief thought of running home to Mother and begging her to *fix me* drifts into my head. I could do it. I left clothes there. Irene and Mother would be the pressure I need to rediscover my discipline. But the very idea that doing something like that would keep me from Sean breaks my heart. Weakly, I say, "Promise?"

"I swear it, Leslie."

"I don't think I can do this clothes shopping on my own. Do I still have something to work with at home?"

Silence.

Anger overcomes the panic. "Sean. Do I still have clothes?"

"The flames were so pretty."

I clench my jaw. "You said you'd *donate* them."

"I did! I was making a joke. Trying to calm you down."

“Sean!” I shriek, remember I’m in a semi-public place, and rake in a breath, hoping no one heard me.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it right now. Let hubby take care of you.”

“I am going to kill *hubby* if he *ever* refers to himself like that *again*.”

He chuckles, like he’s allowed to feel *joy*. “Have fun with your friends. Have lunch. Trust me. Not your head. Not anyone else’s words. Only me.”

“You’ve got so many issues,” I snap.

“It’s true. Maybe Velspar’s therapist does couple therapy? We could save time if we go together. I think it’s a splendid idea.”

“Any therapist would be horrified by what you’re doing to me.”

“Debatable.”

“Are you serious? This has to be abuse.”

“I don’t know,” he singsongs. “Isn’t this kind of what happens when you’re admitted? I think it’s more comfortable than every variable in your life being controlled while you sit in a hospital room and stare at the bleached walls. Certainly better than hooking you up to a feeding tube if you deny oral nutrition.”

“That doesn’t happen.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. People with severe eating disorders who end up in the hospital can spend an average of eighty days in an environment with monitored meals, exercise, and, oh yeah, intensive psychotherapy. Funny. Therapy. Big deal. Should get some.”

I dare glimpse at the mirror, but I don’t know the person staring back, so I stop, try to control my breaths. My mind is a mess. Part of me screams that I was *fine* before Sean started taking all these drastic measures. The other part of me recalls waking up with nausea, spitting up acid in the sink while trying to brush my teeth, feeling *awful* and dizzy and tired. All. The. Time.

Just a few weeks and at least a handful of those awful things are less severe.

I like eating. I hate feeling like I shouldn’t. I hate feeling ugly almost as much as I hate feeling weak.

“Talk to me,” Sean murmurs.

“Being physically weak makes me feel more mentally strong. I’m scared. I’m scared of facing people when I don’t feel like myself anymore. I don’t know who to be, how to act.” It’s so wrong. It’s so stupid. But it’s also Sean. And he gets me...he...he gets me. Everyone needs that. “Being like I was let me feel better than everyone else, and I thrive under that assumption.”

Sean snorts, but it's not mocking. "Yeah, that makes sense. Take it from someone who thinks you are better than everyone else, though. The only people you need to worry about being better than are your mother and that awful sister of yours. Once you're strong enough to eat an entire slice of pizza in their faces and lick the grease off your fingers, you'll have arrived. You're going to have everything they want. I guarantee it. You are going to thrive without assumptions. And I will love you no matter your size, so please only concern yourself with locating whichever one makes you feel the most alive. Without makeup. Or clothes. Or mirrors. Listen to your body. Even though you're struggling to find footing in your mind, your body knows what it needs." He pauses for a couple moments, letting his words sink in. "What's it saying right now?"

My lips part. I tense, setting a hand against my stomach, over the slick material of the red dress. "It...lunch. I'm hungry. I want lunch."

"That's my good little girl. Get yourself some lunch, Les. You don't just deserve it. Your body needs it to survive. And just between the two of us? I like surviving with you."

I like surviving with him, too. In a lot of ways, it feels like living for the first time in my life.

## CHAPTER 7

♥ The dark side has cookies, so does Sean. Coincidence? I think not.

~~~~

Katina hits the table, and I tense, ready for a comment about my food. I've barely touched it. But I got it. And it looks amazing. And I want to eat it, but I'm scared. I'm still reeling from the new pictures of myself that are now burned into the backs of my eyes.

I want to go back home, where there aren't mirrors, where Sean feeds me, where I don't have to worry about doing anything other than whatever makes him smile and purr stupid little compliments that fill up my soul.

I'm a follower masquerading as a leader while he's a leader pretending to be a follower.

I do what I'm told and hope to scrape a scrap of affection off the bone. He coordinates the world around him so it gives him what he needs.

"Les?" Colette says, bringing my attention up off the vegetable takeout container. It's dripping with garlic sauce. But it's not pasta, or rice, or bread. Carbs. It's not carbs. It's colorful, nutritious. Garlic is good for me. Or that's what Sean says. He says a lot of things are good for me, primarily *eating*.

I pretend to be all right. "What?"

She watches me, sees through me, can tell I'm falling apart, can te—

Katina hits the table again, then she pulls out her phone. Moments later, mine beeps.

**Katina:** We heard you yell Sean's name in the changing room. Were you on the phone with him? Did you send a picture of that dress to him? What did he say?

When I drag my attention off my phone, Katina is basically rabid. Her pretty, flawless curls are much too tame for the violent interest in her eyes.

"Ew," I say, out of reflex. "No, I did not send a picture of the dress to him. Yes, he called. Yes, I yelled at him. That's what I do. Because he's stupid."

Katina's lips curl. She signs something, and Colette laughs. "Ssst-upid boys are the only kind."

I stab a broccoli. "Exactly."

Katina signs something else, and I pick up a word here and there.

Colette's mouth falls open, but Katina shoots her a look, so she rolls her eyes. "Okay, fine. It's true." She looks at me. "Sean's the best boy in the group."

I smother the laugh that wants to burst out of my chest. Arching a brow, I say, "Um. No. Actually, Reg is the best boy. He's a pit bull puppy, a suspect of brutality but harmless unless sicced. Velspar is the sweetest boy. He'd tear up asphalt with his bare hands and remake the world for the people he loves. Sean is just, ugh, *Sean*. He wears a smile to keep the internal desire for mass genocide off your radars."

Both girls blink.

I'm off my game. I don't think I was supposed to say that. Friends do not out other friends' toxic traits.

Katina signs; Colette translates, "So he's got a d-d-dark s...side?" Colette gasps when Katina continues, and Katina lifts her brows, demanding her words be heard. With an eye roll, Colette begrudgingly says, "Would he like to join the alien porn fan club?"

Probably. Dang Sean.

I laugh, and the distraction lets me put my broccoli in my mouth. Hopefully *boy talk* exceeds talk about the fact I am eating. And look like a pig. Boy talk. *Boy talk* needs to exceed the fact I'm eating for my own brain. "I'm just saying. Sean's great. They're all great, in their own ways. I wouldn't be friends with them if they weren't, but, among them, Sean is the definite biggest ew. So, no, I am not sending him pictures of me in seductive red dresses. Thanks."

I am just planning to slip into said seductive red dress and see if it does anything to make the remnants of his twisted brain melt. Even though dressing up a cow isn't exactly— Please shut up. Please shut up and eat another bite. This time, it's a baby corn. And it's adorable. And it tastes amazing. And I savor it. I force myself to savor it.

Eighty days in a hospital.

Eighty days.

"I think he has a thing for you," Colette blurts, and Kat nods, white teeth on full display. She pulls a bite of noodles to her mouth, thrilled by the notion that Sean "has a thing for me."

It occurs to me that, maybe, the fact we live together on account of him ramming his mouth into mine and begging didn't make it from Velspar to Colette? Odd. Not unpleasant. Especially given this conversation.

We're just friends. Why in the world can't guys and girls be *just friends*?



With the occasional *tame* benefit. Okay...I'm starting to see where it might be confusing.

I scoff. "Obviously he has a thing for me. Who wouldn't?" He's a guy. I was a pretty girl, *am*, whatever. I don't know. I'm growing irritated. If you push two people who are attracted to the opposing gender together for long enough, they wanna boink. It's just a *fact*. Regardless of a lack in romantic interest, that's how the world works. Look at what happened with Colette and Velspar. They hated each other. She moved in as his maid. Now, they're probably boinking constantly.

Ew.

And, okay, there was more romantic interest between them than there has ever been between Sean and me. They were kind of in love with each other way before they wanted to admit it. I remember the moment Velspar first saw her like it was yesterday. His entire brain shut off. When she ignored his effort to talk to her, that little boy had a fricken meltdown.

More food goes in my face.

"Les," Colette notes, like we're sincerely good friends. "Come on. You d-d-don't like him at all?"

"No, I *d-d-don't*."

*Not cool*, Katina signs, fixing a glare on me, and I wince. Crap. Crap. That was—

I drop my fork, open my mouth. Closing my eyes, I say, "Sorry. I...I didn't mean that. Can we just drop this? *Please*? Whatever's between Sean and me, it's not pretty. It's not romantic. It's just...nothing. We're friends." Who kiss. Live together. Are secretly married. "He's my emotional support idiot."

Colette draws her pretty blond hair over her ear and sips her soda. "Velspar's my emotional s...support idiot."

I catch Katina sign Reg's name and assume she's claiming him as hers. Then her eyes widen, and a darkening hue shifts the color of her cheeks to a deeper, fuller brown. She waves her hands. I catch *no* in the flurry.

"*Mhmm*," I taunt, nudging vegetables around in my takeout container. "Tell us more about *that*, Kat? What is going on with you and Reg."

Cooling her expression, she says, *Nothing*.

Right.

Yeah.

Probably the same sort of *nothing* that is between Sean and me... At any

rate, I shouldn't press her if I don't want her to press me, right? Unlike other friendships I've had, not making people uncomfortable is the way these ones work. And...I appreciate it. I appreciate it almost as much as I appreciate how neither one of them says a word about the fact I finished every last vegetable, and ordered a juice to-go.



I decide in the car that I'm going to be livid. I march to the elevator and wait, pissily, for it to bring me up to the penthouse. I step out, and I smell... baked goods?

Why are there baked goods here?

I hesitate so long, the elevator door nearly closes on me before I step out. I have to catch it and stumble through with my shopping bags. Baked goods. Probable chocolate. Wait.

Is that the smell of cookies?

*Have I been transported to the dark side?*

Swallowing hard, I wander toward the kitchen and stop short with a tiny heart stutter as I watch Sean pull a tray of little chocolate chip cookies out of the oven. They're heart-shaped. Dang Sean.

He sets them on the stove and catches my eye. Smiling, he pulls his oven mitts off, takes his phone out of his pocket, and pauses something before putting it and a set of earbuds back. "Hello, little one."

I cut a glance at the cookies, then back to Sean's eyes. "I ate lunch," I blurt. "I made myself do it." Now, be proud of me. Praise me. Say nice things that my cruel head will tell me are lies. Then shut off my cruel head with a kiss. Save me from the suffering of living in my skull for a few, bare, blissful moments.

It's the least he can do.

He grins, then he wraps me in a hug that lets me release all the tension in my shoulders. My bags sag, and I press my nose to his neck, let the subtle hints of warm sugar and the cedar of his soap calm me down.

"I hate this," I mutter.

"It's okay."

"It isn't. Nothing's okay. If I've really been killing myself, that means *my own mother* has been wiring my head to make me kill myself. Slowly. Painfully. How am I supposed to deal with that?" I suck in a hard breath, then snap, "And *don't say therapy.*"

"Some people shouldn't have kids. I'm still glad we exist, though. I like

knowing you.” He kisses my temple.

I am going to obliterate him with my new little red dress. Because it is literally the only other outfit I have if he really did get rid of all my clothes. Honestly, what in the world is wrong with him? It’s like he’s signed me up to a step-by-step recovery program without initial consent. The long-term success depends on me. Except, think again, because *you’re mine*, forever and ever. Amen.

Is there a word that means both *disturbing* and *comforting*? I’ll have to ask Colette.

I mutter, “Are those cookies for me?”

“I baked you some treats. For being such a good little girl.”

I could grab the fork in the strainer and stab him. But I’m not going to. Yet.

The hug’s too warm, safe, right. It’s nice enough for me to ignore the little rat in his brain that thinks it’s acceptable to hide his smirks beneath grins. Letting my bags slip from my hands and to the floor, I wrap him up until I feel something close to *better*. Once that’s over with, he kisses me, and kisses me. I’m fighting for air and wondering if it’s okay to climb around his waist by the time he stops.

Except it’s not exactly like he *stops*. He just gives my mouth a break and lets me breathe as he drags my hand to his mouth. He kisses my fingers, my palm, my wrist. His mouth skims up my forearm, to my elbow, my bicep. When my frilly blouse sleeve gets in the way, he pushes it up on my shoulder and kisses right next to my bra strap.

His nose runs back down my arm, and he lets out a deep breath. “Every inch of you is beautiful.”

I flutter, pretend for bare, blissful moments that I can believe him.

He lets me go, and I almost fall after him like he’s my center of gravity. Striding to the stove, he plucks a cookie off the tray and takes a bite. Without looking at me, he holds his arm out, and I wish I could say I don’t feel like a giddy puppy when I trot into that welcoming space, but I do. His arm curls around me, strapping me to his side.

It’s wonderful.

Revoltng.

There’s nothing *good* or *romantic* here. He’s my best friend. We’ve got emotional issues that we use each other to satisfy. His father told him to marry me. That was his key out of that man’s house without getting cut off.

There are layers upon layers of *yeesh, that's not healthy* at play here.

We are a toxic burrito.

I could probably work up to eating a whole burrito soon. Maybe give it a few months.

Sean holds the rest of the little cookie up to my lips, and I open my mouth like I don't find myself hating everything about what I am quite regularly.

I bite.

I chew.

He smiles.

*Pig.*

It tastes so good. I want five more.

*Fat pig.*

I force myself to swallow.

*Fat, fat pig.*

Sean curls a finger beneath my chin, tips my face up, and licks a bit of melted chocolate from my lip. "I'm sorry about today. I wasn't thinking." He kisses. "I'm so proud of you for having lunch anyway. You are so incomprehensibly beautiful. You star in my every illicit fantasy."

"Yuck."

He laughs. "Sorry."

A curse slides into my head, and I can't deal with it. "Sean?"

"Mm?" He dapples my cheeks with mindless kisses, and I'm sensing that *maybe* there are hints of romance in whatever is wrong with us, collectively. It's too upsetting to think about if there aren't. Who knows why. It's not like I care whether or not this is some pure little fluff fest or some dark little jaunt.

Whatever tames the agony of existence. Right?

"Do you think Velspar's therapist has availability for us?" Chewing my cheek, I shift my weight. I should get out of these heels. My feet hurt. I don't need to be a model in this place. I just need to be...me. "I don't want to go alone."

Sean's eyes glitter before he sweeps me off my feet, spins me, and kisses me. My legs wrap around his waist, and I laugh, because I must be delirious from the chocolate.

"It's *therapy*, Sean. You're not supposed to be this happy."

"Hush," he tells me, holding my waist, smiling so very wide. "It's getting you help. It's proof I'm not the only one trying. It's the first real step you're taking on your own."

I toy with the curls at the base of his neck. “I’m not going alone. I’m looking forward to seeing the list of everything that’s wrong with you.”

Sean snorts, eyes rolling. “Do you think therapists pass out awards? *Most Messed Up* would look lovely on our living room wall.”

“I bet it’s more like yearbook superlatives. *Most Likely to Commit Arson. Most Likely to Laugh During Horror Movies.*”

“Horror movies are funny. Everyone cries and screams on set then goes to the break room and has a muffin with the person covered in fake blood.”

I will admit. That image is hilarious.

“I might be able to get us in for tomorrow?” Sean says. “I can organize it tonight.”

Tomorrow would be good. After all, I do only have one real outfit right now. Guess I’m wearing my little red dress to therapy. I’ll seduce the therapist into providing me with a passing grade. What a plot twist, as the girls might say/sign. Taking a deep breath, I nod. “Okay. Let’s.”

## CHAPTER 8

♥ I wish new outfits could fix the world.

~~~~

“Hi, my name’s Sean Ulysses Montgomery. I use humor as a coping mechanism in order to handle a childhood of neglect, impossible standards, never knowing when I was allowed to do anything or if it would make my father upset, being the crippling disappointment, not having a living mother, and watching new women barely five years older than me come in and out of my father’s bedroom throughout high school. I’m pretty sure I have sadistic tendencies. I am not working on them. I am also not going to go to prison.” Sean turns to me after unleashing *that* bomb on the plump black woman who is—somehow—still maintaining a smile in her seat across from the cream couch where he’s just sat.

I didn’t even have a chance to sit before he threw his mental records at this poor woman. I do that now, smooth the skirt of my red dress, and take in all the pastel shades of the room. A basket of fidget toys rests on the dark wood table in front of us. Bookshelves lined with calming art pieces reminiscent of nature—bird nests in glass jars, little collections of moss and shells, paper flowers—create a homey atmosphere. It’s comfortable. Intentionally cluttered.

After a few moments where I’ve not said anything, Sean adds, “This is my wife, Leslie Steele. I married her for morally gray reasons. She is also my best friend, and I love her, so it isn’t as distressing as it sounds. For me.”

I fold my hands in my lap. Since it feels like I’m here to be graded on my brain, I smile in order to pretend I am a lovely, polite person. The masquerade fails almost immediately since my first inclination is to say, “We signed up for couples’ therapy, but we don’t actually need relationship assistance. It’s more like Sean is my emotional support idiot, and I...” I pause, clear my throat. “I should start over.”

Sean relaxes back, looping his arm over the cushion behind me. “No, I think you’re doing great, Les. I fully embrace my title as your emotional support idiot. Our relationship is obviously the healthiest thing to ever grace this room.”

I nudge into his shoulder; he nudges back.

Our therapist, Mrs. Sadie Wilson, shakes her head gently as she turns and pulls a folder open. “This is a safe space where you can say anything you want. You don’t have to worry about saying the wrong things. Just be honest with each other, me, and yourselves.” She pins two packets into separate clipboards and hands one to each of us before drawing our attention to a cup of fake flowers.

Sean gasps and plucks a sunflower out like it’s the best thing ever. They are actually pens.

How...quaint.

I don’t know if I like it or if I just appreciate the fact it’s fitting.

Cheerfully, he asks, “Is this our first test? Do we win a prize if we get the answers right?”

This woman’s expression maintains tender, welcoming airs. She should be nominated for sainthood. “This is just an initial assessment of your support groups, what you’d like to focus on with our sessions, information about privacy and consent. Please be aware that everything that happens in this room goes no further than these four walls unless in the case of court order...” Sadie explains bits and pieces of her legal rights and ours while Sean helps me fill out the paperwork, by means of teasing me on the fact I haven’t memorized our address yet.

It takes great willpower for me not to elbow him in the gut. My restraint probably means I’m winning at therapy.

Sadie finishes her spiel and asks if we have any questions, so Sean’s free hand flies into the air as he passes back our clipboards. “What happens if our vivid recollections of abuse cause you to have a mental break and send you to a psychiatric ward?”

“*Sean!*” I snap. “She’s handling *Velspar*. Do you honestly think anything that we can come up with could even begin to compare to his horrendous situation?”

Sean’s smile vanishes, and he looks right through me. “Obviously, Les. I doubt *Velspar*’s *trying* to break his therapist. He’s too nice for that. I am not.” Beaming again, Sean addresses the poor woman. “How is *Velspar* doing?”

“I’m not at liberty to reveal any information about my other clients.” She’s still smiling, almost pleasantly, vaguely amused.

But, then again, that is Sean for you. The man’s good at creating an atmosphere of twisted comfort. Dark jokes and bleak lines. It’s when he drops the smile and intentionally starts catering to unease that things go

south. May the universe have mercy on his dear victims.

I look at my nails and wait while Sean plays with our therapist for a little while, saying horrible things in darling ways. Is depression contagious? *No*. What if the bleakness of life and existence is outlined for you in excruciating detail? *You didn't put depression down as a point of focus; would you like me to note it?*

On and on, they spin.

Thank goodness I fixed my manicure last night. It matches my little red dress, which Sean didn't even offer a lingering glance. I might be getting fat and little red dresses might be useless against Sean, but at least my nails are perfectly shaped and the polish isn't chipped. Are my hands chubby now? I must be imagining it, right? Hands don't get chubby unless you're *really* fat. Am I *really* fat? Already?

"Mrs. Montgomery?" Sadie says, but it doesn't register that *Mrs. Montgomery* is *me* until Sean touches my knee.

Mrs. Montgomery. Whoa. That's weird. I didn't take his last name. I'm still a Steele, so it should be Mrs. Steele, if anything. Whatever. It doesn't really matter.

Bracing for some question about why I think starving myself translates into being loved, I say, "Hm?"

"Sean's expressed that the unorthodox reasoning behind your marriage isn't a point of concern. How do you feel about it?"

I blink. We're starting with stuff like that? Weird. "I don't care," I note.

"Did you feel pressured into making such a big decision against your will?"

I lift a brow. "Well, he said I didn't have a choice, so yeah. I was pressured against my will. But it's not a problem. Sean's just like that." Also, wait a second. Why am I *Mrs. Montgomery* while he's *Sean*? Are they already on first-name basis? Did I miss that while my nails were more interesting? Am I already at the bottom of the therapy class? I wanted to be the star pupil.

Fricken Sean. If we've become academic rivals now, our future is looking very "Velette."

"Like what?" Sadie asks.

My skin prickles in that way it does after a kid's asked me *why* for the eighth time and I don't know what answer comes next. We're about to start digging, and who knows if I'll like where we end up. I'm not here on account



of my relationship with Sean. Did she miss that part?

“Like...” I glance at him, at his smile. It’s disarming. And I blush. “I don’t know. Aren’t we here to talk about the fact every time I try to eat a normal, healthy meal, my brain calls me a fat pig and says I don’t deserve it? That’s the point of this. Please regard Sean as furniture.”

“Part of healing from emotional traumas is establishing a safe support system. Since you two are living together suddenly, I think it may be important that I get a feel for how you relate to one another, if the change in your relationship is causing stress, whether or not you are effectively responding to one another’s emotional needs.”

My hands clench into fists.

Sean locks his fingers around his knee. “I feel very emotionally satisfied.”

“Don’t lie,” I snap. “If we’re going to do this, we’ll do it right.”

“Who says I’m lying?” he asks, *allll* innocence.

Teeth gritting, I say, “I don’t do anything for you. You’ve spent the last three weeks taking care of me. I haven’t done any cleaning. Any cooking. You’re barely awake most days.” My throat closes as the full picture comes clear in my mind. “You drop whatever you’re doing whenever I want you to. If I grumble about what I’m working on, you set whatever you are doing aside and help me. I don’t do a dang thing for you, Sean. There’s no way you’re *emotionally satisfied*. Are you sure you’re not pretending to be a sadist, because being with me seems pretty masochistic.”

Sean, dang him, shrugs. “Two sides of the same coin, I guess. Bottom line is I’m happy.”

“I’m not,” I state before I can think.

“But you’re never happy, Les,” he says.

The words erode the iron plating around my heart.

I suck in a deep breath. “Why in the world do you put up with me? Why does *anyone* put up with me? I’m only good at being superficial, and the *healthier* I get, the more that slips away. That is all I have.” Tears blur my vision before I so much as close my mouth, and Sadie passes me a tissue box when I look up at the pale blue ceiling to hold them at bay.

Sean smiles and takes the box for me. “She won’t use these. It would ruin her makeup.” He pulls one free, letting it flutter between his fingers. “And, as you’ve just heard, everything she is can be removed with one little makeup wipe.”

I laugh; the sound’s wet. “I *wish*. It takes like four or five sometimes just

to get my eyeshadow off.”

“Why do you put up with Leslie, Sean?” Sadie asks.

I stiffen, and I don’t know if I’m prepared for pretty lies. Sean hones them too well.

He tosses the box onto the table. “Who knows?” He folds his tissue in half on his lap, then turns each of the edges down toward the center. “She’s volatile. And grumpy. And if you put the wrong shade of *white* with the wrong shade of *other white*, she gets pissed. She’s mean, and loud, and insulting.”

My word.

He’s making a boat.

Out of a tissue.

“She’s physically abusive, too. Sometimes when I’m feeding her, I watch a distinct *I could stab him with my butter knife* flicker through her pretty hazel eyes.”

Who gave him permission to know my secret thoughts like that? I fold my arms, embracing my title of *grumpy*.

“Oh...” Sean sighs, setting the flimsy boat on my lap, where it slumps against my ineffective red dress. “...but those eyes. They see everything. Even me. Even the core of all the less-than-socially-acceptable parts that make me up. Her standards are high, higher still for herself, but she sees the good things in monsters, the potential in the world around her. And that? That makes it easy.” His eyes meet mine, great green pools of mysterious, wonderful things. “That makes it easy to *put up with her*. Every day. For as long as she’ll let me.”

Stupid heart making stupid flips. I never authorized gymnastics. Also, he’s not allowed to act like this in front of people. This is *private* menace. *My* private menace.

I drop my gaze off him, muttering, “Can you put it on the record that Sean is a chronic manipulator? He can make you believe anything he wants. I don’t fall for it. That’s why our relationship is special. In a platonic way.” In a platonic so long as you *don’t look in my dreams* way.

I don’t know if Sadie does as I ask, but she writes something down on the pad in her lap, so I let it go.

From that point, we digress. Sean helps explain the stuff I don’t want to about my whole *eating thing*. I confirm when I’m supposed to, say a few words about how my mother hates me, and I guess that messed up my brain,

you know how it is. Sadie nods along, empathetic, like she actually *does* know how it is.

I hope not.

For her sake.

Then again, she seems happy, and she's carrying the kind of weight my mother would openly mock, so if she *does* know how it is, maybe there's sufficient hope for me to somehow end up *okay* even if I end up looking like her once I'm healthy? Who knows.

Therapy is exhausting in an *I just unpacked all the boxes after a big move in a single day* kind of way. Deciding what to keep, discovering what maybe shouldn't stick around, putting everything in a place, it's a *process*. It takes time.

Sadie assures me that healing is a cycle. It's not linear, but the revolutions do get easier with time.

There are better things for me to focus on about who I am and what I can do. Beauty is an undefined concept. Weight is just a number.

There are better things to spend my time measuring, better things to quantify my worth.

I have to find them. But, worse, I have to believe in them once they're found.

Redefine, realize, rebirth.

Create a new, healthy thought process. Understand it's conducive to a happier, more fulfilling lifestyle.

Grow.

It's that simple, and that hard.

At the very least, when Sean squeezes my hand on that cream couch, I know I'm not doing any of it alone.

## CHAPTER 9

♥ The chance that I am completely in love with my best friend in an ooey gooey way is high. ~~~

I did not realize it last night because I keep the pajamas I'm using folded beneath my pillow. Now that I need a new set, however, it seems that the wicked being I married (platonically, for semi-mutual gain) went so far as to strip my dresser along with my closet.

I have socks. I have underwear. He spared my bras, even though I swear they are getting tighter and giving me the kind of self-hating anxiety the whole *destroy all the clothes* initiative was trying to fix.

The drawer containing all the above is the only one he left untouched, and I have *nothing* to wear tomorrow unless I'm okay with waltzing around in only any of the aforementioned articles.

Shockingly, I am not.

"Sean!" I shriek, stomping out of my room to pound on the door to his.

"Come on in, little one."

I might kill him if I do. Oh, look, I've turned the knob.

With his laptop propped against his bent legs, Sean sits on the ebony comforter of the bed I bought when I tossed his old one and redid his room. Instead of the unassuming oak wood furniture from before, now everything is a dark cherry wood. The subtle undertones of red fit him almost as perfectly as the bright-eyed *is it because it reminds you of drying blood?* comment he made when he saw it for the first time.

No, it's not for a creepy reason like that. It's because he's regal and unique and deserves something better than plain old *oak*.

Lifting my chin, I fold my arms. "Because you are the worst, most abusive husband ever, I do not have any clean pajamas."

He cocks his head toward his dresser and continues to type without looking at me. "Top left drawer."

I blink at him, shifting my gaze to the referenced furniture.

Wandering that way, I pull open the drawer and let my nose scrunch. T-shirts. It is a drawer full of t-shirts. Okay then.

I select a plain black one, march into his bathroom, and slip out of my red dress. The soft fabric of his t-shirt drapes over me, a tent that reaches my

mid-thighs. The neck slips off my shoulder, so I put it back and puff a strand of hair away from my face before fixing it behind my ear.

It's just pajamas.

And feeling small at the moment means more to me than feeling *model tall*.

Hanging my dress and bra over my arm, I leave Sean's bathroom and head for the door.

"Have you done your affirmations for..." Sean's voice trails off, and I face him.

His fingers hover over the keyboard. His large eyes fix on me, trailing down across the shirt hanging off my figure like a glorified sheet. Lips parted, he stares, pulling in a stilted breath when the t-shirt collar slips off my shoulder again.

Annoying. Scowling, I fix it. "No, I haven't done my affirmations yet. They are stupid. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is just self-brainwashing. *I am beautiful, no matter my size. My appearance does not define my worth. Fat is not a bad word. Fat is not synonymous with ugly. I am proud of what my body can do for me, not what it looks like.* Ew. Gross. Hook me up to some creepy whispery ASMR and let a recording do the work for me." His eyes don't pull away. I stomp my foot. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" Sean rocks his head back against his pillow, still watching. Voice rough.

A crackling heat shoots down my spine. *This* is the reaction I wanted for my red dress. Is he really giving me the *I can't take my eyes off you* treatment for a *t-shirt*? The injustice. I'm half-sure this t-shirt has a hole in the left armpit, too. I ignored it for the sake of my sanity. But its existence can no longer be discarded. I let my lips pinch. "It's a *t-shirt*, Sean."

"My t-shirt."

"You are *not* that possessive."

"I think I am." He sets his computer aside. "Come here."

Frick.

Some of my unspeakable dreams as of late start with those words. And where they end? Well. That's somewhere between feeling like the most beautiful girl in the world and feeling like a puddle of melted wax.

Against better judgment, and quite considerable amounts of data backing it, I make my way to him. The collar slips off my shoulder again, and this

time I don't fix it.

"It's appalling," Sean murmurs, reaching for the hem of the shirt, tangling his fingers in it, "that you don't see yourself the way I see you." He tugs, and I don't even fight it. I sit where he tells me to, let him take my dress and bra away to set by his laptop. "You are beautiful. I like you in *my* size. Your appearance will never define your worth, but—" He curses. "—if it did, you'd still be priceless." He eyes the gap the collar of this massive shirt reveals of my shoulder, then he closes his eyes. The fortifying breath he takes next fills me with irrational disappointment.

I chastise myself for recognizing that I *want* something dreadful to occur between us.

One room. One oversize t-shirt. One dark-clad bed. And one murmuring, rich voice filling me up with superficial compliments fed directly through my skin.

When his eyes open, he's smiling and meeting my gaze. "So. How are you doing, Les?"

"Like a house on fire."

"That's goo—"

"The blazing heat consumes me from the inside. Faulty wiring in my skull started the hungry, unquenchable disaster. My very foundation crumbles beneath the heat. All the things I once held precious go up in dramatic, flickering flames. It is terrible to watch, terrible to live through. I'm trapped in a back room, choking on smoke, debris, the realization that nothing will ever be the same. I can rebuild, but this charcoal will never revert back into the exact panels that once made me up. No matter what I do now, there's no way back."

His hold on the hem of my shirt tightens, and I'm glad it's actually his shirt. I'd kill him for stretching out my clothes. "Do quit flirting with me."

"It is agonizing. But I am fighting to realize and believe that *this house* is where I have felt nothing but pain, emptiness, and crushing lonely guilt. I am not okay. Logic demands I understand I have never been better."

Sean smiles until his eyes are glittering, beautiful things—only faintly obscuring malice. "I wish it never had to be like this. I wish you never had to wake up and doubt yourself or fear your love might dry up if you didn't hurt yourself constantly."

"Says the man amused by an image of fire."

"Fire's pretty. I don't mind watching a house burn. I don't want you or

anyone who doesn't deserve it inside. I like to pretend I use the mixed up wiring in my head for good, but inside my skull is a brutal place. I could have picked anger or hate in order to deal with the emotional starvation. But, nope, I stuck myself with humor. So here I laugh, amid the flames."

I scoff, tearing my attention off him. "And you told poor Sadie you weren't going to work on it."

"I'm not hurting anyone who doesn't deserve it. And I find myself in the unique position of gleefully being able to do what's necessary in order to help the people I care about." He tugs the shirt, making me look back at him and brace my hands against the bed to keep from falling on top of him. Inches apart now, my face close enough to feel the whisper of his breath, he says, "You're at the top of that list, Les. You know that, don't you?"

"Suffice to say you've not married Velspar or Reg."

A dry laugh leaves him. "Suffice to say."

Frick. Frick frick frick.

I want him. I want him with all my broken pieces. If we came together right now, our sharp edges would clash until nothing but a puddle of torn flesh and blood remains, but I want him all the same—with every ragged edge. I can't believe I never felt this way with him before.

His kiss that night at the pool party undoubtedly changed something in my skull. The moment the revolt melted away into sparks and flurries, I don't think I stood a chance.

Handsome, horrible Sean. Malevolent care. Extreme and monstrous and...kind. Kind in all the ways some *good kind* people aren't. Good kind people hesitate to do what it takes sometimes. Sean's the kind of person who would kidnap his friend with depression and monitor them twenty-four-seven while force-feeding them dopamine in the form of healthy habits, affirmations, and therapeutic propaganda.

He'd rather be the villain in the darkness who shoves someone into the light than the hero standing on the edge with his beckoning hand outstretched.

When it comes to life or death, selfishly he refuses to give out the choice.

I set my hand on the firm plane of his chest, immensely irritated by the notion he's been eating cheesy, carby leftovers while maintaining his physique. Letting my fingers skim the hard expanse, I find his abs through the thin fabric of his shirt. The definition of each muscle makes me huff a sigh.

Why couldn't I have been born a man? Women starve themselves for beauty. Men bulk up and exercise. I'd much prefer exercising and protein powder to forcing myself through a routine of crunches and planks while feeling like my head's about to detach from my body sometime either before or after I dry-heave in the sink.

It's not fair for either side. But at least one isn't necessarily killing itself.

Sean's fingers unravel from the shirt and trail up to my neck. They lace around the slender column, too large for my brain to suggest its gotten chubby. His thumb swipes over my jaw. I swallow, hard, drawing a shaking breath into my chest.

*I am beautiful.* In this man's eyes, I can almost believe it. Even though the last time I saw myself completely, I was bloated and *strange*, in this moment I feel frail and desirable. No matter what size I might be. Because, thanks to him, I don't even know.

He whispers a curse followed by my name. His throat bobs. "Now why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" I mutter.

Humor sparks in his eyes, taints his smile. "Like I slipped into your red dress and bra."

My eyes roll, and I drape myself against his firm chest, coiling my arms around his midsection. He welcomes me with his own embrace, smoothing the dark fabric of his shirt against the bumps of my spine. His heart pounds in my ear, and I dwell on the drumbeat.

"I don't want people to feel like I do," I murmur.

"Unless they deserve that agony, neither do I," the monster hums back.

"I've been going about everything all wrong. I've been analyzing my mother's business models, fighting to create pieces reminiscent of her success. But I don't *want* her success. I want my own. And I want my own to be a direct spite to hers." I must imagine it, but I swear on the word *spite*, Sean's heart skips a giddy beat. "I want to be a driving force against everything she stands for. I want to offer snacks when I shoot with models for magazines. I want my styles available from extra small through 3X and beyond. I don't want to build anything that thrives on pain and insecurity. I want stores that feel good to be in, employees who smile and never so much as give you a disgusted once-over."

"There's what I've been waiting to hear. I hope you don't mind."

I blink, lift my head. "Don't mind what?"



“You made the lobby of your office building beige.”

## CHAPTER 10

♥ Tripping in the right direction still counts as progress, I think.

~~~~

I have an office building. And I am checking it out in Sean's clothes. They are baggy, grunge, but I am literally making them work. I've got a hair tie pulling the tank top back and a hoodie hanging off my shoulders. He let me (I didn't ask and he just sort of said *ah* when he saw) cut his tightest pair of jeans up to accommodate our height difference. I'm in a pair of my own sneakers, which have only ever seen a treadmill.

And for the first time in *years*, I feel...amazing?

Not horrible.

Let's go with *not horrible*.

Physically, I am doing better than I can remember. My stomach doesn't hurt, and the baggy nature of my outfit makes me feel a little less *fat*.

*Fat is not a bad word. Fat is not synonymous with ugly. Fat is an adjective. Like pink. Like purple. Like beige.*

I love the beige. It's homey, warm, welcoming.

"There are offices upstairs. I'm in the process of kitting them out with equipment," Sean says, somehow...*reliably*? That can't be right. But, there he is, wearing a *Transformers* Decepticon t-shirt and glancing around at the cool, lovely lobby of what will become my base of operations. It's comfortably snuggled into the east side of Pratt, where things are safer because they're Velspar's.

On the other side of the city, horrors take place systematically in the shadows. And while his awful family sometimes sends those *horrors* out this way in order to spite Velspar, it's infinitely safer on this side. Velspar.

"Velspar knows about this?" I ask.

"Sure," Sean notes, tapping the call button for a stunning glass elevator. Beyond the frame, a thin stream of water cascades across tiles speckled with the occasional obsidian square. It's so gorgeous my heart is racing. "Velspar knows everything, apart from the whole *we're married* thing."

I step into the lovely elevator, beaming. "I thought your father would be summoning us at some point for some kind of political dance. Attaching Steele clothing stores to Montgomery apartments. Outfitting Montgomery

staff in Steele attire.” My nose scrunches at the idea. Mother would hate it, but I can’t say the image particularly sits well with me either. “What exactly did your father want out of this? Just a merger of old money?”

“Meh,” Sean offers, linking an arm behind my back, *low*, fudge. It feels nice even through the thick fabric of his hoodie, which is too hot for September but perfect in this chilled building. He guides me out of the elevator and onto the design floor.

My breath catches. Great big drawing tablets. Clean white desks. Dress forms. Vacant channels for reams and reams of fabric to eventually live.

Heat pools low in my belly, and I shiver. Smiling, I whisper a curse, take it all in, fill it with colors and sewing machines and employees of all shapes and sizes rushing here and there, *excited* to create things instead of afraid whether or not a mis-stitch will end in termination. The birthplace of everything the designers on my line put out will start here.

There is entirely too much to do—contracts to make, people to hire, businesses to ally with, mass-production facilities to construct from the ground up. It’s a *lot* of money. So it’s a grand thing I’ve got a couple rich friends willing to help.

My mind works, spinning.

Colette is rising into the public eye more and more each day. I’ll use her to sponsor my products, get the word out, have her super fans wearing lines and perfumes inspired by her work. Velspar is obviously the main cash behind any operation within the bounds of his city. Sean...well...Sean’s got the building management background; heck, he made *this* happen. Reg will handle legalities. Kat’s got me with stocks and playing the market in order to compound funds, I think, maybe. Out of everyone, Kat’s probably the person who would be least likely to jump on board in assisting me. Our relationship is through Colette, which is through Velspar.

Her family isn’t trash, though, so even if she doesn’t want to help out personally, her father will be more than happy to take on a new client. So long as Mother doesn’t threaten to pull her own business. I’ll have to do what I can in order to keep this whole project quiet until it’s much too late to stop it.

I’m chewing my cheek and making myself a different kind of dizzy when a granola bar appears in front of my nose. I blink at it. Chocolate peanut butter. Yum.

I shift my attention up the arm of the person offering it.

Like a siren, Sean tempts, “Christen the building with something your mother’s has never seen—a chocolate bar wrapper. Go on.”

Tiny revolting, mean words inform me that this is a *snack* and I am a *pig*, but I snatch the bar out of Sean’s hands, rip open the wrapper before I can even think to check the calories, and take a bite.

Sean’s grin broadens, wicked, and the *pig, pig, pig* echoing in my head twists.

I bet if Sean were a *fraction* worse, he’d be pressing me against a clean white desk and whispering how I *am* a pig in my ear. He’d kiss and tell me how cute little piggies are. How there’s nothing wrong with being any of the words I can’t stop myself from thinking I am. He’d torment and tease until my damage means something different.

And, in a messed up way, I’d be okay. Eventually. Even when my head insists on name calling, I’d be perfectly okay.

Twisted as we are, there’s no straight path out. The threads have to be untwisted in equally disgraceful little ways.

I take another bite and swallow. And in my twisted attempts at reaching *okay*, I pay my respects to piglets. They’re pink. I like pink. So what if I am one? This granola bar is worth the supposed shame. It is not shameful to feed myself. Even if I’m only doing it right now on account of the way it makes my best friend’s eyes fill with so much joy I want to cry.

One day, I’ll do it for me. One day, I won’t have to rework every insult in my brain into something that allows me to remove the power some words have over me. One day, I’ll believe in something better than an impossible standard. One day, *beauty* will be what it is meant to be—*more* than superficial ideals.

When I’m finished with the chocolate granola bar, Sean brushes my lips with a kiss and takes the wrapper from my hand. His warmth leaves before I’m ready, but the glee that hits me when he tosses the garbage in a clean trash beside one of the desks makes it all better. “I figured you’d want to research and order your own devices and products. Heaven knows, I’ve never touched a sewing machine and would probably get polyester.”

“You are disgracing this very room with that word.”

He flashes me a grin over his shoulder. “Should I go back downstairs and wait where a lobby couch will eventually be like a good little boy? I’ll even sit on the floor and twiddle my thumbs.”

I slip my hand into his, let our fingers tangle. “No. I...”

“Go on,” he murmurs. “Make my day.”

I roll my eyes. “I like you here. Show me more.”

He spends the next few hours showing me what will become my office, the floors where boring but necessary aspects of this business will congregate, the break rooms where he says I must incorporate a sufficient snack budget.

At the end of the tour, I’m on a precipice, looking out at an empire I’m about to create.

And it’s a thousand times better than *beautiful*.



Who knew that alien smut would be the perfect mental break from scanning business information, looking for personnel teams, narrowing down my suppliers...

I’m a third of the way through the book before I even realize, and it occurs to me in the exact moment the female lead is rolling over her feelings of attraction for her alien kidnapper that *I* might be in the process of assimilating fully to this whole *reading thing*.

Hence, I do what any sane young woman on the verge of a mental epiphany might.

I text my dealer.

**Leslie:** The man is blue. BLUE. Explain my emotions.

**Kat:** LOL Enjoying the book, are you?

**Colette:** Why the group chat, Les? I do not want to be present for this conversation. My emotions needed no explanation. They said, “That’s weird, respectful no thank you,” and moved on to fluffier things.

**Kat:** You’re afraid of liking it.

**Colette:** My tastes are toxic enough in the real world. I don’t need to provide Vel with more ammunition.

**Leslie:** He’d dye himself blue for you, doll.

**Colette:** Thanks, I know.

I giggle and snuggle mindlessly closer to Sean, who’s working beside me on the couch. It’s become our odd routine lately. Laptops, notebooks, tablets, each other. And snacks. There are constantly snacks.

He kisses my temple without pausing his typing, and I bet he’d dye himself blue for me, too.

**Leslie:** I’m right at the point where they’re locked in a cavern together. There’s a blizzard outside. The snow being tinted purple was an odd choice.

Is that scientifically possible? It feels radioactively concerning.

**Kat:** It's fiction. Just accept it. The purple snow is pretty. It's romantic.

**Colette:** Sounds like even alien smut has the snowed-in together trope. This distresses me somehow. What is life?

**Leslie:** Life is a beautiful thing. With purple snow. On odd planets. With names I can neither pronounce nor spell.

**Kat:** How are the cookies, Les? So happy to have you here on the good dark side after a rocky road that Colette and I fondly refer to as your less-than-palatable backstory.

**Colette:** Usually, after a character arc, you get better. Not worse.

**Leslie:** I think we all know villainy was my only option.

**Colette:** As long as you're on our side now, we'll pretend not to hear the screaming children.

**Kat:** Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back up. If there are screaming children, I hear them. The good dark side has two rules: no hurting children and no rape.

That bar is lower than I thought, but, then again, I am holding a book with kidnapping as the base of their relationship. With the hungry way the author describes how the male lead is looking at our poor female lead, the *no rape* thing is actually kind of comforting.

Ha ha.

What in the world is my moral compass, and why does it seem marginally *improved* since forming friendships with these two?

**Leslie:** In my defense, I don't intentionally make children cry. They do that by themselves.

Sean on the other hand...he'd take candy from a baby if one of his friends wanted it. Or, I *think* he would. I have to ask. "Sean, would you steal candy from infants?"

"Is the infant being *annoying*?"

Yep. That answers that.

**Kat:** I don't want to spoil anything, and we cannot get into details with the child in the chat, but absolutely text me updates! I have about eight million recommendations for once you're finished with this book. You've got to read my girls Gale and Blaire. They wrote this Hades and Persephone retelling that will change your life.

**Leslie:** Hook me up. I'm game for more kidnapping.

Lines I never thought I'd say.

Huh. Maybe I've got a "thing" for it. Here I am, snuggled up with my *you*

*don't have a choice, you're coming home with me tonight kidnapper as it is. The Stockholm Syndrome tastes particularly lovely this evening. Mm. Yes. What a divinely concerning flavor.*

I rest my head on Sean's shoulder as Kat sends a stunningly dark cover strewn with wilted, charring white flowers.

**Colette:** I don't know how you two manage to read this. It would turn my internal temperature up to concerning levels.

**Kat:** Says the only one among us with a boyfriend.

**Colette:** Vel's and my relationship is innocent.

**Kat:** You share a breakfast plate. He feeds you. Never invite me over early again.

Gag me with a cereal spoon. There's some information I did not want to have.

**Colette:** He's a recovering bully. It's best if you roll your eyes and ignore his teasing.

**Kat:** That's not what the anti-bullying videos in school taught me. I'm supposed to tell a teacher. So they can do absolutely nothing. Because nepotism.

My chest tightens, and I don't know why, but I feel like I have to say something in Velspar's defense. The boy was madly in love, had never witnessed a kind emotion before in his life, and broke a little more every time Colette ignored him. The number of times I held him while he sobbed drunk still makes something in me ache.

**Leslie:** Velspar did the best he knew with his hurt.

**Colette:** I know. He's doing better every day as he learns more.

**Colette:** Can I tell you two a secret?

A secret? A girl secret? My breath holds as the idea of how immense an honor that is rolls over me. Even though Colette knows I'm the tag-a-long in this trio, she's including me in something important. She's...trusting me. After everything. After her pitiable role in my less-than-palatable backstory.

I cut a look at Sean, just to make sure he can't remotely see my phone. Brow furrowed, he skips between a dozen different tabs and types information into each one. Who knows what he's doing. Management looks scary. I'm glad I'm hiring other people to do that sort of thing so I can focus on looking great in pencil skirts and guiding the business from the top.

**Kat:** Shoot.

**Colette:** I love him.

Aw. That's not a secret.

**Colette:** I can't get it out of my head. I want to tell him, but it's not time yet. I can't wipe away everything we've been through—everything he put me through. My heart is constantly playing his music. Sometimes he's so sweet and lovely that I want to die. I remember all the broken, awful parts of our history, and I can't stop seeing infatuation in the cracks. I think I might have loved him from the first second I saw him. And I did exactly the same thing he did. I found the way to hurt him most because I was too angry to admit anything else and risk the rejection I'd always known.

My lips pinch, and I run my fingers through my hair.

I hesitate. Just for a second. Then I type:

**Leslie:** Hurting people hurt people. It's a cycle that doesn't stop until it's recognized, and it's hard to recognize, because it is the normal we come to know. Whether you tell him or not, you are making Velspar happier than I have ever seen him just by being with him. He's stronger than he's ever been, and that's thanks to you.

**Kat:** Bad people are never completely bad, and good people are never completely good. He did a lot of wrong things. He probably won't ever deserve you. But I can admit that he's putting in effort. Even though he's still a menace.

**Colette:** I like the menace.

**Colette:** It's...safe.

I find myself glancing at Sean again. His eyes scan his screen, serious and hard, while he brushes a knuckle over his lips. The sight turns my insides mushy.

Forcibly throw out my clothes, mirrors, and scale. Put a plate of food in front of me three times a day and refuse to rest until I've shoved it down. Bake snacks. Kiss the places I fear are ugliest while breathlessly shuddering against my skin.

The menace *is* safe. In stupid ways. Especially when the menace cares about you more than anything else in the world.

I've always been on the side of menace, though. Colette hasn't.

She's coming into the darkness blind and going *huh, blue aliens, who woulda thunk this would be tolerable*. That's got to be terrifying and confusing. Mildly unsettling. This moral dilemma might be another toxic burrito. A toxic lasagna. A toxic crepe cake. Layers and layers of things I'll have to unpack during my next session with Sadie.



With any luck, once I get through them, my brain will make that much more sense. Kat should have warned me that reading would be an eye-opening experience.

**Kat:** Bullying's a mental health disorder. But he's working on it. So. Yeah. I am in the process of accepting him.

**Colette:** I accept your HadesXPersephone raunch. You accept my lil bully boy.

**Kat:** Hades is twice the gentleman anyone you'll ever meet could possibly be. Also, true acceptance would be buddy-reading it with Les.

**Colette:** Politely decline.

**Kat:** Boo. Les? I'm up for a re-read. Want to discover the thrilling dark tale together?

**Leslie:** Ordering it now. It'll be here tomorrow. How does one "buddy read"? And if I finish it in an afternoon, is that acceptable?

**Kat:** Happy to have you on the good dark side, where the bullies are fictional, the cookies are warm, and the judgment is minimal.

Happy to be here.

In a lot of odd ways, it feels like coming home.

## CHAPTER 11

♥ As Colette and Kat might note, the plot thickens.

~~~~

The size doesn't matter. The chub in my cheeks doesn't matter. Do I like it? Am I comfortable? Why can I see my stomach beneath the fabric? Oh—

Someone knocking on the dressing room door makes my heart jump into my throat, and I squeeze my eyes shut, squeaking, "Occupied."

"I know, Les," Sean says, so my eyes snap open.

"You're not supposed to be back here."

"Welp. No one dragged me away. So."

"I'm about to try on new bras," I quip.

"Sweet. Let me in there."

I groan, give the outfit a final look, nod, and pull it off to put back on the hangers. Both the top and skirt fit. My face is rounder in the cheeks, *but* the weird bloating thing that happened before? That's gone. I'm getting *healthier*. That means putting weight on. That is literally the definition of being healthier for me. Seeing the weight is a *good* thing.

"Ain't it funny?" Sean calls from the other side of the door, and I'm glad we're in a nice mall boutique with only one room back here. I don't have to worry about whatever Sean might find *funny* being overheard.

"What?"

"You didn't need implants."

I blink. My cheeks flush. I nearly drop the lacy black bra I'm taking off the hanger. Voice shrill, I say, "Excuse me?"

Sean clears his throat. "Sorry, your mother wanted you to...and...now you've...outgrown your bras...so... Sorry." To his credit, he now sounds sheepish. "I may have overstepped the comfort bounds of our friendship."

No more or less than when I so casually noted how my mother was pressuring me to get surgery for bigger breasts. I wonder if he was expecting my comment then about as much as I was expecting his just now. Clipping the new bra, I go through the motions of checking comfort and snugness. It's not *too* snug. But, then again, this is a place where I'm "allowed" to be *too* snug.

I hate the thought of society *allowing* me to be fat in some places but not

others. It's unrealistic. It's stupid.

I am *allowed* to exist where I am healthy and not in constant pain or nausea, where I can sleep through the night, where I can eat.

I will become confident in my new skin. I will give myself new *allowances*.

I will tear down the standards trapping others like me. I am angry. I am beautiful. But beauty hardly matters.

I am getting stronger every day.

"You're making me want to open the door and watch your brain drip out your ears," I say once I find something like confidence in the way I look right now, standing in nothing more than my underwear and the new bra.

"Oh, would you? That sounds lovely."

I scoff, smiling at my reflection. I haven't seen her since the last time I was in a dressing room, and in some strange way, I can almost appreciate her like I'd appreciate a pretty stranger. Like I'm coming to appreciate the people on my updated Instagram feed. I've been leaving comments, forming connections, forgetting all the insults and jeers I once used to feel better about my own insecurities and imperfections.

It feels so *good*.

I open the door, and Sean stumbles away from it, sucking in a deep breath, stammering, "I was jok—" He scans the clothes I came in here wearing—his—and sighs the moment it registers I'm not in my underwear. "You're a terrible person."

"Was that ever up for debate?" I flutter my lashes. They're light. Because, yeah, I came out shopping with Sean at a boutique in his clothes and didn't put makeup on. The attendant grimaced when we walked in, and I pretended my stomach didn't sour at all. I pretended that my *only* response was thinking *I will create places for me without people like you*. Then I merrily looked through the racks while Sean chatted her into an insecure little hole.

The attendant forces a shaky smile when we exit the back dressing room, and I don't know what Sean said to her, but it was so effective she doesn't make any nasty comments about what I'm getting, glance at the sizes, or wrinkle her nose. In the worst ways, she reminds me of myself. My sister. My mother. My efforts at fitting into the mold they imposed on me.

I don't like it.

So after we leave, I say, "You don't have to stick up for me like you did. That woman is probably in the same place I was, and whatever you said

probably doesn't help."

"Hm?" Sean's attention is on a corner stand serving soft pretzels as he readjusts my bags over his shoulder. "Oh. Yeah. Probably. But she's not you, so I don't care."

"There are those sociopathic tendencies you should really work on," I murmur.

"I'm not a sociopath. Although I was worried I might be. I'm told having remorse over the possibility is a good sign in favor of not being one." He grins, delighted. "Let's get soft pretzels."

I sigh, but we head to the counter, and Sean orders what he wants—which is a large cup of cheesy bites. He's got one positioned in front of my mouth before we've turned from the counter, and I obediently open. Were we not in public, he'd throw me a *good little girl*. And, I'll be damned, he's got me trained.

Chewing, I pretend I can ignore the way glee sparks in his eyes. Even though I can't. It warms me throughout as we head down the crowded aisle. "Why aren't you interested in working on your character?" I ask, dodging a couple of teenagers involved in their phones. A hungrier Leslie would have snapped at them for being a heinous nuisance to society. This Leslie can still taste blissful pretzel salt on her tongue.

"I like my character. Don't you?"

Yeah. But is that *right*? "Feels lame that I'm the only one working on things when my issues most directly inconvenience me, and yours seem like they might go *ooh, bomb, shiny*."

"Are bombs shiny? It seems like they should be. I mean, they have to be brand new, and they can only be used once, so—"

"Sean, you've got to understand what I'm saying."

The wild in his smile tames, and he offers me another pretzel. "Little one, you don't need to worry about me. I'm not perfect, but I'm not hiding misery beneath disconcerting character traits. I'm not nice. I don't want to be nice. *Nice* is a plastic word. And I care about the environment in a *humans are parasites and the bad ones should be placed next to a shiny bomb* sort of way. You get me. Don't make me doubt that." A *wrong* laugh breaks from him as he offers me a fragile smile. "It's literally the only thing keeping me sane."

I bump into his shoulder and open my mouth, so he gives me another pretzel. I chew and mutter, "Karma."

Relief rolls off him in waves. “Thank you.”

Both Velspar and Sean believe in being agents of karma. Velspar, however, pays back equal or less than people deserve. Sean doesn’t have the capacity for equivalent exchange in a sensible way. He believes injustice against his friends—no matter how small—is deserving of capital punishment and acts accordingly without remorse.

Safe in the menace.

In a scary world, having someone scary on your side is reassuring. Someone willing to do what it takes, good or bad, for you creates a sensation of ease. The kind of ease that makes it easier to swallow. Easier to breathe. Easier to exist.

A child turns the corner, collides with Sean’s leg, trips on his shoe, and hits the ground hard.

She scrambles upright, no older than six. Large eyes fix on me, on him, then past us.

“Whoa there.” Sean smiles. “Are you all right?”

She doesn’t say a word, going perfectly stiff.

“Sorry. Did my daughter run into you?” A man shorter than Sean offers us a placating smile as he wipes a hand up his forehead and into the thinning strands of his dark hair. “We were playing a game.”

“No problem.” Sean pushes the pretzel cup against my chest, lets my bags collect on the floor beside him, and bends, wrapping a hand around the girl’s bicep. She pales as Sean pulls her onto her feet, then higher. Grinning at her once she’s settled in his arms, he says, “Hiya, princess. You gotta be careful running around in crowded places like this. You’ll make your father worry.”

Her eyes meet his, desperation rippling in them.

Sean hums, combing her light brown hair off her cheek. “You know something, sir?” His smile vanishes as he fixes his gaze on the man. “This is the Eastgate Pratt Mall.”

The man’s jaw tenses, smile remaining fixed. “I know.”

“Do you?”

The man nods.

“Then I won’t have to ask you twice to run back to the rats on your side of the city and pray you aren’t taking poison with you, now will I?”

Blood runs out of the man’s face, and his lips part. “I don’t know what —”

“I said I wouldn’t have to ask twice. And that’s really a courtesy to you.”

A thread of anger twines into the man's voice. "That's my dau—"

"I don't know him," the girl whispers, the words broken, soft, shaking. "I don't know him."

"I know, princess." Sean smiles for her, bounces her a bit higher. "Don't you even worry."

"This is outrageous. Get your hands off her right now!"

People stop; some stare. I juggle the cup of cheesy, buttery pretzels and get my phone out, hitting record. The man tenses and turns his face from the camera.

Angling the girl away from the man, Sean wraps a fist in the collar of his shirt, drags his face up close, and whispers something I can't make out beneath the buzz of murmurs forming around us. Sean's lips move on my phone screen, and the guy's eyes go wide. He stumbles when Sean shoves him back, then he turns and leaves without another word.

"What did—" I begin, but Sean shoots me a warning look before he bends and picks up my bags.

Slinging them over his shoulder, he says, "Now, tell me, princess. If I were your legal guardian, where might I be...?"



"Are we going to talk about what happened at the mall?" I ask the moment we're up in our penthouse. Sean dumps the piles of my bags on the couch and turns sharply for the kitchen. I follow him after discarding my own load. "*Sean!*"

"Pasta for lunch, little one?"

I fold my arms and glare.

Catching my eye, he sighs. "I could have sworn my screaming Colette's demo at the top of my lungs the entire way home was a pretty good hint that I *don't want to talk about it*. You're normally so good about reading people." He clicks his tongue and opens the fridge. "You must be hungry. Don't worry. Hubby will—"

I grip the back of his shirt and jerk him out of the fridge. "What did I tell you about calling yourself *hubby*?"

"Please don't kill me. I love you." His big innocent eyes glisten with the words, entirely unconcerned, and I release his shirt.

Suddenly clammy, I shrug out of his hoodie, toss it over the kitchen counter, and rub my arms. "That little girl... That man... He was trying to..." My old friend nausea comes back, and I take a reflexive deep breath to quell

it.

“Les, come on. Don’t get lost in your pretty heart just because you encountered it up close. You know the stuff the Pratts deal in.”

“On the *other* side of the city,” I blurt. “Velspar—”

“Is one human. And it’s a messed up world.”

I chill. “How did you even know what was going on so fast?”

“Scared kids are scared kids. If that man were her father, I’d have stood my ground until I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that her fear was exaggerated on account of, I don’t know...” He turns back to the fridge, opens the freezer, and pulls out some fake chicken. “...him telling her she was getting a spanking when they got home because she threw a tantrum in Build-a-Bear.” He flips the package, seems to recall that he sharpied the nutrition facts out, and murmurs, “You don’t abandon a scared kid. If you do, they learn to hide it. And that’s when you end up with adults like Velspar and me.” He gets some spaghetti out of the pantry. “I’m not interested in competition.”

“But you let him go. He’ll just find...”

“Mhm.”

“Sean.”

Closing a cabinet, Sean meets my eyes. “There are a lot of delicate politics at play, Les. Velspar, Reg, and I have been working at it for years. Okay? There’s only so much we can do at any given moment. And sometimes that means helping one kid and moving on with the knowledge that no matter what we do in between our own breakdowns, we’ll never be able to help them all. We do what we can against the people we could have become had we just a sliver less heart.” He wets his lips, and I see the deep frustration he’s been holding at bay. It’s jagged in his eyes. I’m sorry I nudged it into the light. “It’s a horrific game of chess. And we have to play to win, not to protect every pawn, because that either means catastrophic loss or stalemate.” He closes his eyes, takes a breath. “I’m sorry you had to see it up close, little one. Really. We try to protect you from these things.” Approaching me, he cups my cheek in his palm. It’s still cold from the package of frozen chicken.

I step out of his touch, and something in him shatters so violently it rips the hesitant smile off his face. Lifting my chin, I say, “Don’t protect me. Tell me how what I’m working on can help protect more pawns.”

Closing his fingers, he presses his fist against his mouth and looks

elsewhere.

My heart pounds. My lips part, but no sound comes out for a long while. Then, barely, I manage to say, “I’m...I’m already a part of the game, aren’t I?”

“Your mother is a superpower on the wrong side. Your desire to challenge her is something that will crack the foundation of her power, and we are taking that into consideration as we go forward. It could incite the kinds of openings we’ve been looking for.” Sean drops his hand and shakes his head. “But, listen to me, little one. None of us are decent people, okay? Yes, we’re working on things that will make life better for a lot of people. But Velspar’s also losing his mind over how he’s going to propose to Colette. And I—”

“*What?*” I shriek. “He’s going to propose to Colette soon? It’s been, like, half a year.”

Sean’s eyes roll. “Yeah, half a year at the end of a lifetime of addiction, and she’s the kinda girl you wife before getting messy with.”

My mouth falls open. “Are you...are you saying...they...”

“Yes. I’m saying Velspar is as wrecked as he is because of *cuddles*.”

My mind blanks, and I can’t believe it. Colette mentioning their relationship as *innocent* wasn’t a deflection. They’ve probably only gone as far as Sean and I have.

Wow.

Wow, I can’t even... Velspar loves her—just *her*, not any part of what she might be able to do for him or how pitifully attracted to her he is—*that* much?

Sean rakes his fingers through his curls. “So, as I was saying, yes, there’s big bad dark stuff all over the place. But if we only focus on it we’ll have depression on top of the other crap. I don’t know about you, but that sounds awful. I like my serotonin levels where they are, thanks.”

There’s going to be a wedding. Soon? When? Does Colette have a dress picked out?

No. No, of course not. Velspar hasn’t proposed yet. She doesn’t know she *needs* a dress. This will be huge for her career. Weddings are major publicity, and with the way everyone loves their whole *Velette* thing, it would drag in major attention.

“Anddd, she’s gone. Well, glad we got through this conversation. We are the worst kind of people, I think. Should I make a white sauce for the pasta,



or pesto...”

I squeal.

Sean jumps.

I grab his shirt. “I could make her wedding dress! I could make Kat’s bridesmaid dress! She’s obviously going to be the maid of honor, but I think we all know planning a party, clothes, all of that is my field.”

Sean stares at me. Blinks once. Twice. Three times. “Les, you want to plan a wedding that doesn’t exist yet for someone who has only recently begun not to despise you?”

“Um. Yes? She’s my friend now. History is history. They call it my *backstory*. It’s why I’m a *complex character*. And we appreciate growth.” I let him go so I can fold my arms. “Kat and I spent three hours dissecting Hades’s character in relation to the toxicity levels between him and Persephone on account of the whole kidnapping thing in the book we just finished reading together.”

“Oh? What did you decide?”

“Very healthy. Ten out of ten. Quite adorable. It was less *kidnapping* and more *rescuing from an abusive home relationship forcibly*.” I press my lips together the second I hear it.

Sean smirks. “Sounds relatable.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Alfredo or pesto, little one?”

“Alfredo. I’m going to start designing Colette’s dress. I need a sewing machine, so I’m ordering one for home. I’ll need fabric, too. A ton of it. I’ll need her sizes. Do you think she’ll let me measure her if I ask and provide no further explanation?”

“Yeah, probably. Our doll’s a sweetheart, and she’ll make her assumptions, which will have nothing to do with a wedding dress. Because Velspar will hang my intestines out like fairy lights if he learns I told you.”

I wave a hand, already plotting, letting different cuts roll through my brain, toying with veils and trains, different fabrics, how much tulle. “If I can keep the fact we’re married a secret, I think I can keep the fact they’re going to be married a secret.” I’m halfway out of the kitchen before I remember that, oh yeah, *really big important* things happened. I look back at Sean, who’s scrolling through his phone, probably looking for a recipe. “Sean?”

He pauses, looks at me, and his eyes warm with a smile. “Yes?”

“I think you’re doing great. However you’re helping, whatever makes

sense, whatever's possible, you're doing great. And...I'm sorry if you thought I doubted you."

"I love you, too, Les. And it's all right. I know how bad the whole lot of us can look and exactly the extent of the bad we're capable of." He drops his attention back to his phone. "I'm not holding it against you that you're coming out of a survival mode that left you barely capable of fending for yourself. Caring for other people without prejudice is beautiful. There's nothing I love more than watching you thrive."

My heart trips, so I force my legs to carry me out of the room and to my tablet, where I begin research on secret dresses for unwitting brides. Everything will work out, to the best of our broken selves.

All I can do is believe that and do the best I know how. Really, that's all anyone can do in this shattered world.

## CHAPTER 12

♥ If your best friend needs psychiatric help, clap your hands.

~~~~

“I’m hungry.” The words fall out of my mouth somewhere between pinning two pieces of fabric together and wondering if I’m crazy for being in love with the design I finalized for Colette’s dress last night. Yesterday Kat, Colette, and I went out in order to rant about the new series they’ve got me hooked on, and I managed to get both of their measurements in between *Prince Lucien is too dang soft and no the heck he is not*.

It takes my weary brain a full minute to realize what I’ve said aloud, and by that point, Sean has a snack snuggled beneath my nose. Pumpkin bread. *’Tis nearly the season*, he said, three nights ago.

His giddy smile makes me want to hit him for reasons I’ll have to unpack in more therapy, but I take the plate and scoot back from the project space I carved into the corner of our living room, right next to the wall of windows where the natural light is perfect for assessing colors.

Holding his eyes, I take a bite. And, ugh, it’s still incredible. “If you ever want a backup job, become a baker.”

“Why, thank you.”

“It’s not a compliment.”

“It actually is.”

I purse my lips, chew another bite, let the moist, spiced bread fill me.

Sean’s fingers comb through my hair as he dips to kiss my forehead. “I’ll make dinner.”

“Mm...” I relish in his nearness. “Should I make dinner? At our last session, Sadie seemed intent on outlining healthy relationship goals, and you’re still doing everything.”

“Do you know how to cook?”

“No.”

“Then stick to sewing, little one.” He kisses again. “I’ve got you. I don’t mind. It’s not like we’re in a *real* relationship anyway, right? Who needs healthy relationship goals in a faux game?”

I open my mouth to suggest that I can maybe order food—with his money—but my phone starts ringing before I get the chance. I feel every one of his

steps as he moves away from me, but I let him go because he's right. We aren't in a real romantic relationship. We kiss because we're used to physical intimacy and married. While we might be jerks, we're still faithful to certain things. Like marriage paperwork. I guess. So what if I like, *like* him? As long as this is a friendship tangled in politics to him, it can't go anywhere.

Who knows if it even should?

"Hello, Leslie Steele speaking."

The woman on the other end informs me that she's from one of the supplier chains I've looked into, so I put the piece I'm working on aside in favor of grabbing my laptop. The phone call lasts thirty minutes, and by the time *I have a supplier*, dinner is ready.

I can't stop talking about the fact I have a supplier while I stuff my face with the garlic roasted potatoes and green beans Sean made. He doesn't stop smiling at me, like every word I'm saying in a ramble of barely-congruent thoughts makes him personally as thrilled as I am. Once the personnel team I connected with gets back to me, I'll be able to begin working with a staff, creating a launch plan with a marketing team. I have influencers lined up. Designs I'm ready to move forward on. Places ready to begin mass-producing for the common market. Plans to feature my couture in upcoming editions of fashion magazines. One text to Velspar and I'll have the extra start-up cash I need in my account to make it all happen. Also, probably a less-than-three heart emoji.

Dang. I love my people.

"I'll be coordinating with some graphic designers in order to finalize a brand logo sometime tomorrow, and I think I've decided on a name."

Sean's eyes widen, and he finishes chewing his bite. "Really?"

I nod. "Amare." I bite my lip. "I...I also kind of want to change my last name to it."

Sean's next potato falls off his fork before it reaches his mouth. "Leslie Amare?"

"Do you like it?"

His expression turns pensive, and he hums. "Sean Ulysses Amare." A brilliant grin overtakes him. "It sounds less insulting than *Sean Ulysses Montgomery*. Whatever will you call me when you're upset?"

An idiot. All the same, I laugh and shake my head. "Very cute. You're not changing your name to match mine."

"Why not?"

“Because...” I blink, and it’s my turn for a potato to fall off my fork. That’s what we get since he made tiny ones and bathed them in a decadent amount of garlic and butter and all sorts of things that will—*help me continue on my goals of weight gain and health*. I nudge the tiny thing around in more butter and herbs. I can’t think of a reason why he wouldn’t also want to detach himself from his father’s name, but picking the same one I have? “If we change our names at the same time to the same thing, I have a feeling our friends might suspect something.”

“Your friends don’t even know we’re living together yet.”

My brow furrows. “Yeah, what’s up with that?”

“Reg and Velspar can keep secrets? And I guess you’ve not thought to tell them?”

As if I want to reopen comments about Sean and me. No thank you. Romance talk can stick strictly to fiction and Colette, who is happily in a relationship of sweet toxic cuteness. Whatever Velspar and Colette have going on probably isn’t a healthy standard. But the horrifying truth that their *mess* has literally not even *gone all the way* while “healthy” relationships crop up to reveal a stark absence of consent all the time makes me think that there are worse things than blatant toxicity.

Chiefly, obscured toxicity.

If you’re saying yes to wall pinning, you’re saying yes to wall pinning. The end.

Taking a deep breath, I continue nudging my potato around in the sauce. I stab a group of green beans. I don’t bring them to my face. “Sean?”

“Hm?” he asks, mouth stuffed full. There’s garlic butter on his lip. I want to lick it off.

“Are...” Words aren’t behaving themselves in my head, and I solemnly wish I had the linguistic skills of any of the leading ladies in the fantasy romances Katina keeps feeding me. I devour them like they have the secret to life, happiness, and the universe nestled between the gratuitous romantic, uh, excursions. If I’m honest, I skim those parts and focus on whenever tall, dark, and dangerous blushes for the first time.

Infinitely more heart-melting.

“Are?” Sean prompts once his mouth is empty. The emptiness of his mouth doesn’t last long, and maybe a month ago I would have thought him disgusting for it. The more I fix my own relationship with food, the more I appreciate the way he enjoys his. It’s cute how simple things make him

happy.

He's cute.

I really like him...

I don't know what I was trying to ask. I eat my green beans, avert my eyes, let my thoughts trail to the puddle of fabric I'm fashioning into a flowing wedding gown for Colette. It's modest, stunning, something spattered with pale pinks and cherry blossoms.

Velspar's brain is going to melt. I want him to cry in front of everyone.

Simple things, obviously, make me happy, too.

*Are we any closer to romantic than we were a month ago?* has no business invading my head. We're serving a purpose for each other. The kisses mean nothing. My dreams about him mean nothing. Needing to talk myself out of asking to climb into his bed every night is a "me" problem that edges us further into benefits that still won't have the power to make whatever we are anything good or right or *healthy relationship goals*.

"Les, you can talk to me about anything."

"I know that."

"Then...?" He's not eating anymore, and the concern in his eyes has my heart doing the silly pitter patters of a crush.

Except it's not a crush. Crushes are on people whose minds you don't understand. We've been with each other for ages. I know when he changes shampoo because I can smell the difference in his hair. I know when he's upset because I can see the difference in his eyes. I know when he's faking joy and when it's spilling genuinely from his pores.

No. You don't go to therapy with crushes, and they don't overhaul your life in order to get it back on a track that isn't going to crash and burn. Whatever this is for me, it's not a crush. And not knowing if what it is for him has changed is terrifying.

He did just call it a faux game. I have no reason to hope our odds might fall among Velspar and Colette's happily ever after.

"Are you going to make these again? They're really good."

"I hope you know I don't believe for a second that's what you were going to say."

I frown. "Do you want to fight with me, Sean? We can fight. You insist on giving me a butter knife like it's not directly hazardous to your wellbeing."

"The threat of danger turns me on." He sets his silverware down, licks the

garlic off his bottom lip, and folds his hands together in front of him. “What would you like to fight about?”

“Nothing!”

He smiles oh so pleasantly. “This is one of those woman things where you don’t say what you mean and I’m supposed to read your mind, isn’t it?”

“No.” I stab a baby potato and put it in my mouth.

“I’ll have to warn Velspar that married life is confusing.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

He starts guessing: “You’re nervous about your business since you’re realizing it’s actually a feasible thing about to come to fruition?”

“N— Well, yes, but in an average and expected way that doesn’t really bother me.”

He nods, setting that matter aside. “Did something happen with our doll’s wedding dress?”

“No. It’s going very well. Exactly how I envisioned it.”

“You hate my potatoes.”

“These are the best potatoes I’ve ever had.”

His smile broadens; my heart skips.

“May I have a hint?” he asks, so cordially.

I blurt, “It’s about you.”

The instant the words leave my mouth, I regret them. More so when his teasing smile drifts away. The humor in his eyes dies, nothing but deep, dark green abysses of faint worry left. His mouth opens, and I panic.

Jolting up out of my chair, I slam my hands down on the table. “I’m full,” I say, then I make a run for it, planning to lock myself in my bedroom like a child. Unfortunately, Sean’s legs are far longer than mine, and my head start proves useless. I slam my door into his body. He shoves it open. Then he’s stalking me across my bedroom toward the wall beside my dresser. He corners me there.

I don’t remember saying *yes* to wall pinning, but here we are.

“What about me?” he asks. “Have I done something more wrong than usual?” A line forms between his brows.

If I kiss him right now, he’ll taste like buttery garlic. He smells like an Italian restaurant. And I’m not sure I’m breathing properly.

“Leslie.”

“Let it go, Sean!” I squeeze my eyes shut and bunch my hands in my skirt. “It’s...stupid. Just...just let it go.” I don’t know what I was even

thinking. There's too much on our plates right now to bother introducing more confusing emotions. We have loads and loads of work. He's still sleeping so little. And I'm plotting my new business while also planning several variations of a wedding I don't know the date for yet.

My body's no longer collapsing in on itself, so everything new I've taken on feels like a lot less trouble than just trying to survive a little over a month ago was. Sean was never abusing himself within an inch of death. So now, on top of everything he's been dealing with in the shadows, he also has to deal with me.

He deserves more than my selfishness.

We're friends. Good friends. Close friends. Close friends who enjoy a handful of benefits because we're broken and neglected and desperate for affection. That's al—

Sean lifts my face and forces my eyes on his. Voice low and laced in demand, he says, "Talk to me. If I've done something that goes too far, let's clear it up. Come on, little one. We don't do rifts. You yell your frustrations at me, and I handle them. Speak your pretty little mind."

Normally that's so easy. Especially with him. But right now? Right now it is not.

"One," he begins, and I blink. "Two."

"W-what are you doing?"

"Counting to three. I figure if I patronize you like you love so much, you might get upset enough to blurt the problem." His thumb swipes my cheek. "I don't like not knowing things with you. It makes me violently insecure. Please put me out of my misery in one way or another. Murder is acceptable. Just make it fast."

I jerk my chin from his hand, stare at the gray carpet I'll need to rip up at some point. I rack my brain for a lie. Something. Anything.

When I can't find one, I whisper the awful truth.

"What?" He lowers his face nearer to me.

"I..." Clenching my jaw, I force the words out a little louder. "...like you." My body does some inconvenient anxiety stuff that makes it hard for me to thank it for keeping me upright, like I'm supposed to, like my *daily affirmations* tell me to. I can't force myself to look at him. "Are we the same as we have been, or...somehow...at all...has anything changed for you?" I let my mind tumble through my affirmations to keep the panic and less-kind thoughts at bay. The insults I feed myself are horrible. They assure me that



I'm an idiot and ugly and Sean's just doing exactly what he taunted when this whole fiasco began.

He's *being what I need*, and he's playing that role well enough to trick even me into thinking there's a chance of something else here. For all I know, my new addiction with romance books has me obsessing over storybook love.

Why hasn't he said anything yet?

Terrified, I drag my gaze to him, and my heart stutters. The cool beauty on his face steals my breath. Half a pouting smile touches his bottom lip. He releases a sigh, pinches my chin between his thumb and forefinger. Dipping, he tastes my lips, turns my knees weak and useless. "You scared me," he says against my mouth. "So that's all."

That's...*all*? I like him. A lot. More than anyone else. In a fluffy, stupid, romantic way. And his response is *that's all*? Maybe I wasn't clear? No. No, he's definitely clever enough to understand what I'm saying here. Even though he's an idiot.

Dumbstruck, I stare at him when he pulls away, grazing his thumb over my mouth.

My voice feels distant, hollow. "I... That's not an answer?"

"Nothing's changed for me."

My chest tightens.

"I still love you in all-consuming ways. Most of my thoughts find their way back to you. It gets worse each day. The more you grow into yourself and shed the life you've known, the more radiant you become. The more radiant you become, the harder it is for me to look at you. The harder it is for me to look at you, the more impossible it is to look away." He catches my hand, lifts it to his lips. "How long has *liking me* been eating you up inside?"

I try to tug my fingers out of his grasp, but he won't let me as he kisses them and holds my eyes. "Stop it," I whisper, breathless.

"That's not an answer."

I flick my gaze off him, shiver. "Longer than I want to admit."

He hums into my skin. "You could have told me."

"No! Because you're...you're like *this*."

His head tilts. "Like 'this'?"

"Teasing. Even though I—" My voice breaks. "—I've never *liked* someone like this before, you're acting like it's no big deal. It hurts. It's exactly what I was afraid of."

“Leslie.”

“*What?*” I might be on the verge of tears now. I don’t know. It’s probably a hormonal thing. That’s probably what *all* of this is. One big hormonal mistake.

Sean smiles, placating. “I’m sorry. It’s just not that big of a shock to me.”

“Then you don’t underst—”

“I understand. You married me, Les. I gave you a flimsy reason, and you agreed. Of course you like me. I don’t think anyone else in the world would be able to get away with what I have concerning you.” Breath leaves him, and he catches a tear as it rolls down my cheek. “Shh. Don’t cry, little one. It’s all right.”

“It’s a big deal,” I croak, angry, too weak to snap.

He pulls me into his arms, buries his nose in my hair, where my roots are turning brown again, and I’m letting them. “Your realization and admittance is a big deal. Good job. I’m very proud.”

I wish I still had my butter knife in reach. I’d slice him open. “You’re unbearable.”

He laughs. Cursed, perfect laugh. “We’re both a little unbearable. I’m like this. And you’re crying because you didn’t realize it was obvious you loved me.”

My face heats. “I never said anything about *love*.”

“You never have to, little one. Your face lights up when I enter a room. You gravitate to my side constantly. You get a little drunk on the sound of my voice, and a sleepy little smile I don’t think you’re even aware of overcomes you when we’re talking. You trust me. You tell me all your secrets and fears. That’s love. Or that’s what I’ve come to consider it. You were the person who defined the word for me. Before you, I had no idea what it was. Without you, I wouldn’t be able to experience it again.”

Incredulous, I snap, “And that’s not *romantic* to you?”

“Pretty sure that’s obsessive, concerning, dependent, and unhealthy. But if calling it romantic would make you feel better, sure. It’s romantic. Mafia-romance level romantic. ‘Huh, these people need more therapy’ romantic. ‘Goodness gracious, love isn’t a band-aid for that horrific mindset’ romantic.”

I clamp my hand to his mouth before he can continue. “Okay. I get it.”

Gripping my wrist, he moves my hand and bites the fleshy base of my thumb, making my heart jump. He holds my gaze and licks at the sting he just

caused. “Do you?”

“I am a fool. You’re not a fluffy person. We don’t get to be something pretty, even if I’m in fluffy, stupid love with you. I get it.”

He nods, smiles. Bending, he sweeps me up into his arms, and I grip him around the neck to keep my balance. He holds me like I don’t weigh a thing, even though he’s been making adamantly certain that I do.

I guess food really is fuel, energy, strength. And he’s never limited himself on any of it.

Predictably, he brings me back to the table. Unpredictably, he settles me in his lap, drags my unfinished food over next to his plate, and takes a bite of his green beans. “So,” he mumbles around the mouthful, swallowing before his next word, “I get to be *hubby* now?”

My face screws up. “What does that awful title have to do with anything?”

He eats a potato, watching me, wide eyes full of indescribable things. He licks his lips. “You love me. People in love get married. Already did that. Now I get to be hubby, and you get to be wifey.”

If I were still sickeningly starved, I might have spit up a little bit. Instead, I gag. He stuffs a potato in my open mouth. Eye twitching, I chew and contemplate the fact *nothing has changed for him*. He’s loved me in a toxic romantic way from the moment he proposed.

A truly awful thought occurs to me. “Sean.”

“Yes, my beloved wife?”

“Did your father really fo—”

“Have another potato.”

I shove his hand away. “Are you *serious!*? Your father never told you to marry me?”

“Well, actually, he did want me to.”

“But?” I grit.

“*But* he doesn’t even know I did it.”

My mouth falls open. “What about this building?”

“Velspar’s city. I’ve been living here ever since I asked Velspar if I could manage the ‘Montgomery’ on his half and he said sure.”

I pale. “Does *Velspar* know we’re married?”

Sean’s laughter spills over me, and I tell myself to *hate* it. But it’s hard. Because above all else, I love Sean’s joy. Because he’s my friend. Because I care about him. Even though he’s an *idiot*. Wiping a fake tear from his eye,

Sean shakes his head. “No. No.” He curses. “—no. Velspar would be so mad at me. Probably say something about how you don’t manipulate other people like that. It’s wrong. Blah blah blah.” He snorts, eats some more green beans. “You know how he is. The saint.”

My fingers slip toward Sean’s butter knife as a plastic smile paints across my face. Sean really lied in order to get me to agree to marry him. Is Sean insane? He must be insane, right? Maybe we need to go to therapy *twice* a week? And by *we*, I mean *him*?

He catches my hand before I can wrap my fingers around the silver handle. “Bad girl. Don’t stab hubby.”

I can’t believe I love this man. Do I honestly love this man? Maybe I’m just, I don’t know, used to my dalliances and— *And HE* married us, knowing I wouldn’t continue with them while legally bound to anyone. Oh. My. “*SEAN!*” I shriek, chest vibrating with unchecked malice. “We are getting divorced. Right this second. Do you hear me?”

“It’ll take at least a day. And why would you want to divorce me? I’m a good h—”

“If you say *hubby* one more time—”

“—usband.” He smiles, ever so innocently. It’s as though he doesn’t think I can see the *evil* behind the pretty green.

“I can’t believe you manipulated me into falling in love with you!”

Expression unchanged, he says, “Oh, no. I would never do that. That’s messed up. Even for me. I helped you realize you were already in love with me, because it started to hurt a bit whenever I was apart from you. Put simple, *I* realized *I* was in some kind of love with you. And every time I pictured you with anyone else...” He’s still smiling, but the evil in his eyes rises, clearer. “...well...I had to stop that before I killed someone. And you’re a good little girl, despite yourself. So, marriage happened.”

Curses pool through my thoughts, rampant, awful. I shove out of his arms, trip, and barely catch myself on the corner of the table. Running trembling fingers through my hair, I shake my head.

“Les—”

“Stop.” My legs wobble as I straighten myself, but they aren’t weak. They get stronger every day. *I* am getting stronger every day. Thanks to him. I can’t consolidate this mess. The selfishness. The imposition. The care. The desperation.

“Les, what’s it matter the order that things happened?”

“What’s it matter?” I blurt. “You don’t see a problem with what you did?”

A brow rises. “No? It’s *us*. We’re already too far gone for anything correct. We’re mean. We bend the world to suit us. I didn’t hurt anyone. You can divorce me if you want to. You made sure it would be easy before you signed the papers.”

I wait a moment for something incriminating, some little manipulative comment about how it would *only break his heart* or he’d *only murder whoever else I end up with*. But that’d be messed up. Even for him. So nothing of the sort comes.

I clench my fists. “I hate that you’re so good at manipulation. I don’t know what I can trust.”

“You usually see through me, Les. The only reason this worked is because I scrambled your thoughts with a kiss beforehand and left you grappling with the fact you enjoyed it. Manipulation is for other people. Blatant, cold, hard force is the only thing that reliably works on you.” He’s silent for a moment, then his chair moves back against the tile floor, scraping. “Would you like an example?”

“No.”

He’s got my wrist clamped in his hand before I so much as hear his soft approach. “Pity that’s not how force works.” He tugs me into him, lifting my chin with his fingertips. I brace my free hand against his chest, claw my nails through his shirt. Meeting his eyes, I swallow hard at the closed-off look in them. “What’s the problem? Tell me. Or else.”

I shudder, and I have no idea what he thinks an effective *or else* might be, but I know what he’s capable of. If he wanted to, he could rip my still-beating heart from my chest, hold it up, and squeeze. He knows me well enough to tear me to shreds.

Thing is.

Sean would never *want* to do that.

What *is* the problem, in the context of *us*, with our rules and the fact I can undo this, smack him, yell at him, call him an absolute *moron* for having the gall? What is the *problem*? “Did you never think that if I were in love with you, I’d want to fall in love with you at my own pace? I’d want to be a normal girl and do all the normal girl stuff of falling in love? Did you never think that I’d want a choice? That I’d want a stunning proposal where my girl friends—girl friends I *finally* have—leap out with cameras after you pop the

question and I fall into your arms? I've spent my entire life as a puppet beneath my mother's whims. You know that. You know what it's like. You've been your father's puppet on so many occasions, too. When do we get *better*? When do we get to shrug off the weight of everything we have been and everything we've done that hurts and just...just be *normal* or *right*, somehow?"

"Happy and gentle?" he murmurs.

"Something like that."

He sighs. I wait for him to tell me it isn't possible. He already said so. We're *too far gone*. We can't be *correct* now. It's too late. "You're not a normal girl, Leslie. I don't think normal girls exist. If they do, I wouldn't fall in love with any of them. They already sound boring. We are happy. If you just give this past month five minutes of thought and focus on everything that isn't your recovery from anorexia, we are happier than I think we've ever been. Right?"

I hardly have to think about it. The mere fact I'm not dizzy and nauseous right now answers that. Not needing to fight through feeling sick in order to reach the feeling of happiness is huge. I look toward where he's still gripping my wrist, refusing to let go, and don't justify his question with a response.

He continues anyway. "We're also not gentle people. We've lived in worlds where we don't exist. Grasping onto each other until we bruise is the only way to combat the neglect we've endured and let us feel something like secure. I don't know how to love you *right*." He kneels, pulls one leg up, and looks into my eyes as he lets his grip slip from my wrist to my hand. "But, little one, if you show me, I'll do everything I can. If you teach me without sacrificing anything on account of trying to be something you aren't, I will learn. You are my priority. Your health. Your happiness. I'm sorry I twisted things up." A weak smile lifts one corner of his mouth. "But, hey? That's just us. And we're going to make those kinds of mistakes because we weren't taught how to person right. If you think you know how, I am not unwilling to try."

"That would just be going through the motions," I whisper.

He shrugs. "Isn't that what everyone does? On some level?"

I think...I think Sean might be clinically psychotic. Children don't turn out right when they don't get love. Children living completely alone just plain don't turn out right. I had a means to fight for an illusion of affection. I had a sister, back before she got swept up in our mother's awfulness. Sean

didn't have *anything* or *anyone* to go home to. He sincerely doesn't have a clue.

"If I walked away, completely, what would you do?" I ask.

"Cry. A whole lot. Maybe never stop."

"Would you hurt anyone? Yourself?"

"No. Does dehydration count?"

"Please don't joke with me right now."

He transforms his expression into hollow stone. "Sorry. It was the smile. I forgot to get rid of it. I wasn't joking. I don't think I'd know how to stop mourning you. I'd force myself to play the role Velspar needs me to. He and Reg would be all I'd have left. But I don't think I'd really know how to recover if you left. Sorry. That's just the truth." He lowers his eyes to my hand, still clasped in his, and his grip loosens some. I don't even realize it hurts until he eases the pressure. Staring at my throbbing fingers, he murmurs, "Do you *want* to leave? I'd never force you to stay. Please know that. I'd never force you to stay somewhere you aren't happy. It took me years to force you to leave a place you weren't happy. I try to keep myself in check since I know all the wrong parts about me shouldn't be anyone else's burden to bear." Lifting his free hand, he scrubs his face, lets his short nails bite into his skin. "I don't...I don't know. When you said that your mother was pressuring you to get surgery, the restraint inside me that said not to make my feelings your problem broke. I'd only recently come to terms with the fact my feelings for you were different than I thought. Everything snapped. My mind whirled. First, one surgery. Then, because your mother's never happy, another. Another. Another, another, another. And suddenly the perfect inches of you are unrecognizable. Gone. Gone completely. Completely gone. I had to stop it. All the other desires I'd been harboring just spilled out, and I took the opportunities I saw, because my restraint didn't break clean, and I—"

I settle on my knees in front of him, drag his hand away from his face, watch crystal tears spill from broken eyes.

Voice cracking, he says, "Sorry." He blinks, and more tears fall over the tired tint beneath his bottom lashes. "I spiraled. I do that when I'm not pretending but should be."

"I know."

His eyes close as he offers me a wounded smile. Soft, he says, "Yeah. You know."

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say.

He snorts. “Because your broken boy is sobbing on the kitchen floor? *That’s* manipulation, Les. I’m not trying to, so you might not pick up on it. You should go wherever you want if you want to. I won’t cut you off, so please just don’t go back to the prison your mother made. My restraint can be repaired. I won’t hurt anyone you end up loving, even if I want to. As long as they make you happy, I can endure anything.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere else.”

“Ah.” He wets his lips, tastes a tear as it falls in the seam. “Good. I don’t want you to. I *really* don’t want you to.”

Cupping his chin, I catch a tear on my tongue, listen to his curse, the way his breath stutters. His fingers tighten around my hand again. I kiss the corner of his eye. “No more crap in the background. Don’t you dare lie to me about anything ever again.”

“What if it would save your life?”

I sigh. “Actually, literally, clearly save my life? You anticipate a direct situation like that to arise?”

“We’re kind of overthrowing governments and dealing with crime syndicates. So...”

I groan. “*Fine*. But nothing less. I need to trust you. If I can’t, that’s when my world falls apart.”

He nods.

“Also, I want a proper proposal. And a wedding.” My cheeks heat. “And then I want to share a room.”

His eyes widen; final tears fall.

“You’re still...” I press my lips together, attempt to gather my thoughts.

“Ew?” he offers.

“...my best friend. My favorite person. And, yes, *ew*. Completely and utterly, *ew*.”

In the next moment, he locks his tongue with mine, muffling whatever other nonsense I could say in favor of tasting his laugh.



## CHAPTER 13

♥ Literally pissed that I'm not the only one getting character development in this story. What do you mean Sean has to have depth, too? Disgraceful.

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Logically, should I message Kat right now? Absolutely. Why? She's the only stable one in our group. She'll tell me a swift and quick *Don't be an idiot?? We don't date insane people? You think he actually struggles with maintaining a firm grip on reality? MA'AM??*

My heart will bleed. She might knock some sense into me.

Unfortunately, I am aware of this. So I am messaging Colette. Because I think Colette might understand just enough to not try and shut whatever these budding feelings in my chest are down. I just need to figure out the way to do the wording thing.

I have already deleted about eighteen messages. I want to scream and throw my phone. I don't know where to start, what information to provide, if I'm panicking and only reaching out because I'm panicking, if I'll regret telling her later.

Who knows if I can even trust her. She could use this conversation against me. Her new song "Vengeance" definitely implies she's all for retribution. Maybe I shouldn't send her an entire essay to start with. I hope I can trust the fact Velspar is madly in love with her.

He wouldn't love someone who would hurt his friends.

**Leslie:** Hi.

My full stomach turns over, knotting up in a tangle. Very articulate, Leslie. Why would she even reply? How would she even reply? I'm not giving her anything to work with.

**Colette:** Hey! What's up?

So far, I've yet to commit social suicide. This bodes well.

**Leslie:** Can I ask you some questions? About your relationship with Velspar?

**Colette:** I guess? He's right here. Do you need to talk with him, too?

I shudder, rolling to my other side in my bed, so my back is to my bedroom door.

**Leslie:** No. Please. I'd actually prefer if he didn't know about this conversation.

**Colette:** Oops. Okay. Hold on.

My brow furrows, and I don't know what I'm holding on for. Did she already tell him? Is that something you do when you're cute and in a relationship with someone super-glued to your side? Announce who you're texting the second you start?

*@colettehartsings has sent you a message* appears at the top of my screen, and I scrunch up my nose. Uh. 'Kay.

I open Instagram and blink at our empty chat in vanish mode.

**Colette:** Vel and I don't really have privacy rules, so now if he ends up with my phone for any reason, you're safe. He is also banished to the other side of the couch. Looking quite pitiful.

She sends a picture of Velspar staring forlornly toward her, her foot on his chest, one of his hands thread through his hair, the other latched around her ankle.

Okay, yes. See? I have gone to the correct person. Colette understands loving a toxic person who she apparently has no boundaries with.

I take a deep breath, let it out slowly.

**Leslie:** If you tell Kat, or anyone, I'll deny it, but I might be in love with Sean.

**Colette:** Duh.

My eye twitches, and I grip my phone. Listen here, you little twerp... Nope. Nope, I am calm. I'm not at all upset that *everyone* has decided I am in love with Sean and it's not even worth an ounce of surprise. I am here, requesting assistance. For big feelings. Because they *are* big feelings, and it's a big deal. Whether or not anyone else seems to understand that.

**Leslie:** He coerced me into marrying him. He says his feelings are toxic romantic and concerning. He says he wants to possess me. He says he loves me. I think he might be insane. Actually insane. In a medical sense. I don't know that he got enough emotional support growing up, and I think it's left him utterly out of touch with what is and isn't entirely acceptable. I don't know. I love him. I love him so much. But I'm...scared? Worried? I don't know what to do. If I'm supposed to do anything. And, well, you're the only person I know in the business of loving monsters. So, hi. Help?

Colette responds way faster and calmer than I would ever expect.

**Colette:** Are you safe?

**Leslie:** Yes. He'd never hurt me. I'm not scared because of anything like that.

**Colette:** You say he convinced you to marry him against your will...? Apart from physical safety, mental safety is also kind of a...thing?

**Leslie:** Yeah. I know. We talked. He says I can divorce him if I want to. It was a “saw the opportunity and took it” type thing.

**Colette:** Weird. I don’t want to say “cute” just yet, but aww. Look at us. Our messed up boys have no idea how to fall. They face-plant. I think it gives them brain damage.

All men have brain damage. A silly thing like *falling in love* has nothing to do with it.

**Colette:** If you’re safe and he’s not being physically or mentally abusive, I think the only thing you can do is love him. Like you told me before. What Velspar needs right now is someone willing to be there with him while he resolves past traumas and pain. While he figures things out for himself.

**Leslie:** But what if he weren’t interested in figuring things out for himself? What if he were only willing to act on your behalf and he believes everything else is fine so long as it doesn’t bother you, even if it isn’t healthy for him?

**Colette:** I don’t understand? Sean’s seeing Vel’s therapist. He has been for several months now. That means he’s trying to work on himself in some sort of capacity, right?

My mind blanks, and my eyes widen. He... He’s *what*?

**Leslie:** What do you mean he’s been seeing Sadie for several months now?

**Colette:** Sean didn’t tell you? Vel didn’t say it was a secret when he told me.

**Leslie:** He didn’t tell me.

He didn’t tell me, and with how he is, I bet he’s only been going to therapy in order to put together the step-by-step recovery plan he’s been force-feeding me. Yet again I don’t know how to reconcile the two halves of him. On one end, he’s doing *everything* for the people he cares about. And on the other, he’s clearly violently possessive and scrambling to understand how to process his overwhelming emotions.

No one should consider their love a burden on someone else. But he knows he’s a big character. He knows he pushes the limits between right and wrong.

He knew tricking me into marrying him was something Velspar wouldn’t approve of. When his restraint broke, he did it anyway.

It's concerning. He's almost entirely self-aware and drowning in the space between what he wants and what he knows he should want.

He was absolutely correct when he said his feelings for me were *concerning*.

They are violent, obsessive things. I don't know if they're at all sustainable.

**Colette:** I probably shouldn't say this. But if you are completely positive that you are safe: push buttons.

**Leslie:** What do you mean?

**Colette:** It's weird because you guys are friends, not enemies, but do you remember the way Vel and I tried each other when we all went on that trip to North Carolina?

I remember Velspar being really unclear about what he wanted, throwing a hissy fit, and Colette bringing him to his knees while Sean videotaped.

**Leslie:** Maybe.

**Colette:** Whatever's bothering you, see if there's a button that makes it go boom. If no boom, you can relax. Our monsters might put up some scary fronts to protect themselves, but on some level...they're just scared, cuddly boys, wondering why in the world they exist.

She sends another picture, and this time Velspar's resting against her thigh, hugging her leg. His eyes are closed; his lips are slightly parted. The man owns half a city. Businesses upon businesses that affect most of the country and even parts of the world. He's the mind behind all the work Sean has been putting in. But, right there, he looks entirely helpless.

I've seen him look helpless numerous times. Too many for me to bother remembering.

Now that I think about it, earlier today was the first time I saw Sean cry. He's spiraled before, sure. When he does that, I just whack him, and he snaps out of it. But breaking down like he did in the kitchen? That was new.

**Leslie:** Thank you. I think I know what I need to do.

**Colette:** Please be careful. I don't want you to get hurt if I'm wrong. I only really know my monster. And I think we both know by now that he's not anything close to a real one.

Yeah. That's for sure.

Finding some shred of resolve, I thank Colette again and let our conversation disappear.

## CHAPTER 14

♥ One of the toxic burrito layers is panic.

~~~~

Sean's warm breath skims down my neck, and—let's just say...the button pushing? Ha ha. Yeah. It is not going well? Peacefully? Healthily?

Uncertain.

Brain struggling right now.

On the one hand, I feel marginally better. On the other, um, are things worse? Am I just *okay* with it now given the way this...situation...turned?

My jaw clenches as Sean bites, and I tell the shiver reflex to shut up. It doesn't listen. I grip Sean's hands tight as the chill works through me, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. A rough breath whispers through my lungs when he clutches me harder in return. I really only have myself to blame.

Sean pulls back, looming over me in the dimness of his bedroom. Slender light from his uncovered window stretches across his face, his hair, his eyes. That bare, toned chest of his.

City lights look good on him.

Wow.

"You were saying?" he murmurs, challenging, a teeeny tiny bit...well...pissed. If this is how Sean is when he's mad at me, I think I'm a fan. And in case it needs to be said, that's one of those *not healthy things* I should be worried about while I consider pursuing a real romantic relationship with this man.

My throat stings just a bit, right where he sank his teeth. "I forgot."

"You forgot?" His eyes narrow. "You sneak into my room past midnight, sit your pretty self down on my bed, wake me up, and start grilling me like I don't have a soul. And then, when I get mad, you conveniently forget all your questions?"

"There were another few steps in there," I say. "You yanked me down. Pinned. Bit."

"Ah. Right. Yes. The *shutting you up* part. Because of the *hurting feelings* thing. And the *not wanting to cry in front of you again* stuff. I try very hard to be strong for you, little one." Remorse knits his brows, battles the general *peevedness*. "I know I'm not an ideal person, but does my mistake of forcing

you to sign papers without being entirely forthcoming warrant this much doubt? I went about something wrong because my limitations lapsed. Whatever. It didn't hurt anyone. You're free to undo it. I'm possessive. The obsessive wish to crawl inside your chest and live near your heart...bit scary...sure...but...it's not like that's a realistic concern? Why are you asking me while I'm half asleep if I actually have a pro opinion on homicide?"

"I don't know. I worried you might say *yes*?"

"No!" His eyes close, and he takes a moment. "I'm not going to kick children. Not even the really annoying ones. I'm not in the business of stabbing people even if they deserve it unless it's clear self-defense. Can I turn someone's brain into jelly? Sure. Do you try to do that through how you dress? Yep. We're the same. We get each other. Just..." He huffs. "...just stop panicking about things that don't make sense to me. Do you feel unsafe or something?"

Beneath him. After he's just bitten me. "No."

"Then calm down. If I'm freaking you out, remember you're holding my leash. Tug. I'll be good."

"Isn't that *also* a problem? Why do *I* have the right? Clearly I'm a selfish jerk who prioritizes my needs and concerns over everyone else. I freak out, and instead of waiting until at *least* tomorrow to go on a tirade, I wake you up. While you're exhausted. So what if I have an eating disorder? I'm coming to terms with that. You're babysitting me through that. But...but...even if I didn't have that problem, I'm still not a good person. I don't deserve the kind of adoration you say you have for me."

"So what?"

"Why would you love me? Why would you bother loving me? What if I get mad at someone and you do something horrible for my sake? I shouldn't have this much power. It's not okay. I'm *scared*. I'm scared because I don't deserve any of this. I'm not pure and innocent and gentle like Colette. I shouldn't be allowed to have a monster. I'm just—" My voice breaks, cracking, and the horrible truth comes clear. It's blinding and painful.

Sean isn't the problem. Sean isn't what's unnerving me about pursuing something loving and real in a relationship between us. He's not okay sometimes. No one is always okay. Sean's unending kindness for the people he cares about can kindle his capacity for malice, but he monitors the dark parts, lets them free with humor or when he has something to protect.

He's selfless. A little twisted. Probably insane.

But he's so loving it hurts to look at him.

I'm not any of the good things.

I don't deserve the place he's put me in. I'm going to hurt him. I'm going to cause him to do something awful. This evening was the first time I have ever seen him break down in tears, and it was *my fault*.

I'm the one who's not good for him.

"You're just what?" Sean asks, his low voice soothing. I don't even deserve that comfort.

"Wrong. I'm just wrong. This isn't sustainable. Either I hurt you, you hurt someone who doesn't deserve it for my sake, or you wake up, and I lose you. For all we know, *all* of the above could happen."

His eyes roll, and he tucks his head, biting me again.

"What is with all the biting!"

"Sleepy. Feel like it. Didn't make you shut up that time. Annoying." He kisses the spot, sighing heavily against my skin. His body sags, and he tiredly collects my wrists in one hand, pinning them above my head. A pout on his lips, he runs his fingers through his hair, rubs one eye, squints at me. He nips the tip of my nose. "I think I get it now."

"What?"

He yawns. "Your self worth is trash. The idea of being loved in any substantial way and the idea of giving love in any substantial way triggers you. You freak out. You begin dissecting, searching for flaws, because that's what you're trained to do. And, wow, lookie there. I'm full of them. But you love me quite a lot, so it's easy to shift that flaw-search inward with the smallest push back." He angles his head, wearily surveying me. "We following?"

Numb, I nod.

He wets his lips, continuing, "So the flaw-search turns inward, and, yikes, you're full of them, too. Can't have those and be loved. Might as well set the whole thing on fire before it's not your choice to get hurt. Except there's a lie. You can be both flawed and loved. It's okay. It's allowed. And thank goodness for that, for both our sakes."

"But—"

"No buts." He lies back down, snuggling. Letting my arms free, he curls me up against the bare skin of his chest, sneaks his fingertips beneath my pajama camisole, lets his touch graze my stomach. "If you feel like working

on any *valid* flaws, do that. If not, I don't care. I love you anyway. You've spent enough time trying to be someone's severely incorrect definition of a perfect person, Les. Just...I don't know. Do what you can, what doesn't hurt you, whenever the need arises. Example: let hubby sleep. And let hubby call himself hubby if he thinks it's funny." Yawning again, Sean lamely reaches for the blankets and draws them over us both. "Hope you don't mind the *sharing a room* before our wedding. I'm not letting go. There's another toxic trait for you to hyperfixate on and panic about. But, for the remnants of my sanity, do it in the morning."

"Sea—"

He shushes me.

I blink at the carved wooden canopy of the four-post bed I bought when I redecorated this room. I wanted something regal and elegant, something proper for a master bedroom, something comfortable for Sean.

His heat soaks into my flesh, getting deeper than bone, maybe straight to my soul. His heartbeat pumps against my shoulder. His breath caresses the roots of my hair.

I never thought I'd be sleeping here when I picked it all out.

After tonight, I wonder if I'll ever be able to bear sleeping anywhere else.



Sean whistles as he dumps a small load of fresh laundry on the couch. Shaking out one of my blouses while it's still warm, he puts it on a hanger he's already fetched from my closet. It's not even breakfast time yet. It's barely morning. What is going on?

I squint out the living room window at the dim light rising above the city streets. The sun hasn't even peaked into the day. "Se—"

"Ah!" He jumps, holding one of my skirts to his chest, jolting his wide-eyed attention toward the hallway, toward me.

We stare at each other for a few moments.

The surprise on his face melts off. "Good morning, little one."

"What are you doing?"

"Washing your SUV."

I am going to shank him. "It's barely seven."

"I've been up since five."

"What? *Why?*"

He pins my skirt onto a hanger and reaches for another article of clothing. A t-shirt, looks like one of his. He tosses it across the room onto the chair in a



lump. “Things to do.”

“Like...laundry?”

“Mhm. Laundry. Emptying the dishwasher. Checking my email. *Not* fervently staring at you while you sleep in my bed. Mostly that one. I is a good boy.” A wide yawn pulls from him, and my shoulders droop.

“Sean, you’re exhausted. Go back to bed. I’ll...I’ll do the laundry.” Yeah. I absolutely know how to do that. My youth was not spent yelling at my mother’s staff for ineffectually managing to keep my clothes from being wrinkled while crammed in an over-stuffed closet. I can iron, too.

Sean shakes out a pair of slacks, deftly folding them and laying them over a hanger without pulling his gaze off me. Lifting his chin, he references the lump of his t-shirts. “Go, then. Fold one.”

Oh dear. I was planning to google *how* once he went back to his room.

Taking a deep breath, I scowl at him, march to a shirt, and hold it up. I shake it out, because that’s what he’s doing with all my clothes, then...I fold it in half, matching up all the sides. Again. And once more. Now it’s *folded*. And small enough to fit in a drawer. I have succeeded.

Sean snorts at my efforts, grabs a shirt for himself, and does some kind of fancy voodoo magic that ends with the sleeves tucked neatly and the front of the shirt on display. It looks like the professionally folded ones in the department clothing stores at the mall. But *neater*.

I whisper a curse beneath my breath, straighten, and present the shirt I folded. “Functionally identical.”

“Uh-huh. Go back to bed, little one.” He brushes a kiss to my temple. “I’ll handle this.”

“We should just hire someone to *handle this*, so you can get more sleep.”

His brows rise, and he continues handling the laundry. “Suddenly my sleep is important to you?”

Because I’m pissed, I grab another shirt, lay it out, and study the one he did, carefully reverse-engineering the steps. “Of course your sleep is important to me. Last night was...” Amazing. But horrible. But only because *I’m* horrible. I don’t think I’ve ever been more attracted to someone in my life, and he didn’t even let it go anywhere. He teased my brain chemistry, turned my innards to mush, then cuddled.

How very *Colette and Velspar* of us.

The weirdest part is how treasured it made me feel. How treasured and guilty. Giving nothing; getting everything. That has been our entire

relationship. I guess now that I'm wrestling insecurities with a clear mind and no instructions, it's easier to have a heart.

I hate it.

"Last night was...?" Sean hangs up one of my dresses, laying it carefully with the others.

"Ugh. I asked Colette how to deal with evil, since I'm pretty sure you're more insane than Velspar, and she said to push buttons, so I was pushing buttons."

"Attempting to activate the murder button when you're the only one around. Very bold. Pity for you I keep it right between my shoulder blades, so I can't reach it on my own."

I poke him between the shoulder blades after I successfully finish folding the shirt. In hindsight, it was a bad idea.

He twists, trapping me in his arms, one around my waist, the other lacing fingers around my throat. He bites the shell of my ear as he straps my back to his chest. A whirlwind of emotions and thoughts rush through me. Not a one is actually concerned about whether or not I am going to survive the next five minutes after having activated his "murder button."

"Play with fire much?" he whispers in my ear before kissing the spot he bit.

"You're doing too much," I tell him.

"Freeing up my time would give me more leeway to plan homicide. Keeping me busy with mundane chores actually protects the world from all the awfulness that is *me*."

"Sea—"

"Isn't it fun listening to people scream? Want to help me set an elementary school on fire? I'll bring marshmallows. The particle board desks make an interesting, if toxic, smoking flavor." His thumb presses into my pulse. "But you're reluctantly attracted to toxicity now, aren't you? I'm sure you'll love it."

He unravels before I can get my bearings, and my head is spinning by the time I turn to find him morosely shaking out another one of my blouses.

"So you're still upset?" I hedge.

"Being tired makes people irritable. Yes, I'm still hurt, but I'm also in awe of your audacity. I asked you not to doubt me because you understanding that I'm not something terrible keeps me sane. Keeps me from becoming something terrible. It's like, wow, way to create a self-fulfilling prophecy,

Les. Kudos.” He plucks his phone out of his pocket. “Siri? Where’s the nearest school?”

I take his phone away and shut it off. “Okay. That’s enough theatrics.”

His brows rise. “But, *Les*, I am one hundred percent *theatrics*.”

“No, you aren’t. You’re one hundred percent kindness and mischief. It’s like...it’s like you have the whole *dark humor* façade to cover the fact you’re just a bleeding heart.” I wrench the hanger out of his hands. “You have to stop doing everything for me. Because if I want to keep this, keep *you*, I can’t become another vacuum for your energy. You...” My lips part, and I watch him, really *see* him. The exhaustion. The effort. This *pissy* side that I know he wouldn’t show to anyone else. “You don’t have to be what others expect either, Sean. You also get to be both flawed and loved without condition.”

He puffs a breath, rolling his eyes. “How entitled.” He picks up another article of clothing, firmly shakes the wrinkles out, and slips it onto another hanger. “I’m not fighting to adhere to expectations, Les. I’m filling in where I’m needed. There’s a difference. My goals are attainable. And I’m well aware that people love me unconditionally, now, even though their realization of that leads them to have psychotic breaks on account of projection.” His dry gaze catches my eye for half a moment. And it really pisses me off.

“You told me to do what I can. What doesn’t hurt me.” I grip my fist in his shirt, jerk him down toward me, and press my mouth to his. The breathless moment stretches, then I inhale his exhale. “I can do this. I can help where you need me, too.”

His fingers dance to my wrist, hold, then ease my grip from his shirt. “You’re dealing with a lot right n—”

“And you aren’t?”

His eyes close; he doesn’t release my hand. “I’m fine.”

“You’re tired. And you have to deal with *me*, so I’d argue that you aren’t *fine*.”

“I don’t consider *you* as something I have to *deal* with, little one.” He draws my fingers to his lips. “I am not perfectly sane. I do not entirely understand the world. My perceptions of right and wrong are severely weighted in order to suit me in the moment. I act impulsively and selfishly when I know I can get away with it. I am quite aware of myself and my flaws. I am not in the business of playing games I can’t win. I am not going to entertain more than I can handle.” He smiles, but it looks empty. “Unlike

the rest of you, I accept myself. I was the only one around to do it. I didn't have an olive branch to fight for. No siblings. No circumstances that would achieve anything remotely *loving* if I just followed the rules. I did everything I could, everything I was told, and I *never* received a scrap. I'm perfectly okay with my limits and my brain and my manner of existing. I use my evil for good, and I take just a little too much sometimes in reward, but I've been smart enough to surround myself with people who are forgiving of that. Don't worry about me." He lets my hand go.

"I can't *not* worry about you."

"Your concepts of care are extreme and violent."

"And yours aren't?" I snap.

His smile tips a little more toward genuine, if satirical, as he plucks another one of his shirts from the pile and throws it into the chair with the others before folding a pair of my pajama shorts. "It's like you don't hear me when I say we're cut from the same cloth. My willpower's a little more substantial than yours. You're welcome to shove against the immovable object, making things more difficult for me and less productive for you, if you want, but, in the end, I'll still be doing what I'm doing, and you'll feel guilty for making it take more of my time."

"That's low."

"What is?" he asks.

"Trying to manipulate me so I stop trying."

"Sharp as ever."

My chest does a silly thing, a silly stupid thing, a silly stupid *in love* thing. I graze my fingertips against his bicep and use the toxic I know in response to the toxic he does. "Come to bed with me. Just for a few more hours. We can forget the clothes here. I'll take care of them later. Please."

He breathes a curse.

I repeat, "Please, Sean."

His eyes close, and I watch his throat bob. "*That's* low."

"Is it weird that I don't mind begging for you? Only you?"

"Leslie."

I step a fraction closer. "You've done so much for me. I'm sorry I'm struggling to figure out where I fit when someone wants to love me without strings. When *I* want to love someone with all my soul."

He sets the shorts down, flexes his fingers. "The clothes will wrinkle. We'll have to waste time putting them in the dryer again."

“They’re nothing special, and I’m not planning to go anywhere right now. You’re more important. Let me be whatever you need.”

I’m smirking when he cracks. His nose scrunches when he turns and finds my triumphant expression, but he just rolls his eyes before kissing me. Teeth and tongues and desperation. He marches me back, trails his hands down my sides, plucks my thighs up, and wraps my legs around his waist.

I work his shirt off between breathing his air. He drops his jeans somewhere in the hall.

We fall into bed together, and I’m still grinning impishly as he rests over me, palms planted on either side of my head.

“What was that about substantial willpower?” I ask, lashes fluttering.

His teeth bare in a wild smile. “You really are terrible, little one. I love you so much.”

“I can help with chores. We can spend more time together, like this. No more me waking up alone. I don’t like that. Feels like a hook up. You’re not a hook up.”

“Yeah, I think being a hook up involves hooking up, maybe. What do I know?”

My eyes roll. Too much. He knows too much, and that’s probably what makes him insane.

Reaching up, I hug him, running my hands through his hair as he lies down and lets our bodies tangle. Bare skin and innocence. Care. Love.

It’s the scariest thing I’ve ever encountered, and I don’t know when I’ll ever feel like it’s something good or I’m someone good enough, but when his breaths slow, allowing him to give in to his exhaustion, I think that *maybe* I at least can do this much. Just what I can. What doesn’t hurt me.

We’re both figuring out our place with new emotions.

My figuring it out means panicked questions at midnight; his meant marrying me when the opportunity presented itself.

He wins when it comes to extreme responses, but I won when it came to getting him back in bed.

So I guess we match. In perfectly flawed ways.

## CHAPTER 15

♥ Why does the first day of October always feel like the calm before the storm?

~~~~

Sean is looking so much better each day, and I'm not going to say it's because I'm helping with chores...but, yeah, it's because I am fumbling through helping with chores. The ones that don't hurt my nails, obviously. We also have a pretty strict *get up together* rule in place now, which assists with the boy's seemingly compulsive wish to leave my arms at five in the morning after going to bed past *midnight*.

I imposed a minimum seven hours of sleep each day requirement. Eight is optimal. But Sean wouldn't budge from seven. He told me I should have started my debate with ten and worked my way in like a good business lady. We shook on the seven, and I cursed my inexperience.

Right now, I'm cursing my inability to make decent pancakes. I fail to understand why Sean's efforts at learning how to cook went swimmingly while mine are going...drowningly. Does the food know I hated it until recently? Do the carbs insist on paying me back for my rude comments concerning them?

"Your heat is up too high. And I think your batter is a bit too thick. Add some milk," Sean says, from behind me, near our kitchen table, or above it rather. He's standing at the top of a step ladder and doing useless things, because my dissociative panic response to the whole love, slash coerced into marrying through deceit, slash his breakdown thing made me blind to aspects of *Sean* that are thoroughly and completely harmless.

"Please be careful up there." I lower the heat and hesitate before adding a bit more milk to my pancake batter. Pancakes. I can't believe I'm the kind of girl who is making pancakes nowadays. When they're done, I plan to drench them in pure sugar, too.

Carbs and sugar. What have I become?

"Do you think I'd break an arm if I fell?" Sean ponders, peering down at me. The ceilings in this place are atrociously high. Especially when one is up on a ladder putting fake spiderwebs in all the corners. "Maybe a leg?"

"Don't you dare break anything." I flip the burnt side of my pancake up. "I don't think we'd survive on my cooking alone..."

Sean hums, loosening the filaments of his next spiderweb. “You could bring me soup and feed me while wearing a little nurse costume. ’Tis the season for many nurse costume options.”

I scoff. “Please. If you want me in any kind of costume, just ask. I’m a gracious lover.”

The distinct noise of ladder legs shaking sends my heart into overdrive, and I nearly knock the bowl of batter off the counter as I spin and find Sean hanging on for dear life, face blistering as red as his hair.

“What are you doing?” I blurt.

“What am *I* doing? What are *you* doing? Don’t say stuff like that when I’m doing dangerous things. We’re just lucky I wasn’t operating a power tool!”

“You started it!”

“I was *joking!*”

“Well, don’t joke when you’re fifteen feet off the ground!”

“It’s a character trait. I can’t help it! *Joking* is my *default setting!*” He jabs a finger in my direction. “The other side of your pancake is burning!”

Tensing, I face my frying pan and snap, “I wanted both sides to match!” as I stuff a spatula under the thing.

Sean’s laughter accompanies my scooping the totally burnt pancake on top of several other less-than-wholly-acceptable cakes. Ugh. Maybe it’s because it’s the first of October. Black cats ran around, spreading all their bad luck, and it clung to me.

It’s the balance of the universe. By insane means, I ended up married to a handsome, wonderful man who wouldn’t bat an eye if I decided I didn’t want to do anything other than watch TV on the couch every day. It’s crazy to think that *watching TV on the couch all day* was once among the only things I could stomach the idea of doing.

Now, my body lets me do chores. Make clothes. Have conference meetings with potential designers I’m introducing to my budding team. I’m set to launch my brand some time near the end of this month, and it’s going to be glorious. Immense. Overwhelmingly better than poorly-made pancakes.

Yet, somehow, the poorly-made pancakes are a beautiful part of it, too.

Sean traverses down the ladder for a moment, then returns to his collection of webs in order to hang dozens of spiders in the gauzy material. Slowly but surely, the kitchen matches the Halloween vibe he’s erected throughout the rest of the penthouse, and I finish making my pancakes.

I set the stack beside the syrup on the table. “If any spiders fall in my food, I’m going to be mad.”

He comes back down the ladder. “Are we sure they won’t improve the flavor?”

My elbow hits the defined plane of his stomach, and memories of tracing his muscles as we fall asleep hit me hard. Things are so different between us now, but in some ways they’re breathlessly the same. His hip cocks into mine as he smiles up at his work. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s...” I let my eyes roam the complex disaster of webs that thoroughly ooze from the ceiling. “...something.”

“When we have our wedding, can you wear black?”

“What?”

“A black wedding dress. With spiderwebs. I don’t know. It sounds sexy.”

“Is it a wedding or a funeral, Sean?”

His arms cross. “Okay, maybe the dress is white and the webs are black?”

Pinning my hair behind my ear, I trot to my workspace in the living room, get my tablet, and am sketching an outline into my *design ideas* folder by the time I return to the kitchen. Sean wraps himself around me from behind, arms against my plump waist. Except it’s not really *plump*. He reminds me when I start to freak out that I’m actually still underweight. Then he kisses. And kisses. And whispers tender curses into me like I’m a drug he’s living for.

It helps. Sincerely. Like so, so much.

Maybe it’s not ideal to find my worth in how someone else perceives me again, but until I’m able to manage kinder emotions on my own consistently, the fact he finds me worthy of his adoration while I’m not starving myself makes a huge difference. I might not deserve it, but if I’m beautiful to him, I can survive.

“Veil or no veil?” I ask.

“Could it just be, like, a fall of spider silk? Maybe tattered?”

I pause my sketching. “Okay, so, when did you start thinking I was *goth*?”

“You’d look great in a goth style.”

“Obviously, but still.”

He chuckles, low, near my ear. It sends heat stretching through my chest. “What do you want for your dress?”

“Something like...” Chewing my lip, I change my drawing color to red, put a vague web design from the waist into a flowing train. The design is



naturally slimming, far less fairytale than Colette's. Quite a touch more risqué. Bared shoulders, lower neckline. Regal. No tulle. "This?"

Sean swears before his warm breath hits my ear. "So about the proper proposal...what are you looking for?"

"Take me out on a date. Give me flowers. Involve my friends. Also, you're picking my ring from a selection that I can email you."

"Do send."

I close out of my drawing app and open up my email, gathering links I've already had prepared. "You can't do it on our next date. Since we've not left the house to do anything fun for weeks, I'll know what you're planning. You have to try and make the proposal at least a little bit of a surprise."

"Given the fact you just said that, doing it on our next date would be a surprise because you just excluded it from expectation—the definition of a surprise is unexpected."

"You don't want to take me out on multiple dates?" I frown.

"We do everything together. What makes a date a *date*?"

There's an annoying point. "*Ugh*. I want to do something fun. We should go on another road trip. Drag Kat with us. I'm cooped up. I'm wasting away."

"You want a triple date proposal out of state?"

"It couldn't be a triple date. Kat is adamant that her and Reg are not a 'thing'."

"Reminds me of someone else I know, who is now happily married to her *not a thing*."

I roll my eyes. "Kat is a perfectly stable individual, though."

"So that crazy gleam I sometimes see in her eyes..."

I sniff. "Purely illusion." Or not. Okay, I have read some of her literature now. Maybe Kat's got a wild side that fits with us a little too perfectly. I imagine being physically incapable of talking comes with immense frustrations. I, of all people, know that appearance is not a reliable indication of mental stability. "Use that curly head of yours. Make up something romantic. Even toxic romantic is fine. Set something on fire in my honor."

"I'll have to do a Reddit search and locate ideas."

"While you're there, do a search on whether or not you're an a-hole if you plot your proposal in accordance with suggestions provided by twelve-year-olds."

Sean slips away from me, leaving me chilled as he sits in front of what

might soon be cold burnt pancakes. “I think we already know the answer.”

“Absolutely?” I flutter my lashes as I take my own seat.

He pulls three sad pancakes onto his plate and beams. “Without a doubt.”

## CHAPTER 16

♥ Ew, gross. Why is everyone in love?

~~~~

“So?” Colette rests her cheek against her hand and writes something in the notebook sitting on the wicker pool table between us. Her little nose scrunches up, and she scratches the line out, writing something else in the slim space above the discarded words.

I pull my attention off *the men*, who are acting like *children* where they’re splashing around in Velspar’s pool. After pancakes this morning, I went stir crazy, told Sean to *get in my SUV*, and dragged him to what was my safe place before home became my safe place. Kat and Reg are on their way, because I messaged Kat and demanded her presence. Funny that they were together. Hm. Yes. How very *not a thing* of them, indeed.

“Do Kat and Reg bother you?” I ask, ignoring that so of hers, because ew no we are not talking about Sean and me.

“What?” Colette radiates pink peace and pearly innocence. Even her frustration at not getting whatever she’s working on the way she wants it doesn’t do more than wrinkle that little nose of hers. If she knows what I’m talking about, she’s an excellent actress.

Turning back toward the guys, I tell myself that Sean doesn’t look attractive while lunging after pool toys, less so when he leaps on Velspar’s back, and obviously entirely not so when Velspar plunges him underwater. “You know. The fact that Kat and Reg are most likely acting out the contents of our books and absolutely embracing the content of yours in ‘secret’. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Why would it bother m-m-me?” Colette asks. “Katina is a-llowed to d-d—go out with whoever s...she wants.”

Sean flips Velspar, rising out of the water and shaking droplets from his curls.

“Right. But. That whole thing that happened with Reg before...”

Colette frowns, finally lifting her attention off her book. “We’ve come to terms with that,” she clips. “You were the one, the one who s-said he was just like the rest of you.”

“Exactly. Like the rest of us. And Kat’s...you know.”

Colette's expression turns icy. "What do I know, Les?"

My stomach churns, so I roll my eyes, flip my hair, scoff. "Um. Voice of reason, much? If it's not fiction, she doesn't tolerate it. I cannot tell you how many times she's prefaced our book conversations with *I'd kill a man for doing this in real life, but...* It's like she wants to make sure I know 'toxic equals bad' and I better stay on my best behavior. And you two are, like, ride-or-die friends. It doesn't bother you that she's going out with a guy who did something that almost made Velspar cut him off on your behalf, and it also doesn't bother *her*?"

Colette's lips pinch, but the iciness in her expression has filtered away—giving me room enough to breathe. Her attention skids to Velspar, softens. Overwhelming *love* washes into her so violently it threatens to steal the breath I've just found away. "S...she d-d-doesn't know."

"What?" I blurt.

"I never, never told her. It's not important, right? Reg d-doesn't remember. It was a lapse in judgment while he was d-d-drunk."

If I've learned anything from geeking out with Kat about books, that looks like the set up for a huge plot twist. Kat's just not like us. She doesn't have the messed up brain thing that sees a red flag in real life and says *mm, sexy*. She's, how to put this kindly, entirely sane?

There's a difference between *wild* and *off her rocker*.

"Are you not going to tell her?" I ask

"Why would I?"

"What if she finds out at the worst possible moment, and their romance collapses?"

Colette gives me a long stare, like *I'm insane*. Well, sister, have you seen the guys we fell for? Yes, we are. Laughing, she shakes her head. "Ssspeaking of crazy, how's marriage?"

My face turns red, and I throw a quick look toward all entrances and exits. Once I'm certain no one is coming within earshot, I thread my fingers together against my skirt. "Fine." I clear my throat. "Innocent." I fiddle with my thumb nail. "We've been sharing a bed ever since I...panicked and pressed buttons. Nothing went boom. I discovered I was projecting my fears about myself on him. And now we cuddle like children."

Colette's smile takes on a knowing edge that makes me regret being honest. She draws a heart in the corner of her notebook. "Yeah. That sounds about right."

“Are you serious?”

A low hum leaves her. “The m-m-morning a-fter I pressed, I pressed buttons, he ssst-ole my first kiss, and we’ve been, been sharing a bed for cuddles ever s...since.”

Well, I’ll be danged. There’s an actual scientific method to monster taming. “What’s the next step?”

Her head tilts, curiosity rippling in those baby blue eyes. Heat erupts in her cheeks. “M-m-m-marriage. I-I-I th-ink—”

A dripping shadow appears behind me while I’m amusing myself with the tomato. Dread swells before I look up into Velspar’s amber gaze. Threats line his sharp smile well before malice laces his words. “Are you tormenting my darling, Les?”

I jut my bottom lip. “Please. We’re *friends*. Go drown your possessive rump already.”

Arching a brow, Velspar steps away from me, meets Colette, lifts her flushed face on the tips of his damp fingers, and proceeds to make Colette’s blush contagious. I look away from the gratuitous PDA with a huff. Show offs.

It’s not like I’m jealous.

It’s just that the freak I’m in love with is currently riding a blow-up orca, and I simply cannot resolve my feelings on that matter. My half-sunshine, half-space idiot. The deadly combination of dark matter and brilliant gas.

It’s unfair what his smile and the unhinged spark in his eye do to me.

“Where are Kat and Reg?” Velspar asks, assumedly after breaking for air.

Colette, still entranced, doesn’t stutter a word. “They’re still on their way. Katina says they stopped somewhere for breakfast.”

Oh? Breakfast? A *late* breakfast? Katina, you dog.

Velspar releases a brief *huh*, and I know we’re thinking what Colette would never so long as Kat keeps up this whole *not dating* business. Imagine trusting someone so completely you take them at their word, regardless of the surrounding evidence. It’s the difference between when Colette told me her relationship was maintaining *innocence* and when Sean told me. When she said it, I rolled my eyes. When Sean did...

Considering he lied to me in order to coerce me into paper-signing, maybe I ought to reevaluate how much I trust him.

Considering *trusting him* is the only thing giving me stability in this life, maybe I won’t.

“Hey,” Reg says, suddenly behind me, and I jerk out of my skin as I look up at the giant. His dark eyes fall across my face, and he nods his greeting. Kat’s hands are moving in a conversation with Colette that everyone else at the table can understand, just not me.

“Hi, Kat,” I cut in, smiling.

She grins, waves, continues her spiel, and...so this is what it’s like for her to be on the outside.

Interesting.

Anxiety pricks, unfurling across my skin in the uncomfortable silence, so I slip away toward the pool and cross my arms as Sean—on his orca—kicks his way to the edge. “You’re not five,” I snap.

“I know. I can do this *and* stay up till midnight. Isn’t life grand?”

I scan the others, the flailing hands, the full-body motions, the laughter. All the things I wasn’t invited to on the other side of the lounge, and sigh. “No.”

“You’re capable of learning the language.” Sean slips off his orca, hitting the water with a splash that makes me step back. Breaking the surface, he pushes his curls back and rests his folded arms on the pool deck, smiling up at me. “They’re not excluding you maliciously.”

“I know that. And I’ve been trying to learn. It’s just...”

“We’ve got a lot on our plates right now and less practice time than a certain Reginald who sticks to our new kitten like glue?”

I huff. “Yeah.”

“You want to know something positively scandalous?”

My interest piques. “Only always.”

“I’m half certain he discreetly calls her...cat.” Sean moves his fingers to the corner of his mouth and pulls the shape of whiskers. “Like. *Kitty* cat.”

I gasp, tuck my skirt beneath my legs, and crouch, lowering my voice. “Are you serious?”

He nods.

“That’s absolutely adorable.” I scoff. “And Colette believes her when she denies there’s something going on? Ridiculous.”

“Well, in all fairness, what did we look like while you were in denial?”

My lip curls. “Perfectly good friends. Close, platonic, normal *friends*.”

“And the point is...” he trails off.

Groaning, I mutter, “It’s not a thing until she wants it to be a thing, and even if it is a thing, it’s not a public thing until they want it to be a public

thing.”

“What a good little girl.”

My face heats, and I make sure that the rest of the group is still firmly on the other side of the lounge. They are. But Reg’s dark gaze is on us. His eyes meet mine, and he lifts a brow. Then one hand. *You okay?*

My eyes roll, but I throw him a yes. “The audacity.”

“I agree. How dare one of our friends care about you. Want me to waterboard him?”

“As if you could. He’s basically twice your size.”

Sean shrugs. “With half my capacity for malevolence.”

I can’t help myself. I pat Sean’s wet curls, letting my fingers slip through the silken strands. His eyes close as he lifts his face to me like a contented puppy, and the tension runs out of my limbs. He cracks an eyelid. “Don’t.”

“Don’t?” Don’t what? My fingers still.

“Why?” Velspar says, and I jolt, turn, find his foot positioned inches from my back. Yet again, I didn’t hear him approach, but I guess Sean did. I scramble away from certain danger, and he sucks his teeth, pouting at Sean. “You ruined my fun.”

“It’s not fun for Les to ruin her pretty clothes. You can pull that stuff with our doll, but—”

Velspar’s eyes light, then he turns on his heel.

In a matter of moments, he’s got Colette in his arms, shrieking his name, clinging to his neck, and laughing. “Vel! No! Stop it! What are you—” She gasps. “It’s cold! D-d-d-don’t!”

“It’s okay. I’ll keep you warm.”

“You can’t even, can’t even keep your *own* body warm, Vel!”

I step a safe distance from the commotion’s splash zone.

“You know how to stop me,” Velspar notes, a mere foot from the edge.

Colette searches his eyes, and I wait for her to—gag—do that whole *please* stuff. Instead, she laces her fingers in his hair and throws her weight toward the water. A snort explodes out of me at the look on Velspar’s face when he realizes he can’t stop himself from falling in.

They hit the surface, break it, and the only thing that poor man worries about is lifting his girl above the waves while her laughter peels. It tugs a grin out of him, and it’s so sweet I might leave here with diabetes.

My eyes roll off the idiots and find Sean watching me, cheek resting against his arm, dark green eyes trained and impassable. The barest hint of a

smile softens his lips, and if diabetes is marked by sudden heart palpitations...I might need to see a doctor.

Kat touches my arm, and before I can look at her face, she has her phone positioned in front of me. My eyes go huge.

**Katina:** Vel is going to propose to Colette sometime this month.

Biting my tongue, I make sure my tone is impossibly low before I whisper, "Really?"

She nods. Types. Holds the phone up again.

**Katina:** I don't think we're going to have much time to plan anything between the question and the wedding. If we aren't ready, they're going to elope.

I grimace, and Kat releases a silent snort. Pulling my phone out of my purse, I tap furiously and show her the screen.

**Leslie:** A bird might have spilled the seeds. So...

I bring up my sketches for Colette's dress, then the progress pictures. With each one, Katina's eyes get larger, and for some reason her usual silence feels far more...daunting. My heart is pounding by the time I show her the nearly-complete dress that is presently waiting on a few final details in my living room.

Kat grips my arm, half shakes me, then lets her fingers fly across her phone screen.

**Katina:** WHAT THE HECK, LES?? ARE YOU SERIOUS.

"I-I'm sorry." My entire body turns leaden.

She smacks me in the arm, types more, shoves her phone too close for me to see it clearly. Once I've stepped slightly back, the words focus.

**Katina:** You're supposed to tell me this stuff. I thought it was so sketch when you took OUR measurements. Where's mine? Yours?

**Leslie:** Ours will be easier to make, so I haven't started yet but...

I show her the sketches I have prepared, and if she could speak, I think she'd be squealing. Her entire body vibrates, her nails digging into the soft flesh of my upper arm.

**Katina:** Do you have EVERYTHING planned?

**Leslie:** More or less.

**Katina:** Food?

I pull up my spreadsheet, which outlines several options for catering, reliant on different themes, each with slight variations depending on the expected season, indoor and outdoor locations, designated shopping carts



with decorations for every choice, photographer portfolios, invitation designs that—again—fit the thematic options. “The dress is obviously not up for debate because I spent basically a million hours deciding *exactly* what fit her, but I wanted her to have a selection for everything e—” I stop when I locate the aghast expression filling Katina’s brown eyes. “I’ve overstepped.”

Numbly, she nods, and my chest pinches.

**Katina:** But in the best way ever. This takes so much stress off. Do you have a bachelorette party planned?

“I...can, but that’s up to the maid of honor, isn’t it?” I whisper.

**Katina:** Parties are stupid.

I blink. “Doesn’t Colette share that opinion? Isn’t that why you’re perfect to plan one she’d like?”

Kat’s brow jumps, and her entire body translates that I have a point through the way her shoulders rise and her expression shifts.

**Katina:** You’re in charge of the obligatory lingerie gift. I would, but I think I’d vomit.

Melting Velspar’s brains is one of my favorite pastimes. I nod.

**Katina:** Her mother will be there, so try not to make it too racy.

Not...racy...underwear. Specifically honeymoon underwear. The underwear designed with an expectation of raciness. Got it.

**Katina:** I don’t know exactly when Vel’s going to propose. I just know it’s going to be soon.

**Leslie:** I can have her dress finished this week and ours done early next week.

Mine is going to be a touch odd since I have been informed that I’m not allowed to measure myself. It’s going to be a lot of estimates and pinning, but it’s probably less work than scheduling breakdowns throughout the whole ordeal.

**Katina:** Perfect. I’ll come by and try mine on once it’s done. What’s your address?

Come by? As in. To my home? With...

My gaze trails to Sean, who is blissfully third wheeling. Or maybe he’s double-dating with the orca. Unclear. He is holding a plastic flipper.

Yeah, I can’t imagine why I don’t really want Kat to know about my involvement with *that* right now. I’m still sorting out how I feel. We’re so different it almost feels like a joke, and that’s the last thing I want it to be. It’s bad enough Colette is in on the punchline. Wincing, I tap out a response.

**Leslie:** Maybe I could come by your place instead?

**Katina:** Ah. Right. I forgot. The whole toxic mother thing. Okay.

She texts me her address, and we exchange a devious look, the previous feeling of exclusion well and completely in the past.

## CHAPTER 17

♥ Healing is a process of little realizations, and I think I'm finally making them. One by one.

~~~~

It's the part where you're *a part* of something, I think. It's why people bother with other people, making relationships, falling in love. It's the part where you're curled up on the couch, watching *Coraline* with your husband, barely paying attention to anything but the way he's loosely braiding your hair, only looking up from your phone to laugh when he whispers *your mom* every time the Other Mother comes on screen. It's the hot chocolate and the cozy blankets and the falling asleep once the text in the email you're answering blurs. It's the waking up in bed with an awful, stale chocolate taste in your mouth and a wonderful, warm feeling in your chest.

It's the arms that tangle perfectly around you as you come to. The fact it's clear your goof of a husband brushed your hair before carrying you into bed.

It's his heartbeat.

His scent.

This home.

With every correspondence that brings me closer to my team of designers, marketers, and planners; with every text about an utterly insane book I simply must read yesterday; with every stitch on a gown that my friend will wear when she marries my other friend; with every way someone draws me in and makes me feel *a part* of something, I get it.

I finally *get* it.

The way I was living in an effort to rise above *all* of this, to be *better* than every single person who makes life worth enduring, was unequivocally awful.

Sadie says that beauty is a concept every person must define for themselves, and I think I'm getting closer to figuring out what she means. Beauty isn't so much something you see; it's something you feel.

Sean's laugh. Kat's hands. Colette's voice. Velspar's eyes. Reg's sincerity.

Beauty is outrageous books, burnt pancakes, and riding plastic pool orcas.

Beauty is living in a body that allows me to experience beautiful things.

I get it now.

I get it.

Around me, Sean stirs. His lithe body stretches, and he pulls me a fraction tighter against his chest. His lips part in my hair, half-kiss, half-words. “Morning, little one.”

“Good morning.”

He locks my leg to him, thigh against thigh, skin against skin beneath my pajama shorts, and I flutter like I don’t care that I cried when I realized the thigh gap I’d starved myself within an inch of death for was gone. I flutter and remember the firm way Sean planted kisses and murmured gentle words while I sobbed into my hands.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, those moments sometime last week were the most erotic I have ever experienced, and it never went further than his fingers digging deep into new fat, curses, *look at mes*, and *you are so unbelievably beautiful and perfect that sometimes when I look at you I forget how to breathe*.

The memory alone makes me shiver.

“Coffee creamer for breakfast,” Sean murmurs into my chestnut-turning hair. “Cookie cereal. Have they made spoons out of candy canes? I want to order candy cane spoons for the holiday season. It’s a...” His tone drifts, still half-asleep. “...special occasion.”

That sounds amazing in all the ways me from two months ago would think it sounds awful. Me from two months ago would think it’s gross, full of sugar, no, why would *anyone* want to put that in their body? Disgusting. Revolting. How dare you speak that specific collection of words in my presence?

Me from two months ago was a sad creature. A tired creature. A hurting creature.

“That sounds gross,” I murmur into Sean’s skin before kissing him over his heart.

His fingers flex, dig into my back a bit. His short nails graze my flesh, and I realize one of his hands is beneath the hem of my camisole as his grip moves up, rolling the fabric. His hold locks around my shoulder. “It sounds amazing. Whimsical. I’m certain it’s what fairies eat.”

“Diabetes in the form of brown milk.”

“Brown...milk?”

“The cookie cereal you have turns the milk brown. Because of the chocolate chips. It’s about three hundred times more sugar than a person

needs in a given week, and—”

He separates us, tired eyes gleaming. The distance leaves me cold. The bliss in his expression is the only thing keeping me from pitifully burrowing back against his body. “You tried it. My cookie cereal,” he says, exorbitantly happy.

I wet my lips, try to get the stale hot chocolate taste out of my mouth. “I put maybe *ten* in a petri dish. My milk was brown by the time I got my spoon.”

“You must have pretty vehement opinions about straight chocolate milk.” His nostrils flare when he sucks in a breath. “Chocolate milk. With cookie cereal. And a peppermint spoon!” He’s popping up out of bed before those horrible, horrible words compute.

I wrap the blankets around my shoulders and tuck myself against the body heat clinging to his sheets. “What happened to green smoothie Sean?”

“Green smoothie Sean was a sad boi. You have surpassed such delicate treatment.” He pulls a pair of jeans out of his dresser, tugs them on. Haphazardly, he plucks a random t-shirt from his drawer and pulls it over his head. He’s in the bathroom brushing his teeth before I can bear the idea of crawling out of bed.

Mid-October chill snuck its way in. We need to turn the heat up.

“What day is it?” I ask from my cocoon.

“The twelfth,” he says around his toothbrush.

Cursing, I shoot up out of bed. “I’m having breakfast with the girls at that one place. With the pancakes. The pancake place!” I trip out of the sheets, leaving the doors open as I charge through the chilled house and into my room. I grab something out of my closet, stare at it, get something else. No. Nope. No, no...maybe.

“Pancake place? *iHOP*?” Sean stands in my doorway, and I jump.

“Yes, that’s right. *iHOP*. I’m changing, Sean!”

He holds up a hand and turns his back on me.

I decide that’s good enough and slip out of my pajamas, cursing when the outfit I picked doesn’t zip up past my bra strap.

“You okay?” Sean asks.

I let out all my air, suck everything in. “Can you zip me up? I...haven’t worn my nice clothes for a couple weeks. And I think my casual at home clothes are...kinder.”

Toothbrush hanging out of his mouth, Sean takes me in. His foamy smile

makes my heart skip a beat. Approaching, he scoops my hair over my shoulder and undoes the zipper down to the hem of my underwear. “Wear something that fits, or wear your casual clothes.” He doesn’t give me a chance to reply before he’s spitting in the bathroom sink across the hallway.

“Excuse me. I’m going out for a nice breakfast.”

“You’re going to iHOP.” He rinses his mouth out, stretches his neck, rubs a sore spot while flicking water off his toothbrush. “With your friends.”

“I like to look nice in public.”

“You always look nice.”

Well, I wouldn’t really know, now would I? I have limited mirror exposure. I am a child whose gaming console has been crudely ripped away in order to curb addiction. “Sean, I am perfectly all right. I will go shopping with the girls *after* breakfast. And I won’t even cry. But I would like to wear a nice dress out with my friends.”

“When do you need to leave?”

“In an hour.”

He meets my eyes. “Okay then. Fix the dress.”

My brow furrows. “What?”

A lopsided, patient smile lifts the corner of his mouth. He spins his toothbrush between his fingers. “Sorry. Are there not two finished bridesmaid dresses, one finished wedding gown, and one half-finished wedding gown in our living room? You can’t do something about sizing that up in an hour?”

My entire world crashes down on top of me. My lips part. My heart thumps.

I have limited fabric available here. But I have so much extra lace it’s insane. It would be too simple to tear out the zipper, put in a few inches of a lace backing. Could I make it work? Make it look like something I didn’t do just because I couldn’t fit in it anymore?

I gasp.

“I’ll put in a layered skirt.” I slip out of the dress, hold it in front of me.

Sean coughs.

I ignore him. My mind is whirling. “I’ll layer the skirt and make it lace up like a ballet slipper.” I could add some detail to the bust, the sleeves. Yes. Perfect. It will be absolutely perfect.

I march out of my bedroom and toward my work station in the living room without another thought. It’s only when Sean—red-faced to the tint of his hair—hands me his t-shirt without meeting my eyes that I realize I am

only in my bra and underwear. It's when I take the shirt without quite meeting his eyes and feel its heat that I realize it's the one he was just wearing.

Without another word, I put it on, he disappears back down the hall to get another, and I pull seams. One stitch at a time, the old way unravels, making room for something new.

## CHAPTER 18

♥ Isn't love just a sickly sweet mess, similar to a coffee made by Sean?

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“What do you *mean* Velspar is *proposing* to Colette *right this second*?” I snap at Katina once we are well out of earshot, heading deeper onto the property, toward where Colette’s mother, Helen, has been living since she left some nursing home’s twenty-four-seven care. Or something.

I don’t actually know the details. Just that she got in a car accident, wasn’t walking for a while, and now she is.

Katina pauses, sighing heavily, and makes my phone beep for the second time since she dragged me out the door.

**Kat:** Exactly what I typed.

I blink at the words, twitch a little bit. “In their *kitchen*?”

**Kat:** Yes?

“Unacceptable!” I turn on my heel.

Kat’s got me by the arm, adamantly keeping me from moving another step. Her eyes translate murderous thoughts, so I glare right on back.

“It’s a *proposal*. That’s not supposed to happen in a *kitchen*.”

Kat’s expression twists up, a distinct flare of *why not*?

“How is a *kitchen* romantic?”

She releases me after making sure I won’t barge back down to the main residence and drag Velspar out by his ear for *daring* to propose without employing even a scrap of effort. I really ought to do that. I really, really ought to.

My phone beeps.

**Kat:** Why’s it have to be theatrical if they’re in love?

I thought Kat and I had a certain understanding, given our mutual taste in literature. I suppose not. “Does Velspar even have a ring?”

Kat shrugs.

I swear, lift my hand to my face, pinch the bridge of my nose.

Kat begins typing on her phone again and spends the next ten minutes explaining that Colette’s mother and her got together and coordinated a list of *eighty-three* tasks for Velspar to complete before they’d so much as condone the relationship. Clearly, heroes receive three tasks in order to prove their



mettle. Villains require an additional eighty.

I'm shocked by the revelation that Velspar put *that much effort* into making sure the people Colette cares about would know she is precious to him. From what I've seen, no amount of disapproval would wrench her from his side, so on some level...he was just being kind. But, well, that's Velspar.

Kind without a clue what to do with it in a world where *kindness* finds punishment, not reward.

I take a calming breath, tell myself it's *fine* if Colette is happy with a kitchen proposal, and nod solidly. "Okay. So. Wedding. Probably winter, right?"

**Kat:** We'll be lucky if it's not tomorrow.

I narrow my eyes at the screen. "Speak your secrets, woman."

Katina lifts a brow.

**Kat:** How long would you be able to share a house with the man you're in love with without going all the way?

So far, two months. And. Okay. Yeah. My face burns. There's heat and lips and skin and touch, closeness without *close enough* lining every part of these past two months. "Fair point."

**Kat:** How much minimum time do we need to talk them into?

"Well, if they don't have anyone to invite who would need to coordinate time for travel, I need a week. Money talks as far as reservations and accelerated orders are concerned. Velspar will give me whatever I tell him to in order to make it happen." I gasp, pale. "Kat, don't take this the wrong way. Like, please don't, but it's not *just* a wedding. This is also a huge promotional opportunity for both Colette's career as a rising artist and the launch of my brand."

Kat blinks, looks at her phone.

**Kat:** Yeah, no. That makes total sense. You really only need a week with that aspect included?

Relief swells. I ignore it. Because, um, yikes. I might be planning a wedding, launching my brand, waiting on my own proposal, and situating how absolutely *all* of that fits into the plots the boys have regarding the dark side of this city's leaders. All before the end of the month. I swallow, harden my resolve. "A week is plenty of time, if that's what they want."

Kat grins, flashing bright white teeth.

**Kat:** Beautiful and fierce. I love it.

My chest turns light, airy, and I beam. Beautiful and fierce. That hits

different coming from a girl who means every word she doesn't say. I don't know that I've ever felt more confident. Clasp hands, we nod—sisters in arms—then we continue toward Colette's mother's house in order to confirm the final bits of our plans.



Colette is on a horse.

I was not expecting that when I was summoned back to their mansion the next day, but there she is, waving exuberantly. Is the horse in the wedding? The ring bearer, perhaps? Colette's family seems to consist of *mother*, the end, so maybe getting a horse for a ring bearer will keep Sean from having to do it? And, well, Velspar does have that *thing* about dogs, so a *horse* is the next logical option.

Yeah, okay, this is perfectly normal. I wonder if any of the churches I have selected will allow a horse in the sanctuary. May have to opt for an outdoor location.

Stepping out of my SUV, I lift my sunglasses and meet Velspar in the yard where he's holding a training rope. "Hey," I comment.

"Sup?" he asks.

"Horse?" I query.

Velspar shrugs. "She named it."

This information, somehow, answers nothing and everything. Colette encountered a horse and named the horse, then Velspar made the horse hers because you can't name an animal around Velspar without him asking if you want it. I learned that when we went to the zoo for a field trip and I made the mistake of calling one of the monkeys *Sean 2.0*.

With an evil glint in his pale-toned eyes, Velspar said, *Want him?* and it's a good thing I was old enough to reply with: *ew, no*. I can't even imagine what my mother would have done had I come home with a monkey.

I sip the mocha coffee Sean made me before I left. It's probably fifty percent creamer. And there's an edge of peppermint that suggests he not only located those candy cane spoons yesterday but also got them in our house within the past twenty-four hours. Without my knowledge. Dang Sean.

Velspar watches me sip for too long, so I lift my cup. "What? You want some?"

His smile splits across his sharp features, rounding the edges of his jaw a fraction. "Low fat?"

I mutter, "...no. Enough sugar to kill a guinea pig, actually. Sean made

it.”

He kisses my temple, and my heart skips. I lock my eyes on him, but he’s already forgotten I’m here. “Darling,” he calls, reeling the sleek, copper creature Colette is on in. “I think Ember needs some rest. Les is here so can we talk about the thing?”

“Yes! The thing! Let’s.” Colette dismounts with the grace of a woman who has been riding all her life, and since I sincerely doubt she was ever on a horse prior to whenever *Ember* appeared, I’m jealous. Physically, she’s strong. She’s a woman who never abused herself, even when the world did. A woman whose hard work shows in her body.

It’s another irrefutably beautiful thing I would have turned my nose up at not long ago.

Velspar drops the beast off with someone I guess he hired to take care of the less-than-enjoyable parts about having a horse, then we make our way into his glistening parlor. Sheet music lays scattered across the piano, and I glance over it as I reach the couch.

“Love, You”

That’s a cute title. I wonder what it sounds like.

Sitting on one couch, I cross my ankles, sip my drink, ignore the PDA when Velspar pulls Colette onto his lap before she can sit beside him on the couch across from me.

“Vel, behave yourself,” Colette whispers.

“What? You were just on a horse. Don’t get stinky horse on the couch.”

What’s this? A reasonable excuse? Shame my potential candy cane spoon has melted. I would have liked to gag myself with it.

“So?” I ask, not really sure why I’m here, as in *just* me. If this were a *wedding announcement*, wouldn’t the *entire* gang be here? I expected an impromptu party. A text of *come hither at once* sent to the group chat Velspar made when we were basically three. He nicknamed it *Hooligans* as though we were his daft goons.

With no consideration for the fact she’s on Velspar’s lap, Colette clasps her hands and vibrates. “We’re getting married!”

I blink. I stare. My brow furrows.

Colette’s smile drifts away, and Velspar’s expression transforms into stark aggression.

Glare fixed on me, Velspar asks, “Problem, Les?” If I grind up Velspar’s voice right in this moment, it could be used to polish diamonds.

“Uh. Yes. Where’s everyone else?” My spine straightens, and a horrible thought occurs to me. What if everyone else *already* knows? Kat knew, which makes sense, but Velspar told Sean about his plans well in advance, too. I’ve been hearing everything from third-party sources since the start. Did I do something wrong? Is this some kind of warning? Some kind of *we don’t want you at our wedding?*

“We’ll tell them later, once we know what we’re telling them.” Velspar flicks his hand, like it’s of no consequence.

Colette’s blue eyes bore into me, searching, peeling away everything I am. Cautiously, she says, “I know you’re busy ssst-aring Amare, but you’re the person who knows the, knows the stuff.”

The...stuff?

I am not following, and I am almost out of my eighty percent creamer coffee.

“Les, we’d like to get married on Halloween. Because we’re both autumns. And we’d like you to help us with the wedding. Because we are absolutely not actually autumns.”

Colette’s lip juts, and she frowns at Velspar. “You ruined the joke.”

“I think she’s panicking, darling.”

“Oh.” Colette regards me for another moment. “How can you...tell?”

“Her posture went from good and natural to ‘cosplaying a streetlamp’.”

Colette’s head tilts as she accepts that horrid reason, and I try to rediscover my *good and natural* posture.

“You...want me to help with the wedding?” I ask.

“Obviously,” Velspar comments. “Who else could manage to put something show-stopping together in the next eighteen days? We want it to be uniquely us, dramatically breathtaking, cover-story appropriate. We’re planning to sing our vows, and I want it on the news. But also private.”

“Vel.” Colette stops him before his demands turn into even more of an oxymoron.

“What?” he queries, innocent and demanding.

Colette’s head shakes, but her smile glows, more than usual perhaps. “It’s going to be s...s-small. But extravagant. I’d like to use it to promote m-m-my work, and if it’s f-feasible, could it help A-mare? Or is there not enough time for your brand to m-m-make the clothes?”

“Shut up.” My mouth falls open. I jolt to my feet, look between them.

Colette’s eyes reflect nervous surprise; Velspar’s indicate a clear *tread*

*carefully.*

“Kat told you?” I blurt.

Confusion ripples across Colette’s face while Velspar continues threatening me with his icy gaze. She asks, “Told m-m-me what?”

“We haven’t told her yet,” Velspar says. “I assume she already knows what happened, but we’ve only formally told Helen. We planned to tell you, see if our date was possible, then tell everyone when we had a better grasp on what needed to be done.”

I curse, comb my fingers through my hair, and set my mostly empty cup on the coffee table. “Laptop. I need a laptop. Thank goodness I’ve been working in the cloud.” I huff. “You really should have told me on the phone, so I could bring my own stuff.” When no one moves, I snap my fingers. “Velspar, *laptop*. Colette, *come here*.” I pluck my phone out of my purse, go to my images, and flinch when *my* nearly finished dress appears first.

“Oh my,” Colette whispers beside me, hesitant, eyes tracing the vibrant red trim, the illusion of spiderwebs woven into the train. “That’s... It’s beautiful.”

My eyes roll. “Calm down. I’m not putting you in *that*. That’s...” I cough, clear my throat, mutter, “That’s...well...mine. For. You know. Whatever.”

“Yours?” Colette asks, breathless.

“Yes,” I grate. “Now, hush about it.” I glance toward where Velspar exited and swipe to the photo of Colette’s dress once I’m sure he hasn’t returned.

Colette claps her hand to her mouth when the full fall of fairytale lace and silk appears. Soft pinks, crystal cherry blossoms, *perfection*. “*Oh*,” she breathes.

“Yep.”

“That’s...”

“*Yep*.”

Voice trembling, she says, “Your d-d-d-designers have already...for m... me...?”

I scoff. “Oh, honey.” Warmth spreads, caramel thick, in my chest. “I made this for you myself. Is it perfect? Or is it perfect?”

Eyes huge, Colette says, “It’s perfect.”

Velspar returns, lifting his laptop, and Colette bounds into his arms, nearly making him drop it. “*Vel*, she *made* my wedding dress. Herself. Can

you even believe it?” she blurts, gripping the stupid tattered coat thing that Velspar’s been wearing some variation of since we were basically two.

Unsurprised, Velspar cocks his head. “Well. I guess there have been no secrets. Remind me to castrate Sean later.” Colette pushes him; he doesn’t budge, but a heart-melting smile warms his eyes. “I told you she wasn’t all bad, darling.”

“I know s...she’s not. Ssst-ill. It’s incredible. It m—had to have taken hours.”

“Naturally. Les doesn’t pull punches or cut corners.” Velspar’s gaze meets mine, approving, gentle. “That’s just who she is.”

Who I am.

I’ve been wondering about *who I am* for a while now, ever since my world flipped upside down and everything I knew redefined itself as toxicity I had to let go of. *Who I am* is someone who would do anything for her friends, someone skilled enough to rely on, someone Velspar appreciates, someone Sean loves. Who I am is so much more than *pretty*.

My face turns as red as the trim on my wedding gown. Pushing my hair behind my ear, I hold out my hand for Velspar’s laptop. “If you think one stupid dress is incredible, get ready to be amazed.”

## CHAPTER 19

♥ PSA: love is beautiful, in all its shapes and sizes. And so am I.

~~~~

I am exhausted, exhilarated, and a teeny tiny bit entranced. After leading meetings, yelling at ignorant associates who don't understand that I know the rules for *normal people* but I *want* the rules for a *billionaire who is getting married*, and making sure everything is lined up for all the huge stuff I'm handling, being with Sean in the quiet of each evening serves as my reward.

He's a drug that releases all the tension, all the stress, all the nerves. He calms my mind, so I can sleep.

His fingers tickle over my thighs, absentmindedly stroking. Looking up at me, he appears more drunk than I've ever seen him, and the high it causes is everything.

Dipping, I swear in his mouth, letting my legs squeeze his hips. They're perfect narrow hips, the kind male models dream of. He's so beautiful. He's just so beautiful. I can't believe I never saw it before. Or maybe I can. Sean is very good at giving off the vibe of a harmless child.

Until, of course, the moment he needs to be something else.

His fingers dig into me, kneading, and I shudder, whisper his name, nip.

I love this, him, *my life*. I didn't know people could be *this happy*. I didn't know it could be *this simple*.

"Little one?" he murmurs when I break to calm down, to breathe.

I rest my head against his shoulder, my body against his chest. I hold him for a moment as I respond, "Yes?"

"On a scale of one to disgusting...how ashamed of me are you?"

My happiness falters the smallest bit, but I force myself to laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"We've been all over the place for all sorts of things these past few days in preparation for weddings and schemes and brand launches. We've been around our friends, strangers, everyone. And...you still treat me like we don't do *this* every night. Like I've not tasted so much of your skin that once you fall asleep on me, by me, in my—" He curses. "—heart, the taste of you haunts me until I reunite with you in my dreams." He swallows. "I just...are you planning to tell anyone, ever? I want to propose. But I can't do that until

I know you're okay with everyone hearing you say yes...or something, right?"

My heart thuds, and I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

"If you never want to tell anyone, that's fine. I just don't know how to do the whole *involve your friends* in my proposal thing? Or...a wedding with them? Instructions unclear, you know?"

I chew my lip, and I try to picture what our relationship coming out in front of everyone would look like. Colette knows. Colette didn't really seem to care outside of her attempting to talk about it that one time. I don't know if I can wrap my head around how it looks.

Sean, the idiot obsessed with food, and me. Sean, the idiot who acts five, and me. Sean, the idiot, and me.

It's not an attractive picture when no one knows the sneaky "dark side" he keeps locked away. The *little ones* and *good girls*. The edge of danger, stability, and maturity that keeps me coming back like an addict.

On a scale of one to disgusting, ew.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Nearly midnight, I think."

I reach for my phone on the nightstand, sit up in Sean's lap, and sigh. This could annoy me for a good long while after, but there's no way to avoid it.

Sean's phone notifies after I've sent the message to *Hooligans*. A chill goes through me, but I lift my chin and show him my screen. "You are disgusting. And an idiot. And childish. But I lo..." My heart skips, and I have to look away. "But I loved you when we were just friends, and I have *never* been ashamed of you. We don't look right together. You're sunshine and rainbows. I'm dark, irritated clouds. No one sees your lightning, and only you know how to clear my skies. So it's embarrassing to admit publicly the parts of myself that—" My phone buzzes, and I flinch, dropping it on Sean's chest.

It buzzes again, on him, but his eyes are fully locked on me. "That...?"

"That adore you," I whisper. "We clash. Like paisley and plaid. It's just weird. But if I'm ashamed of anyone, it's myself."

Sean's lips curl in a slow smile, and he lifts my phone, pushes back his curls, and taps a few things. In the very next instant, he's gripping my chin with his free hand and connecting his lips to mine. A shutter sounds halfway through my eyes rolling back.

"Wha—"



“Shh.” Sean kisses me gently, then lets me see my phone.

**Leslie:** PSA: Sean and I are romantically involved.

**Kat:** Were we not supposed to know that?

**Velspar:** <3

**Reg:** About time. Congratulations.

**Velspar:** <3 but from Colette

My heart jumps at the sight of the photo Sean just took, sitting precariously in the send box. “Don’t you—”

He taps the arrow, and the image floods the screen.

“Sean!”

He grins. “I don’t think we clash at all. We’re picture perfect.”

I shove him back against the bed, and he laughs. His laugh. *Ugh*. His *laugh*. He tosses my phone to the other side of the bed, where it has a tiny seizure before going silent, and I resist the urge to strangle him. “Why are all of our friends even up this late?”

“Who knows?” His attention flicks from my eyes to my lips as his hands come to rest on my thighs again. The security they offer is corporeal. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“You adore me?”

My eyes roll. “I’ve always liked your personality. It’s wild in all the ways I crave. You’re demented, and free. Being important to you feels...so good. Right. Like...almost like there’s a chance I’m worth it.”

“It?” he murmurs, skimming the hem of my pajama shorts with his thumb, ducking his touch just under the edge.

“Time.” A breath fills me. “Energy.” I let it out slowly as I close my eyes. “Love.”

“I love you tremendously, Leslie. You are worth everything.”

In the quiet of moments like these...it’s almost painless to believe.

I kiss him again, and shortly after we drift off to sleep.



Way too much can happen in a matter of months. Given the right events, way too much can happen in a matter of *days*. It’s crazy to think that one random choice can change the rest of your life. For instance, if I never chose to read about a blue alien, I never would have fallen in love with romance novels (which include varying levels of blue alienness).

Two months ago, if someone told me I was invited to a bachelorette party

that would consist of reading quietly in the living room, with snacks, then watching a movie with the bride's mother after opening gifts...I'd have gagged, asked if there would *at least* be decent alcohol, and hard passed after being told *no*.

Life is weird.

Hugging the latest mafia dark romance Kat recommended by Gale Greenway and holding Colette's gift bag, I ring the bell and wait for Colette to open the door. Her dress is *adorable*. Pink and lacy, a collection of powder puffs and sheer fabric. I smirk. "How'd you convince Velspar to leave you while you're wearing *that*?"

Colette laughs as she lets me in. "Easy. I put it on a-fter he headed out for his bachelor party." Her eyes spark as she whispers, "Do you know what they're up to?"

"According to Sean, there's a shocking absence of bars. No women jumping out of cakes. Nothing of interest or scandal to note. Maybe they'll play a first-person shooter and yell at sports."

Kat appears in the kitchen archway, her expression fixed in question. *They watch sports?* she signs slowly. Since we've been spending more time together in order to prepare for the big event, I've been learning more words, getting better at reading her lips, connecting the motions to the signs.

"Vel d-d-doesn't," Colette says.

"Huh." I lift Colette's gift bag. "Where should I put this until we do gifts later?"

"Oh, plans changed." Colette takes the bag from me, peeks past the sparkly white tissue paper, and turns red.

"Is that Leslie?" Helen asks, poking her head around Katina.

Colette jumps, whirls, hides her gift bag behind her back. "Y-yes!"

Helen's pale brow arches. I check my manicure. I would never get the most scandalous red and black lingerie I could possibly find, top it off with a pink set just in case that's what my sweet friend prefers, and give it to her in front of her mother. That sounds devious. And my *devious phase* is most assuredly in my *backstory*.

My lips quirk up in one corner. "So. What are the plans now?" I flick a finger toward Helen. "You were supposed to come a bit later, I thought? Did you bring a book?" My lashes flutter. "I'm sure Kat's got an extra with her. She mood reads up to eight at a time."

*Ten*, Kat corrects, then every muscle in her freezes as she realizes I'm

suggesting she share her literary masterpieces with Colette's mother. She lowers her hand to her side, plastering her middle finger to her slacks, just out of Helen's sight.

Okay. Fine. I'm still in my devious phase. But it's not *malicious* anymore.

Colette clears her throat, and Helen straightens. "Oh, right. I came by because I'm hungry. I'd like to go out for dinner with you girls first, if that's all right with everyone."

"Of course!" Colette smiles, tucking her present off in a nondescript corner where it may never be heard from again. Until Velspar finds it.

That'll be fun, I'm sure.

Moments later, we're all piled in her little yellow bug, speeding down the interstate. Colette insisted that her music would not be the soundtrack for tonight, but obviously she didn't know that I had all her songs available with two taps when she handed the AUX cord back to me.

"Vengeance" pumps through the speakers for the tenth time when I realize we aren't heading to Taco Bell. Rather...we aren't in Pratt City anymore. Striking rock outcroppings catch street light and glitter as we pass through mountains, over bridges, beyond overlooks displaying twilit valleys.

I tap Kat's shoulder. *Where are we going?*

*To get food.*

Out in the middle of nowhere?

Colette pulls off the interstate after a few more minutes, and there's a literal cow pasture on our left. Are we going to eat in a barn? The entire stretch of two-lane road in front of us leads a twining path through forests once the fields siphon away.

The bug jostles as Colette turns onto a dirt road. Thick trees stretch on either side of the single-car space, and it's a good thing I don't spend my days fighting nausea anymore, because my stomach tumbles, shaking up acid. Clutching my purse, I peer through the brush, looking for gleaming eyes.

If I had to guess, the kind of restaurant found at the end of this trail serves the very people who arrive...

I pause the music. "Um. Doll?"

"Yes?" She continues steadily forward.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Out to eat?"

"But, like, *where?*" As kindly as I can manage, I say, "I'd like to look up

reviews. Check the menu.” Confirm whether or not we’re all about to die.

“Oh, it’s okay. We’re almost th-ere.”

Oh. Okay. Cool. So, to clarify, I *don’t* have time to write my will in the Notes app?

The swamp of trees breaks apart, lackadaisically, bit by bit revealing moonlight, then firelight, and—oh my word—there is a gleaming bonfire. This is a cult. We’re going to have sacrificial animals for dinner. I—

My rising panic chills when the *rest* of the scene comes into focus. The glare of the bonfire levels out well enough to shed light on the surrounding arches covered with crawling flowers, connected by strings of fairy lights

Colette pulls off by the trees and parks.

I stare.

It’s...beautiful.

Great heaps of flowers create a boundary around the crackling flames. A lit fountain of bubbling pink liquid centers a table loaded with food that sits off in a puddle of flowers. So many flowers.

Kat pushes me toward my door, grinning ferociously.

“What...”

She shoves again, so I snap. “Okay, *okay*.” I get out of the car and barely manage to inhale the fluttering scent of food melding together with the subtle hint of charred wood before Colette grabs my hand. Pushed from behind by Kat and tugged along by Colette, I stumble through the trim grass, thankful I assumed I’d be having a quiet night in. I wore flats. Heels would not have survived this terrain.

My heart skips once *the guys* come into view. Velspar and Reg are here, handsome or whatever...but...

Sean.

Sean stands at the head of a blanket of flowers, dressed in a suit. Firelight beats against his skin, draws out the blaze of his hair, ignites passion in his eyes. He smiles, slow, tender, *wicked*, and I shudder.

Colette and Kat abandon me right in front of him, and my skin goes electric, prickling.

I stare at him, wide-eyed, warm from within despite the beat of flames at my back. “What’s...going on?” I whisper.

He curls a finger beneath my chin in a brief caress. “You really don’t know?”

“This isn’t a moment for us. It’s Colette’s and Velspar’s—”

“We’ve got a thousand moments. All of us do,” Velspar notes as Colette falls into place beside him, settling in the crook of his arm. He presses a kiss to the top of her head. “We both want to share as many as we can.”

“Th-at’s what friends d-d-do.”

My heart skips as I find Kat standing near Reg. She grins and nods. Heck, even Helen is smiling at me. Friends. I’ve never had a moment like this before. Soft, kind things never “fit” with the guys and me. I was never in a place to appreciate Sean’s efforts at gentleness before now.

When you grow up like us, you get used to thorns and brambles. You never expect a break in the trees to mean anything but danger.

My face blisters, and I clasp my hands together against my skirt. “Well. Go on then.”

Sean chuckles, combs his fingers through my hair, and touches a kiss to my cheek. “Marry me, little one.”

A frisson of heat skates down my spine. “You’re supposed to get down on one knee. Ask. Not demand,” I whisper.

“You’d have me ruin this suit?”

He does have a point. Before I can admit to it, however, he drops, both knees in the grass. Fire licks in his eyes as he looks up at me. “I love you,” he says, predatory. It’s more than a claim of affection. It’s a claim on my soul, a simple, effective *you are mine*. “Will you marry me?”

I bite my cheek. “Do you have a ring?”

“Yes.”

“Well...?”

His eyes close, and he sighs. “Les—”

“Do it right.” I hold out my left hand. My fingers tremble when he takes them, presses a kiss to my palm.

“You’re supposed to say *yes* before you offer your hand.”

“You messed me up,” I protest.

He chuckles again, pulling a ring box out of his jacket pocket. He slips my favorite ring out of the selection I sent him onto my finger. “Not yet I haven’t.” His gaze flicks up to me, molten. “Say *yes*.”

I’m too breathless. I snap, “Obviously.”

He rises, tucks my body against him, grazes my ear with his lips. “Yes?”

The word quakes as it leaves my mouth.

Sean’s smile sparks, and he lifts me, whirling me in a reckless circle. “She said *yes*!”

“Shocking!” Reg calls, half a smirk lifting the corner of his mouth.

Colette squeals, and Velspar snorts, falling into the puddle of flowers surrounding us when she tackles him. Katina claps, looking feral and happy, until something Reg signs makes her eyes go huge. I laugh, holding tight to my husband, who just became my fiance.

I guess doing this out of order, twisted up, and all over the place was our only option. After all, it's *us*.

When he pulls my face to his and kisses me, I melt into his heat, let the world fall away.

Right here—with him, with them—this is happiness. This is limo rides and movies and pizza and peace and perfection. This is everything I never knew how to want.

*This is beautiful.*

## CHAPTER 20

♥ I am getting married. Again. This time I want to. Weird.

~~~~

“Colette,” I snap, then flinch, because—yeah, *okay*—I *heard* it that time. When several people on the catering staff muttered that I was a *bridezilla*, I rolled my eyes. Excuse me. Wouldn’t you *also* be a little testy if you found out you were getting married a week and a half ago, in a double wedding, with your best friends?

Uh. Yeah.

It has to be *perfect*.

I just about imploded when Colette said we should have a double wedding, Velspar confirmed it was all right with him, and Sean admitted that he’d coordinated the possibility of that when he plotted the entire proposal with everyone to begin with. Halloween is the only appropriate day for the likes of us to get married, isn’t it? And my dress has the whole red silk spiderweb design in the trail, doesn’t it? Also, just think of the *marketing*.

Like the first time he proposed, I couldn’t exactly say no. Not that I wanted to. But still. Dang Sean.

When Helen said she’d be happy to walk me down the aisle with Colette, I ruined my makeup.

While I sobbed, she hugged me, thanked me for everything I’d been doing for Colette since my *character arc*, and somehow managed to pull me into wet laughter as she stroked my hair and made me feel—for the first time in my life—like a *daughter*.

I can hardly believe I’m getting married.

With my friends.

With a mother who is not only willing to give me away but who is also willing to hug me in spite of all the weight I’ve gained.

If I don’t choose anger in these moments and fix all my attention on the superficial ideals of perfection I grew up saturated in, I am going to fall apart.

Colette tries to adjust my hair again, and my expression is the only cue she needs to stop. Rolling her eyes, she crosses her arms. “Why d-d-d-didn’t you hire someone for hair and makeup?”

Because *I* wanted to do it. Regardless of everything else I was meant to

handle today, I wanted to do it. I wanted it to be a special friendship moment that we'd look back on in the years to come, like when one of the photographers I hired got pictures of Kat zipping us up.

I snap my compact mirror closed and set it on the mirror-less vanity table strewn with accessories and makeup palettes. “*Um*, because you had *me*, and it was too late to get anyone decent by the time I realized I would now also need to have my hair and makeup done? I had a *week* to make your wedding *our* wedding. There’s a whopping three people in the wedding party apart from the brides and grooms. I did not have a ton of help.”

*It’s just hair*, Kat signs above the book she’s reading on a couch on the other side of the room. I catch the words out of the corner of my eye and turn, folding my arms.

“I heard that.”

*No, you didn’t*. She flips the page.

“You’re going to wrinkle your dress sitting like that,” I snip, hands on hips, fully *bridezilla*. Her beautifully crimped curls hardly needed more styling, and I succeeded in getting her to wear *at least* a splash of makeup—also known as *gloss*. She’s wearing lip gloss. Do these women not know that the second we exit this building, we will be *on the news*? We’re going to be on front covers across all sorts of nationwide magazines. My marketing team is going to get us on front covers *worldwide*. And Colette’s maid of honor is only wearing gloss as she wrinkles her dress and reads a book about men with wings.

“Les, it’s okay,” Colette attempts.

I turn my fury on her, and she blinks dully. It’s like I don’t even scare her anymore. Ridiculous. “*Ugh*.” Taking a deep breath, I temper my frustration, my nerves, the *my goodness, this is actually happening, don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry*. Gripping her arms, I say, “Sean knows how to do my hair. Kat.”

Kat looks up, a look of pure *you did not say my name as a summoning command just now* gleaming in her eyes.

I adjust my tone. “Could you go get Sean?”

*No*. She goes back to reading, and my eye twitches.

“Les, you can’t let him s...s-see you in your d-d—gown.”

Crap. I forgot about that. “Velspar can also do...” I stare at Colette, who is *also* in her wedding gown. Her fiance can’t very well see the pastry fall of sheer layers and gauze littered with jewels and soft pink blossoms before its time either.



“Katina, can you coordinate for us to sssst-ep in with Reg and S...Sean while Vel comes th-is way?”

Kat heaves a sigh, closes her book, and sets it down. *I hate weddings*, she signs before leaving with Colette.

After a few minutes, Velspar enters, grinning hopelessly. He looks me over, and his teeth bare. “Well, don’t you look like a proper bride, Les.”

“Can it. My hair’s a *mess*. I can’t do it myself because *someone* stole all the mirrors in this room. I only have my makeup compact.” Huffing, I take in the black-on-black with a side of black that Velspar’s wearing. He is a nightmare. You wouldn’t even need to put him in grayscale if it weren’t for his eyes. “I’m curious. How much do you know?”

Velspar chuckles as he makes his way over. “Everything.”

“About?”

“Everything.” He stops in front of me, turns me in a rush of skirts, and combs his fingers through my hair. “You’re already married. Sean’s been aggressively taking care of you from the moment you agreed to become *his*. We’re friends, and Sean’s always been good about claiming his people as though his trust has never been broken. He told Reg and me the moment he realized he was in love with you.”

My heart thuds. “He...said you wouldn’t approve of the way he married me.”

Velspar hums. “I assume he manipulated you, which I don’t approve of. I don’t have many details since he hasn’t told me that part likely due to the fact he knows I wouldn’t approve. That information came from my web of informants all over the city. They know to keep track of my family—both blood-related and the ones I’ve chosen. I knew the morning you both left. By afternoon, I knew what happened. Sean’s nothing if not the opportunist.”

“Tell me about it,” I mutter. Pinching my lips, I reach for my compact. “Do you know about his whole...dual character thing, too?”

“To some extent. There are things he has done for me that I would not have the stomach for.”

I let a slight breath out. Right. Of course. There’s more at play than even I can surmise from the outside. “I hate being in the dark.”

“We all had hoped we were keeping you in the light.” Reaching for a clip, Velspar pins a final lock in place and kisses my temple. “You are important to us.”

“I’m not too fragile or weak to be a part of all the things you guys are

handling.”

Velspar’s smile pities, and I hate it, but that’s just *Velspar*. Easy to hate; easier to love. “You’re smart and intuitive, Les, but until recently, a stiff wind would have taken you out. We’ve included you where you can stay safe. We know the way you can command the public is invaluable.” He tucks his fingers into the pockets of his slacks. “It’s a dangerous game that monsters play in the shadows.”

“Am I not one of you?”

He grins. “You’ll always be *one of us*, Les. But the most monstrous thing about you was how your self-abuse scared us. We’ve never wanted to lose you, least of all to yourself.” He angles himself slightly forward, meeting my eyes. “Face it. You’re a sweetheart.”

“Saying such crap on my wedding day, no less.” I scoff, clapping my compact closed and tossing it beside the rest of my makeup. “I’m getting *better* now. I’ll take classes. Learn how to do the self-defense stuff Colette does. Then, I want fully in.”

Velspar’s expression darkens as he straightens, taller than me even though I’m wearing red heels that lace like spiderweb up my calves. “I don’t care that Colette can throw some idiots. She couldn’t throw me. She’s not invulnerable, and neither are you. She *never* touches the dark side of this city. I will cleanse it before she ever knows. And I doubt that Sean’s opinion differs concerning how much involvement he wants you to have.”

“Sean’s crazier than you but a touch less toxic in this whole *I’ll control my lover* way. I want to do this. He can’t stop me.”

“I don’t want to control Colette. I want to keep her safe. And if we’re going to judge the *control* we are willing to employ for the sake of the people we love, where’s your vanity mirror, Les?”

I wince, biting my cheek. “I can help.”

“Yes, you are helping. Safely.”

“I don’t want to just be used.”

He sighs. “Is this really a conversation for our wedding day?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t it be?”

A flurry of humor lightens the firm line of his lips, and he rolls his eyes. “Talk to Sean about it.”

“Ew. Already deferring me beneath the hand of my husband? I’m going to vomit all over your clothes.”

“I love you like a sister. He loves you like the other half of his soul. I

might be convinced to let my family play in dangerous places with me. It's up to him whether or not he's willing to risk a fragment of his own life." Dark as an oil spill, Velspar says, "I would find a productive place to put my rage and revenge in order to recover from your untimely death. He would not."

I fight the shudder threatening to scrape down my spine. "Fine."

"Fine."

I spin slowly. "What do you think?"

"I've never loved red, but you manage to pull it off."

"Doesn't the song Colette's singing today start *red as blood*?"

"It's a fitting, ugly representation of my sins. A horrid picture that she loves me in spite of. Red's likeness with blood is why I don't love it. I assume that's the very reason Sean does. We're broken in different ways, the lot of us." He lifts his gaze to the ceiling and shakes his head. "We didn't break like a puzzle. But together, our pieces fit."

A knock sounds moments before Helen enters. "Are you girls ready... Oh, Vel."

Velspar throws his future mother-in-law a blinding smile. "Mom. How are you feeling? Do you need to sit down?"

Helen's expression dulls. Marching to him, she stabs her fingertip into his chest. "Treat my little girl right, or I'll kill you in your sleep."

"Not even Colette tries to do that anymore. I almost miss it." Trotting backward away from Helen then toward the door, Velspar embodies the kind of hypnotic grace people should never trust. "I suppose I'll go get in position, answer some questions from the press, save cats from trees, help old ladies cross streets...provide sugar to children. All the angelic stuff I obviously embody."

Helen pinches the bridge of her nose as the door closes again. "That boy..."

"Sorry. This is probably difficult for you. I promise that he'll take care of Colette. Completely. In every way he knows how. And in the ways he doesn't, he'll learn."

Helen smiles. Slim wrinkles I never saw whenever my mother's sharp smiles graced me crinkle in the corners of her eyes. "I know that, Leslie. I would never allow this if it weren't the case. He's come a long way. He's not perfect, but even I can tell Colette is safe with him." She takes my hands in hers. "We haven't talked much, and even though I understand you were

among Velspar's close friends, you rarely came up, so I'm hopeful you didn't do much to hurt Colette."

Am I offended I wasn't worth mentioning? I think I might be offended.

Clearing my throat, I refrain from wetting my lips. "Oh. You know. Wicked by association. My backstory is bleak, but I'm character developing beyond it. Or something. Colette can count on me now. I promise."

Helen nods. "Are you nervous? I've not spent much time with Sean either, but just from what I saw at the bonfire..."

I sigh and wonder *which* part she's thinking of *specifically*. At the bonfire, Sean roasted gummy bears instead of marshmallows, piercing them through while acting out their tiny screams. He chuckled and seemed sincerely elated when they melted off the pike.

In short, he was his vivacious self. And to those unaware of his manners, it's a bit terrifying to watch. Even I, in a moment of panic, wasn't sure about his limits, and I've known him practically my entire life.

"I'm not nervous," I confirm before I remember that it's my wedding day. And tonight's my wedding night. And *Sean* is *Sean*. One look and he makes my heart skip. "I'm a touch nervous. But not concerned. Sean's interesting, but he uses his evil for good."

"His evil?" Helen's brows furrow.

I shrug. Was I not supposed to say that to a mother who is not the embodiment of evil? Interesting. I've been seeing Sadie for several weeks now, and she's been helping with the whole eating issue, but maybe I should start taking some of her *healthy relationship* advice more seriously. At least so I can pretend when in the presence of a normal person.

Oh, yes, my husband would never hold me down and feed me cookies while telling me what a good little girl I am. Ha ha. How concerning would that be? Not sexy at all. Nope...

Crap.

I just remembered something.

It's socially acceptable for him to feed me cake in about an hour. Sean keeps his evil under wraps in front of people. Public humiliation play isn't fun unless consent has been provided, and, yeah no, I'd skin a man before providing that. But what am I going to do if a spark of deviousness runs into his lovely green eyes as he holds up that fork?

Melt.

I will melt right out of my dress. The cameras will catch me in a puddle

on the floor.

Helen threads her fingers through her hair and shakes off her apprehension right as my nerves erupt in full force. She murmurs, “Well, I suppose it’s about time.”

Yep. It sure is.

## CHAPTER 21

♥ Right when everything comes together, everything falls apart.

~~~~

Picture this: you're about to get married to your best friend, who you're already married to, but whatever. That part doesn't matter. Everything is perfect.

Blue sky and warm sunlight rains down on the wide open field awash with flowers. Security personnel maintain a clearance that almost—but not quite completely—contains the scattered reporters, journalists, and gossip mag writers to the edge of your vision. Flower petals pillow the ground ahead. Great silk scarves delineating the aisle pool like a tide into pounds of red and pink roses. White petals flutter on the chilled breeze. The curtain separating you and your friend from the men you're marrying parts...

You take a deep breath.

You take your first step beside a mother you barely know.

Then “Toxic” by Britney Spears plays.

All my fluttery feelings grind to a halt, and I blink. Sean's face morphs into a crazed grin above his red tie. Colette laughs. Kat and Reg exchange a surprised look from where each stands beside one groom.

Velspar smirks.

I am going to *behead* him.

Later. When there aren't cameras.

While there *are* a hundred cameras, I am going to smile and pretend I'm not the least bit self-conscious about the fact I had to take the seam out of this dress two days ago and make it a size larger. Soon the entire world will see me, and I am about to become the face of a brand that says *be confident in who you are*. So that's what I have to be. Whether I believe it completely right now or not.

Amare is going to wash across the country, Colette Hart by its side. Today we trend. Tomorrow, we fill stores. And right now, on live television, our wedding march is “*Toxic*” by *Britney Spears*.

Velspar better enjoy his wedding night. He won't see morning.

Helen passes us to our respective grooms, sandwiching me between Sean and Velspar as we face the officiant. If Velspar could hear me, I'd whisper

that he's doomed, but the second his eyes locked on Colette in her fluttering gown, everything else in the world ceased to exist.

His eyes will always be hers. *He* will always be hers.

"Plotting murders, little one?" Sean murmurs in my ear, reminding me that he's holding my hand.

Reminding me that I'm getting married.

Publicly.

To him.

My face heats, and I refuse to meet his eyes. "Did you know?"

"Know what?"

Holding back my sigh, I dare provide his crisp black tux a passing glance. It's not wrinkled. That's good. When my gaze comes up to his eyes, my heart hiccups. I freeze. The world around me melts out of existence, and there's only him—the way he's looking at me, the warmth of his hand, the glassiness in his gaze.

"Are you going to cry?" I ask, following his lead when the officiant prompts for Colette and Velspar to begin their vows—the song.

We step to the side, giving her space to take center "stage," and Sean whispers, "No. Are you?"

"And ruin my makeup?" I scoff.

He chuckles, the low tones resting beneath Velspar's voice as he joins Colette's song in a madrigal of his own vows. It's so sickeningly sweet I might hack up a lung.

I smile. "Thank goodness we aren't like them."

"You're not going to sing to me, Les?"

"I didn't even write vows."

Sean turns oddly silent throughout the rest of the song, but I only realize it at the end when I look away from the kind of kiss that shouldn't be broadcast live, or take place three feet from one's sniffling mother. Red is tinting Sean's cheeks.

"What?" I ask.

The officiant nods at him, indicating his turn, and my stomach twists. Oh no. He wrote vows. He wrote special vows. I am the worst wife ever. I didn't even think of vows. I figured we'd do *in sickness and in health* and call it a day. The *normal* vows are cute, right? Decent. They cover the bases. Don't be a jerk to your spouse regardless of exterior circumstances. Take care of them even on the days you'd rather stab them with your butter knife. Till

death do ye part.

Sean faces me, and my jaw locks, my smile turning entirely plastic. He cups my face, tenderly, sweetly, gently. Like I'm precious and he's in love with every inch of me.

Leaning forward, he kisses my cheek before settling his lips near my ear. The heat of his breath absorbs into my skin, and I can barely hold myself up.

"I love you, Les."

My eyes close, and the fake smile drifts off my face as I shiver.

His arm links around my waist, holding me steady. "I have loved you for as long as I can remember, but it was only recently I learned the length and depth of my affection. I would burn the world for you just to watch fire kiss the hazel of your eyes. Until the end of my days, I vow to be your monster. Through whatever means, I will protect you, put you first, love you, and love you, and *love you* as I perfect what love is. Whenever you're scared, let me trample your fears. Whenever you're lonely, let me hold you. Whenever the person you find in the mirror is less than what I see, let me shatter the glass and paint a truer picture. You are my life, little one. Beyond death, my heart is yours."

When he starts to pull away, I wrap my arms around him, hold him tight and close and try not to cry as a shaking breath trembles through my chest. "I love you." My voice breaks. "I love you." They are the only words I know, the only ones I have. They will never be enough. "So much. I love you so much, Sean."

He tucks his face against my neck. Laughs. Holds me.

It's a miracle I don't cry during the *I dos*.

After the ceremony, we go through the motions of taking photographs, appealing to the news outlets, showing off our dresses, and doing short interviews before we reconvene in the privacy of the venue. The warm air in the hillside log cabin releases some of the tension in my limbs when it sweeps over me and through the sheer sleeves of my wedding gown.

Despite the fact I had the entirety of the dining hall decorated, only the wedding party table at the height of the earthy room is set with crystal glasses, swan napkins, and dinner plates. A lavish buffet, much too expansive given the fact there are only seven of us, takes up one side of the room. A few kitchen staff stand behind the steaming dishes, waiting and ready.

"That's a big cake," Reg notes, hands tucked in the pockets of his slacks, suit jacket already mysteriously dejected.



I follow his gaze to the five-tier wedding cake strewn with pink and red frosting roses. The avalanche of flowers flood from tier to tier, pure sugar. It's exactly what I ordered, so I smile like the mere sight of it wouldn't have made me gag just a few months ago.

Eyes sparking, Velspar drags Colette over to the sweet mass, swipes his finger through a frosting flower and begins being inappropriate like a handful of staff aren't uncomfortably waiting for us to get our meals.

Sean grabs my hand, and I straighten, tripping after his long strides.

My heels click against the polished dark wood floors. "What are you—"

"Dessert first." When he stops abruptly beneath the silk scarves draped from ceiling beam to ceiling beam above us, I nearly ram into his back. Grinning horrendously, he looks at me. "Dessert, food, *dessert*. Dessert sandwich."

Okay, *that* might make me gag. "I don't want two slices of cake."

Chuckling, Sean tips up my chin and kisses my nose. "I'm not talking about *cake*, wife."

My face heats as I catch his drift, then I murmur, "I *might* want two slices of that."

To his credit, Sean feeding me cake comes nowhere close to whatever the heck is going on between Colette and Velspar. It's like they don't think anyone else is even here. Her poor mother got a slice with Kat and Reg and is—somewhat adamantly—ignoring her child's bad decisions as she takes her seat at the head table, pleasantly chatting with her companions thanks to Reg translating.

"They're cute together, I think." I take Sean's hand and mindlessly lick a bit of frosting off his thumb.

He melts into a little puddle. "Really? I think they're a bit much."

I cut a glance at Velspar and Colette, find them laughing, their hands and faces just about covered in both frosting and smudged lipstick since they've neither bothered with utensils nor coming up for air. "Yeah, no. I'm not talking about them." Even though, okay, I kind of think they're cute together, too. I nod toward Reg and Katina. "She's not going to take advantage of him. He's not going to misbehave in order to achieve her attention, because she won't be okay with that. They've got a good balance."

"Are you already plotting her wedding?"

"Purple."

Sean sighs. With a single finger, he directs my chin back toward him.

“Can we focus on *our* wedding right now?” Prepping another forkful of cake, he holds it up to my lips. “I’m a little bit obsessed with this moment.”

“Like you haven’t been feeding me since you coerced me into your penthouse.” I open my mouth.

He lifts a shoulder and lets me take the bite, purring, “But you’ve become so much more obedient since then.”

I wonder if the heel of my shoe would go right through his black derby and break his foot.

Almost shy, he takes a bite himself and smiles at the rest of the slice on his plate. “I can’t begin to explain how happy it makes me to see you enjoy this. Seeing you healthy enough to enjoy something without any nutritional value makes me think I should have kidnapped you years ago.”

“Maybe you should have. It would have saved me a ton of problems. Honestly, what were you thinking?”

His head tilts. “Kidnapping equals wrong?”

“Gross. Lying equals wrong. You should have been honest and kidnapped me. I would have gotten over it.” I open my mouth again, the picture of refined grace.

He rewards me with another bite. “Quite so, you are very forgiving. It’s a trait I can count on.”

“Can’t you?” I grab a napkin off the table and dab at the corner of my mouth. “I won’t even kill Velspar for changing the wedding march song.”

“Oh good.” Sean finishes the last bite on his plate. “Because that was totally me.”

Velspar barks a laugh as he reaches for a napkin, and I look between them, stammering, “W-what?”

“As if I’d take a chance at ruining today. Or highlighting the very bad decision that now only an extensive legal process could ever undo.” Velspar wipes his messy face and cuddles Colette while she gets her own napkin.

“Reg will d-do whatever I s...say. If I want his legal a-ssistance to d-d-d —”

“Can’t say *divorce*; can’t *do* divorce. Those are the rules, darling.” Velspar’s eyes close, boyishly thrilled as he hugs his wife from behind. He’s never letting her go. Ever. And he will spend every moment going forth making sure her life is bliss. Of that I have zero doubts.

My life, on the other hand...

I scowl at my husband, who ruined my perfect wedding with his

nonsense.

“What?” he dares to ask while he dares to reach for another slice of cake.

I take the cutter away.

His eyes roll. “Part of this whole event was a marketing ploy. Shiny things end up forgotten in minutes. Funny things trend, get shared, reach more people. Funny things have a longer shelf life and appeal to a wider audience. I fixed it for you. You’re welcome. Am I a good hubby, or am I a good hubby?”

“Are you going to outgrow calling yourself that?”

He slips the cutter from my hand and provides himself another gracious helping before heading toward the wedding party table with an adamant, “*Nope!*”

I sigh and swipe my finger through the frosting on my way after him. I don’t make it halfway to the dais before a breeze sweeps in the open doorway. Finger in my mouth, I look toward the entrance and freeze.

Irene.

Not just Irene.

Irene and Alton.

My sister and Velspar’s brother. Here. Now. *Why?*

Dread swarms, choking me, twisting the pure sugar in my gut, sticking me in place. I pull my finger from my mouth as though I can undo the damage of these last few months. But I can’t. I can’t, and it’s *not* damage. It’s not.

But looking at Irene after all this time makes me feel *wrong*. Model height. Model weight. Model blond hair. Model babydoll blue eyes. Perfect as a Barbie doll with none of the considerate character to match.

Irene’s scowl fixes on me, disgust rioting through her thin face. She slips a golden lock of straight blond hair over her ear and approaches. Each click of her heels pounds in my head. She stops, scans me, and lets her nose wrinkle. “What a disgrace. You haven’t even kept up with dying your hair.”

My heart shrivels.

“Mother and I could hardly believe our eyes when we saw this extravagant ad.” Her gaze cuts over me again. “You really poured yourself into that.” Harder, she pins me with her frigid blue eyes. “In all the wrong places, too.” In an instant, her nails latch into my chin. “*Amare*, Leslie? What are you playing at? You’re a useless, ugly, fat pig who clearly has no discipline on her own. What makes you think you have any business running

a company? You probably made this in your bedroom just like all those other foolish little projects you threw together once upon a time. You're a child."

Irene's eyes widen, nostrils flaring, and I hear a distinct grind of bone against bone before her nails scratch off my face.

Sean holds her wrist stationary, even as her reedy muscles struggle and flex. Emotionless, he says, "Touch her again, and I will kill you. Talk to her like that again, and the last meal you reluctantly eat will be your tongue as I force it down your throat."

Alton tuts and pries Sean's hand off Irene's wrist. "Threatening a woman, Montgomery?"

"It's actually *Amare* now. Weddings. Paperwork. Name changes. You'd know how it is if there were a chance anyone might ever love you." Sean smiles, icy. "By the way, since you're here, how are you enjoying the rat problem, Al?"

Alton's calm disposition falters, a blinding hint of rage igniting before he glares at Velspar.

"What?" Velspar comments, eyes large, innocent, unassuming. "Why are you looking at me if you're interested in rats? I've recently gotten a horse, no rodents. Darling." He glances at Colette. "Would you like a little hamster or something?"

Graceful as a queen who knows her position, Colette checks her nails and sings, "I'd prefer we simply handle the vermin, love, not get more."

Irene grits her straight white teeth, baring them. "Mother is not happy with you."

Sean scoffs. "Irene, *please*. When is that woman ever happy with either of you?"

"She will not stand idle and let her own daughter disrespect everything she's built, everything we've worked for."

"I'm sorry you're such a disappointment." Sean loops his arm around my waist, sheer unyielding pity and concern vibrating off him like a physical, murderous entity. "Really sounds like a personal problem, though."

"How can you live with yourself?" she snaps, ignoring Sean.

Mouth dry, I stare at my sister, see my mother in her hard angles, her tone, her words. Worse, however, is the fact I see myself. Looking at Irene right now is like what it once felt like to look in a mirror. All the words she comes up with are ones I used to tell myself. Rather, hers pale in comparison to the hatred I showered myself with every day.

Sean's pity might be a means of insult, but I actually pity her. Because I know her. I was her. And so long as our mother favors her, she may never be free.

Swallowing fear, I pretend like I always used to when I was fighting nausea every moment I was upright. "It's actually easier to live with myself now that I'm not killing myself, Irene. If Mother's scared I'm going to threaten her business, just say that."

Irene barks a scoffing laugh. "*Threaten* her business? Have you gone both stupid and fat? Mother runs a worldwide empire. You've got a pathetic startup. You're embarrassing us and yourself."

"Just by protecting my organs and encouraging other women to do the same?"

Confusion streaks across her perfectly-tweased brows.

I set a hand on my stomach. "If you're embarrassed because I'm protecting my organs, that really does sound like a *you* problem. Personally, I prefer being *fat* over liposuctioning away my heart." Lifting my chin, I sneer. "I've learned that if you don't protect some things, you lose them, so I'll gladly take being an embarrassment over being hollow." Discarding Irene, I brace a hand at my hip and glare at Alton. "What are you doing here?"

"My dearest brother just got married. I'm hurt I wasn't invited."

"Then be hurt, and go away. We both know your *dearest brother* would pay to watch a bus run you over."

"Well. Haven't you grown fangs since last we spoke." His attention rakes greedily over my wedding dress, and I picture Sean disemboweling him with the cake cutter before his gaze returns to my eyes. "I always thought you'd be marrying Vel. I guess you had to forfeit your position in favor of someone prettier than you."

"If you're attempting to put a rift between my precious friends and me, you're wasting your breath." I step closer, meet his eyes, and hiss, "Velspar is a sweetheart. He'll lock you up for your crimes. He'll do it legally. Humanely. Sean is one word away from removing your jugular. Don't test my patience."

"Oh?" Alton smiles, perfectly calm, amused. "Let's call that bluff."

He grips my chin, and his breath grazes my lips.

Blood doesn't have time to rush from my body before his skull cracks against the wood floors.

Irene screams.

Alton gasps, eyes panicked right above where Sean's hand clutches his face. Knee on Alton's shoulder, Sean smiles as he pushes bone from socket. Alton's soundless scream glints in his eyes, rage and pain and—

“Sean,” Velspar states.

Sean grinds deeper, dislocating the joint with an awful, harrowing *pop*.

“*Sean.*”

“Sorry, boss.” Sean's eyes gleam, pools of darkness above a chilling smile. “It's personal, and you don't have my leash.”

Velspar sighs, looking my way. “Les?”

I wait a moment longer, then I close my eyes. “That's enough.”

Sean rises, leaving Alton gasping, one arm limp, one hand shaking above his crooked shoulder. In a single smooth motion, Sean lifts him to his feet by his dislocated arm and snaps everything back into place.

Quiet agony ripples across Alton's furious features. Voice rough, he chokes on his words. “Yo— You'll pay for that.”

Sean laughs, positively merry. “You'll have to fix your rat problem first, won't you? The way I see it, we're always going to be ten steps ahead of you. You *breathe* in a way we don't like, and we'll start pulling at the blocks in your foundation. We're done playing nice and letting you exist. It's not about *spite* anymore, right, Velspar?”

Cheerful, Velspar rests an elbow against Sean's shoulder. “Right. We're *becoming better people*. And *better people* don't let monsters roam free.”

“What do you think you are?” Alton sputters. “We're *all* the same. Your paltry *morals* and useless *boundaries* are nothing more than self-righteous egotism.”

Velspar looks behind us, strides to the cake, and scoops a handful from the base. I cover my mouth as he marches straight to a still-horrified Irene and smears the bright red frosting over her lips. Flicking the remains onto Irene's dress, he says, “We're *caged* monsters.” He cocks his head back, finding Colette where she stands near the head table with a gaping Helen, sneering Kat, and disinterested Reg. “Right, darling?”

Arms folded, Colette shakes her head and trills her sing-song. “That was unnecessary.”

“Sean's not the only one who gets to be mad when our Les is hurt.” Velspar pouts. “But, like she said, *I'm* harmless.” Dropping all apparent mirth, he snaps his fingers. “Reg.”

The hulking man takes another bite of his food before grabbing his

napkin on his way up.

Kat's eyes widen, and she grips his arm, but he slips from her grasp as he dabs his mouth. Dropping the silk in a crumple, he cracks his neck. "I think it's time for you both to go."

"This isn't over," Alton hisses.

Reg's hand latches onto Alton's shoulder, and the man's face pinches. Leaning closer, Reg murmurs, "You're right. This isn't over. It's just beginning. And that should terrify you." He shoves Alton a step toward the door. "Your move, Pratt."

Alton catches Velspar's eye. "Our parents—"

"Are no longer people I care to placate. Reg is right, brother. You should be very, very *afraid*."

## EPILOGUE

♥ Ew. Gross.

~~~~

*Seven hours later*

“Some wedding, right?” Sean laughs as he steps out of the elevator into our penthouse, our home. Pulling his red tie free, he yawns and tosses it over the back of the couch on his way to the kitchen. “Want a snack?”

“We’ve been eating all afternoon.” And dancing. And laughing like threats weren’t exchanged in the middle of our day. Seeing Irene and still having lunch feels like a bigger accomplishment than getting married.

Sean returns from the kitchen with a glass of water and holds my gaze until my spine tingles. After drinking half the glass, he says, “I should clarify. It’s me. I’m the snack. Want a snack?”

My face turns red, but I straighten and twist toward my bedroom, seeing the open door to the master bedroom. *Our* bedroom. “I want to wash my face. Get out of this dress and these shoes.” Comb my hair. Maybe take a shower.

“Little one.” His hands fall at my hips, and my breath shivers as it enters my lungs. “Are you okay?”

“Of course.” I swallow. “I’d just like to get cleaned up before...stuff and things. You know.”

He kisses my neck. “We can get cleaned up together. If you’d like.”

I force myself to take a step forward, out of his arms, away from his lips. Turning, I face him. “Sean. About what happened today.”

He glances sidelong and runs his fingers through his hair. “Did I go too far? I’m surprised I didn’t break your sister’s wrist, but I do try to be a good boy and make sure the damage isn’t quite so apparent.” His gaze flicks to me, innocent as a candle flame. He would never burn down a house. Not even if you knock him into a pile of lint.

“I want in. I want to know the plans. I want to craft my part in them myself. I don’t want to exist knowing that you’re using me to meet ends. I don’t want to wonder when you’re helping me with Amare because you want me to succeed and when you’re guiding me toward playing a part in a scheme.”



“It’s dangerous to know details.”

“Aren’t I already too close to the source? Couldn’t someone use me to get to you anyway?”

Sean’s jaw locks, and his fists clench at his sides. “Being directly involved would put you in more situations where you’ll be a target. There’s a difference between using you as live bait, and destroying you in order to choke out your part in the construction of their downfall.”

“I’m done being used and pretty.”

A weak smile tugs on the corner of his mouth, and he lifts his hands, spreading his fingers. “Come on, Les. Is this really a conversation for tonight? You know the only thing both of us *really* want to do tonight.”

I fold my arms.

His shoulders sag. Shaking his head, he sighs, marches to me, and slings me over his shoulder.

“What are yo—”

“Hush, little one.” Striding into his bedroom, he flicks on the light, and tosses me into bed. “You can’t out-manipulate me. Sorry.” He holds my gaze as he lets his suit jacket fall. “I don’t have the capacity to pity you for feeling used, and no one should pity you for being pretty.” Cupping my cheek, he leans over me, kisses me softly. “I care less about how it makes you feel and more about keeping you safe and healthy. I had thought that much would be clear by now. I’ll force you into the good things until your feelings catch up, because keeping you within my reach is most important.”

I turn my face when he moves in for another kiss, and he nips my cheek. “Sean, I understand that. But I can handle it. I’m getting stronger every day. I want—”

“Why? Does some moral obligation to tear down tyrants compel you, little one? Why opt to face more danger just because you want to know why I’ll ask you to pull certain strings? It’s too late for you not to play a role at all. I understand that. I am scared every second of what your involvement might mean, *if* you’ll be targeted regardless of how we’ve tried to separate you from the bleakest parts. The deeper you go, the darker it gets. We can’t save everyone. There are hard decisions to make, people you choose to abandon in favor of fighting for others another day. You think we’re all monsters just because we’re rude and mean and don’t much care to pull punches? It’s uglier on the inside. You won’t like it.”

“If you’re starting fires, I want a match.”

“You can pour gasoline. I don’t want you near the flames when they erupt, Leslie.”

“I don’t need to be babied.”

“Don’t force my hand, little one.”

I grip his collar. “Don’t force *mine*.”

He arches a brow.

“I could blackmail you.” I glance at his lips. “If you’d like.”

“I have no emotional compunctions with which to capitalize on.”

“No? No emotional compunctions, is it? What am I?”

“Wifey.”

“If I say *no* to all the things you want for tonight, what would you do?”

“Deal with it. Cry myself to sleep. If I can talk myself into it being morally acceptable somehow, potentially attempt seduction just in case it might do me any good.” His fingertips skim up the waist of my gown. “I don’t think you’ve realized it yet, Les. Your body is a beautiful thing, but the part of you I love the most has nothing to do with it. Withholding your body is not exactly something you can use as a weapon against me, and if you *dare* threaten to hurt it, I have no qualms about forcing you to stop.” Pain ripples through his dark gaze as he lets his touch trace all the way from my waist to my chin. “*I love you*. My love is a dreadful burden. I know that. It’s twisted and aggressive, domineering. I concede to submit myself to you in every way that won’t see you to harm. There is no limit to my obedience. I would rip myself to shreds in your stead if you commanded it. With you, I have no boundary.”

“That’s not the healthy relationship goals Sadie’s been trying to implement.”

“All people are different. I enjoy being yours.”

My heart thuds, and I can’t look at him anymore. “Please, Sean. You’re precious to me, too. I want to be in a position where I know enough that we can protect each other. I can’t do that in the dark.”

“Wrong. You can’t do that in the light. We’re operating in the dark where pretty little *bright springs* have no business.”

“Sean.”

Sighing, he rests his forehead against my shoulder. “You’ve always been stubborn. Difficult to reason with. You want your way in spite of the consequences. It is infuriating when I don’t have the justification behind forcing you not to do the stupid thing. I love you, I love you, I love you, I

love you.” He sucks in a deep breath, then stands straight, glaring down at me. “I. Love. You.”

“I love you, too.”

His eyes close. “Promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“If it comes down to it, don’t put yourself in further danger on my behalf.”

“Is this the part where I lie?”

He swipes his hand over his face. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

Standing, I wrap my arms around his neck, press a hard kiss to his jaw, and whisper, “I promise, hubby.”

“You are my undoing, Leslie.” He coils me up, tight against him, nearly bruising. “If anything happens to you, this world will not withstand my wrath.”

“Is that supposed to manipulate me into being careful, for the sake of *the world*?”

His breath skims through my hair. “Did it work?”

“I’ll be careful, for you, Velspar, Reg, Kat, and Colette. Doing anything *for the sake of the world* is much too heroic a notion for the likes of us.”

His chest vibrates with the ambrosia of his laughter, and I fall into it as he murmurs, “Point taken, little one. Now...” Warmth fills his gaze as he draws me near for a kiss that promises the beginning of forever. “...who’s my good little girl?”

My eyes roll, and I bite back a groan because I can’t deny it now any more than I can deny how much I care about this disaster of a man.

I’m neither good nor little, but one way or another, I am most definitely *his*.

Till death do we part.

## EXTENDED...PROLOGUE?

♥ When one goes to therapy, make sure you don't get worse.

~~~~

*Five months earlier*

“Unfavorable experiences during childhood and mental development tend to have long-term impacts on individuals well into adulthood. Ideas trained and formulated in youth end up heavily embedded in a person’s character. Habits of both action and thought are difficult to alter once they’ve been set. Our brains naturally operate on systems that opt to expend the least amount of energy, so change is uncomfortable and often exhausting.”

I nod along with what Sadie’s saying while sketching a dinosaur in the notebook I brought. Lying upside down on the couch with my shoes resting against the wall, I cross my ankles and pin my pencil between my nose and lip in order to view my work.

Rawr.

Needs more spiky things?

Probably.

“This said, Sean, I understand why you’re adverse to the idea of implementing change in your behaviors and mindsets, but the neglect you’ve experienced paired with witnessing debauchery so early in your development have left you stranded with...unhealthy traits.”

“We’re talking about the sadism again, aren’t we?” My pencil falls to the floor, and my heart sinks. Dang it. I twist lamely in an effort to figure out where it landed without abandoning my position.

“You’ve been seeing me for a couple weeks now, and you’ve been extremely detailed in outlining your issues, but we’ve not confronted any of them.”

“I am of a belief that people are problematic. It’s what you do with your problematic that matters. I’ve got a little thing in my brain that says *laugh* when someone falls down the stairs. I’m aware of the fact it is impolite to push them in order to receive that high. I am also happy to help whoever has fallen up.” The pencil is under the table. Just out of reach. I stretch for it anyway, graze it with my fingertip. “I suppose I’ve given you enough

background to have a grasp on who I am if we've reached that point where you're psychoanalyzing me in order to tell me things I already know. I'm not here to 'work' on myself. I have a *moral dilemma* concerning my best friend." I cannot reach the pencil. With a sigh, I forfeit my position, swing my legs to the ground, and get the pencil before slipping it into the rings of my notebook. "When someone has a broken arm, they see an orthopedic surgeon. When someone has a broken brain, they see a, well, you. Your non-broken brain has information I require." I smile, pleasantly. "Imagine with me... There's a set of stairs beside a road. My friend is walking past them. A car veers toward her. If I push her out of the way, she'll fall down the stairs, but she'll survive. Do I push?"

Sadie's eyes close for a moment. "I feel as though I might need more information before I condone suggesting a course of action."

I sigh. "My friend is killing herself. In order to help, I probably have to overstep some good healthy boundaries of freewill, yada yada. Do I overstep?"

"You can't force someone to get help. All you can do is attempt to support them."

My smile turns less pleasant, and I fold my hands together on my lap. "I'd beg to differ, but I'm not usually the one in a position of supplication." Skimming my finger against a line in my notebook, I murmur, "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. It's willing self-manipulation. People in toxic situations are brainwashed into believing lies about themselves. They're gaslit, abused, traumatized. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy imposes self-discipline to undo that damage of their own freewill. Unfortunately, people who have been chipped into fragments of themselves struggle to attain the courage in order to employ their freewill. The cycle maintains. They're so far gone they've convinced themselves they don't even have a problem. *Am I the bad guy* if I become the abuser and reverse brainwash the lies away?"

"What situation is threatening your friend?"

"She's anorexic because of her environment and family pressure. I'm scared that she's going to end up in a hospital. I'm scared that her mother will pull strings in order to keep them from helping her. I'm scared that even if she gets out, her mind won't be any better, and the cycle will inevitably repeat. She is constantly in pain. I am constantly in agony watching it."

"I hesitate to condone force, but I can tell you what tactics patients with anorexia use to overcome the illness. Perhaps you could guide her toward

options that will benefit her?”

I hum. Well, that’s a start, anyway.



*Four months earlier*

“The part that obliterates me is the fact Leslie is *beautiful*. It’s not even her body, which looks so fragile. It’s everything else. The copper shade of her hair when it’s natural? The shape of her lips? Her little nose? Her eyes?” I practically groan as I close mine. “Her eyes. They’re full of colors. They see *everything*. She’s got such a skill for creating, commanding attention, taking charge. It’s incredibly appealing, seductive even. I’m so pissed she cares so much about her weight she’s letting it cripple her. She could be *everything* if she only gave herself the energy and strength her body needs.” My voice quiets, fading out, and the ache in my chest swells irritatingly throughout my limbs.

“Sean?”

I open my eyes and locate the pad of notes in my lap before glancing at Sadie. Combing my fingers through my hair, I wince. “Sorry. I got swept up in my thoughts.”

Sadie smiles. “I might be overstepping with this speculation, but I want to make sure I’m not misunderstanding. Leslie is your friend?”

“My best friend.” I did not think that was something that could be misunderstood. We’ve been discussing her for the past five sessions.

“Do you have romantic interest in her?”

My eyes widen. “What?”

She peers down at her own set of notes. “The way you talk about her sometimes makes it seem as though your relationship goes deeper than friendship, but you’ve not explicitly mentioned it.”

Of course I haven’t. Leslie is...a friend. My best friend. “I just said her body’s fragile. I’m a rough lover. I’d break her in a...romantic context. So, no, our relationship doesn’t go deeper than friendship.”

“Romantic love goes deeper than the context you’ve just insinuated.”

Weakly, I offer a smile. “I really shouldn’t love people in that way. Loving her as a friend is bad enough. Any more and I’d be desperate to own her. I recognize that, and I’d never put her in that position.”

“If I may speculate for a moment more?”

I present my hand, giving her the floor.

“You’ve been seeing me for two months now out of concern for Leslie. Throughout our visits, you define and address your thoughts in regards to all your friends. You’ve expressed nothing but care in your actions. As you’ve been quite self-aware in assessing yourself, is there a reason you’ve decided explains why you don’t believe you deserve love?”

“We’re not like that. And I don’t believe that I don’t deserve love. I believe that other people don’t deserve the weight of *my* love unless they’re inclined to enjoy something of...well...toxicity.”

“Consensual misbehavior that includes clear boundaries isn’t toxic.”

I blink. That’s a fun way to put that. “Huh.” I tilt my head. “Even if it’s very messed up?”

“If you’re clear about your expectations and allow your partner the freedom to say *no*, it’s not toxic behavior.”

“Interesting.” I chuckle. “Leslie has no problems telling me *no*. Or *ew*. Or *gross*. Or *Sean!*” I’m smiling wide before I realize and force the expression to fall. “Not that we’re at all... We’ve never... And, I mean, we’re kind of liberal in that whole...regard. If there were any interest, we would have acted on it. Sometimes I tease her about it, and she calls me gross, and I laugh.” My heart squeezes, and I clench my fist against my leg. Leslie fills my head. Beautiful Leslie. My Leslie. The things I’ve done with other women on a whim...with Leslie. My fist trembles, and I shake my head. “N-no. That’s... wrong. Isn’t it? Les and I...we’ve got more important emotions between us. I could never ask her to...”

Sadie waits, patiently, for long moments. Then, softly, she prompts, “To...?”

I wet my lips, press them together, whisper, “Love me...like that. Completely. I told you. I’d want her in so many ways that no one who isn’t just using me in return should have to deal with. I’m careful about how I interact with others because I know I’m messed up, and I don’t want to hurt anyone who doesn’t deserve it.” I press my lips together, squeeze my eyes shut, and will myself to stop shaking. “I love her. I want her safe and happy and healthy. I don’t need anything in return.”

“Sean...” Sadie’s calming tone forces me to look at her, and I pretend a tear doesn’t slip down my cheek. Stupid therapy. I prefer to unpack my emotions in the privacy of my own room. With snacks. Like an adult. Gaze gentle, Sadie says, “That’s the purest kind of love there is.”

My lips part. More tears fall. My jaw clenches. “Sadie?” I let out a breath,

try to contain myself. “I love her. Tremendously. Am I still allowed to love her if I push her down the stairs?”

“I would be careful and leave that only as a last resort.”



*Two and a half months ago*

“So. Um. Sadie?” I clasp my hands between my knees and refuse to meet my therapist’s eyes. Leslie is out with Colette and Kat. Rather, *my wife* is out with Colette and Kat. I clear my throat, glance up, back down. “I *may* have thrown her down the stairs. Except I tripped, too. And now we’re both careening. I’m going to try to get her to come see you? Because I’m going to start doing the whole ‘step-by-step, positive manipulation, forced Cognitive Behavioral Therapy’ stuff? But I feel like there’s a reason you haven’t really ‘approved’ of it, and she’ll need a professional. Who isn’t panicking. Because. Right.” I laugh. “I also might have coerced her into marrying me. Which was so not ‘freewill healthy boundaries’. It’s just... I may have kissed her. And she may have kissed back. And I’m almost certain that we’re in love with each other. So. I did a bad thing.”

I take a breath. Pull one hand free of the other and rustle my curls before gripping them, meeting Sadie’s eyes, smiling, wincing. “I’m okay with the sadism. Really. It’s manageable and not expressly violent. Could we do something about my impulses though? I’m thinking that *maybe* I should work on them. Especially now that I’m married.”

Sadie blinks at me.

And I’m not sure she’s supposed to.

But my therapist laughs.



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