

a sweet romantic comedy

HOW TO
DESTROY
YOUR
LIFE-
LONG
BULLY



CAMILLA EVERGREEN

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A SWEET, BULLY ROM-COM

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Reader Expectations

Heat Level: Fade-to-black, innuendos, bullying, four donkey curses (because the MMC is one) and a beaver house (because they've gotta live somewhere), sensual description, mentions of sex

Notable Tropes: Enemies to lovers, villain/sunshine, bully romance, guy falls first, it's always been you, billionaire

Triggers: Depictions of bullying, physical and mental abuse, toxic behaviors, ableism, eating disorders, alcohol

Style: First person present, single POV

Stress Level: Medium

Ending: HEA

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For Noe
Sorry. No one gets kicked in the teeth.
Maybe next time?



AUTHOR'S NOTE

♥ Please read.

Greetings! While this is a rom-com, it also deals with some heavy and harrowing topics. If you are looking for a purely sweet love story, I recommend checking out...any other book in this series.

If you're looking for a touch of menace, well, darling, this is the book for you.

Please be aware that this love story is violent. The characters hurt each other (intentionally). It is, at times, far darker than the genre suggests it should be. There are direct depictions of bullying and abuse. One character struggles with anorexia. One character is mute. Our main female lead has a speech impediment. Our main male lead heavily relies on alcohol as a coping mechanism and, despite his cocky airs, suffers rather intensely with his self-worth.

This relationship has a happy ending because this is a book. In the real world many of the situations depicted should be given no second chances. We've gone past red flags. There are red banners. Red police tape. A whole dang siren screaming *Back Away Now*.

As the first chapter states: in the real world villains quite rarely have the sorts of redemption arcs that can excuse a past of cruelty. In real life I would be very hesitant to forgive bad behavior even if there are "reasons" behind it. In real life forgiveness is important. But often times it's smartest to forgive someone and separate yourself from them in the end.

This story is not intending to "romanticize" or condone bullying. At all. Period.

This story exists because the author (me, hi) is unacceptably addicted to falling for the guys in dark cloaks with personalities that I'd want to smack upside the head if encountered in reality.

This warning is my "read this as fiction, glean the point, and enjoy, but don't assume that point comes anywhere near *love makes everything okay in the end*." It doesn't. I have seen far too many toxic relationships ruin my closest friends, so I can't not preface this somehow.

Be wise and aware.

If someone who acts like a jerk to you doesn't say he'll do literally anything you ask of him and follows through on that promise, it ain't worth it, sis.

Sometimes we do not have the luxury of exploring the "alternative POV" and seeing the good or potential for goodness in everyone.

Sometimes villains stay the villains. And you ought to kick 'em in the teeth.

Take care of yourselves,
Camilla Evergreen

PROLOGUE

♥ In the real world, enemies remain the villains and do not become the lovers. ~~~

It's not productive to hate. It's not productive to hate. It's not—

Bryan shoves me into the brick wall behind our high school while Leslie, Reginald, and Sean look on, their faces twisted with humored pity. Leslie's hazel eyes flicker with amusement in the dim afternoon sunlight as Bryan's fist gathers the collar of my uniform polo up, stretching it out.

I'm not like the elite students here with thousands of dollars in allowance each week. I earned my place at this stupid *college prep* school, but my financial aid doesn't cover clothes. I only have two uniform shirts. I can't afford to let him ruin this one.

“Ssst—”

Bryan barks a laugh in my face, his dark eyes glowering as he shoves me harder against the wall.

I lose my air, and the rest of the word blurts from my mouth. “—op!”

“What was that?” he asks. “S-s-s-s-stop?” His lips curl in a vicious grin as he mocks me—incorrectly. He doesn't even have the decency to echo my error as it was. He puts his own twist on it, making it something else. Making *me* something else.

It's embarrassing.

It's humiliating.

I swallow the bitterness rising in the back of my throat, choke down the curses I'd spit with full clarity if only my own mouth didn't betray me every time I speak.

Bryan slams me into the wall again, and I wish—not for the first time—that he wasn't built like a truck. All tan skin, dark hair, and brawn. It's no wonder he plays football. All he'll ever be is a *jock*. In two years he'll ride a sports scholarship through college, peak there, and drown himself in anything that numbs the hollowness of his existence. And me? I'll be standing on stages in sold-out amphitheaters. As my favorite artist Taylor Swift said in her song “Mean,” I'll be big enough that guys like him can't hurt me anymore.

“You didn’t s-s-s-stutter when you were insulting us earlier,” he mocks, goading me for a reaction, putting on a show.

“Let m-m-me go,” I say with as much strength as I can muster.

Earlier was a mistake. I shouldn’t have been speaking out loud to Katina; I should have been signing. But I was so *mad* after what happened. Who wouldn’t be mad? *Leslie* will never understand what it’s like to ration pads each month or steal toilet paper from public bathrooms. She had *no right* to go through my bag and trash my sanitary items for a joke. She had no right to stick my pads all over my locker, write insults on them, and laugh at me while I packaged them back up. She had no right to make sure everyone else who saw laughed along with her.

If it’s not my stilted speech, it’s my general poverty. I know I don’t belong in a place like this, with the rest of Pratt City’s elite next generation, but I’ve worked hard every second of my life in an attempt to drag myself away from the bottom.

I earned my place.

The rest of them were just born into it.

My body trembles, and tears fill my eyes.

I’m scared.

I’m mad.

It’s not productive to hate. It is *not* productive to hate. It *isn’t*. They don’t deserve that much space in my head.

They will *never* understand *anything*. And twisted parts of me *wish* I could force them into my shoes for just one day. I want them to suffer and stress like I do. I want *Leslie* to know what it’s like to wake up and wash her face and go to school without the ability to put on any makeup or add a thousand accessories to her uniform. I want *Bryan* to lose a hundred pounds because he doesn’t have enough food to eat. I want *Reginald* and *Sean* to already be looking for jobs in order to help pay rent.

I want them to know. And I want them to hurt.

“Where is, where is your m-m-master?” I hiss, my stomach turning even as I force the words out.

Bryan’s face crumples, rage filling his dark eyes until they turn oil black. He releases me. But I don’t get a moment to rejoice. His fist collides with my face, knocking me to the ground. “*Master?*” he spits as something warm collects and drips from my nose.

I’m... I’m bleeding.

The white hot pain jars, stinging with my every labored breath.

My shaking limbs barely get me up on my hands and knees.

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Bryan stomps into my back, sending me sprawling into the dust again. He pins me beneath his foot, scoffing. “Sorry. *Who do you think you’re s-s-stuttering to?*”

Stupid. He’s so stupid. All of them are stupid.

And they aren’t even the worst this place has to offer.

“I know none of you have enough brain ce-ce-cells to d-do a-nything on your own. Velspar si-sicked you on me like d-d-dogs, d-didn’t he?” I turn my head in order to lock eyes with Bryan as a bruise blooms on my cheek. “Pathetic.”

Bryan lifts his foot high, and my blood runs cold. Hatred fills his expression. He’s going to break my ribs. I’m going to die. He’s going to kill me. I—

He tips off balance, backward, and stumbles away from me, cursing as he regains his footing.

Sunlight breaks from behind the clouds, raining down on none other than Velspar Pratt himself.

The boy, the myth, the monster. The very prince of this danged city.

Whatever Bryan was going to do to me pales in comparison to whatever Velspar might. It’s pure, cruel fate that we’ve been going to the same schools since kindergarten. As long as I can remember, his dark hair and feral amber eyes have haunted my nightmares.

Slow smirks, tactical webs woven to ensure my humiliation, sheer delight taken from my failures.

The most Bryan knows how to do is physically hurt me.

Velspar acts like he *knows* me to the core of who I am. He’s often convinced me he knows every thought in my head, every secret thing I’ve never dared to utter aloud. His cruelty doesn’t hinge on stammering back at me or on calling me stupid. His cruelty goes deeper, hits harder. He doesn’t need to mock me for something like my speech. He never has. For years, he’s let his idiotic minions handle the *mocking*.

The only thing Velspar knows to deliver are killing blows. His actions leave me feeling pitiful and helpless, trapped.

I wait, one agonizing breath shifting through my lungs. I’ve been hit and bruised before, but I’ve never been beaten like this—stomped into the dirt, afraid of broken bones or for my own life. Being on the ground like this in

front of Velspar is new. He's craftier than brutality. He knows how to turn his hatred into something physical without ever going so far.

Still, I wonder if he loves it.

I wonder if he'll use the tip of his eccentrically stupid spiked boot to tilt my chin up. I wonder if he'll purr something dreadful down at me as he smiles. He so does love to smile. He wields his infuriating charm like it's the only weapon he'll ever need. And thus far it really has been.

There's no doubting the boy who rules this city is different than everyone else. It's not just that his dark clothes and, as of late, occasional makeup (which are both against dress code) make him stand out—Velspar Pratt has an energy around him.

He's like a star that has supernova-ed into a black hole.

"Get up," he says, the honey-smooth tone of his voice hinging on bored.

Oh, I'm sorry my being thrown into the dirt and pummeled is boring you, Your Majesty. Thousand pardons.

My shaking limbs fumble some as I get my legs back under me. My back aches where Bryan kicked me down. It hurts to stand upright, but I refuse to cower in front of Velspar. I will *never* cower in front of *anyone* named something as stupid as *Velspar*. Of course *his* parents pretentiously named their kids something *unique*. *Velspar* is almost as hideous as his older brother *Alton's* name.

I don't know why he irritates me so much, just in general, not even when he's doing something awful—which is rare but still. I hate how much of my attention lingers on him when he has no right owning any of it.

It is not productive to hate. It is not. It isn't.

But with him I have to constantly remind myself of that.

Velspar Pratt is the second son of this empire in which we all live. It's his birthright to be pretentious and cocky and *awful*. That's what happens when you're raised in a city bearing your namesake. Everything the light touches is his. And he acts like it. And everyone—even Bryan—knows it.

Velspar lifts a slender hand to my cheek. His frigid, pale fingers ice the bruise forming there.

He's still not smiling.

Searing hatred causes the amber gold of his eyes to flash like lightning.

Without taking his eyes off me, he strokes my skin, degrading me to the likes of a pet, and angles his head toward Bryan. "Why?"

Bryan scoffs. "She was insulting us."

“Oh?” Velspar still doesn’t look amused, and that fact alone makes my insides knot.

His resting state is *amusement*. Every single year he’s found a new way to turn me into his personal brand of *amusement*. Seeing him like this—his cold, cold hand touching me while murder glimmers like stoked coals in his eyes—is terrifying.

He cocks his head, letting his unnaturally dark hair slip across his porcelain forehead. “What did you say, Colette?”

I shiver at the sound of my name on his lips. He’s always said it slow, pronouncing each syllable. My name is sharp when he says it, spoken with knives. I wish I could steal that venom away from him and use it for myself.

Lifting my hand, I swat his wrist to get him to stop stroking me.

He leaves his hand inches from my face, hovering with my fingers against his palm. He regards my small hand against his large one and doesn’t move.

“I s...said you were a bunch of insensitive tampons.”

Velspar’s brows crawl upward, and he wraps his fingers around my hand. “That’s all?”

I let my eyes narrow and try to tug out of his hold. It’s iron. “If I tell you every horrible th-ing I’ve said about you, we’ll be, we’ll be here all night.” I violently wrench my hand away.

He chooses the exact worst moment to release me, and I slam my elbow into the brick of the school building. Pain rips up my arm to my shoulder, and I curl inward, wincing.

By the time I gather myself enough to register Velspar’s moved away, Bryan is on the ground beneath him, sputtering as Velspar punches the larger teen in the face while kneeling him in the chest.

“W-what are you—” Bryan begins, but Velspar grips the collar of his shirt and stuffs it in his mouth.

He rises, shaking his hand and tossing back his hair like he’s just starred in a music video. “I don’t appreciate it when my *friends* take it upon themselves to break my toys.” He pulls a black wallet out of his dark torn-up jeans.

Bryan scrambles to get the cloth of his shirt out of his mouth, immediately spitting curses as he tumbles onto his feet.

“Sean, Reg,” Velspar states, and the other two boys lunge forward, on cue, grabbing Bryan around the arms to stop him from attacking their master.

“Get off me!” Bryan roars.

“They’re helping you.” Velspar pulls several twenties out of his wallet. “If you even try to hit me, you disappear. Do you want to disappear, Bryan?”

Bryan pales, and a swallow passes through his thick throat.

Velspar snaps his wallet closed. “That’s what I thought. For now, I’m excusing this stupidity—because that is what this is, isn’t it? *Stupidity?* Only brutes without brains resort to violence.” He turns to me, and his bloodcurdling smile slips into place. Somehow, it always makes me fear for my life. Somehow, he manages to make the expression while loathing simmers in his eyes. He fixes both the smile and the loathing on me. And the effect is dizzying.

I have to fight the urge to shrink beneath it.

Velspar tosses the cash at me, and it flutters like fall leaves around my quivering body. My eyes follow the twenties, and the dizziness heightens as slight breezes toss what must be a couple hundred dollars around in the dust at my feet.

I don’t make a move. I will not go scrambling after money on my hands and knees. No matter how much I need it. That’s exactly what he wants. And I refuse. I *refuse*.

His smile deepens; his loathing darkens. “I’d expect nothing less, *Colette*. You’re mistaken if you think I want you to go grasping for my money while I’m still standing here. You could be starving, and you wouldn’t dare take a single peanut from me. No. I’m going to leave. We’re *all* going to leave. And then you’re going to make sure you get every last dollar. And I’ll know you did. Because you have pride, darling, but you aren’t stupid enough to waste hundreds on it.” Without another word to me, he turns, and his voice hardens. “We’re leaving. Now.”

“Bu—” Leslie begins.

Velspar stuffs his wallet back in the pocket of his jeans and grasps her chin, getting entirely too close.

I clench my fists as I watch their nearness. It eats away at something in my chest, and I can’t breathe.

“What is it, Les? You want to ruin my fun, too? You want to pretend Colette is your toy like Bryan did?” His fingers dig into her perfect thin face, and a flicker of nerves sparks through her hazel eyes.

Something in my chest hones in on that, eases, *revels*.

I know she had to be the one to go through my bag and ruin my things. She deserves to feel a fraction of the fear I go through by being around

people like them every day. It's just karma. Nothing half as personal as *hate*.

Velspar releases her, and she shoots me a glare before she turns with him, bumping into his shoulder and huffing—like they are real friends. It makes my blood boil for reasons I don't understand.

They all walk away, and the moment they're out of sight, I scrub the back of my hand across my face, drop to my knees, and gather up the cash.

I'm so tired of trying to ignore Velspar and his lackeys. I'm so tired of just hoping it will go away. Sophomore year is the perfect time to fight back. It's time I do more than pretend I'm unfazed.

I am going to buy tampons. I am going to tape five to Velspar's locker. And I'm going to have the middle one higher than the rest.

Screw them.

Screw him.

It is not productive to hate.

Perhaps that's true.

I've said nothing about revenge.

CHAPTER 1

♥ Fate is just *hilarious*, isn't it?

~~~~

*Five years later*

Of all the lowdown, nasty, no-good, rotten—

Velspar smiles at me from where he sits in his danged shiny, polished, rich-kid parlor of fricken-fracken *elegance*. All but *sprawled* across the pristine white sofa across from me, he looks exactly how I remember him from high school graduation—when I saw him last and hoped to never see him again. Okay. Older. He looks a *tiny bit* older.

He's still tall, lanky. His features are still sharp, horrifying and otherworldly in their beauty. He's still got that same tousled black hair, those same amber eyes. He's still wearing clothes that are reminiscent of Hot Topic, if Hot Topic catered to people worth billions. The ripped-up jeans are much too familiar. The black shirt and long, wraith-thin ragged coat that fits to his form and flares from his waist to end near his calves are also much too akin to the memories I have of him.

So nice to know the monster hasn't changed even the smallest bit.

My eye twitches.

He matches this stupid room. Everything is in black and white—blinding shades—just like his clothes and pale skin. The only splashes of color are *gold*, in the same shade family as his amber eyes. It's intentional. I just know it's intentional. He's arrogant enough to have his darned mansion modeled after himself. I bet he loves walking through a mirror.

I feel sick. And angry. And just outright baffled. I've been baffled from the moment he opened the front door and let me into this parlor to the left of the exuberant foyer.

His brows only rose when he saw me; my words choked immediately away.

The past five minutes have been a silent standoff between us, and if this isn't just like old times...

Sophomore, junior, and senior year. Me versus him. Silent standoffs from across crowded cafeterias. Nothing to win or lose, yet he always found a way

to make me feel lesser. Wordlessly. It's a real gift—bullying someone with your eyes alone.

His teeth flash in a grin I know all too well. "*Colette.*"

My fists clench against my dress, and I force a swallow down my throat. He still says my name like *that*. I could maul him. Right here. Right now. I could just *maul* him. If my nails were longer, I'd scratch out his eyes, but in my line of work, I don't exactly get away with having nice long nails. Nope. I've got callouses from scrubbing rich brat's houses top to bottom.

I hate myself for not checking the name of my new "employer." I can't believe I took one look at the *long-term* and *live-in* and *fifty thousand dollar salary* and leaped on the opportunity before anyone else could. I ignored my boss's attempts at telling me this household was *problematic*. I assumed something handsy was going on. I've dealt with handsy employers before.

I didn't expect that the person who influenced me to learn self-defense would be sitting right in front of me now as a potential recipient of it.

The world is an unwelcoming place. I learned young that letting fear stop you means giving up on living altogether.

Do it scared, but do it, whatever *it* is. Never let the jerks see how much they affect you—until it's been ten years of torment and you just *have* to tape feminine products in a middle finger to their locker, or put jello in their backpack, or, if you're *really* stupid, clip a sparkly barrette in their obnoxiously silky dark hair. Which they will wear. The entire day. And touch *fondly* whenever they catch your eye.

I am supposed to be too old to be scared of childhood bullies now, but sitting here across from the person who made me dread waking up in the morning proves I'm not immune to ancient wounds. Velspar Pratt twisted a knife into me every day for over *ten years*. And the smile he's wearing says he is *delighted* to have a chance to keep twisting.

*Another mind game? After so long?* his eyes glimmer, practically dancing. *Oh, darling. Don't mind if I do.*

I sneer against all better judgment, because I had so nicely packed him away in the recesses of my mind. I forgot entirely that he used to call me *darling* when he taunted.

The memory alone makes my blood boil. It was so patronizing. I was the *only* one who got the term even though he terrorized everyone, including his friends.

Somehow before he speaks he manages to look even more pleased. "I



take it you're debating how much you need this job?"

Actually, I'm debating whether or not it's possible to get away with murder. It was the maid with the candlestick in the parlor! I swear I wasn't *trying* to hit him, officer. I just wanted to see how well the gold matched his eyes.

Seriously. Who in this day and age has an entire candelabra on display in their sitting room?

I stare at it, scowling.

I do need this job.

I'm desperate for a place to stay where I'll be warm and fed without having to pay so much for it.

I have debt that I *need* the twenty thousand dollars above average salary to pay off.

I know better than to think Velspar won't make me jump through hoops during this interview in order to secure this position all before he rips it out from under me and laughs as my hope shatters. As if I'm going to expect to be fed by the person who had my lunches thrown away. As if I should seek a warm room from the person who locked me out of our elementary school in the dead of winter.

He just *left me* out there in the cold until my fingers turned bright red and I was shaking in my threadbare coat.

And, of course, because he is *Velspar Pratt*, no one did anything to him. If he'd told the teacher who found me not to let me in, she wouldn't have. Period. It's infuriating how this darn city's caste system holds sway in *Virginia*. Weren't we supposed to be by the people, for the people in America? Why in the world do we humor an arrogant prince just because his family owns the land this city rests on?

People who don't suffer the consequences of their own actions piss me off more than anything.

"Did you forget how to speak these past three years?" His lips tip into a demeaning pout.

Old hatred I shoved and shoved down bubbles to the surface. I denied it so long. I promised myself he'd only ever get *indifference* out of me, but *oh no* Velspar is too *good* at being despicable. And the worse the things he did or championed, the harder it became to forget him when I went home.

Sophomore year, I broke. Sophomore year, I fought back.

Sophomore year, everything *changed*.

I had to force myself to forget him after graduation, when the worst thing he did was flick the tail on my cap, lean much too close, and murmur, “It’s been *fun*, darling. I hope you cry yourself to sleep missing me.”

I haven’t *missed him* for even a moment.

“Do you still keep in contact with Katina?” he asks, the buttery smooth sound of his voice just the same as always.

My stubby nails dig into my palms as my breaths grow harsh. In high school, Katina was my only friend. We weren’t the same because she came from a nice family with old money and strong stock broker connections while I came from a broken one with no money and no connections. We found ourselves together because of our issues with language.

She can’t speak due to a childhood injury. I can’t speak well due to my speech impediment. Kids called us *Dumb and Dumber*. And we signed far more clever insults about them behind their backs.

It’s supremely irritating that Velspar is asking me casually about our classmate like we’re catching up at a high school reunion, like he didn’t look down on both of us and enjoy tormenting me in front of her. It was like he wanted to prove the differences between Katina and me. It was like he wanted to remind me I was alone in his city, nowhere near his status, nothing comparable to even my only friend.

I look elsewhere, at a grand piano I doubt is ever used. It’s probably here for the *aesthetic*. I’d kill for a chance to learn piano. Maybe I should. I mean, hey, the day’s still young, isn’t it?

I can add *kill Velspar* and *steal his piano* to my to-do list. How exactly am I going to get it on the bus with me though? Maybe I should also steal one of his cars? I bet he has at least five. He has an entire suite for a live-in maid, of course he’ll have an entire building dedicated to cars.

Of all the pretentious, no-good—

“Talk to me, Colette,” he murmurs, voice low and enchanting. The years we’ve been apart seem to have only refined his charm. It’s maddeningly unfair.

“Why should I?” I ask, wetting my lips

His smile twists, turning feline, and he draws a finger up to his lips, letting it brush over the soft pink. “Because I like your voice.”

My eyes roll so I’m looking at the other half of the room. The bay window encases a plush daybed and reveals a swathe of garden bursting with flowers. It’s the most color I’ve seen here so far, but it’s still all severe—

crimson roses, scarlet zinnias, ruby amaryllis. I wonder how many landscapers he has primp his yard each week. I wonder if he knows the names of the flowers or if he just gives his hand a vague wave and says *red*.

Red as blood and bitter wine.

“You don’t believe me?” he asks.

Why in the ever-lovin’ world would I believe him? A compliment from him is little more than a trap. It may be years since we’ve played, but I’m not stupid enough to have forgotten his games.

“It’s a truly remarkable voice,” he continues the moment my eyes land back on him, and I’m struck with a chill. Maybe I shouldn’t have looked at him. Maybe he wasn’t after my response. Maybe he was reeling in my attention.

Maybe I remember the game but I’ve forgotten the rules.

Maybe I’ve already lost.

“It’s probably the most beautiful voice I’ve ever heard.”

I school my features to present ultimate disinterest. The one thing Velspar hates more than anything else is being ignored or disregarded. He thrives on attention. Since I’ve already made the mistake of giving him an ounce of mine, now I have to remain unfazed.

You, Velspar Pratt, are *boring me*.

“Are you going to prattle on?” I drone.

He arcs a brow. “Do you not stutter anymore? You did when we graduated. Don’t tell me you outgrew it in the past three years?”

It bothers me that he knows anything about stuttering, that he knows it’s something someone can grow out of. It bothers me that these taunts of his—sanctioned all around my *voice*—aren’t ridiculing.

I don’t know how to read his expression. I don’t know if he’s genuinely interested or amused as he waits for me to respond the way he wants. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to keep myself from stammering unless I start singsonging my words together. It’s too late for that even if he wasn’t already aware I did it sometimes when I had to communicate with the teachers who were particularly disappointed in my lack of fluent speech. Right now, I’m specifically choosing my words, switching some up last second in order to trick my brain. These past few years working in the real world have led me to discover tactics to tamp down on the issue. They are not always as effective as I’d like.

“You did?” he prompts when I’ve not answered. Tilting his head forward,

he looks through my soul. “You didn’t?” Amusement flickers sickeningly in his whiskey-colored eyes. “Say *my stuttering doesn’t deter me anymore.*”

My stomach dips. I have the most issues with *m* and *d* and *s*. Especially *st*. It’s like he crafted that line specifically with my struggles in mind. In fact, I’m certain that’s exactly what he did. I flex my fingers. “I d-d-didn’t th-ink you’d paid that m-much attention, Ve...” Nope. His name is going to be a mess thanks to that *sp*. Best not to try it at all. Biting my tongue, I brace for laughter, torment, teasing, something vile and primitive, some victory over me because ha ha ha Colette still stutters.

He doesn’t even bother. Insulting something that ultimately says nothing about me has never been his style. He always, always digs deeper, seeking out the more important things, where he can hurt me the most.

“Does that make it difficult to get a job?” he asks.

I flinch.

He rocks forward, planting his feet on the floor and clasping his hands between his knees. “So it *does*. How regrettable.” His gaze darkens. “Basically, I’m the best option for employment you’ve had in...ever, maybe?”

I hate him. I can’t be here for even another moment.

Standing, I take a deep breath. “I’m not going to put, going to put myself th-through this. Good d-day.”

“Hundred thousand,” he says, and my feet freeze. The front door is just past the archway out of this room, sitting opposite two spiraling staircases that lead onto a lavish balcony overlooking the vast foyer. I can see the gold trim of the far railing. I can see the shining black marble before the ebony front door. It’s in reach, but I can’t move.

A hundred thousand. That would give me a fighting chance against Mom’s medical debt and the nursing home fees.

Fingers graze my ear, tucking my shoulder-length blond hair back.

“D-don’t touch me,” I whisper, unaware when he even moved behind me. His legs are entirely too long, his steps much too silent without his obnoxious calf-high boots. I’ve always thought of him as a creature more than a person, something wickedly alluring when he shouldn’t be. Everything about him puts me on edge and alert.

His fingertips drift a second longer against my neck before pulling away. “A hundred thousand dollar salary. Nearly two thousand dollars a week.”

It’s pocket change to him. The lazy way he murmurs the words proves it.

He's being intentionally enticing, like a siren beckoning me to the depths of the ocean. He always did enjoy waving his riches in my face. After a time, when I was angry enough, this way he acts became almost a *comfort*.

The only good things about him have nothing to do with him at all. He was born into his beauty and his wealth. Everything that *matters*? Everything he *chooses*? None of that is good.

Maybe he likes it that way.

Maybe I like knowing I'm better than him because I choose to be and worse than him only in the ways I couldn't help.

"I'm not ssst-upid," I tell him.

He laughs, the sound too close. I almost convince myself I feel it in my hair.

"*Darling*," he patronizes, and I grit my teeth. He still hasn't outgrown that? Screw him. "I have never once, for even a moment, thought you *stupid*."

I believe him; I hate that I do.

My heart races, afraid. I don't like being here. I don't like his proximity. I don't like the idea that he can reach out and touch me and I might not be able to stop him. I know he's stronger than he looks. I know he's more skilled than he appears. He can throw people three times his size onto the ground and keep them there. It isn't just his money and position in Pratt, Virginia that makes him something to fear.

I don't know what he became during these past three years.

I don't know why he's been considered *problematic*.

I'm scared.

I'm scared, and I feel like a child again, battling for indifference when I want to cry. He can smell fear. I just know he can. And he'll use it against me until there's nothing of me left. That's what a bully is. That's what he has always been—someone interested in burning those he considers lesser to ash.

So I have never let him.

"I am not going to humiliate m-m-myself by working for you. I'm s... sure you'd just love to have m-me cleaning up your me-me-m—" My fists clench. "—filth. You'll fire me after you've had your fun. Whatever *fun* it is you're already planning, I d-don't want a-ny part of it."

"Hundred thousand. I won't fire you as long as you do bare minimum for the job. I'll give you ten thousand up front if you agree not to quit in the first three months—that's the longest anyone has lasted."

I bark a laugh to cover my nerves. “What d-did you d-do to them?”

“They couldn’t handle me.”

My eyes roll, and I find myself facing him before I can think. He’s almost an entire foot taller than my 5’5”, and being this close, looking up at him like this, is jarring. He wasn’t this tall before, not that I remember. He was *tall*, but he has to have grown several more inches since we were eighteen. “Tell me.”

His eyes flicker with mischief, and he lifts a hand, letting it frame my cheek—an inch away from my skin. His hands are cold, and I know they’re cold, and they’ve always been cold, but I feel the heat of his nearness right now as he doesn’t touch me.

“How horrible do you think I am?” he asks.

Very. Whatever is *the most*, that is how horrible I think he is.

“I’ve never touched someone against their will, have I?” he murmurs, tracing the outline of my face without connecting his skin to mine. “You told me to stop. I did. I don’t remember ever getting any complaints. Do you? Did I ever hurt you?”

Not physically.

Never physically.

“You prefer psy-psy-psychological torment.”

His smile broadens, as though I’m reminding him of something quite fond. “Did I get under your skin, *Colette*? Right through to your psyche?”

My chest pinches, and I can’t take it anymore. I swat his hand away from me.

He accepts the action as permission and clasps tight, drawing my palm to his cheek, imprisoning it there.

“Let go,” I demand, and he does. Sickness crawls up the back of my throat. “I’m not falling for th-is.”

“Yet you’re still here.” He spreads his arms out at his sides, hands splayed. “You know the offer is too good to pass up. Your entire expected year’s salary in three months. All at the cost of a little pride, maybe a little sanity, but who needs that anyway?”

“I happen to like my s...sanity, thank you very, you very m-much!”

He snickers.

I stab my finger against his chest and the torn-up black and ash-gray shirt he’s wearing. “You’ll m-m-make things di— hard on me. I’ve outgrown your abuse.”

Velspar touches a hand to his heart, or where a heart might be if he had one. “I believe I’m being quite generous.” He slips into the pocket of his dark jeans and pulls out a black wallet. “You’re a *good girl*, Colette.” He plucks a couple hundred dollar bills free, and my mouth goes dry. “I’ll give you this if you promise me that you’ll consider my offer during the next few days. You have until Wednesday to come back.” Pinning the cash between two fingers, he offers it to me like it’s nothing. “You’re a smart girl.” His expression blackens, the poised smile on his face going cold. “I’m sure you’ll make the right choice.”

The *right choice* is to leave him with his stupid money and not give this “deal” another thought. But I’m hungry. And tired. And I live in a studio apartment with a thousand dollar rent while Mom relies on the staff at her nursing home to take care of her. It’s nine thousand dollars a month just to scrape by, and most of it goes on credit because of course I don’t make anything close to that. I want a cheesy bean and rice burrito from Taco Bell without having to sacrifice my next two meals for it. I snatch the cash and turn on my heel, plowing for the front door.

The fresh April spring air does nothing to calm the torrent inside.

*You’re a good girl, Colette.*

My stomach twists as I shove the money in my pocket and force my legs to march down the steps, around the elaborate fountain that centers the roundabout in front of his mansion. I charge down the drive to the high, wrought iron gate at the front of the property. The entire surrounding area oozes wealth. The nearest bus stop is several miles away. If I accept this, I’ll be stranded here—with him.

If I don’t, it could take years before I can overcome our debt. Mom is finally recovering. I need to be able to support her while she’s getting better.

Sniffling, I scrub at my cheeks and realize I’m crying when the back of my hand comes away damp.

Great.

*You have pride, darling, but you aren’t stupid enough to waste ~~hundreds~~ thousands on it.*

Velspar Pratt, you royal b—

## CHAPTER 2

♥ Assess whether or not vengeance is duly deserved.

~~~~

Katina tugs on my sleeve, drawing my attention as we step into the Barnes and Noble. The safe scent of ink and paper settles around me like I don't have life-changing decisions to make before tomorrow. It has been all of two days since I lost the will to live. All of three hours since I caved and explained the situation to Katina.

Her solution, as per usual, was *bookstore*.

Never minding that I can't afford to buy more than one book a month and the library is the only balm for my insatiable reading requirements, something about being in a bookstore makes things better.

So long as there's books.

So long as I *might* one day be able to afford a little bookcase full of them.

Maybe everything will be all right.

Katina's hands form words. *That's perfect! I knew we'd find all our answers here.*

"What—" I don't get a chance to finish my thought before she's pulling me toward a display with several books by the same author. A sign accredits them as *TikTok Sensations*, and I'm stuck trying to wrap my mind around how self-help books got big on TikTok when Katina shoves one in my face.

How to Destroy Your Lifelong Bully.

Oh my. How deliciously tempting.

I deadpan. "Really? I can't commit any felonies. I d-don't want to be s... sued."

Katina's chocolate brown eyes soar upward before she crams the book into my hands in an effort to free hers. *I know you. You're going to do this because you've convinced yourself you have to. I doubt this book would be so popular if it resulted in people getting sued.*

Yeah, probably because all these books look like satires that no one should ever, ever listen to. Still, I open the hardback and glance over the table of contents. The first chapter is deciding whether or not the bully deserves it. Um, yes. Velspar deserves a lot of bad things. Most chiefly a smack to his

pretty, smirking mouth.

Does this book list legal vengeance options? That would be literature.

Katina taps the pages as I'm flipping through, looking for either a list of options or a step-by-step on how to get away with murder. When I glance up, she signs, *I'll get it for you.*

"Th-at's a bad idea."

It's a great idea.

It's a tempting idea, if and only if this book actually holds the answers to a tyrant's downfall. I have the suspicious feeling it does not. Bullies are sad people who were not held enough as children. In Velspar's case, I have the sneaking suspicion his parents didn't *hire* enough people to hold him. Maybe he was sad and unloved in his giant, cold mansion where he could have anything he wanted all the time forever. Maybe he dried his tears with twenties and blew his nose in hundreds.

The poor dear.

I know it isn't *kind* to scoff at his clear lack of emotional support just because he's rich, but there's a point where he has to be responsible for his own actions. From day one, he was an awful child, and that's excusable enough because children don't know anything. I'm judging him for getting *worse* as he grew up.

I'm judging him for Monday when he looked at me and I couldn't see a singular thing that had changed.

He wants to hurt me. He wants to hurt people. He's sad and angry and twisted. And now? Now that's on him. Now those are his decisions. That's the baggage he's *choosing* to hold onto.

My eyes narrow on the page in front of me, and I look up at Katina.

She smiles, her light brown cheeks dimpling.

"I am going to take the job," I tell her. "Because I have to."

She nods, signing, *I know.*

"Attempting to d-destroy him is a bad idea."

Her head shakes, kinky brown curls tossing. *No, it's the best idea.*

"It's not feasible."

It's quite feasible. Crush him into dust. My beautiful friend manages to look particularly rabid for an angelic moment, dark eyes glinting with lethal promise.

I love her.

Sighing, I close the book. "Okay. I won't do a-nything illegal, but I will

read.”

I look forward to his rather timely demise.

I wish.



The front door to Velspar’s mansion swings open well before I reach it, and I grimace, gathering my strength as I make it up the final few steps. He regards me icily, smirking as he leans against the jamb. “*Colette*,” he purrs. “So good to see you.”

I swallow bile and keep myself from fleeing.

I am here for money.

I am here to destroy him, if possible; that goal has yet to be determined. I’ve not had time to read more because I’ve been busy packing up my meager belongings in order to move...here. I am already dreading this decision. Velspar Pratt does not have a limit on what he’s willing to do in order to get his way. I have no idea what he’s planning or intending to have me do once I put him in a position of power over me again.

It’s foolish that I trust he won’t hurt me physically when he’s fully capable of decimating my mind. It’s always a game of wit and will with him. I don’t know if I’ve ever won since he makes up the rules as we go along. Interacting with him is akin to drowning. I’m constantly fighting for air as waves crash and tides churn.

“Back to being mute?” he asks, cocking his head against the trim.

I blink dully at him. “Let’s get th-is over w-with.”

His smile falls, and I take some enjoyment in that minor victory.

So much so, it brings a pleasant smile to my face.

He stretches his long limbs, pouting like an aristocrat who simply can’t get comfortable in his own skin. “You’re much too pretty when you smile, *Colette*. I think I prefer your tears.”

“The feeling is mu-mu—” I close my eyes, feel my brief joy evaporate. “Likewise.”

“You find me pretty?” he teases.

I rub my temple. “Your p-pardon, Your Grace. I wasn’t a-ware you were oblivious to th-at fact.” I sigh, as though communicating with him is quite troublesome—spoiler alert: it is. “What a sh-sh-shame your good looks are where your m-m-merits begin and end.”

His teeth bare in an unattractive grin. “Well now. I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“Of course you would.”

“Colette Hart thinks I’m pretty. I wonder. Do I ever grace your dreams?”

I drawl, “If ever you have, they would s...sour into the m-m-most revolting nightmares.”

He chuckles. “Oh, to haunt your wakeless hours.”

“You certainly have m-m-m-mastered haunting my wakeful ones.”

At last, like I’ve passed some demented test, he steps aside and lets me in, closing the door behind. I follow him through an archway connected to the foyer and into a vast kitchen with a long bar counter. Like the rest of the space I’ve seen so far, it’s fully adorned in blacks and whites with hints of gold.

I shouldn’t be surprised by his narcissism. It remains his single defining trait. Without missing a beat, he pulls a key out of his pocket and opens a door at the back of the kitchen, pushing into a quaint living space. Fully furnished, the most remarkable thing is the color. Pale blue sofas sit atop cream carpet while lovely floral drapes adorn tall windows. Sunlight pours in, streaking rainbows through a crystal chandelier centered above an oak coffee table.

“I don’t care what you do with the furniture. Change it if you hate it.” He strides to the other side of the space and opens a door into a perfect bedroom with a large four-post bed dressed in a sky blue coverlet. White cloud-soft pillows swallow nearly half the mattress, and I don’t even know what anyone is supposed to do with them all.

Once I’ve discovered the tidy bathroom, Velspar folds his arms and leans against the wall between the door and a large vanity dresser. “Acceptable?” he asks.

It outshines my current living situation ten-fold.

I stop ogling the nice and neat linen closet stocked with thick light blue towels and shrug.

Expression turning wry, Velspar dangles the key from his slender fingers. “What’s that? You don’t want it? You prefer *my* bedroom? Why, *Colette*.”

I accentuate my eye roll. “That’s new.”

“What is?”

I hold out my hand for the key. “The risqué humor.”

“Well, we are adults now.” He drops the cold metal into my palm. “I suspect you can handle it. No doubt you’ve toyed with the wiles of men and found us all lacking by now.”

The wiles of men.

I blink slowly at him. “What ce-century are you channeling?”

“You disapprove of my vocabulary?”

I disapprove of his existence.

He laughs. “Are you suggesting you’ve not yet acquainted yourself with wily men?”

I shift on my feet and grumble, “Th-is co-conver-sation is m-m-m-making m...me uncomfortable.”

Clicking his tongue, Velspar nods. “Ah. Yes, I can hear that.”

I shoot him a look.

He flutters his fingers at me. “The stutter. It’s worse when you’re nervous. It used to irritate me.”

Join the club. My stutter has been irritating people since I learned to talk. Knowing as much is mortifying. Irritating Velspar is somehow less grating than annoying or inconveniencing strangers, though.

Sighing, he straightens off the wall and turns out of the bedroom, forcing me to jog in order to keep up with his stride. “I didn’t like that it was so easy for people to tell when they’d bothered you.”

“What?” I blurt.

“I’m sure you remember. It annoyed me when other people bothered you, more so when they knew they had. I didn’t want them to have the satisfaction—they didn’t deserve it.” Velspar waits for me to exit the suite before closing the door behind me.

I scowl at him. “And I s...suppose you felt you d-did?”

He flicks my short hair, giving me a toothy grin. “Naturally. What don’t I deserve?”

I could begin listing things, but I hold my tongue since he’s already wandering behind the kitchen counter and throwing open a massive fridge about as large as three regular-size ones.

My stomach drops out of my body as my mouth falls open.

In this line of work, I have seen some dreadful messes, but this? This gives me horrified chills.

Everything is crammed into the crevices. Rotting fruit and leaking platters overflow. I don’t know what to say. Did he just shove absolutely everything dirty out here in this spotless place in *there*? What has he been eating? How has he been surviving on his own?

I’ve decided. He does not deserve the ability to purchase his own food.

How much did he think he could eat in order to have his fridge get this frightening?

“You can cook, right?” he asks.

I nod, slowly. I *can* cook. I don’t have any certifications for it, since that’s not required. I don’t even *need* a high school diploma for this job, but here I stand, over-qualified to serve. *Over-qualified* was an excuse dozens of employers used to turn me down when I was trying to find work just because the high school I went to was so elite.

“I like to have three meals a day normally,” he says. “This is leftover from a party. My last housekeeper quit in the middle, so...” He fixes an entirely too-bright smile on me as he swings the door closed. “...this is what happens when I’m left to take care of myself.”

I think I pale. If you matched my skin to the pure white appliances, you might not see a difference. “A-ah...” I say, and, believe it or not, that wasn’t a stutter. My brain is short-circuiting in a different way right at the moment. This twenty-one-year-old man can’t clean up after himself? And he has the gall to look chipper about it?

Rich people should perish.

“What happened at the party th-at m-m-m-made your last housekeeper quit?”

His amber eyes are so disarmingly full of innocence I put my guard all the way up. “Nothing,” he says.

“Now the truth?”

His head cocks; the action is uncharacteristically canine. If he were an animal, he’d be a cat, a big, prissy, arrogant cat. “Nothing happened out of the usual. She was in her seventies, so I doubt anyone was particularly uncouth.”

“Ve-Ve—” I wet my lips. “Velss...”

The innocence melts out of his expression, and he rests against the counter, watching me intently as I struggle with his name.

My face heats, and I grit my teeth. “Tell me the *truth*. I’m here, but I haven’t ma-ma-made any de—final choices yet.” I slam the key he gave me down on the counter by the sink and glare. My next words spill out too fast for my brain to trip. “I know you don’t care about anyone but yourself, but I don’t want to put myself in danger. I need to know what I’m getting myself into. Can you be *remotely* decent for *once* in your life?”

Velspar neither berates me on clarity nor asks me to repeat myself nor

slow down. He just sighs. “It lasted three days. When I came to, she and half my guests were gone. I got a text about her quitting.”

“Three d-d-days?”

“Also, you don’t have to call me by my full name if you get stuck on the *sp*. You can just call me ‘Vel’.”

Vel? I’ve never heard anyone call him *Vel*. I somewhat distinctly remember him hating when people tried to clip down his name like that. Lips parted, I gape at him.

He smiles cruelly, eyes glinting with wicked promise. “Or *Mr. Pratt* if you’d prefer. Sir’s nice, too. Or, what was it you said before? *Your Grace?* I liked that.” He begins counting off on his slender fingers. “Majesty, my liege...” Something lethal darkens his irises. “Didn’t you used to tell my lackeys I was their *master* in order to piss them off? You can call me that now, if you’d like. *Master.*”

My nose scrunches. The idea that I managed to piss off his lackeys while goading his ego doesn’t sit well with me. Neither does the fact he has the audacity to request it. “Vel’s fine.”

“Pity,” he murmurs as he drops his hand and strides away without warning—again. Isn’t that just so like him?

He takes me on a tour of his mansion, which includes his poking his head into rooms, lifting his brows like he’s never seen them before, and saying some variation of *uh, well, I guess if it needs dusting, you can.*

His bedroom is off-limits, for my sake and my safety—and *oh, don’t look so disappointed, Colette; wait, is that an uncomfortable comment? Your pardon, Your Grace.*

I had almost forgotten what it was like to want, desperately, to run my fist straight through someone’s face. Not even my more handsy employers made me want to rearrange their features like this. Probably because those people, point blank, needed to be shot and Velspar? Velspar needs to *suffer.*

He shows me an indoor pool that pours out into a yard complete with waterfalls and enough greenery to make it look more like a lush pond than a man-made swimming pool. I don’t have to worry about the pool or outside. He has *other* people for that.

I’m welcome to use the pool, and the bar, and the billiards table, and the theater, and, and, and...so long as he isn’t using them. Obviously, I’m allowed to help myself to any food, at any time. He’ll connect me to a bank account that he expects me to use in order to purchase food and cleaning

supplies.

At the end of the tour, we return to the parlor, and he sets the appropriate paperwork out on the coffee table between us. Boredom laces his every motion now, as though he's run out of the wherewithal to care.

Years of experience tell me this is a trap. I'm being lulled into a false sense of security. I should get out now, while he still has the nerve to fake civility.

"What are m-my hours?" I ask him, since that hasn't quite been discussed yet, and if he's planning to throw three-day long parties, I need to know exactly when I'm allowed to check out of that fiasco.

"Nine to five?" A brow arches, like he's not sure.

"That's a late breakfast and an early d-d-dinner."

His lip curls in a deprecating grimace. "Already so eager to take care of me, Colette?"

I keep my expression perfectly neutral. "I'm just trying to m-make this se-sea—less painful for you. No s...surprises for either of us."

"Where's the fun in that?"

"Th-is is a job. I d-d-don't like you. Id-d-deally, we d-don't have to s... see m-m-much of each other."

His lips purse, and his eyes narrow on me. "Was that just a hard line to say, or are you freaking out on me?"

I grit my teeth. "I am *not* freaking out."

"You're about to live with someone you despise, and while that feeling is mutual, I'm in a position where it can be rather gratifying and *fun* while you're...well...not." He crosses one long leg over the other and links his fingers around his knee.

I shudder. This is obviously a trap. He just said as much in plain terms. And that's part of the long game, isn't it? Later, when I regret everything, he'll get to play all high and mighty and tell me I agreed to this. He kept nothing from me. I'll be foolish because of my own choices, not because I was born poor or with a speech impediment.

It's not fair that I have to take the chance of being humiliated and tormented because I need the money.

Mom needs the money.

We need this.

Things will be different once she no longer needs to stay at the nursing home, but for now? For now, it's up to me to get us both through.

Leaning forward, I reach for the pen.

Velspar swipes it out from under me, and my stomach tips upside down.

It's already starting, isn't it?

Hesitant, I glide my gaze up to him and swallow back bile.

Velspar smirks at me, twirling the pen in his fingers casually. "I'll sign first."

Oh, by all means. Ladies first. I force my eyes not to roll as I motion toward the papers.

Hatred mingles with elation, and he stops the pen's spinning. "You want this job, Colette?"

"D-don't m-make m...me walk out on, out on, out on you now."

"Nervous?" He leans forward, dragging the first page toward him. Setting the point of the pen on the line, he doesn't make a single motion to sign his name.

I will not be cowed. I will not be cowed. I will n—

"The job is yours, if you say *please*." Sparks fly between us, and I don't know which burns brighter—mine or his. I also don't know which is more likely to send the other up in flames.

I'm almost entirely too used to bullies telling me to say things. However, Velspar isn't mocking my speech right now. This is different. I could stammer the word for an eternity; he wouldn't care. No, what he's interested in is for me to *beg*.

Leaning forward, I press my hand over his around the pen and hold his simmering eyes. His fingers flinch beneath my grasp, and he moves his gaze off mine. That minuscule win sends a high through my soul. "You...first."

His darkened eyes shoot back up, and his sharp smile turns vicious. "Oh?"

"I'm not going to beg for a job that countless others d-don't want, Vel. But if it m-m-makes your s...sorry pride feel better, I'm willing to oblige. After you do."

His free hand clamps around mine—cold, cold, cold.

"Go on," I whisper. "S...say *please clean up after m-me, Colette. I'm a grown m-m-man who d-d-doesn't know how to do it m-myself*."

For the fraction of an instant, I swear he's watching my lips, and then I know I'm watching his because he wets them.

Someone else may have used the opportunity to repeat after me exactly, stammers and all, but Velspar doesn't. Eyes flashing with murderous intent,

he gets so close I can feel his breath against my skin—minty, with a twist of cinnamon. It burns. “Colette,” he begins, and my name on his lips alone skates a fingertip all the way down my spine. “I just don’t know what I’ll do without you if you don’t agree to spare me from my own filth. No one has ever been able to manage me like you.” He crushes his fist around my hand. “*Please, Colette. Please serve me.*”

I flutter my lashes. “No.”

His smile vanishes, like I’ve slapped it off his face, and the utter elation that riots through my chest is unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. An ugly laugh goes tumbling out of my mouth, and I pull my hand free of his suddenly lax fingers.

He stares, furious and baffled, a little twitchy. “Pardon?” he growls.

I’m weightless as a bird. My bones are hollow. I’m fragile, but I can fly. I bite my lip and soak in his revulsion for several long moments. I forgot what it felt like to play with fire. It’s the scariest thing in the world. “Can’t take a joke, Vel?” Still smiling, I offer a tiny, mocking bow. “Please, oh great one, I am ever in need of th-is job. Please, oh please, let me *serve you.*”

The sound of his pen moving and the papers shuffling hits my ears, and when I glance up out of my bow, he’s scribbling his name into the proper places and shoving the pages to my side of the table. Once he’s finished the last one, he tosses the pen down and leans back, folding his arms. “You think you’re so dang cute, don’t you?” he snarls.

“D-do you?” I ask, pushing my hair over my ear as I lean forward and start signing away my soul.

An irritated sigh leaves him, and he mutters, “You’re like a doll. A perfect, porcelain doll. Every time I expect you to break, you surprise me. It’s frustrating to have you ruin all my plans at the final second. You’re always butting in where you aren’t wanted and abandoning me where you are.”

My brow furrows as I finish my last signature. “You’ve wanted me s... somewhere that I let you d-d-down?”

His eyes narrow, and he looks elsewhere, ignoring my question. “I expect that you’ll be moving in immediately and starting tomorrow. Do you need help getting your things?”

“I don’t have much.”

He scoffs. “Obviously.”

Give me patience...

I stack the papers neatly, separating out each of our copies. “I th-ink I

can, I can manage.”

“You don’t have a car.” He stands, heading off like he just expects to be followed. When I don’t, he pokes his head back into the room with an expression that says I’ve ruined his day.

First of all, good. Second of all, I am the picture of innocence. Thank you very much.

“Come on,” he gripes, exasperated. “Let’s get your crap.”

Sorry. What?

CHAPTER 3

♥ Never trust the hand that feeds you.

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“I’m so happy for you, baby,” Mom’s voice buzzes through my earbuds while I text Katina. Mom, of course, is getting the veggie version of this past day. Katina? Katina gets the raw, sheer, what the— “A stable job in a nice house with good pay.” She snuffles, and I wince as my fingers fly across the phone keyboard.

**Colette:** He has a truck. He drove me to my apartment and helped me pack up my things. The silence of the drive was chilling. And the permanent grimace? I wish I got his expression on camera when I told him that the furniture wasn’t mine so we didn’t have to worry about it. “You sleep on a bed that OTHER PEOPLE have slept on? You mean to say you don’t BURN things commoners have used??” I need to bathe. My skin smells pretentious.

“It’s a great job. Relatively easy, too,” I lie through my teeth. “The family —” Notice: *not* singular man my age who I used to come home crying about from preschool through high school graduation. “—is fairly tidy. I’ll m-m-mostly be, be m...making me-me—food.”

Mom sighs, tutting. “Sweetheart, you know you’re not supposed to give up on words. It will make things worse.”

That is what the internet says, yep. But even with my mother, I don’t want to get stuck saying *me* ten times in order to squeeze out *meals* when *food* works just as well. The internet doesn’t even know why people stutter at my age, and there are “cures” all over the place, but everyone’s different.

**Katina:** He’s being so sus. Why do you think he’d help you move instead of leaving you to fumble through on your own?

“I’m working on what I can. It’s been an a-fternoop. Big changes.” I do *not* say it’s been a *d-d-day* or a *m-m-morning*. Honestly, it’s been a life... I never ever thought I’d be sitting in Velspar’s housekeeper suite, working for him. I bet he’s just *loving* this turn of events. He never failed to drive home the fact I belonged beneath him, exactly like this.

Just thinking about this whole situation makes me nauseous.

“Right,” Mom decides. “I forgot stress agitates it.”

**Colette:** He definitely wanted to get more ammo to use against me.

I'm surviving off the skills I learned throughout my childhood. If you shake the lion's cage, you startle the lion. If the lion roars in your face, remember he's caged and refuse to be fazed. The best thing to do when faced with a caged lion is ignore him and hope he can't swipe you too badly through the bars. But the best thing to do when he's not caged? I only figured that out in high school. And apparently the answer involves cheap pranks purchased with the very money he threw at me.

I don't exactly have the option to return fire with fire now. Putting shaving cream in his locker is just a mess I'd have to clean up. And he'd enjoy watching me do it.

In a twisted way, I'm glad I'm not stuck with someone like Bryan. Velspar has never physically hurt me, not even when he was the smallest brat. Shockingly, he wasn't a biter. He's done *unpleasant* things—like lock me outside in the snow—but, hey, right now it's spring?

I sigh. I'm basically screwed. This was an awful idea.

Rolling on my side, I stare at my three pathetic boxes of belongings—one of which holds the book with the supposed answer to my dilemma. "I'm not sst-str—" I fumble far longer than I care to admit before getting the word out. "*—stressed*. It's just all very, all very new."

Mom hums, like she knows better than to believe me. Graciously, she doesn't press. I know she means well when she tries to help me with my stutter. All parents *mean well* when they try to help their kids, but sometimes they think they know about things they've never experienced alongside the things they have. When she got in her accident last year and the doctors weren't sure whether or not she would be able to walk again, I didn't WebMD the answers for her.

I was there for her, doing whatever I could to help her toward whatever recovery was available. At her own pace. On her own terms.

I love her to death, and I'd do anything for her, but I wish she'd ignore my stupid stutter. Her treating it like a failure she needs to help me overcome hurts. My stutter says nothing about who I am at all.

People rarely seem to get that.

"When will you be able to visit again?" she asks, her tone brighter. "It's so much more fun to play bingo ten times in a row when you're here."

I smile. "I'll work s...something out. I m...m-miss you."

"I miss you, too, baby. I'm so sor—"

“None of th-at. I’m happy to take care of you now. We’re a team, right? In it together in th-is crazy ci-ci-city.”

“You betcha.”

After Mom hangs up, I sigh into a lump in the pile of pillows that swallow this bed whole. It’s such a big bed. I’ve never been on such a big bed before. My phone buzzes in my hand after I’ve taken my ear buds out and set them on the nightstand, and I lift it above my face.

**Katina:** Sorry, I was ordering dinner. He’s such a nosy jerk. I hope you crush him into dust and spread his ashes in the James River. He deserves to get washed to the other side of the state, far away from his city where no one knows his name.

I cannot argue with this flawless plan. Oh, wait.

**Colette:** Regrettably, murder is illegal.

**Katina:** It’s only illegal if you get caught.

Or if you’re not rich enough to buy out your crimes. Like, hey, it’s only a hundred and fifty dollars to park in front of a fire hydrant. I spend more than that on dinner. *Sips three-thousand-year-old wine that I probably poured out of a crystal decanter.*

I wish I could afford to order dinner, or that the monster I now work for actually had edible food in this house. Cleaning his fridge and ordering groceries tomorrow is going to be agonizing, but at least I may not be going hungry for the next three months?

Not that Velspar particularly cared about whether or not I ate in school.

He was always taking my lunch or giving it to his lackeys or getting them to take it. Once, he stole an apple right out of my hand and stomped it into a pulp on the sidewalk right in front of me. It was old and mealy, but it was what I had. It exploded beneath his outrageous spiked boots. The sour scent of the pulp hitting my cheek is still raw in my memories.

“Stupid spiked boots,” I mutter at myself before the banging sounds of someone trying to break in attack the suite door.

I jump clean out of my skin as thundering pounds rattle the walls. Heading toward the ruckus, I discover Velspar standing in the kitchen outside my rooms. “What are you doing?” I blurt all at once.

He arches a brow and swings his lean body to the side. Hooking a thumb over his shoulder, he directs my attention to the counter overflowing with take-out boxes. “I ordered food.”

I blink at the cramped counter and see several subs alongside a handful of

Chinese containers. A stack of five pizzas towers above the assortment of fast food and finer dining bags I've never even seen the names of. "For what army?" I go rod straight and inch back, waiting for people to crawl out of the corners. "Are you having a party?"

He snickers, flicking my hair before striding to one of the bar stools and settling in front of a plate. "I didn't know what you wanted."

He didn't know what *I* wanted?

I harden myself, clinging to the doorjamb for protection. *My* rooms are safe. They are sanctuary zone. Entering them without permission is as bad as sexual harassment. And Velspar's a lot of things, but "predator" isn't one of them. Not in *that* way. "There's a catch?" I slink more into the shadows as fresh, hot scents I'm familiar with tangle in mysterious ways. Greasy, buttery pizza. Crisp, warm sandwiches. Steaming fried chicken. A spattering of cheesy macaronis. "It's a trap."

Amusement flirts with his lips. "Darling, the fun part tonight is watching you think that." Lifting half a turkey and rye sandwich to his mouth, he tugs out the chair beside him with his foot. It rests in front of the other empty plate. His eyes say *come if you dare* when they lock on me, and my stomach growls as though to suggest I am capable of daring.

I slip away from my protective space, leaving the door open in case I need to run back to my hovel.

"You're scared of me," he says, and it is not a question.

"It's poisoned."

He exhales a laugh. "Oh, yes. I've gone through all this trouble in order to poison you. You've seen my fridge, Colette. It's no exaggeration to say that I need you alive and capable of doing your job."

I sit, mildly uncomfortable with our proximity while I take in the smorgasbord. "I'm beginning to s...see how your fridge turned into a war zone."

"I'm hopeless," he muffles into his sandwich. Reaching over me, he secures a family-size Bojangles' box and pops it open in order to retrieve a container of mac and cheese and a few pieces of fried chicken. He dishes himself out half the mac and cheese before he notices I'm watching and flashes me a broad grin.

It's unsettling. The friendliness is unsettling.

"D-do you d-d-do this with all your help?"

He nudges the rest of the macaroni toward me, and I bite my lip as I

accept it, dumping it out onto my plate. He says, “The rest of my ‘help’ have had their unfortunate lives together and didn’t need my assistance.”

My brow twitches; he stands to lean over the counter and shuffle through the pizza boxes. Once he’s located the one he’s looking for—my favorite, a margarita pizza with thick crust—he plops back into his seat and drops a slice on my plate. I look between it and him, uncertain why I’m more offended by the familiar action than the words he just spewed.

Perfectly chill, he lifts a forkful of his pasta toward his mouth and nudges his chin at my plate. “That’s right, isn’t it? Us good kids had our good kid pizza days for being good kids, and you always gravitated toward that one.”

My fists clench tight against my thighs before I reach for the slice. “I hate you.”

“I hate you, too,” he coos, bumping my shoulder with his before continuing to eat.

We munch for a few moments in an oddly amicable silence that makes me question everything I know—which, of course, is probably the point of this. Setting up a false sense of security is step one in hurting someone. He’s priming me for...something. Probably betrayal. It would be so sweet to get *me* to trust *him* and then shatter that trust into a thousand pieces.

As if I would ever trust him, though.

Velspar Pratt wasn’t even nice to his friends in school. I spent more time than I’ll ever admit watching him all those years, and ulterior motives taint everything he’s ever done. If he let someone borrow a pencil one week, the next he needed a *favor*.

He exists in a state of chess, plotting ten moves ahead with every step he takes.

I know better than to let anything “good” from him sway my opinions or convince me to drop my guard. He hasn’t changed; it’s too late for him to pretend he has when he told me to beg just this morning.

“You know we can’t eat all th-is,” I say, tensing when he passes me an order of egg rolls before I make a move to get them for myself.

“I wasn’t expecting us to.”

“It’ll go to w-waste.”

“Sure will.” He grabs a container of lo mein and pushes some onto his plate. Then he steals one of the two egg rolls off mine, and I can’t even protest because it’s not like I bought any of this. Nevertheless, the *crunch* of him biting into it grates on my nerves.

“You’re going to help, to help me put it a-way.”

Velspar goes perfectly still beside me, save for another grating *crunch*. “Pardon?”

Maybe my growling stomach was more correct than I thought. Maybe I *am* daring. I stab my fork into his *lo mein* and twirl, holding eye contact as I stuff the bite in my mouth.

His Adam’s apple bobs as he watches me chew. When his discomfort turns physical, I soak his every slight fidget in, then I swallow. “It’ll go bad before I can get your fridge clean. You have to help m-m—”

His lip curls. “Darling, I don’t *have* to do anything.”

I stare at him until his gaze jerks off my eyes and his fist clenches against his torn-up jeans. His thumb taps his thigh, and he’s genuinely disturbed.

What fun.

“People are *ssst*—” A muscle in his jaw begins to bounce as I trip through the word; he doesn’t interrupt me. “—starving in this very city.” I lay a hand against my chest. “I was one of, one of *th-em* recently. Living off one m-m-meal a, a day.”

That muscle in his jaw leaps, and he grits, “Okay. Fine. Are you done?”

“You’ll help?” I ask.

“I’ll help. I’ll do whatever you want, darling. Just *ask*.” His eyes flicker with fire, and he grips my chin, tugging my face an inch from his. “I mean that sincerely. *Ask*. Don’t you dare *tell* me what to do, but by all means, *ask*.”

A shudder travels down my spine, and pictures of his fingers digging into adolescent cheeks wander behind my eyes. Velspar was rough with people, wasn’t he? He got into fights, too. I saw some of them directly—he always won. Sometimes, his opponents disappeared.

His hold tightens on my skin, but it’s more firm than hard. I’m certain it was painful for the victims in my memories. This isn’t painful at all.

Quietly, I murmur, “You’re trying to get m-me to beg again?”

“Always,” he whispers.

For a startling moment, hot desire coats his eyes. It leaves me dazed, afraid, and enticingly curious in the worst ways. His teeth bare, and I watch him shove the flicker of heat into the darkest recesses, letting a tepid hate bleed over everything as he drops my face like I’m revolting. Returning to his food, he doesn’t look at me again.

Somehow, he manages not to look at me throughout the entire ordeal of cleaning his fridge. There’s precious little that can be saved, but I get it



wrapped up neatly with the fresh leftovers from tonight, all while I'm hyper-aware of his existence.

He handles the dishes, and before the very moment he was elbow-deep in soapy water, I never could have imagined him doing something so mundane or manual. I have a sneaking suspicion he obliged in order to keep his back to me, but I'm not complaining.

I'm not complaining in any regard.

I'm full, and confused, and anxious. But in the strangest ways, Velspar Pratt is familiar to me. My own monster. My own darkness. He's the doubts in my skull that are so present I hardly let them faze me anymore.

I fear him like I fear my own mind.

And I am disconcertingly comfortable with this arrangement.

## CHAPTER 4

♥ Warning: bullies can be volatile. Proceed through this book with caution.

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Step one of destroying my lifelong bully (after having decided he deserves it) is to get inside his mind. I don't particularly want to. I'm almost certain Velspar's brain is as wretched as his fridge was before last night. And yet, here I am, meandering through his house and attempting to locate clues while I dust.

So far, I know very little about his daily life. Right now, he's downstairs in a living room with a massive, empty hearth that's polished like black diamond. He's on his laptop, and he was looking terribly bored when I left him. He ate cold pizza for breakfast at six a.m. before I was awake, told me I didn't have to worry about feeding him when he gets up unnaturally early, and loudly disapproved of my reheating my breakfast pizza in the microwave. His disgust was oddly...charming. Yeah, charming. The fact he finds my having warm pizza for breakfast—thus making it no longer a *breakfast food*—troubling is lovely.

I'll have to put cold cereal on the shopping list and eat it for dinner in front of him. Or, worse, provide him a bowl of it for dinner, just to see what happens. I am, after all, responsible for his meals.

In my mind, he flips the cereal bowl like an irate cat, sending splatters of milk all over the floor and walls, probably my clothes, too. He'd aim for me. No question about that. Maybe he'd even say something inappropriate once I'm doused.

I rub at a weird tingle in my chest as I dust off a dresser in one of his nondescript guest rooms. The large room bears nothing personal and mimics the rest of the house's interior design with its black, white, and gold. It probably exists purely as a private alcove for some of his party attendees. I doubt he uses it much himself.

I'm most definitely dreading when I'll witness one of his parties, but if the debacles are the worst of this situation, I'll survive. I'm more than used to having loud, rude neighbors, and if I'm able to stow away in my own space until it's over with, marvelous.

Interestingly enough, my history of cruelty at his hand built up my BS tolerance to astronomical levels.

Would I have preferred being safe rather than unshakable? Ha ha...yes. But in this world, unshakable isn't a bad trait to have developed.

Humming to myself, I slip into the next room, and the next, dusting away until the *next room* is none other than *his bedroom*. I can't picture it. His house so far has been spotless—aside from his fridge. And considering there was a *party* here that his last maid *quit in the middle of*, he had to have done the cleaning himself, right?

Last night proves he happens to understand the concept of doing the dishes.

Did he clean his house on his own?

Does he have some vendetta against his refrigerator?

Prompted more by the itch of wondering whether his room is clean or dirty than anything else, I reach for the knob and find it unlocked.

My heartbeat thumps erratically in my ears as I step inside, leaving the door open like I left the other doors open. I am but an innocent maid, doing my cleaning duties, and this is an outrageously large house. I can't be blamed for accidentally stumbling into milord's private chambers.

It's completely black—that's the first thing I notice as I move into the pitch darkness of ebony carpets and jet walls to begin dusting the dresser. The sunlight streaming in through his giant dual balcony windows ends up swallowed.

The mammoth, sprawling mirror in front of me doesn't have a smudge on it. Unlike in the other rooms, where the furniture was bare, there are a few photographs in dark frames scattered across the dresser here. A sterile family picture of him, his parents, and his older brother—he's not smiling. A couple of him and friends I remember all too well—Leslie, Sean, Reg. He's smirking and looks quite awful in all of them. And...

My stomach dips, a bout of nausea taking hold as I find the splash of a pink barrette settled in front of another frame. It's the barrette I put in his hair that one day at school. The one he wore all day. The fact he kept it is as chilling as the contents of the largest picture frame nestled behind it. Small images of me sit crammed together inside. They're all tiny rectangles and mismatched scenes, cut straight out of our yearbooks. I have no idea what I'm supposed to think.

Thoughts stall.

Why?

They're not even defaced.

I should not be here. My feet fumble as I step back, then I shriek because I hit a hard chest.

Hands clamp on my shoulders, steadying me, and I throw my head up to look into Velspar's severe face.

"What a-re you d-d-d-doi—" My mouth moves in time with my heart, both panicking and shaky.

"I could ask you the same." His fingers slide down my biceps, griping me right above my elbows. "I thought I said not to enter my room."

He hardly made a sound when he followed me in here. Is he allowed to be both large and silent? It's not right.

My tongue twists all over on itself, and I struggle with every last one of my words. "I-I-I was just d-d-d-dusting in, in or-der."

He breathes a humorless laugh. "Don't lie to me, Colette. You came into my room knowingly. You're scared out of your mind. There's no *innocent* mistake here." His body hunkers down, letting his lips graze the shell of my ear. "It's sweet to know I still have such a grand effect on you." His teeth snap near my skin, and I squeeze my eyes shut. "I suppose since you think it's okay to invade my privacy, I shouldn't bother respecting yours?"

"I'm s...s-s—"

"What were you hoping to find?" Anger vibrates in his tone, barely restrained. "What *did* you find?"

"*Sorry.*"

"I don't want an apology. You know I pay back what's due." His fingers graze right back up my arms before he releases me and steps away, giving me the space to breathe. "Look forward to it, darling." He sighs, brows dipping with weary exasperation as he tucks his fingers in his pockets. "And do behave yourself from now on. Am I being unreasonable?"

I swallow, hard. "N-no." Not yet.

He tilts his head back so he can look down his nose at me and smile with placating mockery. "Then be a good girl for me, okay?"

My fist clenches around the duster as the back of my throat burns. He's vile. Completely vile. Everything's a twisted power play to him. I bet he planned this. I bet he planned this and stayed up last night cutting my pictures out of our yearbooks so he could get deeper in my head. Who knows why he kept the barrette. It doesn't matter. He's resourceful; he knew he'd find some

way to use it against me in the future.

I am not going to be rattled. Taking a deep breath, I step toward him, hissing, “Why a-re you, are you so ob-obsessed with m...me being *good*?”

“Because I know how difficult it is for you.” His gaze roams my face, then his brows flinch, and he looks elsewhere as though he just realized what he was doing. “It took you all of one day to break the one rule. I’m not even surprised.”

I don’t know what he’s talking about. It’s not hard for me to be good. I am the *good girl*. I was always the *good girl*. A wonderful student. A helpful daughter. I work hard and do everything right. It’s not *difficult*. It’s all I’ve ever known.

Yet, here I am, in his room, breaking the one reasonable rule he gave me.

“I’m s...sorry.”

“I’m certain you will be,” he says, casually.

“I m-m-mean it. I sh-shouldn’t be here. And I’m s-sorry.”

His pupils drag toward me, like it’s painful to look at me again, then his lids half lower. “Do you want me to forgive you?”

I nod once.

The flurry of a smile graces his lips. “Well, I won’t.” He curls a finger beneath my chin. “Care to know why?”

My jaw clenches, but I mutter, “Oh, d-d-do enlighten m-me.”

His minty hot breath skims my skin as he whispers, “I like withholding things from you. It’s...justice, in a way, isn’t it?”

Withholding things from me, a person with *nothing*, is justice? How could I have *ever* withheld anything from *him*? Even if I’d tried, he’d just buy a new one.

His hand drops from me, all mocking softness gone as he jerks his head toward the door. “Get out of here.”

Taking a deep breath, I go, glancing back just in time to find that his quiet steps brought him to his dresser and my pictures. With a sneer that sends chills down my spine, he flattens the face against the black surface with enough force to shatter the glass.

CHAPTER 5

♥ Outsmarting the bully is going to cause problems. This does not mean you shouldn't.

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Every day that goes by where *nothing happens* leaves me more anxious than the last. And, of course, that is probably the point. Velspar is nothing if not incredibly patient.

Coming to the end of my first week with *no apparent incident* feels more foreboding than it should. I'm questioning my every move as I attempt to dissect the monster and do my job.

Velspar's days are mundane. So pathetically mundane.

He wakes up some time between six and ten. If he's not made himself breakfast by the time I'm up at seven thirty, I fix it for him. He has not complained at all over my "fixing" the leftovers these past few days for his lunches and dinners. I have not received a single insult questioning whether or not I actually know how to cook. Not a word about how the first two days consisted almost entirely of leftover rice meals.

His single complaint concerning food was about me warming up my own pizza.

He wakes up. He eats. He does stuff on his laptop. He takes phone calls by the pool. He shoots me sly smirks and aloof glances from time to time. It's like school without his army. Also, I'm being paid. Also, I'm responsible for his food budget, which is—weekly—*one thousand dollars*. Seeing the account after he handed me the card gave me a slight aneurysm. One thousand dollars. A week. For two people. Lamely, I asked if this was his party budget and if I'd be making the food for whenever those happened. Numbly, he arched a brow and said he had his parties catered, unless I wanted to make the food.

I did not. He didn't press the issue.

It's a warm Thursday in the lovely month of April before I gather enough courage to calm down. Velspar has been tricking me all my life. In reality, he is a boring rich guy with nothing to do and no real importance.

Such appears more evident with every passing moment I choose to believe it.

“So,” he says, as he attempts to balance the eraser of a pencil on the tip of his middle finger. It’s not going well. Not at all. He looks kind of silly the more he tries and it falls. “You want some time off tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I answer.

He positions the eraser on his finger again, and the pencil leans immediately. “I’m not keeping you trapped here. You’re allowed to come and go as you like. You only have to do the bare minimum, which makes the fact you’ve been deep-cleaning every room hilarious.” His eyes don’t spark with any emotion even as he reveals the joke.

Frustratingly enough, he’s probably not fazed by the joke since *I’m* not fazed by it. “I d-don’t d...do partial work.”

His lips twist as his tone bites. “No. I suppose you don’t. Yet, here you are, my slave. The dregs of society with the work ethic of a CEO.”

My fists clench.

He glides along like he didn’t just degrade me to *the dregs of society*. “Where do you want to go?”

I lift my chin. “I s...suppose if you aren’t keeping, aren’t keeping me trapped here, I d-d-don’t have to tell you.”

“You might want to tell me,” he notes. “Considering one of us has a car and can drive, and one of us is you.”

I don’t so much as flinch because *as if* I’m going to tell him where I’m going or ask him to drive me there. The very last, last, *last* thing I need is him to meet my mother. Absolutely *no thank you*. The people in this city know who he is, and she knows what he’s done. Their meeting would be explosive for so many reasons I don’t want to deal with.

And that’s just if his game is to invade my personal time and not laugh at me for asking him to drive me somewhere. I can hear him snickering *Why would I do that? I don’t work for you* already.

“I can m-m-m-manage.”

He sighs so deeply it’s as though I have personally killed his favorite pet right in front of him. With my bare hands. Yet the action somehow only succeeds in disappointing him to the core of his being. What an odd combination of emotions. “Of course you can *manage*, Colette. Your ability to *manage* is never in question.” The pencil falls, and he leaves it on the floor as he drags his attention up to me. “The nearest bus stop is several miles away. You expect me to let you walk there and back? What if you come home late? You’re a pretty little girl. It doesn’t bode well to have you

walking outside alone at night. It's bad enough you've had to do it during the day."

*Pretty little girl.* I regard him dryly. "I'm c...certain th-is neighborhood is full of criminals."

"You never know."

Our gazes hold one another at gun point, and it's striking how serious he can look when he wants to.

I push back my hair. "Unfortunately, I d-d-d-don't th-ink I'd be, I'd be much help with tax evasion."

His lips don't smile, but the sliver of amusement that leeches into his eyes sends the smallest flutter through me. "Is that all poor people know about us rich folk? We evade our taxes?"

I clasp my hands together in front of me. "Yes. Very two-d-dimensional, the rich."

He reclines, splaying himself across the couch, without a care in the world. "I suppose it's easier to picture tax evasion as the worst thing a powerful person is capable of. No one likes taxes. However, do you happen to know where the most money in this world comes from?"

The way his voice dips into inky darkness makes me not want to know. I stay silent.

His amber eyes melt down into burnt orange. "People, Colette. People are the greatest and most expensive commodity one can exploit. And I'm not implying the exploitation is through *employment*."

My stomach somersaults, and I take a step back.

He brightens up, casually getting to his feet and tossing his dark hair like he didn't at all say something horrifically disturbing. "So where am I escorting you tomorrow, darling?"

"I-I-I can take care of m-m-m-myself."

Pity threads itself into the shadows of his eyes as he approaches and angles his body toward me, pouting. "Such a sweet, innocent girl. I'd buy you."

I tense.

He chuckles, smiling. "Oh. Well, wait. I already have." Passing me, he flicks my hair into my cheek. "Pick up that pencil, will you? It's ruining the nice clean room."



***Katina:*** That's a new level of twisted.



Katina sends a slew of curses in regards to Velspar as I make the long trek from my “home” toward the bus stop on Friday. I nod along in agreement with her every foul classification. It’s a new low for him to threaten me in such a bleak way. I know it’s not a lie, of course it’s not a lie, but to put it in my head like that? It’s messed up.

If I’m honest, I was shaking as I tried to sleep last night. I don’t want to be out past dark in the city any more than most people, but the fresh fear when I might have liked to stay with my mom through dinner isn’t great.

**Colette:** I guess he learned that he needed to dig deeper to get a rise out of me.

**Katina:** Implying you would get kidnapped and sold isn’t just bullying. That’s seriously demented.

Since when isn’t Velspar seriously demented? He was content to let me starve through school. He let his lackeys torment me constantly. He used every opportunity he could find in order to metaphorically crush me beneath his stupid boots. Every time I looked up, he was there, watching me with a simmering loathing in his eyes. Those eyes of his still appear in my nightmares more often than I care to admit. Usually, they’re attached to the head of a giant snake. And if I don’t wake up in time, he swallows me whole.

**Katina:** If you’re scared tonight, I’ll come get you and drop you off at that monster’s front gate. Velspar’s sick. I hope you’ve got a plan to crush him formulating. Is the book being helpful?

**Colette:** No plan yet. So far I’m on step two, which is attempting to figure him out. It’s prompting me to beat him at his own mind game, which is difficult considering I don’t feast on the souls of small children and puppies and, therefore, don’t have the same aptitude for evil.

The silent hum of what must be an electric car creeps up the road behind me, and my chest tightens as I force myself to keep my pace steady. It’s the middle of the day. I’m not scared. I’m not scared. I’m not scared. I will not let Velspar Pratt get to me. I will n—

A door opens, and my heart jerks out of my chest as my pace picks up.

“Colette.”

I freeze, throwing a look over my shoulder to find Velspar striding toward me away from an electric blue Tesla. “Wh—”

He stops inches from me, glowering. “I warn you to be aware, and I find you texting. Not only that, you didn’t even let me know when you were leaving.” His arms fold. “What do you have with you right now?”

I look down at my phone. In my pocket, I have my bus card, some cash, and my “house” key.

Velspar gives me a look that makes me think he’ll search my pockets himself if I don’t reply, so I tell him.

His eyes close as he manages to breathe a sigh from somewhere deep in his throat. The way it makes a rumbling noise is entirely intentional. “You don’t even have pepper spray?”

“I can take care of m—”

His voice rises. “Taking care of yourself means not doing something stupid when there are other options available. It means at least taking basic precautions.”

“You’re just trying to get in m-my head like you always have, and I will not give you the s...s-satisfaction!”

His eyes roll. “Darling, I don’t need to get in your head anymore. I live there.” He sweeps an arm toward his car. “Now, get in, or I’m stalking you all the way to and from your destination.”

“I’ll call the police.”

He blinks, like I’m very troublesome and he’s very bored. “Darling. I own the police.”

I stuff my phone in my pocket and grit, “I know self-d-d-defense.”

“Uh-huh.”

In a rash moment of frustration, I do something I have wanted to do for *years*—I grab Velspar Pratt, angle my body to leverage all his gangly limbs, and fling him over my shoulder onto the stretch of grass beside the sidewalk. Or—at least—that’s what I set up to do.

In reality, I get into position, feel his weight give, and discover it’s shifted a second too late for me to counter. My stomach leaps into my throat as I lose all sense and control of my body.

Velspar’s panicked eyes are the last thing I see before I squeeze mine shut and brace for the hard impact of sidewalk. He curses, then my back hits his body. “Reflex,” he spits near my ear as he gathers me up against him. “Don’t *do that*.” His breath pours into my hair. “You’re so—stubborn! I know you don’t trust me, Colette. I get that. I love that. But I *promise you*, I am not so much of a raging arse as to let you put yourself in unnecessarily dangerous situations. As long as you work for me, your safety is my responsibility. So get in my stupid car and tell me where I can take you.”

His arms around me are solid, circling my body and holding me tight to

the expanse of his chest. My rump is settled on his thigh, and he has never before been quite this *big*. I meet his sneer, dumbfounded.

He winces but doesn't look away as his hand splays up my arm to settle at the pulse of my throat. A touch of wonder-struck twists in his hateful eyes. Voice rough, he hisses, "I am not letting you go until you agree. Every second you delay, I'll just assume you like it here."

Of course he'd assume that. I can't believe he's holding me like this. I can't believe he took the fall for me when I was trying to flatten him on the ground. I don't like it here, but I'm not exactly as disturbed as I should be with his arms around me and his frozen fingers teasing the vein in my neck.

Because I can, I let my weight settle against his chest. When he stiffens into stone, I close my eyes as though I *am* comfortable and unashamed for it, because that takes all his power away. "Are you a-ctually being nice, Vel?"

His grip near my throat solidifies, and the stupidest thing is how unafraid I am. I've seen him grab throats and shove people into walls or lockers, but I'm not scared right now. I can hear his heartbeat—it's erratic, like *he's* the one who's afraid—and the mere idea of that makes me smile.

I want to push all his buttons and see what makes *him* crack. It's what my book suggests I do. I never realized how desperately I've always wanted to.

Velspar strokes my pulse, the icy touch of his thumb making itself deeply known. It's not a caressing touch. It's hard, as though it's keenly aware just a bit more pressure would make me bruise. It's a threat in itself, a promise, a reminder. "When have you ever known me to be *nice*?" he growls.

"I haven't. Imagine m-my current s...surprise."

He scoffs. "You hardly seem surprised. You seem rather comfortable, actually. Do you really like my lap that much?"

"I'm so-so—aking in your d-d-discomfort. It's cathartic."

"Ah. Is that so?" he mutters, voice dry. Then he stands. With me. In his arms.

My heart jumps at the sudden weightlessness, and I throw my arms around his neck, clinging.

With one arm braced behind my back and the other under my knees, he carries me to the car, finagling to get the door to lift open so he can dump me inside. Once my butt hits the seat, he pries my arms off his neck. The door shuts, trapping me inside the sleek black prison.

He slips into the driver seat and side-eyes me as he presses a button to make his door close. "Where are we going?"

“I’m being kidnapped,” I say. “You’re going to s...sell me.”

His eyes roll as he puts his seat belt on. Muttering, he starts driving down the road. “There’s not enough money in the world...”

My face heats. “What’s th-at s...s-supposed to, to mean?”

“You’re too pretty to give up.” He stops at the end of the street. “Left or right, darling?”

I can’t handle the way my chest responds to his agitated mumble. No stretch of the imagination could make his words *tender*, but the fact he seems bothered over thinking them true means something.

I wish I knew what. “Left.”

He turns.



I’m anxious by the time Mom’s nursing home comes into view. To his credit, Velspar doesn’t say a single word when I tell him to turn into the parking lot outside the large, cream building with massive glass windows and steeped gray roofs. Thanking him for doing something I never asked him to is upsetting, so when he parks, I nod at him, figure out how to open my door, and step out.

He steps out as well, and I grimace.

“What’s with the face?” he asks, already looking like some kind of goth maelstrom ready to draw everything inside this bright, clinical building into his inky tide. He is the black hole that will rip hand sanitizers off walls and devour all the bingo blotters, leaving nothing but emptiness in his wake.

“Th-is is m-m-m-my face.”

“No, it’s clearly more irritated than usual.” He slips his fingers into his ripped jean pockets. “Who are we visiting?”

My scowl deepens.

He smiles in response. “Embarrassed to be seen with me? In a nursing home that bears *my* namesake?”

I glare at the neat yellow and white sign reading *The Dogwood at Pratt Inn*. Everything in this city has his name, so it’s not some big surprise. Pratt, Virginia belongs entirely to the Pratts. They are the all-powerful beings. Their friends are the elite. Their enemies the rubbish.

If I believed Velspar had a soul, I’d explain that I don’t want my mother to worry about my current situation—which showing up with him would more than accomplish. I forfeited the only weapon I could have used against him when I invaded his privacy last week. If I dare to say he’s not welcome

in my personal life now, he'll just say this is payback for my intrusion into *his* personal life earlier.

I scramble to figure out my options. No matter what I say, I can't allow him to know how deeply he's affecting me or how desperately I don't want him to be a part of this.

He peers at me like a cat toying with a mouse. He knows where I'm going to run and when. He already has a paw prepped to stop my escape.

"I d-d-don't want you to come," I decide, finally.

His smile turns more lax. "Clearly. I suppose you don't think I'm worthy of visiting the elderly? I'm sure they'd be happy to have my company alongside yours. They'll pinch both our cheeks and say how we're an *adorable* couple. Won't that be fun?"

A wicked thought flashes neon in my brain. He thinks I'm here to *visit* in general? Well then. I smile. "I d-don't th-ink you can handle it."

"Try me."

"D-don't s...say I d-d-didn't warn you."

His smile tightens as I pass him, somewhat aware of his bootsteps behind me. They're heavy and solid, and it makes sense why he can walk so silently without them when he's used to keeping them from clomping around all over the place. Without their weight, I bet he's floating.

We sign in, and I smile at the receptionist who greets me and graciously doesn't mention my mother before falling over herself in front of my "guest." *Oh, Mr. Pratt! Welcome to The Dogwood! Had we only known to expect you...* Etc. And etc. And etc...

Velspar eats up the attention like he's a starved beast, grinning charmingly and making politely arrogant conversation. He seems to fancy himself a real missionary for being here. I tuck my annoyance down and remind myself it will *allll* be worth it in a moment. Once he's done slurping up the adulation, I guide the grinning jerk into the building and toward the common room where, presently, all the nice ladies are scheduled to have manicures. It happens every Friday. And my mom doesn't much like the smell, so she stays in her room on the other side of the building.

The spacious sitting room comes into view, the warm taupe walls decorated with large, generically beautiful paintings. Giant pots filled with fake flowers indent the off-white carpet in the two corners that don't connect fully to the bustling hall. Sunlight streams through three small windows to spill over the collection of women taking up the array of sofas and

wheelchairs.

“Colette!” One of the sweet old women beams when she sees me approach. The nurse painting her nails a striking bright pink looks up and smiles before her eyes go massive on the grim reaper by my side. I doubt the residents here care enough to remember who Velspar is when so many of them are struggling with different levels of dementia, but the staff absolutely know their overlords.

And I just walked in with the one whose antics at formal parties and events make front covers.

“Hi, Annie,” I greet the elderly woman first, hoping she’ll at least allow me to keep Velspar’s ego in check. No such luck.

Her gray eyes turn mischievous, and she pinches my cheek. “It’s about time you brought your boyfriend.”

I titter a laugh and speak in singsong. “Oh, no. He’s not my boyfriend. I found him outside, looking homeless and pitiful. He wanted to get his nails done with you today. If it’s all right.”

Trish, or the nurse taking care of Annie’s manicure, flicks her wild brown eyes toward me.

Annie doesn’t notice the strain of panic in Trish’s eyes as a wide smile pours over her wrinkled cheeks. “Of course it’s all right! Grab a seat, young man!” She tugs her hand free of Trish’s hold, thankfully and miraculously not smearing the polish. She swipes thin wisps of her white hair back against her head and calls to the rest of the room, “Ladies, we have a visitor!”

Those able to walk pluck themselves up out of their seats, and it takes another moment for Velspar to find himself surrounded by elderly women dotting over his style and asking what color he’d like his nails to be painted.

Velspar shoots me a look, his smile more baffled than angry. It’s questioning and curious, but that’s shockingly the extent of it. He genuinely doesn’t seem to care that I’ve shoved him into this. “Is there black?” he asks before settling himself down into a plush love seat as though it’s a throne.

I roll my lips into my mouth in order to stop myself from laughing. He looks positively out of place, yet also dreadfully comfortable. It’s a picture I wish I could capture and keep forever.

My mother’s roommate, Rosalind, barks, “Do we have black?”

Trish and a couple other nurses jolt before combing through the cart holding all the tools and polishes. Janice finds it first, raising it high like a prize. “Yes! Yes, we’ve got black!”

Someone claps. “Splendid!”

Velspar’s cheek gets pinched, but he takes it all in stride, arching a brow at me. Like we’re playing a game. And he’s won.

What a silly man.

His brow falls along with his smile when he realizes I have stepped away from the sitting area by several feet and am now squarely standing in the center of the adjoining hall. His gaze flicks from my eyes to my smile, and the most delectable little flicker of disconcerting recognition goes through his expression.

I sing, “I’m so glad he’ll be taken care of! I felt so very bad for him when I saw him sitting outside in all those ripped-up clothes. He deserves something nice, I think. The poor dear.”

A few of the nurses give me odd, horrified looks, but I’m not even sorry. I probably will be, later, but right now? Right now, I’m halfway down the hall heading to the other side of the building where my mother is. And that’s all I really care about.

## CHAPTER 6

♥ No matter what, do not allow the bully into any more pieces of your life.

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I hold Mom's hand and smile as she uses her other hand to talk through the latest *nursing home gossip*. Her side of the little room hosts only the bed, TV, a bedside table, and a conservative closet area egressed into the wall. The fact her roommate is currently torturing Velspar is almost as delightful as the fact Mom was able to get the window bed.

Going from being my energetic mother, always doing something in order to bring in money or take care of our little family, to unable to get out of bed on her own takes a toll. Having a bird feeder right outside her bedroom window helps. Some. Or so she's said.

I hope it does.

But I know what it means to fake being more okay than I am.

"...so then Rosalind's grandson came by for her birthday when he was supposed to be on a business trip, and he brought the *entire* family, three sheet cakes, and enough ice cream to put The Dogwood's supplies to shame. We partied past curfew." Her pale blue eyes sparkle with all the mischief of a teenager who got away with sneaking out, and I laugh.

"You're a wild one."

She cups my cheek. "Look at me, going on and on. What have you been up to, baby? How's the new job as a live-in?"

I lift a shoulder. "It's nothing new, really."

Her blond brows lower as her pale pink lips purse. "Is the family still being nice with you? Did you get any pictures of your living space?"

I nod and release her hand, so I can get my phone out. "It's like a fairy tale bedroom."

She gasps when I show her the few pictures I took. It takes all of two seconds for her to grab my phone and begin swiping on her own. "Colette! This is gorgeous! You have a living room?"

"It's connected to th-e kitchen. The m-m-m-master bedrooms are upstairs, so there's plenty of space between the rest of the family and I."

Mom's elation tempers as she tosses me a look, and I wonder if she

knows I skipped out saying the grammatically appropriate *me* or if she isn't fond of how I fumbled "master." Graciously, she doesn't say anything about either. "It's a beautiful space. Tell me more about the family. Are there any pets? Anyone your age?"

I chew my lip for a moment. "N-no pets..." My voice drifts as I try to figure the rest of what I need to say out. I've already lied by saying the family is *nice*, so lying isn't the problem. Keeping track of a bigger lie and creating actual fake people that I'm "living with" might be. "I d-d-don't know what to s...say about th-em."

"*Colette.*" Velspar's hard tone hits me in the back of the head, making my back straighten before I whirl toward the open door. The man throws back the wavy black locks of his hair as he marches into the open doorway—a dark god. He's polished and pristine, literally *stunning*. My mouth falls open, and all I can do is gape at him. They found makeup. I haven't seen Velspar in makeup since high school. My heart rate kicks up several notches, pattering incessantly.

I forgot how devastatingly handsome he could appear.

Black frames his already striking eyes, splashes of gold flaring in the eyeliner wings to draw out the whiskey hues of his irises. Dark pools of shadow punctuate the severity of his expression, and he falls against the doorjamb, folding his arms.

"You think you're freaking adorable, don't you?" he asks, his highlighted gaze jumping to Mom for half a discarding second. His painted fingernails tap a tandem against his bicep. "There has been a Dogwood Inn consensus, darling. We've all decided it's your turn for a makeover. I picked out your colors myself."

"Velspar Pratt," Mom whispers his name like it's a curse, and my stomach knots, bundling up the nerves into a tangled ball.

She moves out of the corner of my eye, and I turn, jolting to stop her. "M-M-M-M-M-Mom, n-no. You're not s-s-supposed to get up, to get up on y-your own."

Rage sparks in her eyes, pain creasing the skin around her thinning lips. "I have words to say to that boy, and I am not going to sit here like an invalid when I do."

"Please." My throat closes. "Don't hurt yourself."

"What is he doing here?" she demands as she struggles to move her legs over the side of the bed. "Why is he talking to you?"

“You’re g-going to hurt, to hurt yourself. You’re getting b-b-better. Please. *Please*.” The words fall from my mouth, a stumbling mess of anxiety. I flinch when Velspar’s footsteps close in. His hand settles on my shoulder, and Mom turns livid.

“*Don’t you touch my daughter!*”

His hand jumps off me.

Mom scatters curses throughout her words. “I don’t care who you think you are or what your last name is. You’re a horrible, *horrible* person, and you have no right to treat people the way you do. *None*.”

I tremble, going cold and hot at once. Tears brim in my eyes to overflow down my cheeks.

“You sicken me,” she hisses at him. “I wish you knew how it felt. I wish —”

“Ma’am, you’re going to injure yourself.”

Mom’s teeth grit. “You’re *lucky* I physically can’t injure *you*.” Breath seethes through her as she finally gives up on attempting to get out of bed in favor of throwing a hand in my direction. “Do you have *any* idea how many times Colette came home with bruises because of *you*?”

“I have never—”

“*You* didn’t have to get your hands dirty. You were more than happy to watch atop your untouchable tower, *knowing* we didn’t have any other options. You tortured a girl who needed a good education in order to get out of this pit of poverty *your city* threw us into.”

Velspar’s hand closes onto my shoulder again, this time like a vice. “I have *never* been happy to watch someone hurt Colette. Not a single time. If you’re going to be upset with me, at least be upset for the right reasons. For example, I *wanted* to happily watch, and I hated that I couldn’t.” Velspar lowers himself and takes my face in his hands. Lifting his dark shirt to reveal a slice of toned pale skin, he scrubs the fabric beneath my eyes. “I *promise you*. I paid every bruise I knew about back ten-fold.” He murmurs, his voice low and lethal, “I spent long nights hating how it made me feel better to find ways to hurt the people who hurt you.” He drops my face and turns back to my mother. “I’m an awful person. I’ve accepted that. But, *please*, what can you really hope to do about it?”

Mom spits a curse at him. “What are you doing here?”

Velspar cocks his head and lifts his gaze toward the ceiling, pondering. “Up until this moment? I was being molested by elderly women, courtesy of

Colette.” He grants me a wry smile. “Thanks for that, darling.”

I hope they didn’t use sanitary mascara brushes and tiny bugs eat his eyelashes.

Mom’s attention falls on me, and I can see in her horror-stricken eyes that she’s already put the pieces together. She knows why Velspar is here. She knows why I’ve been so vague about my “new job.”

Weakly, I whisper, “I d-d-d-didn’t want you to w-w-worry.”

Something in her gaze cracks before her skin pales. Mouth parted, she numbly shakes her head. “No.” Her lips tremble. “It’s not worth it. Baby, no.”

Swallowing hard, I stand. “It’s f-fine. It’s di-di-di—not the same now. We can’t go into m-m—further d-d-debt.”

“Screw debt. I will not have you submitting yourself to this... this...*monster*.”

I flinch, looking at Velspar.

His eyes slip off some distant spot beyond the window in order to find me, and there’s *nothing* in them. No anger. No amusement. Nothing. He’s a husk, and it’s so vastly different from what I’d expect to see—arrogance, victory, something sickeningly enticed by the fact he managed to hurt both me and my mother this deeply. I can’t stop myself. I squish his cheeks between my fingers, and confusion flicks on in the void caverns of his gaze. One brow jumps. Ignoring it, I shake his face a bit and look at Mom. “He’s harmless. S...s-see?”

Velspar Pratt, billionaire heir whose power stretches over this entire city, does not utter a word.

“People change,” I offer and wet my lips. “I’m not holding a g-grudge. He’s already a-pologized. And he’s paying, he’s paying me well.” Really well. Well enough that if I survive even longer than three months, I’ll be able to obliterate most of our debt. By the time Mom has recovered enough to leave this place, we won’t have to worry about outrageous bills looming over our heads.

I glance at Velspar to double-check that I’m not going to die for what I’m doing, and by some twisted mercy, his eyes tell me that I will not die *here*. They flash with the wicked promise that my time shall be nigh *soon*, just not *here*, and I snap my fingers off him before forcing a smile for Mom’s sake.

She doesn’t look convinced. “You’re cleaning up after the Pratt family?”

Velspar clears his throat. “Just me, actually.” Slipping his fingers into his

pockets, Velspar eyes me. “And you’re happy, aren’t you, Colette? You sing all day. You don’t have to worry about anything you need. I drive you safely wherever you want to go, without any issues or protests. Because you’re a good and obedient girl who is very serious about self-preservation.”

I shoot him a glare and find a sharp, emotionless smile in the quick flash of his teeth.

Mom whispers, “You’ve been singing again?”

My chest twinges at the bare, raw hope in my mother’s voice. I don’t want that part of myself to lay naked where Velspar can see it. I couldn’t bear that. He doesn’t need anything else to use against me. When Mom got hurt, I gave up on all my dreams—at least until she got better. Singing was one of the things I put aside. And I don’t know if I’ll find my way back to it now or not. “Just to pass th-e time.”

“It’s hauntingly beautiful,” Velspar says with an annoyed sigh. He’s no doubt latching onto the fact I do *not* want to have this conversation in front of him. He always knew exactly how to get on my nerves. “All your talents are wasted scrubbing grout.”

I bite my tongue to keep from snipping how he probably *loves* that my “talents” are wasted serving him on my hands and knees. All my life, it seems like that’s where he’s wanted to put me. Bet he’s real happy now.

Mom snarls, “You make my daughter scrub your grout?”

Velspar’s haughty expression shifts toward something less despising. “Madam, I would never make a young woman scrub my grout. She does it all by herself as though it has personally offended her.”

Mom’s brows knit. “Colette?”

“I d-d-do a good job.”

“An excessively good job. I find the extent of the *good job* you do personally offends me.”

I startle when someone knocks on the door, then I turn and find Trish standing beneath the arch. “Excuse me. Sorry. Mr. Pratt, Colette, everyone’s waiting. Were you still going to do her makeup?”

Velspar brightens like a match catching light. He plants his hand at the small of my back. “Absolutely.”

“What?”

“I told you,” he drawls. “I picked out your colors and everything.”

“But...m—” I look back at Mom.

Velspar insists. “It’s not going to take all afternoon, and we have the

whole day. Plus other days.” He all but shoves me forward a step. “I’ll bring you here whenever you want to visit if you just ask. So, really, I think you owe me thirty minutes.”

I’m so shaken by his offering to bring me back whenever I want that I let him steal me away. Once in the hall, Trish marches ahead of us, leaving us in a solitary bubble.

Velspar’s hand does not move from my back—his fingers splay. “You could have told me you forgot how to handle me with makeup on.”

“What?” I echo as my face heats.

“The way you looked at me before the stark fear settled in?” He pauses, tipping my chin toward him and swiping his thumb beneath my eye as he smiles ruefully. “Do you find me unbearably handsome, darling?”

My skin buzzes under his touch, and I can’t stand it. “You flatter yourself overmuch.”

“Well, someone’s got to. I have very fragile pride.”

“Can I sh-shatter it?”

His lips curl into a tormenting smile, and my body responds in foreign ways. His hand lowers across my cheek, and his thumb tugs on my bottom lip. The action is so intimate and unknown I lose my breath. He murmurs, “Not when you look at me like that.”



Velspar spends the entire ride home looking at me and sighing at length, irritated. I don’t ask any questions, because I don’t care what’s bothering him. And, besides, Velspar says what he wants to when he wants to. Nothing I could say would make him spill anything he doesn’t want to—or, alternatively, make him shut up.

Finally, he sneers, “You are entirely too pretty.”

“Oh?” I murmur with disinterest, catching my reflection in the side mirror. He painted me up in pretty doll shades of pink—a far cry from the mess I expected when he shoved me into a chair and took my face in his hand. Velspar does so love subverting expectations. The tint on my heart-shape lips draws out their fullness. The colors above my eyes brighten their blue. I am lovely. And I know it. And if that pisses him off? Ha.

The most shocking thing I’ve learned today is that Velspar knows how to put on someone else’s makeup—almost professionally. In close second is the fact he gets along with old women. Bringing up a tie for third is how he didn’t mind staying with me the entire day, through dinner and evening

bingo, versus how he almost graciously helped clean up with the volunteers while I spent more time alone with my mother defusing the bomb that is his reappearance in my life.

The moment I forget this is building up to a trap, he'll get me. So I won't forget. I won't humor him.

"It's offensive," he spits, turning onto the neighborhood road boasting all the high walls of his social class. "I'm offended."

"Good."

He glares my way before rolling up to the gate of his property and lowering the window in order to put in the PIN. When the metal eases open, he huffs like a pertinent child. "Why does your mother hate me?"

My brows leap before I bark a laugh. "*Really?*"

"Yes, really. I was a saint to you, compared to—"

"Compared to the people you *ordered* to hurt and antagonize me?"

We slide up the driveway, toward the garage, before Velspar growls, "She thought *I* bruised you."

"You m-m-might as well have."

He presses a button to open the garage door and glares at me the entire time it's rising. "I never, once, told anyone to *hurt* you."

"Physically."

His lips part and close, then he scowls as he drives into the garage and parks. With another push of a button, both our car doors open upward. Once I exit, he steps out and blocks me, staring at me until I want nothing more than to look away. But I can't. I can't let him know he's making me antsy, so I stare back and put my energy into appearing unflappable even though he has me cornered between two of his vehicles and a solid cement wall.

He takes a step closer; it's calculated, unnerving. It makes something dip in the pit of my stomach, something I refuse to run from.

"I liked the moments you were scared of me," he says at last. "I liked them a lot. I liked how they meant you were finally thinking of me enough to decide I was something worth fearing. It made it easier."

I suck in a short breath when his hand touches my cheek. The dim parking lights in the garage coat his face in deep shadows, highlighted further by the makeup he still wears. Feeling as though my legs will give out at any moment, I ask, "M-m-made what easier?"

His mouth moves toward me, close and then closer. It doesn't touch me, but it's close enough that I wonder—horrified—if I want it to. "How much I

thought about you.”

My heart thunders, panicked and out of control.

I have never been in a position like this before, not once. In school, Velspar reigned, making sure anyone who wanted to live ignored or antagonized me. I was too focused on surviving to even bother with crushes. No one who wouldn't save me was worth my time anyway. When I graduated, I threw myself into finding work in order to help support my little family.

I've lived in a constant state apart from others.

I don't know what's happening.

I don't know what to do.

“You're devastatingly beautiful,” Velspar whispers, and there's hate in his voice that reminds me not to let my guard down, not to let him whisk me away into whatever this is. His hand slips to my chin and grips. “You always have been.” His lips just barely brush my ear as he hisses, “And I liked the idea that maybe you feared me more than I wanted you.”

When he steps back, he takes my entire soul with him. I have no words. My thoughts trip over themselves before they even have a chance to reach my mouth. His smile is cruel as he takes me in, and I conclude that he *has* to be messing with me. The realization doesn't help me navigate what I'm supposed to do or say.

“When?” I ask finally.

He lifts a brow.

I steel myself, hands clutched at my sides. “Since when d-do you want to pretend you sst-started feeling that way? We were children when we m-m-met.”

His eyes narrow. “Let's *pretend* it happened immediately. Let's *pretend* I imprinted on the beautiful little doll with golden hair and stunning blue eyes the first second I saw her. Let's *pretend* that the sound of your voice stole my breath the instant I heard it. Let's *pretend* I wanted to mutilate anyone who made fun of you for your stutter. Let's *pretend* I was enthralled, enticed, and overwhelmed in every way. From the first moment.”

“You hate me,” I remind him.

“Oh yes. I hate you for many reasons. Never think I'm implying that I don't. I hate you more with each passing moment.” Tucking his fingers in his pockets, he smiles wanly. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you. Come now, darling. Say it back.”

I bite my cheek so hard it's a wonder I don't taste blood.

He angles his head to regard me like I'm a plaything. It's a look I've seen countless times before, but it has never been laced with so much desire. Or maybe I've just never recognized it before now.

He's always looked at me as though he would devour me whole if only given the chance.

I've always neglected to concern myself with *how* he might do so.

My greatest weapon was to ignore him—until the moment I couldn't anymore.

I step back and startle when I hit the concrete wall. It's chilled against my back, through my clothes, and I clench my jaw as it reminds me of the way his hands feel on my skin. My blood turns to ice when my vision starts to blur. I don't want to cry now. I *can't* cry now.

I'm not even sad or scared. I'm just utterly confused and overwhelmed. This is a rotten game. Maybe it's his worst.

Elation paints his inhumanly beautiful face when my first tear falls. He coos at me, "Oh, *darling*, you'll ruin your makeup." His tongue flicks out to wet his lips; he looks starved.

I can't breathe.

Another tear falls.

"You're lying," I whisper at last. "You're trying to get under my s...s-s-skin."

"I'm, clearly, already there. I'm embedded in your pores. I've poisoned your blood. I'm going to chip away at you until I'm satisfied."

"You only have th-ree m-m-months."

"I only have three months to find another reason to keep you. One of these days you'll realize it, *darling*." He begins to turn.

"What?" I snap.

He stops, glancing at me over his shoulder. "We're addicted to each other, Colette. It's the most despicable thing in the world." Air leaves him, and he gazes at the ceiling of the dim garage. "You have to have felt the emptiness these past few years we've been apart. If you haven't, I might just cry myself to sleep tonight. Seeing you again is like remembering my favorite color. It is so dreadfully *dull* without you around. I don't know how either of us has survived."

Without another word, he walks away, and I remain where I am—mouth dry, limbs weak.

I don't want to understand. I don't want to understand. I don't want to understand.

But I do.

I do, and I don't know what to think about it.

CHAPTER 7

♥ Assess all angles. Bullies are rarely as two-dimensional as you might want to think. ~~~

I stay up reading half the night, barely coming to when my alarm goes off. Gingerly, I pull myself from my nice, warm, soft bed and hide my *How to Destroy Your Lifelong Bully* book away before I get dressed in a simple blue frock.

My reflection peers back at me in the bathroom mirror, my pale lashes stained from the makeup yesterday.

I can feel Velspar applying it. I can see the line between his brows as he concentrated. His cold touch and steady hand haunt me still.

I liked the idea that maybe you feared me more than I wanted you.

Shaking my head, I force myself to clean up and leave my rooms. We are officially out of leftovers, which is why I put a decent amount of energy into ordering and putting up groceries before I left yesterday. This morning, I am making pancakes with fresh fruit.

This morning, the house is silent.

I hum a tune from a long-lost dream to fill the empty air. It's forlorn, hopeful yet despondent. It's been in my head for years, and the lyrics torment me, chasing me around like ghosts.

*Never enough, never enough.
Will I be
Ever enough, ever enough?
Can you see
More than the rough parts of me?
Can you hear
Me when it's tough to be clear?
Never enough, never enough.
I'm never enough, never enough.*

"That's depressing."

I launch out of my skin, nearly flipping a pancake onto the ceiling. My song chokes to silence on my tongue as I find Velspar yawning at the kitchen entrance. His hair rests in dark waves atop his head, uncombed and wild from

sleep. A simple black shirt hugs his chest. A pair of black and gray plaid pajama pants hang low on his narrow hips.

This isn't my first time seeing him like this.

But it is my first time after whatever happened in the garage yesterday. After whatever that was, seeing him like this feels too intimate.

This is his first time addressing me while I'm singing.

After what he told Mom yesterday, I knew he'd heard me before, but until this moment, he'd let me be.

He hums the tune perfectly as he crosses the room to seat himself at the bar counter. "Key of G?" he asks

I swallow. "I d-d-don't know."

The fingers of his right hand rest atop the marble counter, gently arced. He hums along with their flowing motions, and my breath sticks a little tighter in my chest. He's playing piano.

He knows how to play the piano.

The book I stayed up half the night studying the first few chapters of advises me to beat the bully at his own game. I wish I could blame my next action on that advice, but I don't think about the book at all until after I've already blurted the insanity.

"You're d-d-devastatingly beautiful."

Velspar freezes. His eyes close, and he gathers himself before letting them open on me. Leaning against his left fist, he plays his right fingers idly in the pattern he just established—my song. "Oh?"

I wince. "I take it b-back."

"You can't. It's too late. I'm stunning, and you think so. And now I know you think so. And that is wonderful."

Scowling, I twist on my now-burnt pancake. Plating it, I dump some of the fresh fruit I washed on top. Then I plunk it and the fruit bowl down in front of him.

He looks between the half-crisp thing and my face. An irritating smile spreads across his lips. "My beauty is so distracting you burnt my pancake."

Huffing, I get him a fork and the butter, syrup, and whip cream. As I'm pouring more batter into the frying pan, I mutter, "You're prettier with m-m-makeup."

"That is the point." The sound of the whip cream fills the pause between his words. "I knew you liked it."

"It was as repulsive as I remember."

“You’re repulsed by how intensely you’ve always liked it.”

Upset, I get him a glass and the orange juice, setting both in front of him. “Why d-did you learn how to put on m-m-makeup?”

“Les taught me in high school. I thought it was fun, and it pisses my family off, so bonus.” He stabs a strawberry and twirls his fork. “*No son of mine is going to wear that girly filth.*”

“Wasn’t m...m-makeup originally for m-men? Like heels and ssk-skirts?”

He lifts a shoulder. “I don’t know. Does it matter?”

Possibly not. I turn back to my pancakes, so I don’t burn another. I make it through two more before the sound of juice pouring makes me look back at Velspar.

He’s a touch too boyish and innocent sitting there, pouring himself orange juice and eating a burnt pancake without a word of complaint. He’s crossed one leg up against his chest, and his bare foot curls over the edge of the stool. His toenails are black.

Moving the glass to his lips, he murmurs, “Have you only just realized I’m pretty? If you stare like that all of a sudden, I might be inclined to blush.”

I’d love to see that. “You’re not pretty. You’re beautiful. D-d-d-devastatingly so.”

He takes a long sip. “I’m almost honored that you’re mocking me with a word that’s so difficult for you to say.” He cuts into his pancake and glares. “Consider yesterday the first and last time I open my heart to the likes of you.”

“I wasn’t a-ware you had one.”

“One what?”

“A heart.”

His laugh is dry. “It’s shriveled up and sad, but it exists.”

It being less than in optimal condition would explain why his hands are always so cold.

Finishing up the last of the batch, I fix myself a plate and sit beside him, almost too comfortable doing so.

“The others didn’t do this,” he says, stealing a strawberry off my plate while I’m pouring the syrup.

“What?”

“Eat with me. It’s not actually professional.”

To accentuate the fact I don’t care, I stuff a big bite of my food in my

mouth.

His smile is open, honest, and kind for a fraction of a second—then he remembers he’s none of those things and focuses a neutral look down at his food. “I’m having a party tonight.”

“Oh no,” I mumble around my chews.

“You’re welcome to attend. I very much want to see what happens to you when you get drunk.”

I flinch. “There’s going to be a-lcohol?”

“Yes. Quite a lot of it, too.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Pity,” he notes, almost sincerely. Standing, he gets several more pancakes and picks the strawberries out of the fruit mix I made before returning to his seat and drenching everything in syrup.

I watch him longer than I want to, then I look at his black toenails. “You know,” I begin, “it’s not healthy to imply you want to get, you want to get me d-d-drunk.”

His fork clatters onto his plate, and he stares at me with wide, shocked eyes. “Colette,” he states, aghast. “Are you suggesting I’m *toxic*?”

I don’t know why but I nudge him in the shoulder and roll my eyes. “Yes.”

His lungs fill with air as he retrieves his fork, numbly shaking his head, like this information is all very new to him and quite completely distressing. “I’ll simply have to alert my therapist immediately. They really have been having a tough time figuring out what’s wrong with me.”

My mouth betrays me when it smiles, and I try to hide it behind another large bite of pancake. My guard is not down. He’s just stupid. And a little funny.

It’s no surprise how he managed to surround himself with people. He knows how to make himself good company when he wants to.

I guess I never suspected he might want to with *me*.

“There you go again,” he mutters into a mouthful.

“Hm?”

“The *smiling*.”

“I’m not s...sm-smiling,” I muffle out past another bite, like it’s a contest. Who can talk with their mouth the fullest?

“You definitely are. I know you are.” He stuffs more food in his mouth. “Because you’re so dang gorgeous.” He swallows. “Stop it.”

I swallow. “Sst-stop what? Being gorgeous?”

“Yes. That.”

I fix my eyes on him. “Say *please*.”

Excitement flashes through his irises, and his teeth bare in a grin. An eternity passes as we look at each other, grinning, excited, nearly *giddy*. Like we don’t have a history of carnage between us at all.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

My chest is fluttering, and I want to rip him apart. What happens if I chip away at him until *I’m* the one who’s satisfied?

He curses.

“What?” I whisper.

His head shakes, and he plucks a strawberry from the fruit bowl in front of us, taking a bite. “Nothing. I just hate you so much it’s killing me.”

My lashes flutter, and I purr, “I’m so glad.”

He pushes the rest of the strawberry to my lips, and my stomach jumps as the juice dribbles down my chin. My mind shorts out, but I don’t want to lose, so I take a bite, holding his gaze as it turns molten. He brings the final bite back to his lips while I chew, and the way his eyes close as he touches the rest of the fruit to his tongue makes my breath stammer.

It’s all a ruse.

He’s getting deeper than my head. He’s hunting down my heart.

This is a dangerous game to indulge, but I don’t think I know how to stop.

Velspar wasn’t wrong yesterday when he said we were *addicted* to each other. I hate it. I was clean for three years. But now the drug is back in front of me, and it’s worse than I remember.

Once he’s finished the strawberry, it’s as though none of what he just did happened. He returns to eating his pancakes; I return to eating mine. The sweetness against my tongue lingers with every bite I take, but I ignore it and him.

I’ve spent a long time trying to forget the pieces of my childhood that scare me. I don’t want to remember feeling so powerless and afraid or humiliated for things outside of my control. I don’t want to recall my mother’s friends “advising” her on how to help “fix” me.

Have you tried speech therapy? You need to start her young if she’s going to succeed later in life.

We couldn’t afford therapy, and Mom was almost certain I’d grow out of it. I hoped I would, too.

Now, I think she blames herself. Now, I think a lot of the advice she heard while I was growing up comes back to her when she tries to help me get my stammer under control. I understand. It hurts, but I understand.

The things I don't understand are how kids could be so cruel to me just because I had problems speaking. Even before anyone knew it was something to laugh at, kids got fed up with me. They wouldn't wait for me to finish speaking, or they wouldn't understand what I was trying to say.

I don't like her; she talks funny.

I was lonely.

Completely lonely.

So I practiced at home by myself, but it was almost always easier when I was alone. Talking to myself is like singing. Somehow my mouth and my brain can communicate when I'm alone or when I'm singing. I adapted to a singsong way of speaking until I outgrew the leniency for it.

You're almost in elementary school. Talk normal.

Talk normal?

You won't like that either. I promise you.

Why is your voice like that?

I blink, pausing with a bite of pancake halfway to my lips. I forgot. I forgot, but I see him now—Velspar. He's tiny, a dark set of curls wild around his head. He's angry, but when wasn't he? I didn't like him immediately, well before he'd approached me. I didn't like him more when he talked to me, because *why is your voice like that* was the first thing he deigned to say.

Immediately popular and beloved Velspar, despite the fact he was an awful boy who got in fights and cursed at people, also had a problem with my voice. I didn't like judging people so quickly because that's what people always did to me, but resentment for Velspar started before I ever had to give him a chance. His awful nature shone.

I ignored his question. I stuck up my nose and decided the prince with everything didn't have a right to *me*.

Velspar, Velspar, Velspar. Small and chubby-faced Velspar. Angry, angry, angry Velspar. When I said nothing, he added, *It's...like music*. And then when I still refused to speak, he let his awful roam free. *It's annoying*.

Let's pretend that the sound of your voice stole my breath the instant I heard it.

When he said it was like music, I thought he was insulting how I learned to sing my words together in order to keep from stuttering. Singing is like

magic. It fixes everything. I don't know why. No one knows why. It makes people accuse me of faking my stutter. It makes people accuse me of being able to speak normally because I can sing words just fine. I thought he was just another judgmental little brat who had a problem with the solution I'd discovered.

I thought he meant I was annoying.

Let's pretend I wanted to mutilate anyone who made fun of you for your stutter.

What if he meant my voice was as *beautiful* as music and he was annoyed that he thought so? What if Velspar was angry because he wanted to be angry and the fact he didn't hate something got on his nerves?

What if the absence of hate for something—or someone—was the reason he chose to hate, way back when, at the start of *us*?

Daring, I murmur, "You like m-my voice?"

Velspar glances at me as he steals another strawberry from the bowl, ignoring the blueberries and bananas completely. "It's enchanting. I hate it."

Against all better judgment, I smile.

It's a dangerous thing to assume Velspar hates and hurts me because he's *attracted* to me, but if he *is* attracted to me, I have power over him. It's a dangerous thing to assume I have power over a wild creature, but in a twisted way, it's also comforting. It makes vengeance so much easier.

CHAPTER 8

♥ Taking dangerous chances is not at all advised.

~~~~

Music booms beyond my suite, breaking past the rain of my shower. The songs aren't nice. Most are full of language and outright nasty images. The beat is violent and pounding. It's only been a couple hours, but already I understand why this would be *problematic* for people asked to live here.

I can't imagine the headaches if this is a constant for the next three days.

Do rich people at Velspar's age not have anything better to do? Does Velspar spend the entire time drinking?

How is he not dead?

For some reason, the idea of Velspar being *dead* makes my stomach tighten as I step out of the shower and dry off. Death's too good for him. He needs to live a long life and develop his character. Maybe one day in the far-off future, he'll have matured into the kind of rich person who regularly visits nursing homes for reasons outside of inconveniencing me.

As I get dressed, my mind paints him in all his lovely makeup as he helped clear dishes and trays from the dining area at The Dogwood. It's a troubling image—the way he smiled and laughed with volunteers as though he was one of them. Picturing him crowded by elderly women and helping direct them on how to do his makeup is another disturbing thing I'm glad I didn't see.

His nails are still black.

Right now, during this party, his nails are black.

I haven't seen him since he was coordinating where to have the catered food put. He caught my eye when I approached in order to help and told me, *Oh, darling, you might want to tuck off if you aren't interested in joining us tonight. People will be coming soon.*

That was it. No teasing or tormenting. Just a sincere line allowing me to leave before I could find myself in a precarious situation with his friends.

I settle into bed with my phone and sigh, hoping I'll be able to concentrate on a new freebie book from one of my favorite authors. Freebooksy and the library app really are the only way I've lived this long, if

I'm being honest.

Before I can get into the story, I get a message.

**Katina:** There's a party there tonight??

I arch a brow.

**Colette:** Yes. How did you know?

She sends me a screenshot of Leopard, and I groan at the image of a thoroughly trashed living room. That's going to be fun to clean in roughly three days, I guess. Sighing, I reply:

**Colette:** I get to clean that up later. Huzzah.

**Colette:** You want to know the weirdest thing?

**Katina:** A lot of these kids went to school with us, and, by the looks of it, they didn't mature by even a day?

**Colette:** They did? I don't recognize any of them?

**Katina:** This picture is on my feed because I'm friends with Quincy. She wasn't awful. I'm actually sad she's willingly submitted herself to the kingdom of the monster. What's your weird thing?

I chew my lip and glance through my open bedroom door, past the living room, and toward the door that opens into the kitchen. It is firmly *locked*.

**Colette:** I was invited.

**Katina:** ??

**Colette:** Velspar, casually, invited me. He said "you're welcome to attend" all proper like. He said he was inviting me because he wanted to see me drunk, but several hours ago instead of pressing the subject, he warned me before anyone got here, so I could avoid them.

**Katina:** Of course he'd want to see you drunk. Drunk people act so stupid.

**Katina:** !!!

**Katina:** Drunk people act so stupid! VELSPAR IS DRUNK RIGHT NOW.

I pale, my skin going cold, and I know what she's suggesting well before she's suggested it.

**Colette:** That's a bad, dangerous idea. I have no idea who's out there if people from our school are here.

The last thing I need is for someone like Bryan or, heaven help me, *Leslie* to be out there. Bryan never hit me again after Velspar flattened him, but I'm absolutely not going to take my chances. That was high school. We're adults now. And they're drunk. There are *other* ways to hurt me now, and

intoxicated minds probably won't think twice about it.

**Katina:** All you need is one humiliating video of him.

While that idea is quite tempting, I don't know what Velspar would even consider *humiliating*. He let a bunch of old ladies paint his nails. And it bothers him so little he left them like that.

Actually.

It bothers him so little he said *here do my toenails, too*.

**Colette:** It's a good idea. I just think it would get me killed.

**Katina:** Girl. I wish you weren't right.

Next thing I know, the noise beyond my suite fizzles into the background while Katina tells me about the latest "Lord Prince" book she's reading and how I have to find time to either borrow it from her or the library. I tell her it sounds like fanfiction. She tells me that's what makes it so *good*. We talk for a couple hours, then she heads off to bed, which means *it's bedtime*. It's bedtime, yet the constant pulse of a bass that I've been violently ignoring for the past few hours is still going strong. Slurred voices and shrieking laughter fill the space just beyond my suite.

In the expanse that Katina's going to bed left behind, my mind finds itself back on Velspar.

I bring up the picture Katina sent me and zoom in on the details. Blurry bodies. Wild eyes. Spilled food and lifted wine glasses.

What is Velspar doing out there?

Do I even want to know?

Why do I care at all?

My attention focuses on the blurry figures in the background of the picture. Even though the details aren't clear, there's skin-to-skin going on.

Would Velspar be somewhere doing *that*?

My flesh heats, and I roll over in bed, hugging one of the fluffy white pillows.

I've seen Velspar kiss people before. It happened. And I saw it.

Didn't it bother me, even back then? Before breakfasts together. And driving me places. And adamantly telling me that he *never once* condoned people physically hurting me—to an extent he paid the pain back tenfold.

When I'd catch sight of him tucked away in a corner at school with some girl in his arms, something almost always prickled through my chest, like a cactus beneath my skin. He could be gentle with people. He just chose violence with *me*. And when he noticed me noticing him?

Oh, that was undoubtedly the worst.

I can still see the hate pool in his eyes as he made a point of holding my gaze throughout the whole ordeal. It felt awful.

*I liked the idea that maybe you feared me more than I wanted you.*

My feet are on the ground before I can stop myself.

I brush out my now-dry hair and fix the simple pale green dress I'm wearing in the mirror. My heart stampedes, but I've already made up my mind. I want to know. I want to know if he was lying when he suggested he was attracted to me. I want to know what he'll do now that we're adults and he's only got half a mind since he's definitely drunk.

If he's with *someone else*, given the chance would he pick me?

Fragile breaths slip through my lungs as I pad to the door, feel the pump of music beyond, and lift my chin high.

I push out into the fray.

Bodies mill about in the kitchen, some vaguely familiar faces catching my eye and discarding my existence. Immediately, I notice it's hotter out here than I expected. Bottles of liquor, from wine to straight gin, sit half-used on the counter. Broken glass scatters across the floor, the largest pieces kicked into the corner, and I hope I don't step on any shards as I make my way to the foyer.

Everyone is wearing black and white.

I missed that detail from the image Katina sent me, but as I navigate through, the fact I'm in green overwhelms me. Gazes brush and vanish, as though it's obvious I'm the help, inconsequential, unremarkable. When their radiant skin spills jewels and lace and silks, I suppose I really am nothing special in this simple cotton frock.

I make it to one of the back living areas before a sharp laugh spears me through the chest.

Leslie.

No.

No, no, no.

Words slurred, Leslie blurts, "Colette Hart!" A shriek of laughter plunges out of her mouth, and I turn, meeting her thin face and those hateful hazel eyes. She curses merrily, stretching perfectly french-tipped nails. "What is the riffraff doing here?" Her gaze slices down over my clothes, and I recognize that her attention has gravity—it pulls in more attention with it.

But of course it does.

Leslie is the heiress to a world-wide fashion empire. Velspar deemed her worthy to stand at his side as one of his elite. Her entire being is focused around flare and drawing the eye. She knows how to call attention. She knows how to command it.

Drunken faces figure out who I am, and I pluck the people who used to find creative ways to make my life difficult from the crowd. Leslie sloppily purrs, “It doesn’t look like you were invited. You obviously don’t know the dress code. Or—” She disintegrates into laughter. “—maybe you couldn’t *afford* it?”

I take her in, and I’m scared, aren’t I? Am I?

I’m unsettled. Definitely unsettled.

But the longer I look at her, the more I can tell her makeup is smudged. She’s missing an eyelash. Her bright red lipstick is smeared across her cheek.

She’s a mess. I don’t think she could do basic addition right now.

If she tries to hurt me, I *do* know self-defense, and I don’t think if she knows it as well she’ll be able to counter me like Velspar did in this state. Still, my gaze keeps falling on her smudged lipstick. Anger rises at the sight of it, and I know there are probably hundreds of people here, but I also know Velspar and Leslie were *friends*. Close. They were together. A lot.

I hate the idea of him being responsible for her disarray.

I hate it *a lot*.

“Where’s Vel?” I ask, disarmingly calm.

Leslie’s eyes widen, and she tosses her dyed blond hair. When I knew her in school, her hair was brown. On her it looked better brown, and the bruised parts of me thrill a little at the idea she wanted hair like *mine*. “Vel?” she spits. “No one is allowed to call him *Vel*.”

“I am,” I say. “He asked.”

Rage explodes in Leslie’s eyes, and she teeters a step forward.

I stand my ground. “I was also invited.”

“What happened to your st-st-stutter?” she jeers.

I tilt my head and slur my words like hers, relieved to discover it’s a little bit like the singing magic when they all run together. “I could ask you what happened to your voice, too, but, see? That’s impolite.”

“Why you little!” She lunges for me, and misses, and I laugh until arms close around me from behind.

They’re not safe. Or kind.

My stomach plummets into my toes.

Looking up, I find Reginald's black eyes. His rough face morphs toward delight as he grips a fistful of my dress. Alcohol heavy on his breath, he murmurs a lazy, "Now, Les, don't be so hasty. She says she was invited."

"She's a little liar!" Leslie screeches.

"Was she? I don't remember." His free hand clamps around my chin, pointing my face toward him. "At any rate, she's here, and she's out of dress code."

Velspar didn't tell me about a *dress code* when he invited me.

Reginald pulls, and the hem at my waist rips. The sound of threads breaking is loud enough I hear it above the music. It freezes my blood to ice. The fear I should have been feeling all along slams into me as I catch on to *exactly* what's happening.

He's going to tear my clothes off.

In front of all these strangers.

And then? And then *what*?

Ragged breaths tremble out of my chest, and I frantically attempt to assess my options. If I try to reason with them, my stutter is going to reveal itself, and they'll be too busy laughing at that for me to outwit them. Reginald is bulkier than Velspar, and he already has me pinned awkwardly against his chest. I don't know if I have the strength to leverage myself against him.

Can I manage?

Terror makes my body stiff, and I don't know whether or not I'm strong enough to try.

Reginald continues slowly tearing away my skirt—one thread at a time. His languid words accompany the leisurely action, then he stops when the hole is two inches wide. "Velspar was obsessed with you, you know that? Someone should let him know you're here. He wouldn't like it if I have all his fun."

My fists clench, and I suck in a sharp breath before slamming my elbow down and back.

Pain erupts in his expression before his hold goes lax. He crumples away from me, falling to his knees. I curl my bare toes back before slamming a kick between his legs. He squeaks. Actually *squeaks*.

Laughter and cheers spill around me, clashing with Leslie's screamed curses.

When Reginald falls to his side on the black carpet, I whirl on her, daring

her to approach me.

She takes one uneasy step forward, stops, and continues tossing curses in my face.

“I a-sked where Vel was,” I snap, my voice clipped and wobbling. I’m scared. I am scared.

And Velspar isn’t supposed to make anything better, but I think he might be the only person who can get me out of this mess unharmed and clothed. Of that, at least, I am certain. And that is all I want right now. Who cares what he’s doing or who he’s doing it with? Nothing has changed. And I shouldn’t bother getting tied up in thinking there’s anything unspoken between us.

We hate each other. We have hated each other. There’s no depth to that sentiment. No hidden moments scattered throughout our history. There’s *nothing* for me to over-analyze. He’s just in my head—like always—and he’s found an awful new way to mess me up.

Leslie’s face turns red as she keeps slinging violent words. Next thing I know, the cold fluid in her glass douses the carpet, missing me. With a screech, she throws the entire glass at me. The stem breaks when it hits the floor.

Leslie lunges for me, claws extended. She grapples for my skin, screaming and scratching. The burgeoning cheers heighten into a chant. I try to shove her off, but she catches my skirt, and it tears further, hanging off my hips, revealing a slice of my stomach and the hem of my underwear. Someone whistles.

Something smashes.

Every single person startles, turning toward the noise. Even Leslie forgets what she’s doing as she teeters away from me and looks aimlessly toward the sound. In the dining room across from the living space I’m standing in, a massive oil painting rests askew against what was until just moments ago a glass table. Shards from both the painting and the table streak across the tile—piercingly shrill.

And leaning against the now-vacant wall like a peeved cat is Velspar.

The first thing I hate myself for noticing is the lipstick smudged across his neck, along his collarbone, at the corner of his frowning mouth.

He glares, but his eyes drop to my torn clothes and spark with a different kind of fury. Livid, he pulls himself off the wall and marches his stupid, stupid, *stupid* boots through the broken glass.

This is all his fault. This is all his fault. This is *all his fault!* He didn’t tell

me about any *dress code*. He still fraternizes with the lowest of the low in the highest of the high. I hate him. I don't know how to hate him more than I do in this moment, while I stand in a torn dress as someone else's makeup mars his perfect pale skin like a spattering of awful bruises.

If I could bruise him right now, *I would*. It would be the least that he deserves.

Stopping in front of me, a touch unsteady on his feet, he fixes his attention solidly on my dismantled waistline. The skirt hangs off one side of my hips like a limp rag. "Who?" he asks.

I cut my gaze toward Reginald, who's still keeled over on the carpet.

Velspar glances at him and arches a brow, as though merely curious to find there's a person crumpled beside him.

Because I'm angry and ashamed and scared, I hiss, "He s...said you were, you were ob-obsessed with me."

Someone laughs as I fumble my words.

Velspar slices his attention around the room, scowling. When his irate glare returns, he tilts his head back. "Ah. Did he now?" His bleary eyes narrow, then he has my wrists clamped in his hands. He pulls my arms forward and sneers down at the scratches marring them. "And who did this?"

All the eyes in the room rest on me, and not even the pumping music can erase the silence that seems to swell from all around. My tongue thickens in my mouth, and I don't trust myself with anything remotely close to language right now, so I simply turn and fix my attention on Leslie.

She rallies a proud, tilted smile. Velspar drops my wrists, strides past me, and slaps her.

My mouth drops open as her smile flies off her lips, replaced with horror.

"W—" She chokes on her own spit.

As far as I can tell, Velspar didn't hit her hard enough to leave a mark, but that's not the important part, is it? He hit her. He just walked up to her and *hit her*. I shouldn't be so surprised. Velspar's hit people before. Velspar's been volatile for as long as I've known him—unbridled and unchecked.

He doesn't live by the same rules as the rest of us, and I've always known that.

So the part that's shocking me now must be the fact he *hit her* on my behalf. In front of everyone. Clearly. There's no question what he did was for *me*.

"You—" she shrieks. "How *dare* you hit a woman! What's wrong with



you!”

Velspar scoffs. “Sorry, Les. I’m a feminist, so I couldn’t care less about your gender. Compared to Reg, you got off easy.”

She flinches, holding a hand to her cheek as her gaze flies toward Reginald.

“Behave yourself, stupid. You’re literally an heiress.” Velspar flicks her forehead and releases an annoyed sigh. The action is tender in a way that makes my stomach curdle. I bite my lip and shove whatever I’m feeling far away from my mind. It’s not helpful.

Leaving my room was stupid.

I don’t know what I was thinking.

Finding Velspar with someone else’s lipstick all over him answers whatever questions I didn’t ask aloud.

So he claims to have wanted me once upon a time. Big deal. Obviously, that’s nothing special. I don’t even know why in the world I’d *want* to be special to *Velspar Pratt*. I wouldn’t so much as know what to do with that kind of power over him. Because, unlike him, I’m not a monster.

I need to disappear now, change, hope this dress ripped cleanly enough for me to be able to fix it.

Before I’m able to retreat from the room, Velspar mutters, “Where do you think you’re going, Colette?”

Tension tightens every last one of my muscles. Slowly, I find his eyes. “Home.”

Anger sparks, flaring like a fire in his narrowed gaze. “*Home?*” he mutters, drawing near. In full view of everyone, he pinches my chin and stretches my neck as though he can forcibly extend my height to reach his. “After you’ve come all this way and started fights among my esteemed guests?”

When I attempt to get air into my lungs, all I find is the bitter stench of whiskey on his breath. It’s intoxicating—hot and sweet and cinnamon when it should just be *bad*. I grit my teeth, forcing myself not to look at the mark at the corner of his mouth. Forcing my rage not to tinge with hurt I can’t explain.

Against my will, my eyes flick down to his lips. A smile stretches that lipstick smudge until I’m chilled.

“You interrupted me,” he murmurs.

I want to hit him. I want to fight him. I want to send him to the ground in

pain just like Reginald.

This is it. I knew it was coming. All his more-or-less decent behavior and mutterings of irritating desire bring us to this moment where he gets to shatter the sense of security he's been fostering. I expected this.

Do your worst, Velspar Pratt. I was nearly stripped in front of all your guests, and I know you prefer more creative psychological attacks. Honestly, right now, nothing you can say could scare me more than what almost happened, so *do your worst*.

His gaze lowers to the bared slice of my cold, revealed skin, and his hold on my jaw turns to iron. "It appears no one told you the appropriate attire for tonight."

If by *no one* he means *him*, then no, he didn't tell me jack squat.

I want to dunk his head in his stupid pool and count to three hundred.

"As host," he murmurs, "it's my job to address those who violate my rules *personally*."

I attempt to jerk out of his hold, but his fingers circle my wrist before I can. There's no escaping that solid grip. I stumble after him when he turns and tugs, announcing to everyone, "I, unlike my foolish guests, know better than to see about correcting a lady's garments in public. As you were, fools. Your efforts were atrociously uncouth, and you got what you deserved. I'll see to this matter in private. Like a gentleman."

My heart launches into my throat as I trip after Velspar's gait, fighting in futile earnest against him. Even drunk, he's stronger and more steady than he looks. He takes me around the glass painting the dining area as his *foolish guests* spur him on.

Gentleman my left big toe! This is the last thing a gentleman would do! Is no one going to stop him? No one at all?

He doesn't pause for a moment even as I dig my heels and scratch at his fingers. He doesn't stop until we're upstairs in his bedroom and he's slamming the door behind us. He tosses me in front of him like he can't bear to touch me a moment longer, and that's the most reassuring news I've received tonight. I catch myself on my hands and knees right in front of the broad expanse of his bed.

Dark, dark, dark. His room swallows the dimmed light overhead in its endless black. If I'm not careful, this carpet will swallow me, too.

Arms folded, Velspar falls back against the door and looks down at me, entirely *appreciating* the fact I'm on the ground before him.

Of course he is. The b—

“What in the actual steaming cesspool of idiotic idiocy do you think you’re doing?” he asks, his refined, careful words from moments ago now horribly slurred into a blundering mess—like he’s forgone all effort.

I snarl, “What d-do you m-m-mean? You *invited me* and so *conveniently* left out any m-m-m-mention of a *d-dress code*.”

He throws his hands up, fury igniting in his eyes. “You *immediately* turned down my invitation. Why would I inform you of further details? ‘Oh, right, yeah, that party you don’t want to come to is a black-and-white event. Dress accordingly in your room.’”

Gritting my teeth, I snap, “You d-d-didn’t think for a m-m-m—instant that I m-m-might get curious and change, and change my m...mind?”

“I didn’t think for a moment that my *friends* were stupid enough to attack you, if you’re asking whether or not I planned this.”

I wasn’t asking. I already assumed, and I was quite content with the assumption. It occurs to me as I’m still sitting on the floor that I am horrified, and now I’m shaking. My arms hurt where Leslie scratched me. The revealed skin of my stomach is freezing. I don’t think I can stand; it’s a miracle I’m managing to breathe. “Why are you sst-ill friends with s-s-such a-wful people?”

He folds his arms again, angrily tapping his index finger against his bicep. “It’s complicated. But in case you didn’t realize, I’m an awful person, too. So I guess the whole awful lot of us just fit together.”

I bite my tongue before I blurt something idiotic like *you’re wrong* or *you aren’t like them* because it hardly matters. He isn’t like them. He wouldn’t do what they just did unless someone had done it directly to him first. He pays back awfulness with similar awfulness, but he doesn’t initiate this brand of it on his own. He initiates other things that are worse in other ways, and it’s difficult to weigh one crime against another. So what if Velspar wouldn’t strip me in front of a bunch of strangers; he would make them believe he’s stripping me right now.

My stomach hurts.

He’s awful.

*Awful, awful, a—*

“You’re shaking,” he murmurs, suddenly kneeling on the floor in front of me, crawling partly over my body. His cold hand cups my cheek, and liquid want consumes his amber gaze. The color deepens and darkens. His tone

shreds. “*Did Reg touch you?*”

The way he asks is so distinctly *do I have to kill him?* that I don’t know what to do or say for the longest moment. My gaze catches on the smudge at his lip, and, stupidly, I mutter, “No. Not like I a-ssume you were being, you were being touched.”

He settles himself back, bending a leg to rest his elbow on as he pulls his hand away from my face. “Does it bother you that I was being touched?”

“No.”

He watches me for so long I’m afraid he’s calculating the best way to reveal my lie and hurt me for it. Instead, he lets his attention slip off me and says, “People kissed me. I let them. It’s nice to feel wanted. It’s not like I ever expect *you* to want me. If you did...” His voice trails, and it’s cruel for him to leave that line so open. He rubs his eyes before falling back against his carpet and sweeping his fingers through his hair. “I am drunk. Quite drunk. I hit Les. I’m drunk enough that I hit Les. She’s not all bad. She’s pretty bad. She probably deserves another smack or two, but...” Velspar sighs, sprawled like a starfish on his carpet. “Oh, whatever.” He stretches, and his leg bumps my thigh. “Come kiss me, darling, if it bothers you. Tell me never to kiss anyone else. Hug me. Hold me. Torture me. Torture me like you know what you’re doing and refuse to stop.” His eyes close, soft breaths moving his chest, and he looks as though he’ll fall asleep right on the floor.

I can’t shake the emptiness in his words, the longing, the loneliness.

Settling my nerves, I inch toward him as though he’s a wild animal ready to strike at any moment. I don’t know why I’m taking chances. I don’t know why I’m desperate to see more, to peel him apart, to make sense of his chaos and see if it’s anything I can understand.

In this quiet, his lethal beauty is calmer than I’ve ever seen it. His dark lashes rest against his pale cheeks, and I see the years I’ve known him in his face. He’s aged. His features have matured and sharpened, but somewhere in this quiet is the little boy I first met and every stage I’ve seen of him since.

Drowsy, his eyes ease open part way, and his dark pupils swallow the whiskey hue as his gaze fixes on me. His hand lifts, cupping my cheek in ice once again. His fingers slip through my hair and set the loose strands behind my ear. “Sweet torment,” he murmurs. “I hope I don’t remember this. The eternities I’d be haunted...I can hardly begin to imagine.”

I touch my thumb to the corner of his mouth and scrub the infuriating smudge away. “You hate me,” I remind him, my voice a fragile whisper as I

remind myself.

“Immensely. You have less than nothing, yet you’ve always risen above me without trying. You are lovable when I am not. You refuse to adore me, and I hate that the most. You see me for who I am, not my position, and you don’t let me forget how worthless I am without what I’ve been born into.” He caresses a fingertip around the shell of my ear. “I want your attention. Only your attention has ever felt real for long enough to matter.”

Lifting the low, frayed collar of his shirt, I wipe away the smudges of lipstick on his neck and down his chest. “Nothing you can ever s-say or d-d-do will excuse how you treated, how you treated me. So what if you hated me? You were a king, and everyone followed your lead. Had you just ignored m-me...I wouldn’t have s...s-suffered.”

“I’m aware. I never expect mercy or forgiveness, Colette. I wanted you to suffer. I never wanted anyone to harm you, but I wanted you to despise me. I wanted you to know I was behind all your suffering. I wanted you to hate me enough to show me the time of day.” He catches my hand and holds it to his chest, right over the beat of his heart. Here, his skin is warm. “You shouldn’t ever forgive me. The things I want to do to you...the things I want to make you do...I can’t deserve forgiveness unless I repent, and I refuse.”

I lean closer, hovering over him. My hair slips free from behind my ear and touches his cheek. I soak in the heat pouring from his chest as though his icy fingers aren’t holding me there. “What th-ings?”

He glances at my hair against his cheek and closes his eyes. “They’d horrify and upset you. We’re both so proud and stubborn. We were born to clash. You’d hate every moment just knowing you were fulfilling my desires, and I’d love it, but I am just not that much of an arse.”

He seems so harmless like this. I don’t know why my skin is on fire or why I’ve never felt this at peace with another person in my life. After everything that just happened, peace shouldn’t be anywhere near me. Yet it is. Maybe it has something to do with the drunken way his words melt together, honey smooth and tired. Maybe it’s the honesty laced in his every murmur, the way we’re on the floor together, how he’s holding my hand.

Maybe it’s nothing I can name at all. Maybe it’s only something I can feel.

“Tell me. What are they?” My heart thunders as I swallow and whisper, “Your desires.”

Velspar takes a deep breath, then he threads his fingers with mine. In a

frightening instant, he's launched upright and tipped me back. My shoulder blades hit the carpet; I lie flattened beneath him. He presses his weight into my hand as he grazes his free fingertips against my bared waist. Hot breath flushes against my neck, and my whole body seizes with the understanding that's not just his *breath* against me anymore.

It's his lips.

My breaths shorten. I can't control my mind.

He bites me, and I gasp, tensing before he strokes his tongue against the spot where his teeth nipped. I grip his hand to ground myself, and he tightens his hold in kind, crushing.

Breathless, he hisses, "It's disgusting how much I want you. I want you to scream my name—demand my attention like I have always demanded yours. I want you to beg for me to notice you—like I always have, from the first moment. I wanted you to look at me and adore me like you were supposed to." The cold tip of his nose strokes over my erratic pulse, burying itself against my throat. "Punish and praise me. Want me and hate me. Never ignore me. Never leave me." Agony causes his voice to break, and the next thing I know, he's trembling around me, his weight pressing against my entire body as he wraps me in his arms. "*I've missed you. Why haven't you missed me?*" His hands grip my clothes, and he curses, over and over. "I hate you. How dare you walk out of my life like you didn't change every—" He curses. "—cell in me, like I meant *nothing* to you, like you were glad to be rid of me. *How dare you.*"

My heart races. He's so solid, real, here, and I can't shake the feeling he might be crying while I stare, wide-eyed, at the ceiling. The dimmed light from the much too unnecessary chandelier barely illuminates the corners of this room, and the shadows in my mind take over.

Would he go this far to trick me? Drunk as he is, would he even know how to?

"You bit me," I whisper.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to," he murmurs into my skin.

I grip my fists against the carpet, genuinely afraid I might hug him. "You weren't a biter. Not even in preschool."

"You bring out the worst in me."

How lucky for me. I lift my hand to his hair and grip, pulling his face away from my chest so I can look at him.

He pouts, his glassy eyes on the verge of tears, like I thought. He uncoils

from around me in order to kneel over me, caging me in before unlatching my fingers from his hair. “I don’t advise you do that, Colette. I am out of my mind, and it’ll drive me crazy.”

I want to drive him crazy. I want to make him go mad. I want to make him crumple at my feet and kiss my toes and beg apologies I won’t give. I want him to recognize that I’m better than him. But in wanting that I know I make us the same.

Are we the same?

Because I can’t help myself, I grip his mouth, unnerved by how easily the rough action comes to me. The ease of it is almost an answer. *Are we the same?* Perhaps more than I thought.

His eyes close, and two tears slip free to splash against my cheeks.

“How pathetic,” I hiss. “You’re crying.”

“Of course I’m crying. I’ve broken my own heart into a thousand pieces. It’s quite a painful thing. Obviously.”

Good. After all he’s put me through, a little pain on his part is justice. “Tell me an embarrassing secret,” I murmur, dragging his face as close to mine as I dare. Lying beneath him like this, I’ve never felt more powerful. I am disconcertingly calm. My mind and tongue are so relaxed it’s like I’m all by myself—unafraid. Music pounds beyond, people laugh beyond, life moves beyond. But I am here, and Velspar is here, and I want to feel this in control always.

He was wrong. We do not clash. We’re a madrigal—two voices blending different words and melodies into a singular song. I hear him now; maybe he’s always heard me even when I thought no one did. And maybe he hated it because he couldn’t get my tune out of his pompous skull.

“An embarrassing secret,” he mumbles, dazed, drunk, lost. “I want to kiss you.”

“Obviously. You’ll kiss anyone.” I flick my attention to his lips then back up to his eyes. “I want a worse secret. Something that will let me destroy you.”

He skates one finger down my arm, from my wrist, past my elbow, to my shoulder. “I dream about this.”

“This exactly?”

He hums, sagging until his forehead presses against mine. “I hate you.”

I smile.

“I wanted to torment you at my side tonight. This never would have

happened had you been with me.” His fingers slip past the rip in my dress and caress my waist until I’m shivering. His touch slips higher, brushing over the lowest bone of my rib cage. “This isn’t fun. Reginald is a moron. I hope you broke him.”

So do I.

Velspar topples to my side, evading my grasp on his face as he drags me near, one arm curling frigidly around my waist inside the fabric of my dress, his icy palm settling against my back. He traces the bottom of my bra strap, near the clasps, under them. He bumps down the ridge of my spine. “Break me if it suits you, if I go too far mindlessly. If I deserve it, I’ll let you.”

He deserves it. I know he does.

I curl slightly closer, unsettled by how relaxed I feel in spite of what he deserves. I have known him forever. I have fought him in my nightmares. He is as much my flesh as I have ever been. If I must crawl inside him to rip him apart, I will. Perhaps he’s warmer on the inside than his hands can portray. “I will break you,” I promise. “Don’t let anyone else kiss you again. Don’t touch anyone else like this again.”

He exhales a wry laugh. “Darling, I have never touched anyone *like this*. No one else is worth the reverence.”

My skin hums; I lose myself in the spiced scent of him. Liquor and soap, a heady hint of much-too-expensive cheese, the full bite of bitter wine. Cinnamon. Spice, spice, spice. In every way his touch isn’t, he smells warm.

His words are barely audible muffled against me. “If I’m not to let anyone *else* kiss me, are you volunteering yourself?”

“No.”

“Cruel mistress.”

“Be alone and tormented, like you made me. Suffer. Suffer until you begin to hope I might relieve you of the pain. Then, when you can’t stand it, when you think it might work, beg me for the things you hate yourself for wanting. Let me deny you your desires like you denied me basic human respect.”

He tangles his legs with mine, uncaring entirely that the action draws my ripped dress up farther than it ever should be. His body is the chain that keeps me tethered. “You intend to act so despicably?”

“I learned from your example. You have only yourself to blame for whatever I decide to do.”

His breath settles, in harmony with mine. “Repulsive creature. If your



goal is to make me hate myself, you're much too late."

"My goal..." I tie my hands in his shirt and search for something warm from his body. "...is to make you pay. You asked me to torture you. It would be rude not to oblige such a lovely request."

"I will not be idly beaten."

"I expect not."

His lips caress the side of my head as he tucks himself around me, offering me the secret heat that gathers near his heart. "Darling villain. My nightmare muse. So long as you're near...so long as you're near."

## CHAPTER 9

♥ All people have limitations, even villains.

~~~~

When I wake, I'm in my bed and I don't remember falling asleep or getting here. Silence burdens the space around me, eerie and complete, while sunlight shines through the window. With a horrified start, I recall Velspar's party, Velspar's arms, his touch beneath my ripped clothes, his whispers, his drunken secrets and promises.

Lurching upright, I whip the blankets off and find my ruined green dress.

Okay. So. He's still the same manner of horrible and not a step better or worse.

The understanding he didn't change me into unripped clothes or pajamas under some twisted guise of *assisting me* before tucking me into bed is more calming that it should be when his icy fingertips are haunting my skin at this very moment.

He touched me.

He slurred almost tender words at me.

Does he remember any of it?

Muddled by the understanding he confined me in such peace last night my speech didn't even struggle, I get changed into a pair of pants and an oversize t-shirt. If the party is over, I need to make this place livable again.

That's my job. That's something to focus on that *isn't* last night.

As I'm tying my hair back in a short ponytail, glass shatters in the kitchen. I jump as a string of curses follows the crash. Hoping it's not a lingering guest, I peek out of my room and find Velspar standing sour-faced in front of the stove. A cabinet full of hard liquor sits open above him, and a broken bottle soaks over his black socks.

His sharp, squinted eyes jerk toward me, and he sneers. Lip curled, he mutters, "There's an inconsiderate amount of broken glass in the house today, darling. I suggest you wear shoes."

I look at his socks and can't help but agree that *shoes* would probably be a good idea as he reaches for a fresh bottle, glances at the label, then pops the stopper and drinks until the pale yellow fluid streams down the cords of his

neck to douse the front of his plain black shirt.

He's hungover.

It's the silliest and most disheveled I have ever seen him.

I can't help my laugh.

He scrubs the back of his hand over his mouth and glares at me like I've insulted his firstborn. "Do shut up."

Leaning in the doorway, I smile impishly. "Th-at's not what you s...said last night."

Horror blanches his face, and he looks from me to the bottle in his hand. Suddenly, he throws down another gulp and, reassuringly, snips, "There's no way. I wouldn't."

"D-d-did."

"*Would never,*" he growls.

So he doesn't remember a danged thing. "You bit m-me." I bare my neck although I doubt there's a mark. Dragging my fingers to the spot, I remember the sensation of that moment alarmingly well. "Right here."

He shakes his head and turns, ignoring the broken shards on the floor as he marches away. "Clean this place up and stop thinking you have any idea how to rattle me."

"I'm not on birth control," I blurt, because I'm either an idiot or I have a taste for fire. Flames and ash. Honestly, it'll be easier to handle the residue of last night if I can push my unsettled emotions off on him. Let him take responsibility for the chaos he caused and had the audacity to forget.

Velspar freezes beneath the archway leading out of the kitchen. Long moments of tense silence fill the space, too thick to breathe in. Or so I assume. Because I haven't seen Velspar's chest move since I spoke. I imagine his mind fighting for memories like my tongue sometimes fights for words. It is a glorious image.

He snaps out of it. Swiveling, he cocks his hip against the wall and looks me over—head to toe, slowly, appraising. He sips the liquor and wipes his mouth. "Well. I suppose if I've made such a grave mistake, we should get married. Just in case."

My heart thuds into my ribs. "Are you a-ctually pr-pr-pr-pro-proposing?" *That's* his answer to this farce? It's way more honorable a sentiment than I'd expect him to even joke about. And for some reason it makes my insides tingle.

"Do you really think your not being on birth control is a concern the

morning after *whatever* occurred? Are you sincerely implying there's a chance you're *pregnant* right now?"

Clearing my throat, I mutter, "You never know."

He lifts a shoulder, his eyes dark and dull. "Then I guess I have to take responsibility for my Schrodinger's child. We can elope by next week since nobody will be happy about it and want to come to our wedding. Pity. You'd look amazing in a gown."

First of all, he didn't just say *Schrodinger's child*. Second of all, how far am I going to press this? If he thinks he can just casually drawl a proposal at me and get away with it, he's got another think coming. "You really d-don't remember last night?"

"I don't exactly throw parties in order to remember them."

I avert my eyes. "So you, so you don't recall ruining my d-d—clothes?"

His expression is dry with disbelief, so I wander into my room, get my dress, and show him the rip.

Guiltless, I look at him past my lashes and wonder exactly how much paler he can physically get. "You were r-rough. You can't s...say you've never bruised me now." I lift my arms. "L-look. I'm covered in sc-scratches."

The bottle slips from his hand and hits the floor with a sharp shriek.

His entire being flinches, and he scowls at the new mess before gritting his teeth and pointing at me. Stalking forward with his finger still jabbing, he meets me at my doorway, looks down, and freezes. He grabs my arm and swallows hard. "This is too far."

I sniffle—as though I am devastated he's treating me like this after our night of blissful passion. Alas, poor innocence. I knew her well.

The rage on his mortified face cracks. He grips my cheeks, his fingers shaking against my skin. "I would *not*. I would *never*. I don't want to. I have never wanted to. That's not what I meant when I said I wanted you. You have no right to use that foolish moment against me like *this*. Stop this nonsense now. *Immediately*. This isn't an acceptable game, Colette." His eyes are pleading, desperate for me to reveal the prank and admit I really am as rotten as him for thinking a joke this severe is appropriate. He whispers, "I would not forget such a thing. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I...if I hurt you."

My chest tightens, and I can't stand it. I can't stand not knowing what to think about him when he says things like that, so...*sincerely*. Finding anything about him that's *human* is frustrating. I harden myself against the

pulse of heat surging to greet his frozen, trembling hold.

“You can’t lie to m-me now. I-I-I was s...s-sober last night; you weren’t. You s-s-said entirely the opposite th-en.”

His hand falls from my skin, sheer terror gleaming in eyes that are now fully aware. A hard swallow makes his throat bob. “Did...you...” His lips press into a pinched line. Physically pained, he forces out the final word. “... consent?”

I stare directly at him, cold.

His lips part, opening and closing with gaping distress. Stammering, he chokes on every thought. “I— You— We—” His eye twitches, and he crashes his fingers through his hair, head shaking. “I wouldn’t force you. I wouldn’t force anyone. It doesn’t matter how drunk I was. It doesn’t matter how much I—”

This is so much cheaper than therapy. Crueler, definitely, but aren’t we quite the pair? I stuff my dress into his hand, and he holds it loosely, like it’s an infant he doesn’t know what to do with. “You’re right. You wouldn’t. You d-d-didn’t. And you never will. Reginald d-d-did th-is.”

Something flickers into Velspar’s gaze, but it’s not relief. His hands close around the fabric. Low and deadly, he says, “*What?*”

“He assaulted m-m-me. You took me to your room. You t-told me all kinds of s...s-secrets. I fell a-sleep in your, in your arms. Nothing else.”

“Reginald touched you?” he breathes.

“Only to rip m-my sssk-irt.”

“And I...we didn’t...”

I shake my head.

He drags my dress to his face and pours a violent sigh into the fabric. “You’re a monster.”

“I learned from you.”

His brows knit when he peeks over the bundle at me. “Did you say something like that last night?”

I tilt my head. “I wonder. You sh-sh-should probably ssst-op drinking so m-m-much. You begged to kiss me.”

His head shakes, and his eyes roll. “I’m sure I did. Have you seen your lips?”

I slip my feet into the sneakers I have by the door while he holds up my dress and scowls at the rip, assessing.

He mutters, “Perfect little pink heart, those lips of yours. They exist to be

kissed. I want to harm whoever has.”

No one has. But I don't say that. I say, “You s...said you d-didn't want me like that just m-m-s...seconds ago.”

“I lied because *someone* was making sexual assault claims.” His eye twitches as he folds my dress in two quick motions. “Who *does* that? So I bully you a little bit.” He slaps my folded dress against my chest. “Your revenge is making me think I'm the scum of the earth? While I'm hungover? Darling, I have *never*—”

Grasping my dress, I slur dryly, “A *little bit*?”

“Okay, a lot. But still.”

“You are th-e sc-scum of the earth.”

“At least I have boundaries.”

I scowl, eyes narrowed, and I would *love* to see an outline of what he considers a *boundary* if destroying a poor girl's lunch was within them. “I'm new to bullying. Is there a guidebook I can borrow?”

“As if I'd help you torment me by offering you my heavily-annotated notes.”

“You a-sked m-me to torment you.” I fold my dress another time and toss it on the floor by the door. “I'm ob-obliging your request.”

“What a good girl you are,” he drawls. “If you've no other means by which to convince me I'm a felon, I have a splitting headache, so I'm going back to bed.”

“St-st-stay.”

He winces, dragging his gaze over me. “...why?”

Why indeed. Maybe because I want to see if he will?

I step past him, toward the fridge and the atrocious counters I'll be spending the next few days taking care of. Most of the food I bought is obliterated now, despite the fact there were catered options, but I find a bag of frozen bread in the back of the freezer. “I'll m-make you some toast.”

Velspar doesn't move for a time, then he pulls out a stool in front of the crowded bar covered in rotting refuse. “Toast. Is that supposed to make me forgive you for spiking my blood pressure?”

“We aren't in the habit of forgiving each other.” I shove a collection of dirty plates over far enough for me to reach the toaster. Broken glass and puddles of alcohol slosh underfoot.

“I suppose not. I never thought we'd outright lie to each other though. What sorts of things did I tell you?”

While his bread is toasting, I get a trash bag from beneath the sink and begin chipping away at the mess. “Oh. All m-m-m-manner of sw-swee-sweet nothings. You s...said you adored me. I’m your a-ngel. You m-m-missed me. You never want to live without me. You cried s...some. I wiped your tears and cradled you like a baby.”

Velspar pushes garbage aside in order to rest his elbow on the counter in front of him. “I have no idea if you’re still lying.”

“You s...suckled your th-umb.”

He blinks dryly. “I do, however, have a sneaking suspicion.”

I smile his way, and something in his expression eases.

Planting his cheek against his hand, he looks sidelong away from me and sighs. “I don’t like it when you lie to me. I trust you, Colette. There are honest ways to hurt me, and I’m almost certain I provided you with enough lust-centered drivel to manage.”

My smile falters, and the toaster pops, jerking my attention away from him for blissful moments.

He trusts me?

Why does that make something heat in the pit of my stomach?

I chew my lip as I find a clean plate and butter the bread. When I set it in front of him, I murmur, “You d-did cry. It s...surprised me. And I liked it.”

He lifts the bread and takes a crunching bite as he holds my eyes. He swallows. “It’s twisted, isn’t it? ‘I affect this person so much they’re crying.’ It’s a heady rush of power. I couldn’t stand when other people made you cry. Your tears are mine.” He takes another bite and watches the melted butter drip onto his plate. “*You* are mine. Did I tell you that last night? Did I whisper it in your ear as some messed up reason you should let me kiss you?” His brows knit, and he grumbles into his toast, “Did I actually bite you?”

“You a-bsolutely bit m...me.” I still don’t know how to feel about it, so it’s probably good Velspar’s eyes roll like he doesn’t believe me.

“You do look astonishingly tasty,” he purrs. “Guys probably nip at you all the time.”

I scoff and return to clearing off the counters and packing the garbage bag. “I d-d-don’t know why you th-ink I have such a lewd history.”

“You’re stunning. I doubt your relationships have been particularly *lewd*—since you’re so interested in pretending to be a good girl—but I’m certain you’ve had no shortage of interest.”

I hum and dump an entire tray of stinking hors-d’oeuvres in the trash. My

most risqué experiences have included handsy employers and their nearly broken wrists once I showed them I wasn't an easy target. "Who has time for a relationship?" I say before I remember *he* definitely does. Crap.

"So..." he starts, hesitantly. "You're saying..."

I let a tray clang into the sink as I toss my hair back and look down my small nose at him. "If I were to become *yours*, I would only ever have been *yours*. But I'm not, and I never will be, and I hope that d-drives you m-m-mad."

He bites into his toast, and the *crunch* thunders in my head as he pins his simmering eyes on me. "Oh, *I assure you*, it does." A smile creeps over his lips, making my heart stammer. He chuckles. "Should I convince you to love me, Colette? Should I really make you *mine*? How wicked would that be, after everything I've done?"

"Quite," I breathe.

"Quite," he echos, licking crumbs off his lips. "Am I that bad, do you think? Could I do it?"

He's far worse. "You m-might ce-certainly try. You're terrible enough to try."

His eyes glimmer with mischief and plots drenched in thickening amusement, like he's found a new game to play and he believes it's going to be his favorite. "Marvelous. The next time I bite you, I'll remember you begging for it."

My laugh is humorless and soft as I get another trash bag out and picture cramming all his lanky limbs inside. "What if I bite you next instead?"

"Would you like to? Bite me, that is."

"Are you begging?"

He considers my words a moment, finishes his toast, and licks melted butter off his thumb. "Yes. Will you do it?"

"No."

"Please?" he stands, sweeping around the counter and standing in front of me, a bag of garbage between us.

With the way I'm crouched in order to open the second bag, it looks like I'm bowing to him, and when I straighten up, it looks like he was thinking the same thing—just delighting in it. I snarl, "Get on your knees, and I'll consider it."

My stomach lurches when he drops to the floor.

His dark jeans leech spilled liquor as his weight crunches shattered glass.

I hiss, “What ar—”
“*Please.*”

Warmth as slick as melted wax slips down my spine, leaving a horrid shiver in its wake. He robs me of my breath and manages to look like the same violent ruler he always has been, even down there on his knees and beside a bag of trash.

His expression says everything I need to know about who is in control right now. It doesn't matter that he's kneeling. It doesn't matter at all.

Mouth dry, I whisper, “You really want m-me to lo...love you?”

Malice spreads his smirk thin. “I want the power your *love* would come with. You don't make half efforts, darling. To be loved by you would be to own your soul. There's not a thing you wouldn't do for me. Your hate blesses me with ownership of your mind. But your love? That would grant me your very essence.”

“I have never loved anyone before.”

“Perfect.”

My fists clench. “Have you?”

He cocks his head, sweeping his attention over my every inch. At length, he says, “Perhaps I'll tell you once you're hopelessly undone by your adoration of me.”

“In order to break m-my heart?”

Velspar relaxes as though I've said something very silly. Even on his knees, he proves he can look like an arrogant prick. “My sweet darling... haven't we established the fact I have boundaries? It's so much more fun to leave you wondering whether or not *breaking your heart* falls within them.”

Scowling, I kick the trash bag at him. “Take out your crap, Vel.”

With a mocking bow, he drags himself out of the broken glass and does as I've asked.

CHAPTER 10

♥ Beware of the bully's attempts to fraternize with your friends.

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*Pretentious*, Katina signs the moment after I open the front door for her. She pouts her lip as she looks into Velspar's house—freshly clean after the disaster that happened just three nights ago. *Some people are rich like me, and some people are single-handedly hoarding the net worth of entire countries.*

Tell me about it.

I wince when I catch Velspar silently descending the stairs out of the corner of my eye. He's wearing his usual eccentric attire—a dark shirt and jeans paired with a long black overcoat to match his still miraculously unchipped nails. Smiling, he says, “Afternoon, Katina. Long time no see.”

Katina, being Katina, shoots him a middle finger tipped in pale purple.

Velspar reaches the bottom of the stairs and plants a palm against his chest. “Had I known you were visiting, I'd have prepared refreshments. Shame it's so hard to find good help these days.”

Katina whacks me in the arm. *If you want to off him while I'm here, I'll help you hide the body.*

*Tempting...* I make a point of pondering her statement then shaking my head and exaggerating a sigh.

Velspar laughs and crosses his ankles as he cocks a shoulder against the wall. Sheer delight reflects in his eyes, and it's honestly never a good look on him—no matter how brilliantly handsome it makes him appear. “This brings back memories.”

*I'm offended he's acting like they're fond memories*, Katina quips.

I nod, eyeing Velspar like he's speaking a different language and I have no idea what he's going on about. Somewhere in the back of my mind, however, I wonder if these *are* fond memories. Katina and I always ate lunch together in the corner of the lavish preppy high school cafeteria. We ate and “talked,” and no one knew our secret jokes—except maybe Katina's translator, but from what I remember of that older woman, she didn't pay us much mind unless Katina needed to communicate with a teacher. Often, she

seemed peeved her life had led her back to high school.

Meanwhile, Velspar sat on the other side of the vast room, surrounded constantly, and never stopped watching us. Every time my gaze found him, he was watching, and I liked the way his brows occasionally knitted with irritation, his usual, cocky smile replaced with a tiny frown. I hoped he was feeling as left out as people like him made us feel every day.

Now, however, he's not frowning. He's beaming, like we're all old chums.

*He looks stupid, I tell Katina. Like a cheerful little puppy.*

*Should we give him a doggy treat and pat him on his clueless little head?* Katina flutters her long dark lashes and grins a small bit chaotically. Goodness, I love her.

I contemplate her suggestion, making an excellent show of scanning Velspar from head to toe. I know he knows we're talking about him. But I want to act like a turd, so I sniff and mask my expression with scorn before flippantly signing, *No. He doesn't deserve any treats or head pats.*

Katina's silent laughter lights up her eyes, and I grin at her before smirking impishly at my puppy dog employer.

How silly of me to forget the man is not, and never will be, anything other than an arrogant cat.

His amber eyes flicker with warmth. "You're increasingly beautiful when you think you're being clever, darling."

Katina's laughter twists away. Her brown eyes widen, and she tugs on the sleeve of my blouse. *Beautiful? Since when does he say things like that to you?*

I pinch my lips and ignore Velspar. *He's switched his tactics in an effort to get under my skin. It's a new way of mocking me.*

Even though I say so, I don't know whether or not I entirely believe it. When he was drunk, he didn't seem to be mocking me. As his cold fingers reverently traced my bones and his breath ran across my forehead, he seemed to genuinely believe I was lovely enough to hold. Not *touch* in any way that might benefit him—just *hold*. That's a special sort of lovely, I think, at least according to what romance novels have taught me.

Katina's petite nose scrunches. *He seriously keeps getting more demented. Is this a Stockholm syndrome situation? Do you need help?*

Always. I sigh. Then I sign, *Yes.*

Velspar puffs a laugh, and we both glare at him like annoyed owls.

Excuse us, we're having a *private* conversation here. Don't interrupt with your stupid face noises.

He ignores my mental projection to say, "So, ladies, what truck should we take?"

"What?" I ask.

"For our outing today. We have to take one of the trucks. For some reason, my dining room table seems to have broken."

He literally broke it. Himself.

I snicker and ignore him as I tell Katina how he threw a fit and knocked a giant painting into the table. I leave out every detail concerning how it happened at the party I was dumb enough to go to even after I said it was stupid. It was a normal day. And he was throwing a normal tantrum. And he shattered his stupid table in a perfectly normal—for him—way.

To recap, it did not happen at a stupid party, and he wasn't—in his own strange way—protecting me.

My face heats a little at the thought as I finish my story, and Katina lifts her brows, signing, *What a moron.*

I nod affirmatively.

*Tell basket case he's not invited out with us and we aren't helping him replace his table.*

Velspar rests his hand on my shoulder before I can open my mouth. Teasing my hair, he says, "I will get you Taco Bell."

Katina blinks. *The boy is not serious.* She stares at me, then reels back. *You are not considering it.*

Free Taco Bell. It's as though a primitive switch has flipped in my brain.

I am so simple-minded. This is repulsive. I'm repulsing myself. I've been raised *strictly* to save money, so even though I am getting a living wage while working here, I could never justify spending extra at Taco Bell when I have free food in the kitchen and debt a mile high. More than that, if he's paying, I could get *fancy* Taco Bell. I wouldn't be confined to the bargain menu like every other time I have ever gotten Taco Bell with Mom.

Eyes narrowed, I glare at him, entirely forgetting that he's playing with my hair. The weight of his hand on my shoulder is much too intimate, but it's like it's not there. Or it's an extension of myself. Natural. Much too natural.

*I can buy you Taco Bell!* Katina's hands fly through the words, frantic and exasperated.

"Sp-sp-spending your m...m-money isn't justice."

Velspar curls a lock of my hair around his finger. “I’ll spoil you. You just have to ask.”

“You’ll carry our bags at the sst-stores we want to go to?”

“If you ask.”

I chew my lip. “And you’ll cha-chauffeur us everywhere?”

He pins my hair behind my ear. “Just. Ask.”

I face Katina. *That’s a good deal.*

*I do NOT trust him.*

*We can plot his downfall as we eat his Taco Bell.*

Katina sniffs, indignant. *Blood money.*

Velspar’s thumb traces my jaw, and that draws my attention to the fact he’s been mindlessly teasing this whole time.

I swat his hand away, keeping my focus on Katina. *It’s up to you, but it would be such a good opportunity to overpower him together. And get free Taco Bell.*

With a long sigh, Katina says, *Fine.*



Shockingly? *It is fine. Exceptionally fine.* The very first thing Velspar does after we get into his white Honda Ridgeline is pass Katina his phone so she can get us all in a group chat. Because she should have a way to communicate with him if she so deigns.

That’s the word he used, too.

*Deigns.*

He lets us sit in the back seat and—frankly—insult him as he drives us to the nearest Taco Bell.

*I can’t believe he still dresses like a member of the Adam’s family.*

Laughter bubbles out of me. *He should grow out his hair and braid it like Wednesday.*

*His hair isn’t entirely short. Maybe we should see how it looks braided.*

Force-braiding Velspar’s hair. I wonder if he’d let me. He absolutely let me put a sparkly pink barrette in it, in front of the whole school. I bet if I *asked*, he wouldn’t say a word against my braiding it now. My gaze shifts toward the rear view mirror to find his eyes locked on me while we wait at the red light in front of Taco Bell. His lips stretch in a disarming smile—as though there’s not even a drop of malice in his gaze.

My stomach dips toward my toes, and I remember he’s not a friend. There’s an ulterior motive at work here. He hates me. *I hate him.* And just a

few days ago he claimed he was going to make me love him in order to break me.

Whatever game we're playing, it isn't a *nice* one.

He slips the giant truck much too easily into a parking spot before jumping out and getting my door with a flourish. "My lady." He offers me a hand.

My eyes roll, and Katina taps my shoulder, pulling my attention away from him. Delighted to ignore him as he stands there, I face my ally in this mess.

*If he's going to commit to this nice guy act, has he apologized for being awful? I, for one, have not heard an apology.*

"Is anything amiss, my ladies?" Velspar asks, his regal tone tinged with impatience.

I wet my lips. "You've not a-pologized to us for being awful while we were growing up."

His brows rise, then he looks right past me. "My sincerest apologies, Lady Katina. I was quite entirely unbearable to be around in my youth, and I hope someday you might forgive me for ever making your childhood less than optimal."

Katina's scowl says everything it needs to even before she throws him another middle finger and scoots out the other door. Because I'm feeling bold, I toss him a middle finger as well and follow Katina.

She signs a few choice words that compare Velspar's general self to a particular part of masculine anatomy as we head across the street and step inside the restaurant. Several customers mill about, waiting on their orders, while a short line situates itself in front of us. A giddy smile paints across my face as the smell of beans and cheese overwhelms me.

I am going to get a Chicken Quesadilla. And a Freeze. And a Cheesy Gordita Crunch! And a Chalupa SUPREME! All the things Katina always got for me whenever the jerk paying for it now destroyed my food.

It is the *expensive* order. The nostalgic one.

I am unhinged.

And the universe knows it because in the very next instant a bulky man charges through the door and rams into me. An irritated sound erupts from the middle-age man as I stumble out of his way and into Velspar. Velspar's arm curls around my waist and draws me against his chest before he cuts a glare toward the man who has just skipped in front of us.

*Ugh, rude.* Katina's nose scrunches, her eyes flaming as she takes the guy in as though she might need to identify him in a lineup later. When her eyes roll toward me, she sneers. *Can you believe people these days?*

"Excuse me, sir?" Velspar's icy tone slices into my blood as his fingers dig protectively into my flesh. "We are in line."

The man tosses a look over his shoulder and catches Katina signing. He scoffs. "I'm in a hurry. I don't have time to wait for—" Flicking a meaty hand at Katina, he discards us entirely.

Velspar...smiles.

Every last one of my organs ceases function, and I lift my hands to his chest, stopping him before he can step forward—and commit a murder.

His crazed eyes slash down to me before his head tilts, a silent question of *why are you stopping me from murdering this piece of refuse, darling?* apparent on his face.

"It's n-not w-w-worth it," I whisper. "I'm f-f-fine."

The man grunts as he shuffles forward. "Great," he mutters, "one's deaf and one's retarded."

Velspar *snaps*. Setting me decidedly aside, he marches up to the man, grabs his shirt, and jerks him out of the line. The cashier gasps in the middle of repeating a customer's order. Conversation stunts all around, and I cower back as the attention of every person in the space shifts toward us.

"S-sir!" the cashier stammers before tossing a look into the kitchen. "I need a manager!"

"What the h—" the man starts, his words cut off as Velspar shoves him toward the entrance.

"Leave," Velspar comments breezily.

The manager plows out the side door and freezes when her eyes lock on Velspar. A momentary recognition takes place before tawny brown eyes slant toward the bulky man. Breathless, she puts her attention back on Velspar. "Mr. Pratt. Is there...anything I can do to help?"

Sweeping back his hair, Velspar says, "This gentleman ran into my companion, cut us in line, and started mumbling insults. I want him gone. His mere presence would ruin my lunch."

The woman wrings her hands and nods.

"You can't be serious!" the man sputters.

"I'm sorry, sir." The manager's voice trembles. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

“This is—” He curses, shouting a stream of creative expletives that succeed only in making Velspar appear bored on top of irritated.

At last, Velspar flexes his fingers and shares a chilling grimace. “Sir, either you leave immediately of your own accord, or I call the authorities and have you locked up for assault.” Wicked delight dances across Velspar’s expression when the man pales. “I can pull whatever strings I want in order to make sure you have the worst possible time. Would being incarcerated not put a damper on the hurry you seem to be in?”

“—rich brat!” The man throws up a hand and turns before plowing out of the restaurant and marching in front of a car that slams on its brakes. The man screaming at the driver settles itself beneath the resuming chatter of people inside, and Velspar...Velspar spares a moment to look distinctly *put out* by the fact the car didn’t have the decency to run the guy over.

But...I mean...that is Velspar for you.

“Mr. Pratt.” The manager’s voice hardly resonates above a whisper. “Is there anything else I can do to be of assistance? Would you like your meal today to be on the house? C-coupons?”

Velspar snorts and taps the woman’s shoulder amiably. “Don’t worry about it, Shelly. I think I can afford Taco Bell, at least this once.”

His feline smile stretches when Shelly’s eyes go large and startled. Her hand lifts to her name tag as though she forgot she was wearing it, then she nods, letting her gaze slip toward Katina and me. Hesitantly, she whispers, “Are there any...um...*accommodations* we can make for your companions?”

Velspar’s expression sharpens—a grin edged in knives. “I believe they know how to navigate this unaccommodating world on their own by now. But the sentiment is acceptable. I suppose.” He pats her shoulder again and dismisses her without another word, returning his attention to Katina and me.

We stare at him.

He lets a tiny, confused frown overwhelm his pretty face. “What?”

Katina’s gaze flicks toward the cashier, then she smacks him in the arm and points at the diminished line. It’s our turn. Lovely.

My nerves are shot, which means this isn’t going to be a pretty order, and after what just happened, the focus clinging to all of us makes my stomach hurt. I know I have to go first, because Velspar’s on a gentleman kick and Katina needs to type out her order in a notes app on her phone, so I approach the counter.

The cashier smiles too wide, casting a wary glance at Velspar when she



chirps, “Hi. What can I get you?”

“Hello.” I shift on my feet as I look up at the menu. I wanted... “I...I—um.” It occurs to me that I’ve never actually made the fancy order myself before.

Velspar’s presence moves near, his arm falling around my shoulder and dragging me into his firm side. His thumb strokes my pulse, his fingers aimlessly chilling my neck. “A Chicken Quesadilla. Two, actually.” His index finger taps my throat casually like he’s not perfectly positioned to—on a whim—strangle me. He’s strangled other kids when he’s gone off; I’ve seen it happen. I’ve seen him pin people to walls and snarl in their faces. But I’m not scared. Not even a little bit. He breathes a sigh. “Oh, what was that other thing, darling?” He looks down at me. “Some kind of crunch. And cheese.”

“Cheesy Gordita Crunch?” the cashier inquires, helpfully, as though she is serving the mob.

Velspar basically is the mob. He snaps his fingers. “That’s right. Cheesy Gordita Crunch. How many of those, darling?”

“Just th-e one, please.”

“Two, then,” Velspar notes.

Our cashier nods.

Velspar hums. “There was something else.”

Yes, there was something else. *In my thoughts*. How does he know what I want from Taco Bell as if we’ve been friends for years and have done this a million times? Don’t tell me he knows what Katina always got for me after he ruined the lunches I brought from home. I bite my lip. “Chalupa. S...S-Supreme.”

“Two Chicken Quesadillas, two Cheesy Gordita Crunches, and a Chalupa Supreme?”

“Make it two of those as well,” Velspar says. “Katina?”

Katina looks up from her phone and tosses her kinky curls. Stepping forward, she shows the woman her phone screen. After her order is in, Velspar gets us all Freezes—which I forgot I wanted and completely ticks off the mental boxes.

I don’t know what’s more troubling—the comfort I feel beneath his arm as he wheels me toward the counter in order to wait for our food or the fact I’m considering he has the ability to read minds. Logically, they shouldn’t be equally concerning, but I don’t actually believe he can read minds. Just mine.

“How’d you, how’d you know?” I whisper while Katina focuses her attention on her phone, fingers flying across the screen.

“Hm?” Velspar leans against the trashcans in front of the drink machine. “Know what?”

“M-m-my order?”

A fond smile curls the corner of his mouth. “Darling, I’m not sure you’re aware of this, but your devotion to Taco Bell is almost unnerving. Your usual order is two Cheesy Bean and Rice Burritos and two large waters. That’s what you’d sometimes bring for lunch. This is what you got whenever your lunch mysteriously disappeared, and the way it lit up your face was... endearing.”

My stomach sours, and I stiffen.

Right. Velspar knows his enemies.

The details he packs up in his mind are unnerving. Almost as unnerving as the fact *he* was the reason behind my lunch disappearing. If it weren’t for Katina ordering me food, I wouldn’t have eaten lunch during half my school years. It’s been so long since I had to remember those times. Katina is a gift, and I’ll never be able to thank her enough.

Velspar’s fingers close around my throat like a lethal necklace, and I lift my hand to his wrist, muttering, “Could you not?”

He squeezes gently. “What? Scared? You tensed. I’m checking your heart rate to make sure you’re okay.”

This is not a proper medical procedure.

His phone blips, and—leaving the hand around my neck where it is—he fishes the device out of his coat pocket.

Katina looks up at me, finds his fingers around my neck, and pours her attention back down into her phone for half a second.

Velspar’s phone buzzes in his hand, and he snaps his fingers off me, lifting his palm in mock surrender as he continues to let his weight press into my shoulder. “Well, excuse me,” he murmurs as he types something out. “Has anyone ever told you that you have a surprisingly dirty mouth, Kat?”

Katina shoots him a tight look and rolls her eyes.

Her phone chirps a moment before Velspar puts his back in his pocket.

Wait. Are they talking? Why isn’t my phone going off? I thought we were all in a group chat. What do they have to say to each other without me? “What are you two talking a-bout?” I ask, looking right at Katina.

She shakes her head, and my heart flinches.

When I look at Velspar, the pain in my chest heightens.

He flashes me a smug smile and lifts his brows. His eyes say everything I need to know. *As if I'd tell you.*

An awful thought occurs to me, turning my mouth dry. What if he's here to get between Katina and me? What if this is a plot to either isolate me or convince her he's not everything we both know he is? If he really is playing a game for my heart now, he needs to break down my support system and largest source of reason, doesn't he? He's smart enough to know that there's no way I'd begin to fall for anyone without talking to my best friend first.

This is bad.

He's setting the traps.

If I don't figure out a way to respond soon, I'll be surrounded and stranded—entirely at his mercy.

## CHAPTER 11

♥ At this point, you may have to reassess whether vengeance is duly deserved—or if there's something you missed.

Velspar is a hateful creature, but he's smart as a whip.

I am having a moment of feminine panic.

First, Taco Bell. Of course Taco Bell was little more than a primer, something to both set me on edge—because why in the world does he have my order memorized—and lull me into safety—because it's hard to focus on anything while diving into the artistic wonder that is a Cheesy Gordita Crunch. I mean, really, a crunchy taco pillowed in the center of a layer of cheese and a soft flatbread shell? It's the definition of bliss.

Second, Katina and I planned to try on lavish dresses I would never be able to afford and she doesn't really need. It's something we do for fun, gleefully riding off the fact she's a rich girl and has the flair for it. Never in a million years did I think I'd be the *I'll wear it out* girl. But that's what Velspar made me.

Velspar picked out a stunning green dress with a modest neckline, intricate embroidery around the bust, and a silky waterfall skirt. He told me to try it on, convincing me it was a good idea only because Katina was nodding like a bobble head and signing that it would look great on me. Before I left the fitting room, he had purchased it.

*Oh good. It fits. It would have been embarrassing if it didn't because it's yours. Here's the receipt.*

The amount on the receipt; which is tucked in a tote he also bought for me to keep my clothes, wallet, and phone in; gives me indigestion.

I am overdressed for the bookstore I am presently sitting in.

Which brings me to point three of why I am having a moment of sheer feminine panic.

Books.

I know I wanted to use Velspar's money to get Taco Bell. I know that my moral code could be swayed for a meal that ultimately cost less than fifteen dollars. I know I couldn't exactly undo the fact he bought me a dress since he did it while I was literally naked. I can accept his purchasing a drink and

cookie for me at the Barnes and Noble Starbucks.

But this?

This is a problem. This is a direct attack in an effort to steal my heart.

Velspar beams at me from above the stack of books he's just set on the table Katina and I are sitting at. He said he was *going to the restroom*. He's a filthy liar.

Katina's brows rise as she sips her iced salted caramel mocha. The three books she picked out look pitiful beside these new recruits.

They're all titles I looked at earlier.

They're all titles I desperately wanted.

I think he's got all of *Fantaseries* in there, the series by that fanfic author Katina has been wanting me to get and read and probably fall hopelessly in love with. From the brief paragraphs I skimmed earlier, I would die for Arella and I'm hoping Lucien has a brother. Just saying.

The panic halts, reels back, lets my brain return to the driver seat. Oh. Oh. Okay, he's bullying me. He's going to get the books I want then not let me read them or something. He'll keep them in his room and I'll get to occasionally see him reading them around the house as though YA fantasy romance is remotely his speed.

What a monster.

I glare.

Velspar's smile warms, *lovingly*. "Did I miss any that you wanted, darling?"

At a glance, yes, absolutely he did. I want half this store. But also—where's the punchline? Is he going to wait until later to swipe them away from me? Wait until I actually believe they're mine?

Looking quite proud of himself, he takes his seat and reaches for his coffee, black, like his soul—or so he'd told the pretty cashier in full deadpan when she'd attempted to flirt with him while we ordered a few minutes ago.

First, Taco Bell. Then, a dress. Now, *books*.

Or potentially books.

My tummy does an awful little flutter, and I crassly remind it that if this isn't going to blow up in my face, it is quite blatant bribery. I scowl. "What do you th-ink you're d-doing?"

"Torturing you in new and exciting ways," he answers, and it's so honest I twitch.

Katina taps the table. *Let him buy you books. You deserve books.*

*It's a trap.*

Her brow jumps. *You're right. It is. A trap to get you to hallucinate for hours. He knows you're too smart for drugs.*

I'm too smart to think he's actually going to get me a stack of books. That's a proposal. My romance-virgin heart wouldn't be able to handle it. He has to know that. Getting someone who likes to read a stack of books this tall is like forming an emotional blood bond. I am not eager to lose my soul.

I sip my iced chai and turn up my nose. "I d-don't want them."

Velspar's elation hardens. "Colette, what did I say about lying to me?"

"Why would I care about a-nything you've ever said?"

His eyes roll toward the ceiling, and he takes a long drag of his coffee before setting the cup down and standing. "I'm going to get you more books. You should sit here and think about how naughty you're being." Standing, he passes behind me and makes a point of combing his fingers through my hair before he mutters, "Little Miss Read the Entire School Library doesn't wants books. As if."

I hate that he knows I did that. I *hate* it. I fight a shudder as my lip curls, then I lift my hands. *This is worse than school. I don't know how to handle him when he's pretending to be—* My fingers stop because I don't know. I don't know what he's pretending to be. A friend? A lover? Just plain nice? He hates me, and everything he's ever done has been in order to hurt me.

I can't stand how this new *method* is working.

I can't get the night of the party out of my head. Whenever he acts sickly sweet or touches me, I'm transported back to the way he convinced an entire room of people he was going to finish what Reginald started then seemed genuinely pissed at himself for letting me end up in that situation.

If I close my eyes, I'm pinned beneath him against his carpet again.

His eyes flashing with hatred and want consume my nightmares. The way I gripped his hand—the way he griped mine right back.

He clutched me so tight, said he missed me, and cried.

With the way I bullied him the morning after, it's too easy to believe this cruel game we're playing is one I can also enjoy. If only I knew I could be cruel enough to follow through, I might be tempted to relax.

*Take advantage of him.* Katina's gaze rests on me, stable and reliable. *Let him buy you things and drive you where you want to go. See how far he'll go for this charade. If he's going to play dirty by being nice now, you should play dirty by letting him.*

I'm not a mean person, or I try so hard not to be. I know what it's like to hurt and be afraid. I don't want to be like *him*. But maybe it's too late to pretend I'm not at least a little bit terrible, too.

He's used to toying, and I'm used to being played.

But when I made him pale, when I affected him, when I got him to admit in panic how desperately he *wanted me* but he'd never *force me*, the thrill was immaterial. My monster has boundaries, and seeing the sliver of a moral compass on him while our roles were flipped changed my world.

He's dangerous.

Am I?

Could I follow through, when it counts?

Taking a deep breath, I fix my gaze on Katina. *What did you talk about in Taco Bell?*

Her attention slips off me, and she reaches for the straw in her drink, stirring up the ice.

Dread coats my skin at the idea they spoke about something *secret*.

Sighing at last, she grabs her phone, unlocks it, and slides it across the table to me.

My nerves settle as I look down.

Their chat wasn't long. Three entire messages.

**Katina:** What's going on here? Why are you so close with Colette all of a sudden? Why did you want to come with us today? What's your deal with hanging all over her and being a jerk on our behalf? Why Taco Bell?

Her second message is a colorful array of curses that break down into her demanding he gets his @!\$% hand off my throat. His response answers only one question and gives me absolutely no information.

**Velspar:** Colette likes Taco Bell. :)

I blink at the screen until it goes black, and I don't know what to make of the fact there's nothing conspiratorial going on. Every last thing I think I should expect dissolves into nothing, and I'm left without a clue.

Velspar returns with more books after I've given Katina her phone back, and I ignore him as I try to sort my thoughts.

*I hate him*, I sign at last.

Katina nods. *He is a royal prick. He should buy you this entire building after the grief he put us through.*

It's stupid how I think he would if I just *asked*.

He did say, *I'll do whatever you want, darling.*

Then he repeated it before we left today.

Katina's advice seems an awful lot like the advice in the book I've been reading. Identify the bully's limits, dissect his brain, push his buttons. Flip the script.

Has Velspar denied me anything I've asked for? Right down to kneeling in broken glass and begging, he's done everything I've asked without complaint.

*I'm going to do it*, I tell her.

She cocks her head.

*I'm going to see how far he'll go.*

A vicious grin splays across Katina's brown cheeks. *Crush him into dust.*



The chances of my being an idiot are, remarkably, high. Even if that's not what my GPA would suggest. I ranked at the top of my class from the moment I entered school. As poor as Mom and I are, I grew up listening to the importance of getting good grades. Without many friends, all my time went into helping out around the house and studying.

On paper, I am *smart*. Smart enough that I passed nearly all my high school classes with *over* a hundred percent. Because. Extra credit.

Paper is a decently poor basis for real life.

My stomach hurts.

I don't know what I'm doing or what's wrong with me or why there's a tiny bundle of nerves shooting electric pulses down into my toes.

This doesn't excite me. It doesn't. Not at all. Not even... Not even completely.

I'm scared. And stupid. Not excited. But we have been over this.

Fingers trembling, I lift my hand and knock on Velspar's bedroom door, then I curl my arms around my pillow and hold it tight to my chest.

My pj's are modest. Velspar has *boundaries*.

Obviously, I don't. But that's an issue for when I can afford a therapist.

I jump when Velspar's door swings open, and *oh*.

I'm staring at bare chest.

Breath leaves me as I take in the smooth, pale planes of his muscular body. Unlike his face, his body doesn't carry that same severe, otherworldly sharpness. His porcelain skin is toned without any exaggerated definition. He's...beautiful.

And apparently when he shows up to breakfast in his pajamas, the shirt is



a courtesy to me because it looks like this is how he rolls out of bed. I have no idea how to feel about that slice of decency. None at all. Wouldn't he want to be a jerk and make me ogle his prettiness? Isn't being arrogant and vain a big part of his character?

Do I know anything about Velspar Pratt? *Truly?* Or have I just been guessing this entire time?

Finally, I drag my gaze up to his face, expecting a smirk since I've been staring for longer than is morally acceptable. He's not even smiling.

Brows knit, Velspar takes me in and blinks. "Colette?" He scans me, and there's no vanity or arrogance. Not even a little. He rubs one eye and stifles a yawn, like I jerked him awake when he was almost lost to the world. "Is everything okay?" he murmurs. The undertone of concern spears me.

"M...Can I s-sleep with you?"

Every last inch of him freezes; I don't think his bodily functions are active anymore. He's not breathing. His heart probably isn't beating. He croaks, "Pardon?"

I hug my pillow. "Can I sleep with you?" I take a step closer and gather courage around myself like a piece of flatbread around a bed of melted cheese. "I haven't been able to get you out of, out of my head s...s-since the night of the party, and today...today was incredible."

His breathing jump starts with a tiny, choked intake. His mouth opens and closes, and he looks both ways down the hall. "D..." He clears his throat. "Darling, you must tell me what actually happened when I was plastered."

I inch forward, pushing him back into his dimly-lit room. "You held me. And bit m-my neck. And begged, begged me to torture you. S...so I am. You th-ink it's fun to play with m-my feelings? I'm going to play with yours."

"You let me hold you?" The words escape him in a rush of breath. "Did I not give you a choice?"

I roll my eyes. "I had a choice. I fell a-sleep in your arms. You told, you told me you wouldn't touch or kiss anyone else a-gain."

His eyes flash with panic, and his entire body flinches when I kick the door shut behind me. His chest rises and falls at an accelerated tempo. "Was that your way of volunteering?"

I let a humorless laugh free. "Funny. Th-at's what you s...s-said the first time."

"Funny," he echos, wetting his lips. "Darling, playing like this isn't a good idea."

“Because you want m-me? D-d-desperately?”

His hand clenches into a fist at his side, and he stops retreating. Tone biting, he snarls, “I never would have expected you to sink this low.”

I match his venom. “You bought me twenty-th-ree books, Vel. Clearly you’re s-s-serious. I m...m-might as well be.”

His eyes narrow. “I fail to see where buying you books threatened either of us. You have no idea what I want to do.”

Splaying my fingers, I flatten my palm against my chest. “It was a d-d-direct attack on m-my heart. Are you telling me you’re going to hurt, going to hurt me?”

He grits, “Darling, if you climb in my bed...” He scrubs the back of his hand across his mouth. Hatred mingles with heat in his eyes as he takes me in, one inch at a time. He whispers a curse. “What do you want me to say? How should I appease your cruelty tonight, Colette? I was wrong. I’m a monster. How dare I buy you something I know you want. You should really have me flogged.”

“Tell m-me th-at you’ll give up.”

“On?” he asks.

“Th-is ssst-upid game. I d-don’t want you coming after my heart or m-m-my love. I just want to clean your sst-upid house.”

A wry, violent smirk thins his lips. “Oh?” he purrs. “You’re already so scared that you’ll fall in love with me? It’s been days, *Colette*. Mere *days*. Am I that attractive?”

My betraying gaze falls across his chest just long enough for him to notice and let his smirk stretch.

He steps into me, wrestling my pillow away and grabbing my chin after thrusting the bundle across the room. “I *am*. Well, darling, if you were here on a personal desire, you should have said so. I have no qualms obliging you if this is more than cheap seduction.” His thumb swipes across my lip, and the challenge is unmistakable.

I am not going to back down this time. Not until either he ends this—or I win. “You d-d-disgust me,” I whisper. “How badly d-do you want m...me?”

He snakes his free arm around my waist and drags my body into his. “My life is a desert, and you are the first sight of water I have ever seen.”

I shudder, losing my breath. “I hate you.”

“Say it again,” he whispers, nearing my mouth.

Instead, I blurt, “I’ve never been kissed.”

He stops inching forward as his hold solidifies. “No?” he rasps. “Never once?”

I stay silent.

“Never. Been. Kissed.” He drops my chin in favor of grabbing my hand and pressing it to the bare skin of his side. “Yet you’re petitioning a spot in my bed?”

My hand slips against his skin, traveling up his back toward the definition of his wing bone. “Vel...”

He curses, melting into my arms. “*Colette.*”

My head’s foggy, messy, overcome by a sick headiness I’ve never felt before. Excitement electrifies my nerve endings. With no small amount of trepidation I realize *I want this*. I want Velspar insatiable for me. I want his violent eyes and cold hands and whatever his dangerous kisses taste like.

I want him to be *mine*. I want to make him pay for everything with his soul.

Clutching him, I dig my short nails into his back, feel him tremble and go weak as I eliminate the space between our bodies. The only place left for us to meet is our lips.

“Say I can kiss you,” he exhales, every word rough. “I’ll beg if you like. I’ll grovel on my knees and kiss your feet if that’s what it takes. Please, Colette.” He looks *tortured*. “*Please.*”

He’s not even drunk. Unless I’m stronger than liquor.

I drag my nails up to the base of his neck and tangle my fingers in his silky hair. Tipping my head back, I let my lips graze his—just a brush. His cinnamon breath fills me when I inhale; he burns me from the inside out.

It would be so easy to kiss him.

But I can’t stand how much I want to.

After making my life miserable, he doesn’t get to make me want him now. He has had *everything*. He doesn’t get to have me, too.

Shaking, he whispers a frail, “*Please,*” against my mouth.

“Pathetic.”

He jolts like I’ve stabbed him, but he doesn’t move even an inch away.

His stuttering exhales fill my body, and I soak them in as I pull his hair, sliding my cheek against his in order to whisper in his ear. “I don’t want you,” I lie, eerily calm. Being near him, like before, is too natural. Touching him is familiar somehow, like I know him better than anyone. Like his body is already mine to claim. And isn’t that terrifying?

Isn't that *wrong*?

"You remind me of everything that has ever hurt me. I can barely bear being in the same room as you. I hate you, but only because I have to deal with you. When this ends and I'm done using you for your money, I'll forget you ever existed, and I'll be glad to do it—relieved even. I'll get out of this city entirely, and we'll never see each other again. You'll go back to missing me... And I'll go back to never having to remember you exist."

Water hits my shoulder, and I pull back to find Velspar's lips parted and tears running down his cheeks. While I was talking, he went slack, his arms releasing me to hang limp at his sides.

A horrid sensation of unease ripples through my heart, and I lose my grasp and my nerve. I jerk away from him as though his cold skin could burn. "I'm sorry." The words leave me before I realize.

Velspar wipes his cheeks and covers his eyes, muttering hoarsely, "Only you would break me and apologize for it." His fist clenches. "Get out of my sight, Colette. I can't..." His head shakes, and he drops his hand to look at me with glistening eyes. "I can't with you. I deserve nothing less. But..." He exhales a curse and closes his eyes. "...it hurts."

I did it.

I hurt him.

I destroyed him.

I broke him down to tears.

*How in the world did he enjoy doing this to me?*

I guess this is my answer. *No*. I am not cruel enough to follow through and delight in causing pain like this. I will never be *that* cruel. I will never match *him*.

With my stomach and heart firmly in opposing locations, I turn on my heel, throw open the door, and run.

## CHAPTER 12

♥ Whatever you do, don't kiss...well crap.

~~~~

I couldn't sleep last night. Whenever I drifted off, Velspar was there to torment me in the darkness, and not in the way he usually is. Usually when I dream about Velspar, he's a monstrous creature ready to devour or hurt me.

Last night, he was devouring me in a different way. All throughout the restless moonlit hours, he kissed me as though I had chosen to accept his pleas instead of hurting him. The vague, dreamlike distance between us left me shivering every time I woke with a start.

Finally unable to bear the pattern anymore, I force myself out of bed at six, put on some work clothes, and march up the stairs without a singular plan.

I am not a monster who makes people cry. I am not *him*. I have to fix this—I do not know how to.

His door is open when I reach it, exactly the way I left it last night after I ran, and my stomach clenches, turning over with the understanding *he* is close.

Setting my fingers against the wood, I push his door open a slight inch further and flutter when the shape of him becomes clear beneath the ebony coverlet on his bed. In the pitch darkness of the room, he draws all the light from the hall. My heart pounds, and I can't stop myself from staring.

He's hugging my pillow.

He's buried against my pillow like a child desperate for comfort.

Something inside me aches, and I force myself to his bedside.

Wake him. Apologize. Explain myself—somehow.

I was unnecessarily cruel, like him, but I'm *not* like him or any of the others who made my childhood terrible. I can't heartlessly make someone cry and not regret it. He's awful. Dreadful. Worse than I thought since he always, *always* gloated whenever he managed to break me down like I broke him down last night.

That isn't me.

That isn't me at all.

I will make sure he knows I'm really sorry. I will make sure he knows that while he definitely sucks...he...

My thoughts dry up, and I don't know what I can offer him by means of comfort. He sucks. He's terrible. I don't trust his kindness for a moment. I'm not even sure I trust his tears. What I'm doing right now has absolutely nothing to do with him. It has everything to do with the fact I feel awful.

I was lying last night, but he doesn't deserve anything close to the comfort my guilt is trying to get me to give him. He doesn't deserve the truth of knowing my idiotic body craves him like it's always known him.

I take a slight step back. If I'm here for selfish reasons and I don't even have anything good to say, I shouldn't be here.

The moment I come to that conclusion, Velspar's eyes squint open, and my heart lodges itself in my throat.

Slowly, he unravels his arm from beneath his covers and around my pillow, then he grabs me.

My world spins, and I'm in his bed, pinned beneath the cage of his body, his lips on mine in an invasive kiss.

Breath ceases. Thought chokes.

A small sound escapes from the back of my throat, and I think it might be my heart screaming for purchase.

"Colette," he mumbles, hardly awake as he angles his mouth and dips for my lips again. He moves with tender precision as he gathers my hands, stretches my arms above my head, locks my wrists together, and renders me immobile. All his weight settles into my wrists as he pinches my chin and guides me.

Kissing him is like losing every part of myself. My mind swirls, and I'm dreaming, but he's real, and he's actually warm for once, and I don't know how to breathe. I gasp for air, and he bites, tugs, abandons my mouth so I can pant as he travels up the length of my jaw to nip at my ear.

He likes teeth. Of course he likes teeth.

The big problem right now is the fact I think *I* like teeth.

"Vel," I breathe his name, and his grip around my wrists tightens.

He drags his attention back over me. The dark wild of his hair splays across his forehead above his molten eyes. "Do your worst," he murmurs, his voice sleep-ridden and rough. He slips his fingers through the inky strands of his hair and offers me a cruel smile. "No matter what you say, we both know how this ends."

A surge of self-preservation strikes me through the chest, and I croak, “How?”

His eyes spark as he bares his teeth in a smirk. The expression is rife with pain, but that doesn’t stop it from being hopelessly seductive. “Feigning that adorable innocence?” he murmurs, nipping my bottom lip again. “We’ve been at this all night, darling muse of my nightmares.” His words form against my mouth. “Tear me apart.”

His free hand slips beneath the hem of my shirt, and I squeak. “Vel, no. Vel—st-st-st-st—” Panic hits me hard and cold, dousing everything in a violent chill. I fight, helplessly writhing beneath him.

Velspar freezes, and his brows knit as his fingers plant flat against my stomach. His thumb swipes over my bellybutton, and I whimper. Horrible realization filters into him, waking the mist, and he swipes again, tracing the shape. A wobbling smile shakes on his mouth as he whispers, “Co...lette?”

I can only whimper again.

He rips himself off me, freeing my arms as he lunges from the bed. The sheets tangled around his legs grip and hold tight, sending him tumbling toward the floor with a muted yell. He hits the carpet with a painful *thump*, and I wince as I drag my flushed body up to look down at him.

One hand to his head, he points a trembling finger at me. “W-why aren’t you a dream?”

“Why are you dr-dr-dreaming about me?”

A splash of red cuts across his cheeks, and his jaw locks. Malice laces his expression as he scowls. “Why are you in my bed?”

“I came to a-pologize. For last night. And you threw m-me here.” Absently, my hand lifts to my lips. They’re sore, swollen. Bee-stung.

Goodness. What *was* that? What just happened?

I will never be the same.

Velspar sneers. “Ah. Yes. *Last night*. You might as well apologize for the whole night. You’ve kept me up in fits.”

I scowl. “That d-doesn’t s...s-seem all th-at bad.”

Lifting his chin, he bends one leg to rest beneath his elbow. “No? I suppose that’s because in reality you, my darling, are incapable of reaching into my chest and tearing out my still-beating heart with your bare hands.” His lip curls as he stares, disgusted. “Before crushing it in front of me as I black out on top of you.”

I shudder, nauseous, and he barks a laugh before burying his face in his

hands and falling back onto the carpet with a yell.

Curses tumble from his lips as his fingers slide up into his hair and grip. “So! You came to apologize, and I violated you instead. Great! Wonderful! My *favorite!*” He splays out, arms stretched and pale against the black carpet. “Kill me again, Colette. I’ll wait for you to select the sharpest words—you’ve always been so good with them.”

I clutch my fists and lean over the bed to look down at him. “Th-at’s low for you.”

“Low for me? I wasn’t aware I had a *low.*”

“You d-d-don’t ever make fun of m-my ssst-utter.”

His brows shoot up, and his seething gaze fixes on me. “Darling, I’m not making fun of your stutter. I’m being quite sincere. We took a creative writing class together and Composition 101. By some sadistic means, our teacher spoke with each of us loud enough for the whole of the class to hear. I was always called first, because obviously, and right after I got to hear how horrid my writing was, she’d call on you and say something dreadful like *you missed a comma here, precious, the rest had me in tears.*”

I scoff. “Hardly.”

“No, no. Please. Do tell me where I’m wrong. By the end of the semester, she had asked you to look over the first chapters of a book she was writing. You were correcting *her* grammar and peeling apart *her* plot like you’d written the thing yourself. Face it, Colette, you were brilliant. You *are* brilliant. Do you have any idea how infuriating it is to see you after these past few years and find you rotting away all that innate talent of yours?” He clenches a fist and hits the ground. “You are effortlessly better than me when every odd has been against you, and instead of continuing to bull your way through to the top you deserve, I discover you floundering at the bottom. You should be running companies and writing lyrics, making something out of that hauntingly beautiful voice of yours, cursing anyone who thinks a damned stutter matters in the least. Tell them to f-f-f-f-f-f—” He flails a hand, finally finishing the swear. “—off!”

A delirious laugh pours out of him, and he claps his hands to his face again, whispering the curse to himself then exhaling, “I hate you.”

My heart shudders, and I can hardly sew my thoughts together. How much does he know about me? How many details did I think no one noticed—that he did? “S...so you hate, you hate me because you’re jealous and s-s-selfish and have to be the best? You can’t st-st-stand sh-sharing the sp-

spotlight? That's why you m-made my life m-m-m-miserable?"

Velspar sighs, like I'm incredibly stupid, even though he just called me brilliant. "There are a thousand reasons I hate you, darling. And I compile more each day." He scrawls his finger through the air. "*Took Colette's first kiss*, reason one thousand and one. That's going to keep me up for the rest of my life. Sleep was interesting while it lasted. A bit gory for my usual tastes. But c'est la vie."

I huff. "You are s-so dr-dramatic."

"Quite true. It's how I keep myself from breaking down in tears. When I'm not dramatic, when I'm sincere, when I'm honest, you see the cracks in my armor and exploit them, and that's dangerous for both of us. Apparently. Just so you know, if you try to sue me for this, it won't end well. I'll say you came into my room and tried to assault me, and that will be the truth everyone believes. I own the cops, judge, jury, and media. So good luck."

My eyes roll, and I'm done with this. My head's a mess. My body's hot. I wrestle the blankets, knocking my pillow out of bed as I try to escape the tangle he got me in. Velspar glances sidelong at my pillow when it falls beside him, then his eyes go huge—because clearly his bed is evil and has a habit of evicting people in the worst ways possible.

"*Colette!*" he chokes a second before my body hits his and strangles the air from his lungs. He hisses a curse as I scramble, planting my hands on his bare chest.

"S-s-s-sorry!"

Wincing, he mutters, "I was joking about the murder, but I specifically said to use your *words*, not crush the life from my body." His hands settle at my thighs—which are straddling him and half his bedding. Words seem fairly impossible.

He's still warm.

I can taste his kiss.

He's so solid. Real. *Mine*.

I don't know why. I don't know why. I don't know why.

"I lied," I exhale.

His grip on my thighs flinches. "Pardon?"

"Last night, I lied."

His eyes narrow.

I can't stop myself. Everything tumbles out in a rush, words slurred, like I'm drunk or terrified or both or just...just consumed by *him*. Worse, I think I

always have been. Worst, I don't know *why*. "I lied because I was scared of what you were doing to me when I'd come to get back at you for toying with me all day and pretending to be *nice*. I lied because I didn't want to admit how much I wanted you. I hate it. It's gross. You're awful. You really are awful, and I shouldn't want to be near you, but I've known you forever, and out of everyone in this world no one makes me feel the way you do. You, you're terrible, but in all the wrong ways. I can't make sense of it. I can't make sense of you. And I keep feeling like you're going to trick me and hurt me, because that's all I know to expect from you, but you've never ever done anything I've expected. You're a monster, a creature, something entirely unknown, and I-I..." I'm shaking. Fists pressed against his chest, I'm shaking. "I hate you."

His hand moves up the entire length of my body before locking around my neck and forcing my mouth down on his.

I shudder, try to fight it, but I can't.

I melt into his lips, splaying my hands against his chest then up into his hair. He groans when I dig my fingers into his skull and grip my fists full of the strands.

The kiss is hungry, starving, and when he bites, I nip back.

He tumbles me over in the disarray of his bedding, and I protest, locking my legs around his hips.

He curses into my mouth. "Colette, behave," he chides, unlocking one of my hands from his hair and twining our fingers as he holds me down. I know I should assume the action is a power thing—he likes to pin and control—but for some reason I think he just wants to hold my hand, and that's stupidly innocent.

Pulling his mouth from mine, he looks down at me and squeezes my hand. I squeeze his back, panting for breath and logic. I don't know what to make of anything right now. He watches the rise and fall of my chest a moment before touching a kiss just above the collar of my t-shirt.

"Vel..."

"Hm?" He traces his kiss to the crook of my neck and nibbles.

"What...are we? This...this isn't..."

He licks. "This isn't what? At least for me, this is everything."

I quiver, and my eyes fall closed. "This isn't fair. You...you were..." Tears burn, but I keep them at bay. "You don't get to have everything you want."

“You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Sh-shut up.”

He kisses behind my ear. I dig my heels into his back, and a strangled noise escapes him. “*Colette*...if you do that...”

“Shut up,” I tell him again. “I can d-do whatever I want.”

My skin muffles his voice, but he agrees. “Mm.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I hiss, clutching him closer. “If it weren’t for Katina, I would have gone hungry. You d-destroyed my things when I could barely afford them. I existed among insults that not even my favorite teachers dared to curb, *knowing* you championed them. It was awful.” I suck in a breath when he starts to suckle the tender skin of my throat. A violent shiver rocks into me. “You tortured me. You think you deserve to want me?”

His hot breath fans against my throat. “I deserve to want you just as much as anyone else. What I do not deserve is to have you, but, my darling, you are far kinder than I am.” He kisses my cheek, my temple. “Or far crueler.” His nose skims across the bridge of mine. “Endlessly, you could take me to the precipice and shove me off the cliff. I’d pluck my broken bones from the wreckage and follow you like a lamb to the slaughter no matter what. Anything to stay with you. Anything at all, *Colette*.”

That doesn’t sound anything like *hate*. This doesn’t feel anything like hate. But what would I know?

I leverage against him and tumble him onto his back. Dazed, he looks up at me from the puddle of his bedding, cups his free hand to my cheek, and combs his fingers through my short hair.

I kiss him, falling easily into the rhythm of his mouth like the song of his lips is the one my heart has always been singing. I pull away abruptly. “This will be ugly. We’re going to hurt each other. I *want* to hurt you.”

“You don’t. You can’t stand hurting people. For the longest time, you couldn’t even stand hating me. It drove me mad to find indifference in you every morning, no matter what had happened the day before. Just once I wanted to look at you and see that maybe you remembered my name, but you made me start fresh every single day.” A fond smile traces his lips, and his eyes sparkle like gold in firelight. “Until the tampons.”

I reel back. “What?”

“Sophomore year in high school. You taped tampons to my locker in the shape of a middle finger. We spent the rest of that year and the next two at war. They were the best years of my life. You saw me. I finally got you to see

me.”

“How could I not see you? You saved me,” I choke out, surprising myself. Stiffening on top of him, I bite my lip to keep from saying how it was the scariest moment of my life, how I thought I was going to die, how seeing him was a *relief*.

“I spent twelve years *saving you*, Colette. That was just the first time it happened in front of you.”

I search his eyes and shake my head. “No. You, you made people...”

“I fight my own battles. Whatever I did to you, *I* did it. Everything else I had nothing to do with.”

My head continues to shake. “No, your influen—”

He exhales a scoff, linking his free hand beneath his head in what is a hopelessly and casually seductive position. “Darling, I told everyone, countless times, that you were *mine*. The idiots acted on their own in efforts to impress me, and nobody learned even when I violently told them otherwise. I never intended for you to get swept up in the politics or the power play even though I selfishly refused to leave you alone myself. You were an easy target anyway, so I convinced myself nothing would change even if I pretended to lose interest.”

I swallow. “My food. You... Right in front of me.”

His lashes flutter indignantly as his eyes roll. “Excuse me. It pissed me off whenever I saw you eating garbage. So I destroyed it.”

“It was all I had!” I dig my fingers into his skin.

“Yeah? That’s why I DoorDashed you Taco Bell, dingdong. Why do you think our orders are the same?”

My body goes ice cold.

He regards me coolly. “And every time you found *fresh* fruit in your locker from the honestly way too overprice cafeteria? I liked to sneak you the puddings, too. Do you have any idea how cute you were when you found them? Holy heck...”

My heart pounds. “You...you’re lying. Katina... I always s-s-said thank you, and s...she never...”

“I don’t lie to you.” His thumb skates across mine as his gaze moves from my eyes to my lips. “Not to you.”

“But...”

“I’m sure we were both looking out for you at different times. Unfortunately, I didn’t always know everything.”

“You hate me,” I breathe.

He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses. “And that is no reason for you to be injured or go hungry. I do have a moral compass, Colette. It’s just royally screwed up.”

The film over my past shatters into thousands of pieces, and I dissect our history, one memory at a time. The fragments are sharp enough to cut my fingers, but Velspar isn’t lying. There’s not a single time *he* did something that *he* didn’t take care of. He threw money at me when people ruined my things. He played the twisted superior, but *he was taking care of me.*

In the cruelest ways possible. Because he’s still a monster.

I hit him. I pound my hand against his chest, then I wrestle my other hand free. Gripping both in his hair, I shake him. “What is *wrong* with you!”

He grabs my wrists. “Loads.”

“You—” I cover his mouth with mine, and the action is too comfortable. This person, Velspar, is my person. I can do whatever I want to him. He won’t stop me. He won’t mock me. He’s at my mercy, and I own him. I whimper into his mouth as tears careen down my cheeks. “You’re the worst.”

“Thank you,” he answers, breathless.

“A-pologize to me. For everything.”

“Never.”

I fight his hold on my wrists, but he doesn’t let me free. Sitting up, he pins my hands to the side of his bed before he’s kissing me some more. His fingers stroke my palms as he grips me tighter and kisses me deeper. He doesn’t stop until I’m gasping heavy breaths through my mouth.

He crosses his legs so I’m sitting in the cradle, then he kisses my nose. “You want me.”

I turn my face away from him.

“Your silence is the best truth you can give.”

I sneer. “You’re beautiful. Who wouldn’t want you?”

He kisses the spot where my jaw meets my throat. “You’d be surprised.”

“Idiots,” I hiss.

He laughs against my skin, making me shiver. “You never cease to amaze me, Colette.” He kisses again, and again. “Say my name? Please?”

“Vel.”

“All of it?”

“Velspar.”

He curses, resting his forehead against me. “Can I keep you?”

I don't know. I don't know what to think right now. My lifelong nemesis is everything and nothing like what I've grown to know. I have so many emotions to sort through. And I can't convince myself that this is kind. Whatever this is, there's violence beneath the surface of our skin. With every kiss comes a nip. With every sweet word comes the memory of a cruel one. We are malice-driven, getting high off the lust for control and consumption.

"We'll see," I murmur, fighting the constraints of his hands in a futile effort to get closer. "The second you touch someone else, I'll disappear. So you better be serious about whatever this is." I search his eyes. "Okay? I'm not sharing my villain."

Liquid amber eyes flashing, he grins. "Possessive princess. You really were volunteering."

"Shut up."

He teases his mouth against mine, refusing to kiss me again. "I would, but I think you like my voice as much as I like yours."

"Do not." My chest trembles with an exhale. "You're obsessed with me."

"A little bit, yeah," he mutters, painting his tongue against my swollen bottom lip. "It's been a chronic affliction for years. Have I said you sicken me yet? Because you do, Colette. You really *do*."

CHAPTER 13

♥ In real life, no one has the luxury of being two-dimensional. ~~~

After untangling ourselves from each other, I leave Velspar's room so he can get dressed. While he's putting a shirt on, I start breakfast. For some reason, in my head, he is both more and less bearable than he was before, um, *this morning*.

In dark glory, he appears, silent as usual without his boots, and my face heats at the sight of him lingering beneath the arch, watching me.

What have we done?

What was I thinking?

I shove the scrambled eggs around in the frying pan and try to ignore him looking at me. It's almost impossible.

The bar counter stool slides against the tile floor, and my breaths refuse to even out at the realization he's moved closer.

"I think I'm supposed to be making you breakfast," he says suddenly.

I choke on my own saliva. "Huh, what?"

He's smirking when I glance back at his stupid handsome face. "Those are the rules. The guy makes breakfast for the girl after she spends the night with him."

My heart jumps out of my chest, hammering into the cage of my ribs, beating its way toward him. I tell it to stop being *idiotic*. "I-I-we d-d-didn't!"

His infuriating smile stretches further. "Didn't we? You haunted my entire evening, then you appeared in the flesh, and, well." He washes his gaze down the length of me. "This morning is going to haunt me for the rest of my life."

I pull the frying pan off the heat and butter the toast and get orange juice and sausage—I've just decided we should have some sausage links. I should have started those first.

"You're so cute when you're flustered."

I slam the freezer shut and wave the package at him. "Be nice!"

"You know better than most I'm not nice." He threads his fingers together beneath his chin, all innocent glee in those evil eyes of his.

“I have a lot on, a lot on my m-m-mind.”

“Me, mostly.”

It takes significant willpower to keep from throwing frozen sausages at him. Grabbing a knife, I narrow my gaze, rip open the package, and stab through one frozen chunk.

Velspar’s smile wavers the smallest bit as I turn back to the stove, get another frying pan, and slice frozen chunks of sausage into it. His breathless curse hits my ears as I’m fishing some cheese out of the fridge to mix into the sausage and eggs. “You’re so beautiful.”

“I am th-is close to ssst-stabbing you, Velssp-spar.”

“Oh, I know. It’s unequivocally hot.”

A shiver races down my spine, and I screw my mouth shut as I finish making this horribly out-of-order breakfast. Eggs should have been made last, not first, the toast is cold, only the sausage came out decent, but Velspar doesn’t complain at all. He’s not complained about any of my food, even when I’ve knowingly made dishes with ingredients he doesn’t like. Unlike in school when he’d leave little piles of the offending vegetables, here he’s gritted his teeth and eaten everything.

“You’re a m-m-monster,” I say as I settle in beside him with my plate.

He crunches his toast, smiling dreadfully.

This is the happiest I’ve ever seen him.

I don’t know what to do with myself, so I pile some rubbery eggs onto my bread and eat as though I can’t feel his every movement beside me. This is surreal. I didn’t have to make breakfast. He wouldn’t have cared if I hadn’t. Maybe he actually would have made it himself or ordered something if he didn’t want to. Right now, if I feel like it, I could take his toast right out of his hand and begin eating it. I could nudge him in the arm and kiss him when he looks my way, or I could smack him in the back of the head and frown like he’s done something wrong just from sitting beside me too merrily.

He’d let me.

He’d let me do whatever I want.

I smile.

“Too pretty,” Velspar mutters into his food, and I bump his shoulder.

“You d-deserve to be tormented by m...my prettiness.”

“You’re a dear little angel. What are you doing trying to torment people?”

He grins.

I roll my eyes. “If I’m an a-ngel, what would that m-make you?”

His grin turns impish, and he starts leaning toward me before the doorbell rings in rapid succession.

I startle as a fist pounds, the thundering sound reverberating throughout the mansion.

“*Helooooo*,” Sean’s familiar voice calls. “Velspar! Velspar Pratt!”

Cringing, I cast a look at Velspar, who sighs and mutters, “I never should have given them my gate code,” before yelling, “No one’s home!”

Leslie laughs, and my stomach knots. She’s here, too? *Is Reginald?*

The pounding continues. “Open up. It’s the police!” Sean claims.

Velspar closes his eyes and stands. When he passes me, his fingers comb through my hair, and I soak a little too much comfort in from that gesture. Or I try to. Even though I’ve lost my appetite, I force myself to keep eating and maintain steady breaths.

“*What?*” Leslie shrieks, and it’s the first word I actually hear since Velspar left.

Sean’s laughter drifts toward me, and I crunch into my toast, refusing to look even when he’s *right there behind me*. “Wow. Seriously?” Sean backhands Velspar in the chest out of the corner of my eye. “Good for you. Dream come true, right?”

Leslie scoffs. “More like *nightmare*. I hoped your last party was an alcohol-induced fever dream, Velspar.”

“I told you it wasn’t,” Sean notes. “I have the texts to prove it.”

Leslie’s hip cocks as she arranges a Gucci purse on her shoulder, the thin silver chain highlighting her bright red blouse flawlessly. “I had so hoped it was. All things considered.” She shoots Velspar a nasty glare that suggests she remembers he smacked her.

His returning grin shows he regrets nothing, and probably never has. If only that were reassuring.

“What in the world is she doing here?” Sean strides in front of me and plants his hands on the counter by the sink. His green eyes flicker and dance with lighthearted amusement, and I remind myself that he was never one of the ones who bruised me—at least. None of Velspar’s closest did—until Bryan. And if I remember correctly, Bryan was evicted from his place beside Velspar after he had.

Interesting.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been laying her since last Saturday?” Sean says.

Disgust curls in Leslie’s voice. “As *if* Velspar would enjoy humoring the

riffraff like *that*.”

Sean’s eyes light and flick off me. “Does she still do that th-th-thing? You know? My memory of the party is absolute crap. Real shame.”

Velspar’s sigh fills every crevice in the room. “It is a shame. Considering you were the jerk with enough common sense to alert me of the situation, I had hoped to have more than your drunken texts and missed calls along with a handful of blurry images of your thumb to give me clues as to what happened that night. My only sober source has been...less than reliable.” His gaze catches mine, and my heart responds to it like I’ve just found home.

“I didn’t get an answer.” Sean pokes me in the head. “Talk.”

Velspar laughs and sidles up behind me, grabbing Sean’s hand and twisting his wrist until he caves against the counter. “Do that again, and I’ll break your—” He curses. “—hand.”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, okay, ow. Uncle. Help.”

Velspar releases him.

Leslie’s lip curls as she sits beside me and nudges the remains of Velspar’s food around with his fork. She stabs a sausage, lifting it to her nose. “This isn’t low fat, is it?”

“I hope not,” Sean notes, stretching out his wrist before grabbing a piece of sausage and popping it in his mouth. “Mm, good.”

“I thought you were trying vegan,” Velspar mentions as his arms coil around my shoulders.

I’ve officially stepped out of surreal and entered a complete twilight zone.

Leslie hums, distracted. “Vegan is hard. I was mostly doing raw on that diet, and it just made me...really hungry.”

“You know, bread and pasta and potatoes happen to not include animal product.” Sean pushes himself up onto the counter. “If you let yourself have more than kale smoothies, I’m sure vegan wouldn’t be *that* hard. I’ll do it with you. Let’s go plant-based, Les. I’ve always hated trees.”

Leslie shoves Velspar’s plate right off the counter and into the sink, where it breaks, and literally no one cares. “I am *not* here to talk about *my* diet. We are here to kidnap Velspar.” She whirls, tossing her pristine bleach-blond waves over her shoulder. She shoves a long fingernail at him. “Consent to kidnapping.”

Velspar rests an impertinent cheek against the top of my head. “Kidnapping?” he drones. “Where are we going?”

“On a road trip!” Sean cheers. “Because Les’s mother is being a royal—”

“North Carolina,” Leslie interjects. “I want to go to a bee store.”

“A...bee store?” Velspar asks.

“A *bee store*,” Leslie grits. “Do you know how many different kinds of honey there are at a bee store?”

“You’re allowed to have honey?” Sean asks, kicking his shoes noisily against the cabinets. “According to some, that’s not vegan.”

“Shut it, you,” Leslie snaps with a flagrant eye roll. “We are leaving on a four-hour trip, and we are going to a bee store, and we’ll probably stay overnight somewhere in some hotel where we will all find something scandalous to do with the exotic locals.”

Exotic locals...one state down. Yep. That checks out. I think they’ve got blue skin and silver eyes across the border.

Or maybe I’m thinking of the last YA Martian freebie romance I got off Freebooksy. Yeesh. That was a...trip. Note to self: YA is not always *sweet and clean* these days. My poor innocent soul said *space is cool, sci-fi’s a palate-cleanser*. I am a fool.

Velspar shrugs himself off me. “Okay.”

My heart stutters. *Okay? Okay*, as in he is leaving me after *this morning* to go on a several-day trip in which there are plans to find scandal with the locals?

Leslie beams. “*Wonderful*.” Standing, she flicks a discarding hand at me. “What are you doing with this thing while we’re gone? Has she actually been staying here, Velspar? Because *ew*. If you’re actually doing what it really looks like you’re doing, *ew*, and don’t tell me. Just *ew*.”

“She lives here,” Velspar says.

Leslie grimaces and covers her ears. “No, gross!”

“I adopted her because she’s beautiful. We’re getting married in the fall, because I’m an autumn.”

Leslie snaps her hands off her ears. “You are *not* an autumn! Neither of you are an autumn!” Stomping her heel, she huffs, pointing at each of us. “*You* are a very clear spring, and *you* are an obvious winter. You can’t be more opposite.”

Velspar hums, and I hear the amusement lacing his tone. “I thought summer and winter were opposites. We’re actually one right after the other, as close as possible without being right on top of each other. Which is, of course, a shame.”

“I am not having this conversation with you. Just drop your dalliance off

wherever she goes, and *let's go*. We can get real food on the way."

"Real food isn't a sugar-free fruit spritzer from Starbucks," Sean informs.

Leslie's eyes narrow on him. "A *spritzer* is alcohol. Starbucks has *Refreshers*. You're all trying to get on my nerves today."

Sean snickers, and Velspar combs his fingers through my hair, nails grazing my skull. "Darling, do you have anything to say?"

Sean blurts an outright laugh, clasps his hands, and falls onto the counter, dramatically mouthing, *Darrlinggg*.

I press my lips together. "Have fun."

Velspar leans into my view, brows dipping in an all-too-familiar way. He's about to tease me. Ruthlessly. "That's it?"

I nod once.

He massages the back of my neck, pouting. "Not *let me grab my phone?* Or *Leslie, clean up the broken plate first, you silly cretin?*"

Leslie scoffs as if those words had actually left my mouth instead of his. "Excuse me?"

"Well, we can't leave the food to rot while we're gone."

"Not that." Leslie splay her palm. "Sean, clean up the stupid plate. I mean *it* is coming with us?"

It being me. Always a delight to be in this crowd. Except I've never exactly been *in* this crowd before. Maybe that's why something feels different about it. With Velspar's hand on me like he owns me, like I'm his, like I belong, I can almost convince myself I do.

"Of course she's coming. I'm dependent. I'll go through nasty withdrawals and break things." Velspar arches an accusing brow. "Why? Isn't she pretty enough? She's very fun to dress up. I did her makeup once. You would have been proud of me. Don't you want a female friend, Les? What's the problem?"

Leslie folds her arms as Sean scoots off the counter and begins taking care of the broken plate and wasted food. Her gaze slashes over me and hardens. "Well, we hate her."

"We sure do," Velspar confirms lightly. "But also I would die for her and probably die without her tonight...so..."

Leslie's eyes roll. "Ugh, you're disgusting. Whatever. See if I care. I'll be in the car." With that, her heels click right out of the room and she slams the front door behind her.



How...did I get here?

Leslie's black SUV streaks down the interstate while both her and Sean scream along to Katy Perry at the top of their lungs. It's an honest offense to music. Velspar taps along to the beat, his hand against my thigh, and I haven't said three words since I decided that I apparently trust Velspar more than I thought possible?

I don't know.

Maybe I just hate the idea of him going anywhere with Leslie *overnight* and I actually trust him way less.

Katina: Make sure you keep your phone charged and your location on. I wouldn't put it past those freaks to abandon you somewhere on the side of the road.

Katina: Honestly, what are you thinking?

Colette: I'm probably not thinking. I'm definitely not thinking.

I don't know how to tell her what happened this morning. I don't know if I should. Velspar was horrible to both of us, even if Katina had constant adult protection from her translator and I don't remember any of her things ending up ruined—not that she couldn't have easily replaced them. Even if Velspar wasn't one of the people insulting her for her disability and ridiculing me for my stutter, he hangs out with people who call me *it* and talk about me like I'm not sitting right in front of them.

There's no good reason for me to want to be around him. There's nothing I can say that would make it sound like I'm in my right mind.

Hey, I kissed Velspar this morning, and maybe he told me some things that are messing with my head, and maybe I don't want to be apart from him, so maybe that's why I'm on a road trip with him and two people who, yeah, probably wouldn't hesitate to drop me off on the side of the road.

Katina: Keep me updated. I will come get you if I need to.

Colette: You're the best.

And I might just be the worst.

When I lower my phone, I catch sight of Velspar's hand on my shorts. He's keeping perfect time with the song. It's as addicting to watch as it is to feel, and it takes me a moment to recognize that he's not just *keeping* the beat, he's *playing* the notes. The sight takes me back to when he caught me singing in his kitchen, and it occurs to me that I haven't been this surrounded by music since Mom got in her accident.

The song comes to a screaming conclusion, and Leslie whoops.

“Requests!? We need requests!”

“We need *food*,” Sean counters as he dutifully goes through Leslie’s playlists even as “Love You like a Love Song” by Selena Gomez starts.

“Food is for the *weak*,” Leslie snaps. “Colette! Song.”

I startle, peeling my attention off Velspar’s hand. “What?”

“Give us a song,” Sean says, looking back at me from the passenger seat. “And also confirm that you want food. The three of us need to overpower Les. Or we’ll die of starvation.” The serious glint in his eyes as he shoves his curly red hair off his forehead makes me blink.

I’m not exactly hungry, and I don’t really want to enter an environment for potential public humiliation, but Velspar didn’t get to finish most of his breakfast, so maybe we should get something. “I could eat.”

“*Song*,” Leslie grits as she swerves in front of a slow car.

“‘Jar of Hearts’?” I do not attempt to say *Christina Perri*.

Leslie grins, seemingly appeased, and a few moments later the melody begins. Velspar’s fingers adapt to it with a clear procession out of “Love You like a Love Song,” lulling me into his touch. I shouldn’t like it so much. I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t be desperate to see what he can do on a real piano. But here I am, a bundle of bad decisions about to be in a completely unfamiliar place where anything awful can happen.

Sean kicks his feet up on the dash and crosses his ankles. “You should sing, Colette.”

Absolutely I will not.

Leslie laughs. “Oh, wow. That’s right. Colette *sings*. Remember that public speaking assignment we had to do in Mr. Granger’s class, Velspar? The one Colette ended up singing for? Did you tell your paramour the fit you threw when that hardarse refused your request to extend Colette’s time limit?”

Sean snorts. “That was rich.”

Leslie curses and taps her fingers against the wheel. “He was such a strict jerk.”

He was one of my favorite teachers. I bite my lip because I remember that presentation. Mr. Granger asked me ahead of time about any accommodations I might need—either extended time or shortened—and I refused to have anything different from everyone else because I already knew the world rarely made accommodations for people with complications even worse than my stammer. If I couldn’t keep up with just this little tic, I wasn’t

going to make it in the “real world.”

Or so I told myself whenever my speech impediment might impede. I would figure things out creatively—like turning my entire presentation into a song so I could get through it without stuttering even once.

Sean stretches his hands around the head rest. “There was something Old Mr. Granger said that made you go completely mental, Velspar. What was it? It wasn’t just the fact he refused—although you totally do have a problem with being turned down...”

I fix my eyes on Velspar, and his smile hardens as his fingers dig deeper into my thigh.

Leslie chimes, “I remember. Mr. Granger said, *Mr. Pratt, Colette doesn’t need you. And our dear Mr. Pratt lost it.*” Her laughter is an odd mix of bright and dark melodies. “The tantrum was glorious. You got blackout drunk and tore apart literal furniture before actually passing out, all the while muttering curses and *of course she does, of course she does, of course she does.*”

Velspar grips my thigh, dredging into my flesh, before he pops my seat belt and drags me into his lap.

“Hey, th-is isn’t s...safe.”

His arms tighten around me, and he dares me to refuse him. Okay, Sean, I agree. Mr. Pratt absolutely has a problem with being turned down.

“What’s going on back there?” Leslie demands. “I do *not* want hanky-panky going down in my car. Do you hear me, Velspar?”

“Crystal,” he mutters, fitting my head against his chest and settling in. His fingers resume their full symphony against my side, and I puff a breath as I surrender.

“I’m hungry,” Sean complains, perking up when we pass the fast food sign for the next exit. “Look. Eisenstein Bagels! Let’s get bagels.”

“Bagels are *bread*,” Leslie says.

Velspar groans. “Les, you are beautiful, and you can eat a stupid bagel. Your mother’s an idiot for thinking you need to lose weight to fit her grotesque fashion standards. She looks like the Other Mother from *Coraline*, and for the love of carbs, you shouldn’t follow in her footsteps. You deserve a stupid bagel. So let’s get some stupid bagels, yeah?”

Leslie takes a deep breath, but when the turning lane for the next exit shows up, she merges.



I don't know where we are only that it's been five hours—during each of which I have messaged Katina to assure her I have not been stranded. We are now standing in a tiny store filled with honey on a block that belongs to what must be the smallest main street in the world.

If I had to describe my present location, I'd say it's where every last small town trope of a story happens.

"Wildflower honey," Velspar reads the label on the bottom of a two-inch tall glass bear. It's adorable.

On the other side of the rustic stretch of dark wood floor, Sean peers into a glass jar with a honeycomb inside. His expression is a mix of disgusted curiosity and general lack of knowing how to feel about what he's looking at.

So...

This is what young adults with too much money and too few responsibilities do in the middle of the week for absolutely no discernible reason.

Leslie pokes herself between Velspar and I, which makes my stomach clench. Over these past few hours where I've maintained a near-mute lifestyle, Velspar has been my anchor. I've convinced myself that if I cling to him, everything will be fine. I won't get left somewhere. Bad things won't happen.

Just this foot of separation makes me uneasy.

"That's so cute," she says, like she's a normal girl with a soul. Heck, she's even smiling like she has one.

Velspar pinches the chubby little bear between his fingers and shows me. "Is it like looking in a mirror, darling?"

I roll my eyes and wonder if *maybe* I should cut this umbilical cord tying me to him. Even if I don't stick to the menace like glue, he's probably not going to abandon me in North Carolina.

Leslie pouts a perfect pink lip at me. "I remember you talking more. Come on. We're *friends* now, aren't we? We just went on a road trip, and clearly Velspar thinks you're decent enough to—"

"Les, leave it alone. She can say whatever she wants to whenever she wants to. And as far as who is *doing* who, I think you've misunderstood which of us plays the dominant hand in our relationship."

Dark brows rising, Leslie tosses her blond hair over her shoulder and murmurs, "Well, there's something I wouldn't expect the all high and mighty Velspar Pratt to admit out loud."

Velspar mutters, “Consider it a warning. There’s only so much I’ll tolerate.”

“Before you slap me?”

“Basically.”

Leslie laughs, casually nudging him in the ribs. “You’re a darned mess.” Crossing her ankles, she braces an elbow against Velspar’s shoulder and gives me a perusing once-over. “So. What’s to like about Little Miss Colette Hart?”

“Nothing. She’s perfect, and I hate it.”

“Adorable.” Leslie covers her mouth with her slender fingers. “Velspar’s smitten by the pond scum who made his life difficult. What a twisted turn of events.”

“I m-made *his* life d-d—hard?”

“Les.” Velspar stops her before she can open her mouth again.

A look I can’t decipher passes between them, and Leslie hums. “Oh whatever.” She pushes off him and clicks her way behind me, pinching her nails into my shoulders as her high heels cause her to tower over me. “We’re going to go do *girl things*. There’s a quaint dress shop a few stores down. We’ll meet you silly boys at the toy store across the street when we’re done.”

Sean appears with a small basket full of honey bottles. “There’s a toy store?”

Eyes rolling, Leslie shoves me toward the door, and my body tenses. I lock eyes with Velspar, and he flashes me a chilling smile.

“Les, if you hurt her, I’ll make you pay.”

She throws him a perfectly-manicured middle finger and pushes me out onto the sidewalk.

CHAPTER 14

♥ Bullies are nothing but trouble.

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**Velspar:** Don't forget that I'm right here if you need anything at all. <3

Of course Velspar texts using a less-than-three heart. That's so unbelievably him. And seeing as I completely forgot I had his number, it's nice to have the reminder that he really is just a few taps away, should I need him. Hopefully, I won't need him.

Leslie isn't drunk right now, and we're both adults. We can both act like adults, can't we?

We step into the boutique, and Leslie immediately waves off the nice elderly woman who comes to greet us. "We're just looking," she snips, as though the world bows to her every whim.

Okay. Well, I'm an adult. Leslie's still mean.

I smile sheepishly at the older woman before taking in the cramped space packed with rows and rows of clothes. Toward the back of the store, the floor depresses into an alcove with accessories, and beside it on the left a couple steps lead up to a hat and scarf display. It's exactly how Leslie described it earlier. *Quaint*. And a bit overcrowded. Too much stock, not enough clientele, judging by the fact the workers appear to be the only other people here.

I like it, but since I'm friends with Katina, I know the kinds of places girls of Leslie's caliber shop. The garments in those places are silk and taffeta and chiffon, and they are arranged to draw the eye and breathe luxury. Nothing here is doing much breathing. And I'm fairly certain country music doesn't drone through crackling speakers in the places Katina and I have gone.

"You're so chubby, Colette." Leslie plows toward the nearest row of dresses. "What are you, size six?"

I had no idea a size six was *chubby*. Leslie's life scares me, and I don't think I ever want to meet her mother if that woman is the person shoving all this into her head.

"Eight," I tell her, and a genuine horror crashes through her eyes like a storm.

“Wow. Okay. I won’t judge Velspar’s preferences. You’re too short to be a model anyway, so you might as well enjoy being alive and stuff.” Her lips twist as she pulls a black dress off the rack in front of her, checks the tag, and hums before holding it up to me.

I can’t shake the sense her comment implies that she *doesn’t* enjoy being alive. And stuff. I don’t know that I’d survive in her shoes. Being able to afford *everything* yet still forcing myself to get an egg white flatbread bagel sandwich without cheese and barely picking at it before handing it off to Sean is just...sad.

“No,” she says after a long, surveying moment, then she shoves the dress back into place. “Come on. Help me look.”

“What a-re we looking for?”

“Something to make all your assets pop and piss Velspar off.”

My brow furrows. So the bullying thing isn’t just Velspar versus everyone else? People like Les are allowed to bully him back?

She catches my expression and throws her hands to her hips. “So you’re telling me you *don’t* want to watch Velspar’s brain shatter then ooze out of his ears at the sight of you? I want that. Everyone wants that.”

“I d-don’t th-ink—”

“No, you aren’t thinking.” She sniffs.

I frown. “I wasn’t finished talking.”

Exasperated, she rolls her eyes toward the ceiling. “Colette. Listen to me. Velspar brains. In a puddle. At his feet. We have one goal.”

I regard her dryly, taking in her wild hazel eyes all framed with flawless makeup that makes the shades in her irises gleam. “Are you d-d—finished?”

She twists on her heel and marches through the store. “I can’t talk to you. You just don’t understand reason. Of all the things to fight me on!” She makes an exclaimed noise and throws up an agitated hand.

I think she might not understand the entire concept of *reason*.

Shoving her way through the selection, she makes metal hangers scream against metal racks as she slides dresses aside in rapid succession. At last she cheers and yanks a sleek black dress free. “Perfect!” She fiddles for the tag while I try to guess exactly how low the cut of the neckline would look on me. “It’s a six, but you can probably squeeze in. It’ll have a better effect anyway.”

Folding my arms, I sigh. “No.”

“No?”

“I’m not going to s...s-squeeze into anything for Vel.”

She cringes. “Okay, first of all. That’s rude. He’s your lover or something. He deserves at least a little effort. He’s a major disaster, okay? But he’s genuinely the best guy I know. And second of all, no one nice calls him ‘Vel’. He hates that.”

“He’s not m-my lover. I never want to m-m-meet the other g-guys in your life. And we already had th-is conversation about his name when you were d-d-drunk. He s...said I could call him Vel.”

Leslie gags. “He’s so taken with you it makes me want to throw up. He can’t stand being called ‘Vel’ because that’s what his family calls him, and if you think the lot of us are bad, you should really meet his brother. I’m half-certain those people are actual criminals. Like...*bad* criminals. My skin crawls whenever I’m around them, and I have to pretend it doesn’t because of the whole ‘they own half the city’ thing.” Sighing, she puts the skimpy dress back, folds her arms, and peers around.

Only *half* the city? *Actual* criminals?

I hardly get a moment to process before other more directly harmful situations arise.

Leslie’s gaze lights when it lands on a section of lingerie, and I quip a quick, “No,” before that thought can take off in her skull.

She scowls at me like I’ve just kicked her perfect white toy poodle.

“I d-d-d-don’t have m-m—cash enough for—”

“I’m obviously buying. I know you’re poor and crap.” Stepping up to me, she grabs my shoulders and shakes. “*Work with me*, Colette. We’re dolling you up. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve been around a girl who isn’t some kind of way with me due to my position and ravishing good looks? Let’s put the past behind us and have fun. Velspar’s fine with you now, so as long as you’re not hurting him anymore, that’s good enough for me.”

*She’s not all bad*. Velspar did tell me that, didn’t he? I never thought I’d believe it. But I suppose no one is *all bad*.

Sighing, I chew my lip. “I’m a sp-sp-spring, right?”

Her face erupts with cheer, eyes brightening. “Yes! Your colors are going to be warm oranges, reds, yellows, pale pinks. Every brown. But browns are boring, so forget brown unless you’re going to an office party.” She gasps and points. “Velspar said he did your makeup. What colors did he pick?”

Now that she mentions it... “Pale pinks.”

Leslie grins, and there really is a pretty girl stuck inside all her meanness.

“So he *does* learn. I’m almost proud.” She whirls in a flare of her black skirt. “Okay. The boy gravitates toward purity and innocence even though he dresses like Halloween and had the option of doing you up in red while staying true to your vibe. Maybe my methods wouldn’t have resulted in the required brain puddle. Aha!” She clicks her way across the wood floors to another section of the store where she pulls out a light pink dress. “Voila.”

If I put that on, I will look like a doll again. I shift my weight before striding to her and snatching it out of her hands. “I will need sh-sh-shoes. I d-d-don’t th-ink these s...sneakers will cut it.”

A giggle bubbles out of her. “Now we’re talking.”

I smile. Almost, anyway, I think we are *almost* talking.



Leslie is mean. That part isn’t exactly debatable. I bet she’d shove an old woman for sport, *but* she is also a tiny bit incredible. After getting me into the pale pink dress—which I have been informed has a sweetheart neckline with butterfly sleeves that swoop into a drop waist before pouring into a layered skirt—she fitted me with a set of matching white ballerina flats, a clutch for my meager personal items, and a bracelet because “my lack of accessories was depressing her.” Next, she took me down a couple shops where she bought me an entire set of makeup, sat me down in the corner of the store, and painted me up before shoving the leftover items into the boutique bag that carries my *peasant clothes*. Or so she called them as she folded them up in there.

By the time we make it to the toy store, Leslie has gone from the bully I remember to a regular girl, who happens to be somewhat mean, and I have reverted back into the doll version of me.

For the record, Velspar and Sean have stayed Velspar and Sean. This toy store also appears to have an extensive selection of stuffed animals in the back, so when we approach, they are tied up in a heated slow-motion battle between giant sloths—including vocal sound effects.

Leslie groans. “Men.”

Boys, I think, grinning hopelessly.

At Leslie’s chiding, Velspar turns, and I watch the smile on his face morph into sheer awe as his brain shatters in order to melt out of his ears. Sean velociraptor screeches as he swats a sloth paw across Velspar’s face, and Velspar shoves his battle sloth into his friend’s arms before striding toward me.

My heart flutters as his cold hand delicately cups my chin and tips my face to his. His free hand smooths down my waist, toward that *drop waistline*, and settles before the layers of the skirt pour from my hips. “Les, you’re a monster,” he murmurs.

She gives a little curtsy. “Thank you. I know.”

“That smile is killing me, darling.”

I giggle. “You were battling with giant sl-sl-sloths.”

“Because I am an infant, and you...you’re lovely.”

Sean toddles over, holding both sloths. “I’m glad you both survived. Can we get dinner now?”

Leslie’s eyes roll back in her head. “It’s always *food* with you. I bring a princess into your presence, and you just want *dinner*. Look at her. Look at my masterpiece. Appreciate what I can do to a pauper.”

“You only changed her clothes,” Sean mumbles. “She was pretty enough before. You need to get over yourself.”

Velspar’s eyes roll as Leslie lunges for Sean. He shoves the sloths between them, and I shake my head. “Your friends are s...something sp-sp-special.”

“That’s for sure.” Naturally, Velspar draws me against his side. “Did Les behave?”

“Well enough, I guess.”

“Excuse me!” She shoves a sloth away from her and blows now-tousled hair from her raging eyes. “I was a *delight!*”

I lean into Velspar. “I th-ink it’s d-d-d-dinner time.”

“Yes!” Sean’s teeth flash in a grin. Leslie just sighs.



**Colette:** I’m alive and fed, and we’re about to get rooms at a Hilton.

Which will be my first time ever staying in a hotel. The luxury that spills out of the lobby alone has me glad Leslie saw fit to dress me up. In my work clothes, I would have been ashamed to step foot in this place.

So far, on the whole, I’m having a good time? With three of the people who made growing up the worst, I am having a good time. It’s the strangest thing. They haven’t changed, as far as I can tell, but I’m no longer public enemy number one. And maybe I understand more about them now than I did before. I don’t know if recognizing them as complicated people with pain and poor outlets for it excuses anything, but understanding that they aren’t so untouchable does bring me a step closer to no longer feeling inferior.

Strange how *getting into the bully's head* was step one in that Melanie Richards book. It's effective.

Once inside at least these bullies' heads, they cease to exist in the same state of power.

Leslie tosses her hair, entirely ignoring the hotel attendant as she looks back at us. Her eyes roll the second she sees Sean still gorging himself on an extra order of fries from dinner. "We're all getting separate rooms, right? There's a bar across the street, and I figure now that princess is a princess, she might as well try her luck fraternizing with the locals along with the rest of us."

Velspar's laugh is cold as he cements his arm around my waist and plasters me to his side. "Yeah, no."

I glance up from my phone to catch a glimpse of the standoff before returning my attention to my texts.

**Katina:** They're getting you your own room, right? They are getting you a room, right? If they aren't, send me the address of the hotel, and I'll make the arrangements.

**Colette:** Sounds like they're getting four rooms, so I'm taken care of.

"Three rooms," Velspar says, and I stiffen.

Leslie throws her arms together and scowls. "You mean you two *aren't* coming to the bar with us? You're our bodyguard."

"Until he catches someone's eye, anyway." Sean stuffs some more fries in his mouth, and the hotel attendant's face scrunches, like he knows he's not going to enjoy interacting with us once someone decides to pay him the time of day.

How surreal that I distinctly remember when my face looked as disassociated as his. It's weird being on the other end of this.

"Oh, I'm coming. Colette isn't. I prefer going home with someone. Hotels are cold."

At *that*, I bristle, and my jaw clenches.

Velspar's index finger traces circles into my side.

Leslie appears as irritated as I now am, except she's brave enough to say why. "Velspar Pratt, this is a *family* trip. You will get a hotel room with the rest of us, and you will not forbid my doll from having fun."

Velspar's hand travels up to my hair and grips before tugging my head against his chest. His honey-smooth voice carries a sharp promise with it as he murmurs, "It's for your own sake, Les. If she's with us, you won't get any

attention at all.”

Leslie’s mouth drops open, and she spins, slapping her credit card down on the counter. “We would like *three* rooms, please—specifically one for me, the princess, and the idiot with the fries. The nicest ones you have available. Full amenities. Room service. Whatever.” Leslie practically ignores the man when he asks for ID in favor of looking at me as she shuffles through her purse for it. “Doll, you’re welcome to order whatever you like. And of course you’re coming with us. Get drunk. Bring five guys back with you.” She gives me a catty smile as she all but tosses her ID on the counter for the hotel attendant. “Don’t let Velspar think for even a moment that he owns you. It goes right to his head.”

I know that much, so I school my features and separate myself from Velspar’s hold. “I’ll come. I’ve never g-gone to a bar before. S...s-sounds fun.”

Snatching up three key cards, Leslie purrs, “It does, doesn’t it?” She looks over the packets and grins deviously before handing me one. “Here. The biggest bed. For all the men you’re planning to lure back.” Her gaze cuts toward Velspar as I take the packet. My stomach dips as my fingers close around the card, and I can’t bring myself to look toward Velspar at all.



Bars are loud. And this one smells like stale smoke. Despite the sign by the door that says it’s a *no-smoking zone*, it’s clear many of the patrons’ clothes don’t abide by that rule and have dragged the aroma in with them.

At a glance, the place is packed with older men, and if I weren’t mad at Velspar right now, I’d happily glue myself to his side.

“What a dump.” Leslie laughs as her heels click across the ash wood floors. The low lights reflect off the shiny faux mahogany bar counter in front of a display of liquor bottles. The gentleman behind the counter scans us warily, and it occurs to me that none of us look especially like we’re supposed to be here.

It occurs to me a moment later that I’m expected to drink. And pick up men. Two things I have never done before. Two things that make me subtly ill just thinking about.

Velspar passes me, abandons me, and gets the bartender’s attention.

“Ever the alcoholic,” Sean murmurs, scanning tables. “Ooh. They’ve got wings. Doll, you want wings?” He grins at me, green eyes sparkling. “I’ll get you wings. And a drink. You name it.”



Velspar tosses back something in a shot glass, leans a hip against the counter, and scans the entire room. His attention doesn't even graze me as he locates a couple young women in the sorts of dresses Leslie wanted to put me in this afternoon.

My fists clench. "A d-d-drink would be lovely. Th-ank you."

Because I feel almost exposed while standing, I slip onto a stool beside where Velspar is scouting out the room. We don't look at each other, and it's like I don't exist throughout the entire process of providing my non-driver ID.

Despite clearly ignoring me, when a little shot glass appears, Velspar swipes it away before I can reach for it. He throws the liquid down in a single action, slamming the glass back onto the counter afterward. "Come on, Sean. If you're going to treat her to a drink, get her something fruity and sweet. Actually, no. I don't trust you. Les."

Les perks up from where she is now nursing something pink and scanning the room. She arches a brow and takes a sip. "Hm?"

"Get my doll an appropriate drink. Sean isn't allowed to give her shots."

Leslie rolls her eyes, and I scowl. Is *everyone* going to call me *doll* now? Rather, am I even dressed appropriately for this environment? I'm a pastel princess in a den of seductive black dresses and blue jeans.

"I can have a sh-sh-sh—"

Velspar taps my cheek, startling me. "You can't even say shot. I don't think you should have one."

He may as well have stabbed me in the heart. I snap, "After a few drinks, I'll be able to say anything." If the internet searches I did once upon a time prove reliable, anyway.

"I don't advise self-medicating with alcohol, darling." He pushes his hair off his forehead, eyes flashing with menace.

A tall glass of something pink appears in front of me, and I pluck the cherry out, looking at it like it's a new fruit. "D-d-do you take your own advice, Vel?"

He steals Sean's shot when it comes, downs it, and turns the cup over on the polished counter. "No."

"Not cool, man," Sean protests, but Velspar is already marching across the room.

Leslie takes his place beside me before the ache in my chest has a chance to erupt. "Okay, so what's your *type*, doll?"

Emotionally abusive, apparently. I lift the cherry to my mouth and turn on my stool to take in the room. Refusing to let my gaze linger on the fact Velspar is already talking with other women and laughing, I ask, “What’s yours?”

Leslie casts a sneer at Sean as his greasy wings arrive, then her eyes roll. “The opposite of that mess.”

He munches. “I have half a mind to feel offended right now.”

Leslie’s lashes flutter. “That’s more mind than you usually have at your disposal. I’m so proud.”

Intentionally, he takes a grotesque bite and holds the basket toward us. Leslie actively gags, but I smile and take a piece. Leslie snatches it from me and holds it between her fingers like it’s dirty underwear. “Colette! You’ll ruin your lipstick, and you left your makeup in your room, so you can’t even fix it.”

“But you always have your lipstick on you, so you should eat it for her, Les,” Sean recommends. “It’s bad to waste food.”

Leslie dangles the piece toward him. “No. Just no. Take it back if you’re so concerned about wasting garbage. Ugh. It’s dripping oil.”

“That’s what makes it good.” Sean lets Leslie dump the wing back into the basket, but I don’t miss the slight way his brows draw together as she does.

This mismatch of mean people care about each other. Sincerely. I guess I’ve always sort of known that. I wonder if I’ve been jealous of it before. To be untouchable, unburdened, in a spotlight, adored even by the people who hate me. That might be what I’ve wanted my entire life—the freedom to live in the sun without being disgraced.

I look between them and shift slightly in my seat before glancing down at the dress Leslie bought for me. “Can I ask you s—a question?”

“No, we won’t judge you if you like older men. The pickings are pretty slim right now.” Leslie sighs, disdainful.

My attention slips toward Velspar, where he seems to have attracted every woman around our age in this place. Everything in me feels cold, but I can’t look away. “What was your pr-problem with m-m-me? S...so I ssst-uttered. And I relied on sch-sch-scholarships. I d-d-didn’t get in your way. I kept to, kept to myself.”

Leslie’s expression morphs into disgust. “You did *not* keep to yourself even when you did, and that was exactly the problem. You ignored us until

you didn't, and didn't things get better when you stopped?" Scoffing, Leslie rolls her eyes at Velspar and mutters, "You made his whole life once you stopped ignoring him. Honestly, doll, no one really cared about your st-stutter." She snorts like she's made a grand joke. Tossing her hair, she sips her drink and shrugs. "The stutter and the poverty thing is all you gave us to work with. It's obvious you're pretty, and with our *wonderful* school posting everyone's grade business on the announcement board each week, we all knew you were smart."

"But why d-d-did you bother, you bother me? I know I d-didn't fit, but I d-d-did everything I could to d-disappear. Vel told, Vel told me he told everyone to leave m-m-me a-lone." And it's clear at least they care about him, so why wouldn't they have listened?

Sean mutters, "You took Velspar's place. He was supposed to be at the top of the class. And his family made sure he knew he was failing to overcome some nondescript charity case every chance they got. We watched you hurt him and ignore him. We saw how it messed him up, so even when he told us to leave you alone, we had our own reasons for hating how you were hurting our friend. We wanted to make you pay, and, I don't know, somehow help him, I guess."

Leslie's lips purse. "He's used to being number two in his family. You made him number two at school. School was the one place he thought he might earn the attention of his parents, and you stole the opportunity from him consistently. All while your mother wrote you little notes in your lunches and said strange stuff like *I love you*." Leslie's fingernail raps sharply against her glass. "Even though you aren't a size zero or perfect, you still got to be loved."

"Because," Sean interjects hopefully, "being a size zero isn't a requirement to receive love from the right people."

"Can it, Sean, or I'm throwing my drink at you."

Sean forces his smile and sets the comment aside as he fixes his attention back on me. "Basically, Colette, you had what we didn't, and isn't that just the way hatred comes about? Most of us didn't really care about you past how you affected Velspar. Those who hated him saw your power over him and wanted to best him by besting you. It might not look like it, but he feels a heck of a lot deeper than the rest of us. If Les's or my family opted to just give us a couple million dollars to get out of their sight, we'd be delighted. Sticking around on their terms is just unending pressure for us. For him, that

kind of rejection was scarring.”

My face pales, and I look between them. “What? Is th-at...”

Sean nods. “He’s been living in that big, empty mansion alone since he was fifteen. His ‘family’ comes around when they get bored or want him to do something that *only a Pratt can do* but they don’t want to. Sometimes, they have him make an appearance at city-wide events to show that they’re a *big, happy family*, but there’s nothing real there. I don’t think his mother even looks at him half the time. They’ve used and abused and bullied him—”

“Mentally *and* physically,” Leslie hisses into her glass.

Sean winces. “—all his life. Pratt is a shiny name in our city, and we all see the glistening rulers exactly the way they want to be seen. But ultimately?”

Leslie snarls, “*Ultimately*, they got one heir too many. And he wasn’t another *perfect* one according to their ideals. And some of that is your fault, Colette, because part of being the *perfect Pratt son* is outdoing absolutely everybody. Always.”

Bitterness coats my throat, and I whisper, “But th-at’s not m-my fault.”

“It is your fault. You just had no part in it. Ridiculous, isn’t it?” Leslie scoffs. “Anyway. That’s why everyone hated you, doll. You were *too good*, and to add insult to injury, you acted like you were better whenever you pretended Velspar didn’t exist. As he grew to understand his family had the emotional capacity of a brick, the next thing he wanted was everyone else’s attention. Especially yours. And you refused to give it to him. Like a—”

“Hey,” Sean intercepts Leslie’s curse. “Come on, Les. We’re old enough to understand that Colette ignoring Velspar was basically How to Handle a Bully 101. No name calling.”

Her eyes roll, but she obliges before she groans. “Okay. *Fine*. We’re awful, and we were awful, and we don’t care about anything or anyone. If it saves you the therapy, Colette, it was never *actually* your fault. And for the love of low fat ice cream, quit staring at Velspar like your heart is bleeding all over these sticky floors. He’s a man. *A man*. And he’s an idiot. And he’s literally still desperate for your attention and willing to do awful things for it because, yes, he happens to be that stupid. He wants nothing more than for you to snap and walk over there and drag him away from all those women then kiss him into oblivion before going back to your *shared room*. Because, disgustingly, that’s all he wanted when he went off with that three room crap earlier.” She slams her hand down on the bar counter. “Boy, it’s no wonder

he couldn't make the top of the class. He's a sincere moron. You're obviously the type of girl who rises to a challenge and would do anything he wants if he were just sweet with you."

Sean nudges my arm. "But he *won't* be sweet with you for, like, twenty different reasons. Among them, he doesn't think he's capable of being good. Acting nice makes people act nice back, and that's manipulation because people wouldn't be nice to him unless he's coerced them into it. He's a man desperate for something real. Cultivating hate creates something he can at least trust really exists, but manipulating love?" Sean tuts, shaking his head.

"Primarily he's stupid." Leslie cranes her neck. "Is there anything low fat here?"

"I wonder why the girl who had water for dinner is hungry. Such a mystery," Sean mumbles to himself, or to his chicken. It's anyone's guess.

I try to compute all their words as I sip the fruity drink in my hand. In twisted ways, what they're telling me makes enough sense. It doesn't change or fix or absolve anything, but it does at least explain something.

Velspar acts like a king and feels like nothing. Every time he's admitted that he *doesn't deserve me* he's believed it to the point of agony. Because it's not just *me* he doesn't believe he deserves.

It's love.

Being in pain doesn't excuse causing it. But at least I understand why he's so broken.

Off toward the other side of the bar, a woman standing on top of a modest stage announces a *karaoke hour* while drunken cheers erupt from the tables below. Shortly after the announcement, caterwauling begins—along with whistles and good-nature praise.

My attention latches onto Velspar again, right as a stranger touches his bicep. He brushes the caress aside. Without looking at me, he gestures, and the woman's gaze meets mine for a snarky once-over ending in an eye roll.

I flush.

Leslie's *right*.

That...that *idiot*.

Huffing, I lift my drink and take a long, fruity sip. "What is th-is?"

"Sex on the Beach," Sean informs me. "It might taste like a tropical explosion, but there's vodka in there, so pace yourself unless you do want to get blackout drunk."

I hum and let the odd fruity burn slip down my throat as though I don't

care whether or not I get drunk. Liquid courage, right? I don't know. I don't get out much. Rather I should say this is the first time I've ever gotten out quite this much.

I'm with the *bad kids* for a change. And they are battered as all get out. It rewrites everything I've ever known about this group of miscreants into a solemn melody. The violent beat is only there to hide away the timid serenade of hopeless loneliness, insecurity, and rejection. The sharp edge on a crystalline life.

"Leslie," I say after I've finished my drink.

She looks up from hers, taken slightly aback at the sight of my empty cup. "You want another?"

I shake my head and eat the orange because waste not, want not, or something. "I want you to know that Vel's right. You'd be lovely in s-size zero or, or sixteen. You're kind of m-mean, so I understand putting so much ssst-ock in your body image, but you're also kind of talented, so m-m-maybe don't worry about it quite as m-much. Eat dinner with gr-gr-grease. Sst-art a fashion line of your own that displays whatever body type allows you to have an entire egg on your entire bagel." I grab Sean's basket of wings and push them into her hands. "If anyone th-inks your weight matters in the least, tell them to s...s-screw off." I slip off my stool. "Now, if you'll excuse m-m-me."

"Is she already drunk?" Leslie blurts before an edge of startle enters her voice. "Sean, she's not heading toward Velspar. Follow her, dang it. He'll kill us if some creep..."

Their voices fade into bickering as I approach the woman who announced karaoke. She smiles at me and pushes her massive dark curls aside. "Hi, hon. You interested in the next spot?"

"Yes, please."

She smiles big. "We have access to pretty much any song you can think of, so just let me know what I can queue for you."

A thrill runs down my spine, and I know *exactly* the right song. "I Knew You Were, You Were Trouble' by Taylor Sw-Swift."

Her brow lowers. "You sure, hon?"

"Completely."

"Hey." Sean catches my arm. "You're going up there?"

I smile, and he laughs, releasing me as the final notes of the previous song slip into a chorus of shouts. "Okay then. I guess Les knows what she's

talking about. Challenge met, doll. Challenge met.”

Grinning, I turn back to the woman orchestrating the event. “Can I s-say s...something before the m-m-music starts?”

The woman gives me a gentle smile, the look in her eyes asking a soft *can you?* “If you want to.”

Nodding, I wait on my cue, then I climb the stairs, make my way across the bright stage to the mic stand, and try to find Velspar where he was standing before. Except he’s not there anymore. He’s crossing the room toward where Leslie remains at the bar. Anger taints his face, a touch of panic in the way his fists clench and release. After he’s opened his mouth and said something I can’t decode, Leslie whacks him in the back of the head and throws a flippant gesture my way.

The moment he turns, our eyes lock, and his expression falters.

I start quoting the beginning of the “I Knew You Were Trouble” music video, with some slight variation. “I knew your world burned too bright and m-m-moved too f-fast. But—” Drunken laughter and snickers start in the crowd below me, a few snide *she’s going to sing?* lifting to my ears, but my attention rests entirely on Velspar’s widening eyes. “—you look a little too m-much like an angel when you s...s-smile. S-sometimes I forget you’re the, you’re the devil.”

The heady beat of the song takes over, blocking out the overwhelming jeers. The words come immediately, and I hit the cue on time, tossing my hair back as I put everything into the performance—just like I’ve always dreamed. It’s the alcohol, I tell myself, as the laughter fizzles into surprise and Velspar’s gaze darkens. It’s just the alcohol that makes this feel so natural. It’s not the fact I’ve dreamed about stages and music as long as I can remember. It’s not the fact I’ve practiced choreography in my room to the made up tunes that always, always fill my head.

It’s just the alcohol.

And the annoyance at myself for being affected by another one of my bully’s games.

And that bully’s slow steps through the crowd toward me—where he belongs.

The sneers and mocking have twisted into standing ovations before I’m even halfway through. Whistles shred my eardrums as I sing how I *knew* Velspar was trouble the second I saw him while pointing straight at his stupid face. Velspar’s eyes simmer with something like hatred and something like

desire—thick and unwavering—right above a wry smile.

When the last word—*trouble*—falls from my lips, Velspar's the only one silent, watching me as cheers blister into a cacophony. Fingers hooked in his pockets, he keeps his heated stare violently latched on mine while drunk men shout for an encore like this is a concert.

Something in my heart tells me it *should be* a concert, but those are dreams for someone without debt, for someone whose Mom won't potentially need another surgery in a few years. For now, I'm the plaything of a certain Velspar Pratt who is paying me too much to clean his house because what he really wants is my company and he's too messed up to ask for it.

Without breaking the connection between us, he makes his way to the bottom of the steps and meets me as I leave the stage.

A breath whispers from him, and he shakes his head. "I hate you."

"And you, Vel, are nothing but trouble."

He leans near my ear and references the lyrics as he whispers, "Did you really fall hard, darling?"

"Are you going to take a step back?"

"No." His fingers latch around my wrist. Their icy touch contrasts the warm breath that hits my ear. "Let's get out of here."

"Are you s-suggesting I want a boy in m...my room?"

"Our room."

I let my body mold to his. "Oh? When d-d-did it become *ours*?"

"Always was." He turns, tossing Sean an upward nod when we pass. I hardly question why the redhead has his phone out or why it is trained on us as Velspar leads me away.

In my head, there's only him, Velspar, my troublesome villain.



## CHAPTER 15

♥ Do not fall in love with your lifelong bully.

~~~~

It's a nice hotel room, probably. I think it was when I—very quickly—dropped my bag off earlier. It's difficult to see it now past Velspar's broad chest. The second after we've entered, he pins the hand he hasn't stopped holding to the wall beside the door and cages me in. My chest rises and falls in quick succession, because he just dragged me all the way across the street—where we nearly got run over—and up the stairs—because I guess he hates elevators.

He tips my chin up with one curled finger as his hold on my hand solidifies. For achingly long moments, all he does is stare.

“What are you waiting for?” I whisper. “Permission?”

He exhales a laugh. “That would be the polite thing, wouldn't it? No. I'm mourning the inevitable.” His thumb smooths across my cheek. “I am going to absolutely obliterate your pretty makeup.”

“I can take it off. Leslie got me wipes.”

“Don't you dare. Why stop killing me now, right?” He kisses in the wake of his thumb's caress. “You belong on a stage, Colette, and not one in some vulgar speakeasy.” Whispering a curse, he melts his lips against my neck.

I shiver. “It looked like you were begging for a-ttention.”

“So you decided to show me you have no trouble garnering it for yourself?” His breath stutters against my skin. “Knowing I wanted you, you opted to show me how effortlessly you could make everyone want you. Cruelty is a particularly enchanting shade on you, darling.”

I don't know what I would have done if he'd not budged from where he was *garnering his own effortless attention*. If he'd glanced my way, offered a disinterested smile, and continued on like I wasn't acting purely to get under his skin, I might have died. A laugh spills out of me, and I sink my fingers into his hair. “We're so a-like. How sst-upid. We're going to tear each other to pieces.”

“You have no idea what you do to me, how frustrating it is to want you, to know you will never reciprocate the way I feel. I don't want to accept the

truth that, to me, you will always be everything, and, to you, I will only ever be a moment.” He rests his forehead against my shoulder. “You are better than me, and you can have anyone. One day, you’ll find someone who treats you right, who doesn’t tease or taunt you, who doesn’t think to do anything drastic in order to plead for your attention or nearness. One day, you’ll find someone who never did anything to lose the right to deserve you.”

I pull his hair, and he grips a fistful of mine as he drags his striking gaze up and looks me in the eye. His calm makes me yank harder.

He murmurs a placating, “Ow.”

Tugging again, I twist my hand out of his hold and slam him back into the wall, pinning *his* wrist.

Amused, he looks down at me, and a dreadful smile flirts with his lips. “My.”

“You want to know what’s frustrating?” I whisper, slipping my fingers up against his palm to twine them with his.

Shuddering, he arches a brow. “Do tell.”

“You.”

He snickers. “Ah. Well. I knew that one.” Glancing sidelong at our joined hands, he smiles gently and closes his fingers over mine. “Have your way with me, Colette. Make me pay for frustrating you however you deem fit.”

“You wouldn’t like it if I really made you pay.”

A crazed flicker lights in his gaze, challenging me.

“I know better than to give you what you want. Making you *pay* would mean refusing to share this room with you. It would mean ignoring you, not teasing or tormenting or even hurting you. Making you pay is pretending you don’t exist.”

His smile falls, and he looks over my head at the space I still haven’t even bothered to take in. Velspar swallows all my attention no matter where he is. “It would be a shame not to share such a nice room, though. It’s so lovely. I bet it would only be *mildly* disturbing under a black light.”

My nose scrunches, and I drop his hand, jerking away from him. “You’re di-di-disgusting.”

He’s not wrong. It is a nice room, all white and clean. The centerpiece of the space is a large king-size bed, big enough for four people. The starry night sky stretches above buildings outside the window, and I sigh as I cross the pale carpet in order to close the blinds. The view is a stark reminder I am not home. I am somewhere in North Carolina where the hotel is bigger than

everything else and the lights are so dim the sky stretches right into the distant mountains. Stars kiss the earth where the mountains crest, and it feels like a song waiting to happen.

Once I've dragged the curtains over the blinds, I twirl and spit, "You know what? You're despicable."

Unmoved near the door, Velspar's brows rise.

I plant a hand against my chest. "Yesterday, I asked to share your bed, and—"

"Then you put me to sleep in tears," he drawls.

I narrow my eyes. "*I a-sked. You refused. Now, you're asking, and you just, you just expect me to accept?*"

He smiles, brilliantly, and I throw my hands in the air as I march to my boutique bag and fish out the makeup wipes Leslie got me earlier.

I drop my bracelet in with my other clothes before I straighten. "You think the world revolves a-round you, but it d-d-doesn't. You know I'm too good for you, so instead of being *better*, you resort to, to m-m-manipulation or control." I barge into the bathroom and begin scrubbing my face raw. "I am never going to listen to you if I d-d-don't want to. I am never going to m-m-mute m...m-myself for anyone. Get over yourself, Vel. One thing I've learned from a lifetime of d-dealing with you is th-is: we are exactly what we believe ourselves to be. If you tell me I'm worthless, only m-my own belief will ever m-make it true. If you treat me like I'll only ever s...s-see you as a m-m-m-moment, that's all th-is ever will be. You can't control the way I feel, good or bad. However I choose to feel, you had nothing to do with it." I throw the crumple of wipes at the trash and spin to face him.

He leans in the bathroom doorway, his forearms braced against the frame.

I huff and repeat, "Get over yourself. To me, you're just Velspar. You're not a Pratt. You're not important. You're a bully, a monster, a villain."

He slips into the bathroom with me and cups my splotchy cheeks in his cold hands.

"But..." I whisper.

Velspar drops his forehead against mine and sighs. "There's more?"

"I've never wanted to do the things I want to do with you with anyone else." My heart beats an erratic tempo as I let my eyes close. "You're my monster. And there's a melody in you that calls to me like a tortured song. I want to sing it while you play the keys of my soul. I've spent my whole life trying to prove the apparent things about me don't define me. With you,

there's nothing to prove. I don't even need to fear the ugly parts of myself because they can't compare to yours—and you know that, and you hate it. There's definitely someone better out there, Vel. But whoever that is, he's not you."

Velspar kisses me.

I slip him out of his coat and let it fall as I step him back into the bedroom. Plush carpet settles beneath my shoes before I kick them off, and he makes a muffled sound when he hits the foot of the bed. "Co—"

I cut him off, spreading my fingers across his chest and up to his shoulders. Pushing down, I make him sit before I climb into his lap.

His hard breaths press against my chest, and he tugs his mouth away from mine, parting his lips. A strangled sound escapes him when I don't move my mouth off his skin or give him an instant to speak as I kiss down the column of his throat. Breathless and rough, he clutches his fists in the skirt of my dress. "*Colette*, wha—" He gasps as I slip my hands beneath the hem of his black shirt. "—t..." His words muffle into nonsense as I pull his shirt over his head, throw it away, and push him to his back.

He falls, the smooth defined planes of his stomach beneath my hands. He stares up at me, pupils large and out of control, terrified.

I trace a muscle, and his eyes roll back.

"Is this what you wanted when you decided we'd share a room tonight?" I ask.

His breaths stammer as he fists his hands in the pristine down comforter. "This is more than I would ever let myself want, *Colette*. All I wanted was to tease you until you let me hold you."

"Tease me?" I lower my lips to a spot over his heart. He's warm here, and I convince myself I can feel the erratic beats beneath his skin. He's so...alive.

Velspar curses, and each of his words suffocates beneath the overwhelming desire tightening his voice into a husky mess. "Ha ha ha. Isn't this like one of your silly romance books, darling? Only one bed for the both of us. Anything could happen. Anything at all." He shudders violently when I flick my tongue out against him, and his words choke into a handful of muted curses. He drags a hand up and into his hair. "*Colette... Colette*. Yes. Please. *Colette, Colette, Colette*."

"My romance books aren't s-silly."

Ragged breath fills him. "No. I suppose not. They appear to have been quite educational."

I laugh against his skin and lift my head in time to catch his tormented smile. I trap it against my mouth, and his hands find a place at my hips, fingers digging deep into my curves. When I break for air, I whisper, “You haven’t flipped me onto my back yet. Are you feeling all right?”

He laughs. “I do not trust myself on top of you, darling. We both smell like alcohol. I’m definitely buzzed. The only thing I won’t bear being to you is a regret.”

I kiss the corner of his mouth. “Regrets are hard to forget.”

“So are first loves.”

“How arrogant.”

“I’m not talking about yours.”

My heart stutters, and I meet his eyes. A boyish smile tugs sheepishly on the corner of his mouth that I just kissed. I trace it with a fingertip. It’s a... trap? He can’t mean what it sounds like he’s saying. I don’t know what game he’s playing at only that he’s definitely playing. If he insists that he hasn’t lied to me, every *I hate you* he’s whispered has been true. I’m not going to fall into this trap of wordplay where he’s making it sound like I’m his first love.

I don’t have the stamina for that—and if it isn’t a set-up, I don’t know how to respond.

So I kiss his nose, then his cheek, pressing myself close as I comb my fingers through his hair. “You’re too pretty.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Hm?”

“When the person you hate most in the world is beautiful.” His hands slip lower, down my thighs, and he begins teasing up the hem of my skirt.

“My clothes stay on,” I murmur into his skin.

“I am a victim of sexism.” He releases my skirt and tucks his cold fingers near my bent knees. “My shirt was stolen with no intention of reciprocation. This is a hate crime.”

Dancing my fingers up his side, I make him tense while I bite my lip and hold back a laugh. “Being forced to watch you with other women was a hate crime.”

His throat bobs as his lashes kiss his cheeks. “Appalled you don’t trust me to make friendly conversation with the opposite sex.”

“Are you suggesting *I’m* toxic?”

“Also, I didn’t force you to watch.”

My laugh escapes. “You’re unbelievable.”

He grins, those warm whiskey eyes of his glittering like jewels. I think I may have lied before. This man isn’t just *one* song calling to my soul.

Velspar is a thousand songs invading my every cell.

“Why haven’t I heard you play the piano?” I whisper as I rest against him and let my eyes close.

His arms curl around me, like I’m precious enough to hold even if that’s all I want. “Wireless earbuds.”

My brow furrows. “It’s an acoustic piano.”

“The keyboard I normally play is in my room. If I play the acoustic one where you can see me, you’ll be begging me to take your dress off.”

I roll my eyes, but my skin heats because I’m not entirely sure whether or not he’s correct.

His fingers dance with purpose against my skin as he murmurs, “I’ve been arranging your song. Because I am a pitiful thing with too much time on my hands.”

My heart leaps. “What?”

He “plays” a few more chords before beginning to sing in an enchanting tenor that times perfectly to his fingers. “*Never enough, never enough...will I be ever enough, ever enough?*”

I chill through. “You...put my song to music?”

“Like most things you do, it refused to leave my head.” He cuddles me closer and puffs an indignant breath. “Your little performance tonight, for instance. It’s playing on repeat in my skull. Did you have to dance? Was that necessary?”

“Yes.” I tap my hand against his chest like I need to do anything extra in order to get his attention. “Order a piano. I want to hear my song.”

“*Order a piano,*” he drawls.

“What? Please order a piano? You can’t?”

He threads his fingers into my hair. “I *can*, but it’s past ten. Do you have any idea the effort I’d have to put in and the people I’d have to bother to make a piano *appear* so I can play a song for you...” Sitting up, he braces my legs around his hips and stands like I weigh nothing. “You’re literally so demanding. I don’t know how you can live with yourself.”

I cling to him, tying my ankles together so I won’t fall as he bends to retrieve his coat. “S-sorry. I guess I’m not th-inking.”

He straightens and pulls his phone out of his coat pocket before

discarding the fabric and unlocking the screen as he rubs my back. “Who needs to think this late at night?”

“What are you—”

Shooting me a sharp look, he arches a brow.

My stomach flips. “You...you’re...”

“You asked. Of course I am.”



Twenty minutes later, Velspar has rented out the hotel special event room, which houses one beautiful piano atop a lavish stage. It’s my second stage for tonight, and it’s beautiful. Vast cream wood flooring and mauve curtains. Golden chandeliers and silver accents.

Sniffing in the silence of the room packed with dormant round tables and faux flowers, Velspar flicks on the stage lights and marches to the bench of the grand piano. He tosses the tail of his long coat dramatically when he sits, and I can’t stop myself from giggling.

He eyes me as he lifts the cover and spreads his fingers over the ivory keys of the instrument. “You seem awful chipper for someone who is about to fall in love with a monster.”

“Isn’t love supposed to be happy, no matter who receives it?”

His regal gaze scans me before he loses some of the pretentiousness and smiles. Patting the closed black lid, he says, “Pop up, and do try to be hopelessly distracting. *Sprawl* if you feel so compelled. If I don’t lose my mind by the end of this, you’ve done something wrong.”

Running my fingers against the polished finish, I oblige and *sprawl* back in my pretty dress, looking at him past my lashes.

Velspar soaks in a breath and lets it out. “Yep. That’s the drug.” Fitting his fingers to the keys, he begins—pouring music through me. The vibrations soak into my skin, and it’s *my* song, the tune in my head that I didn’t know how to put into notes. It wraps around me, sends shivers down my spine. I tilt my head back and let my eyes close as I bite my lip and lose myself in the full-bodied arrangement.

It’s too much, even before he starts to sing. That’s when I lose *everything*. My mind, my heart, my soul.

*Always enough, always enough.
Darling, you’re
more than enough, more than enough.
Can’t you see*

Exactly the way you undo me?

I hear you.

Every last word is lovely.

Always enough, always enough.

You are always enough, always enough.

My lip trembles as I cup my hand to my mouth. I don't realize I'm crying until a teardrop slips over my ear. I've forgotten how to breathe.

Velspar hums as he circles back, takes the melody up, and lowers it into a gentle finish. Silence retakes its hold on the room, but the weight of the music presses firm still.

This awful man.

I squeeze my eyes shut, sending more tears rushing down my cheeks. His head blocks out the light beyond my eyelids as he towers above me, grips my wrist, and uncovers my mouth. He kisses me atop the piano, stroking his thumb over my damp cheek like I'm not shaking and grappling for a foothold. First, I'm grasping for him, then I'm shoving him away and croaking, "What's wrong with you?"

He tilts his head, infuriating smile unaffected. "Many, many things."

I drag him back to my mouth and bite.

He moans a curse against the pull of my teeth—something sharp and adulterated with my name. He crumbles over me, forearms braced around my head, his one hand still clutching my wrist, stroking my pulse, holding me down.

I turn my face away from his mouth. "You changed my song."

"Mm." He nuzzles my throat. "It's not depressing anymore. You're welcome."

"You're so—"

"Charming?" He nips. "Irresistible?" He kisses. "Amazing?"

"—addicted."

He clucks his tongue, somehow finding the most sensitive spot on my neck, right beneath my chin. "Right." His breath tickles me ruthlessly. "That." Pushing my fluttery sleeve down my shoulder, he torments the flesh around my bra strap with an array of tiny kisses. "Do me a favor?"

I make a small sound.

"Say my name?"

"Velspar."

His hold on my hand tightens. "Now beg."

I shouldn't. I shouldn't. I sh— "Please," I whisper.

He presses his forehead against my shoulder, and his heavy breaths skate across my clavicle. "Again. Pretend to want me, Colette. At least a fraction of how much I want you."

"Velspar, please. I want you."

He holds me close in that desperate way he held me when he was drunk. Trembling slightly, he soaks in my words, then, almost shyly, he murmurs, "Let me hold you all night?"

Soft, I say, "Please."



We return to our room, and Velspar holds the door open for me like a perfect gentleman—if a perfect gentleman looked like he was about to devour his lady. The promising strain in the air makes my heart hammer. But there's something else clinging to my skin.

My song. He wrote the music around my song and answered the lyrics like a love letter.

I'm still so hopelessly distracted by the notes in my veins I don't realize Velspar is stripping until he pushes his shirt toward me. I look between it and his bare skin, gaping at the fact he's now only wearing his socks and his boxers. Both are black. His boots are kicked off beside his jeans, and I didn't see him remove either.

The slash of blush across his cheeks traps my attention as he clears his throat. "Here. I know you could sleep in your other clothes but..." He smiles, and it's soft, gentle and shy in a way I've never seen on him before.

He wants me in his shirt. He wants me in his bed. He wants me in his arms.

Pretend to want me, Colette. At least a fraction of how much I want you.

I don't have to pretend.

My shaking fingers wrap around the warm fabric coming from his cold hands, and he's so beautiful I could cry. For the second time tonight, apparently. Just in case I do, I turn sharply on my heel and hide myself in the bathroom to change. His shirt fits over me like a dress, wrapping me up in his scent.

Always enough.

Hugging an arm around myself, I push my fingers through my hair and bite my lip. What is going on? I'm not about to sleep in Velspar's shirt while he sleeps beside me. That's too insane. This is *Velspar*. The boy who made

my life horrible. The man I should still despise.

Fishing my phone out of the little purse Leslie bought me, I check my messages to distract myself from the whirlwind of thoughts and find Katina sending emojis of knives and bombs.

I guess I forgot to message since I told her we were signing in at the hotel, and it's probably too late to message her now. Since she hasn't started calling me, I'll assume that she's not sending a search party after me and let it be for tonight.

I find a complimentary toothbrush and fold up my things as I brush my teeth. Every time I catch sight of myself in the mirror, wearing Velspar's midnight black t-shirt, my heart wobbles a bit.

What would Katina think about this? My mom? I've never kept anything from either of them. The last thing I want to do is disappoint them. Logically I know that since this would disappoint them, it's not good. A smart girl would walk away from all of it. But I'm in too deep. I have tasted liquor on his tongue and salt on his skin and the wild in his touch and the music in his soul.

I like Velspar.

Just thinking those words makes my stomach turn over as tingles race through my chest, but it's so violently true. And that's terrifying.

I understand the characters I used to roll my eyes at now. It always annoyed me when I read about characters in messed up relationships who clung and clung because *I loveeee him*, but now I get it. I shouldn't get it. But...

My heart thuds, and I back way up.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait just one second. I do *not* love Velspar. I kind of like him, but this is closer to some desire-induced fever dream. He makes me feel some kind of way—because he's devilishly handsome, amazing at the whole touching business, and surprisingly romantic. I can't love him because I don't trust him or anything he's ever done.

Or so I say.

As I stand in a hotel bathroom, wearing his shirt, about to sleep in the same bed as him.

My mouth goes slack, and I stare at my reflection.

Wait. Okay. So. Either I'm a raging idiot or I *do* trust Velspar. Considerably. Maybe not in a sense of "he's not playing a game" but in a sense of "he won't *literally rape me*." I trust Velspar enough that I taunted

him the other night merely to push his buttons. I asked to sleep with him then. And I'm going to sleep with him now.

That is how much I trust him.

I trust he won't hurt me. I trust he's not going to use tonight to torment me emotionally or physically. After seeing how he interacted with those women at the bar, I even trust that he won't "cheat" on me and risk losing whatever it is we have.

Breath leaves me, and I almost swallow the toothpaste foam in my mouth as my jaw locks around the neck of the cheap plastic brush.

Hold on.

Holdddd on.

He...he actually literally seriously *was* telling those women at the bar that he was taken. He's taken? I took him? What...what are we? Are we *dating*? *Together*? I wasn't listening when I asked him before. Oh my word. Okay.

Deep breaths. I have to calm down.

He said *this was everything*. He said *I* was everything he'd ever wanted.

We aren't anything close to official, because *I* haven't said so. As far as he's concerned...

You have no idea what you do to me, how frustrating it is to want you, to know you will never reciprocate the way I feel. I don't want to accept the truth that, to me, you will always be everything, and, to you, I will only ever be a moment.

He knocks softly on the door, and I jump out of my skin, plastering myself against the cold wall beside a towel rack. "Are you embarrassed to be seen in my shirt, darling? Or are you just torturing me with the wait?"

I swallow the foam. "I'm b-b-b—" Calm down. Stupid mouth, *work*. "I'm b-brushing m...m-my teeth." I spit the remaining foam out and rinse the brush. Teeth brushing noises. Excellent diversion. He'll have no idea I'm actually having a heart attack.

"So you're dressed?" he asks.

I muffle an affirming reply.

He *opens the door*.

Why didn't I lock it?

My wide eyes fix on him, and my heart jerks into my throat. I chastise it and feel my face warm as he takes me in.

I'm in his shirt.

He's basically naked.

My brain is functioning on the fumes of sense, if there are any left.

This is a trap. This is a trap. This is a trap. I cannot possibly trust *Velspar Pratt* so much that I'm considering letting my guard down enough to melt into him all night. Intentionally. Not just because I'm passing out from exhaustion after something scary has happened. So what if he says pretty things? He *could* be lying. So what if he kisses me like I invented air? It's not like we need it while we're kissing. So he tweaked my song and arranged it to music and played it for me because I asked. Big deal. He also goes on a four-hour road trip to another state on a whim.

Wanting him isn't safe. Liking him is positively idiotic.

"Don't tell Les." He smiles at me like I'm not panicking as he finds another toothbrush. "I like that on you better than the dress."

Of course he would. He's a possessive monster. This shirt is a claim. No one can look at me in it and assume I don't already belong to someone. He's a dog, marking his scent. And I let him.

He begins brushing his teeth while I fight to unravel my thoughts.

Interacting with him is like drowning. Waves crash over my head. I've sunk so far below the surface, I don't know which way to swim.

He spits in the sink. "Okay. I'll go sleep with Sean."

My heart convulses. "Wh-what?"

"You're staring at me with this strange mix of terror and regret. The terror's well enough on its own, I suppose, but I meant it when I said regret's the last thing I want from you. Maybe I pushed too far. I got swept up in the moment. And you...you let me." He drops his gaze to the socks he's still wearing and ruffles his hair. "It felt amazing to hear you appease my selfish whim and tell me things I've only fantasized about. I know you don't do what you don't want to, so the taste of knowing you wanted to succumb to me shot heroin through my veins. Obviously, I got greedy, and now you're freaking out."

"You th-ink y-you know how to d-d-d-decode m...m-my facial expressions?"

He watches me for several long moments, unamused. "Darling, have you realized that sometimes when we're together you don't stutter at all?"

Of course I have. It's repulsive how comfortable I can get around him when I shouldn't. I frown.

"And right now, you're stuttering worse than normal?"

I fold my arms and look away.

“It’s a tell,” he notes, casually.

“Th-at’s not f-f-fair. You d-d-don’t get to, get to use it a-against m-me like everyone else.” My fists grip my arms, my short nails burying into my skin. “You, earlier, *sh-sh-sh-shot*.”

He murmurs, “I know. I was being pissy because I never wanted to go to the bar at all, and I didn’t want my good little girl to mess around with alcohol or get drunk. I wanted you to drag me to your room and remind me what you said would happen if I touched anyone else. It was all quite an elaborate plot. You’d shove me and get angry. I’d laugh and say I hadn’t forgotten the rules. You’d start to cry. I’d kiss your pretty tears—cue teasing about book tropes.” Sighing, he splays his palms at his sides. “Oh *no*, whatever will we do. Now you’ve ruined my plans to gallivant with strangers, we have only one room to share, and I’m already getting cold. You better hold me.”

I lift a hand to my face and take a long, slow breath. There’s a potential I’ve given Velspar way too much credit all these years. Either that or his genius surpasses everything and he knows how to play a harmless dork too well for me to ever see the betrayal coming.

Dragging my gaze toward him, I can’t believe there is a betrayal coming—which is the point. Yet...his smile’s a bit too soft, a little too youthful and hopeful. I can’t believe he’s playing right now. Because we’re about to share a bed. And *he has boundaries*. He wouldn’t trick anyone into getting this close to him. It would hurt both of us in the end.

“You d-do not get to, get to make d-d—choices based on a-ssumptions.”

Something much too warm fills his gaze. “I just don’t want you to be uncomfortable yet force yourself to do something because you’re stubborn, darling.”

Pressing my lips together, I pass him and mutter, “If I were m-m-more s...s-stubborn, I’d enjoy telling you to get out of m-my room. Playing elaborate, confusing games is sst-upid. You sh-sh-should just a-sk me for what you want, too.” Keenly aware of his quiet steps behind me, I peel back the soft comforter and slip into the sheets.

He stands at the foot of the bed, watching me. “You’re sure you’re okay with this?”

I fix him with a dull expression. “If you’re trying to m-m-make me beg a-gain.”

Delight fills his eyes. “Not until we’re curled up together.”

“M-m-menace.”

“Absolutely.” He turns the light off, and the next sound I hear is him slipping in on the other side of the bed.

I settle down on my back and stare at the black nothing in front of my eyes, pretending my heart isn’t thundering in my ears.

His foot touches mine.

I cringe. “Are you sst-still wearing your s...socks?”

He laughs. “My feet get cold.”

“All of you gets cold,” I quip, rolling onto my side in order to face him. It’s pitch black in here. I don’t even know how far away he is. “Your hands are a-lways like i-i-icicles.”

Somehow, he finds me with his ice hands and strokes my cheek. “Warm me up, darling. I’m freezing to death.”

“G-good.” I inch toward him, feeling for his bare chest. My fingers slip flat against his skin. Something about being unable to see him makes the exploration of him innocent. I find his bicep and the cords of muscle that design him. He’s so perfectly crafted.

It’s offensive.

“If you ever use the fact I want to be here in order to hurt me, I...” I press my face to his skin, listen to his pounding heart. “...I will forgive you instantly and never think about you again.”

He clutches my shirt as he pulls me as close to him as I can go. “My vicious darling. You know how to exploit my darkest fears.”

I kiss his skin, whispering, “If you don’t hurt me, though...I think...I think I might just want you forever. Enough to beg. Enough to hate. Enough to love.”

Velspar shudders. “Colette...”

“Is...th-at what you want?”

“Yes.” He exhales the word, like a prayer. “Yes, Colette. You’re what I want. You and everything you are. It makes me sick to think how deeply I want to carve myself into you. You deserve better than the way I will endlessly torment you.”

“Torture me.” I curl my arms around him, trace the wings of his shoulder blades. “Let’s clash like fire and burn like stars. Let’s be bright and unashamed and remarkable. Let’s be everything people told us we couldn’t be.”

His fingers thread through my hair as he laughs. “I would have settled for

happy, but *spiteful* is good, too.”

“It’s not spite. It’s justice.”

“It’s spite, darling. You don’t have to convince me it’s anything half as decent as *justice*. Let’s be spiteful, awful people. I’m sure evil looks cute on you.” He sighs. “Maybe even sexy. But I’m trying not to think like that right now.”

“Good boy.”

“You are not making it easier.”

I grin against his chest, and the tempo of his heart lulls me to sleep.

CHAPTER 16

♥ Whether the bully is trying to or not, ruining your life is in his blood.

~~~~

**Colette:** I survived my trip. More than that, Leslie invited me out for tea sometime. She told Velspar to get me a tea dress.

I erase the message for the three hundredth time and sigh as I lie in my bedroom, wondering why it feels so empty after last night, wondering if it's a completely terrible and awful idea to wander upstairs to Velspar's room in a few hours and mention something stupid about how he still hasn't returned my pillow and—eh—it looks happy here, might as well sleep with you.

Or something.

I don't know.

Leslie and Sean left about thirty minutes ago. I have showered and changed, so I am officially *back home*, and I have to tell Katina that, but I don't know how to word it in such a way that suggests I may potentially be defecting to the dark side and it's not *all* bad.

This feels like...

Fraternizing with the enemies. Condoning the shoving of old ladies. Joining Team Take Candy from Babies.

I would never shove an old lady or take candy from anyone, of course, but isn't there a saying that goes *show me your friends and I'll show you your character*? If I didn't have a bad time on this trip, what does that say about me?

I'm ashamed to admit what I've done. All of it. And telling Katina will be nothing like telling my mother. My brain, for survival purposes, etched out a lot of what I went through as a kid. Mom's an elephant. She won't be gentle with her words, and she'll remind me of all the very logical reasons I absolutely shouldn't be playing with fire.

I told Velspar we should be bright and unashamed and remarkable.

Ha. I guess I let myself get caught up in the pretty moment.

**Colette:** I survived.

I'm amazing with words.

I hate secrets. They make me antsy and nervous, and they feel like the



start of betrayal. My friends and family mean everything to me, and I don't want to betray or hurt them. The longer I keep the fact I know the taste of Velspar's lips from all of them, the harder this is going to be.

Gathering myself up, I drop my phone in my frock pocket and walk-of-shame myself up the stairs to Velspar's door. It's cracked open, but I knock softly as I glance inside.

Sitting on his bed with the nightstand light on, Velspar looks up from his phone and brightens, danger flaming to life in his gaze.

*He hates you*, I remind myself as I nudge the door open wide enough for me to enter. *He wants you*, I counter like that part matters. It's...complicated. But of course it is. It always has been, more complicated than I knew when I was just trying to survive school with the kinds of grades that might allow me to give my tiny, precious family a future.

"Colette," he purrs, "miss me already?"

"I'm a-shamed of you," I say, because *dang* he's annoying. It's like I keep forgetting that.

Confusion knocks the stupid off his face, and I wander in, take his phone away, and snuggle into his arms. Because I can. Weird. He hugs me like it's oh-so-natural, and the shame melts away because how could *this* be anything but perfect? Velspar's an imp, but I don't think there's anything he wouldn't do for me if I just ask.

"You're ashamed of me, darling?" he whispers into my hair, and I'm glad that I at least can't hear the hurt if there is any.

"I d-don't know how to tell Katina what's going on." I clench my fist in his shirt. "I don't know what's going on. What's going on?"

He cradles me as he relaxes back. "What's going on..." His chest rises with a breath. "We hate each other."

"Yes. Right. That. That is why I am, I am sitting on your lap right now."

He laughs. "No, darling. You're sitting on my lap right now because you kind of like me. It's bothering you because you hate me."

Oh. Well, aren't I lucky he can explain these things to me?

"I'm flattered." His fingers comb through my hair.

I pinch him in his firm stomach. "No."

He confiscates my hand by means of holding it. "Oh, but I *am*. You're ashamed of me, but you want to keep me, and you know that your friend won't like it, so you're scared to tell her in case she makes you remember why I am a very bad idea. Because, my dearest darling, we both know I'm a

very bad idea, and you're happy for the moment to pretend it isn't so."

He's peeled me open and nipped my heart. If he doesn't kiss and make it better, I might just throw a fit. When he shows no signs of making it better, I get off him. "I'm going back to m...my room."

My feet hit the floor, but he doesn't release my hand.

I frown at him.

His smile broadens. "Running away from the truth never turned it into a lie."

"Never know. I m-m-might get lucky this time and d-decide I, decide I don't care about you a-nymore."

His fingers tighten their hold, and he reels me back in. "No." He kisses me, and I can't with him.

I have to force myself to stop melting and turn my face away from his lips. He doesn't care as he continues kissing my cheek. "Vel. St—no."

Stopping, he sighs, irritated. "I can't help you, Colette. Yes, you're making a bad decision. Yes, I'm no good for you. Yes, your friend is going to be disappointed, even horrified. Yes, that's going to hurt to face. Yes, she might knock some sense into you. Yes, you might just be smart enough to leave me before you're in too deep. Don't you think if I had a good answer that didn't end with you going away, I would give it? Honestly?" He cups my face, sinking his fingers back into my hair. "I haven't changed. You should run. I care about you enough that I've been sabotaging myself this entire time. I'm not going to pretend I'm redeemable in front of the people who love you without strings or twisted desire."

Anger sparks, and I snap, "Care about me more. Care enough to change and redeem yourself."

"You say that like changing my entire being is easy to do."

"It won't be. Care about me that much. And then care more. Care entirely."

He chuckles, gripping my chin. "You sound like me, darling."

My heart flutters. My body hums. Why do I love this so much? This bold, unapologetic, burning relationship we have... It's precious to me, and I don't want it to go anywhere even if I also don't want it to damage the other precious relationships I have.

"Are you scared they'll see how much you're like me?" he whispers. "Are you scared they'll realize you were never a good girl at all? You were just waiting to be free from your pathetic restraints, just *waiting* for the

chance to be as bad as I am.”

My eyes narrow, and I lace the fingers of my free hand around his wrist. “Don’t think you can start putting me on your level now, Vel. I will *never* be as bad or as good as you. I will *always* either be far better—or far worse.”

Releasing me entirely, he lets me tumble face-first into his chest. He lifts his arms and links his hands behind his head, stretching out merrily. “No, no. Don’t bother getting up. I like you there.”

Huffing, I push myself upright and straddle him, which only seems to make him more delighted. Because I can—which does seem to be my new motto—I wrap my fingers around his throat.

He doesn’t so much as startle, and I wonder what would happen if I actually go so far as to cut off his air. I gently apply some pressure.

“You have to press your thumbs into my windpipe,” he offers helpfully. “I can still breathe if you sort of just generally squeeze.”

It’s his confidence that almost makes me want to watch him choke, to watch him realize I’m serious, to watch him realize I am as terrible as him, to watch him believe I am capable of being worse. When both of us know I’m *not*. Velspar Pratt is the kind of man who would hand me a knife, chastise the way I hold it, then ask if I’m interested in hurting him or killing him so he can instruct me on the best places to stab.

I mutter, “This would scare my mother to death.”

“Yes, I’m sure no parent wants to picture their child strangling someone—even poorly.”

Leaning forward, I kiss his forehead, then I free his throat and bundle up on his chest with a sigh. “I hate you.”

“I’ll do whatever you want in order to make things easier.” His breaths lull me toward safety. “Just ask.”

“I already told you what I wanted.”

“I can’t give you a contradiction.”

I burrow deeper against him. “What?”

“I cannot care about you entirely if I am not entirely myself. As I am, you own every shattered fragment of me. If I *pretend* to change—because *change* isn’t something we can just demand no matter how much we pray for it—I will no longer be able to offer you anything real at all.” His arms close in, confining and safe. “I’ve broken my own heart into a thousand pieces. I can’t put it back together and be whole for you as though the hairline fractures won’t forever be there, but I can promise that every last shard is yours.”

I tangle my hands in his shirt and close my eyes. “Let them say whatever they want. It disgusts me, but I like you, Vel. And you like me, too?”

“Like,” he says, as though he’s trying the word out on his tongue for the very first time. “Hm. Let’s go with that, so I don’t embarrass myself.”

“Embarrass yourself,” I mutter at him.

“I would. Really I would. But I don’t know if you adore me enough yet, so I guess I won’t.”

I draw myself up to catch his eyes, then my phone goes off, and I jolt.

It goes off again. And again. And again.

I fumble for my pocket as the text tone continues blaring, cutting itself off, and chiming some more. Once I get my phone out, I drop it on Velspar’s chest, and he pouts down at it while it buzzes and bleeps.

**Katina:** Survived?

**Katina:** SURVIVED?

**Katina:** Is THAT what we are calling THIS?

**Katina:** I’m coming over.

**Katina:** Yes, right now.

**Katina:** I am coming over right now, and you are going to EXPLAIN YOURSELF.

**Katina:** I don’t think I have EVER been more pissed at the fact I can’t scream.

**Katina:** What. Is. This??

And then she sends a link to a YouTube video labeled *You Won’t BELIEVE What This Girl Did to Get Back at Her Boyfriend! ‘I Knew You Were Trouble’ cover. [Emotional.]*

My skin pales, going cold, and I touch the video. It fills the screen.

*“I knew your world burned too bright and m-m-moved too f-fast. But you look a little too m-much like an angel when you s...s-smile. S-sometimes I forget you’re the, you’re the devil.”*

Velspar shifts his weight to look at the screen, his brows puckering as the entire song plays out, continuing right up until he’s dragging me out of the bar.

If the way he’s taking me away while I smile foolishly at him doesn’t reveal the truth to everyone who might see this, the fact the audio caught him saying *let’s get out of here* and *our room* absolutely does.

My mouth goes a bit dry.

Velspar laughs, but it isn’t kind. He takes my phone, restarts the video.

His eyes spark as he takes it in. “No...” A muscle in his jaw twitches. “No, no, no.” He swallows in a way that makes me think his mouth is dry, too. He curses. “This is my life now. Watching this is my life now. Look at you.” He barely drags his attention off the screen for a fraction of a second. “Just. *Look at you.* You’re looking at me. You don’t stop looking at me for even a moment.” His smile stretches, delirious and upset and mesmerized.

“Vel,” I croak.

He flinches, forcing his attention to me. “What?”

I feel lightheaded. Dizzy. Dehydrated? I don’t know. My vision splotches, and I can’t wrap my head around what’s going on, what this means.

Before I can attempt to gather my thoughts, Velspar drops my phone and jolts toward me, because I’m falling off him, toward the floor.

I don’t know if he catches me or not.

## CHAPTER 17

♥ If you're stupid enough to sympathize with the bully, do not expect support. ~~~

It's silent when I come to. But that doesn't mean people aren't in the room.

Blearily, I try to refocus my thoughts and figure out what happened. My stomach twists with nausea as I remember *the video*. The video that Katina sent me. The video Katina saw. If Katina saw it organically, that means *a lot* of people have seen it. The tingly numbness in the back of my throat threatens to overwhelm me as I learn I'm lying in Velspar's bed, tucked in like I'm precious.

I bet the monster kissed my forehead and everything.

Drowsy, I glance up, ahead, and lose my breath again.

Katina and Velspar are standing in the middle of his room, hands flying with words—as in *all four* of their hands are making words.

Velspar's animated signing involves his entire body as he communicates in the language effortlessly.

I must be dreaming.

I have to be dreaming.

His slender fingers shout. *She was going to tell you! We were just talking about it. And for the last time, no. No. No. No, I did not do anything to her when I dragged her away to our room. I was an angel. An innocent angel. She's the one who threatened my purity.*

My face erupts in flame.

Katina's expression twists. *Yeah right! You're a weasel, and you've never ignored an opportunity to crawl your way into her head. You do not get to take everything from her and throw her away when you get bored. You do not get to humiliate her anymore. Grow up!*

Velspar's eyes narrow, then he does the only thing left to do. Sneering, he lets his lip curl as he rocks his head to the side and throws up both his middle fingers.

Katina looks about ready to *maul* him, but that's when his disgusted eyes find mine. The feline arrogance filters away, and I can just about see his tail flick warmly as he drops his middle fingers and strides to me. "Darling,

you're up."

I look between Katina and him, cowering at the worry in her chocolate brown gaze. She remains where she is past the foot of the bed, covering her pinched lips with her hand and waiting. I wish I knew what she was waiting on. Trembling, I ask, "How b-b-bad is it?"

"Bad?" Velspar brushes my hair away from my cheek. "Nothing's bad."

"But...th-e video."

"Has had an overwhelmingly positive reception."

Everyone knows that Velspar Pratt, billionaire prince of *Pratt, Virginia*, is involved with me. Elsewhere, this might be a cute video, ultimately forgotten, but here? In the city of Pratt itself? It's prime gossip, big news.

I'm feeling dizzy again. Am I going to be able to go outside anymore? Are people going to recognize me? What are they going to call me? What are they going to ask? What are they going to accuse me of?

People like Velspar don't end up in *nice* relationships with poor girls. Even if we like to pretend we've evolved beyond arranged marriages, at least for people in his position political connections forged through marital bonds still run rampant. He's old money. He has a reputation to uphold.

And me? I'm a nobody who has just become a somebody well before I even know what, personally, we are.

Velspar's subtle elation tames, and he touches my hand. "Darling, fame like this lasts only a moment if you ignore it. If you want it to, it will go away."

What he means is if I regret the fact our connection being public makes it real and I don't want him anymore, he will go away. That's what he's been prepared for from the first moment. My wanting him at all is a miracle that shouldn't have happened, and it's only a matter of time until my interest in him runs out.

What about his interest in me?

If I give him what he wants and satisfy some age-old craving in him, will he tire of me like I'm a worn-out toy he's done playing with?

Does anything *us* ever become something reliable and dependable?

Or will it always be fire and stars ready to burn out?

His cold hand cups my cheek, and he presses his forehead to mine, trembling slightly. "Please don't look at me like that," he whispers, and my own fingers lift to cage his. I hold him close and tight, my short nails dredging into the side of his palm.

My chest hurts, but I manage to breathe. “We need to see m...my m-m-mother tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“We have to explain th-is and hope the news hasn’t reached her first.”

He nods, the hesitant motion pressed against my forehead.

I look past him at Katina, whose arms are folded as she takes us both in. The unnerve on her face is no doubt similar to the unnerve I feel just below the surface of my skin.

I have spent my entire life confined by circumstances outside my control—I think I’ve gotten almost decent at managing them. This is nothing. I am not ashamed of my stutter, and I am not ashamed of wanting something dangerous, for however long it might last.

Bracing myself, I blurt, “Vel likes me.”

Katina’s brows jump, and she signs a simple, *So?*

Bile rises, but I ignore it, stumbling more through the *other* half. “I-I kind of l-l-like him.”

Katina’s eye twitches, and her hands move as she begins stalking toward me. I can’t focus on both her face and her whipping words, so while I’m certain anger overflows in her expression, I watch her hands. *What do you mean you like him? He’s awful. Or have we forgotten that mind games are his specialty? This is exactly what he does. He doesn’t lift a hand himself; he just makes you think he controls everything. He chokes you until you suffocate. He crafts these elaborate schemes in order to make you do what he wants. There is no way to like someone like him because you never know when he’ll change the game on you.*

Velspar slips his hand from my face and pulls back, lowering his gaze off Katina’s hands. Guilt sparks a moment before he smooths his expression into shined glass—empty and glittering, hard and emotionless.

Katina’s teeth bare, and she flings a hand at him before saying, *Look! He didn’t even tell us he knew sign! He’s known. This entire time! He knew every single word we said at school in front of him. Did he tell you that?*

My stomach hurts.

*Did he?* Katina demands again.

I shake my head.

*Even though we all went out together, he didn’t say anything. He watched us call him demented. He saw you reveal he was getting under your skin. I bet he gloated over every single moment. He’s no different than he’s always*



*been. I thought you'd be smarter than this.* Something horrified flashes in her gaze, then she's marching toward Velspar and shoving him to get his cold focus on her. *That's the game, isn't it? You've always been angry that Colette is smarter than you. Making her fall for you, even just convincing her to give you a chance, is the stupidest thing she could do. That's it. You win. Now leave her alone.*

Velspar drags his attention off Katina's hands. I chill when a brilliant smile overwhelms him. "Well, there you go, ruining all my fun." He sighs and touches the curve of my jaw in order to make me face him. "Did you hear, darling? I've won. Your friend says you've fallen for me. I guess that means this silly game is over. I win. I've finally proven myself smarter than you. Wanting me is idiotic." He grips my face. "If you care about me, you must be stupid. In fact, wasting even a thought on me lowers your IQ." His gaze skims down to my lips. "Isn't that right?"

I shove him off me and stand. My body restarts, making me stumble, and lo and behold Velspar loses the arrogance immediately as he catches me.

Dryly, I meet his eyes, and he looks away, clearing his throat as he lets me go. "I mean, fall, peasant."

"S...s-sorry, Katina. He's just not, just not as sm-sm-smart as we thought growing up." I clap my hand to his cheek and offer a weary smile. "No of-offense."

"I assure you I'm completely offended. But what else is new?"

Katina shakes her head. *I can't believe this. He's horrible.*

"He is."

*But you...* She cringes and can't finish the line.

I don't think I can finish for her. I've already said I *like* him once tonight. More would go to his head. Even once is pushing the limits of making him unbearable. Besides, there are other things to deal with.

I find my phone on the nightstand and learn it's just past eight thirty. I'm scared to find out, but I force myself to look up the video. My head swims when I discover tens of thousands of views and hundreds of comments.

Whatever people are saying, I don't want to know. I *don't*. So I focus my energy on the account name instead. SeanDotCom. Of course. Then I look at the description.

*My buddy Velspar is whipped.*

I arch a brow. "You're whipped?"

Velspar confiscates my phone, scans it, and rolls his eyes. "Great."

Katina nudges me. *Can we talk? In private.*

Stealing my phone back, I plop it in my pocket and nod. The entire trek from Velspar's room down to my suite I try to think of reasonable angles to approach this situation from, but there just aren't any. Nothing Velspar has done that appears good or kind matters unless Katina trusts the source. And she doesn't even though I've come to.

All the same, the moment we enter my living space, I let my hands get in the first word. *He put a song I wrote to music.*

Katina cocks her head.

*He put my song to music, and he wrote a response to it, and he sang it to me at the hotel after he hunted down a piano because I asked him to. He teased me about making outrageous demands as he was already fulfilling my request. I know this is stupid. I know this is the stupidest thing after everything he's done and who he is, but there's just something about him that makes me lose my mind.* I shudder because that's not a reliable or wise reason at all, but there it is. Something about Velspar makes me lose my mind. And something else about him makes me not care.

Brushing her curls aside, Katina holds my eyes and responds slowly, *We both know that has always been his goal. He's always sought to get in your head.*

I know that. I do. I can picture his taunting smirks beneath the sheer disgust and hatred in his eyes. I can hear the degrading things he's said to me. Velspar has always been both awful and self-deprecating. Raw and adrift amid all his arrogance.

*Why is your voice like that?* he once asked.

From the first moment as horrified disgust coated him, he saw me. And he hated that what he saw affected him half as much as it did. If only I'd replied to his question, everything would have been different.

Sean told me, *It might not look like it, but he feels a heck of a lot deeper than the rest of us.*

I've felt it recently, ever since he wrapped me up in his arms on his bedroom floor. Velspar feels things with his whole soul. Whether it's hate, or love.

*I'm safe,* I tell Katina.

Her dark eyes soften with concern that makes me ill. Gently, she says, *I hope so.*

## CHAPTER 18

♥ Some things have to change, and some things never will.

~~~~

Things didn't go great with Katina, so I suppose I should know better than to expect anything different from Mom. Still, I wanted the opportunity to tell her in my own words, without the horror of the video hanging over our conversation.

No such luck.

The moment I step foot in The Dogwood at Pratt Inn, the air is stiff with unsaid words. People I've known for months look at me in entirely new ways before they catch sight of the dark sentry behind me and remember themselves.

Everyone knows.

So Mom knows, and likely the only reason she hasn't contacted me is because she has no idea how to address her disappointment yet. Mom never was the parent who disciplined when she was upset. She always said if Dad had stuck around that might have been *his* job, so good riddance.

Instead of approaching this with any sort of delicacy, I'm entering into a conversation where she thinks I have already gone past the point of no return and made the mistake that landed her with me before she was anything remotely close to prepared.

It won't matter if I mention that Velspar made me breakfast this morning like a perfect gentleman. After Katina left last night, the only place I wanted to exist was in his arms, and he was adamant this morning that the man must make breakfast for the girl after she spends the night with him. A moment of sweetness like that doesn't make up for our history. Mom won't care so long as she remembers how I used to come home beat up for no reason.

Velspar's name is a curse. And once a word becomes marred by the weight of profanity, it isn't easily undone.

Shakily, I grab Velspar's hand after we've signed in and are completing the walk of shame to my mother's room. His eyes go wide, and he throws a look between my face and our clasped hands as though I hit him instead.

"What?" I hiss.

He squeezes my fingers as warmth stokes like a fire in his expression. He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses. “You *like* me.”

“And in case you need th-e re-reminder, th-at is ruining m-m-my life right now.”

He chuckles. “I know. Isn’t it delightful?”

I hate him so much. He is despicable. Truly, completely awful. He didn’t even have the decency to look anything but overjoyed at the fact I spoke with Katina last night but fell asleep with him. Here I am, choosing him when that decision makes everything else that has ever been reliable in my life fall apart.

I groan and crush his hand, hoping the pretty bones in his slender fingers break. Of *course* he’s happy about this. The flipping monster. I should have strangled him yesterday. I *really* should have strangled him yesterday.

Nothing like instilling a little PTSD in a jerk to brighten one’s mood.

Heart in my throat, I knock on my mother’s door, easing it open after I hear a response. The second Rosalind’s eyes train on me, she claps her hands and shrieks with delight. “Helen, your little star is here!” Hobbling out of bed, my mother’s roommate clasps my cheeks and giggles before moving for Velspar’s face. Her bent frame can’t quite reach, so she barks, “Boy, get down here.”

His head lowers with immediacy, and my heart does a fluttery thing as he murmurs a startled, “Yes, ma’am.”

Rosalind squeezes his sharp features as though there’s even an ounce of baby fat left to pinch. Slapping a kiss to his forehead, she succeeds in shocking the rest of the color from his skin. “What a good boy!”

“Colette!” Mom calls, and if Rosalind calling *Velspar* a good boy wasn’t already jarring, the smile on her face is. “Come here!” Her arm reaches, and I abandon Velspar with my mother’s roommate, because I have a habit of stranding him with elderly women, as I go to her. Her hand clasps mine, her eyes lit with unshed tears. “Baby, you *sang*. On a stage!”

“In a bar,” I offer because...aren’t we missing important details?

She waves a hand as though that hardly matters. “You had a standing ovation! You *sang*.”

A lump strangles the air from my lungs, and I squeeze her hand. “Yeah. I...yeah.”

She laughs. “I just saw the video maybe half an hour ago. I didn’t get a chance to call yet.” Looking past me, Mom smiles—actually *smiles*—at

Velspar. “You used protection?”

Velspar’s brain combusts. His mouth opens and shuts, eyes flicking between my mother and I as streaks of red cut across his cheeks and slash all the way up his ears.

Before I can ask Rosalind if Mom’s been put on morphine, her expression hardens into steel. “You *didn’t*?”

“We didn’t,” Velspar breathes, holding up his hands. “We haven’t. I won’t. Not...without...until...I...” His panicked gaze focuses on me, but I relax.

You’re doing fine, babe. Man, I wish my stammering were cute and bumbling like that.

A spear of betrayal glints into his gaze the moment he realizes I’m not going to help him. With the realization, spite creases his brow. Flipping a switch, he chills out completely, lifts his chin, and pockets his fingers. “I mean, no. We didn’t take a single precaution. Colette’s having triplets.” He casts me a tight-lipped smile that looks a lot like *your move, darling*.

Mom blinks at him, murmurs a *huh*, and fixes her brilliant grin back on me. “If nothing happened between you two, that’s even better. I’m so happy you *sang*, Colette! When all this mess started, I hated that you had to abandon everything you’d been working toward in order to take care of me. Bad choices with men aside, you have an opportunity to make a career out of this without applying to any of those musical arts colleges you were looking into. You can start living your dream *now*. People respond to you, your...*energy*. It’s like you were born to take the spotlight.” She cups my cheek. “I’m so proud, baby.”

I can’t believe I forgot. My mother’s history is full of bad choices involving men. I’m the product of one. She knows what putting any weight into my “relationship” would do because she *was* me at one point. Anything negative her parents said about her *bad choices* just shoved her deeper into them.

She had a lot of growing up to do when she had me. She had a lot of time to assess how she would do things differently in order to protect me from the things she did that left us crippled with poverty.

It’s not that she doesn’t have an issue here—it’s that she’s scared to address it at all. And, besides, me following my dreams and building a career that might give me a life is far more important than a strange dalliance with a dangerous man.

Tension eases out of me as I smile. “It was a-mazing.”

She nods, and a tear cascades down her cheek. “You’ve shown the world what you can do in spite of your impediment. I’m so proud.”

My heart winces, but I keep smiling.

Until Velspar says, “Pardon?”

Mom’s smile turns a touch plastic as she gives Velspar the briefest consideration, treating him like a leaf that’s blown across her path—noticed and forgotten by the next step.

“Colette’s stutter isn’t something that deserves any spite. It hardly requires recognition. She is amazing, period. If she wants to make this her career, there are going to be many people who claim her popularity depends on the fact she’s *overcoming* her impediment by achieving the courage to talk in front of crowds. No matter what she does, it is going to be used to define her. People who forget her name will look her up as *singer who stutters*. It’s inevitable since people focus so much on so little that matters.” Velspar’s fist clenches as he implores, “*At least* those closest to her, those of us who understand the sheer depth of her beauty, should refrain from defining her by her most insignificant parts. I can’t stand it.” His gaze shifts toward me and narrows. Lip curling, he mutters, “You have always outdone me fair and square. Your success has never stemmed from pity for your poor birthright or your speech impediment. You were bold and beautiful on that stage. The only spite that matters is the spite that got you up there. You acted to spite *me*, darling. Your little stammer had nothing to do with it.”

I can’t stop myself from laughing. Plunging my fingers into my hair, I take a couple deep breaths and keep myself from crying. “*My word*, Vel, you’re so arrogant you can’t even share spite.”

He sniffs, indignant. “Why should *I* have to share?”

I cast him a lopsided smile. “It’s the polite thing to do.”

He angles his body down to meet my eyes, just inches away. “Why should *I* have to be polite?”

“Menace.”

Grinning, he pecks a kiss to my head.

Mom clears her throat, and I remember we aren’t alone. More than that, Rosalind is beaming at us from her bed and pressing her fingertips together before her lips like we’re a soap opera.

Skin heating, I bite my lip. Velspar distracted me with his pretty words and his pretty eyes. It’s terrible how he so easily opens me up and knows

exactly what he needs to say in order to tear me down or make everything better.

Forcing innocence into my expression, I smile a bit stupidly at my mother and tilt my head like a sweet puppy who does nothing bad—even though being with Velspar in any amicable sense is the equivalent of peeing on the floor right after I’ve been let out.

Mom flicks a finger between us, threads of sincere worry balling up in her eyes. “Is this...a serious...*thing*?”

Oh, my dear sweet mother, I have no idea what kind of *thing* this is at all. *Thing* is a grand word for it. Vague and unknown. Undefined.

And since I have asked for clarifications and have been met with cryptic games, I look at Velspar and let my mother’s question echo in my eyes. I’m *everything* to him, sure. But does that mean we’re *dating*? Are we going to get married someday? Can words even describe what we’re doing when he talks so fondly about my *spite*?

Romantic relationships, according to my romance novels, don’t start until after the hate shifts into love.

He deflates and drones, “No, of course not. I would only die for you, so this *thing* is really not serious at all.”

“When you’re so dr-dramatic, it’s hard for me to tell what you a-ctually mean.”

Sticking his tongue in his cheek, Velspar sighs, then he turns on his heel. “I am going to go play in the kitchen, darling. It was a pleasure, Ms. Helen, Ms. Rosalind.” With a flagrant wave, he steps out of the room.

Rosalind guffaws, slapping her wrinkled palms against her thighs. “I like that boy!”

I do, too, sounds in my head, but I shove the words aside. “He’s a m-m-mess.”

Mom watches the doorway like Velspar is about to reappear. When he doesn’t, she seems content to shove thoughts about him aside as well. “So, Colette, what are your plans?”

“Plans?”

“You’ve got a boost of visibility. Are you going to use it in order to kick start your platform? I’m sure you can teach yourself an instrument online. Probably guitar. You can find cost-effective guitars at pawn shops!” She’s glowing, and I haven’t seen her this upbeat since the accident.

I don’t say that I’m almost entirely certain Velspar would buy me a new

guitar if I wanted one. I seat myself gently on her bed and consider my options. It would be a little too pompous to let this opportunity slip through my fingers. “M-m-maybe I’ll ssst-art an account on YouTube. It will give m...me access to an a-udience if they s-s-s—sub-sc-sc—” I swallow and shift my weight.

Some of the light on Mom’s face falls. “You were doing so well today.”

Because Velspar was here. And he kills every nerve of miscommunication in my head that trips me up when getting my thoughts to my mouth. To him, the stutter means nothing, so with him, the worry that makes it worse is gone. If I do or don’t muddle through, he’ll respond to what I’ve said not how I’ve said it.

Everything he said before compels me to ignore my mother’s comment. My speech difficulties don’t define me. Whether or not people are willing to listen says more about others than it ever will about me. “If I can gain followers from th-is, I’ll have access to th-em when I have s—a product to sh-sh-share.” Heart light in my chest, I lift my chin. “I’m going to write an album, and I already know who will help me a-rrange the m-m-music.”

All I have to do is ask.



“No.” Velspar doesn’t give my request a single thought as he stirs a big pot of soup in the nursing home kitchens.

If I weren’t already jarred by the sight of him in a hairnet and apron, the fact he just shot down my rambling, eager plea to have him help me arrange the music for the album I just decided I really, really, *really* want to write would have absolutely done the trick.

It’s like I’ve been slapped.

“But...” I whisper.

He glances sidelong at me, and the corner of his mouth jumps into a smile. Eyes glittering, he laughs. “Aww, your face.” He cups my chin. “Too cute. You thought I’d help you with your whole heart. *Velspar, will you do this thing for me that is basically a full-time job?*” He drops my face and looks in the soup pot, droning, “Smile. Smile. Bats lashes.”

I just decided something else I really, really, *really* want to do. And that is strangle him with his ladle. Fists clenching, I allow anger to overpower embarrassment. Okay, sure. I did ask him to do something for me that is a full-time job. You know what I *didn’t* ask him to do, despite his claiming he *would*? Die for me.

Now that it's a tempting offer...I wonder if it remains open.

"Not even a *please*. No begging at all. Just pounce in on me while I'm *working* and act like I live to serve you." He clicks his tongue. "I'm offended, but what else is new?"

"Okay. I get it. You've rubbed it in m-m-more than enough." I roll my eyes. "I'll leave you to your l-lu-lucrative career."

He elevates his chin. "*Thank you*. I'm a chef."

I turn on my heel and almost make it past a metal counter filled with slices of chocolate pie before I'm whirling back around. "*Why?*"

"Because it's fun to cook, I think. Okay, sure, I'm only trusted to stir this pot, but the idea of cooking is fun, I think. The *atmosphere*."

I groan. "You know what I m-m-m-mean. Why d-d-don't you want to help m...me? It'll be so m-much fun." Scrunching my nose, I grit out the truth. "I *want* to, I want to make m-music with you. Of course we'll sh-share credit. Is th-at why? If th-is is some pretentious crap about you wanting m-my m-m-music to be completely m-mine, that's dumb."

"You want to make music with me?" he asks.

Folding my arms, I mutter, "Yes. No. Not anymore. You s...s-suck."

"Well, that's hardly some big revelation."

And yet, at times, he makes me forget completely.

"Colette."

I scowl at him.

"I am entirely messing with you. Of course I'll do anything you ask."

My heart responds to that before my brain, and I stare at his suave smile before the all-consuming urge to rip it off his face overwhelms me. My eye twitches. "Too late! I don't want your help anymore."

"Mhm, I'm sure." He drags me against his side. "How many love songs are you going to write about me? Entire odes to my kisses? Do you need more raw material?"

I shove against his chest and eye the blue fire beneath the giant pot on the stove. "Vel, th-ere's an open f-flame!"

He spills me backward away from it into a dip, and I clutch the straps of his black apron as I squeak and hold on for dear life. He purrs, "I'm being careful."

"*Vel!*"

We get kicked out of the kitchen.

Every muscle in my body is convulsing as Velspar and I sit at a table for

two in the vacant dining area. Because Velspar is...*Velspar*, when the real chef told us off like grade schoolers and asked us *politely* to take whatever we were doing elsewhere, he grabbed two plates of chocolate pie.

Both plates, in case anyone hasn't already assumed, sit on his side of the table, where he is taking consecutive bites out of both and offering me none. Because *Velspar* is *Velspar*.

And he'll always be *Velspar*. Spiteful, confusing, chaotic...occasionally wonderful...*Velspar*.

Ugh.

Gripping my hands atop the faux oak table, I tell myself to focus on how stupid Velspar Pratt looks in a hairnet, not how sensual the way his lips draw the thick chocolate off his fork looks. That would be lewd and inappropriate and potentially piss me off more.

Entire odes to his kisses.

As if.

He scoops a luscious, satiny bite and finally holds it up for me.

Unfortunately for him, I know his current mood. He's impish. If I dare try and accept this *offering* of his, he'll pull it away and laugh, making a show of eating it himself, hold what he has and I don't over my head. The day I met him he had already maxed out his mental maturity. That's a fancy way of saying he has the behavioral skills of a five-year-old.

"I was so excited," I snap. "And you ruined it."

"You hurt my feelings; I decimated yours. Isn't that just the way with us?" He inches the pie closer to my lips.

It takes all my emotional maturity to keep from swatting the fork across the room. "When did I hurt your feelings? I wasn't aware you had any."

"Ow." He touches the fork to my lips, and chocolate smears.

I lick it off and push farther away from him.

He watches my tongue move much too intently. "See...what hurts is the fact you trusted me enough to excitedly ask me to do something for you, but you don't trust me when I tell you you're important to me. Even after promising me that we could clash like fire and burn like stars, you act like we aren't playing for keeps. A day after saying we could live unashamed, you confess that you're ashamed of me. You don't understand a very simple thing, and I know it's my fault, but still...it hurts a bit to know you come to my bed for comfort yet haven't figured out that something has changed between us."

“What has changed?”

“I’m not trying to hurt you anymore. I want to play a violent game, but I don’t want it to hurt you. I want us both to have fun. I want you to believe me when I tell you good things, and I want your arrogant disregard when I tell you anything you don’t like. With our history, we’re never going to be something pure, but I’m happy to pay for what I’ve done however you see fit.” He holds the fork up and lifts his brows. “Own me already.”

I’m scared to let myself believe I should dare. Even if I want to. Even if *owning him* sounds like everything I’ve ever wanted. It’s not healthy. It’s not *pure*. It’s definitely not the soft romance stories I read and fall in love with. “Why do you want th-at?”

He cocks his head. “Want?” He blinks languidly, like a cat. “What makes you think I *want* it? It just is. I find it irritating you don’t act like it. That’s all.”

Eyes narrowed on his glimmering irises, I let my lips part as I move toward the fork.

The second before I close my mouth, he pulls away. Humor sparks to life on his face, and I growl. Launching to my feet and grabbing his hand, I hold him steady and stuff the bite in my mouth.

His smirk only broadens, utter patronizing in the lilt of his tone. “*That’s my girl.*”

My whole chest tingles as my face heats. Pulling back, I fall into my chair, fold my arms, and cross my legs. Bitter sweet chocolate pudding coats my tongue as I chew. I swallow. “I’m not your girl.”

He scoots his chair closer and gets another forkful prepared. “You definitely are. More each day, honestly. It’s delightful to wake from my nightmares and find a dream.” He feeds me another bite. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted... You are.”

“I don’t want to believe you.”

“That’s what makes it all the sweeter. Struggle like I have for years. Let me *watch.*” Malice, so familiar, gleams in his gaze as his lips part. He gives me another bite, closing his mouth in time with me. While I chew, he bites his lip, and every cell in my body feels how he’s making this intimate.

The jerk.

He’s still in a darn hairnet and apron, but I’ve never seen anyone more beautifully seductive.

This *thing* we have. It’s obsessive. Toxic. All fire and hate and games.

Our history is violent. Anger has tainted our feelings for one another from the start, whether we coped by acting on them or by ignoring them.

This thing isn't serious. It's severe.

"You'd die for me?" I whisper into my next bite.

"Are you asking me to?"

My head shakes, and I swallow. "I don't think I could live without you."

Demented bliss lights so violently in his gaze it brings both a smile and tears. He mutters a curse when he feels his own eyes fill, then he drops the fork on one of the plates so he can tug the collar of his shirt up and dry them.

"That...that was cruel."

Shrugging, I pick up the fork and the plate and continue eating while he falls apart.

"Tell me something sweet," he murmurs.

"That's no way to make a request—or so I'm told."

A broken chuckle moves his chest. "Please."

Thinking for a moment, I dismantle the crust of my pie. "It is so dreadfully dull without you around. I couldn't forget you if I tried."

His smile might just be everything, but I pick up the other slice of pie and pretend it isn't.

CHAPTER 19

♥ It is never too late to decide vengeance is not duly deserved.

~~~~

“Hey, Vel?”

“Hmm?” Velspar sets an overflowing plate of pancakes, eggs, bacon, and toast down in front of me before adding a glass of orange juice and a hot chai tea.

It has been almost a week of these lavish breakfasts, after which we descend into *music* until we get hungry for lunch or dinner, depending on exactly how badly we got swept away into our songs. Without rogue parties or road trips in the way, Velspar’s taken me to see my mom two more times in the past six days.

Her physical therapy is moving along slowly, but there is progress, and that’s the most we can hope for when at the beginning of all this we were told she might never walk again.

Katina is ignoring all unsavory subjects and acting like Velspar doesn’t exist during our usual daily texts, and I suppose that’s her version of waiting for me to wake up on my own without pressure.

On the whole, everything is perfect, so I hope I never wake up at all.

But I am left wondering...

“Am I still your maid?”

Velspar—elbow-deep in soapy water doing the dishes—chirps, “Of course.”

I take a bite of my toast and watch him scrub grease while I eat my lavish breakfast. Forgive my skepticism. “Are you *sure*?”

“Positive. If you’re confused, I can invest in a little uniform for you.” He blinks down at the soapy water. Hands going still, he looks up and meets my eyes with *far* too much enthusiasm.

“No.”

His mouth opens.

“No.”

He pouts, trying again.

“N. O.”

He sighs and resumes scrubbing.

Forcing myself not to giggle, I scoop up some eggs and let myself enjoy the perfectly cheesy bite. “It’s just—” I lick my lips. “—you’ve made me breakfast every day this week. And you’ve helped do the dishes. And I caught you st-st-starting laundry yesterday.”

“So the least you can do is appease my masculine whim to get you in a frilly apron?”

My eyes roll. “No.”

Despondent, he lifts a shoulder. “The contract says you’re not allowed to quit for another month and a half, so, yes, legally you are still my maid.”

I’m not allowed to quit. But also he’s not allowed to fire me so long as I do bare minimum, and I’d say with the recent arrangement I really am doing the *bare minimum* as far as cooking and cleaning are concerned. I nudge the cube of melting butter atop my stack of pancakes. “Are you going to fire me once the contract is up?”

“Why would I ever do something that would require you to get another job and spend less time with me?” He sets a frying pan in the strainer and begins rinsing a spatula.

The butter cube slips over the edge of my pancakes and lands in my eggs. “I appreciate what you’re d-d-doing, but I d-don’t want to take a-dvantage of you. Hopefully, with your help I’ll m...make s-s-something of my m-m-music and—”

Velspar dries his hands on a towel and looks down his nose at me. “You’re adorable. Stop it.”

My brow furrows.

He rolls his eyes and tosses the towel onto the counter. “You’re stressing yourself out for no reason, and I’m flattered that you feel guilty for taking advantage of someone who barely deserves to breathe in your presence. It’s lovely, truly. But can we both just recognize the fact that, despite your faithful efforts at being my housekeeper, my hiring you in the first place was just an excuse to get you back in my life?”

My eyes widen.

He rolls his eyes toward the ceiling. “Look more shocked, darling. It’s a testament to the fact I’m not a stalker that this happened purely by chance. Had I languished much longer without you, it may not have. You live here as long as you like. You do whatever you like. I’ll pay for anything you need. I’ll take care of your mother. You name it, it’s yours.”

I can't find words, and I don't even know what I'm trying to say when I whisper, "But..."

"But *that's taking advantage of me? But clearly I'm a poor rich boy who wants to be valued for something other than my money?* After everything I've done and will do to you, you've earned the right to 'take advantage of me' for the rest of my life. I couldn't care less about my money. The only thing I really care about is taking care of you in a capacity that allows us to be near one another. What's the point of being rich if I can't enjoy existing with the people I care most about?" He smiles—it's much too warm, and perhaps a touch somber. "I think it's silly that my family continues to work when they have enough to last them generations. If you can toss a child aside with a couple million dollars and not bat an eye, you should probably rethink what you're even doing with your life. They don't have anything to live for, so they put themselves at the height of society and run their empire in order to quench the emptiness. It's dull.

"I'd much rather just lazily enjoy you while we play our games and find meaning through what we can share with others. If using my money is taking advantage of me, have at it. I prefer to consider it *paying for the once-in-a-lifetime experience that is you.*" Gentle, he considers me, that smile of his unwavering as he folds his arms. "You are lifelong, eternal. Whatever you need is paper well spent. And you don't need to feel any sort of way about it. Okay? Don't blame yourself and call it *taking advantage*. Blame me and call it *buying your existence*. I really am so much of a pretentious fool I think I can buy a person who's priceless. Honestly, you're letting me get away with theft."

Velspar. Pratt. Velspar. Freaking. Pratt. Impulse demands I kiss him, beg him to kiss me, hold him and cry until the fact he just said *I'll take care of you as long as you want me to* sinks in. But I can't bring myself to be that vulnerable, so I say something else entirely.

Breath shaking, I set my fork down. "Can you teach m...me to d-d-drive?"

His eyes shine like I didn't change the subject at all, like he doesn't care, like he'll never care what I do or say so long as I'm including him. "Finally. I've been waiting for you to ask me that." Rounding the counter, he sits on the stool beside me and pulls his phone out of his pocket in order to show me a picture of a little yellow Volkswagen bug spattered with flower decals. "Isn't she cute? You told Katina once it was your favorite car, and this is

your favorite color, so—”

“Why does that background look like your garage?” I blurt.

He slides to the next picture and doesn’t change his chipper tone. “Because I already bought her for you. A young lady really should have a car, especially stubborn ones who don’t always like to ask for favors. She comes with a nice little handbook so you can study for your permit. I’ll take you for the test as soon as you’re ready, then we can find a parking lot somewhere to practice in.”

Every time I think I’ve discovered the extent Velspar can go, he obliterates my expectations.

I have a car.

He bought me a car and has been planning to teach me how to drive so I can get my license.

He really has been planning to keep me from the moment I walked back into his life. All he’s been waiting on is for me to accept the inevitable.

His arrogance is the most despicable thing in the world. *He* is the most despicable thing in the world.

Grabbing his collar, I smash my mouth to his. He makes a pleading sound before his phone falls out of his hand to hit the hard tile between us. The second his hands are empty, he wraps them around me, grappling for nearness as he plunges his fingers into my hair.

I kiss him like I’m drowning. Because I am. I am drowning in music and words, in being heard and seen and wanted. In the promise of fire and safety unlike anything I’ve known before. Panting, I cling, my mouth resting against his as I fight for a breath that tastes completely like cinnamon and mint. Velspar fills my entire being, and I never want anything else. “I adore you.”

“I love you.”

My heart stops, and he yanks his face back when I freeze. His chest rises and falls as he looks me over, his hand still clasped in my hair. Sore, my lips hang open. I couldn’t have just heard him right. It’s impossible. Just yesterday, he sighed *I hate you* into my hair as I cooed “Blank Space” by Taylor Swift against his chest while we were drifting off to sleep.

My hands on him, my legs tangled with his, his body tense with desire I refuse to let him act on, I murmured, “*Boys only want love if it’s torture,*” until he was hating me.

He hates me.

He doesn’t love me.



He misspoke.

Combing his fingers through my hair, he looks askance. “What?”

“You...”

“I did say I’d tell you who I loved once you adored me. I love you. I’ve loved you. For me, there has only ever been you, and I’ve never known how to handle the feelings you stir inside me. I have never been able to handle how angry it made me to know that you, lovable you, had earned even my affection when you have never been lacking, and me, unwanted me, could hardly earn your gaze.” He wets his lips, mindlessly lowering his thumb to the pulse in my throat. “You have caused me more pain than anyone. I have hated you for everything, most of all making me love you without...” A raw laugh escapes him. “...*without even knowing it.*”

Words are not forthcoming, but I choke them out horrifically. “How, how, how could I, could I p-p-p-possibly know! You—you were—”

“A menace?”

“Yes!” I all but shriek.

He flashes an alluring smile. “I still am.”

I shove him in the chest, and I can’t believe what he’s saying for even a moment. He loves me. He’s loved me. He hated how much he loved me. And he was awful because of it. It wasn’t just that he hated his *attraction*; he hated his love? You don’t hurt the people you love. You do everything you possibly can to...protect them from pain. A broken laugh tumbles out, and I cover my mouth. “How is *any* of th-is love? The way you—you’ve treated m-m-me— Th-at isn’t— It isn’t!”

“I’m not making any excuses, Colette. I’ve been awful. I am awful. I’m selfish. You didn’t act the way I wanted you to with me, so I responded horribly. I’ve been raised in a world where you don’t get better when someone hurts you—you get even. No one taught me how to deal with big emotions, and I have never been *good* enough to care.”

I hit his chest, push out of my seat, and head toward my door. I can’t be around him right now.

Without moving from his chair, he catches my arm and holds tight. “Don’t walk away from me.”

“Or what? You’ll stuff m-m-m-my head in the toilet?” My lashes flutter rapidly, holding tears at bay. I can’t believe this. I can’t believe *him*.

He frowns. “I have *never*—”

“You have flushed m-my food while you got your m-m-m-minions to

hold m-me b-back. You have m-m-made me believe you, believe you'd *let th-em.*"

His hold on me flinches.

I rake in a breath. "And you d-d-d-destroyed s...s-so m-ma—many of m...my th-ings—right in front of me—before waving your m-m-money in m...my face. You were unbearably cruel in how you 'looked out for me'."

"What's wrong with you?" he hisses, dragging me into his embrace and pinning my arms at my sides when I try to peel his fingers off me. "I don't expect anything to change. You never have to love me back. Everything we have become is more than I could have ever wished for. Why would knowing that I love you *bother* you?"

"Because!" My chest hurts, and I don't have much strength left to fight. "You d-don't get to tell m...me you *loved* me back then."

"I did."

"No."

He grips my chin. "I *did*. I do. I have done everything wrong, and I will never suggest I am capable of loving you right, but everything I have ever done to you—"

Gritting my teeth, I yell, "No! Th-at's what I d-d-d-don't want to hear! Love me sst—arting *now* when you, when you m-make me breakfast and write, write s...s-songs with me. D-don't tell me th-at the horrors that m-made me feel helpless were m-m-mot-mot—inspired by *love*."

He closes his mouth over mine in a vicious kiss, and it breaks my tears free to spill down my cheeks. Leaving me once I'm gasping, he rasps, "They were and weren't. I hated you. I loved you. You pissed me off. I couldn't bear the thought of a life without you. Every time you brought rotting food to school, I destroyed it and gave you something better. Whenever I saw something of yours that was broken, I got rid of it and gave you the money you needed to replace it. I didn't want you to know I was acting because I *cared* about you, because I *hated* that I cared about you. I wanted you to lie awake fearing me. I wanted you to pay attention to me. I wanted to take care of you, but I didn't want you to know, because I didn't think you would *ever, ever* care about me in return. You made that clear from the first moment I tried to talk to you.

"I was terrified. And lonely. And empty. And so angry. And I loved you. And you were the softest, most beautiful thing in my world, and you ignored me when I finally found the courage to take a chance on you. It *hurt*. It *hurt*,

and I couldn't bear not existing to you. I wanted you to hurt worse than me and know you'd made a mistake." Large tears fill his eyes and overflow. His lips shake as he forces more words to spill from them. "I don't deserve anything. I know that. I know I *should* have cradled you close and treated you preciously and given you everything your pride might allow me to, but there was so much pain in my life, and your presence made so much of it worse, and you rejected me on top of it all. *I love you, Colette.* I love you so much it's like my heart is bleeding for you constantly. I love the sound of your voice. I love how your spirit rises to meet mine, how your laughter lights up an entire room, how you touch me and taunt me. I love how completely brilliant you are. I love how, in a world where your *words* have been mocked, you've fallen in love with stringing them together and delivering them loud enough for everyone to hear. I love how you throw your entire self into everything you do. I love the shape of your hands when you sign. I love how engrossed you get in your books. I..." His heavy breaths slow as he touches my damp cheek with a slender finger. "There is nothing I don't love about you." Exhausted, he drops his forehead against mine. "I am wrong, Colette. I know that. I know I can never be right for you or anyone. I know my love is insufficient. I know my actions have made it worthless. But it is yours, and I am more than prepared for you to hate it. I'm am more than prepared for you to wake up one day and find someone else who cares about you and loves you the way you have always deserved. I don't know if I can ever be better. I doubt there's anyone perfect enough for you." The caress of his touch chills me to the bone. "Still, please. Stay in spite of me. Stay to use me. Stay and torture me. Move on and put me through agony every time I have to watch you with someone else. Just. Please. Whatever you do to punish me, don't let it be leaving."

I have never fallen in love before. I have been loved by my mother and Katina. I have known love to be something kind.

Velspar's *love* is twisted and *wrong*. It's so tainted with hate and vengeance I don't know how it can be called *love* at all. I don't want to call it that. Learning that he was taking care of me in his own demented way, learning he had boundaries, learning that he wasn't *as bad as I thought* is different than suggesting any of the "good" parts in the bad were because of *love*.

Love is kinder than to let hatred and anger and *getting even* dilute it.

It's easier to see him as the soulless villain I'm dancing with—an

unbreakable, unreachable creature without a heart to bruise. It's easier to pretend he is capable of growth *now* when it's softer between us.

Complicating the past, lining his blades with love and not pure poison, hurts more than it should.

I have not wanted to know his humanity, because making him *human* does not make him good.

It just makes him as helpless as I was under a different set of circumstances.

It makes us the same, and not in the strong, cruel ways. In the pitiful, broken ones.

I can't believe I've come all this way to learn that I don't want to destroy Velspar any more than he has wanted to destroy me. All we've ever wanted was each other without any idea how to express it. Violent, angry creatures that we are, we had no idea how to trust giving ourselves away.

*Why is your voice like that?*

I could have answered him. I could have taught him something. I could have even angrily responded and learned that *five-year-old Velspar* was as much of a flirt as he is now. I could have snapped *like what?* and heard him respond softly *like music*. But I didn't, and, oh, how we've spiraled.

I touch his throat, feel his pulse jump. "Kiss me."

His breath stammers, voice rough. "Colette..."

"Please."

"Colette...I..." He clutches me. "Tell me you'll stay with me. I'll do anything you want. Just promise to stay with me. In any way you see fit."

"I promise."

His eyes snap open, amber and glass. "You promise?"

I nod, letting my fingers slip to his chin, his jaw. "We have to talk though. M-more. About everything. I want to know what happened with your family. I want to tell you about my m-m-mother, why I d-don't have a father. Become human to me—something more complex than a faceless villain, someone who grows and learns, someone who chooses better even when they don't think it's possible. Become someone you believe is worthy of love. Act like it. And I will love you."

Breath leaves him, and he frames my cheeks with shaking hands. "You... you aren't saying that to give me false hope before you rip it away to make me pay?"

"I'm not trying to hurt you anymore either. I'm s-sorry."

“For what, darling?” he whispers against my lips. “There’s nothing you’ve ever done that you need to apologize for.”

My fists clench. “I didn’t see you. You needed me to, and I refused, because I knew that was the best way to hurt you, and it was all I could do to hurt you because I don’t handle the guilt of *hurting someone intentionally* well. We’ve been fighting like this forever—both of us—and there’s a lot of hatred in our history.” Shifting on my feet, I try to hide myself against him. “You did scare me. But it was a different kind of fear than everyone else warranted. You’ve always been different.” I shudder. “Vel...what if we’re both from broken homes with damaged opinions on how to handle emotions we don’t understand?”

“What are you saying?” His hold on me solidifies.

I bite my cheek, grip the hem of his shirt. “Whenever you kissed someone else, it messed me up. I was watching you all the time. And pretending I wasn’t. All the time, Vel. I couldn’t stop myself.” The words rush out of me. “You were so beautiful and deadly, and I told myself not to hate you because I knew better than to so much as think about boys. My mother always warned me about them, so I never figured it out. But I think—I think maybe—I wanted you. And I hated you for not even giving me a chance.” I tug on his shirt and hit my head against his chest. “So...ha. Had you been a little nicer, I might have figured it out sooner, and had I been a little more open, you probably would have been the one adoring me.”

“Definitely,” he exhales, wrapping me up as he curses. “I’d have made you my princess and forced people to bow when they approached.”

A wry laugh escapes me. “Maybe it’s better for everyone we were so dense.”

He kisses my cheek. “It’s never too late for people to start bowing.”

It’s never too late.

The idea of that eases something tight inside me.

It is never too late.

## CHAPTER 20

♥ In the end, you can always join the ranks of the monsters.

~~~~

It's silly how after we come apart we link our pinkies like children and both pick at the tepid food on my plate. Velspar made enough for five people, and I think he was planning to steal once he'd finished the dishes. Our stools are so close I can feel the heat of his thigh against mine.

In the comfortable silence, my heart weaves lyrics and melodies.

Cold hands. Violent eyes.

You have me hypnotized.

He takes my slice of toast straight from my fingers and bites into it right where I last did. Holding it near the eggs, he mumbles through his chews, and I scoop some on. Swallowing, he squeezes my pinkie. "Your mother. What happened?"

I cut into one soggy pancake. "Last year, in December, she was hit by a car."

His hand tenses.

"She was walking to work for a late shift on Christmas Eve, and the streets were mostly empty, except for one drunk driver. No insurance. And of course we don't have medical insurance, so—"

"Making a memo to fix that immediately..." he mutters into his eggs with a huffed breath.

My chest warms. "—it evaporated all our savings. Initially, they thought she'd be mostly paralyzed from the waist down, but then a few s-s-s—operations unpinched enough nerves that there was hope. I was only working in order to save up for a fine arts college, but the part time I was doing shifted into over full time in order to stay on top of the medical debt."

"So she's in recovery at the nursing home because she needs full-time care, and you have to work full time in order to pay for it."

I nod.

He curses, and I put down my fork in order to steal my toast back. Seamlessly, he plucks the fork up and saws into the pancakes.

"She's doing a lot better than she was even though she still needs so

much help. She couldn't sit in a wheelchair at first. Now she can go to the bathroom and the dining room. It feels so slow, but it is big improvement." I crunch.

"Debt's gone," Velspar says. "Do you like where she is now? We could move her here." He lifts his chin toward the suite connected to the kitchen. "I can hire a personal nurse, and she can stay there. You spend your nights in my room anyway, so—"

A nervous laugh strangles itself leaving my chest. "Y-yeah, I can s...s-see that being the opposite of a-wkward."

Velspar doesn't smile as he looks at me, and I realize he's not making an inappropriate joke.

I do spend my nights in his room. If I want to move my small collection of books and personal items into his room, he'd let me. And my mom could move in. And maybe it would be awkward for a little while, but Velspar does have a way of charming people. I have no doubt he'd win her over.

My heart squeezes, and I force my attention back down on my food. "M-m-m-maybe when it's easier to mo-move her? Right now, being in a car is painful."

He chuckles, and *now* he is teasing me. "Colette, did you just fall more in love with me?"

"I have given no indication of being in love with you at all."

"Mhm." He kisses my cheek, and it's a syrupy, gross thing I scrub away immediately.

Narrowing my eyes on him, I snip, "Tell me about your brother."

All humor falls out of his eyes, and he drags his gaze elsewhere as he stuffs a large bite of pancake in his mouth. "What's there to tell? We share genes."

"Alton Pratt, voted most handsome according to the city newspaper. Spends his days running businesses, donating to charities, and kissing puppies."

"He is allergic to puppies, and the joy of others." Velspar's lip curls as he closes off.

"You mean to tell me someone you don't like is allergic to puppies and you didn't organize to have hundreds brought to their bedroom?"

Velspar lets go of my hand and sweeps back his hair. "I once *found* a puppy in a box when I was ten and wandering around the city because being at home was worse than being potentially kidnapped. I brought him home. I

named him Red. Alton sneezed *once* at dinner, and my parents went on a witch hunt, found Red, and killed him.”

My heart stops. “W...you...you’re being d-dr—”

“I am not being dramatic, darling. My father grabbed Red up by the scruff and all but threw him into the arms of a maid. He yelled at me for hours, acted like I was trying to murder Alton. I searched every pound in the city, learning too late they’d sent him to one outside the city limits.” Velspar shifts in his seat and can’t bring another bite to his lips. He drops the fork with a sigh. “Objective success, I suppose. I can’t look at dogs anymore, so Alton’s no longer threatened.”

Nausea tightens in my gut, and I don’t think I’m hungry anymore either. I put down the final sliver of toast.

Softly, Velspar says, “Something about us Pratts? We’re very good at being cruel while looking nice. We have *other people* to do our worst deeds, so our hands stay perfectly clean. It bothers me so much when you claim I was ever like that with you. I *always* took an intimately personal approach to you. I didn’t want my hands clean if it meant someone else’s would take my place. If anything was going to stain me, I wanted it to be you.” A raw, hateful smile glints in his eyes before he’s letting it spread across his cheeks. He curls a finger beneath my chin. “Look at me, darling. You’ve defiled every inch.”

I hum as my body responds to his teasing. “You’re too good at this,” I whisper.

“I’ve had so many sleepless nights to practice.”

Lifting my hand to his chest, I let myself feel the warmth of his heart. “Leslie said they hurt you physically.”

Velspar’s eyes close. “Of course she did.”

I press my lips together and wait.

At last, he mutters, “Why do you think I always ignored school dress code?”

“Because a polo simply was not fashionable enough for you.”

He lets a laugh puff out his nose. “No. Well, yes, but no. There were no light jacket options with the short-sleeve polos, and the long-sleeve dress shirt option was too see-through. I had to cover bruises. It’s funny.” His tone doesn’t make it sound funny. “Somehow I managed to end up spoiled even when the rod wasn’t sparred.”

“You’re not sp-spoiled.”

“Beautiful, I am most definitely spoiled. You are sitting in my luxury kitchen in my mansion with a garage that houses almost twenty cars. You haven’t even explored the entire grounds. I have gardens and recreation buildings, a mother-in-law suite farther up the property, an alcove dedicated to bonfires surrounded by man-made waterfalls. There is no question as to why I am unbearable.”

Goodness. He really is unbearable. “You have a mother-in-law suite?”

His pretty eyes blink as though he’s just remembering that fact. “Huh. Yes. I suppose that would be more comfortable for your mother and us once she’s ready to come home.”

Home. This place is *home*.

Before I can close the distance and kiss him, an odd buzz begins a staccato rhythm below us. With a quick peck to my mouth, Velspar sweeps down to get his phone and frowns at the screen. Closing his eyes, he turns out of the room. “What?”

Because we’ve already established the fact we’re basically toxic monsters, I ignore his effort at privacy and follow him through the foyer toward the front parlor. Velspar picks up the pace, marching right out of the room and down a hall leading toward the pool lounge.

Curse his long legs.

“Yes. So?”

Curse his vague conversation.

He pushes all the way out past the bar toward the pool, and stops abruptly near the deep end. “And if I refuse?”

I settle in behind him and attempt to overhear the other side of the conversation. All I gather is a masculine voice.

Velspar turns on his heel, startling me, and before I know what’s happening, he’s saying, “I guess I don’t have a choice then,” and pushing me into the pool.

I hit the water hard and sputter as I kick my way to the surface and cling to the ledge. “You *monster!*”

Velspar pockets his phone and regards me with a pouting frown he morphs smoothly into a delighted smile. His gaze skims over my soaked dress, heating my skin, and I tuck myself right against the wall in order to hide.

Sniffling, I whimper, “It’s cold.” I hold out my hand and opt for pitiful eyes. “Help.”

“Darling, we both know you’re going to pull me in.”

Water drips from my lashes as I blink them sadly.

Sighing, Velspar removes his coat with his phone, sets it safely aside, and clasps my hand. I scramble to escape the icy glove, and he murmurs, “Hold on.” Crouching, he grasps my elbows and picks me up out of the water like I weigh nothing. He rises to his full height and sets me on my feet once he’s there.

Water spills off me, and I huddle against him for warmth, effectively soaking him without fulfilling his expectations of pulling him in. Ha ha ha. “Who called?” I ask.

“See, if I wanted you privy to the conversation, you wouldn’t be soaked right now.”

I glare up at him and fling water from my hair, splattering droplets across his cheeks.

Closing his eyes, he blocks his face with a palm. “Quit it. It was Alton.”

A lump drops into my gut, and I go still. “What does he want?”

Sighing, Velspar rubs my damp back. “He was speaking on behalf of our parents. There’s an *event* coming up that I am required to attend—which is code for *come be perfect in front of cameras and the wealthiest parts of society*. Or else. Obviously.”

I sneer. “Obviously.”

His fingers straighten my wet hair, and I don’t know what’s colder, but I shiver as he combs and combs, watching me. His hand moves to trace droplets down my cheeks. He catches one that falls from my lip and carries it to his tongue. The action heats me to my core, and I’m almost too dazed when his lips part again to hear him say, “They demand I bring you.”

“What? Why?”

“So you can be humiliated out of my presence and their sight. Discarded as I am, I still have to be a Pratt. The second they know your name, they will remember who you are, and things will be brutal for both of us.”

“And you *have* to go?” I whisper.

His gaze falls to the way our damp clothes press into one another, the way I’m molded to him, and he lets a touch skate down my arm. “These are the only times they pretend to pay any attention to me.”

I flinch. “So? Why do you need that attention?”

The solemn moment breaks, and he angles his head to look down on me. “Darling, you know I need *all* the attention.”

“They don’t deserve you,” I hiss, gripping his wet shirt. “They *don’t*.”

“No one deserves me. I’m entirely too much for everyone.” His cocky smile makes it seem as though he’s proud of that, but it’s clear the dark meaning behind his words opens countless scars.

He’s not being proud. He’s recognizing the fact he’s a monster.

I seethe, “If you take me with you, I will not be silent.”

Fire sparks, and he grips my mouth, pressing my cheeks into my teeth. “No?”

I mutter, “*No*.”

“Good. You want to cause some chaos and burn down my parents’ glistening little party with me, darling? You want to *make* everyone see and hear us whether they want to or not? You want to be *trouble*? You want to be monstrous?”

My heart lunges for his, an awful, angry thing confined for far too long. “Yes.”

He releases my mouth and hikes me up around his hips, holding my thighs as he abandons his phone and his coat beside the pool and marches us—damp and dripping—into the house. “Then we need to get you fitted for the kind of dress only the truly heinous wear.”

“I’ll call Leslie.”

He laughs as we leave puddles on the floor. “She will love that you see her as truly heinous.”

I’m sure she will. In a strange way, it’s comforting to be among the despicable—especially knowing we’re about to face someone *worse*.

CHAPTER 21

♥ Sometimes you can still be the princess, even with the villain at your side. ~~~

Are you sure you're comfortable? Velspar's hard words and pinched expression linger in my mind as I sit in my—as Leslie described it—*divine* red evening gown. The flurry of a smile on my lips comes entirely from the way Velspar circled and circled me while I was trying this *divine* thing on. *It's a little bit...not to mention the... Plus... Also...* he stammered, hand gesturing first at the horrific neckline that plunges between my breasts, then at the thigh-high slit that reveals my leg as I walk, then at the way my entire back is bared.

Leslie called him a big baby. I fluttered my lashes and asked if he needed me to put something else on.

His response was a curse. *No. Heck no. I just want to make sure you're comfortable.*

I glance across the limo where Velspar—in a dashing full-black tux—rests his chin in his hand and peers out the window at the nightscape of the city rushing by. Boredom is rife in his expression. But he also hasn't looked at me since my hair and makeup were done. Maybe he's as enamored by me as I am by him.

Crystals—that might actually be diamonds—shine all over the crown my hair has been twisted into. Fiercely dark makeup—that matches the liner and gold flecks of Velspar's—brightens my eyes. Red lipstick defines my mouth while a gloss forces my lips to shine as though they're constantly wet. Around my shoulders, a lavish feathery wrap softens the solid red with a pillowy white.

I cuddle the puff and undo my seat belt.

Velspar doesn't look at me. “If you move any closer, I am going to destroy your makeup. And your dress. And that darned fluffy thing that I'm certain serves purely as a—”

I plop myself down next to him, making sure to cross my legs so the slit opens *all* the way up and the white high heel straps that go all the way up my calves are on full display.

Breath catches in his chest. “Colette...”

I hug his arm, and watch the reflection of his eyes close in the window. “You’re t-t-tense.”

“And you’re stammering words you usually don’t have any issues with,” he murmurs, low, lethal, beautiful.

“I a-lways th-ought you, thought you knew m-m-my problem w-words.” He’s hopelessly addicted to me. And that addiction is my drug.

He sighs. “‘M’ and ‘d.’ ‘S’s’ followed by a consonant and in general. ‘Th’s’ and some ‘a’ words catch you, but you usually don’t repeat those sounds.” He plants his palm on my revealed thigh, and the frigid touch sends a spark of icy awareness up my spine. Voice rough, he mutters, “I know you. In every way that I’ve had access to, I know you.”

I thread my fingers with his and sigh into his existence, into being known. It settles my nerves and quiets the beat of my heart. “Did you bring the matches?”

He squeezes my hand. “Naturally. It wouldn’t behoove a gentleman to leave a lady with a spark and nothing to facilitate its light.”

I giggle. “*Behoove.*”

“Insulting my vocabulary, darling?”

“I love it.”

He pulls my hand to his lips and traces one long, red nail as the limo slows in front of an extravagant building. “I’m so glad you sharpened your claws,” he whispers into my skin.

Before the door is even open, cheers and camera flashes erupt around the roped-off, carpeted lane leading from the car, up a flight of stairs, to the massive event hall. It’s so glitz and glam. My heart stumbles.

If I pretend it’s a concert, this is everything I’ve dreamed of.

The moments slow, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Velspar tucks his lips near my ear. “I’m going to play it up for the cameras. You are stunning, Colette. Let me make sure every picture worth posting proves you’re mine.”

“You’re impossible. How do you know people won’t th-ink *you* are *mine*?”

He laughs quietly. “Because of the sexism in our society?”

“I d-d-did not want an a-ctual answer.”

“Pity.”

The doors open, and Velspar gathers me up so we spill out in a waterfall

of my red skirt. My gown's train washes behind us against the carpet as he holds me unbelievably close and smiles his charming Pratt smile. People eat it up. Questions explode at us. Reporters with microphones hang past security guards. Girls our age and slightly younger scream like Velspar is more of a celebrity than I knew.

He locks eyes with them, and his lips curl wickedly. Someone faints.

It's so startling watching a woman collapse I hardly hear Velspar's laugh. His eyes fix on me as he stops our procession toward the building. In full view of everyone, he tips back my chin, reveals my neck, and dips a hungry kiss against my throat. I gasp, clutching him, and fight to retain some shred of dignity as he melts my insides into mush in front of a hundred people and a dozen cameras.

He licks, and I bite my cheek.

That's it.

I'm going to strangle him when we get home. I am going to wear this get-up all night and refuse to let him touch me. He will pay. And it will be wonderful.

Drawing away, he slowly opens his eyes on me. His overwhelmingly lovely smile remains unfazed even as a glaze of desire taints his amber irises. He mouths *mine*, and I whisper, "Yours."

Blush cuts across his cheeks, and he abruptly turns us toward the steps, leaving me to stumble after his long strides. In another instant, he's whirled me into his arms so he can take the stairs two at a time toward the giant double doors at the top. A laugh explodes out of me—lost beneath the sounds of everyone losing their minds—and I hug him around the neck, blissfully happy.

Once we're inside, a single word douses my joy and turns me icy.

"Father." Velspar's grip on me becomes steel, and I relax my hold around his neck in order to pull up the façade Velspar trained me to use all throughout my childhood—disinterested, bored, untouchable.

I locate Neal Pratt, the man who owns all the land beneath our feet and all the businesses upon it, the man whose ancestors built a village into a town into a city long, long ago.

His features are as sharp as Velspar's, his eyes just as magnetic even if they aren't exactly the same whiskey shade. The thin lines around his mouth and eyes age him, but he approached age with grace. When he smiles, it's slick as oil and deceiving as a serpent. "Vel."

Velspar's voice outdoes his father's entirely. No contest. Velspar is handsome in ways this man probably never was.

Silence stretches between them in the golden hall that leads into what appears to be a ballroom from what I can see through the open doors. Polished tile floors. Elegant music blending with refined voices.

I don't want to be out here talking to someone who hurt Velspar. I don't like the strain Neal puts in the air. I don't like the tense fear coiling in my stomach that suggests Neal starts malevolence while Velspar purely finishes it.

I want to go in the shiny room. And play.

It's an amusingly childish thought, and I can't help thinking Velspar would love it.

Tittering a laugh, I channel Leslie's better-than-thou (because I'm in a pretty dress and you aren't, ha) attitude and employ my greatest defense against my stutter—lacing my words with singsong. “Mr. Pratt.” I dangle my hand like I'm a princess because, hey, Velspar is holding me like one. “It's so *charming* to meet you.”

His hand lifts to take mine, but Velspar turns me away from his father and lets me down. “Yeah, don't touch her, all right?” Velspar's smile could freeze a volcano.

His father returns the frigid expression as he plants his hand behind his back. “What an immature protective streak, Vel. Not that I'm particularly surprised.” His eyes narrow into slits. “I do doubt anyone here would be interested in taking someone with no prestige from you.” Tone light and lined in venom, he asks, “Could you not find anyone closer to your status? Beauty matters little for men like us.”

Not missing a beat, Velspar flashes his teeth in a gilded grin. “I'll be sure to tell Mother that if I see her. As my darling said—*charmed* as always, Father.” Clasp my hand, Velspar moves us down the long hall and into the expanse of the ballroom.

My breath catches once we step in, and my head tilts back to take in a chandelier made entirely of scintillating shards of glass. It throws splashes of rainbow over the painted ceiling. Gold crown molding frames the walls, and all of the luxury goes on *endlessly*. Live music trickles from the stage. Refreshments arranged in glorious displays weigh down long tables covered with pristine white cloths.

I want to taste everything. I want to touch everything. I want to do

everything.

Can we dance? Is this the kind of party people *dance* at?

I don't *see* anyone dancing, but if I *ask* and all...

Velspar closes my mouth by pressing a fingertip beneath my chin and drones, like he isn't hopelessly in love with me, "Do look more out of place, darling."

My eye catches on dark skin, and I squeal.

Dropping his arrogance, Velspar jerks me closer, like I've been attacked, and curses. "What? *What?*"

I point across the room. "It's Katina!"

"Of *course* it's Katina. Her family manages the stocks of almost everyone here."

"She's always at these things?" I sing.

"More or less." Velspar clears his throat. "Our interactions are...brief."

My brow furrows as I tilt my head.

He lifts his chin toward her, and I look to find her shooting him a middle finger—which he responds to in kind—before smiling at me. "Brief."

I roll my eyes and sign at him. *You're such a child.*

It's tradition. He manages to look exceptionally refined and somewhat offended.

Locking eyes with Katina, I ask, *Can you believe him?*

The only thing I can't believe is that you're here with him.

That's fair enough, I suppose.

What are you doing? she asks. Even from all the way over here, the worry in her dark eyes comes through before something distracts her, and she looks away in order to smile prettily.

I tug on Velspar's sleeve. "Let's go join up with her."

"This isn't a party, Colette."

It is. It literally, actually *is*. I titter, "Why not? Because you aren't drunk?"

He thinks for a moment and nods. "Yes, now that you mention it. There should be...ah." Scooping an arm around my waist, he glides me toward the nearest waiter carrying a tray of champagne glasses and scoops one tall flute up. "Mmp." He lifts a finger at the man, stopping him from carrying on. He downs the glass, returns it, and grabs another before flicking his fingers in dismissal.

"That was rude," I express in monotone.

Velspar sips the bubbling drink with an arched brow that says in no questionable terms *who do you think I am?*

Honestly? Better than the hardened façade is what I think he is. Deep, deep inside Velspar Pratt is a squishy center full of affection and playfulness. He's someone sweet and rough who cares a whole lot about the people who pay him the time of day—even if it's only for a moment. I kiss the corner of his jaw, forgetting I'm wearing lipstick until I see the brush of my error on his skin. "Oops..."

Downing the rest of his second drink, Velspar catches my hand and stops me from wiping the mark away. "Leave it. I need its strength."

My cheeks warm.

"Doll!" Leslie cries, startling my attention toward her open arms draped with flowing starlight drop sleeves. She pulls me in for a prim and proper plastic greeting, then she frames her fingers at her chin and lets her lips pinch as she takes me in. "Hm. Well." Her attention flicks to the smudge on Velspar's face. "I'm not even surprised..." Tossing her hair, she hooks a finger at me. "Come, doll. This is your *debut*. I've many crowds to introduce you to. Remember all names and professions, but don't let anyone here convince you that they *aren't* your subjects." Displaying the stunning room with a sweep of her arm, she purrs, "These are the paltry cogs in your kingdom." Her fist clenches, sparkling nails catching light like little knives. "Demand their respect."

Velspar stuffs something in her mouth, and a high-pitched sound flees her throat. She waves her fingers in front of her face as she looks between Velspar and the person carrying a tray of tiny hors-d'oeuvres...which she was just assaulted with. I crane my neck, trying to get a better look, while Velspar says, "Chew and swallow, Les. It's unacceptable for a lady to spit out her food—especially food offered to her by her benevolent host." He lifts a cracker topped with a glob of soft cheese to his mouth and takes a bite before offering me the rest.

I have located heaven. The rush of salty, buttery flavors wash into every part of my mouth as I chew, and—my word—if all the food here tastes like this, we have to go decimate the displays *immediately*.

Seemingly on the verge of tears, Leslie chews, swallows, and trembles. "Look at what you've done. Now I'm going to carb crash. And then I'll be *starving* again."

My heart pinches, and I touch Leslie's hand. "When you feel hungry a-

gain, we'll have d-d-dinner together."

She glares at me and jerks her hand away.

"Dinner together..." Velspar echos, trying the words on his tongue. Laughing suddenly, he cups Leslie's face. "Yes. Dinner together. We're having dinner together, and we're going to peer-pressure you into eating an entire meal, and we're all going to have a slumber party in my theater room. It's going to be marvelous. Where's Reg and Sean?"

"Katina?" I ask, eyes trained on the affectionate way he's touching Leslie. It doesn't quite bother me like I think it once would have.

"Obviously Katina," Velspar quips as he searches the masses and releases Leslie.

I wince. "Wait. Reg?"

Leslie pouts. "You have a problem with Reg? Sure, he's more brutal than Sean, that freaking goof, but he's just about like the rest of us." Examining her nails, she hums. "Now *Bryan*? Bryan's been so dead to us Velspar practically banished his entire family from the city."

My brows rise.

Leslie laughs. "You didn't know? Oh, doll, when Velspar graduated, his family divvied up some *enterprises* for him to run, to try to keep him out of trouble. He was adamant about—"

"You talk too much," Velspar mutters, lifting a hand and waving someone over.

"Well, *someone* has to explain the revolting mess that is you." Leslie covers her mouth like Velspar might stuff more food in it as she turns her attention back to me. "Velspar made sure he got rights over everything that belonged to Bryan's family and...*relocated* him."

Sighing, Velspar lets his fingertips slip up the skin bared beneath my feathery wrap. He takes his time touching every vertebra of my spine. "Bryan was one of my close friends. He knew better than to lay a finger on you. Hurting you was betrayal. I make people pay in accordance with the severity of their crimes. He's lucky I didn't murder him."

The fact Velspar tore down an entire family for my sake doesn't surprise me. The fact he *owns* anything in this city with the way I now know his family treats him does. I've not seen him work a day in his life. "You have enterprises?" I ask.

"Sure."

Leslie's eyes flash with gleeful malice. "Sure. He's taken what he was

given for propriety's sake, maximized it, and claimed his birthright fully—out of pure spite since he almost immediately delegated the workload once he was content with his accumulation. I'd say you own the half of the city you live in, no?"

"Why should *I* have to live on land I don't own? My stupid family seemed to think I was an idiot because you outdid me, Colette. They never once assumed that maybe we were both geniuses, so they didn't so much as give my very strategic business requests a second thought before signing over the keys I needed to cut them off from my rightful half." Velspar smiles as Reginald and Sean make their way to us from the other side of the vast room. I stare at his profile, computing.

He did *what* now?

This man is terrifying. Seriously terrifying.

Clapping his hand to Reginald's, the terrifying man icily greets the brunet. "Hey. Been a minute."

Reginald pales slightly, glancing my way before saying, "Hi."

Sean beams. "The gang's all here." Gasping, he leans close to Leslie and murmurs, "Is that cream cheese on your lip?"

Blushing red-hot, Leslie jolts back and lifts a hand to the corner of her mouth. "It is *not*. Get away from me."

While Sean torments Leslie, Reginald shifts on his feet and adjusts his tie with one meaty hand.

Velspar smoothly prompts, "Reg? As we discussed?"

Reginald clears his throat, wary. "Uh. I don't actually really remember what happened, Colette."

"Ms. Hart," Velspar corrects, and Reginald shoots him a dark look. Velspar raises his brows. "What? You *disrespected* her. Now you can show a little *extra* respect. It's still on her whether or not I remove you from existence, so you might as well grovel a bit and show you're sincere."

Closing his eyes, Reginald lets out a slow breath and murmurs, "*Ms. Hart*, I don't remember what happened, but I'm sorry. I'm told I took a joke too far."

"Too far?" I hiss. "A *joke*?" My heart thunders in my chest, and I feel sick.

Velspar takes one look at my face, sighs, and says, "Sorry. Seeing as she's the only one who remembers what happened, I guess what you did was unforgivable."

I grit my teeth. “You tried to rip me out of my clothes. Of course it’s unforgivable.”

Reginald’s eyes widen, and he looks between us as he takes a step back. To his credit, he manages to look entirely horrified as he lifts his palms and shakes his head. “There’s no way. I... I wouldn’t...”

“You *did*,” Velspar notes, an inky bleakness to his tone. “And you aren’t forgiven. So I guess we’ll see what I want to do with you later.”

Reginald cups a hand to his mouth, whispering, “I...I’m sorry. There’s no way... While drunk, I may have tried to scare you, but I would never go through with it. I’m so sorry.”

Regally, Velspar sighs and lifts his gaze toward the glittering chandelier. “Perhaps you should reevaluate how much you drink if it makes you think what you did was an acceptable joke.”

Reginald scowls at Velspar before caving and dropping his attention to the floor. “Fair enough.”

“I know. It is *more* than fair enough.”

My jaw clenches, and I grip Velspar’s lapel. “D-d-do *you* forgive him?”

“My opinion does not matter in the least, darling.”

Bitterness coats the back of my tongue, and I straighten myself. “*Fine*. D-do you *be-believe* him? He would, he wouldn’t have gone th-rough with it?”

Velspar regards his friend, and his gaze darkens, crackling. “All things considered, it hardly matters, but, sure, I believe him. It’s bad enough to taunt something so crass without any reason, and we happen to have the proof that things went *far enough*, but I do doubt Reg would have gone completely through with such a threat. As it stands, he didn’t touch you inappropriately when it would have been much too easy to do so. That excuses little, but I suppose it might settle your conscience, Reg.”

Seething breath pours through me, and I can hear Reginald saying how Velspar was obsessed with me, how someone should get him, how Velspar wouldn’t want him to have all the fun. I guess that proves this man had no intention of finishing the job himself. Looking back now, it’s easy to believe he was just trying to scare me—like old times. My dress was hardly made immodest until Leslie lunged for me, too.

Eye twitching, I cast a look at Leslie—who stood there and *watched* the whole thing happen. She outright attacked me that night, and we’ve become almost friends since.

It’s so much easier to pretend the people who have hurt me don’t have

souls or limits. It's so much easier to pretend there's nothing more to the story. Liquor-addled actions don't deserve innate forgiveness. Anger or gloating or twisted *amusement* aren't good reasons for what happened. I don't have to be the better person here or accept any apologies.

I don't have to give anyone a second chance.

But some people are monsters in human skin, and others are just the opposite.

I know that now. Irrefutably.

I never would have known which side Velspar fell on had our story ended when I refused to see past what I thought I knew. What Reginald did was wrong. But even I know how easy it is to get drunk on Velspar's attention or approval. I don't know what I might do for it if it didn't already belong to me.

Tempering my breaths, I ask again, "Do *you* forgive him?"

Velspar rests his head against the crown of my hair, murmuring, "Darling, I love you more than anything in the entire world. I will do whatever makes you most comfortable, but if I honestly thought Reg capable of the horrors he, during a lapse of judgment, taunted, I would kill him right here with my bare hands. And that's just the rotten truth."

I believe every last word Velspar has ever said to me, and these are no different, so I slip from his side and stab Reginald in the chest with one red-tipped finger. Looking up at him, I hiss, "No m-m-more dr-drinking around m...me. No m-m-more joking a-bout me. A-ny request I m-make, you fulfill without complaint. G-got it?"

His wide eyes hone in on my finger before lifting to my face, but he nods. "Yes, Ms. Hart."

Moving back, I huff and cross my arms. "Colette is fine."

"No, no," Velspar chimes. "*Ms. Hart* is fine. Until, of course, it becomes Mrs. Pratt. But that's another thing entirely."

My heart flutters, but I don't have a moment to analyze those words before Velspar sweeps me around and hunkers down to whisper, "Can I invite him to the thing tonight?"

"The sl-sl-slumber party?" I ask.

Velspar nods.

I roll my eyes. "I guess."

He grins at me, and nothing is more beautiful.

CHAPTER 22

♥ And it all went up in flames...

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Who knew parties could be fun?

First of all, the food is *amazing*. I've never had anything like it. Velspar's teased me countless times over the fact I won't have any room left for dinner—*want a bet?* Secondly, the atmosphere is a song in itself. Gold and pearl and silk. It's lovely, and I'm already composing another album. Thirdly, once I managed to drag Katina into the group, the real party started. Her sass hits Leslie's priss right between the eyes, and the viciousness lingering in the air between them could start fires.

I'm having such an amazing time translating Katina's snide remarks and convincing Leslie that absolutely *everything* there is to eat is so divine she simply *must* try it, I don't remember there are enemies among us until they've crawled right out of the gilded tile.

"Colette Hart," a deceptively kind voice begins, the baritone unsettlingly smooth.

Katina flinches, and her words still as she looks past me.

Leslie is less polite, offering a hard *ugh* before tossing back the rest of her champagne.

Slowly, I turn and find none other than Alton Pratt.

He smiles, and when he takes my hand, his fingers are warm. Bowing, he grazes a kiss against my knuckles, refusing to let me pull away. "To think you'd be showing up in my younger brother's life again." His dark brown eyes fix on me while he's bowed against my hand. "I can't believe I didn't recognize who you were in the debacle of that viral video."

Finally, he releases me, and I cut a look toward where I last saw Velspar. His back is toward me, a grin on his face while Sean throws his head back and laughs.

Alton notices my gaze, and a hint of something pitying dips his brows. "I don't know what my awful brother has told you about me, but—"

"Nothing," I singsong. "He's told me nothing about you. I'd barely remember your name if it weren't plastered all over the city. Makes a girl

wonder what you're overcompensating for."

Alton's eyes widen before he laughs—I do not trust the good-nature sound of it. There's malice hidden here. The kind of malice that enjoys hurting people without any reason, without any anger. Just *because*. Somehow, chillingly and completely, I do not believe this person has empathy. "My dear, are crude insults how you managed to stay ahead of Vel all these years? I'd always assumed the teachers took pity on you for your poor speech, but it makes just as much sense to learn you distracted him by landing blows against his pride."

I hum. "Is that what I've just done? Landed a blow against your pride? *Darling*, how insecure are you?"

Alton's eyes narrow, just so, before he wipes that touch of bother from his smiling face. "Do you have to speak like that in order to a-a-avoid sounding like an imbecile?" Touching a hand to his chest, he clears his throat. "Forgive me. There was a tickle."

I let a mask of surprise round my crimson lips into a perfect 'o'. "Speak like *what*? Do tell. I am *ever* so interested in what you have to say to me. This is not *at all* comparable to communicating with a brick wall." Casting a catty glance toward Leslie, I lift my fingers to my mouth. "Although I did hear that the Pratts have the collective emotional capacity of one, so it may not be so far-fetched a comparison."

"*All the Pratts*?" Alton asks, a tiny grating edge beneath the words. "Even your lover?"

My lover. I titter, laughing merrily. "Well, I wouldn't worry about his emotional capacity for long. Since he's proven to be the only Pratt with one, I've been toying with the idea of making him into a Hart." Alton's smile drops away, and he opens his mouth, but before he can get a word out, I gasp. "*Speaking of*, isn't it *funny*? Here we are, a Pratt and a Hart, both of us misspelled body parts. Add just one letter to my name, and it's dreadfully romantic. Take just one from yours, and...my...you're an arse."

Leslie snorts, clamping her hand to her mouth and twirling toward Katina who, while silent, is absolutely *vibrating*.

Alton hisses, his smooth mask shattered, "You clearly have no respect or talent to speak of."

I roll my eyes. Oh yes, attack my passions because you're *prat hurt*.

"It's no wonder why you've struck my brother's fancy. Two nobodies are made for each other."

A nerve inside me pricks, and I flutter my lashes. “Excuse me?”

“I do believe you heard me. Last I knew, there was nothing wrong with your ears. Just your mouth.” He snips the last word as though he thinks his tone is capable of biting.

*Darling*, I promise you I have heard it all.

“Hm. So what you’re saying is I have a smart mouth? That’s more than I can compliment you on.”

Eyes narrowed, he sneers, “I’m saying you are disrespectful, can’t sing, have no standing, and are altogether just *perfect* for my failure of a brother.”

Cocking my head, I take Velspar’s brother in from head to toe, and I see the abuse he’s capable of. It’s a frightening sort of malice because it’s concealed beneath his polished persona. The very idea of how many times he personally hurt Velspar sets my blood to boiling. Sniffing, I adjust my feather wrap and head toward Velspar.

“That’s what I thought,” Alton mutters beneath the click of my heels.

I guarantee he won’t be thinking much of anything for long. Katina and Leslie’s steps follow behind me, but I keep my focus on Velspar completely. “Darling,” I chime, and I’m half certain I could call him just about anything and he’d respond to the sound of my voice alone.

He turns from Reginald and Sean, smiling until he catches sight of his brother behind me. Going tense, he strides to meet me, clasps my arms, and checks my hands and wrists. Voice simmering and low, he whispers, “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

Wow.

If I hadn’t already gathered the kind of man Alton Pratt was, Velspar’s reaction is all the information I’d need. I lift my hand to his tie, wrap a fist around it, and tug his head down. Curling my lips to his ear, I whisper.

Velspar’s eyes go wide, and he jerks up to meet my eyes. “Are you... Seriously?”

I tug him down again and whisper some more.

He barks a laugh. “I mean, yes. Of course we *can*. Of course I *will*. Honestly, darling, what am I always telling you?”

My eyes sparkle as I let go of his tie. “Just ask.”

He kisses my nose. “That’s right.” With the finesse of royalty, Velspar gathers the attention of our small throng. “Reg, get a limo for the lot of us prepared in front of the building. Sean, I only want lights on the stage. Les, prep the masses—music off, attention grabbed.” Velspar’s eyes fall on



Katina's, and she lifts her brows in challenge. He grins at her. "I'm not trying to exclude you, Kat. I'm just not sure I'm comfortable ordering you around yet."

I gasp. "Katina plays violin." I grip her hands, grinning massively. "Katina, play violin?"

Brow arched, she nods and signs, *OK*.

Velspar's attention darts toward his brother, and the viciousness that sparks into his honey-tone eyes is gorgeous. Grabbing my hand, he says, "Okay, team. Onward."

I giggle as Katina, Velspar, and I march after Leslie, who gathers her dress up and takes to the stage like she owns it. The music fails with a single flippant gesture, and heads begin to turn as she secures a mic. "Good evening, Pratt City! We have a special treat for you." The lights all shift for a moment, plunging us into darkness, and Leslie's mirth fizzles as she says, into the mic, "Ugh, *Sean*." Taking a cooling breath as only the stage lights come back on, Leslie provides a resplendent smile and lifts her arms, long sleeves glittering. "Put your hands together for our very own Velspar Pratt, his very own Colette Hart, and our dear friend Katina Louis!"

The people respond with applause that blanket me in a vengeful warmth. I whisper the song into Katina's ear, and her face twists into utter glee before she clicks her way to the violinist and secures the instrument.

Leslie relinquishes the mic to me as Velspar kisses my cheek and heads toward the grand piano.

Darkness washes the sea of people navigating toward the space below the stage, but I can make out a few faces—specifically the ones who have shoved their way closest to the bottom of the platform. I shoot Alton and his father an air kiss before nodding at Velspar and stepping back into the role I know I was born to play.

In perfect sync, the three of us start "Mean" by Taylor Swift with a violent aggression that sweeps in and takes charge. My voice carries into every crevice within the room, and the concert energy grips the refined mass. Cheers rise like ocean tides; I drown in them; they set me free.

When I sing the harshest lines, I'm staring right at Velspar's family, assuring them there's no question who I find *pathetic* between us. When the final note enters the space, cheers erupt to fill the sudden silence.

Fluttering my lashes, I drop the mic with an ear-splitting *thump* that can barely be heard above the applause. Velspar, Katina, and Leslie meet me in

the center of the stage, and I laugh at the wild glint in their eyes.

Velspar rakes me to his side. “Well, darling, shall we get out of here while the fire roars?”

“A-bsolutely.”

Kissing my cheek again, he sweeps me down the steps, pausing briefly when his father and brother intercept us.

I look Alton right in the eye and smile brighter the more restrained rage I find pouring from his gaze.

Velspar stares directly at his father’s furious expression and laughs, shaking his head. “The cycle ends with us, Father. Your threats to disown me no longer hold any weight. I’ve outgrown your beatings. I’ve found my family and made my own fortune, so now you are, unequivocally, unnecessary.” With a flippant wave, Velspar guides me past them. “Cheers.”

“Wait just a—” Alton’s hand latches onto my shoulder, and I twist, gripping him and thrusting him over me.

He hits the floor *hard*, all air knocked from his body.

Velspar’s eyes go huge. Leslie chokes. Katina’s mouth drops open.

I dust off my hands and glance at them. “What?”

Velspar gathers himself with a cough and a curse. “Nothing. Nothing. I love you. Nothing.”

I grin. “I told you I know s-self-d-d-defense.”

He scrubs a hand down his face, and laughter explodes out of him. “Yep. Yep, you do.” Grabbing my hand, Velspar beams. The four of us dart away from Alton’s groaning blubbers as people begin to recognize there’s a *man* on the floor in the dim lighting and that the man is none other than one of their revered Pratts.

Before he can start shouting nonsense, we are outside in the crisp May night, breathing deep and flying past a suddenly awakened group of reporters who rush for the rope barricade with their cameras and their questions.

Reginald throws open the limo doors, and Sean catches up to us, wrapping an arm around Leslie and laughing like a fool. It’s contagious because she starts laughing, too, and doesn’t even shove him away.

We pile into the limo, and Velspar shouts his address through the window at the driver before dragging me in a tumble of dress and feathers onto his lap. “Reg, we need food ordered.”

“Something low fat!” Leslie screams, falling into Sean as the limo starts forward.

He catches her and declares, “*Nothing low fat!*”

She hits him, and he snickers, catching her wrist and pressing a kiss to her palm that turns her cheeks the same crazed shade as his hair.

Katina nudges into me and holds her phone up, showing me Spotify.

Because it just feels right, I sign, “*Wildest Dreams,*” and drape myself against Velspar as the music starts.

I sing along, my eyes locked on Velspar’s as I run my fingers through his hair and get drunk on the way he watches me, on the way he cups my cheek, on the way he touches his lips to mine, whispering, “My nightmare muse, this is so much better than my wildest dreams,” against them.

Around us, the music continues, several other voices melding into the rise and fall of the melody. It’s a chaotic, beautiful thing, tainted by dark histories rife with pain. Bundles of regrets and brokenness. Apologies never quite said. Forgiveness never quite given.

Among it all, I melt into Velspar’s kiss, knowing we are dissonant and powerful, a crescendo that will only ever continue to build.

We were born to burn like stars, pulled into the gravity of each other, set aflame and adrift, basking in one another’s light from afar as we refused to collide. This is blinding and searing and violent.

It’s a cruel, passionate disaster.

It’s all-consuming.

Unending.

Eternal and lifelong.

We are a story. We are a song.

# EPILOGUE

♥ Do not try any of this at home.

~~~~

One hour later

“Pass the chips! Leslie needs them!” Sean shouts while a movie blares in Velspar’s theater room. I’m wholly convinced it’s playing for ambiance since no one seems to be paying attention to it.

Leslie screeches, “I do NOT. I have had two slices of pizza. *Two.*”

“And we’re all very proud,” Velspar concludes, shifting my weight on his lap and rubbing his thumb over the bared bumps of my spine.

We all look like quite the collection, lounging about in our nice party clothes while chips and Cheetos cover the carpet at our feet. Tux jackets rest flung over burgundy movie seats. Someone’s tie lays strewn among pizza boxes and half-empty liters of soda. It’s a painting, it’s a song, it’s beautiful and human, and I love it.

“I’ll kiss you if you eat a third,” Sean declares, and Leslie’s eyes go huge as the movie screen lights up the flush of red slicing across her cheeks.

She shoves him. “You are *revolting!*”

In a quieter corner, cuddled up in the arms of a human-size teddy bear that—of course—Velspar owns Katina grins at Reginald, her hands moving slowly as he watches with intent. Apparently, his grandmother was deaf, so he learned some sign from her.

Apparently, he’s a stupid softie who gets swept up in awful moments in his efforts to vie for attention he hasn’t had since she died.

We’re a mess. All of us.

Sighing, I wonder if there’s a side to almost every story that we don’t get to see, if the people who need to be *destroyed* are far fewer than we assume. Pain is so contagious. It’s easier to get angry or even than it is to attempt vulnerability when we’ve already been taught it hurts worse to fail when we’ve actually tried.

Humans are complicated, and that’s why there are stories and songs—little pieces of priceless moments, of what it means to be unguarded, of what it means to be neither purely good nor entirely bad.

Velspar traces a fingertip all the way up the slit in my dress, dragging the chilly touch back down to my knee. Again and again, until it's unbearable.

I snuggle against his chest, slipping my fingers between two buttons of his shirt and touching his skin.

"Colette..." he whispers into the partially-dismantled crown of my hair.

His heart beats against my fingertips, and I look up at his face all smeared with my lipstick. The makeup he wore to remind his father that he can't be controlled is still perfect, lining his eyes, making them shine like gold. He's so lovely and severe my heart can hardly take it.

"I want you, Vel," I murmur, touching my lips to his jaw, tasting the salt of his skin, nipping at him.

His whole body trembles beneath me, and his hand travels fully up my leg, his entire cold palm settling where the slit in my dress begins and daring to move no farther. "How badly?"

"Quite badly." Letting my head rest against his shoulder, I close my eyes. "I've always wanted you, Vel. Always." I pop a button on his shirt and feel his warm skin fully against my palm. "You're so beautiful."

"Colette..." He swallows, hard.

"I have so much fun with you. You're unapologetic, and you treat me like I don't have to apologize for anything either."

"Because you don't." The words leave him strangled.

I kiss his throat. "See? There you go again. Making me feel whole like it's effortless." I tip my nails into him, and he takes a tight breath as I coo, "I hate you."

"Yeah?" He wets his lips. "Say it again."

I lean near his ear, whispering beneath the ruckus, "I hate you. So much."

"I hate you, too." His fingers grip the soft flesh of my thigh. "So very much."

"But..." I whisper, "...you love me more?"

"Madly. So much so it is hard to breathe without your skin against mine. How I survived years without you, I will never know." Dipping his mouth, he lets his lips play a cruel, teasing game with mine. It's reminiscent of other games we've played throughout our past—desperate and pleading and violently passionate. It's one we've come to know well.

It's one I know will never end.

And, now, I never want it to.

This game of ours was always, and forever, meant to be *lifelong*.

It is not productive to hate. It is not productive to hate. It is not productive to...love.

But we do it anyway.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

♥ Seriously. Get therapy.

~~~~

*Five months later*

My back burns; bruises speckle my flesh; blood...oh but I don't want to think about the blood. Blood is messy and unrefined and it's deceptively red when it dries brown. Ugly thing, blood.

Alton hisses hateful things in my ear, from somewhere, but it's too dark or blurry to really tell, and I sigh because the words are always alike, and I've grown tired of them.

I'll never amount to anything.

I'm unlovable.

I'm good for nothing.

Blah, blah, blahhh, blah, blah.

Outside of this nightmare-scape, I know I own half this city and have kept those facts from the public in order to step on my family's nerves. At any moment, I could change half of *Pratt* into *Hart*, and go through the paperwork to have the city limits reinstated. That scares them enough that they've been trying to find a way back under my skin ever since the party in May.

It's just awful when the ones you've abused rise above you, isn't it?

Awful, awful, awful.

That said, here in my nightmares that depict times long since past, the pain remains raw. I'm a frightened child who will never be wanted, who will always be tormented, who has yet to atone for my own wickedness.

Here, in the shadows and phantom agony, I still believe I *can*.

That's the thing people seem to overlook when it comes to apologies—ultimately they mean nothing. Ultimately they express regret for actions you still committed, hurt you still dealt. Words are too flimsy. With time, the sincerest among them can turn into lies. There is no such thing as a verbal atonement.

An *apology* that actually means something is a promise that you will never, ever, do what you did again. And, honestly? I just don't have that

much faith in myself. Maybe I'm too prideful or selfish or stupid, and maybe this moral conviction helps no one, but one thing I happen to value is sincerity.

I will accept ugly sincerity over pretty frivolity any day.

I don't trust I will ever be *good* enough, so I embrace the fact I have given up trying.

By giving up, these words that claim I'll never amount to anything lose all their power. So what? I don't care.

Years slip through the shadows, and I grow, and I grow, and I grow. I get worse.

Worse, worse, worse.

I learn self-defense. At fifteen, I overpower Alton *once* when he's trying to attack me with our father's belt buckle for something I didn't even do, and now I'm in my big, cold mansion. I'm still a child, but I'm outcast here, and it's empty enough to make me wish I'd never tried to stop the pain. At least pain is feeling *something*, right? At least it requires something like attention, doesn't it?

It's so cold.

I'm so lonely.

And here is where I rot for moments that feel like eternity.

For some cruel reason my mind never gives me the kindness of Colette all throughout my childhood—perhaps it knows that I didn't deserve the infuriating peace just seeing her at school gave me during the years I was trying to get even with her.

Weekends killed me back then, and I spent them obsessing over her while being angry at myself for it.

Her perfect blue eyes. Her perfect golden hair. Her perfect little smile that was never once for me.

Perfect, perfect, perfect.

Oh, how I hate her. My darling. My love.

Look at me. Look at me. Look at me.

Please. I'll beg if you show any sign it might help. *Please*.

I don't know how to be loved, but I need you to look at me, so even if your eyes are full of hate, it is enough.

Anything is enough.

But even *hate*, cruel being, you deny me.

I am starving.



I am parched.

I am undone.

With that thought, the prison of my skull lets Colette's lithe form slip from the distant mist like a wraith. She is hauntingly beautiful, and I wish there were some deviation from how she normally looks when I'm awake, but there isn't a single divergence. Her walk is just the same—elegant and refined. The curve of her hips as they move charm me into a daze. Her approach almost always makes me forget why she's here—to make me pay for my crimes.

Her hand reaches for my chin, short nails digging into my flesh as she forces me to face her. I am on my knees and ready to plead with her for forgiveness, kindness, love, but I already know she will give me nothing, and I deserve nothing, and...my word...why must she be so lovely?

It is wholly unfair.

She kisses me, but it's too gentle for my Colette who responds to my kisses with teeth. This kiss is softer than air, stealing the breath from my bones. It leaves me suffocating before her nails close over my heart and she whispers, "I will never want you. I will never love you. You d-do not d-deserve m...me. You never have, and you never will. And th-at is your f-fault."

Lies, I know. I know my Colette is in my arms at this very second, lying in my bed, dampening my chest with her light exhales. But these are the lies my brain tells me over and over, every night. These are the lies I get to hear for one very simple reason.

*They should be true.*



Care to know something *fun*?

Hi, my name is Velspar Pratt. I have everything. I own more land than any one person ever should. I'm a billionaire. I could buy a horse this afternoon—and I *might*—just because it would be funny to see how Colette reacts to a random horse appearing.

My gaze lifts toward the ceiling as I brush my teeth in the bathroom, and I should actually put that on my agenda. What would Colette do if I had a horse delivered to the front door? Better yet, what if I had it delivered to her mother in the mother-in-law suite farther up the property? That would get reactions out of both of them.

Is there a holiday today that I could use as an excuse since saying I did it

because Colette went off with her friends for breakfast this morning and I needed attention is a little bit toxic?

I am working on the toxic thing. My therapist says I shouldn't be toxic just because it's funny. Which is lame. I think that's the only good reason for it.

Continuing to brush my teeth, I pull my phone out and watch the universe mock me.

October 12.

National Stop Bullying Day.

Here's a horse, that I bought in order to bully you, for National Stop Bullying Day.

If you ask me, that's a little ~~ironic~~ hilarious.

I should start over since I got sidetracked.

Something fun...I'm Velspar Pratt...I have everything...I'm getting a horse later.

And I'm being bullied.

I spit in the sink, rinse my mouth, and cross Colette's and my bedroom to reach my bedside drawer. Inside lies the most important book I own. Plucking out what Katina calls *my diary* (my therapist told me to do daily reflections), I plop onto my bed and turn to *the list* in the back.

I'm not saying *the list* has eighty-three points, but, okay, yes, I am saying that. This list—which is a collection of goals given to me by Colette's mother and best friend—must be accomplished before I am allowed to marry my girlfriend.

Frowning, I grimace at that title even in my own head.

Colette *is* my girlfriend. I guess. We haven't ever actually said that part out loud because our relationship is more like *I own you, you own me, capeesh?* (Insert Italian hand gesture.) She doesn't call me her boyfriend. The only time she refers to me in any sense remotely akin to *boyfriend* is when she's singing Taylor Swift's "Lover" into my skin. *Girlfriend* doesn't do what she is justice. Neither does *lover*. Again, she *is* my lover, as in the owner of all my love. But she is infinitely more than that. She's my lifelong bane. The most harrowing part of my existence. The one thing in this world that I cannot do without.

Therefore, saying that the final task on my list turns my blood to ice is an understatement.

*Propose (and have Colette say "yes").*

I have completed tasks as extravagant as *Buy Colette a library*, but this—the entire point of the stupid list—scares me. I mean, come on? In order to complete *Buy Colette a library*, I *literally* gave her an actual library (East Pratt Public Library—now Colette Public Library). Katina smacked me in the back of the head and told me she meant *refurbish* one of my guest rooms *into* a library and let Colette fill it with books.

Floor-to-ceiling bookcases required. Sliding ladders non-optional.

Real Beauty and the Beast stuff—completely on brand for us, all things considered.

I sat through an overly dramatic (even by my standards) rant concerning how much of a crime it was for me to not already have a library in my mansion. Excuse me if I read on my Kindle. I like trees. And being able to enjoy literature in a comfortable position. Mostly that second point...we have established I'm no saint.

Something inside me is terrified Colette will say 'no' just to watch me crumple. For all I know, she's seen this book and read my list and has been waiting for the cruelest punchline ever. I should probably mention that we don't exactly have a "healthy" relationship.

If a "healthy relationship" abides by orthodox rules, we threw those away from the beginning—probably because we're both insensitive, broken messes who like starting fires and have a "hurt them before they hurt me" mindset. We're getting a bit better about that last part, but some things I doubt will ever change, and I don't entirely want them to.

Privacy isn't something we believe in. "Personal space" is a joke. Being separated in any way gives me raging anxiety. We're two forces drawn violently into one another. Dreadful mental cages have left us feeling unseen and unwanted. We are battered and bruised, littered with trust issues and other issues. Probably something like thirty-seven issues in a trench coat, barely keeping it together.

Everything I am is hers. If she stumbled upon my book and felt like opening it, okay. I don't care. I love her. She can know whatever she wants. Read my "diary." Read my texts. It's not like we haven't said the worst things directly to one another. There's nothing left to hide.

We are raw to one another, deeper than skin and bone.

I just hope she doesn't think it'll be a fun joke to say no if she has seen this little plot.

I just hope if she does think it'll be a fun joke, she'll restart my heart

quickly after dealing the blow and say “yes.”

I’m potentially terrified that it won’t be a joke.

What if she doesn’t want to marry me at all?

A nervous chuckle slips through my chest as I slam the book shut and stuff it back in the drawer.

Standing, I march downstairs.

Of course she doesn’t want to marry me.

It’s been half a year since we reconnected. Half a year of my still being a menace to her. Half a year of little *I hate yous* instead of *I love yous*. She hasn’t told me she loves me yet, and I mean obviously that’s totally fine of course. She did tell me I needed to start acting like someone who believes himself worthy of love, and that’s just...not going well.

I’m messed up. I’m *still* messed up. We just have an *understanding* now. Maybe I’m pretty enough that Colette doesn’t mind humoring my desperation. Obviously I’m rich enough that it makes sense to stick around me in order to stay comfortable and taken care of—even if her YouTube is blowing up and her albums are taking off and she can easily outsource my part in her music and support herself and her mother now, making my existence in her life no longer necessary.

Oh. Crap.

Clapping my hand to my mouth, I suck in a sharp breath and pace my way to the fridge, yanking it open to find it beautifully stocked and organized. Colette housewives for me still, and I love her. I love the fact the rooms that were once the housekeeping suite are now her library. I love that when I asked her if she wanted me to hire another live-in maid, her nose scrunched up and she asked me why two grown people couldn’t pick up after themselves.

I choose to believe she likes our privacy, even if a couple (most) of the guest rooms are now officially neglected.

I can’t eat breakfast. I’m not hungry anymore.

I wish Colette hadn’t gone out with Kat and Les for breakfast this morning. *I* make her breakfast. It makes her smile as she watches me serve her like the princess she is. I like holding her pinkie around mine as we eat together off the same plate, side-by-side. It’s the most stable way for me to start my day and convince myself she’s with me, I can do something for her, I’m not *all* bad.

I’m having a moment. A panic attack. Or that’s what my silly therapist

would call it. I need to know that she still wants to be around me, in any capacity, for any reason.

My stomach hurts, and my head is swimming.

I plunge into her library and try to calm myself at the sight. It's pristine, everything organized by genre and color. Light shimmers through the large windows to fall over the white shelves built into the walls. The cozy sofa we picked out together rests in the center, largely unused since I'm rarely ever in here, and Colette takes her books to me. Often *on* me. If I'm watching TV and she finds it distracts her from reading—after she's bulldozed her way in and taken ownership of my lap—she tells me to turn it off and pay attention to her while she ignores me in favor of her book.

Obviously I obey. It's not like I was *really* watching the TV after she put her perfect little self near me anyway. Honestly.

She's so cute it's physically painful to think about.

Skimming my fingers along the spines of her books, I try to find her nearness from them as I read the titles.

Lots of sweet romances.

Lots and lots of sweet romances.

Is there a dark romance section? Why is everything so fluffy and pink? I'd really like some corrupted assurance from a dark romance section, maybe an entire shelf dedicated to nonredeemable bullies? That would be nice.

Now I'm scanning for the word *bully*.

And I find it.

*How to Destroy Your Lifelong Bully.*

I swallow as I pluck the hardback free, feeling the slick dust jacket beneath my fingers. It's a self-help book.

Something in my chest clenches, and I flip through the pages, skimming advice on how to get into the mind of your bully, tear him apart from the inside. There are warnings on almost every other page. I make it to the back where the author, Melanie Richards, confesses that the content of this book was, in fact, satirical in order to get something off her chest—although she normally writes quite serious publications like:

*How to Turn Your Husband into Your Book Boyfriend*

*How to Fake Date Your Grumpy Boss*

*How to Marry Your Single Dad Neighbor*

*How to Confess to Your Childhood Best Friend*

*How to Find Love When You're Weird*

None of these titles look serious to me. Except, maybe, the last one.

Why does Colette have this? And, follow up question, have I felt destroyed lately?

A brief memory of the last time we kissed slips into my head, and consider me obliterated. None of the chapter headings advise her to kiss me into oblivion, though, which is a little disconcerting if not entirely disappointing.

Sighing, I put the book back and flop onto the couch.

It's offensive that Melanie wrote a book about destroying bullies and no books about how to make little victims fall for their bullies. The reasons are, of course, obvious, but still. That's totally a lawsuit waiting to happen. Prejudice. Bullyphobia.

Here I am in desperate need of guidance, and I have no book to help me.

Because I'm losing my mind, I buy the marriage book, fully aware there are no single dads in the picture. Three chapters in, I am no further in figuring out how to pop the question. I also can't believe this isn't a satire. What the actual—

My ears perk at the sound of the front door opening, and I pull myself up off the couch instantly, charging for my darling. My heart stammers at the sight of her, and I brace my shoulder against the kitchen archway with a grin as I fold my arms.

Laughter brightens her expression as she steps into the foyer, colorful shopping bags lining her arms. Sunlight kisses her hair, her skin, her gleaming blue eyes. It pours around her like a tide, like she's let it in, and I let my head rest against the wall.

I hate her. I love her. Oh, what she does to me...she doesn't even need to try.

Leslie and Katina enter with her, Leslie's brows knitted as she focuses on Katina's hands. Everyone's been learning sign, because it's only polite, and we're nothing if not polite monsters.

It occurs to me Leslie is holding a takeout bag, and something in my chest warms at the sight of it among her boutique bags. Ever since Sean grabbed her face and kissed her before blurting that he wanted—needed—her to live with him something like two months ago, she's been eating actual meals and making steps toward heading her own fashion line, which prioritizes *health* over impossible standards. I have no doubt Sean's bubbly personality offsets some of the effects of her anorexia as she, slowly but surely, puts on the

weight her body needs.

Big steps forward.

Why are humans such social creatures? Why do we convince ourselves the *right* and *healthy* way to live is to be perfectly okay with ourselves like seeking any validation or help from someone else isn't allowed? Why do we impose limits on everything? Love, but not too much. Accept support, but don't seek validation. It's okay to rely on others, but not completely.

Isn't it beautiful when we can look in the mirror and say *you're enough*? Isn't it easier when someone else tells us while we're struggling to figure it out ourselves?

I don't want to be alone.

I want to marry Colette.

I want her to be my always. I want to make music with her forever. I want to love her like she deserves even when I hate how completely she takes ownership of everything I am.

I want her to love me when I don't deserve it. I want these past blissful months to be my entire future. I want her to stay by my side and love being there. I want her to hate me for how little I leave her mind.

"Are you okay, Vel?" Colette asks the second she sees me watching her. It takes the worry in her eyes to make me realize I've stopped smiling.

Katina raises a brow and signs behind Colette's back, *Are you thinking about the last item on the list?*

I narrow my eyes at Colette's friend and rue the fact one of the requirements of the list is to keep both the evil proctors updated concerning it. Katina and Ms. Helen know I have one last stupid thing left. And Katina, bless, is smart enough to know my stupid mind is rather one-track.

Yes, I'm thinking about the last item on the list.

Yes, it's killing me.

Which was probably your plan.

Nicely played vengeance, Kat. Screw you.

Colette touches my cheek, her skin deceptively warm given the fact it's October and autumn is more than upon us. I want to get married this winter. Because I'm a winter, and selfish, and spring is too far away, and the idea of falling into bed with her and tracing every part of her skin while a fire roars drives me mad.

Colette, my beautiful Colette...hurt me if you must. "We need to talk."

Her lips part as Leslie yelps and barks, "Hey! Quit pulling! What are you

doing, Kat?”

The front door slams, drawing Colette’s attention to the now-vacant foyer, and I guess it’s a good sign that Katina saw fit to give us privacy? Does that mean she believes Colette wants to have this conversation? If this conversation were going to be a joke, I think she’d want to watch.

Colette eyes me warily, and the caution makes enough sense. I’m the kind of guy to have an entire horse up my sleeve. After scanning my face, she cools her expression and clicks her cute self into the kitchen to deposit her bags on the table we only ever use when her mother comes to visit.

Considering I videotaped her mother taking her first steps after the accident while she glared murder at me cooing *baby’s first steps* into the recorder, I know I deserve absolutely every anxiety I’m feeling now and every demand Ms. Helen put on my list. Given this anxiety, I almost wish she’d thought up more ludicrous things to demand of me.

Wait. No. No, I don’t. The sooner I ask, the sooner I can ask again and again and again until Colette says yes. Worst case scenario, I wear her down.

“Is everything okay?” Colette asks once her arms are empty. Threading her fingers together in front of her, she sighs. “You’re finally kicking m...me out, aren’t you? Now that m-my career is taking off—”

I roll my eyes skyward and gather her up against me, slipping my fingers against one of her palms and lacing our hands together. “You know I’d die without you.”

Terrifying for this moment, and absolutely adorable at any other time, Colette pretends to consider what I’ve said in a capacity of interest.

My arm around her waist tightens, snapping the *hm, murder is fun* out of her. Genuine concerns lights her sky blue gaze. “Vel...d-d-did s...s-something happen?”

I kiss her, walking her backward to the wall beside her library. She gasps when I trade bracing around her waist in favor of securing her other hand. She squeezes my fingers as I pin her. Pushing into me once I free her lips, she latches onto my mouth again with a bite that’s hard enough to make me hiss. Desperate. Hungry. Yes.

“Did I hurt you?” she breathes against the corner of my mouth.

“No.” Feeling her want me to the point of frenzy could never hurt. I settle my mouth against her soft, slender neck and sigh into her taste. “Colette, I love you.”

I love you. I love you. I love you.



She shudders. “Let me hold you. Please.”

Since she *asked*, I free her hands, and she wraps them around me, gripping my clothes and my skin, clutching me tight enough to put the shattered pieces of me back together. I let my fingers curl around her neck and angle her face. Her pulse hammers against me, and I draw strength from it.

She responded to the suddenness of my wanting to talk then kissing her against the wall without question, like she’s mine, or maybe like she knows I’m hers. We’ve outgrown questioning each other’s actions. We just *are* with one another. It’s so nice to *be*.

Why am I scared?

“Marry me.”

Colette flinches, and oh. Oh. Yeah. That’s why I’m scared. Okay. Wow. I

---

“Finally,” she breathes, grabbing me and jumping. My balance wavers as her legs wrap around my waist, and I brace myself against the wall as she locks her ankles and crushes me in a hug. A laugh pours out of her, and she snuggles, kissing every part of my skin.

I blink. “F... Finally?”

“I’ve been waiting.” Her tongue flicks against my neck, and I lose my mind, gripping her body as I turn and rest against the wall. Her eyes find mine, beaming, and her hands explore my face, my cheeks. She traces my bottom lip like I’m new to her. “I’ve toyed with the idea of getting you drunk and pretending to be pregnant again just to get you to ask.”

Because that’s absolutely something we would do to each other. Even if I’ve been taking measures to be *less* drunk on the whole lately, I have no doubt in my mind Colette could seduce me into doing whatever she wants. We’re a mess.

I sniff. “That’s a rather toxic plot, darling. You couldn’t have just put me out of my misery by asking yourself? Don’t tell me you condone gender roles.”

Her gaze morphs into something regal and insulting. She all but scoffs. “You officially want to marry me more than I want to marry you. I win.”

A wry smile stretches across my lips. “How vicious. I thought we agreed to stop playing the games that hurt each other.”

Colette settles her lips against mine. “We have. I was only hurting myself. Velspar Pratt, I’ve wanted to marry you for months. I told your brother I’d

turn you into a Hart the one time we spoke, and it's been in my head ever since." She kisses me gently, framing my face in her hands. "I've been sc-sc-scared."

How? I adore her with my every breath. Of course I want to marry her. "About the wedding night?" I whisper, because that's the only thing I can think might scare her since we have yet to go so far. I'd throw myself at her feet if she asked.

She grips my hair and makes sure I see her eyes roll. "Of course not. You'll do whatever I tell you to, whenever I tell you to, regardless."

Yes, exactly. "So, darling, what possibly scared you? Did you think I'd say no as a joke? Did you think I'd possibly risk it?"

"Aren't we moving too fast?"

Way, way too slow. "We've known each other forever."

"But a lot of that forever isn't nice."

I rest my head back and patronize her with a smile I know she finds particularly infuriating. "What's the worst that could happen? We grow to *hate* each other once we're married?"

She bites her lip.

I frown. "Darling, that's part of our whole...*thing*."

She looks away from me, and it's like a spear to my heart.

I say, "The main reason I hate you is because I love you with my entire soul, and it's frightening to adore you that completely. I hate you for being perfect and wonderful. Once, I hated how you separated me further from my family and outshone me and made me feel even less than I already did. Now you *are* my family. Your light is a blessing in my life. I feel like someone who's allowed to be happy, in spite of everything, when I'm with you."

"That's not it," she whispers.

I grip her jaw and force her focus back to me. "Then what is? What scares you? I'll destroy it."

"Every s...single d-d-day, I have to sst-st—op m-m-myself from telling you."

"Telling me what?"

"You sst-ill d-don't believe you're ready for it."

My brows furrow, and I squeeze her dear sweet cheeks. "Make sense."

"I wanted to tell you at our wedding, in our vows. I've been sc-sc-scared that you won't be ready then either, s...so I've not a-sked."

I stare at her.

She melts out of my arms, and I release her face so she can go even though the thought of her abandoning me here full of questions leaves me frozen.

She doesn't go far, and I recognize what she's about to do before she closes her eyes and frees the first word of a new song.

It's one I haven't heard at all before, even though we have made so many together these past few months. It wraps itself around me, crushing, and I don't breathe as the notes slip from her lips.

*Red as blood and bitter wine.  
Can I want to make you mine?  
Cold hands. Violent eyes.  
You have me hypnotized.  
Lifelong drug, you are my high.  
I'm addicted to you.  
It's always been you.  
One look in your eyes, and I'm drowning.  
I can't disguise what you do to me.  
Our hearts beat in time, cruel melody.  
I'll sing you for life.  
I'll sing you for life.  
You know what you've done, but not what you do.  
I hate you, I hate you.  
I hate how much  
I love you.*

While those final words ring in my ears, Colette opens her perfect blue eyes and whispers, "I love you, Velspar. Even when I don't want to. Even when I shouldn't. Loving you is a choice I make against all our odds and broken parts. Loving you is spiting every time you have been less than lovable. Loving you...might just be what love is all about."

My heart breaks again, and I gather her up in my arms as tears spill down my cheeks. Her song haunts me like she always has. *I love you, I love you, I love you* echos, repeats in a sync, to a beat I know we share.

She is perfect and mine, and she has chosen me.

My tears soak into her hair as I hold her and sob, as she holds me and allows my brokenness to spill out of my cracks.

I don't believe in apologies.

But, maybe, I can learn to believe in forgiveness, not from others so much

as from myself. I think, maybe, it's the only way I'll ever move forward and find the person Colette deserves. I have to forgive myself. I have to do better.

October 12. National Stop Bullying Day. I proposed (we're getting married on Halloween, because our love story has been spooky, and Colette is a monster who says it'll drive Les crazy if we say we're doing it because we're autumns...really I think we've waited long enough). I did not buy a horse; I rented one. Ms. Helen screamed, and Colette named it. (I might have to buy it *now*.)

October 13. Last night, I did not have a nightmare for the first time in seventeen years.

## **But Wait... There's More.**

You are hereby invited to witness Velspar's POV at the party. Follow this link to my newsletter where you'll be greeted with a welcome email granting you access to the Super Secret Stuff that is in Velspar's head.

Trigger Warning: it's Velspar's head. Do I have to say more? (He does an itty bit of a swear.)

[My Newsletter](#)

With Love & Laughs,  
Camilla Evergreen

## And Even...More?

Keep reading for an unedited sneak peek of *How to Confess to Your Childhood Best Friend!*

Arabelle lives two distinctly different lives. The drop-dead gorgeous, athletic, and fierce persona her small town knows as a femme fatale beauty advisor, and the closet nerd who spends all her time collecting anime merch, reading fanfiction, and falling in love with the male leads in her romance novels.

Only one person knows her secret, and Maximus—the flirtiest best friend in the world—isn't going to tattle when he has his own double life to lead as both a closet beautician and the manly farmhand his father expects him to be.

The moment Arabelle meets her favorite author at a book signing event and gives him a project she's been working on without even Max's knowledge, lines blur. Suddenly, someone other than Max sees her for the main character she is—but is he the lead in her story? Or is there a different prince charming hidden beneath the friend she's always known?

### ***Reader Expectations***

**Heat Level:** Fade-to-black, innuendos, no cursing, sensual description, mentions of sex

**Notable Tropes:** Friends idiots to lovers, secret identities, guy falls first, forced proximity/living together, only one bed because I might have an addiction

**Triggers:** Rather exceptional levels of shameless cringe, the term “weeb,” the UwU face, parental disapproval, slight mentions of body shaming, which we do not subscribe to, mentions of sexual harassment

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

**Stress Level:** Low

**Ending:** HEA

# PROLOGUE

♥ When you've been friendzoned since birth, not even a kiss will set you free.

~~~~

Whenever I'm at a party, I ask myself, "Arabelle...could you have just *bought* these snacks and be at home watching anime right now?" Usually, the answer is a resounding *yes* that results in some mild mental cursing and general regret for my life choices. If it weren't for Maximus Rhodes, I wouldn't be here at all.

Screw him.

Lifting the last folded Ruffles chip from my bag to my mouth, I ignore the circle of teenagers playing Truth or Dare in front of me and plot an escape as I crumple the bag and toss it over my shoulder. I made an appearance. I smell like beer now. I should be allowed to jet. Home is calling me. The siren song of Japanese entertainment is too great a desire to deny.

There are so many better things to be doing on a Saturday night than sitting on the floor in an unsupervised household, eating chips out of a snack bag, and wondering if I've mixed up the dates for BunSki's enamel pin drop.

I've been waiting to get Haruhi and Hikaru from *Ouran High School Host Club* ever since the artist shared the designs on their Patreon. I swear, if the drop is Saturday night and I've just convinced myself it's Sunday, there will be murder.

"Tumbleweed." Max's languid, southern drawl calls me out of my thoughts, and I look up to find his green eyes sparking with usual mischief in that dramatically-freckled face of his. He's like a forest imp. Or an unseelie fae. All wild curly blond hair, tan skin, and constellations upon constellations of freckles covering him down to his fingers and toes. Oh, Maximus, what have you got up your sleeve now? And per chance can I go home after you've fulfilled your obsessive need for chaos?

Bloody elf boy.

He'll be the death of me.

Everyone in the circle is staring when I give them a cursory glance, so I arch a dark brow that Max plucked for me just this morning in preparation for this wee shindig. "What? Is it my turn? I think I'm going to head out after the

next round, so...”

Liliana scowls at me while Des snorts and fixes his glasses.

Liliana’s hated me ever since she decided she was in love with Max and realized *I* was his best friend. It’s a real shame she doesn’t deserve him. If she had a best friend who I was in love with, my ultimate move would have been to *talk* to her instead of, I don’t know, writing curse words on her locker. But that’s some big brain moves for someone with the IQ of a chipmunk.

I understand her permanent scowl directed at me. I don’t know why Des is laughing. He’s just someone Max hangs out with every once in a while.

“It’s *my* turn, actually,” Max informs me, his Cheshire grin showing off bright white teeth. They are blinding, and I bet he’s been bleaching them. Great. Every time he finds a new beauty product he likes, I turn into his pretty princess guinea pig, and I don’t really want to sit around with crap burning my gums for half an hour.

That *might* be where I draw the line.

Threading my fingers through my head of wild dark curls only Max knows how to take care of, I hum. “This is still my final round. I’m—” I yawn for effect. “—tired.”

“Truth or dare, tumbleweed?” Max asks, paying no attention to my theatrics.

Considering Max knows pretty much all of my secrets and is just impish enough to reveal one as a joke, I deadpan. “Dare.”

A chuckle starts in his chest, and it’s the most devious sound on this planet.

Well, darn.

I guess I picked wrong.

His smile turns more sly, and he lifts a slender finger to his lips. “I dare you...to kiss me.”

A collective gasp with varying degrees of astonish pours from our small group. The sound’s barely audible beneath the pump of music racing in from the other room.

I blink.

Laughter explodes out of me, and I let my hand fall out of my hair. “Seriously?”

“Well, that’s offensive.” Max lays a speckled hand against his chest as though I’ve speared him through the heart. “What if this was my cute way of confessing?”

Liliana makes a half-strangled sound similar to that of a dying cat.

I don't pay her any mind as I shift my weight and get to my feet. "Uh-huh. Sure. I'm leaving in ten seconds, so if you want me to do a dare, you better say it fast."

Max reclines, bracing his palms against the shag rug covered in various party debris, including my chip bag. "I get it. You're scared you'll fall in love with me."

Sighing, I roll my eyes. "We both know we're not one another's type, sunshine."

"Then what have you got to lose?"

I'm pretty sure that I might be among the last few girls at our school Max hasn't kissed, and most of the others are lesbians, so...it's actually quite a big deal. He even shared germs with *Liliana* at least once back before we stopped speaking to her for obvious reasons. Puckering my lips, I conclude, "My dignity?"

Des lifts his hands to his mouth for a riling, "Oooh."

Really. You'd never suspect we were seniors in high school with the way we're acting over here. In the next room over, age-appropriate inappropriateness transpires. But here, we are innocent babes. And one of us just wants to go home and learn the choreography to a new anime song.

Max sniffs. "I'm wounded. Either complete this dare, or I'll dare you to stick around until *I* leave."

My eyes narrow because we both know full well that may not be until *tomorrow afternoon*. Maximus Rhodes has a reputation for being a raging flirt, getting into tangles with girls, partying until the sun comes up, and waking up on stranger's couches to the tune of parents yelling. We're vastly different creatures at a glance—his tan skin and blond curls to my dark skin and brown ones, his chipper attitude to my aloof, his mischievous airs to my more calculating nature.

Even though we appear so different, we're best friends, and Max knows *almost* everything about me.

He probably doesn't know that while he's gone and kissed nearly everyone in our school, I haven't actually had my first kiss yet. If he knew, I don't think he'd be serious about this. Max is a decently hopeless romantic. His female conquests swoon for him on cue, like he's a puppet master and they're all his lovely painted marionettes.

I, of course, am immune to his nature. When you've known someone

since their birth and have watched them grow into the MVP of a host club, you learn to let all casual *my, how stunning you appear today, darlin', resplendent as a butterfly's wings* fall right off your shoulders.

I'm not saying he said this to me after finishing my makeup once.

Except he did.

I choked on my snort, and he broke down laughing as well.

He knows he's a cheese cube and a half. And I still love him for it. *As a friend.*

Last I checked, friends don't kiss unless they've applied for such benefits. I have not.

Our present benefits include (are *limited* to) allowing him to cheat off my homework, him doing my makeup and handling whatever *process* is required to keep my hair fluffy, driving him to school on my motorcycle, and having each other's back twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five.

"Pretty please?" Max's pale lashes kiss his spattered cheeks as they flutter.

The boy doesn't have to beg for affection. Sitting right across from him is someone who would gladly do anything he wants, but he hasn't looked at her twice since she Sharpied my locker.

One thing I've always been able to do is trust Max.

"Seriously?" I ask again. He closes his eyes, tipping his lips to me, so I sigh. Bending to cup his face, I touch a kiss to his mouth. It's chaste as heck, but it's not like I know how to do it better. Dare completed. I'm going away to anime land now.

Sayonara, suckers. Have fun not learning about the power of love and friendship and so forth.

Des blurts, "That doesn't count."

I pull back and shoot him a curious look before remembering I don't care. I'm off to anime land. Peace, nerds—

"Why not?" Max asks, catching my hand because obviously he knows I don't care and am about to run off to the moon like a giddy rabbit.

"Because." Des smirks. "That wasn't a *real* kiss."

I'm being held here against my will. This is awful. I want to watch anime. Or play a video game. Or read a book. Distressed, I stand limply and tell myself not to pout as Max holds me in place.

Main characters don't pout when things don't go their way. They make a plan in order to come out on top. Scanning the room for an over-the-top

escape plot, I wait for random objects to light up like in *Miraculous Ladybug*. Offensively, nothing does.

I've just about checked out of the conversation when Max says, "What? You want tongue or something?"

My brows jump.

Liliana takes a harsh breath before attempting to unlock the hidden ability to murder people with her eyes. So far, I'm lucky we don't secretly live in a supernatural world.

"Yes," Des states.

Max's grip on my hand tightens. "That wasn't specified, so this counts."

Counts for...what? The game? I was not aware Truth or Dare had such strict rules. See? Staying home with my games and shows and books is way easier than attempting to teach me the intricacies of party activities. Why in the world did Max invite me to this?

"Absolutely not." Something lights in Des's eyes, then he's leaning for Max's ear and whispering.

I start to swing my arm in a weak effort to break free. T-minus three seconds until Max is dead to me. Three, two...

"Okay." Max laughs then looks up at me. "Tumbles, Des bet me a hundred dollars I couldn't get you to kiss me tonight without telling you there was a bet involved."

That would explain why Max suggested this game. Here I thought he was trying to include me in "party activities" since he knows I'm not much for drinking, or getting down and dirty, or going to parties at all.

Oh.

"When did he propose the bet?" I ask.

"Wednesday."

Ah. The day Max became adamant about my attending. I get it now. What an unexpected cliché plot twist. Consider my trust shaken, my world crumbled, the light fading from my eyes. How devastating. What betrayal.

I have to say out of all the tropes I know, "they got together because of a bet" falls among my least favorite. So predictable.

Bet occurs. Couplification happens. Real feelings appear. Bet is revealed. Third-act breakup. *I don't care about the bet anymore! I love you!* Forgiveness. Happily ever after.

Barf. Third-act breakups are so forced ninety percent of the time. I prefer when characters care about each other more. Ever heard of *trust*? Do you

know functional relationships can't exist without it? Maybe stick around for five seconds of explanation instead of shutting down and running off to prep for a dramatic ending? Just a thought.

"How do you win, since I'm assuming he provided you an amendment just now?" I ask.

Des's smile melts off his face, and Max smirks. Yeah, Des, sorry to break it to you but I'm friends with a certified imp. I'm used to taking things in stride, just like he is. Together, we're a force of nature, and we cannot be beat. If Des's plot was to make me upset over being "used," good effort, I guess? I'm way too familiar with these sorts of plot devices, and I'm also way too familiar with Max. One vitally important thing to know about Max is he never does anything with the intention to hurt someone—least of all me.

See? Trust. It's all the rage in shounen anime these days. Reasons Uchiha Sasuke is still dead to me...

Meeting Des's gaze, I let a slow smirk lift my lips.

"Are you upset?" Max asks me.

"Nope."

"Hurt?"

"Nu-uh." First kisses are too hyped anyway. Yep. It's not like I'm waiting on a literal prince to appear in front of me and whisk me away into a world of romance and magic and elegance. I've been friends with Max long enough to know the male head is full of garbage and my kind of guy exists purely in fiction. Usually fanfiction.

"Refined" authors have this thing about realism that gives *all* their characters flaws. 'Scuse me if I'm signing up for the perfect versions recorded solely on sites like Wattpad.

Yeah. My romantic standards are astronomical. It's almost a relief to get my *first kiss* out of the way.

"Will you let me kiss you?" Max gets to his feet, looking right at me. We are the same exact height, right down to our fluffy poofs of hair, and I vetoed his attempt to get me in heels for this fiasco, so our eyes—and lips—are right in front of one another.

Shockingly, I don't want his tongue in my mouth, no matter how clean his teeth are. All the same, I shrug, because friend code dictates you don't let a bro down when a hundred bucks is on the line. I'm certain I'll get my Sour Patch Kids tax later. That will make it all worth it.

Max bends a finger beneath my chin as heat flushes to my cheeks. I

refuse to look at anyone else. He combs my loose curls away from my face, and his smile is so disarming I get why he has no trouble with women. “Relax, tumblers,” he says, oozing charm. “I’m good at this.”

“I know that, sunshine.”

He presses his lips to mine.

CHAPTER 1

♥ Step one: confirm that it's impossible to escape the friendzone without exaggerated help. ~~~

Five years later

I blink groggily at the ceiling and let a sigh pour out of my chest. It's a *morning*. The worst part of the day. And I'm waking up. What a cliché. Why don't I march myself into the bathroom and start describing my wild mess of curls to no one in particular before delving into the shape of my nose, lips, and eyes while I'm at it?

Mornings.

What a joke.

Lifting my hand, I tap the air in an attempt to skip the "morning routine" scene, but I'm no longer playing a dating sim. Yippee //derogatory. Condemned to roll out of bed on my own and go through the motions of *morning* against my will, I heft myself away from the warmth and wash up. Throwing on the pleated skirt, turtleneck sweater, and tights that Max picked out for me yesterday, I meander into the kitchen to munch a cereal bar before marching outside to meet the chicken man—as is our solemn routine.

Wide open fields present themselves, an early February chill in the air, as I wander from my wee abode to the tall oak right outside the chicken palace. Roosters croon, already let out of their coop to roam in the fully fenced-in area beyond the excessively large red roosting house.

Max, the chicken man, shouts something horrifically insulting at a poor chicken as he plows out of the coop with a basket of eggs. The hen flees in a panic of feathers to join the rest of the harem, and my lips quip up. Whistling, I call, "You eat those eggs with that mouth?"

When Max spots me, his eyes roll, and he saunters through the first and second barriers of chicken wire that keep all forty-something chickens very safe at night. Latching the final gate, he strides up to me in mud-coated cowboy boots.

"Always a pleasure to see you in plaid, sunshine," I comment, delightfully.

He lets a ravishing smile melt across his face as he leans two inches from

my face. His southern charm lays thick in his minty-fresh words. “Oh, just say you can’t resist me already, tumbles.”

“Did you just come from mucking out the horse stalls? Because I can smell it.”

“You look very sexy and smell wonderful as well, baby.” Passing me, Max sets the basket of eggs in the bed of his beat-up white truck. He lifts one. “You stocked up?”

“I’ll survive at least until tomorrow.”

Eyeing me as though assessing the fact I’ve not exactly eaten a “proper” breakfast, he hums, sets the egg down, and strides across the yard. He clomps up the two steps to the back door of the house I have been renting from his parents ever since we graduated from high school and my parents started saying mean things to me about how I needed to “be more independent” and “figure out what I want to do with my life.”

I already know what I want to do with my life. They just don’t approve. For some reason, they think working at Cosmetica, the makeup store in the city over, and spending all my money on my hobbies isn’t a valid way to exist.

In retaliation, I told Max I needed to move out, and he sorted things so I could live across the street on his family’s property in their guest house instead of a dozen miles away in Greyton. One day people will understand that messing with one of us means facing both of us.

Slipping out of his icky cowboy boots, Max wanders into the kitchen and washes his hands. “Did you have breakfast?” he asks, suspiciously noticing the cereal bar wrapper I forgot to throw away.

I swipe it off the counter and crumple it into the trash beside the island. “Absolutely. This is a red herring. I have eaten a sufficient number of healthy calories this morning and certainly did not wake up five minutes ago.”

Max flicks droplets of water into the sink while holding my eyes.

Smiling, I hand him a towel.

He sighs. “I should move in with you.”

“Ha ha ha,” I laugh robotically. It is not the first time he’s suggested this. It will not be the last.

“Keep you fed.” He hangs the towel over the oven door. “Keep you warm at night.” He circles me and slips the silk night cap he makes me wear off my curls before he gently caresses his fingers through the bouncing mass that falls halfway down my back. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“You are entirely too much sometimes,” I say, entirely too used to it.

He sweeps my hair aside and kisses my nape, and I’m so desensitized to Maximus’s affectionate touches I don’t even shiver. He murmurs into my skin, “Come on, beautiful. Let’s get you ready for the day.”

Submitting myself to the *process*, I obey Max’s every instruction as he leads me into his *makeup room* cleverly disguised as my dining room. I sit in front of the professional vanity table he bought for himself a few years ago, after agonizing over about a dozen different ones for months. Finally, I researched every last one and made him a spreadsheet of pros and cons, facts and figures, right down to the pie charts depicting *aesthetic quality*. Then, bam. Next thing I knew he was cleaning out “my” dining room and turning it into his serious beauty parlor.

It’s not like I care.

Most of my existence takes place in my bedroom, specifically in front of my computer or on my bed. Those are my happy places. This one is his.

Far away from his parents where his father can’t tell him it’s wrong.

A giddy, pure smile brightens his lovely green eyes as he gently pins my hair away from my face and gets to work massaging moisturizers and creams into my dark skin. We’ve been doing this routine for literal years, but he has never spared a single effort with me. Thanks to him, my skin is clean and fresh and perfect, and my loose, full curls haven’t screamed and run off due to his explicit guidance as well.

He orders my shampoo, conditioner, masks, and gels. He tells me if I don’t follow his instructions to the letter, he’ll have to shower with me and take care of it all himself. I’m not afraid of him actually doing that. I’m mildly disturbed at how invested he is in properly mummifying my hair, but I’ve never been afraid of Max. Honestly? I don’t think I’d be afraid if he really followed through on the threat.

Oh? You’re in my bathroom now? Goodness. Where even is your mischief limit, dude?

Max is Max. I’ve known him forever. Our parents have been friends since before we were born. Our mothers have pregnant pictures with their round tummies pressed close. We already have baby bath photos. That’s just what happens when you’re three days apart (I’m older) and have been together since you were in the womb.

There is no escaping one another now. Laughter //menacing.

“Okay,” Max murmurs, examining me closely as he twists closed the tube

of gloss he's holding. Cursing, he whispers, "You're beautiful. What do we think?"

Glancing toward the vanity mirror, I discover that he's turned me into someone else—again. He has a habit of doing that. I say a harsh word in Japanese, and the woman in the mirror does, too. Her lush, shining lips are dark, just a shade closer to red than black. Whatever Max did to my eyes, they aren't the same shape anymore, and the shadow is cut-with-a-knife crisp. White highlights heighten the definition of the darkened areas, burgundy blends sweeping into flawless wings. "You seriously need to come to work with me. Just for one day. You'll put the trained professionals to shame."

"Heck, I wish, tumbleweed." He bunches my curls, fussing over them, like always. "Spending all day with you would be a dream."

"Let me steal you away for today. Don't even change—it's funnier if you do this looking like *that*." Rising from my seat, I let my gaze wash over the reflection of his long-sleeve red plaid shirt and dusty blue jeans. I'm used to seeing Maximus in such *garb*, but it will never suit him.

And we both know it.

He fluffs my hair a final time before resting his hands at my curvy hips. "Alas, my dad would still kill me if I abandoned his precious farm in favor of such *girly* endeavors. You'll have to have all the fun in my stead." Resting his chin atop my shoulder, he closes his eyes and lets his arms coil around my waist completely. "Grab me some blue things? I want to turn you into a mermaid. I have enough aqua shadow palettes, but I need some liners. And lipstick. And nail polish."

"Liners, lipstick, polish. I'll see what I can do. There's a product training video I have to watch on my lunch break, so I'll get to pick out some gratis after. Maybe it'll fit what you're looking for. Any further requests?"

"More nail polish." He lifts my hand to display my fingers. "I'm going to do your nails for Valentine's Day. Something red, probably, if it's available. That should fit with the rest of the ensemble you're planning to wear."

Valentine's Day. Just the thought of it makes me grin, not because I have a boyfriend or any romantic undertakings planned.

Oh no. I have something better.

Valentine's Day is when my favorite author is doing a book signing at the Barnes and Noble in Swisslatter, South Carolina, a city past where I work in Greyton. I am ecstatic. And thanks to Max, I am going in costume.

After nearly five years of being a die-hard fan, I finally get to meet Lord

Prince. I know. It's a ridiculous name, but they started their career by releasing chapter-by-chapter content on Wattpad. I was among the first to live and breathe their fantasy world of Fantasea. Before *Fantaseries*, I'd never seen a character so much like me in both appearance and personality. It feels like a part of me exists in the stunning dark-skinned female lead Princess Arella who falls in love with the cool and clever Prince Lucien. I'm addicted to the wild, passionate adventures they go on as they attempt to break a curse that restarts Princess Arella's world by the end of each installment.

I devour Prince's every new release like I devour fanfiction.

When their popularity exploded, they ended up picked up by a traditional publishing company, and now almost every reader knows the gaudy username plastered across paperbacks and hardbacks and special edition copies.

Every last drop of my respect belongs to the Prince.

I can't believe I'm actually lucky enough to be only an hour away from where they're having their first book signing. I get to be among the first to see who *the* Lord Prince is.

Andddd, apparently, I will get to have my nails done for the event.

"Smile harder, tumblers." Max chuckles, squeezing me tight before letting go. "It's your big fancy book thing where you'll get to meet a dork who actually thought *Lord Prince* was a decent username. I'm going all out. Because it sounds like the idiot needs a glimpse of class. And I want him to fall in love with you."

"For the last time, there's no confirmation on whether or not they're a boy or a girl even with the masculine username. Most guys just don't manage to write women this well, and Lord Prince firstly has *mentioned* menstrual cycles in their books without once suggesting it's an excuse for any emotions, and secondly they have crafted the experiences in such a way that I get cramps...so...I have my doubts—at the least—that Lord Prince was born a dude. This is their first public appearance. Ever." And it is happening within reach of my little South Carolina town. I have never been this lucky before in *my life*.

"Only a dude would have the gall to give himself the title of *lord*. Does he own land somewhere? I don't think so." Max spins me around and kisses my forehead. "You're going to be late to work. Eat something healthy for lunch. Please. A bucket of french fries from the McDonald's across the street is not okay."

“But it is delicious.”

“Somehow also no.”

Scoffing, I wander past him and get my sneakers on before grabbing the strappy heels that allegedly go with this outfit according to my elf of a friend—did I mention that the dweeb handles my outfits already? Because he does. I am pretty much his dress-up doll. Not that I’m complaining.

It’s one less thing to worry about, leaving me more time to unravel Princeverse lore.

“See you tonight, sunshine,” I chirp as I glide outside into the cacophony of animal noises.

Cocking a shoulder against the doorjamb, Max folds his arms and waits for me to pull my motorcycle from the double-bike garage he built for me when I moved in here four years ago. I drag the sleek, lovely black cruiser out onto the dirt path in front of the back door. Before I get my helmet on, he snaps, “Put on the balaclava I got you, or so help me, Arabelle...”

I stick my tongue out at him and get the stupid black sleeve that protects my hair out of the saddle bag. After fitting it over my head, without messing up my makeup, I slip on my full-face helmet, gloves, and form-fitting leather jacket. My bike purrs when I start her up, and I flick the helmet shield down before waving. “Love you, Maximus! Be good while I’m gone!”

His eyes roll as he rests his head against the jamb and lets his pretty eyes scan me in all my cool biker garb. A breath fills his chest, and he lets it out, slowly shaking his head. With full country flare tainting his words, he murmurs, “Can’t make me, darlin’,” and I ride off.

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