### Very Good Girls

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### Very Good Girls

by [Evilsnowswan](http://archiveofourown.org/users/evilsnowswan)

#### Summary

[Golden Lace AU]

*That girl is a god damn problem.*

Lacey French doesn't care what they say about her - even if it gets her in trouble.

[Tumblr prompt: "teacher/student smut, spanking/discipline, Belle or Lacey"]

Set in a AU!version of cursed Storybrooke. Lacey French is a student at Storybrooke High, a troubled kid causing trouble, and Dr Roan Gold, her new Maths teacher with a dark past of his own, has rather unorthodox (and slightly immoral) methods to keep the smart troublemaker in check and get her back on track. — PWP turned Porn with Feels.

(Warnings: teacher/student, underage, spanking, substance abuse. Check the tags.)

- Nominated for Best Golden Lace in The Espenson Awards 2016 & Best Lacey and Best Smut: Kink in 2017 -

#### Notes

Here we go. Fair warning, this is a teacher/student smut fic with an underage Lacey. So yes,
there is a power imbalance - if that bothers you, back away now. To be safe, it gets a dub!con warning, since the prompt specifically asked for spanking/discipline a.k.a. corporal punishment (which I am absolutely against in real life, fyi. Do not hit your kids!).

Trigger warnings for underage sex, teacher/student sex and corporal punishment.
Lacey knew why she did it. Or so she thought. She was aware that she liked the attention and approval of the opposite sex. One way to guarantee it was to show some flesh, and then a little more, until they could see more than they should, more than a good girl would reveal. She would wear her short skirts with no underwear and drop something in the park in front of a guy, then bend down slowly and deliberately until she was certain he had had a good look. Then she would straighten up and throw him a coy smile over her shoulder. It worked like a charm. Men were just predictable that way. Sometimes they would follow her and she would lead them to a secluded spot and show them more – if she felt like it. She liked the attention, but the thrill was what she truly craved (and sought unapologetically).

Lacey French, by all means, wasn’t what they called a good girl, but she had never found it in herself to care very much what people whispered behind her back. She had always denied feeling even the faintest desire to change for anyone or anything, ever. She did not want to be anyone else.

At least not until the first week of September rolled around and she was sitting in third period English and absentmindedly painting her nails a violent bubblegum pink. At least not until the classroom door opened and, instead of prehistoric Doc (who had taught the subject for as long as anyone in Storybrooke could remember), a stranger strode into the room and slammed his briefcase on the teacher’s desk with gusto.

“Please take out your timetables,” he instructs without so much as a greeting. “You will also require a pen.” He waits, sitting behind his desk, fingers steepled, watching them intently and shifting his attention to each of them in turn.

He is sizing them up, Lacey realizes with a jolt. Judging them silently as he watches them shuffle in their bags, the bastard.

Pens are clicking, someone coughs.

She isn’t sure she has ever experienced an English class this quiet. It would be perfect for undisturbed reading in the back, but The Bell Jar lies forgotten at the bottom of her bag under her desk. The sudden tension in the room, she doesn’t like it. She doesn’t like being watched either, not like this, not without her permission. So she just sits, unmoving, unblinking, determined to play him at his own game.

She studies his face. He must be, what, in his mid- to late forties, probably, lines around his mouth, but only very few laughter lines. Either he doesn’t like to laugh, or he must have had very little reason for it in his life so far. Lacey wonders which of the two it is, intrigued despite herself.

He isn’t conventionally attractive, which, in Lacey’s books, is actually a plus. Pretty people bore her (and Lacey hates to be bored). Their faces tell no stories, leave no mysteries to be uncovered. Unconventional, however, means unique. It means a person has character. He certainly looks like he does. The crisp suit doesn’t hurt either. Not at all. He sure knows how to rock a pocket square and tie (even if he is a jerk, he is a well-dressed one). She likes his prominent cheekbones. He does have a nice face, Lacey decides, worrying her bottom lip.

He looks at her then, and her heart skips a beat. Even from a distance his gaze is intense, if not necessarily ... friendly. His eyes travel over her face and Lacey keeps exceptionally still, like she
would when being x-rayed. Just like in the x-ray room, she feels suddenly a little claustrophobic. He’s at the other end of the room, but way too close at the same time, and her face flushes. She looks away to catch her breath, looks down at her empty hands on her desk. Her pink nails are really very pretty. Fascinating.

“This is Maths,” he says matter-of-factly, and the majority of the class looks up, confused. “Slots were switched. Please emend your timetables accordingly now.”

Scribbling. Then silence. The classroom resembles a wax museum, all silent, frozen in position, waiting. Lacey doesn’t write, she just watches. She is waiting – along with everyone else in the room - for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t. That’s it. No explanation, no details.

Her classmates are either too stunned by the turn of events or too intimidated by their new teacher to ask any questions. No one’s raising their hand. Lacey would, she isn’t scared of him, but she has a reputation to uphold, and that reputation does not allow for class-participation or asking dumb questions.

In front row, as if on cue, Mary-Margaret Blanchard lifts a trembling hand. Of course. Lacey smirks. “Yes?”

“Maths, Sir?” Mary asks timidly, her tongue stumbling over the s at the end. Mary calls it Math. Lacey is more flexible. “Do you mean Algebra, Calculus or Trig?”

Lacey can see Mary blush from across the classroom.

She is one of those girls, who blush prettily, giggle prettily, and do absolutely everything else prettily too. She is always polite, speaks only when spoken to, and completes all her assignments on time. Of course, she also has a perfect GPA, perfect pearly-white teeth, and a perfect boyfriend to boot. She dots her i’s with hearts and circles and feels genuinely thankful for every sunny day. Mary-Margaret Blanchard is a very good girl.

“All of the above,” he is telling her, and Mary doesn’t understand, but nods anyway. When in doubt, good girls will always answer ‘yes’, smiling.

Glances are exchanged, and a couple of brave souls, or maybe they are desperate ones, start whispering.

“Clarification in due time,” he raises his right hand, open palm, and all conversation ceases at once.

Standing up, his hands do an upward motion, and the class rises from their seats with him. Lacey makes a point of taking a beat longer than everyone else to get to her feet. He knows, that she knows, that he takes notice.

“Good morning, class,” he says at long last. “My name is Dr. Roan Gold.”

Two syllables. Different. It doesn’t escape her that his r is rothic – a soft tap, rather than a trill.

“Good morning, Dr. Gold” the class chants dutifully back at him, like a flock of lobotomized sheep.

Roan.

Lacey mouths his name soundlessly, enjoying the way her lips curve around the vowels, gliding smoothly over the ghost of a /w/ in the middle, her tongue resting comfortably on the ridge behind her upper front teeth as she draws out the nasal at the end. She smiles.
“Well,” Gold says “that needs some work, doesn’t it.”

Lacey rolls her eyes, but he doesn’t see.

He’s looking at Mary’s boyfriend and a few others, who have sat back down. “You will remain standing until I tell you otherwise.”

The addressed scramble back to their feet quickly.

“Your name?” Gold asks, his eyes still fixed on poor David, who runs a hand through his blond hair, subconsciously hoping that his natural charm will work its magic on Gold, probably. “David,” he says, and hastily adds a polite “Sir.” – but too late. It will not save him, and neither will his tousled hair. He’s already cactus. Judging by the way Gold purses his lips, Mary can go press her black dress for the funeral.

Gold moves out from behind his desk, and only now does Lacey notice that he is using a cane. Has he had it the whole time, she wonders, how could she have missed it? The polished dark wood, beautifully carved, cuts through the air, pointing from Ruby’s phone, to Emma’s coffee cup, to Graham’s basecap, to Kate’s art project, and to other students’ clutter on their desks, before finally coming to a halt, with the quivering end pointing right at her small bottle of glittery nail polish.

“That has to go,” he says, without taking his eyes off her. “Empty desks, Ladies and Gentlemen.”

She holds his gaze this time, ready to stare him down, and reaches for the polish and her hairbrush.

“Tut-tut. Listen first, then move,” he is speaking slowly, condescendingly, and Lacey would very much like to slap that little smile off his smug face. He is addressing the room at large, but searching her face as he continues “Rule number one: you will stand behind your desks when class starts and only sit back down once you have been told to do so.”

Lacey scoffs and crosses her arms. Oh, please. If he truly believes she will jump up, like someone placed a pincushion on her seat, every time he enters the classroom -

“Two, on your desk will only ever be the following items: the course book, a spiral pad - squared paper -, a binder - red -, one mechanical pencil - HB - , one pen - black -, one soft eraser, a triangle ruler, a parabola stencil, a 12-inch ruler - all transparent -, a compass, and a programmable solar calculator. Graphing calculators are not permitted.”

He looks around, as if daring anyone to comment on his list or to object to any of the specifications, but Lacey knows to pick her battles. She considers him with calculating appraisal, her eyes only narrowed by a fraction.

“You should better be writing all this down now,” Gold says. “Butts in the seats.” He checks his wrist-watch. “You have exactly six and a half minutes to clear your desks, write down the supplies you will need, and return your undivided attention back to me.”

Lacey slips the nail polish into her jeans pocket, then proceeds to brush out her luxuriant mahogany curls with her brush, slowly and deliberately, while everyone around her is taking notes.

Gold is back in his chair. He folds his hands, watching her closely over the top of them, his elbows resting on the desk. The corner of his mouth twitches. So he has some sense of humor, the pettifogging pedant.

He raises an eyebrow, and she pauses only a second, before putting her brush down and pulling her hair into a high messy ponytail. A wanton grin on her face, she takes the elastic on her left wrist off
with her teeth, as slowly and provocatively as she dares to, not looking away to make sure that he isn’t going to either. Pushing boundaries can be fun, thrilling even, especially when he’s looking at her like that. His eyes lock on hers and her stomach flip-flops, catching her by surprise. Her hair almost slips from her grasp before she can tie it. She feels her heart thump, tension rising within her.

Now he’s the one with the wicked smirk on his face.

A knock on the door marks the arrival of their new course books, and Leroy, the janitor, wheels them in on his book carriage.

“Ah, Leroy, right on time,” Gold greets him and Leroy nods curtly. “Miss French, Miss Lucas – would the two of you please come to the front and hand out the books to the class? Leroy has done more than enough for you lot this week, pushing this cart around the school and seeing to it that everyone gets their much anticipated books as soon as possible.”

(Huh? When had he learned their names?)

Lacey blinks, looks back and forth between Leroy and Gold, then moves – but she refuses to even glance at her former best friend’s face, as both of them walk towards the front. Lacey hands the dull grey-colored copies out to everyone sitting on the right, and Ruby takes over the people on the left. They maintain a sufficient safety distance, return to their seats in silence, and Lacey finally releases the breath she has been holding, crossing her legs under the table.

Gold swings his eyes to her, his look quizzical. She wants to snap at him to pick another soul in the room to dissect and drill his damn eyes into for a change, and to mind his own freaking business. She squirms in her seat, her left leg bobbing up and down, and averts her eyes, because they are watering at the worst possible moment (Lint. Stupid brand-new books.). She fights the urge to rub at them with her hand, determined not to give anyone any wrong ideas about anything.

“Thank you,” Gold clears his throat, Leroy shuts the door on his way out, and Lacey’s eyes stay glued to the grey rectangle on her desk. “Before we start - it’s time to answer Miss Blanchard’s question. Please open your books to the list of contents.”

Pages are turned in unison.

“Now, this should look rather different from what you are used to.”

He’s right. Trying to figure out the underlying system behind the units’ names and structuring, Lacey furrows her brow.

“In this class you will be asked to focus on the problems rather than the tools. You will be taught to solve them, gaining and applying your knowledge and skills task-appropriately. I don’t do traditional input-oriented, so do not expect me to do your work for you. I know this is going to inconvenience a whole lot of you, but you will need to think for yourselves.”

At this point, the only thing that’s absolutely crystal is his breathtaking arrogance. He’s not answering the question at all, but backhandedly insulting their intelligence. Not that her classmates seem to have noticed, their expressions ranging from politely puzzled to brainlessly vacant, so maybe the arsehole actually has a point. Lacey glowers at him.

“Any more questions?” he asks, knowing full well that none are going to come. Every question Lacey can think of right now would send her bum straight to detention, and she doesn’t have enough books on her for that today.

He waits, they wait. You can hear a pin drop.
“Very well, then. Turn to page fifteen - exercise 2b - and stand, please,” he instructs. “Let’s see if we can blow the dust and cobwebs from your Gyri cerebri.”

Standing behind her desk, Lacey’s jaw hurts from the crazy effort of keeping her mouth closed around her intense desire to scream. Her fists are trembling at her sides. The retorts she’s biting back are clogging up her airways. What she wouldn’t give to be able to give him a piece of her mind right about now!

What follows is an uncomfortable game of public humiliation (which Gold calls warmup) - a mental maths rat race. They are solving the problems in front of them, giving answers one after another, as fast as possible. Those who are too slow or answer incorrectly have to sit back down.

Gold has divided the game into time sections, a subtle knock on his desk signaling the starting points. Sections equal a certain amount of extra work to be completed by the poor unfortunate, eliminated souls - on top of their regular homework, natch - so sitting back down is not a relief, it’s degrading.

Lacey is still in the game. If she has to play, she wants to win – and then tell him that he can stick his warmup where the sun don’t shine, once she is the last one standing.

It’s almost too easy. Lacey has always been very good with numbers, at perfect ease juggling them in her head. She can juggle a lot of things, actually. Her mind is always buzzing with words too – she just doesn’t forget – everything she reads, she remembers. She can quote entire plays, but no one ever asks her to, so she doesn’t.

Around her, her classmates are dropping like flies as task difficulty increases, and she feels a surge of glee, repressing a smug smile that shouldn’t be there, because she hates this, and she hates him, and she’s not a pet rat! But damn does she like to win.

She wants to punch the air as Will, the last one to go down, finally does, tipping his imaginary hat to her. Instead she settles for a relaxed stance and a bored what-like-it’s-hard expression. She knows how to keep a poker face, all those Christmas Eves spent gambling crisps with Granny paying off after all. So long as she appears nonchalant, no pinkness in her cheeks to betray her, she’s fine.

Lacey is aware that all eyes in the room are on her. She’s basking in the spotlight.

“Miss French,” Gold says pleasantly.

It is the first real smile she’s seen on his face, and Lacey starts, slightly cross with herself for her stupid jumpiness. His teeth are crooked.

“Very good, you may sit.”

She looks at him sheepishly, all thought of rebellion and mutiny driven from her mind, and sits - like a good girl.

Had he just praised her? And had she let him?
Student

With more than half of the new semester under their belts, her classmates have learned to fear Maths class and Dr. Gold. Except for a select few, herself included, they struggle to keep up with Gold’s course work, cursing him behind his back, and quivering in their seats during class. He’s harsh, concocts diabolical assignments with multiple subsections and a complicated marking scheme, never gives homework extensions, and grades ungenerously. Class does not follow the traditional curriculum, but rather a cyclical, mixed approach that covers arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and calculus – all mixed together, depending on the problem they are solving. Even Lacey occasionally understands only half of what Gold is telling them, and she has a very hard time coming to terms with that.

Her sharp intellect is the only thing she genuinely takes pride in. It is Lacey’s best kept secret, but she considers herself rather cleverer than most of the people in town, and she isn’t used to being made to feel dumb and lacking in class. People know she reads, and an indecent number of books at that, but she has convinced them all that she is a long way from brainy or brilliant. Cute and cunning, never stumped for a shrewd answer with that big mouth of hers, but not actually smart. Her attendance is spotty at best, her GPA mediocre. Everyone knows she has no interest in academics, doesn’t give a damn about her grades, or about her future, and no one is expecting great things from her. She prefers it that way. Less opportunity for disappointment all around.

Lately, she has become almost a regular on school premises, which Dr. Hopper, the school counselor, deems progress, but he doesn’t know that she’s still treating all her courses like electives. She only shows up for those that manage to hold her interest long enough. She still cuts class, spending long hours in the school library instead, until it is time for lunch, Maths, or British and World Lit – or time to go home.

She goes to the rest of her courses, sometimes, just often enough so they can’t fail her. Even if she isn’t going to pursue a great career, she still wants to graduate High School. And she wants an ‘excellent’ with distinction from Gold. The pompous arse claims he never gives top marks, because no student’s work ever deserves them, so Lacey has made it her mission in life to get a perfect score, 100 percent, in stupid AP Maths. Just because.

So she’s turning up - on the dot - for his class, and she's being as good as gold (pun intended) - even if all the sickly sweet smiling is making her teeth rot, and she can physically feel her IQ dropping. She sits quietly, works obediently and diligently, and even volunteers, her unpracticed hand punching the air just as often as Mary’s these days – much to everyone’s astonishment. She’s a little surprised herself.

She’s sought out Gold in the teachers’ lounge (he smokes) once or twice to amuse herself pestering him with questions – all maths-related, of course. She doesn’t dare pull any stunts on hostile territory, outnumbered by the likes of him, who only grudgingly tolerate her in their space.

Lacey has no plans to become a good girl any time soon, though. She is merely out to spite Gold – that is all there is to her new found passion for school work.

They have recapped basic differentiation (finding maxima for parabola) at top speed, and are now focusing on calculus in more depth: integration and differentiation, including trig and hyperbolic functions and the chain, product and coefficient rules, area and volume integrals in Cartesian and polar coordinates, and first and second order differential equations. Class isn’t solely focused on calc, though. Their heads are spinning as they puzzle over imaginary numbers, including Euler's formula, long division with polynomials, and a basic introduction to group theory. They revisit topics again
and again as new problems require old and new skills in different ways, so people are clinging to the, albeit vague, hope that they might get it the next time around. *(33rd time lucky, right?)*

Gold does not share their sense of stubborn optimism, suggests they switch to core classes, if they cannot keep up, and constantly reprimands them for their poor grasp of the fundamentals. Most lessons, he is being his arrogant and demanding self, and she keeps challenging him just as much as he does her. She shoves and pushes against every single one of his silly rules, bending them, and winding him up until he snaps.

She makes his life hell, playing nice until she gets bored, and then flips the switch on him. She knows she should just stay quiet and behave, but she can’t help sparring with him. Like trained boxers they circle one another, the kid gloves off, *fighting time*. She has made him yell at her in class once before, has driven him to lose it for a few seconds, and Lacey is determined to do it again.

The thought of his dark eyes, glinting dangerously as he glares down at her, is sending shivers down her spine whenever she recalls the memory. Power and fear, a tantalizing, intoxicating mélange – and now that she has had a sip from that chalice, tasted the sweet brew on her lips, and has felt her body tingle with foreboding and anticipation, she cannot stop.
Pleased, and slightly concerned about the response this has gotten. Thank you so much for your likes, kudos and comments!

Now, ladies and gentlemen, as we start our descent into squick, please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on emotional baggage is stowed underneath the seat in front of you or in the overhead compartments. Please turn off your conscience until we are safely parked at the gate. Thank you.

She wants to, but she can’t.

Some nights, she pretends she can. She pretends that all the lies they are feeding her are true, that the picture they are painting of a bright future is within the grasp of her fingertips – all she has to do is commit herself to it, hold tight, and work hard. It’s a nice-looking future, respectable and safe, and she knows she can never ever have it.

He’s asking her, if she has thought about her college options yet, and it hurts. She says, she doesn’t care, she’s not interested, and tells him to sod off. He doesn’t like that, but lets it go, and she’s even more furious about that than about anything else. Now she’s too --- fragile, too --- delicate? She doesn’t need his pity or want his advice.

She is done listening to him drone on about numbers and graphs, anyway.

Gold doesn’t ask where she’s been, when she returns to class two weeks later, ready to do anything to get back into his good books. She finds herself wishing he would just yell at her, or give her extra work, any reaction better than his cold indifference.

She can take a lot of things, Lacey French can, but silence is not one of them, so she works her bum off, and yet he says so little to her in class now, even if she is being very, very good. Good girls become invisible, and Lacey wants to be seen. She has no other choice. He’s not cross, he’s lost interest.

======

Proper school uniform consists of a white blouse and a navy blue skirt. Above her desk, Lacey is a model of compliance today: tidy mahogany hair, spotless white blouse, and stripy school tie - but concealed beneath her desk, she is defiantly wearing a pair of navy blue shorts. Some of her classmates have taken notice, but they are keeping their mouths shut. Some are shooting her worried, others outright admiring glances.

Maybe you had be bold to pull something like this in Gold’s class (of all classes, his!), but she isn’t wearing the shorts to boost her reputation as a rebel, or so she can boast about how she avoided detection (and detention).

Lacey wants to know something much more important. Has he noticed? Does he still look out for
her?

At first blush, her shorts might pass as her skirt. They certainly are the same shade of blue, and a similar length, too. Nevertheless, she is flouting school rules, and he is very strict about his precious rules. She wants to find out if he’s paying close enough attention, her mind buzzing with excitement as she anticipates getting caught and having to admit her behavior, wondering how he’ll react.

Lacey wants to get caught. Gold can no longer ignore her, if she is breaking the rules so unabashedly - and right under his nose. She will get what she wants, always, and she will force his hand if she has to.

He is writing their next homework assignment on the blackboard now.

Homework is Lacey’s kryptonite. She hates to do as she’s told, but she also wants to please him. Her contempt for authority comes into conflict with her insatiable yearning for attention, two hearts beating asynchronously in her chest, battling for survival, and she finds herself unable to reconcile them.

Even on good days, he is sparing with praise, so his is the sweetest praise, which only makes her want it more, every little word of it thrilling her. Scribbled in thin red ink on her homework, commending her, telling her how clever she is, telling her how proud he is of her.

*(She hasn’t gotten one of those comments in a while now, maybe she never will again.)*

Sometimes she reads his words at home, alone in her bedroom, wrapped up in her duvet to keep warm. The collection of loose papers under her mattress has become a shining beacon in the gloom, anchoring her, shielding her, and Lacey wants more. She always wants more, ever-hungry like a predator during bitter cold winter nights. He has thrown her a bone, and she gnaws on it, torn between gratitude and contempt. She takes his scraps, soaks them up, his words sinking deep into her bones and flesh, branding her.

There is a softness in her, just out of reach, that she longs to connect with, but she doesn’t dare, she doesn’t want to want.

He’s dangling Trojan carrots in front of her face and Lacey wants to bolt, wants to buck, before she does something stupid. She tastes blood, the bit already in her mouth, gagging her, and the soft leather of the headpiece ghosting over her cheek and hair, as she makes to lower her head, eyes upcast.

Only she doesn’t. Instead, she flings her head up at the last possible moment, throwing the bridle across the car park, and runs.

Caught in a limbo of needing and not wanting, wanting and hating herself for it, she’s taking the passenger seat, sitting idly and watching herself, as she allows him to break her in, one friendly word at a time. And she falls asleep, imagining him dispensing some very special rewards to his very best student, for being such a good girl.

Lacey stares shamelessly at Gold’s shapely behind as his chalk flows across the blackboard. Around her, people share self-pitying sighs, shooting imaginary poisoned arrows through Gold’s back with their eyes, as they copy down the assignment.

On occasion she flirts with him, trying to attract his attention that way *(usually a foolproof method)*, but the man remains impassive. He cannot possibly be barracking for the other team, she decides. He hasn’t rejected her, not outright. Perhaps, he isn’t over a bad breakup yet, she tells herself, the ghost
of a faceless woman swimming before her mind's eye, sharp thorns between her ribs.

He is done writing and turns to face the class, his eyes passing over all the drowsy and grumpy faces, and travelling to the back, searching for hers. He looks straight at her, and Lacey’s heart flutters wildly in her chest.

“These problems are due by next Thursday. Take your time, and actually put some effort in this time. Some of you desperately need the credit.”

Lacey sits up a little straighter, quickly removing her elbows from the desk, and smiles at him. She has contemplated forgetting her homework, but cannot stand the thought of disappointing him, so she has had to find other ways to stay on his radar.

======

He has indeed noticed. Back at his desk, Gold sighs internally at her disobedience. Lacey’s such a bright girl, yet her silly acting up is becoming increasingly obvious and she’s disrupting his classes. He cannot possibly turn a blind eye and let any more of it slide. He must put a stop to the nonsense and have a stern word with her after class – when he’ll also have to ascertain where her school skirt has gone.

She would play the daft lassie of course, contriving some scarcely believable fiction about her uniform going missing, or having to be urgently laundered. He is beginning to suspect she is flouting underwear regulations too, and makes a mental note to inspect her, just to make sure.

Sitting behind his desk, watching her, Gold is very much wanting a drink.

There isn’t much in Lacey’s records to explain her behavior, and he won’t start asking around, not to raise any unwarranted suspicions. Caring too much, getting too involved, has come back to bite him before, and he will not have that happen again.

Lacey had transferred to Storybrooke High, she and her family having moved here from Boston, but there were no notes in her file to explain why her grades plummeted quite so significantly right around that very same time. Maybe she doesn’t take well to change.

There has been some improvement over the years, enough so she would not drop out, but she has never reached her previous GPA again.

Her file only goes back as far as Middle School, and Gold found himself annoyed at the sloppy record-keeping, until he realized that she’d been born and raised in Australia prior to her time in Boston. That certainly explains the occasional accent-slip, when she is particularly vexed.

Having done well academically in his class for the first half of the semester, Gold has been displeased to find that she has fallen short of his expectations in midterms, despite having such a good head on her shoulders. Maybe she has been too busy annoying him out of his wits to do her work – her behavior deteriorating fast, spiraling out of control, until she had stormed out of his class one afternoon when he had brought up college to remind her to focus on the material. Perhaps that had been a mistake.

He had decided not to bring it up when she returned, to give her time to collect herself, and to study her behavior more closely to analyze its root cause, in order to prevent future reoccurrence.

Gold worries. Things he feels he should have done or said, coupled with his perceived failures as a teacher dominate his mind, looking at the girl now. She isn’t even writing down the homework.
He thinks about his actions and words, finding them inadequate. Festering guilt renders his mind ineffective, and the more anxious he grows, the more pronounced his intellectualization of the whole situation becomes. He rationalizes and views the problem from different viewpoints, looking at it from every possible angle, determined to find the flaw in his equations and calculations, as if he might force a more positive outcome by his sheer brilliance of thought.

===

From the back of the class Lacey tries to decode his gaze. He has spotted her, hasn’t he? Almost by reflex, her mind begins to whiz through her multiple excuses, critiquing their believability, before deciding on one she thinks most bulletproof. It isn’t going to be long now until class ends, and as that moment is ticking ever closer, she’s all of a tingle, her skin warming.

The bell rings and people cannot pack up their belongings fast enough to get out. All around the room sighs of relief mix with the sound of zippers being zipped, and chairs scraping the floor. A few students wish Gold a good day, as they pass his desk to leave. He murmurs his thanks.

Lacey can feel his eyes on her back as she bends down to reach for her worn leather satchel, stuffed to bursting with books and random papers, and hurriedly crams her course book, pad, pens and calculator into it as best as possible. The buckle won’t close anyway, it’s broken.

She turns, and he points at her - wordlessly - his finger beckoning her forward.

“Me, Sir?” she mouths, pointing to herself with faux surprise, but inside, she shivers.

Uh-oh.

Mei-Li, whom she sometimes shares a cigarette with, sends her a worried glance, pausing at the door, hesitating. She and Zora are holding hands, and Lacey’s heart swells for a moment, happy for them, before the sight makes her sad, and her gut returns to the present, knotting.

“It’s okay,” she mouths at them. “I’ll be fine. You go.” She waves them away.

The classroom clears quickly, leaving her alone with Gold.

Taking a deep breath, she walks up to his desk and lets the strap of her satchel slip from her shoulder. It lands on the floor with a thud.

She is standing silently with her head bowed - before realizing, rather alarmed, that she is staring at his crotch. Mortified, she fixes her gaze on the cane instead. Up close, lying across the length of the desk, it looks ominously large, and very sturdy.

Lacey gulps, clasps her hands in front of her waist, lacing her fingers together, letting her pinky fingers brush ever so lightly against her groin. She looks up at his face, batting her eyelashes demurely.

“Explain yourself, Miss French.”

She widens her eyes. “What do you mean?” she asks innocently, her smile suddenly sly. She angles her body towards him, pressing her tongue between her teeth and twisting a tight curl of mahogany hair around one finger. Her eyes glint mischievously beneath her dark lashes as she raises her chin defiantly, her breathing shallow.

His eyes slide down her body, as if he’s undressing her with them, but his voice is calm and severe. “Dress code violation,” he says. “Let’s start with that.”
He is not buying into any of it, it seems. She might actually have overstepped the mark this time. Her heart pounding in her throat, Lacey considers her options. With feigning oblivious out of the run, and passing it off as a prank a goner as well (because he is as sour as a green lemon right now, and clearly not in the mood for her jokes), all she has left up her sleeve is a groveling apology and, possibly, crocodile’s tears.

That, however, is not something she is willing to do. There are worse crimes in the world than exchanging a skirt for a pair of shorts, and Lacey French does not beg for forgiveness, not ever – even less so, when the other person is to blame for the whole situation in the first place.

Now that she finally has Gold’s full and undivided attention, she isn’t sure that she wants it anymore. Her stomach churns as she quickly glances at his face again. It is hard as marble.

Hitting the panic button, she finds herself talking, before she has given herself enough time to think.

“I- uhh - I lent my spare skirt to a friend, because -- she had a lady accident and it needed to be properly washed!” She blurts, gesturing, and talking too fast in her attempt to wriggle herself out of her current predicament.

She tries to read his expression, but she’s still learning all his little mannerisms, and he’s shutting her out right now. So, with her heart racing furiously, she keeps talking, digging herself deeper into this hole with every word that tumbles out, like toads from the ugly stepsister’s mouth.

“Sir, you couldn’t possibly expect me to wear my uniform in that condition, could you?” she finishes almost cockily, and licks her lips. She’d have to be blind to miss the way his eyes follow the movement, but he doesn’t say a word.

(Well, fuck.)

Lacey remains silent and tries not to fidget. Maintaining eye-contact is difficult, and she is growing increasingly hot and uncomfortable under his stern and disapproving glare.

This has to be the lamest cover story in history, and they both know it. She has violated the first rule of bad girls club. Only a bad bad girl adds too many details to her fabricated story to make it sound realistic and believable, when everyone knows that verbosity and excessive complexity are actually indicative of a guilty conscience.

He is frowning at her, tapping his fingers on the desk.

Of course, he doesn’t believe her, and she cannot blame him for it.

Dropping all pretense, Lacey decides to throw in the shovel, and stops digging. She coyly flicks her curls from her forehead and drops her eyes, clasping her hands in front of her body again.

"I didn’t think you’d --- notice," she says softly, clammy hands clasping and unclasping.
Chapter Notes

Thank you for being absolutely wonderful about this little piece of filth. Your feedback makes me happy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He is watching her with a curious expression.

Lacey holds her breath, her face hot.

He understands now. It is quite obvious the uniform story is only a ruse to test his authority - and there is something more, though he isn’t sure what it is yet – or whether to press her on it. Either way she will have to bear the consequences of her misdemeanors. He has been lenient with her for far too long, which has done the girl more harm than good. A mistake he will have to rectify.

"You're a highly intelligent girl, Miss French," he says, shaking his head slightly. "How this display of disgraceful behavior?"

Lacey shrugs.

He looks away briefly, and she feels her stomach lurch, hugging herself with one arm, gripping her left elbow tight.

"You’re looking at me like I murdered someone," she mumbles. "'Tis just a skirt! --- Of course that's what you notice" she sighs. "Men."

He doesn’t miss the note of disdain and derision in her voice, or how she crosses both her arms over her chest like they are her armor as he looks back into her face.

“Step very very carefully now, Miss French,” He looks at her over his steepled hands. “I will assume for your sake that you’re not insinuating what I think you are.”

“Oh, don’t bother,” she huffs. “This little meeting-” she’s making quotation marks around the word with her fingers- “more than proves my point, don’t you think?”

Swallowing his desire to yell at her for the infamous insinuation and attitude, Gold wills his mouth into a soft smile.

So she hasn’t ceased her resistance and lain down her arms after all, she’s playing dirty now, but he will not allow her to seize the reins and back him into a corner by making him out to be the lecherous teacher ogling his student. He’s not that stupid – and it stings a little that she thinks he is.

How can she believe that he hasn’t noticed – the flippant remarks, the make-up, the cigarette pack and lighter cheekily peeking out of her jeans pocket, the temporary purple streak in her hair – the list just goes on and on. He’s pretty sure that she’s even smuggled in booze that one time, and would have called her out on it, if he had been certain. How can she think that he missed any of it?!

Gold watches her: her chest heaving, pouty lips pressed tightly together, her steel blue eyes flashing
She’s cross with him, he realizes mildly amused, which means things are way worse already than he’s anticipated. Not only have all her actions been deliberate - she has actually been trying to catch his attention to force this confrontation, it seems.

Well, if it is his attention she wants, then he is currently reinforcing her bad behavior by giving it to her. If he ignores her and doesn’t give her what she wants, however, that will still only teach her that she can get away with her little stunts without consequence. He will have to give her a reason to want to stop. Add a stressor. Simple Reinforcement Theory.

“So, I take it, you’re accusing me of sexual harassment?” He looks at her gravely. “Then perhaps we should take this to Principal Mills’ office - if you are uncomfortable in my classroom.”

“Beg yours?” That knocks the wind right out of her, and she deflates again. "Of course I don't think that!” she snaps, tapping her forefinger against the side of her head. "That’s garbage!"

“Language, Miss French,” he scolds. “Though, I quite agree with the assessment.”

She is biting her lip furiously, no doubt trying to find a loophole, a weak spot to attack next.

He’s tempted to let her try, to lower his defenses just a wee bit to lay out a trap - and watch her unleash her indignant storm in a desperate brute-force attack, blindly stumbling into it. She has got the fire, the energy; she just doesn’t know how to channel it yet. It’s a pity, really. She’s laying herself open to attack, her defense practically non-existent. She’s an open book – and the girl doesn’t even know it.

While often overlooked by amateur boxers, a strong defense is the key to staying in the ring and to winning matches. Requiring a different set of physical skills than attacking, counter defense - the ability to predict and respond to an opponent's attacks - also involves a large mental aspect. Another lesson Lacey French yet has to learn.

Perhaps he does have the time for a lesson, another round in the ring, before putting his foot down.

“Is that what you’d wish I was?” he asks calmly. “One of the sleazy old nonces ogling you at Granny’s?”

Not knowing whether she is Arthur or Martha, Lacey gapes at him. He – what now? Bastard.

"Shut up!" she shouts, fists clenched at her sides. "You don't get to tell me what to do or how to dress! You don't get to sit there and act like you know everything and hurl your misogynistic bullshit at me! You don't bloody get to insult me!"

"That's not what I'm trying to do," he says sincerely. "This is about me wanting what's best for you."

He holds up a hand, trying to calm her, but it won’t work. Lacey is suddenly livid and she doesn’t care if she’s getting herself into more trouble. How dare he suggest that – that – she would want him to objectify her --- that she would want him?!

"So unquestioningly accepting a set of sexist rules imposed on me by older men is what is best for me," she sneers, hands on hips and rolling her eyes at the ceiling. "Well, excuse me if I don’t buy that."

"No," he says. He is getting angry again, Lacey can tell – and it pleases her. He might act all high and mighty, but he too puts on his stupid pressed suit pants one leg at a time, and he knows she has a
point. “But if your refusal of school uniform regulations is indeed a one-woman attempt at protesting said regulations, then again, I’d suggest you take it up with Headmistress Mills, instead of disrupting my classes.”

A traitorous lurch in her abdomen at the look in his gleaming eyes, Lacey keeps going, egged on by the cracks in his countenance. "Oh, so you’re all for the objectification of school girls?" she asks jeeringly. “Wow.”

He slams his hand down hard on the desk at that, his jaw clenched and eyes flashing darkly.

"I truly didn't want for it to have to come to this," he says quietly, dangerously, his voice a low rumble. "But it appears that you are absolutely resistant to advice and reason."

She backs up a step and crosses her arms over her chest. *Come to what exactly?*

"This has nothing to do with what I think of the rules and everything with you being unable to follow them.” His voice is raised, his accent thick with frustration. She can see his nostrils flaring as he glares at her. "I want what's best for you!" he insists, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Really?" She blows a curl from her face. "I think it does, even if you won't admit it to yourself! You just want everyone to dance to your tune – ”

"Maybe you’re correct,” he snaps, eyes blazing. “Which would certainly serve as excellent explanation for this,” he gestures between them, “because dancing requires deliberation, determination and self-discipline - qualities that you, Miss French, are sadly lacking."

She rocks back on her heels, her breath leaving her in a whoosh, feeling as though he's punched her in the stomach.

"Rules are in place here to guide you and to protect you,” He has lowered his voice again, but there is no mistaking the anger still lingering behind his words. “By disrespecting them you are only harming yourself, and further proving your personal shortcomings. To show consideration for the rules and respect for yourself and others is strength, not weakness.”

Fighting back her tears, Lacey puts her hands back on her hips, pink nails digging into blue fabric, and lifts her chin proudly. “Maybe you need to get your eyes checked,” she flings at him, her chest heaving. “You’re missing a whole lot, if rules are that important to you!”

She knows she’s losing ground and fast, but she doesn’t want him to win, to have the last word on this. He’s toying with words and being a colossal self-righteous boofhead - and someone has to tell him to go to blazes.

“Do not mistake my showing you understanding for approval of your actions,” he cautions, and her stomach flips. “I am neither blind nor daft and have been keeping a close eye on your little childish rebellion for a while now.”

(*Oh. So he has noticed. Good.*)

"Then you're a coward,” she snaps, and he looks as though she's finally landed a good one too. “You lose it over sloppy handwriting, dog-ears and blunt pencils – not calling me out,” she pauses, hesitating. “ --- Why am I that special to you, Dr Gold?”

Lacey leans forward a little, batting her lashes and intending to make him as uncomfortable as she possibly can, but she doesn’t dare getting all the way up into his personal space. The desk, for one, is preventing that from happening anyway, and she’s a little glad for the physical barrier between them.
"I'm not a coward," he tilts his head slightly, a marble statue once again, his smile thin and humorless. "And you are way out of line."

She enjoys pushing his buttons to get a response, but, although she’s hit a couple red ones in quick succession, it doesn’t get her the expected fireworks, all she’s getting is more ice.

“You need to stop, Miss French,” he says, warningly. “Stop right now.”

“What happens if I don’t? You’ll punish me?” she counters mockingly, challenging him. Let him put her in detention or write a note to her parents (like her dad cared). Hell, let him suspend her for a few days, if his ego is that bruised. It’s not like she wants to be here anyway. Why ever had she decided to come back in the first place?

“I think it is high time for a strong reprimand to get you back on track,” he concurs softly, almost sadly, and Lacey closes herself off to the sudden emotion in his voice. It’s no longer anger, is it? She’d rather, it were, thank you very much.

She is worrying her lower lip, but meeting his gaze steadily, a stubborn thrust to her chin. “So, detention?” She raises one brow. “Lines?” She flashes him a cheeky grin, all glossy lips and gleaming white teeth. “What’s it going to be, Sir? I don’t have all day.”

To keep tormenting him mercilessly is a very bad idea, she knows it. She knew it all along, but she has always been an engine without brakes, rushing into disaster and doom, and she doesn’t give a damn what happens to her in the crash. She’ll call him out on his bluff, coward that he is. Even if she’ll be in detention for the rest of the school year, that small victory over him will be worth it. She wants to watch him go boom, just to have the satisfaction.

Gold doesn’t miss the defiant spark in her eyes. Enough.

Slowly, he pushes his chair back, placing his hands on his desk, his fingers closing around his cane, and pushes himself to his feet with calm, controlled movements.

Lacey feels her breathing quicken as he draws himself up to his full height, his eyes locking on hers, the cold fire in their depths making her shiver and her skin prickle with goosebumps.

“No.”

Gold moves alongside her. With the clamor and chatter of the other students long gone from the corridor outside, the dull tapping sound of his cane is unusually loud in her ears, and Lacey nervously opens and closes her sweaty hands a couple of times, before hastily wiping her palms on the smooth sticky fabric of her shorts.

“Hands flat on the desk, Miss French,” he commands, his voice stern. “You have broken the rules, deliberately and repeatedly, and are showing absolutely no remorse for your actions.”

(Is he – ? No, he wouldn’t dare!)

Lacey clenches her fists tightly, until her nails dig into the palms of her hands, but she barely notices. The only thing she is very aware of is the feeling of her heart throbbing against the cage of her chest - and the ominous heating sensation pooling at her center.

“Bugger that!” she protests, but it’s only half-hearted. Adrenalin is making her reckless and she’s too curious, too intrigued, far too hell-bent on finding out exactly how far he is willing to take this. He doesn’t have it in him.
"My word! Haven’t you got quite a tongue, Miss French,” he tuts, shaking his head. "I am afraid, I am not joking - and this is not up for debate. Docking points off your final grade clearly won’t suffice to drive the message home.”

(He’s lowering her grade?!)

Lacey’s lower lip trembles for just a second, almost imperceptibly, eyes wide with disbelief, but she doesn’t back down and doesn’t move.

“Shorts and panties down to your ankles, young lady,” he orders, and she flinches. It’s a proper command this time, not a prelude to further negotiations.

She cocks her head, giving him one last plaintive look.

(Oh?)

No mercy is forthcoming. His eyes merely narrow. “I’m waiting.”

His voice makes her hairs stand on end, heat rising in her cheeks. Another wave of adrenalin is flooding her system like it’s on an intravenous drip - right into her boiling blood at full pelt. She’s sure her heart is going to explode, and her body wants to either run fast for the hills, or to kick him in the gut.

Instead she stays right where she is, a throbbing sensation spreading down through her body quickly until it reaches her groin: A strong, rhythmic pulse.

She’s no stranger to flashing her privates in public for kicks, but this is different. He’s her teacher and they are in a classroom.

He is watching her, eyes darker than she’s ever seen them, and it’s making her belly twist and writhe and her skin hum. There is a new intensity about him now and it isn’t helping the situation in Lacey’s panties one bit.

Nervously, she brings her hands to her waist, grabbing the elastic of her shorts, when she remembers her choice of underwear. *Blue lace*. She got it as a present, it’s expensive, and she has, in fact, lost her virginity wearing it. It is relatively tame, nothing flashy, but the school is very clear about wearing plain unicolored cotton panties. Lingerie is banned.

She turns to face him, trying to conceal the panic in her eyes by furrowing her brow in a childish pout of protest. She doesn’t care that pouting probably makes her look like a silly little girl. She’s in trouble and she doesn’t like it.

(Okay, maybe she likes it a little bit.)

His face is unmoved. “Panties all the way down,” he repeats sternly. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

Gold has to bite back a laugh, as she stamps her foot. She has spunk, he’ll give her that, but that bloody-mindedness will give her grief, if she doesn’t learn when to yield. Panties around the ankles have such childish connotations, but studying her face, he finds it rather fitting. If she chooses to behave like a bratty lass, she will be treated and punished as such, her nakedness revealed without shame, her panties around her ankles to stop any more infantile kicking tantrums.

Lacey swallows nervously. She wonders if she can pull her shorts and panties down together, so he does not see.
(A deep, deep breath.)

She turns back around, and reveals herself with a flourish, pulling both garments down to her ankles in an instant, bending down just a little too far in the process to ensure he catches sight of her fanny peeping out from between her legs.

(Boys will be boys, no matter what he’s said about not being that kind of guy.)

Hoping his eyes are occupied elsewhere and using only her feet, she hurriedly covers as much of the lace as she can with the edges of her shorts, then quickly straightens herself up again, shooting him a glance over her shoulder.

The eyes of a lecherous man would be lighting up with sick delight at the sight of her nakedness. The eyes of an angry man would be narrow slits, staring threateningly. Gold’s eyes, however, remain resolute. Like he has a duty to perform.

Lacey doesn’t like it.

“Hands on your head, feet apart.”

His low growl is vibrating through her, sinking into her body and settling between her legs, and she feels her face burn hot with shame. Her hands are moving quickly, but her feet comply only hesitantly.

“Something to hide, young lady?” he asks, and moves to kneel in front of her, his eyes level with her most private parts.

Lacey’s breathing hitches.

Her nether lips are puffy and slick, as if recently moistened by a lover’s tongue.

Gold looks down and spots the light blue nest of lace between her ankles. Smiling at her naiveté, he straightens up and steps behind her.

Instead of attempting to hide her lace panties, she should have hidden the damp patch on her gusset. It’s telling him everything he needs to know. Unequivocally.

“Would you care to explain yourself, Miss French?”

Dumbfounded, lost for words for the first time in her life and breathing heavily, Lacey can only manage a meek “There’s nothing to explain --- Sir.”

She tries to decipher his tone. Is he shocked? Displeased? Or perhaps --- excited? He is impossible to read - frustratingly so, and that excites her - more than it should, more than she wants it to.

Lacey swallows hard.

"Is that so?” He whispers, stepping closer and placing a hand on her belly from behind, his fingers fanning out across it.

She can smell his cologne - soft sandalwood, layered with deep, rich, potent patchouli, a hint of his tobacco and musk – and her belly clenches with sudden desire for him, for the touch of his fingertips further down her front.

Pressing even closer against her, Gold smiles, a knowing, wicked little smirk, and Lacey blushes profusely.
He can read her body, and probably her mind too, and she feels totally exposed to him - in more than just the blatantly obvious sense. The thrill that jolts through her like lightning leaves her gasping and she’s biting her lip, hard enough to make it bleed, as his fingertips dance across her middle, causing her muscles to twitch.

"Hands on the desk," he says again. It’s neither a shout nor a whisper. His voice is rough, but calm, and she’s not afraid of him. He won’t hurt her, not really. “Do what you’re told, for a change.”

Lacey tilts her head to glance at him from the corner of her eye. “What are you going to do to me?” she whispers, as his hand is moving in soothing circles.

“Bend over,” he murmurs, his accent deliciously thick. “A lesson must be learned.”

Shivering at his words, Lacey moves slowly on the balls of her feet and places the flat of her hands on his desk, bending forwards. As she lowers herself down, her fingers are sliding over the worn pitted surface, feeling every little imperfection.

She can smell the wood’s age. The fresh scent of nature long gone, it smells strongly of cheap polish and a musty kind of wax.

Her most private parts are exposed to his gaze yet again, tingling from the swish of cool air, and her heart is drumming against the desk.

Breathless, she bites back a groan.

“Now, Miss French,” His hand sweeps her hair to the side, kissing the back of her neck, and Lacey can no longer hold back, a moan escaping her, shudders running through her body as she feels his hands slide over her rear end and knead her buttocks.

She can't think --- but then, then his touch is gone unexpectedly, drawing a whimper from her lips.

“Keep still.”

She does.

Something cool and smooth is pressing against her cheeks, and she gasps as she recognizes it.

His cane.

Chapter End Notes

... I'm going to hell. Who's coming with me?
Pain

Chapter Notes

(Thank you for your comments :) )

I don't even know what to say to you. Just enjoy the porn ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Tell me which rules you have broken this week” he says, inviting her confession.

Lacey freezes, finding it hard to concentrate, his cane brushing her like that.

“I ---I- am not sure?”

She breathes deep, tries to concentrate, but it’s really damn difficult. The cane feels almost too smooth on her skin, and it’s sliding up and down, and tremors are running through her, and she wants to yell out what the fuck, but she doesn’t.

“B-broke a few,” she whispers.

“How many?” he asks, his voice a low growl.

She pauses before replying. “I-I don’t remember.”

A whistling whoosh. A sharp resounding blow.

Lacey exclaims in surprise. It doesn’t hurt that much, but she can’t quite believe he’s going through with this.

“Dr Gold!”

She would have bailed out, maybe, but his hand is on the small of her back now, firm but gentle pressure, holding her in position. She can feel the heat radiating off his palm through the thin fabric of her blouse, and she imagines it travelling --- over her hip, back to her stomach, and –

“Let’s go backwards, then,” he says, stepping back, the lingering warmth on her back a reminder not to move.

“One: dress code violation, flimsy underwear,” The cane slaps both her cheeks again, laying a burning stripe across them. “Two: the shorts -” another blow, hitting precisely the same spots, and Lacey gasps, her hands closing and opening convulsively.

But the fiery shock of pain fades quickly, to be followed by a tingling sensation between her legs. A deep, throbbing ache.

So, he likes the blue lace. Perhaps he’s picturing her wearing nothing but, his fingers ghosting over her pale skin, to the clasp of her bra, unhooking, exploring -

(Oh God.)
“Pfft, the bloody uniform again, really? Thought we were done discussing that. Just becau- OW!”

He swats again, more sharply this time, and she looks around at him, offended.

He is spanking her. Actually spanking her, bent over his desk like an insolent little child! She is being spanked on her bare bum by her Maths teacher, and Lacey is suddenly glad that the corridors outside are - most-certainly-praying-to-all-powers-that-be - blissfully empty. If anyone walks in now and finds them like this, she’ll never live it down.

"Miss French, since you continue to fail to conduct yourself in a proper manner, you’re leaving me with no choice but to punish you soundly," Leaning forward, his face is too close to hers as he fixes her, his eyes so damn dark she’s getting lost in them, falling, drowning - and it’s kind of hard to breathe with a heart stuck in her throat.

“As irksome as you may find it,” he says, straightening back up. “If you’re told to do something, there’s a good reason.”

The cane brushes her stinging skin and it shouldn’t feel good, but it does, and she has no idea what to make of that, momentarily distracted, until another slap reminds her to pay attention.

“I insist that you follow the rules to keep you safe,” he’s saying, landing another one and making her yelp, and she turns back around to hide her embarrassment. “Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” she mutters.

“Good,” Gold runs the cane distractingly over the back of her bare thighs. She wants to collapse against the desk top and bury her sweaty face in her arms.

“Now, continue?”

(What? --- Oh.)

Lacey tries to remember, cursing her usually infallible memory for leaving her out in the rain at the worst possible moment of all moments, and trembles. There really is no getting out of this one, is there?


(Whack.)

The cane strikes the back of her thighs and it stings even more than her bum, and she’s amazed her legs don’t buckle.

“I don’t think that’s it, young lady,” he scolds. “The smoking is number four on my list. Think again.”

(Really? He wants this chronologically? Control freak!)

She tries rewinding their conversation in her mind to spot whatever she has missed that has made him furious. Panties, skirt, her calling him a rule-loving fuck. Is she supposed to apologize for that? Lacey shifts her weight to her left foot, the position she’s stuck in taking its toll on her fast-tiring arms.

Well, he can forget that. It’s the truth and she’s not going to say sorry for speaking it. She’s not violating school rules by saying it how it is – he just can’t take it.
The cane’s tip is tracing the back of her knee. It’s sliding up, gently tapping her legs further apart again, the wood and metal, smooth and cold, sliding against the inside of her thigh, and she wonders if he would actually use it to-

“The rules,” he prompts. His voice is rougher now, and she knows she’s not helping when she bucks up against the cane and her hips roll. She doesn’t want them to, she’d swear by it, but the cold metal is so, so close now, so dangerously close to where she’s all throbbing sweltering heat, and she has to bite down hard on her already bruised lip to stifle the startled sound of pleasure.

“Tell me, what’s number three on the list, Miss French,” he rasps, and she can hear the wicked delight in his voice as he chuckles. “A hint, it’s not you rubbing yourself all over my walking stick.”

It might as well be, she thinks, blowing out a breath and forcing herself to remember what else she’s supposed to have done this bloody week. It’s a good thing he’s given her a timeframe, they’d be here until graduation, if she were to make a list of all the rules she’s ever broken in, or around, this building.

Without warning, the cane moves and another stripe is laid across her backside.

“Ow!”

“Answers, Miss French,” The hint of amusement is gone, replaced by severity again. “I’m not getting any younger.”

Lacey keeps herself from asking his exact age, and from making the morbid joke that’s tugging at the corners of her mouth. Her bum’s smarting already and would not thank her for it.

(Fine, going over it again -)

She’s put on the wrong undies, has ditched her skirt for scandalous shorts. He’s caught her, confronted her, and she – oh.

“I lied,” she tells him, albeit through gritted teeth, bracing herself for another encounter with his stupid stick. “My skirt’s fine.”

“Better.”

The rush of relief is accompanied by another wave of embarrassment that renders Lacey’s face an even deeper shade of pink and makes her eyes water.

She has had her chips, but even if she tells him so, apologizes, ready to admit defeat, she realizes, he’ll cut off her retreat. So, she’s keeping her gap shut. It won’t do her any good.

“The lying – it’s habitual, is it not?”

She shoots him a glance, lip caught between her teeth.

If she says no, well, quod erat demonstrandum - that would only prove him right and get her in trouble. If she says yes, she can skip the supporting evidence, the nail in the coffin, and take her poor bum straight to the very same trouble. Awesome.

She shrugs, chewing her tongue, fighting the desire to tell him to shove his cane up his own behind for being an insufferable smart-arse.

“Then we better fix that, wouldn’t you agree, Miss French?”
He’s taking her silence as affirmation, it seems, and brings the cane down with a loud crack again, spanking her hard across the bum. Lacey cries out, almost lifting a foot off the ground.

“Lying is a horrid habit.”

She would have cursed him, making good use of all the foul language in her repertoire, colorful expletives rolling off her tongue with ease and pleasure – and in French too, had she run out of creative names to call him – but the quick succession of smacks, raining down on her quickly blushing bottom, leaves her winded, gasping for air, unable to utter a single word.

Much as she wishes to show it’s not hurting her, Lacey starts to wriggle in her discomfort, as he keeps to a slow, but remorseless, steady rhythm of strikes.

He’s fully intending for her to feel her smacked bottom whenever she’s going to sit down after this, and as much as she wants to take it standing still and in dignified silence, and as much as she’s trying not to, Lacey starts giving little yelps, occasionally stamping a foot as slap follows stinging slap.

Soon her hips are swaying with the rhythm, and, as her bottom turns from pink to crimson, her exclamations grow louder and she begins to bend her knees, instinctively twisting her body, hoping to throw his aim, hoping the next thwack will somehow avoid her burning patches.

But, alas, to no avail.


“Hmm,” He stops. “When in doubt, for the accused.”

Lacey huffs, clasping her bottom cheeks, and flinches. Her tender skin feels shockingly hot to the touch. She makes to bend down to reach for her panties, but his hands stop her motions.

“We are not done.”

(He’s fucking kidding. He has to be kidding.)

Lacey gulps, gripping the edge of the desk for support.

“Skipping over the cigarettes and the ridiculous hair-coloring experiments,” he continues, guiding her back into position. “Assuming good faith, and hoping that you will be smart enough to quit both immediately, --- that leaves us with only one offence left on the list.”

Her head is reeling and she hasn’t got a clue what else is on his stupid imaginary naughty list, but he’s done playing guessing games, and it’s almost a relief.

“Walking out of class, bunking off – anything you’ve got to say for yourself?”

Lacey glowers down at the desk, boiling hot, both from embarrassment and anger, her behind sore and probably glowing as red as beetroot. She tilts her head to look at him, panting softly as the cane slides along the curve where buttock meets thigh.

“This week?” she asks, hesitant.

“Oh, I believe it’s a regular occurrence.”

It’s impossible. He can’t possibly know - unless he has checked with all her teachers.

“No?”
“Another lie,” he swats the curve sharply, and the sting makes her squeal.

“Final warning, young lady. You promised, no more lies,” he reminds her, cane whispering over her skin, sliding up and down.

She knows, her backside must have more stripes than a bloody zebra’s arse by now, and she shivers all the way down to her toes as the cold metal makes contact with her hot, assaulted skin, both stinging and soothing.

“Have you been cutting your classes, Miss French?”

Feeling her tummy flip, she doesn’t dare look back at him over her shoulder again.

“Y-yes, Sir,” she admits, her voice squeaking at the imminent prospect of having to confess just how badly she’s fucking things up - has been fucking things up, for a very long time, actually.

“Name the classes,”

(Why does he care? She’s showing up for HIS classes. What more does he want?)

Lacey runs her tongue over her lips, tasting dried blood and sweat, before pursing them.

“And I will also need to know for how long you’ve been neglecting your education.”

She doesn’t even remember when it started, when she stopped going to class, when she stopped caring. She doesn’t want to remember.

He cannot make her.

“But I –“

She hears the cane hiss in the air a second before it cracks across her backside again, and she stifles a yelp into a whimper.

“No excuses. Which classes? How long?”

The desk is slippery under her hands and she tries to think, tries to spot a loophole to squeeze herself through, like a cat trapped in a fence. She doesn’t care, exactly, but she doesn’t want to tell him, either. She doesn’t want to hear her own voice say those words, make them real. She doesn’t want to have to face them.

Waiting, the cane is tapping her lightly, gently, in time with the ticking of the simple black and white clock above the door, but even the light touch is enough to make her squirm now.

(Ouch. Ouch. Ouch, dammit!)

“Alright,” he says. “Maybe it’s time to jog your memory.”

He doesn’t touch her, his cane serving its originally intended purpose as he speaks, but he might as well have smacked her, for each word’s feeling just like another harsh blow as he’s specifying every single one of her courses and the number of times she has been absent this term.

(Has he memorized her file? Asked around? Is that what they’re all thinking of her?)

Lacey starts as her vision blurs, tears in her eyes threatening to spill over, and blinks rapidly. Why is this worse than the spanking? How is this worse?
Lacey wants to cover her ears with her hands, not caring that she’d fall arse over tit, face hitting the
desk, to shut his voice out, but she can’t move a muscle, a tear smoothing down untouched, cool on
her flushed face, then another.

It takes her a moment to notice that he has stepped closer, his hand back on her stomach, moving in
reassuring circles once more, and she allows herself to relax into his touch for a brief moment, before
pulling herself together and lifting her head, resolutely staring at the blackboard, today’s homework
glaring back at her.

(A deep, deep breath, Lacey.)

“You will attend your classes. All of them.” Picking up her cue, his hand is gone, and the cane shrills
in the air, catching her just below the buttocks.

She bites her lip as sharp pain and warming tingle run through her, but she barely has time to catch
her breath, and there’s another whack, and another.

“Use that clever head,” he utters a word with each strike. “And I do not mean running it against a
wall.”

“No more wagging school,” she pants, her backside on fire. “Got it.”

He slides the cane slowly across the offended skin. “Really?”

Lacey shivers, then yelps again, helpless, as another warming stripe lands across her buttocks.

“Miss French, I asked you a question.”

“Really!” she exclaims, screwing up her face, panting hard.

“Good,” he murmurs, lifting the cane away, and Lacey lets out a deep sigh, hanging her head.

(Yes, okay, fine, fine. He wins.)

She’s going to go to whatever’s on her schedule. If she can find the stupid slip of paper in her
drawers, that is. Perhaps she should use that ‘spensive leather-bound planner, if she can locate that
somewhere among the clutter in her room.

(She knows exactly where the bloody thing is.)

“No, let’s make sure the lesson sticks.”

Before she can protest, he’s spanking her again, properly, timing the whacks to coincide with her
breathing, each blow arriving just after every exhale.

Unable to call out, Lacey moans and gasps, swaying her hips and bending her knees. As her
breathing quickens, so does her discipline.

Another slap burns her right cheek, the pain awful, then exquisite, confusing her. Her left cheek
burns next, stinging, radiating.

Her shallow breathing and the movement of her hips are messing with her head, making her dizzy,
and each time the cane snaps against her, stinging her raw backside, her sit-spots, a vibration buzzes
between her legs, rekindling the forgotten fire, now raging de novo at her center.

His pace slows slightly and momentary flashes of detail are punctuating the pain as she sneaks
glances here and there: his pink face, fixed with concentration, small beads of sweat glistening on his forehead; His sleeve, rolled up that toned forearm, delivering a blow; His waistcoat hugging him oh so snugly.

From between her legs, she tries to catch a glimpse of his crotch (is that a hard on - or just a fold in his trousers?), shocking herself wondering if he’ll fuck her after this, if his hips will slap her fresh sore marks, if she’ll be able to take him balls deep.

(What the actual hell?)

Lacey can barely stand now, her legs quivering, possibly with more than just pain.

Her eyes shoot wide in surprise, her mind dragged into reality, as she feels her pelvic floor twitch. She’s fighting for control, her rational side protesting, telling her she’s probably full to the brim with adrenalin - and it’s making her lose her marbles.

The smacks continue to land. Left cheek - right cheek - left - left - right, the cane revisiting old marks, keeping her bottom ablaze.

“S-sir?!” She almost starts to beg, feeling herself go numb in more than one place, both literally and figuratively. “Please s—stop. I— I’m sorry, Sir,” she whispers, so low he can’t possibly hear her, but he pauses either way - before finishing with six hard whacks across both cheeks that almost make her burst into tears.

But Lacey’s determined to keep her composure in front of him.

(He will not see her cry. Never.)

Then it’s over.

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The silence following her last yelp lingers and stretches; and suddenly, she feels like a puppet with cut strings, and her legs tremble underneath her, threatening to give out, her stinging, smoldered bum a bizarre patchwork of pinks and reds.

Lacey pushes herself upright on wobbling arms and half turns to face him, her eyes down-cast and face burning, breathing ragged, waiting, silently asking his permission.

“Not yet,” he says, calmly. His voice has lowered in pitch, sending a little thrill through her at his accent. He catches her arm and walks her a few footsteps into the corner of the room. His feet tap hers, encouraging her to widen her stance, her shorts and underwear stretching between her ankles like shackles. He nudges her head lower gently, so her nose almost touches the wall, and she lets him, her limbs having turned into jelly and a cloudy feeling in her head.

"Alright," He moves her hands to her head. "Have you regained a civil tongue, Miss French?"

She nods, not trusting her voice to speak.

“Good,” He adjusts her elbows, so they are pointing out to her sides in line with her shoulders. “You may stand here, reflecting on your disgraceful behavior. Don’t move, don’t speak, and don’t turn around.”

Silence, quiet enough to hear the clock tick, is pressing in on her ears.
Behind her, a pen scribbles.

Her cheeks are burning, the cool air surprisingly unpleasant on her cruelly hot backside.

Lacey has never been good at waiting – or at standing still.

But his instructions have been quite clear.

Exposed to the air and counting the seconds in her head to keep her mind busy, she feels her most sensitive parts chill, and with the adrenalin ebbing away and her heart rate returning to normal, the ecstasy of the rush begins to blur with the agony of her shame, swirling in her belly until shame is all that is left.

(Fuck, fuck, fuck.)

She stays in position, facing the white wall, her arms twitching, tiring, her face hot with humiliation.

He’ll never make any of her classmates do this, will he? Then again, none of them have pushed him past breaking point - repeatedly.

Is he looking, she wonders, squirming uncomfortably, but he says nothing.

Eventually, the shame apparent in her expression, she looks back, speaking softly. “W-what are you doing?”

“I have work to do, young lady.” He has returned to his desk and, turning in his chair, sits facing her. “Turn back around, look at the wall,” he admonishes, and she does as she’s told.

Behind her, the clock is ticking, his chair is squeaking, and papers are being shuffled – and it’s driving her nuts.

She lets out a deep breath again, relaxing her muscles a little, flexing her intertwined fingers on her head, and resumes the counting, starting from the top and mixing it up – to create the illusion of a diversion.

(Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept, huit, neuf, dix, onze, douze, treize, quatorze, quinze, seize, dix-sept, dix-huit, dix-neuf, vingt et un, vingt-deux, …)

She hears his pen scribble, stop, being put down, being picked back up, and used again.

(… vingt-neuf, trente, trente et un, …)

Pages are being turned.

(… deux cent dix-huit, deux cent dix-neuf, deux cent vingt, deux cent vingt et un, deux cent vingt-deux, …)

Lacey is cold, and bored, and she wants his attention. She wants to go home.

She reaches out again, with a needy groan, putting all her weight on one leg and then the other, making herself sway slightly. She’ll make him notice her, talk to her, speed this thing up.

She clears her throat, listening for any sign of change in his movements.

Nothing.
She scuffs her feet.

*No reaction.*

She sighs loudly, turning her voice into a childish whine, elongating the vowel sounds as she speaks, and arches her back, swaying back on her legs and threatening to get out of position.

“Siiiiri?”

He looks up in time to see her move. Her hands are still on her head, but her elbows no longer properly pointing out.

He checks his watch. It is about time - and they can save the lesson on patience for another time.

“Elbows out and at 90 degrees! A perfect triangle shape, young lady.”

She hastens to comply, listening intently for any more sounds.

Drawers being opened, rummaging, closing drawers, a soft popping sound.

*(Huh?)*

Lacey freezes in a limbo between curiosity and fearful anticipation, fighting the urge to spin around to look. She knows looking back again will displease him, so she’s keeping her eyes on the wall in front of her, waiting.

Perhaps his punishment is having *some* effect on her behavior, after all.

She holds her breath, her pulse quickening as she hears his chair scraping across the floor, his footsteps approaching, the soft tapping of his cane echoing in the room as he walks.

She curls her toes in her leather buckle shoes until he’s standing just behind her.

“Now,” he asks, placing a gentle hand on her back, between her shoulder blades. “Do we understand the rules?”

Craning her neck, Lacey looks at him, trying to glimpse his face. He’s not cross with her anymore, is he?

“No more trouble,” she says solemnly, but can’t help the smirk that curls her lips. “Unless I want to be punished.” She bats her lashes at him, innocently, her mouth a perfect ‘o’ shape. “Right, Sir?”

“Aye,” he chuckles leniently, his breath tingling on the back of her neck, but gives her a stern look. “And I expect you to work hard in your classes. I want to see progress.”

She nods, making her eyes wide.

“Now, let’s tend to you -- stay still,” he instructs softly, and she obeys, biting her lip and gasping as he touches her, as his hands begin massaging smooth creamy lotion in with a firm touch, spreading it out over her stinging buttocks, his fingertips gliding, slowly and smoothly, pins and needles on her irritated skin.

The clean powdery scent fills the air and Lacey feels like she’s melting, dissolving into a puddle of want and need, the cool lotion calming and soothing on her backside, while his touch is stoking up an entirely different type of fire, making the region between her legs ache, and making her squirm.
He drizzles some more lotion onto her skin and works it firmly into her sit-spot and the top of her left thigh, and Lacey feels a rush of wetness between her legs as he repeats the motion over first her other bum cheek, and then the other thigh, making his way downwards.

His hand brushes the inside of her thigh then, and, with startled movement, she jerks erect, her face flushing scarlet and her breath hissing out between her teeth.

They stand in silence, motionless, teacher and student in marble, and she’s made up her mind.

Shifting, moving, pressing herself up against him, the smooth wool of his suit pants ignites her skin anew, and Lacey lets out a breath as his fingers slip between her legs, stroking, stroking; And she moans low in her throat, spreading her legs further, welcoming his intoxicating touch, her hands sliding from her head, her palms finding the rough wall to keep herself steady.

(Ohhhhh.)

There’s so much she wants to say with her next breath – she knows she’s been a brat, she’s learned her lesson, she’s ready to be treated like a young woman now - but she cannot find her voice, cannot get the sounds out, so she simply gasps.

“I -- I’m sorry for -- violating dress code, and for --- lying, and,” Lacey pants, her voice shaky. The sheer humiliation of what she’s about to say next makes her hesitate, but when he withdraws his fingers, ghosting over her most sensitive spot, she’s blurt out the words in a breathless rush. “I deserved my punishment.” She swallows hard. “Thank you for disciplining me, Sir.”

(Ouch.)

“Good girl,” he commends, and Lacey bites her tongue.

His hand cups her crotch, fingertips resting on her mound, her slick lips in his palm, the warmth making her entrance twitch with need - knowing he’s touching her, his fingers probably mere moments away from entering her.

She wants to feel him touch her where she’s liquid heat, but she understands the dynamic - he’s her teacher, she’s his pupil, and she’ll do what he tells her to. She’ll get her reward if she waits, if she lets him lead. This game has rules, and she’s willing to follow them - if it gets her what she wants.

She stills, signaling her obedience, longing for his fingers to be buried deep within her. She relaxes her legs slightly, shamefully allowing her weight to rest in the palm of his hand. She’s trying really hard not to let her mind wander, but that’s asking way too much.

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A smacked bottom does do wonders, he thinks, but this can hardly be called appropriate behavior either, can it? Were he to send her home now, he’s certain, her acting up would only get worse again as she’d try to grab and hold his attention.

No, she’ll have to be taught that pleasure is a privilege that has to be earned.

"What am I to do with you?" he muses, almost to himself, and she looks around at him, the heat rising above her neckline and covering her skin in a delicious shade of pink, her front teeth assaulting her battered lower lip. Another habit he has picked up on.

The corners of his lips turn upwards briefly.
“Miss French, just so we’re clear, you will report to my office after classes end, every day, until the start of winter break,” he pauses to let his instruction sink in. “And I will send you home after you’ve made sufficient progress learning your lesson.”

That draws a gasp - completely unrelated to current ongoings.

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Lacey squirms, her mind racing to interpret his words. Just what sort of lesson does he have in mind now? -- Progress? What progress? --- Every day? --- He’s not going to do this to her every day, he can’t mean that, surely?

“S-sir,” she blinks, studying his calm face nervously. “I think I must have misheard you. I thought you said every day?” She eyes him, unsure of what he wants her to do or say. “I--- I’ll wear my uniform, properly.”

“Every day this week, and the next, and the ones after that – until Christmas, young lady,” he repeats. “I’m not positive today has left enough of an impression on you for a permanent change in your behavior.” He’s tutting at her again, and she hates it. “Soaking wet between the legs after a punishment? - We both know that you’ll be riding your fingers in bed tonight.”

(Twisted asinine bastard!)

She gapes at him, stunned, blushing deeply over her cheeks and temples.

“So, every day until break, you’re going to report to my office properly dressed. You’re going to keep me posted on your work and show me that you meant what you promised.”

Lacey gulps.

“And rest assured, I shall punish you soundly, if need be, and as I see fit, sending you home with a spectacularly sore bottom, if you dare put as much as another toe out of line.”

(He’s bloody serious. Now what?)

Lacey bites her numb lip. A spanking every day after school, walking home with a shameful, red bottom glowing under her school skirt, and getting home late, would blow. Big time.

"Every day? But – but, if I do well –,” she trails off, hoping that she’ll be let off, if she behaves herself tomorrow – and maybe the day after that.

“If you honor your promises and start fulfilling your undoubted academic potential, you may find that life can become much more pleasurable indeed,” He lets that thought hang in the air for a moment. “Understood?”

"Yes, Sir," she whispers and shudders, letting out a cry at the feel of his fingers sliding back in between her folds.

She’s so wet, it’s kind of embarrassing, but she barely has time to register the silly pang of schoolgirl shame.

He’s tracing her folds, stroking up and down, up and down, tantalizing her, and she bucks her hips against his hand as he settles into a rhythm, hitting her tiny bundle of nerves with every pass, making her moan and writhe, her nails scratching at the white wallpaper as her hands clench involuntarily.
“So, is this what you wanted, isn’t it?” he murmurs into her ear, and the sound catches in her throat - a choked, wanting whimper - as he slides a finger inside her. “Let’s see if the trouble-maker can handle what she’s wished for.”

She laughs breathlessly, moans as he adds another - or maybe two, she isn’t sure - wicked pleasure shooting through her veins with each of his thrusts, her arms shaking with the effort of holding herself up.

Her hips twitch and roll, driving his fingers in deeper, and she cries out again, her breath coming in shallow pants now, blood pounding in her ears, her body tensing and muscles tightening, a small trail of sweat running down her arched back.

He’s still pushing deeper, picking up the pace, and she can’t breathe, light bursting behind her eyes as he swirls his thumb over her clit; And she can’t stop, can’t speak, her mouth falling open, legs bucking, a silent moan on her lips, and – and ---

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"Good girl," he says roughly, his accent thick, reaching for her hands, turning her around, and she stands on trembling legs, cheeks burning and breathing ragged, her hair falling over her face. She doesn’t dare meet his gaze.

"Very good girl."

At his word, Lacey goes through the motions of pulling up her panties and shorts with shaking hands, trying to catch her breath, her heart still thumping hard in her chest. She tucks in her blouse, hastily smoothing the front as best she can.

Her body is buzzing with pleasure and conflicting emotions, and there’s not enough oxygen in the bloody room.

"Are you alright?" he asks softly, and she nods, keeping her gaze on the floor and brushing her hair out of her face with jerky movements, tugging it behind her right ear.

He slips a gentle finger under her chin, raising her head to face him, and she blinks rapidly, his heavy-accented concern and the gentleness in his touch making her heart melt - and the ache of it is more than she can bear right now.

He simply smiles at her, a small caring smile, and hands her his pocket square to dry her tears. Tears she hasn’t even noticed shedding. She takes it from him, her trembling fingers brushing his, and a jolt shoots from her fingertips straight to her core.

Lacey studies his face, their eyes locking, and he might have kissed her then, she realizes, her heart dropping straight into her stomach, if she hadn’t already fucked up her chance with him so spectacularly.

She bites the inside of her cheek to stop herself from crying, her stomach lurching, leaping into her mouth. Everything within her body is in disarray, the chaos making her nauseous, her insides pushing against her skin, and she buries her face in her hands, swallowing back the acid taste in her mouth.

"Hey," He’s touching her shoulder, but she shakes him off violently, spinning away from him, turning her back, her head bowed, desperate to regain some composure, some small shred of control over her mind and body, tingling sensations in her arms and legs.
His handkerchief feels cool and luxuriously soft against her flushed face, and she recognizes his scent: the soft *sandalwood*, the rich *patchouli*, the *musk* and the *tobacco*, and -- something - something else, something *more*, something so very *him* that it makes her heart clench.

She comes up, struggles for air- everything’s just *such* a blur - and doubles her fists, clutching the square of fine silk, clinging to it for dear life. She’s so dizzy. Maybe she shouldn’t have spun on her heels.

Sweat is breaking out on her forehead, shudders running through her, her skin erupting in goosebumps.

"I- I-- don’t – I c- can't--" she splutters, her voice barely more than a whisper, chest heaving, mouth working furiously. "I just --"

"Lacey -" He’s saying her name, his voice a painful caress that’s cutting right through her skin as if it were thin parchment. She doesn’t *want* it. She doesn’t want *anything* from him!

The room is spinning, her body trembling and swaying with it, *tears* -- she doesn’t know if they’re in her eyes or spilling out -- her face wet, hot, feverish.

Her skin’s too tight and she’s positively suffocating, the floor dropping out from under her feet, and she wants to run, a hurricane within her chest. Her brain is demanding she *moves*, but it won’t tell her limbs what to do.

His arm slides around her waist, pulling her a little closer, keeping her from falling over when her legs give out, collapsing beneath her. He is holding her up, steadying her against him, the fingers around her waist still wet, glistening with her juices, and she’s feeling a delirious giggle building up at the back of her *throat*, bubbling, tickling, but it won’t come out.

Her eyes can’t focus, and when he makes her sit, she’s rocking, rocking, rocking, hugging her middle, faster and faster until she explodes into sobs, bent double.

And then she’s talking. Talking like she doesn’t have enough time to say what she needs to. Her words are running together, and some are missing. Her sentences are fragmented, and her thoughts seem to jump from one thing to another. All her fears are tumbling out, unchecked by her brain; She's in mental free-fall, filters off, walls all the way down, her heart pounding out of her chest.

Her numb fingers are holding onto his waistcoat, sobs wracking her body, and she's asking him if it will be okay, her voice broken with emotion, tears streaming down her cheeks.

He tells her *yes*. He tells her over and over everything’s going to be fine, rubbing her back and stroking her hair, his soft words bouncing off her like hard rain until she calms a little, sitting up, dizzy and disoriented – and absolutely mortified.

She’s never been this close to him before, and she’s never had anyone look at her quite like this before either. Her breath hitches, and she hastily averts her gaze to her hands in her lap, wiping the tears from her eyes and face with her sleeve in a quick, agitated motion.

“I’m *sorry,*” she sniffs, snot rattling in her nostrils. She’s not even sure *what* she’s apologizing for, her throat raw and eyes stinging.

"Look at me, Lacey," he coos, still crouching next to her, his hand pumping over his heart, and she lifts her eyes in a brave attempt to meet his, falters, and shakes her head furiously.

*(Stop! It's swimming.)*
"Are you alright?" he asks again, brushing a curl of hair back from her face, his thumb sliding across her tear-stained cheek, and her lip wobbles. She wants to burst into fresh tears, but there are none left inside of her. She’s parched and so very, very tired.

She nods weakly, wiping at her right eye with the heel of a shaking hand, but it is a lie, and she has promised him not to lie anymore.

She takes a deep shuddering breath.

"I -," she whispers, and swallows hard, squaring her jaw and steeling herself before she finally meets his gaze. "I have to go."

Before he can do or say anything to stop her, Lacey has scrambled to her feet, head pounding, and rushed to the front. She grasps her satchel and pushes through the classroom door, running down the corridor on shaky, tingling legs, her bag pressed tightly to her aching chest, mahogany hair flying behind her.

Chapter End Notes

... and the feels (did I forget to mention those? Sorry, not sorry). You're welcome, people.
Alright. Time to continue this. The chapter got away from me and is currently clocking in at over 10k pre-edit - which is why I am breaking it up a little. Here's the first part. The next should follow soon. Just need to finish another scene and edit everything.

The next morning, Lacey isn’t in class, which – all things considered - is understandable, but also a little disappointing. It’s not like it’s unusual for her or anything, only this semester it kind of is, and it’s making her worry.

It’s impossible to concentrate on solving irrelevant math problems when you’re worried. She doesn’t want to care, but Ruby’s not a bad person and, no matter what happened between them last summer, Lacey needs her now. Maybe. They haven’t actually talked since Vic’s pool party, have kept their distance, and Lacey rarely comes to the diner anymore, but their friendship still counts for something, right? It should count and she should be doing something.

Drumming her pen on her desk, Ruby glances to her left quickly, then swings her eyes back to the front, both troubled and puzzled. None of the numbers and symbols on the blackboard are making any remote sense today – not that she’s trying very hard – and all she can do is pray that Dr. Gold doesn’t pick up on her weakness. It’s only ten(ish) and he’s already made Kate cry in front of everybody, and has sent Kenneth and Emma to the witch’s den. So far, they haven’t returned, and the last thing Ruby needs right now is another note sent home to Granny or another awful parent-teacher-meeting. Guardian - teacher. So she better look interested and on top of things, at least. Maybe it’s her imagination, but Gold’s fuse seems to be even shorter than normal today. That guy desperately needs the anger management classes Dr. Hopper so merrily keeps suggesting every chance he gets.

“Anyone else who isn’t willing to do their work today is free to go now!” Gold bellows, and strides back to his desk to lean against it. “If this is the best you can do, then I can assure you that none of you are going to graduate.” His snide voice is cold, as his eyes sweep over their faces, and one could easily chop up the tension in the room and add it to Granny’s stir fry - in neat, little, disgusting cubes.

Ruby pulls a small pack of tissues from her pocket and tosses it across the room at Mary, who has burst into big, fat, salty, stress-induced tears. The girl works too hard. It’s not worth it. Neither is giving Gold a bloody nose, although, by the looks of it, both she and David are currently considering finding out just how much that sweet satisfaction would be costing them, silently debating who should be the one to do the honors.

They exchange more dark looks, but stay in their seats. What a dick. Lacey would tell him to shut it and snap out of it, if she were here, but she isn’t - and Ruby’s not Lacey. Whenever Lacey picks up her dad’s lunch orders on weekends, Ruby hides in the back until she has left - like a total chicken. It’s stupid. She misses having her friend around - if she’s being totally honest with herself - and maybe, just maybe, this is her chance to patch things up. Ruby can almost hear Lacey’s angry voice inside her head already, yelling at her that she’s making everything about herself again. Perhaps she’s right.

She sighs heavily, unclenching her fists, and resumes copying down problems and solutions she
doesn’t understand. *Breathe in through nose, hold for seven seconds, and exhale. Repeat.*

This is not her fight.

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Her chair is empty on Wednesday and he tries hard not to let it get to him; tries not to read too much into it; tries to ignore the twinge of guilt that’s twisting his gut as the pronounced emptiness stares back at him reproachfully all through class. He let it go too far, he’s broken her, and Gold’s fairly certain it’s going to cost him dearly. It’s only a matter of time. He’s almost surprised he hasn’t been sacked yet. Sacked and cuffed and escorted outside to never return to a classroom ever again. It’s bound to happen, sooner or later, he knows. He tells himself that he won’t mind when it does. Maybe it would be a relief. It doesn’t matter that she hasn’t told him to stop, hasn’t told him no, hasn’t told anyone *anything* - it seems - because, *technically*, she *cannot* say yes, so it’s no by default – or it should be. *Should have been.*

He’s not supposed to think about her at all, but she’s the pink elephant in absentia, and his mind won’t listen to him or leave him alone to teach his classes. Naturally, lessons are a complete disaster – as is his whole sorry excuse for a life - because he never takes his own sodding advice. He needs the day to end already, so he can go think (drink) in peace and call his inappropriate thoughts to order.

*Where is she?*

On Thursday afternoon, before the start of their after-lunch class, she’s waiting for him in the corridor, hefting her bag of books on her shoulder and leaning against the wall casually, deliberately nonchalant, but he can *see* the tension wrecking her. It’s rolling off her small shoulders in strong, unmistakable waves; radiating off her frame like heat shimmers in summer. Her shoes have been cleaned and polished, skirt and blouse pressed, and even her long hair, which usually falls almost to the middle of her back in wild, loose curls, has been tamed and brought to submission in a neat side braid. She’s wearing make-up, but nothing the rules wouldn’t allow for. No jewelry - just a lovely, dark blue silk headband.

When he stops in front of her, she looks up at him, her expressionless eyes looking right through him, however, and wordlessly holds out a slip of paper, clutched tightly in her right hand. Her nails are rosy, clean and trimmed, but the cuticles cracked. She picks, chews and tears at them. Another bad habit.

The paper – *an excuse letter, scribbled in a hurry and signed, family matters* – trembles in her uncertain hand ever so slightly, as he’s taking it from her to skim over it. He searches her tired face - maybe to catch the lie, or perhaps hoping to find something there to tell him it’s not his fault - selfishly looking for reassurance and absolution where none should be given or demanded. She’s biting her lip, nervous eyes flickering between his face and the floor, hand picking at a cuff, playing with the small transparent button on it, and he keeps himself from touching her.

“I –“ she whispers, finally, and exhales, meeting his gaze. “My dad needs me at the shop after school.”

All the expertly done make-up isn’t enough to hide her red puffy eyes from him; or the dark circles underneath them - even if he can tell that she has made an actual effort at masking all traces the last 36 hours have left on her face. She’s been crying, and crying a lot, and he pushes back any guilt before he can feel it, nods, and touches her shoulder by mistake, making them both jump. Her mouth falls open, soft lips parted, her face a whispered question mark. And he swallows his burning heart back down into his chest, acid on his tongue, and clears his throat.
“That’s quite alright,” Letting go, he reaches for what he hopes to be a reassuring smile and opens the classroom door, holding it for her. “Let’s not keep your classmates waiting any longer.”

She ducks inside, taking the note from him in passing, face flushed under the layers of expensive foundation, and he catches a whiff of her perfume. It opens a little weird - like a chemical herb that’s not made for her skin exactly – but that burns off in the blink of an eye, revealing the heart almost instantly. It’s a soft, powdery chamomile. The kind of fragrance that lasts hours, but with very little sillage. The kind that makes you want to press your nose to her wrists - which he usually hates, but with this one, he really likes that it's drawing him in closer.

Repressing an expletive, his mind marveling at her unexpected taste for the expensive and exclusive, he limps in after her and shuts the door. Today’s sudden drop in temperature has taken its toll on his useless ankle, and he settles behind his desk with some difficulty, but takes care to keep the pain from showing on his face.

The class is facing him, standing as asked, a sea of anxious, apprehensive faces. She joins them, her face so much paler than the rest - despite the soft bronze blush complimenting her cheekbones. Has she always been this pale, he wonders, her skin reminding him of fresh snow or valuable porcelain. He shouldn’t even notice, but just like her sweet perfume, her soft beauty draws him in, lures his eyes to her face again and again. He’s always been one to value and appreciate elegance and unique beauty, enjoying the exceptional, and she’s – without a doubt – the single exception in a room full of the dull and mundane. The finest collectible piece - that he can’t have.

He hasn’t missed Miss Lucas’ anxious face, framed by curtains of long ebony hair like an old masters painting, turning and looking around, her eyes trying to catch and signal Lacey’s, and he watches in astonishment, as Lacey throws him a halting glance – or is it calculating? - and leaves her usual spot to move down the row to her right, the invisible, intriguing, barrier between the two girls reduced to only one empty seat left between them, as she stops to stand behind a new desk.

“Please, have a seat,” he says, and their confusion would be endearing, if he wasn’t so displeased with them all. Children are no animals, but just like animals their inner balance can easily be disturbed by sudden changes in routine, which is why he usually sticks to it. “Warm-up will have to wait a couple more minutes.” He opens and closes his briefcase, gathering papers from it, and pushes himself to his feet, turning a pained grimace into a disapproving scowl.

“Midterms,” he says coldly, walking around the classroom and dropping marked exam papers on their desks, like each page has done him a great personal wrong. Students are holding their breaths, it seems, their sinking hearts and his clicking cane the only sounds in the room. “A disaster – which you should already know, since you had the nerve to hand these in.” He indicates the sheaf in his hand. The outburst of nervous chatter dies almost as quickly as it started, and Gold smirks.

He keeps walking at a slow pace, wordlessly passing out results row by row, occasionally commenting on grade or student in question. He’s aware of the sharp blades and arrows that are sunk into his turned back, and of the imaginary bricks thrown at his head in frustration, but their anger is misguided. They only have themselves to blame. Just like everybody else.

“Are you serious?!” Emma Fisher groans loudly, scrunching up her face, and turns in her seat to exchange exasperated looks with Misters Nolan and Humbert, who, Gold knows, do share her fate. “Great. My mom is going to kill me.” She raises her hands high into the air. “Happy almost-Turkey-Day, everyone!”

“Spare me your complaints and self-pity, Miss Fisher!” he snaps, and the boys sink lower in their seats, as though guilty by affiliation. Cowards. “Had any of you done any proper work –” he slams more Cs and Ds on the desks to his right, and hands out a healthy B-minus to a wide-eyed Miss
Blanchard, who looks like she’s going to faint in her seat. “Tell me, what will motivate you lot to study for this class, because I’ve run out of ideas?!”

The girl grumbles something in response and buries her face in her arms on her desk. On a regular day, Mr. North wouldn’t be passing up such a perfect opportunity to rile her up, but the boy’s too busy staring at his own papers in horror, his breathing shallow, a big red F inside a perfect circle in the top right corner. Miss Mills won’t be pleased having to deal with the stupid boy and his obnoxious parents yet again.

He has reached the back and his stomach lurches, as though taken by surprise by the inevitable. Gold sighs. He shouldn’t feel bad, but he does. “Appalling, Miss Lucas,” he says, presenting the addressed with pages doused in red ink, and watches the color drain from the girl’s face until it resembles Lacey’s complexion more closely. Their heads bowed, the two girls exchange a panicky look, and he almost feels sorry for Miss Lucas, but not quite. He doesn’t comment on Lacey’s disappointing results when placing them on her desk upside-down, but just keeps walking and handing out the remaining papers smoothly, a cold sneer edged onto his perfect mask, as he finally moves back up the middle row to the front of the classroom.

“Settle down, ladies and gentlemen, settle down!” he turns to face them, hands folded over the handle of his cane, and waits for them to fall silent again. He sweeps his eyes across their ranks, but carefully avoids looking at her, at whatever reaction her dreadful grade might have prompted. “So, you have your results,” he says quietly. “And I don’t have to explain to you why they should be cause for concern. I will, however, express my utmost displeasure with the abysmal quality of this work.” The dead silence in the room is deafening. “Less than a third of you managed to scrape a passing grade, the general standard was appalling. Quite what you have been doing with your time eludes me, because it can’t have been studying.” He shakes his head.

Miss Blanchard’s trembling hand is in the air, drawing all eyes to her, a look of strained determination on her very red face.

“Yes, Miss Blanchard?” he asks, the tiniest hint of amusement in his voice.

“Sir, I was wondering, is there anything we can do for extra credit?” she asks almost desperately, and a few of the boys hoot. He shuts them down with one disapproving look.

“Ah, that,” he says, cocking his head. “While I applaud your work ethic, Miss Blanchard, we will leave that topic for tomorrow.” Gold smiles at the look of mingled disappointment and panic on the girl’s face. “I want you all to take these home and think, and I mean really think, about why you received the grades you did,” he continues, his voice a little softer. “Take a moment to reflect on your own work this semester – your motivation, and the effort you put in, and your expectations – and ask yourselves what you would have needed to perform better.” His words are greeted with low muttering, and he pauses to give them time to process. “I expect all of you to be honest with yourselves – and with me, come next lesson,” he inclines his head towards Miss Blanchard, who is hanging on his every word like a golden retriever pup. “Which is when we will also be discussing your options, should you wish to discontinue this class, and the requirements for those of you who decide to stay and double your efforts – in which case you will be looking for ways to improve your score.” He leans back against his desk, half sitting down on it, to take more weight off his leg. “Be warned, though, the upcoming material is demanding and hard work will be mandatory to pass.”

A few more students have raised their hands. Gold points at Miss Rose – a very fitting name for the timid flower of a girl in third row, incidentally. “Yes?”

“If we failed –” her voice is so low, he has to strain his ears to make out the words. “Do we need signatures, if we –” The rest of her question is drowned out by a chorus of loud sighs and groans
from several of her classmates – Miss Fisher, Miss Lucas and Mr. Nolan among the group.

“Parental signatures are required for all grades – passing or not.” Ruby Lucas is looking daggers at him from the back, and he doesn’t have to ask why. Mrs. Lucas, owner of the local diner and grandmother and guardian to the darling girl currently plotting his highly unpleasant murder, no doubt, is a force of nature that even he would not be foolish enough to cross.

Anger or resignation - either of the two, or both, apparent on most faces in the room - haven’t touched hers. She’s not part of the ruckus, not signing up to join any emergency-assassination squads, or making wild plans to flee the country come nightfall. Gold isn’t sure if any of his words have registered with her at all. She’s pale as a ghost, and nearly as transparent, not even present in the scene playing out around her, her mind somewhere very far away, her eyes open, but dull and unseeing, and her face absolutely blank. Gold starts at her evident despondency, his mind reeling. He can’t draw attention to her now, but he doesn’t like what he’s seeing.

“Silence!” He hadn’t meant to shout, but as a result his wish is granted instantly. “Quite enough chit-chat,” he says, twirling his cane between his palms. “We’ve got work to do. Please, put away your examination papers now, return them signed by next week, and stand.”

The scrape of chairs is loud, as students get to their feet for warm-up. Lacey does too, but she’s not looking at him, or anyone, or anything, really. She only makes it to third section, sits back down, and copies the required extra work into a planner. She does what she’s told, answers when asked, and doesn’t give him any excuse to keep her after class, so when the bell signals the end of the lesson, he lets her go with the rest of them, Miss Lucas by her side, the two of them walking in tense silence. The odd barrier is still there, but Miss Lucas, at least, seems to be more than determined to break it, which, Gold muses watching them go, does fit her MO.

======

Their truck is an old bomb that barely runs, and Lacey has dubbed it the Rolls Canardly, for it can hardly crawl up the small hills on their delivery routes. She sits in the passenger seat, feet up on the dashboard, and watches her dad and Astrid load the back in the wing mirror, as the sun is slowly preparing its descend. It’s only late afternoon, but days are short, and it will be dark soon. She shivers in her thin cotton shirt and cardigan, her jacket still on the counter, but she won’t go back inside and get it.

She eyes her father’s reflection in the mirror while playing with a damp curl. He can yell at her all he wants, but she’s not touching the green stuff. He knows it’ll give her a stupid rash and blisters on her fingers – just like the dish soap and the rubber gloves - she has told him a million times. It’s not her fault he has had to hire help. He can’t blame her for her sensitive skin. She’d help if she could, but the rash isn’t worth it, and the horrible smells in the shop make her nauseous anyway, so, really, what’s the point of arguing about it all over and over again?

Shifting uncomfortably, Lacey picks at a larger crack in the seat, widening the hole in the washed-out fabric, and flicks small bits of foam down into the cluttered footwell. She wishes they would just hurry up. She wants to be done with this shitty day already and finally free to curl up in her room to read – door locked and shutters down. She can’t read in the car – not even if she slaps on a patch.

The rear door is slammed shut and Lacey watches Astrid walk back into the shop, her cheek resting against the cool window.

The driver’s door opens. “Feet off the dash.” Her dad’s standing on the step, hunched over, sweeping up the jumbled junk from his side and flinging it into the back. “Buckle up.” As he hoists himself into his seat and starts the engine, Lacey puts down her feet wordlessly, folding her arms
across her chest and sending papers and empty crisp packages flying. The car is a dump - rubbish, tools and moldy, smelly dirt everywhere; shovels, pots - and the fucking flowers.

Her dad gives her a look, but doesn’t say anything, as the engine roars to life with an impressive number of small bangs and minor explosions. They huff and puff out of their parking space and start driving down Main Street at a ridiculously slow crawl.

Lacey can feel every little bump in the road as they go and she struggles to keep her face impassive. She’s concentrating unnecessarily hard on chewing her bubblegum and is noisily popping it, too – even if it’s pissing off her dad further - to distract herself. Sitting for longer periods of time, even on the soft bench seat, is driving her crazy. Her bum’s still sore, but what is worse, it has turned to sandpaper that can’t be ameliorated despite her rubbing on copious amounts of lotion and cocoa butter. She has even tried her beloved Lucas Papaw ointment on it, which had never let her down before, but it hasn’t helped with the unpleasant itch. Neither has scratching her tender skin – scratching just hurts like hell and is a very bad idea.

He’s drumming on the steering wheel. “How was school?”

“Fine.”

“Did you finish your homework?”

“Yes.” (No.)

He shoots her another glance, but gives up. The conversation is over, and Lacey’s glad. She’s not in the mood, and they both know he isn’t really listening - or looking properly. She puts her feet back up and looks out of the window again – happy, busy people, bustling about their daily business, doing their shopping, dragging their dogs and kids around town. Mary and David holding hands, Emma and her mother boarding up their ice-cream parlor for the winter, Graham passing them on his bike and waving. She sighs.

“Lacey!”

She doesn’t listen- crosses her legs instead.

Their ride is stop-and-go, ringing bells and knocking on doors, and by the time they come back around to 2356 Mulberry Court - and instead of passing it, her dad stops the car-, Lacey doesn’t have enough energy left to protest or make a scene. Hadn’t he kept her busy with addresses and order lists, she might have yanked open her door and jumped out of the moving car two blocks from here or sought refuge in the library. Too late. Feeling numb and shivering slightly, she follows her father, dragging her feet, the gravel crunching under her boots.

*St. Meissa.* She hates the place.
"Well, we’re here," her dad says unnecessarily, opening the door for her. He doesn’t comment on the awful stench wafting out at them from the entrance hall (*he has to be anosmic!* and, when Lacey doesn’t move, he marches inside first, so she has no choice but to follow suit.

The warm, sickly sweet smell engulfing them isn’t that strong, maybe, but it’s definitely *there*, and it’s making Lacey gag. She takes a deep breath, holds it in, and wipes her shoes on the ugly brown mat provided to keep the rain and dirt off the fugly red carpets. Had her shoes and the mat been made of metal, there would have been sparks. Lacey would like that, actually. Torch the place – set it on fire and watch it go up in hungry flames, reduced to a pile of smoking ashes on the ground come morning.

Cold sweat breaks out on her back, and she rubs her arms, eyeing the closed door warily. This isn’t good. How did she let herself get trapped in here? They can’t make her stay; she knows it - but then why won’t her hands move? Grasp and twist the cool golden doorknob, push against the heavy door - to get her out of here, and back to the safety of the car? Why isn’t her brain telling her legs and feet to run, and run as fast as they can, until her lungs burn, until she’s made it home and turned the key in her lock? She glowers at her father, who’s clutching a large bouquet of flowers like they are his life vest. How could he take her here?! He knows she doesn’t want to bloody *be* here! She’s got nothing to say to anyone!

Her dad smiles at her – his sad, little smile; *Sorry* – and Lacey can feel the seams of her heart come undone, the stuffing spilling out into her thoracic cavity. And, as if things can’t get any worse, they run into Mother Superior before Dad has even had time to shrug out of his coat and put it on a hanger on the *visitors* rack.

*Of freaking course*, it has to be *her*. Lacey’s just that lucky. She makes a point of ignoring the two-faced bitch, answering curtly, and only when prompted, and would have refused to shake her hand on principle, if her father hadn’t insisted that she be a *good girl* and do. But she won’t smile. She’ll never smile inside these walls. She’ll die before she does. Cross her heart.

The adults exchange pleasantries and small talk and Lacey looks at her hands, picking at her cuticles and grazed knuckles. Perhaps she’d feel better if she punched another wall - or a Sister or two. Maybe Mother Medusa is going to volunteer, if she asks nicely, and remembers her pleases and thank-yous. She loves being *helpful*, Medusa, does she not?

"I didn't think she was going to make it," she says in an undertone. They clearly think Lacey isn’t listening. "How are the two of you holding up? Rough night?"

"The worst." Dad looks down at the flowers in his hand, and Lacey moves a little closer to him, but still feigns deafness and disinterest. "But we’re getting there. Going to get through this too, I know it."
"It'll get better," Medusa says reassuringly. "I must apologize again, I know it’s inexcusable. One of our inexperienced, younger Sisters was on the floor when it happened; she did not assess the situation right and overstepped her powers. I’m so very sorry for her lapse in judgement."

Lacey grimaces at the words, drenched in insincerity, but her dad just smiles weakly and waves them all away with a large hand - like the man does with apologies, whether they be heart-felt or not. “It’s only her second month, I take it?” he asks. “She will learn. No use crying over spilled milk.”

(Spilled milk. M I L K. --- Yeah, right. Like it was milk that spilled.)

“That’s very generous of you, Sir.” She closes her bony fingers around his hands, and Lacey has to look the other way, before she’ll say or do something really, really dumb, and embarrass her dad. “The Sisters have been praying for your family.”

“Thank you, Reverend Mother.” He sighs again. “Nicky just had an off-day.”

"It was more than a bloody off-day,” Lacey grumbles under her breath, the sound trapped behind her grinding teeth, and tries not to think about what happened two nights ago, but is failing miserably. She stares at her feet to hide her watery eyes and the anger rising to her cheeks.

“Would you like to see her?” sensing weakness like a hyena, Medusa turns to her, that horrible understanding smile stretching what the woman calls her face. “She’ll be delighted that you came to visit. Lacey. You haven’t been here in a while.” She looks at Dad again. “She’s awake and in good spirits –”

Lacey shrugs noncommittally. Her throbbing heart is going to burst any minute now. They better run for cover and fetch a mop and bucket. It’s not going to be pretty.

Dad’s nodding and nudging her forward, and Lacey’s feet are moving, but she’s not moving with them, her body splitting itself, leaving behind more than just half an eyebrow, as they’re walking towards the stairs. Medusa’s many eyes are burning tiny holes in her back, Dad’s hand is heavy on her shoulder, and for a wild moment Lacey expects her feet to sink through a step and get stuck in it, which, sadly, doesn’t happen. Instead, she leads the talking adults up several flights, not taking in a word they are saying anymore, not thinking about where she’s going, her mind preoccupied with grotesque snapshots - blood, sirens and gurneys.

(The stinking place doesn’t even have elevators, for crying out loud!)

When she reaches the third floor - the beautiful glass door with the painted vines on it – not knowing how in the world she even got here, she freezes, and they nearly walk into her. His hand is squeezing her shoulder so hard it hurts, but then he lets go, steps around her, and presses his palm against the glass instead, the warmth fogging it up just a little, his fingers tracing the delicate leaves tenderly.

In her mind’s eye, Lacey is four and climbing on the kitchen counter, her stubby, sticky fingers closing around the big scissors, and she hears herself laugh, a high-pitched unhinged giggle, as she jumps down again and starts running, faster and faster, the sound echoing off the walls. Hopefully she’ll take both her eyes out. And then she can use the flashing blades to cut the threads that keep her heart attached to her body.

“Will the three of you be joining us in the refectory for dinner tonight?” Medusa asks sweetly, and Dad draws up his shoulders like a turtle ready to retreat into its shell.

“We’ll see how it goes,” he answers, shooting Lacey a wary look. “But it’ll probably be only Lacey and Nicky. I’m not sure I can close that early.” He looks at the two of them apologetically. “You
know, the holidays.”

“I understand,” Medusa smiles sympathetically. Lacey wants to knock out her teeth – or pull them out, one by one, and very, very slowly. “But we’ll let the cook know, just in case.” She beams at Lacey as though she were a little kid. “No nuts, soy or beans for you, Lacey, was it?”

(What, we’re trying to be considerate now? Score brownie points?)

Lacey nods once, not looking at the witch.

(Shé’s stone already, so it doesn’t matter, but still.)

“Very well then,” she pats Dad’s shoulder lightly (she does know better than to touch Lacey). “I’ll be downstairs, should you need me.” Then she turns and leaves, and Lacey wonders dimly why she’s even bothered coming up here with them in the first place, if she’s not going in – not that Lacey would ever want her anywhere near the room - or inside it. Perish the thought!

Feeling gloomy, Lacey follows her dad into the corridor hidden behind the milky glass door, their footsteps echoing off the walls eerily, once it has fallen shut behind them. There it is - Room 3-42. No matter how many times she’s walked down this corridor, has passed the other olive green doors and the never changing framed photographs, it still looks sinister and unfamiliar, and she still feels anxious and out of place.

He’s looking at his wristwatch pointedly, nervously bouncing up and down on his toes.

(Wait for it -)

“Heavens! Look at the time! I better -” his restless fingers find his wedding ring and turn it – round and round and round. “It’ll be best – yes – Lacey, you two girls got a lot of catching up to do, don’t you? Surely, you don’t need me to -?! ” He extends the flowers to her. “But, here - take these, give -

She folds her arms across her chest.

The spray is beautiful. Gorgeous sunflowers accented with Solidago, lily grass blades and lush greens, all carefully arranged and tied with fir green ribbon. The bouquet is sunshine and brightness, warmest wishes and highest hopes, and Lacey can’t take it from him. Just looking at it makes her skin crawl and her eyes burn.

(Goldenrod or ‘Solidago virgaurea’, Family: Asteraceae, Common Names: Solidago, Virgaureae herba, European Goldenrod, Missouri Goldenrod, Sweet Goldenrod, Wound Weed, Woundwort, Blue Mountain Tea, Sweet-scented Goldenrod, Anise-scented Goldenrod or True Goldenrod. It belongs to the Sunflower Family. It is native to Europe. There are about one-hundred-twenty-five species of goldenrod around the world; around ninety are found in North America. Goldenrod gets its name from the Latin root ‘solidare’ meaning to strengthen; this is in reference to the alleged healing powers of the plant. Native Americans used several types of goldenrod medically. The Chippewa knew it as ‘Gizisomukiki’, or sun medicine, the plant being boiled in water to produce syrup for treating colds. A poultice made from the leaves was placed in the mouth for a toothache; one made from the roots was used to soothe burns and boils. The Cherokee made a tea that was applied to bruises; a boiled down salve was applied to insect stings. Among its many other uses was in the healing the saddle sores of horses. - Why does she still recall all of this?)

“Go on,” he says, so much sudden fake cheer in his voice that she wants to scream. “Don’t be afraid. She’s fine now.” The flowers quiver in his hands, their blossoms nodding along with him.
Lacey glares at him and hugs herself tighter. If he wants to give her flowers, he will have to do it himself. She most certainly won’t.

“Lacey –“ he’s pleading with her now, and his face is so tired, and she wants to knock the stupid flowers out of his hands and fly into his arms, but they no longer hold any comfort, all the secureness long gone from his embrace. “She’s been asking about you.”

Lacey shakes her head.

(No, she hasn’t.)

She knows that she’s being difficult. He needs to finish deliveries, get back to the shop. Astrid can’t manage all by herself, not this close to Thanksgiving weekend, but Lacey doesn’t want to go in alone. She doesn’t want to go in at all – and she’s not touching the damn flowers.

“She misses you.” His voice is weary. “Please, Lacey.”

She feels her chest tighten into a knot, and automatically extends a cold hand to pluck a single sunflower from the arrangement.

The small thankful smile on her dad’s face hurts so much that she immediately wishes she hadn’t moved a muscle and hadn’t reached for the stupid flower. The rough, prickly stem is tickling her palm, and the peculiar musty smell has clogged up her nose, forcing her to breathe through her mouth instead. There is so much contempt inside of her for the proud yellow flower in her hand that it should shrivel up and die instantly, but it hasn’t got any sense of decency, and lives on to mock her.

“Go on, grub.” He tips her chin up clumsily. “I’ll pick you up after closing.”

She doesn’t answer.

He hesitates, his strong arms hanging loosely at his sides, flowers dangling upside-down. Perhaps he’s contemplating ruffling her hair (like he used to when she was little) or wants to pull her into a hug – but he does neither of the two, and she doesn’t ask him to. She feels bad for him, and bad for poor Astrid waiting at the shop, and bad for the other flowers, left unchosen and decaying in the ruined bouquet still clutched tightly in his sweaty hand.

He smiles tiredly, then squares his shoulders and turns to walk away, and she wants to call out after him - to please stay, to hold her hand and not make her do this alone, not make her do this period, but it feels wrong and selfish, and the words are all jumbled up and get stuck in her throat, choking her - and then he’s turned the corner and vanished from view, glass door squeaking only moments later, and Lacey’s on her own. He’s gone and she stands, small and lost, rooted to the spot, and feeling herself shrink more and more with each passing second, and she knows she has to do it now, and do it fast, or she will bolt.

The stuffy air feels too hot on her face. Her dad would not know - it’s not like she’s going to tell him anything - but sitting in the common room or wandering around until he comes back to get her – she’d be lying to his face – and hasn’t she promised to be good and not to lie anymore? Would it be lying if she snuck off to the Public Library with every intention of returning with a good book to read – and then simply --- forgot to come back here?

She looks at her twitching toes, shrieking and laughter filling her ears, the merciless summer sun burning her sun-kissed neck, her bare shoulders, and her red ears, and the air smells of sunblock,
chlorine and chips. Soon it will be Christmas.

(Do it! Do it! Do it!)

She doubles her fists, the taste of strawberry and vanilla ice-cream on her dry tongue, and rough sand tickling between her toes, and takes a deep breath, holds it in, and runs. ---

And she’s running, running right over the edge, flying, falling, air rushing past her ringing ears, her eyes wide, and --- splash.

Lacey holds her breath and pushes open the door without knocking.

The room is too bright, too cheerful, when she enters, and Lacey wants to be anywhere in the world but here, and see anything but the warm smile that’s greeting her, oblivious.

“Sweetheart, there you are!” She lowers her book, smooths down her cornflower blue dress, and Lacey bites the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood. “Come! Sit! Tell me about your day!”

She’s patting the crisp, white linen sheets - the spot right next to her on the bed. The gesture is so familiar, and it’s her voice, and it’s her face, but it’s not her. It will never be her again.

“What is it, darling?” she asks, furrowing her brow. “Did you and Papa have a row again? I heard his voice.” She looks around, hopeful, expectant, as if wondering where he is, because he knows how important mealtime is to her, and that tea will be ready any minute. “He works too much.”

Lacey’s fingers curl tightly around the flower, nails digging into its petiole, its juice making her hands sticky, and staining her skin. She’s underwater - too much pressure on her ears and lungs.

She drops her gaze and watches the stainless steel blade break the pale skin in her mind. She almost feels her fist smash into that concerned face for it then, splattering red blood on the white, sterile walls – and what an improvement that would be, wouldn’t it? - and very artsy at that (white as snow, red as blood, get it?). But instead she just replies as if her jaw were wired shut. “No.”

She puts the book down on her nightstand – like a highborn English lady setting down her fine china teacup – and extends an inviting hand. “You’re upset, sweetpea. Kids at school give you a hard time again? Should I have another word with Miss Walker?”

(Miss Walker. She still thinks this is Boston and Lacey’s twelve.)

She wants to push away the reaching hand, the open arms, all covered in thick bandages from wrists to elbows, and fly at the woman that used to be her mother, to pummel her chest with her fists until she bloody gets it. Lacey bites down on her lip. Painfully hard. On purpose.

(She doesn’t want to be here. She can’t do this.)

“Is that for me?” She’s pointing at the dumb yellow carcass in Lacey’s hands now, smiling. “A sunflower from my sunflower.”

Her eyes are smiling too – smiling like it’s just another sunny afternoon at home, like time hasn’t passed, like nothing ever happened, and Lacey wants nothing more than to believe her, to wake up from the nightmare she’s been stuck in, her mum by her bedside, holding her,rocking her, reassuring her it’s all just been a very bad dream, and the two of them padding downstairs into the dark kitchen in their fuzzy socks, making hot cocoa and hot milk with honey, and then reading stories until she’d go back to sleep, white-plumed honeyeaters singing outside her window.
Lacey takes a few shaky steps and places the sunflower in her mother’s waiting hands, watching her admire the compositae flower for a moment, before it’s put down atop her book, and Lacey doesn’t pull away, as her mother reaches for her hands next, rubbing her thumb over the bruised knuckles. "But my little sunflower’s sad," she says gently, pulling her closer towards the bed, towards her, and sits her down. "Now, won’t you tell me what happened? Is it school?"

Her chest hurts. Her heart hurts – and she wants to tell her, tell her everything, but she can’t do that – and even if she could, what good would that do? It hurts so much just to breathe, and Lacey wonders if she has cracked some ribs – if simply from the effort of holding herself together so tightly all the time. She looks at her mother, heart racing, and chews her lip.

(It’s not fair.)

“My sweet girl,” Mother says, cupping her face and planting a soft kiss on her cheek, and Lacey releases her bottom lip with a soft pop, as her mother scoots closer and reaches over her to grab something from the nightstand drawer. “There,” she dabs on creme from the distinctive blue pot, spreading it carefully on Lacey’s battered lip. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

Sitting side by side, bodies angled towards each other, their faces are so close now that they’re practically breathing the same air – or they would be, if Lacey wasn’t holding her breath, if she hadn’t rolled over mentally, playing dead.

“Dot -- " her mother’s gentle hand is under her chin now, the other dabbing a blob of creme onto her left cheek, her eyes twinkling. “Dot --" Creme-blobs on both cheeks now. Lacey doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Comma, dash – smiley face in a flash!” More cool, smooth creme on her nose, on her chin, and Lacey’s eyes are prickling dangerously.

Her mother gently spreads the creme in upward and outward movements, laughing, kissing the tip of her nose, her cheeks, planting soft kisses all over her face, and Lacey’s eyes flutter shut. It smells like hot bubble baths, wrinkled toes and fingers, flying foam, and her favorite vanilla-scented shampoo massaged into her scalp. Her mum’s touch is warmed towels and little kisses on the top of her head. It’s being wrapped in a cuddly blanket for bed, and feeling totally and completely safe and comforted, like she doesn’t have a worry in the world. “What is it?” Mother asks again, feathering kisses over her eyelids, and Lacey feels like crying hysterically. “There is nothing we can’t fix.”

(Yes, yes there is.)

Lacey dashes at her eyes with the heel of a shaking hand, torn, and furious with herself, furious with her mother, and furious with everyone and everything else, too. Not here. Not now. She can’t fall apart here. She’s so tired of crying, but her emotions aren’t listening to her, and she bites her trembling lip in a fruitless attempt to keep quiet, as the tears well up for good, sending her world into a blurry mess of white and cornflower blue. “Failed a midterm,” she sobs, and it’s the truth – just not the whole truth.

“Failing means yer playin’, pet,” her mother offers, searching her face. “There’s more -”

Lacey cries harder, unable to speak, but not wanting to elaborate anyway, and her mother rubs her shoulder, patiently. “Darling, talk to me” she coaxes. “Tell me what’s troubling you!”

“C-can’t” she croaks, shaking her head frantically, as she’s pulled into a tight hug, her body shaking with sobs.

Mum rocks her back and forth, humming softly and cradling her in her arms, pressing kisses to the crown of her head until her sobbing slows a little bit. “How can I kiss it better if you won’t tell me
where it hurts, sweetpea?"

Lacey gasps, snuggling closer, drinking in every bit of affection, kindness, and touch greedily, like a flower thirsting for sunshine, and she can feel herself bloom beneath it, her defenses unfolding, opening up to allow her mother to come closer, and she breathes in deeply, breathes in home – it smells like a soft, powdery chamomile.

“My heart,” she weeps, her eyes burning and throat stinging. “My heart hurts, Mum!”

(How could she even begin to explain that ever since they left her, she has been looking constantly, crashing into walls, just to make sure they still exist? And how will she ever find the right words to say that her spinning world has come to a complete shuddering stop when he touched her, bruised her, his name tasting like interstellar dust on her chapped lips, his neck smelling like the color of the wide open night sky, like a home that she’s yet unfamiliar with?)

Mum’s rubbing her back soothingly. “Ah. Love –“

Lacey pulls back abruptly at that.

(No, no, no - not love. It’s not that.)

She searches her mother’s face anxiously, wiping her eyes with her hand. ”No, he --- It’s -“

(She’s not in love! He’s just another wall to crash into.)

“It’s wrong!” she blurs. “I’m broken and my heart’s wrong! And he knows! He fucking knows it, Mum, and I wanted it anyway!” She’s sobbing anew and nestling her throbbing head against her mother’s chest.

“Happy endings aren’t always what we think they’ll be,” Mum whispers at her ear. “We just have to believe and trust that we are right where we should be, when we should be, and let our hearts guide us – even if the next step, and only ever the next step, is all we do see clearly.”

“I can’t see anything!” Lacey sobs. “It’s pitch-black, Mum, and --- I don’t know --- maybe, maybe that’s what I want?!”

“I don’t know,” she says, stroking her back, and rocking her back and forth again, making soft hushing noises. “But we’ll figure it out, baby, we’ll figure it out. Don’t you worry.”

She wants to scream. Wants to ask why – why she’s left her without much of a warning. She’s here - and then she’s not, and that’s so much worse than not having her at all could ever be, so Lacey pretends she doesn’t have her, ever. She can’t shake the thought that it’s her fault. It’s all her fault. All of it. She lets out a shaky laugh. “What if we can’t?” she whispers hoarsely, her breath hitching, and bursts into fresh tears.

Mum tightens her grip, resting her chin on Lacey’s head, and hums soothingly. Catch a Falling Star - Lacey’s favorite lullaby from days and nights long gone – and Lacey, in her distress, can’t tell if it’s making things better or worse. She just listens to the words, the little vibrations flowing through her mother’s body and tickling her ear. The sound’s a little dulled, as if underwater, as if she were diving. She lets her tears fall freely - until there can’t possibly be any more left inside of her.

(Mama ---)

======
“Mum?” She sniffs, catching the scent of fresh lemons with her next shuddering breath, wondering if she’s hallucinating, if her mind has finally been fried. Her eyes are swollen and stinging, and she’s used the word tired so bloody much that it has lost all meaning to her. She runs the back of her hand across her face, eyes closed. Mum’s still rocking them - just very, very slowly now.

“Yes, love?”

“Why do I smell lemons?”

“Maybe you do need glasses, sunflower” she says, and brushes Lacey's forehead with her lips. “I keep telling Papa to take you after school.” Lacey makes a disgruntled noise and Mum laughs. “I swear, between the two of you, nothing ever gets done in this house!”

“Lemons, Mum.” Lacey prompts again, coughing, snot rattling in her nostrils, her ears blocked.

“Yes, yes, Little Miss Impatient.” Mum scolds gently, but Lacey can tell she’s still smiling just by the tone of her voice. “It’s not lemons, pet, but the fabulous and fragrant, absolutely gorgeous fresh plant over there!”

Lacey opens one sore eye long enough to see in which direction her mother is pointing, and to catch a glimpse of the plant in question – it’s sitting in a pot on the little table opposite, five frilly, creamy white blooms.

“Papa gave them to me yesterday, haven’t you seen them?” Mum asks, a hint of confusion in her voice, which Lacey finds alarming, so she hastens to reply.

“Yes, of course I have. They’re pretty. Lilies, right?”

Mum sighs. “Azalea, darling, look.” She taps her on the shoulder and points again, and Lacey lifts her head for exactly 1.3 seconds to pretend to be looking. “Azaleas are a flowering shrub that grow their best during damp portions of the spring season. Ideal for pots on shady patios, garden beds, and as a flowering carpet beneath trees.”

“And they’re all white?” Lacey asks, eyes closed again, and her voice muffled, the rise and fall of her mum’s breathing urging her to rest. She knows the answer, but she just wants her to keep talking, wants to stay here forever, lying on her chest, and listening to her soft voice, her heartbeat, the blood flowing through her body like the tides.

“They come in a variety of shades - from orange and yellow, to pink and red,” Mum explains in her teacher-voice. “You may also see them in solid colors, or with patterns -” she lists them on Lacey’s fingers as she continues, and Lacey smiles against the warm chest, keeping her eyes shut. “There’s margined - that’s with thin margins of two colors - and sectored - each petal showing a different color – and then there are blotched and striped.”

Lacey weaves their fingers together. “What do they mean? Azaleas?”

“Well,” Mum says, tugging her a little closer, and raking her hair with gentle reassurance. “That depends on the color, the intent with which they’re given or received, and also on the part of the world that we’re in,” she states. “Oh, and of course the time period is relevant as well.”

“How so? Can you summarize it for me?” Lacey asks, and her mother caresses her hand and lower arm affectionately in response, pressing little kisses to the crown of her head again. She always enjoys talking about her flowers. They make her happy.

“In China, the azalea flower is thought to be a strong symbol of womanhood, elegance and
abundance - meaning: wealth - especially of beauty or intelligence. In other parts of the world they are thought to represent passion and fragility, and sometimes temperance – which is their Victorian meaning, too – a symbol of temperance or fragile passion - however, they are probably best known for their expression of take care of yourself for me,” she pauses, and Lacey swallows hard. (Poor Papa.) “They are often chosen as gifts to pass along the wish that the recipient be good to him- or herself – especially during illness or trying times.”

“Oh,” Lacey is drawing small circles on her mother’s bandaged arm, her eyes opened just a crack. “That’s what it means then? - Get well soon?” She whispers.

“It tells us: Care for yourself and those around you. Never forget where you came from, and stay in control of your emotions and actions for success in life.”

Lacey turns her head and glances at the plant again to hide the sadness from her mother’s sharp eyes, ear pressed to her chest and listening to her big heart beating steadily. “Does it have medical properties? --- Like Solidago?”

“Why yes, it does!” Mum exclaims, her eyes bright like a still lake in summer. “It’s used as herbal medicine for ailments like rheumatism or cough, and for detoxification. Its scent – so very similar to that of lemons - is believed to comfort both the stomach and the head.”

“Sounds like one hell of a plant” Lacey mumbles drowsily, her eyes heavy with sleep and closing on their own accord again.

“Do you want to know a fun fact?” Mum’s fingertips are dancing across her back, drawing little patterns, and Lacey smiles, breathing deeply.

“Uh-huh.”

“If you send or receive a bouquet of Azaleas in a black vase that’s taken as a death threat,” she whispers into Lacey’s ear, conspiratorially. “Azalea is toxic.”

“Gee, Mum,” Lacey gasps in fake indignation, but the gasp stretches into a yawn. “That’s a ho-o-rrible fun fact!”

They both laugh, and Lacey feels herself drift off to sleep for real, allowing herself to be lulled into that wonderful, false sense of security and peace, the rhythmic rise and fall and the comfortable warmth making it impossible to keep her eyes open, and her senses alert. She hasn’t gotten much sleep lately. Her brain never shuts off anymore, the thoughts and tears never stopping long enough for her to get some rest - and there aren’t enough books in the world to chase the nightmares away.

(Is it okay, if she – just for a little while ---?)

=-=-=-=

“Darling, what did Papa say when he’d be home!!”

Groggy and disoriented, Lacey opens her sticky eyes - to find her mother’s anxious face mere inches from her own, her fingertip tracing invisible lines on her cheek. “Uhhh –“

(What time is it? Have they missed tea? Should Papa be here already?)

Mum looks around for a clock that isn’t there. The room is a perfect replica of her bedroom in Boston – save for the old grandfather clock that the movers damaged beyond repair, but, of course, she doesn’t remember that.
“After work, Mum” Lacey says automatically. It’s not a lie, but the words still burn her throat. “Flowers are a lot of work.” She yawns, rubbing her eyes.

“Flowers?” Her mother looks puzzled, and Lacey bites her tongue, keeping herself from smacking her forehead with the palm of a hand (Stupid!). “What flowers?” Her eyes are sweeping the room again, glazing over, and she furrows her brow, as though aware of the glitch that’s rippling through their little world, disconnecting her from it. Then her eyes find the flowerpot, zooming in on the white blossoms, refocusing, and her face cracks into a wide, sunny smile, everything falling into place again. “Oh, *those* flowers, pet!”

She’s resuming the gentle rocking and stroking, and Lacey doesn’t want to let go just yet, wishing she could hold onto the moment that she just lost, hold onto her, but she can feel her mother slip through her grasp, like water, like air, like liquid sunshine, running through her fingers. Perhaps, she can keep her in a jar? A Ball Jar, maybe - like the painted one they used to collect bugs and little frogs in. Bugs, and frogs, and imaginary sunbeams for winter - to keep their happy thoughts warm. She could use a sun jar for her happy thoughts right about now. Or ten.

“Papa gave them to me *yesterday*, haven’t you seen them?”

“Azalea,” Lacey says tonelessly, a lump the size of a large brick in her throat, and a ravenous black hole opening right above her heart.

“That’s right,” she is beaming down at her fondly - and it’s like looking directly into the sun. A white flash of pain. Lacey wants to shield her eyes. “Did you know Azaleas grow their best during the spring season? They’re ideal for pots on shady patios, garden beds, and as a flowering carpet beneath trees.”

(No, no, please – no! Just a little longer. Another five minutes. Not yet. Please.)

“Uh-huh.”

“They would make a beautiful flowering carpet beneath our good old apple tree, don’t you think?” she asks, her hands braiding Lacey’s hair. “But what would we do with your swing then? No, we can’t have that.” She laughs, and Lacey forces herself to join in, the sound wet and broken and catching on its way out.

“Are you feeling alright?” Her mother’s hand flies to her forehead on instinct. “You’re a little warm, sweetpea.”

“I’m apples, Mum,” Lacey sighs. “Just the sun. It’s really hot out.”

(Lie.)

“Oh,” Mother strokes her hair absent-mindedly. “Is it? Well, then I better get my gardening done early tomorrow. Heat-stroke’s no joke.” She looks out the window, but the sun has traveled further down and taken the warm light with it, leaving the room in semi-darkness, casting them in shadow. “Have you put on sunblock and worn your hat? – I know it looks silly, but it’s keeping your beautiful, clever thoughts safe.” She’s tapping the side of her head playfully.

“Yes.”

(And another one.)

“We’re out of chamomile,” Mum tightens the embrace. Lacey can feel the tension building; she hears the heart rate pick up, the breathing becoming shallower, feels her mother’s movements grow more
erratic. Her voice is wary now, confused. “I should call Papa and tell him to pick some up! --- Make tea.”

She wriggles in her mother’s arms, and, with a sigh, props herself up on one elbow, to study the worried face, their noses almost touching. “He knows. You already told him.”

(Liar, liar, pants on fire.)

“Oh, did I? Silly me, memory like a goldfish,” she chuckles, the tension leaving her face somewhat, and pokes Lacey’s nose. “A goldfish having a little elephant, can you imagine?” She laughs, and Lacey smiles, but it feels wrong, and strange, and sticky around her mouth – like sugar beet molasses.

Her mother keeps babbling on, oblivious and happy, and Lacey wishes she could be a goldfish too. Maybe they could share a bowl. “Of course, your father is no elephant, either - he’s worse than I am!” She grins. “Maybe he’s a --- guppy!” She giggles at her own joke, and tickles Lacey’s sides. “Oh, come on, my jokes aren’t that bad!”

“All right,” Lacey hiccups, swatting her hands away, and rests her chin on her mother’s chest, hands folded underneath. “The absolute worst.”

“Come here, you rude little thing!” She tickles her ribs, and Lacey squirms in her arms. “Here comes the tickle monster!”

The sound of her laughter, bright and cheerful like dandelions in summer, sprouts and blossoms, and turns the room into a colorful sunflower maze – rows and rows of tall, stunningly beautiful sunflowers. Lacey doesn’t know or understand why she finds herself laughing so hard, but she can’t stop. The laughter is bubbling in her lungs, tickling her from the inside, shaking her so hard that it’s taking her breath away. The lack of oxygen doesn’t matter. Nothing does. And it’s glorious. All the anguish of the past few days is melting like butter in a microwave, and she’s floating - a small vacation, a blessed relief from all the distress that’s shoving its way into her brain 24/7. She’s lost the tightness in her chest, the muscles in her neck relaxing, and she feels --- hopeful. And it feels so damn good - a dangerous, addictive drug mainlined into her veins. Her breath is coming in quick gasps between her unstoppable giggles, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill over, but those are tears she won’t mind shedding.

Outside, the clock tower strikes seven, and her joy bursts like a rainbow bubble, making her hit the stone-cold floor of reality hard. She untangles herself, missing the warmth and closeness immediately, and shuffles to the bathroom - a small sink and a toilet in a shoebox, adjacent – to rinse off her tears. Looking up at her own reflection in the simple rectangular mirror, she would laugh, if she wasn’t so miserable. She’s one bizarre panda - they better alert the zoological garden. Her eyes are red and puffy, makeup smudged into gooey black circles around them; her face a patchy pink mess, her cheeks streaked with trails of mascara like some strange kind of war paint. She blows her nose, rinsing her hands under the running water, cools her arms and wrists, and cups a handful to her mouth. Freaking thirsty. Again and again she scoops and sips. She hadn’t realized how thirsty. She lifts both hands to her lips and gulps the icy water down greedily, rinses her mouth, drinks some more, then splashes water on her face, vigorously rubbing at the stubborn blackness, but it’s her Mum’s expensive makeup and it’s mercilessly waterproof(ish).

Medusa better be using heavy-duty laundry detergent on her towels, Lacey thinks, smirking, as she pulls a soft white towel off the rack and buries her face in it.
Oh, and if you're interested in the theme song for this chapter: [here]
When Lacey sticks her head out the shoebox, she’s reading her book again. “Mum? You ready?”

“For what, darling? Were we going someplace?” She bookmarks her page and looks around for the planner that isn’t there. She hasn’t used one since they moved here. “I’m sorry, sweetie, I must have forgot. I just got a lot on my mind right now. Work was a beehive today.”

“It’s fine,” Lacey says, jumping back onto the bed, and Mum frowns. “We’re good on time. What the bees do today?” The bees are her students. Before her brain was holier than Swiss Cheese, Mum used to teach. Biology and English Lit. She’d always call her students bees (and her colleagues hornets - if they did something deserving of the moniker).

“Buzzing, as per usual,” Mum laughs. “Honey’s a big deal right now.”

“Isn’t it always?” Lacey asks, smiling. She scoots closer, fighting the urge to snuggle up again, laces their fingers together, and slowly makes to move off the bed, gently pulling her mother with her. “Come on, time for tea.”

Mum slips her bare feet into her worn petrol blue Birkenstocks and stands, and the two of them walk out into the empty hallway and down the stairs, leaving the olive door ajar.

“Tell me about your day, bumblebee. How were things at the next beehive over? Did you finish your homework?”

======

The refectory is elegant in a minimalist sort of way, echoing the local flora and fauna. The large, sturdy table dominates the space - an elongated ellipse of dark oak with the raw bark at the edges. The impressive tree it’s made from had fallen victim to some violent thunderstorm a couple years back, upended root ball and all, and Marco, the woodcarver, had worked on it for months.

Lacey remembers watching her father struggle to carry it inside - him, the sheriff and his deputy, and some random UPS guy, who was at the wrong place at the wrong time and got roped into lending a helping hand.

Her dad’s always eager and willing to help with whatever this hellhole needs - they even send over free flowers from the shop every bloody week. He says a spot of color does wonders to brighten up the day, but Lacey knows it’s because he can’t make enough time - every flower an unspoken apology, testimony of a very guilty conscience. Lacey’s flowers would fill up the entire space, floors to ceilings, and bury them all alive underneath. Death by suffocation. Slow, silent and pleasantly fragrant.

The many wooden chairs around the table - some already taken, some patiently waiting - are equally beautiful, all clean straight lines and high backs. The spotless floor is slate, the walls cream-colored, and with the tall mullioned windows, it’s almost too fancy a place for the simple evening meal that’s awaiting them, steaming hot, on the table.

Standing in the doorway and taking in the scene, her mother impatiently tugging on her hand, a familiar, revolting smell is washing over Lacey with an unfamiliar shock. The rich aroma of the food, wafting out and beckoning them to come closer, can’t fully mask the pungent hospital smell that she has come to associate with sickness and mortality. The air reeks of all the unpleasant possibilities of this place, and Lacey scrunches up her nose in disgust, as she’s dragged across the room by her
hand, her mother taking the lead.

The woodcarver’s handiwork is too beautiful for a hopeless, ugly place like this. The table - once a living, breathing, growing creature, knocked down in a cruel twist of fate, trapped inside dead walls - just like everyone else now gathering around it. Trapped and strangely preserved, somehow frozen in time, but silently rotting from the core - from the inside out.

*(Tick-tock, tick-tock.)*

They sit down (*she tries not to flinch*) and Mum motions for her to take off her cardigan and place it on the free chair to her left (*he’s not coming, but she doesn’t know that*). Lacey picks up her spoon to keep her hands busy and her mind blank, drumming its back against her palm. The polished silver is unexpectedly heavy to the hand.

At each place stands a tall empty glass to be filled from one of the many water jugs lined up in the middle. Sparkly water, but room temperature (*Disgusting!*). Mum shoots her a warning glance, and Lacey puts the spoon back down - onto her beautifully folded napkin. It matches the deep green runner, which has been decorated with chestnuts, pine cones, leaves and colorful pebbles. Lacey wants to reach out and touch them, pick one up to play with, and she imagines the feel of the cool, smooth stone against her skin, its weight resting comfortably in her palm and calming her down.

Whoever had been put in charge of decorations today, has done a good job. There’s no shortage of ambiance - she has to give them that - but it’s just not enough to make those who remember forget, and those who forget remember. Lacey sighs.

“Sweetpea, what did Papa say again when he’d be meeting us here?” Her eyes search the room, travelling over the other faces, scanning them without showing any sign of recognition. “The food will be cold before he gets here. Why would they serve it already?”

Lacey swallows down the lump in her throat and tears her eyes away from the little stones. “He works too much,” she says, and Mum nods in agreement, patting her arm.

“He does,” Mum notes. “Maybe we can take some home for him.” She’s smiling reassuringly, but Lacey knows it’s bothering her. He should be here. Everyone else is. *She* is.

Lacey glances up and down the busy table through her lashes. The refectory’s almost crowded tonight. An old couple eating side by side a few seats away, studiously bent over their meals, one glass of red wine each (*where did that come from? And can she have some?*), next to them, a family with younger kids that Lacey recognizes from around school, followed by a small group of obnoxiously loud women collapsing with helpless giggles, as a stern woman dining alone at the far end of the table looks on and frowns.

The woman is wearing at least two or three fur coats on top of each other, a pair of blood red leather gloves, and what has to be the entire contents of her jewelry box. If it wasn’t for the high levels of utter oddness, however, she’d be exceptionally beautiful. She has got the highest cheekbones Lacey has ever seen, the blush she’s put on making them pop even more, and the darkest, thickest, most perfectly done eyebrows. Lacey wonders vaguely how long it takes her to draw them on every morning, and if she uses a *transparent* ruler to make the edges quite that - *edgy*. Her remarkable face is contoured perfectly and her lipstick’s the same color as her gloves. The hair is monochrome - no, greyscale - one part very, very white, almost transparent, and the other a very dark shade of grey. Perhaps she used to be a model, or a designer, or some older rich dude’s trophy wife (*God rest his soul!* - someone eccentric and unique, for sure. Someone *different*. Lacey has never seen her before. Maybe she’s new.
Suddenly, the woman returns her look - her eyes hard piercing ice crystal - and the hostility in her
gaze makes Lacey shudder. There is something wild in there too, something unhinged and *felon*. She
definitely has a few roos loose in the top paddock that one, and, the hair on her arms and neck
standing on end, Lacey preys she’s not allowed outside without supervision. She hastily averts her
eyes to the bowls and plates in front of her and keeps them on her untouched food, until she’s sure
the woman has lost interest and turned away.

Creamy mushroom soup, bitter greens with tomatoes the size of grapes, roast beef slices as thin as
paper, noodles in some indefinable green sauce with pepper, baked potatoes, and fresh bread with
salted butter. Up close, everything smells delicious, but Lacey isn’t hungry anymore. She picks up
her fork and pushes a fat, juicy *Solanum lycopersicum* around her plate, chasing it, imagining it
screaming in terror at the prospect of being impaled, skinned and eaten alive.

Something clatters to the floor noisily and a couple heads turn in the direction of the disturbance. At
the other end of the table, a businessman in a grey three-piece is bending down to pick up a bowl off
the floor, then sits back down and calmly proceeds feeding a shaky old man mashed potato off the
remaining plate with a fork, the green sauce dribbling down the wrinkled chin, the toothless mouth
stretching into a devilish, defiant grin. The younger man catches her eye and Lacey starts.

*(Calm down! It’s not him! --- Thank God, it’s not him. Jeez.)*

It’s not him, but she can’t help gazing at him and the mean old man in awe some more, watching the
pair interact, studying them closely - the calm movements, the patient face, the very *blue*, kind eyes.

*(His eyes are brown. Hazel. Cognac.)*

It has to be the suit. It’s most *definitely* the suit - and she needs to get her head out of the clouds (*and
the gutter*) and forget about it - only, that’s impossible.

Lacey shifts in her seat, blushing and biting her lip. Her still stinging bum - it’s a constant reminder -
of him, of the lines they blurred - and the hard chair, even if it is beautiful, isn’t helping to take her
mind off --- *things*. Tomorrow’s Friday. That means double Maths at eight (*sharp!*). And tomorrow
she’s got no note to excuse her after, to save her. She’ll have to go see him in his office after school.
Lacey’s stomach clenches at the thought, her heart fluttering nervously, and she hastily shoves the
limp tomato on her fork into her mouth.

*(Crap! Someone needs to sign that bloody midterm! Maybe she can ask Mum to -)*

“Something wrong, love? You’re quiet today,” Mum’s watching her closely and Lacey feels the heat
travel to her cheeks. Damn her sharp eyes and perceptive mind (*now it’s working. Great*). “Lacey -”
She’s looking at her face, her plate, and back at Lacey. “We’re not having this conversation again.
Dancers need to eat, too. *Especially* dancers! You know that.”

*(She hasn’t danced in years.)*

“Yes, Mum.” Lacey looks at her laden plate, choking up. She’s never going to finish all of it. She
puts down her fork and knife (*properly, like Mum taught her. Manners, Lacey, manners*) and
reaches for the bread instead, buttering it slowly, and as evenly as she possibly can, covering every
last bit and every corner, stalling, playing for time, her mouth dry as sand - but Mum’s not letting up,
her rising eyebrows another nonverbal caution.

*(Ugh.)*

Lacey takes a bite, chews longer than what would be strictly necessary, and swallows with difficulty.
The bread’s rough and unpleasant against her throat. It’s not that she isn’t hungry, she just doesn’t feel like eating right now. She takes a sip of her water (still disgusting) to wash everything down and takes another bite. After a couple more, and after half of her soup’s gone too, Mum finally stops watching her out of the corner of her eye like the mother hawk that she is - was - and refocuses on her own food, and Lacey relaxes a little.

These are ancient battles. They have fought them already, years ago and a hundred times over. She doesn’t have the energy to explain - and if she did, that would only confuse her. She has to remind herself that she’s not doing it on purpose. She doesn’t know any better. Lacey has to be the bigger person - with her grey matter still intact and all - but it’s really damn difficult sometimes. It sucks being the time traveler's daughter, never knowing when she’s gonna jump and where to, playing impromptu hopscotch on her own timeline, on their timeline. Sometimes she falls off completely. Lacey knows it’s beyond her control, but that doesn’t make it any easier.

In spite of the various little accidents and outbursts happening here and there along the table, the general atmosphere is relaxed as dinner goes on, almost happy, as people enjoy their meal and the company, but the light mood can’t penetrate Lacey’s skin, as if she’s coated in gloom and misery, her thoughts far away. She’s never been the golden girl - no matter how hard she tries; the pitch just won’t come off.

“Good evening, Nicolette.” One of the sisters comes over to give Mum her medication. Another face Lacey has never seen before. Has it really been that long since she’s been here last? The Sister is young, probably not much older than Lacey herself, and she wonders how they ended up being so close in age, yet are polar opposites, their lives perfect negatives of one another. Why would someone that young and beautiful swear off everything, swear off being alive, just to be here? To be a nun? Well, she would probably wonder the same thing about Lacey - wonder why - if she knew.

If only Lacey had any of the answers.

“Hi, I don’t think we’ve met,” she holds out her hand. “I’m Sister Thalia - Tally. I’m new here.” She smiles, pushing a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Lacey almost replies with My Deepest Condolences, but catches herself just in time, and takes the girl's hand, shaking it briefly. Her mum is watching. “I’m Lacey. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Unfortunately, Tally mistakes her forced smile and fake friendliness as invitation to join them, sitting down at the table across from Lacey - and, within seconds, the girl has started babbling like a wind-up toy. Isn’t there some kind of silence pledge or vow that nuns can take? Perhaps Lacey should bring that up - conversationally - if Sister Motor Mouth ever slows down enough to give anyone else a chance to speak.

She’s banging on and on and on, a bouncy, excited broken record, but Mum doesn’t seem to mind. She’s seen and heard worse, after all. She’s smiling and nodding politely - between spoonfuls of soup. At least she’s enjoying her dinner, Lacey thinks. They fret whenever she loses weight. She’s eating really well today; it looks like she’s got her appetite back, or maybe it’s the company.

Perhaps the yapping distraction isn’t all that bad.

Lacey smiles at Tally. She’s talking gardening with Mum, handing her the little plastic cup with the little pills in it like it’s the most normal thing in the world, and Mum’s so engaged discussing soil and fertilizers, gesturing animatedly, that she’s not even aware of what her hands and mouth are doing.

The girl is a human sugar cube, 5’3” of fairy floss, here to make the bitter medicine go down a little easier. Her eyes are bright green, like a sunlit clearing on a lazy stroll through the forest, her chipper
voice almost like birdsong. No wonder Mum’s so taken with her. She’s a freaking Nymph in a nun’s habit.

“Tally, tell me, how are your roses? Did fixing the mulch help?”

(\textit{So she remembers some rose mulch, but doesn’t know the number of candles on Lacey’s last birthday cake. But, hey, no worries.})

“You don’t want to mound the mulch right up against the base. Always remember to leave a one- to two-inch-wide gap between the mulch and your rose stems. Roses are kind of like people: Each has its own personality. That means you can’t expect every rose to perform the same. They need to breathe -”

(\textit{Yeah, breathing. Not as easy as it looks, that.})

“You know, my daughter -” Mum stops, looks around, frowns. “Where is my daughter?”

(\textit{Oh, here we go.})

“Lacey’s sitting right next to you, Nicolette,” Tally says, shooting her a supportive smile. “Does Lacey enjoy gardening, too?”

Mum turns in her seat to face her, looking confused.

“I’m right here, Mum” Lacey says in a small voice. She’s still smiling, breathing, pretending everything is fine. Just abso-fucking-lutely fine.

“Yes, I know, honey,” Mum pats her hand absentmindedly. “I meant Belle. Where is my Belle? She loves roses. She did plant an entire bed of the most gorgeous \textit{Duchesse De Brabant tea roses} all by herself the other week. On her hands and knees all day for days, the stubborn girl -” She laughs, her eyes still searching the room for the faces of the ghosts in her loopy head.

She only has to take one quick look at Mum’s eyes to know that she’s gone, a stranger sitting in her place. A stranger who doesn’t recognize her, doesn’t even know her own. A stranger, who remembers nothing of peach pies in summer, soft spices and warm laughter wafting out onto the porch from the all-white kitchen, reverberating so warm against your eardrums, contagious like the common cold, you couldn’t help but catch it too. Her favorite tune by her favorite band is just another song on the radio, and he’s just another man who never asked her ‘may I have this dance?’ to spin her around on the grass, dancing barefoot, the day the power went out, and Lacey’s just another girl - their eyes the exact same shape and shade of blue, but it means nothing. Absolutely nothing.

(Aren’t the pills supposed to be helping?!)

“She and her father are probably holed up in the library still. Maurice brought us these beautiful rare books - gorgeous first editions - she’s not been able to take her eyes off them for longer than five minutes.” Mum smiles fondly and Lacey bites her lip, trying not to be upset and failing.

\textit{Belle.} Bloody Belle again. And now Sister \textit{Rose-Mulch} is giving her that sympathetic look that’s making her insides boil. She can save her stupid pity, Lacey doesn’t need it. Lacey needs a mother that isn’t a complete nut job with extra nuts on top - and \textit{that woman}? She’s not it.

She turns around in her chair, turns back, gazes blankly, then her eyes light up, dragging her entire face into the smile. It hurts. “There you are!” She’s grasping her hand and squeezing it. “Why have you changed your clothes, \textit{my Belle}?’’ Their eyes are nothing alike. \textit{Nothing}. “Did you not like the
dress I put out for you?”

Lacey’s head is spinning, furious wildfire raging in her stomach and her chest, the flames licking at her heart and lungs. She knows who she is, and that's Lacey. She’ll have to remember for both of them - even if her mother won’t.

Whoever that Belle is --- who knows, maybe she’s actually real, maybe there is another girl out there somewhere, another, better daughter - and she’s got her eyes and her laugh, and her heart clutched tightly in her perfect hands - Lacey hates her guts.

She’s not real.

“Excuse me,” Lacey’s face has become rigid, jaw clamped tight, teeth grinding. It’s time to get out of here before she does something they’ll make her regret.

“Belle ---” she says, trying to hold onto her. “What has gotten into you today?”

She’s not going to play. Not now, not tonight. She’s tired. She knows they expect her to, he’d expect her to, but he’s not even here. And she won’t go along with whatever yarn she’s spinning in her head this time, won’t say her lines like a good girl and stay on her mark, waiting for her cues. She’s not going to play pretend, be someone she’s not, just to spare a stranger’s feelings. It’s not like she’ll remember any of it tomorrow, anyway. Groundhog Day, forever and ever and ever - until she’s gone.

(She can’t breathe.)

Lacey jerks her arm away. “I’m not her!” In standing, her chair flies backwards, falling. They're glaring at her like she’s done it on purpose. She needs to turn away now, turn and leave, before she snaps at their wide judgemental stares. There she goes again. She can hear them thinking it. Her face is hot, her skin tingling, her heart hammering against her ribs. She looks at her hands, rubbing the spots where the stupid string’s shooting out from under her skin, itching like mad. Her chest is shrinking, constricting, cutting her oxygen off and making her dizzy. There won’t be enough room left for her swelling heart soon. Her belly’s taking up way too much space - she shouldn’t have eaten that soup. Why is the crazy woman in her many coats smiling at her? “Sorry, I -”

“Lacey?” Tally’s next to her. Has she leapt across the table? No, that would be highly inappropriate? She should know, she’s the reigning queen of inappropriate - ask anyone. Ask him. “We can go into the hall for a bit, if you like? Is it okay if we go together?”

Lacey nods. Fine, she can come if she wants, but she needs to get out of here now. The smell’s making her gag. It’s too bloody hot in here.

(She can’t do this again! She doesn’t want to do this again! Just make it stop!)

“Can you take my hand?”

(Why?)

On the way out, Lacey is holding her breath, dark spots dancing before her eyes. With each stride she just knows she’s going be the subject of discussion later, not the reason she lost it, but the fact that she’s lost it.

Tally’s guiding her through the haze by her hand.

(Why are they holding hands again?)
The hall looks funny somehow, as if everything has been moved an inch to the right in their absence, just to mess with everyone’s heads (like anyone in here needs that). They sit down on two of the red armchairs. They are ugly as hell, but surprisingly comfy. It’s quiet out here - with everyone else still in the refectory - and the air is a little cooler, too. Lacey likes it.

“No, no, no, no.” Lacey shakes her head vehemently.

“He should know if you’re not feeling well, Lacey. Let’s call him -”

Lacey holds her back before she can get up. “Please, please, don’t tell my dad! I promise --- I’m fine. Really. I just need some air,” she looks at the other girl pleadingly, rearranging her features to a puppy face as best she can. “I swear. Please, Tally?”

“No worries,” Lacey says, and thinking about it - she’s really got none at the moment. It’s fine. Everything’s fine. But she would really like to leave now. Walk for a bit, clear her head, go home and read. “But I think I better go now.”

“Wait - can you show it to me again? Make it a little bigger?”

They do it together, Tally copying her movements on her own leg, making the lines longer, making the house larger, and Lacey feels her chest expand, too, grow back to its normal size, her breathing slowing down and vision clearing.

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Sister Thalia sighs. “Are you sure?” she looks uncertain, concerned, overanxious. There’s really no need. It makes Lacey uncomfortable. She doesn’t want a flock of adults to fuss over her and blow this up unnecessarily. She’s apples. Big, red, juicy, shiny apples. They can keep their advice and their pity and their worried faces. “You’re white as a sheet. Maybe I should go get Mother Super—”

“No need to bother her!” Lacey says quickly, forcing herself to smile. “Look, I’m feeling much better already. Fresh air will do the trick, I know it. We don’t live far. Twenty minutes tops.”

(Does lying to a nun make the lie worse? What if it’s a young nun? Does that count?)

Tally considers her for a long moment. “Okay, but you’re heading straight home? And getting some rest? - Promise me.”

Lacey nods.

“And your father will be home when you get there? You’re absolutely sure?”

She nods again. “He should be --- or I guess I could go to the shop instead. It’s even closer. That way I won’t miss him, if he’s working late. He’s probably working late.”

“I’ve been there before.” Tally’s face relaxes a little. “It’s not far. Tell you what, you go, get your air and bring some color back to those cheeks, and ----” She quickly looks over her shoulder. (So nuns do bend the rules too, huh? Lacey knows that look.) “I’ll call the shop from the office in fifteen minutes - we’ve got the number on file - and check on you, see that you’ve made it there okay?”

“Terrific!” Lacey beams at her. “Make it twenty, just to be safe?” It’s almost too easy, she can dial the shop from her phone as soon as she’s out of the door and redirect the incoming calls. She knows the codes.

(That’s even worse than a simple lie. But she really, really wants to get out of here. NOW.)

“Don’t worry,” Tally touches her shoulder and Lacey jumps. “Oh -- Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to --- sorry --- I just - you don’t have to feel bad, Lacey. I’ll take good care of her for you, I promise. Try and explain if I can?” She smiles at her reassuringly, and Lacey finally gets what she’s talking about - who she’s talking about.

(She hasn’t even --- she’s the worst daughter in the world. And a notorious liar. Who lies to nuns? Lying’s horrible. She’s horrible.)

She should apologize, but she can’t go back in there and face her. Not today. Maybe she can send her flowers? Perhaps some of those roses she’s been talking about all evening? Papa will know if they have them at the shop, for sure. Lacey’s going to ask him later. Promise. Cross her heart.

“Thank you,” she says, getting to her feet, and means it. Sister Thalia isn’t half bad. For a nun.

“You’re welcome, Lacey.” They walk to the heavy door together, shake hands again. It almost feels too formal now. “Take Care! I should get back in there.” Tally smiles a little guiltily. “Talk to you in twenty?”

“Yeah. Bye, Tally.”

She smiles. “See you around the next time you come visit?”

(Next time.)
“Sure.”

(Lacey!)

======

After twenty minutes of aimless wandering, her pulse has finally returned to normal and she has successfully intercepted Thalia’s check-up call, convincing her she’s fine and accounted for. Crisis averted. For now.

She can’t really go to the shop (her dad will flip) and she doesn’t want to go home, so she just keeps walking. Thankfully it’s not raining and the streets are empty. People are at home, at Granny’s or killing brain cells at the Rabbit Hole. Lacey can’t get in there no more and she’s not foolish enough to risk getting caught trying. She could go hang behind the bar, but she’s not in the mood for any hopeful morons tonight.

Her feet are taking her to the garage instead. If she’s lucky, it’s Billy’s shift. He’s nice enough and will get her all the booze and cigs she wants for a hasty, messy fumble in the dark. Walking a little faster, Lacey rakes her fingers through her hair and pulls it up into a high, messy bun.
Eros

She sits outside the service station, listening to the silence and staring at the dark sky. No stars tonight. It’s cold, with only her thin cotton shirt and no jacket, her cardigan lying forgotten on a chair in hell, the dampness seeping into the fabric of her jeans, and the frost biting her skin, but it doesn’t matter.

Icy air forces its way into her lungs and stings her eyes. It’s a good thing she’s done crying - any tears might have frozen halfway down her raw cheeks.

Lacey looks up and down the street once, then reaches for her bottles. Large regular Coke (diet?! - An insult!) and Black Spiced Rum in a brown paper bag. The paper bag thing, it’s so stupid. Why not tie a red bow around it and add a flashing, blinking light and a wailing siren? Carry a clinking brown bag, bottle-size, down the street and nobody’s ever gonna guess what you’ve got there in a million years. Yeah, right. She opens her Coke, pours half of it out onto the frozen pavement, watches the dark, fizzing liquid vanish into the gutter, and refills the void with the bold rum from the distinct stout-bodied glass bottle, before tossing it aside.

(Much better.)

Lacey checks her phone. Another twenty minutes until the shop’s supposed to be closing (which never actually happens) and maybe another hour or so until her dad should be on his way to come get her (which he will forget).

(‘Papa, I can’t figure out this history quiz and Mama doesn’t know. I’ll head over to Ruby’s. We can finish together. Meet you at Granny’s for second dinner? xoxo’ --- Send.)

He won’t be there, so she doesn’t have to be either. She’ll walk home, later, and he will still be at the shop. She’ll heat something up, or maybe grab some Chinese on the way home, and go to bed, and he’ll apologize tomorrow for not answering her text, and for not picking her up. Maybe.

If she closes her eyes, she can still hear her voice say that despicable name in her head. Belle.

Lacey sighs, rubbing her eyes. It’s late and freezing balls, and she should go home and get started on her homework or she will be working late into the night again. She’s bugged, her toes painfully numb in her boots, her hands red and stiff, and her nails that dying shade of purple-ish grey. She should have taken her jacket from the shop when she had the chance.

She shivers, both from the cold and the mental image of home - empty rooms, dark rooms, dead rooms - and decides she’ll rather stay here for a little while longer and freeze to death, if she must. She’s got Captain Morgan with his warm spice and vanilla for a smooth finish to keep her company. He’ll keep her warm enough. She lifts her head and looks down the empty street again, her eyes unfocused. It’s fine. She’s not that cold.

Lacey wraps her curls around her neck so they overlap her bluing lips, hoping that her breath will catch in her hair and get trapped around them in a microcosm of warmth. Trying her best to ignore the merciless cold and to keep her teeth from chattering, she tenses her muscles and brings her limbs in closer, bowing her head to the oncoming wind.

Maybe she should go to Granny’s. Have the chicken parm and some icetea - Ruby might even be persuaded to spice it up a little, make it Long Island for her when no one’s looking, if she asks her to. Lacey licks her lips. Ruby would get her whatever she wants tonight, and she wouldn’t even feel
guilty for milking it shamelessly (serves her right), but she doesn’t want to show up on their doorstep like a starved, frozen kitten, neglected and left out in the cold all by herself to die. It’s a small town, people talk, and her dad doesn’t need that kind of trouble right now. She doesn’t need that trouble.

Lacey leans back, lies down on the pavement, hands behind her head, and stares up into the boundless blackness. It’s an opaque, thick blanket and she finds it oddly comforting. The ground’s fine for now, really. She can stay here and just --- stop thinking, stop existing, catch her breath for a little bit.

After a while, maybe five minutes, maybe ten, maybe fifty - who cares - her hands find the left pocket of her skinny jeans and the cigarette pack inside it, pull it out, bring it to her face and rip the plastic film off.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he has materialized by her side out of thin air, almost giving her a bloody heart attack. The cigs slip from her dead fingers, as she bolts upright into a sitting position, her deep-frozen heart jumping out of her chest and her head pounding. “if I were you, Miss French.”

(Fuck her dead and bury her pregnant! What’s he doing here?!)”

“Fu ---dge, you gave me a fright!” she says, her hand covering her frantic heart - a little screaming bird, fluttering wildly in her ribcage and hitting the walls in its blind panic. “Sir.”

It’s really him this time - not another figment of her imagination, not some silly vision or midnight fantasy - and she has no idea how he does it. She should have heard him approaching from a mile away. His stupid stick’s not actually whisper-quiet.

She glances up at him out of the corner of her eye, her gaze travelling the length of his cane, over his calm hands resting on the handle, up his torso and chest (the usual three-piece - under open black coat), until her eyes find his face, find his eyes, focusing.

(He’s giving nothing away, the bastard. Fucking marble face. What’s he up to?)

“Good evening, Miss French,” His lips twitch as he sits down next to her, leaning a little on his stick for support on the way down. She can feel the warmth radiating off him, and for the briefest moment, entertains the idea of scooting closer. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to startle you. I was merely concerned to find you out here all by yourself at this late hour.” He leans back on one hand and wordlessly holds out the other, open palm up.

(What? --- No! --- Fine.)

She picks up her cigarettes and places them in his waiting hand, but he wants more than that, his fingers beckoning impatiently.

Watching, a little confused, Lacey blushes, grateful that it’s dark and that he has no means of knowing where her mind just went. Cottoning on, she moves quickly, her hair flying and falling in her face, as she turns and digs out her lighter, her numb fingers struggling with the pocket. She puts it on top of the pack and blows out a breath. It’s her favorite Dunhill lighter, solid silver with gold strips - and now it’s gone, his fingers closing around it.

“Dunhill petrol pocket lighter,” he says appreciatively, turning it over in his hand, his thumb caressing the lid. Lacey’s heart rate picks up a beat. “Forgive me, but I might have been expecting something more --- pink and more --- plastic.” He smirks, and she opens her mouth to retort, but thinks better of it at the last minute, settling to glower at him instead. “Now, now, no need for the dark looks, Miss French. I know you’re not that kind of girl - even if you want everyone to believe
you are.” He flips her lighter open. “Though I fail to see how such a reputation might be appealing or beneficial to you.”

Seething, she gapes at him. He’s so full of himself, speaking like he’s delivering nothing but universal truths and hard facts, when he barely knows her, doesn’t know her at all, actually, but thinks he has her all figured out regardless. What does he even want from her? This isn’t school. She can do whatever she bloody wants outside school!

She reaches for her coke bottle, opening it with protesting fingers, but before she can take a pull, he’s leaned over, holding out that damn demanding hand again - more firmly this time. “Another bad idea, I presume?” He’s so close now, she can smell his stupid cologne - and the alcohol on his breath. (He’s as full as a boot! The hypocrite!) He probably only drinks expensive, top-shelf shit, though. Not the cheap garbage they sell at the servo.

He takes the bottle from her hands, and she lets him, watching as he sniffs at it and promptly pours it all out into the drain without any further ado. “I believe that’s been tampered with,” he says, like he doesn’t know full well that it was she who did the bloody tampering - and on purpose too - with the sole sodding intent of getting beautifully hammered tonight. “Best not to take that risk, wouldn’t you agree, Miss French?”

She grumbles under her breath, flashing darkly at him again, and chews the inside of her cheek. She should keep quiet, let it go, be good --- “You’re pissed!” she snaps, unable to keep the accusation out of her voice.

He quirks a brow. “Language.”

Lacey bites her tongue, his tone making her bristle. (Fuck language and fuck manners and fuck him!)

Smiling, he shakes his head, as though he’s heard every word. “I am an adult. I’ve earned the right to make shitty choices.”

“So!?! How so?”

“By making it a couple more times around the sun than you have,” he says dryly. “Try and make the right choices while you still can, Miss French.” His voice is suddenly wistful and she wants to ask him why, but doesn’t - and then the moment’s passed. She’s good at missing them - moments. Bloody brilliant, actually. They should give her a medal.

He opens her pack, shakes it slightly, cusses under his breath, and flips one cigarette upside down, before taking out another and lighting that. “Smoking kills - and alcohol does too.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “What are you doing?”

“Lucky cigarette,” he says, taking a drag, and screws up his face in disgust. “You have horrible taste.”

“I’m broke, that’s why,” She glances at him, making sure he hasn’t sprouted two additional heads since class ended this afternoon, and crosses her long legs. He shouldn’t be staring, but he is, his eyes lingering just a beat too long for it to be unintentional, to be innocent. “And what the blo---oming heck is a lucky cigarette anyway?”

He laughs - deep and throaty. It sounds more like a bark and Lacey realizes she’s never heard him laugh before. “Kids these days! Don’t bother with the ropes.” His breath comes out as a near-perfect
smoke circle and Lacey stares after it in awe. She’s only ever seen people make those on TV. Maybe he can teach her how. “A lucky cigarette, or your lucky, Miss French, is a cigarette that you turn upside-down first - before smoking any others in your pack - and it is intended to be the last cigarette of the pack that you smoke.”

“Let me guess, there are rules –” she shoots back, interrupting, smirking, the tip of her tongue darting out between her front teeth briefly. She licks her lips, his eyes following the movement, and he lifts a lazy finger to wag it at her in mock warning. “Terms and conditions apply. Figures.”

He laughs again. “Some people like to pick the third cigarette in the front row from the left. Others slightly shake their pack down or flick the bottom to see which cigarette comes out the farthest.”

“Sounds arbitrary,” she says. “Does it work? The luck, I mean?” She watches his chest rise and fall, wishing he’d pull her close and wrap her up in that warm coat of his with him.

“Not that I recall.”

“Then why do it?”

“Superstition,” he shrugs, taking another drag. “You wouldn’t step on the cracks on purpose, would you?”

(No, she wouldn’t – or maybe she would.)

Lacey worries her bottom lip. It tastes like blue Nivea and it makes her feel guilty.

“Disgusting,” he stubs the cigarette out on the curb and flicks the butt into the gully. “But deadly all the same.”

They sit and stare at the dark sky together for a moment. It’s more grey than black now, a soft yellowish glow to the darkness. Snow. Lacey smiles.

“So, do I need to investigate the source of the illegal goods in your possession, Miss French?” he asks, then nods in the general direction of the station behind them. “That shouldn’t take very long, though, I reckon?”

“Won’t buy ‘em again.” Lacey mumbles. “Okay?”

“You shouldn’t have been able to obtain them at all. Purchase, possession and use are illegal in this state. Consider yourself lucky I’m not the sheriff.”

(Ha! Like the sheriff would ever bust her. He thinks she’s pretty. Disgusting, slimy old fuck.)

“Well, I didn’t exactly buy them ---” Lacey licks her lips again. “Oh, and I had no chance to use anything, either, had I? Thanks to you, Sir,” she sasses.

He frowns, but she can tell he’s not really cross with her. Maybe she should take to upgrading the teachers’ coffee from now on. Make everyone’s lives a little easier. “Are you telling me you weren’t planning on consuming that vile concoction?”

“Intent is meaningless,” she retorts, enjoying their verbal tennis match a little too much.

“Debatable.”

“Hardly,” she argues. “If that weren’t the case, we’d have to lock up everyone as a precaution. We’re all capable of morally dubious deeds, deeds that might or might not be violating applicable law.” She
grins mischievously. “Fact remains; I didn’t drink any of it. And I didn’t smoke either.”

He raises a brow, but doesn’t interrupt.

“You never said not to buy them,” she indicates the cigarette pack in his hand, and he takes out another and lights it. “Just not to smoke any – and I haven’t.”

“True.”

She hasn’t cut class (well, not without permission) or used swear words around him, either. There is nothing he can bust her for. If he’s testing her, she’s still passing with flying colors, tightrope walking the line, staying within the margins of the rules he has set her. It doesn’t matter that she would have broken the rules - hypothetical actions don’t count. He’s got nothing on her. And he never said anything about booze, to be particular.

She throws him a smug smile, shocked to find it mirrored on his face. Is he – impressed? Proud?

Proud of her?

“It’s a school night, Miss French,” he notes.

“My curfew isn’t until dad’s home - and he’s not --- yet,” she says cockily, stretching and pushing her chest out a little more. “Besides, I’m no longer unsupervised, am I, Dr. Gold?” She bats her eyelashes at him, smiling sweetly, and doesn’t miss the way his eyes dart to her chest, her lips, her eyes; doesn’t miss his throat bobbing.

“I guess not,” he looks at her like he’s seeing her for the first time, and Lacey doesn’t know if it’s a good or bad thing. “But since I don’t plan on staying out here in the freezing cold much longer, neither will you, I’m afraid.” His hand massages his left thigh. (Would he tell her if she asked?)

“Besides, you’re cold. Your lips are a lovely shade of purple. Not surprising, I suppose, given your inappropriate choice in apparel, of course, but to stay here would be ill-advised.”

(Inappropriate. Lovely.)

Lacey shudders and it’s not just from the crisp air that’s gnawing at her skin. “No!” she protests, pouts, big eyes and puckered lips, but he’s right, of course. She can’t feel her toes or fingers anymore, and the skin on her arms and legs is covered in goose-flesh, hairs standing on end, in her body’s feeble failing attempt at shielding itself against the low temperatures.

(No lying, Lacey, remember?)

“Okay, maybe a little.” She shuffles her feet, the pavement slippery under her shoes, and cocks her head to one side to look at him, hugging her knees.

“Well then,” he stands - a little awkwardly - but if he’s in pain, it’s not showing on his face. “Shall we? I believe we should pass your house on the way?” He holds out his arm.

(Wait --- what?!)
Storybrooke, Maine, that he could have hailed to get him home, and he’s in no condition to drive himself. She scrambles to her feet, almost slips, but doesn’t. “You’re walking me home, Sir?” she asks, with a raised eyebrow, her voice coming out far less confident and flirty than she’s wanted it to.

“Certainly. Your safety is my concern, Miss French, not just because I’m your teacher - a nice girl like yourself could easily run into grave trouble walking home alone at night. If something happened to you -”

She could challenge him on the nice girl, but his voice is so full of concern, so warm and smooth, and she’s all wrapped up in it, her frozen heart melting like sweet golden caramel. He’s so close to her now, standing right behind her, his strong hands on her shoulders, and she wants to lean into him, wants him to wrap his arms around her from behind and kiss her, and her heart nearly gives out from shock when he does, but only to wrap her in his woolen coat --- no kissing.

Flustered, Lacey blinks and tilts her head back to look at him. “Thank you,” she breathes, her whispered gratitude white in the cool night air, and he’s smiling at her, smiling with those warm, gentle eyes of his, and she’s absolutely and utterly fucked.

(He wants to keep her safe. He cares. He’s going to protect her.)

“You’re most welcome,” he says, his hand on the small of her back as they start walking, gently guiding her to make a left turn onto Main Street. Her legs are useless jelly. She’s gonna be the one to do all the slipping, falling and breaking of vital body parts then.

(He’ll catch her, if she does.)

“We wouldn’t want you to fall ill and fall behind on your work now, would we?”

“No, Sir” Lacey whispers, almost purring, as she snuggles deeper into his coat. It’s wonderfully warm and soft, like being enveloped in a fluffy cloud, and it smells like him, and it’s no longer just her body that wants him.

(Only him.)

They walk down the street in silence for a while and Lacey’s not worried about the long walk ahead of them anymore, for it gives her an excellent excuse to keep holding onto his arm a little longer. Whenever this ends - it will be too soon.

Suddenly, the clouds break into a deluge of whirling snow, and they stop, eyes turned to the sky.

Lacey inhales the crisp, cool air. As more and more flakes begin to fall and settle, the thought of snow melts into her brain - a pure, undiluted joy flowing through her, soaking right into her bones and warming her skin like the rays of an early summer sun. She catches a glimpse of his surprised face, and smiles, her heart swelling, a jittery feeling, a peaceful, gentle, soothing, euphoric flutter of electricity, dancing in her belly.

(Snow! Can this moment get any more perfect?!) 

Lacey loves winter. She loves the hot chocolate with marshmallows melting into the whipped cream, snuggling up with candles burning, soft blankets draped over her, a brilliant book for company. She loves Granny’s hot homemade soup that burns her tongue. She loves the big jumpers, the fuzzy socks, and woolen scarfs and mittens. And most of all, she loves the anticipation of snow, and the happiness it brings her, whether it’s heavy or light, once it arrives.

The snow comes, white and glistening, settling gently and erasing all the troubles beneath, all the
pain. It softens her sharp edges, directing her thoughts toward a perfect night. The cold only crisps up her resolve to make it count, to be bold and go for broke tonight. Perhaps the swirling jolly whiteness that’s showering her face in small crystalline kisses, will give her new reasons to step forward with confidence and make her move. Snow’s magic that way. Nothing bad happens when it snows.

Streetlights are misty in the light snowfall. Ice and snow gently blanket the dark trees, the sidewalks and streets, and the town’s many rooftops - a little while away still. The snowflakes dance and prance merrily in the cold wind and the milky moon peeks through the clouds, like a precious ornament hung in the dark night sky just for her. Winter is a wonderland. Her wonderland.

Sticking out her tongue like a little child, Lacey lets go of his arm and runs. Not caring that it is silly and that she’s being childishly impulsive, she runs and twirls, his coat and her hair flying around her. Snow’s falling faster and faster, almost mimicking her eccentric twirling, challenging her to a race. Laughing, she spins and spins and spins, her world blurring and her body dissolving, becoming one with the snow, her soul riding on the wind. And then she stops, lets herself fall backwards into the soft bed of frosty down with a huff, a giggle, her dizzy mind reeling back into the present.

Everything’s clicking into place.

Winter is a true beauty here, the snow bringing with it a certain clarity, the kind that has her notice the smallest details in her surroundings - like how the trees, though bare and sombre at present, carry the promise of spring within them, hope and light and new beginnings lying dormant in their branches, ready to burst forth and greet the world with gorgeous hues of green.

Out of breath, giddy and smiling to herself, she lies in the snow, ready to explode with happiness, the excess of beauty around her almost too much to bear for a sorry, battered heart like hers.

And then he’s standing next to her again, his worried face framed perfectly by the sky and the falling snow, as he’s leaning over her, his brow furrowed. She laughs at his bewildered expression. He stares at her face for another moment, confused, and then he’s smiling back. That smile, the one that softens his face, making nonsense of its harshness, and lights up his beautiful eyes, illuminating the fire and liquid gold, so that looking up into them makes her feel both stupidly happy and also extremely exposed - as though neither of them are wearing any clothes.

The intimacy - it’s breathtaking. Wonderful warmth is tingling through her whole body, sparks flying from her heart, buzzing in her veins, and gathering in her toes and fingertips on their way to the ground. It’s amazing - and it frightens the hell out of her. Goosebumps and pleasant shivers running down her spine, Lacey doesn’t know whether she wants to pull or push, scared that no level of closeness will ever be enough, that she’ll run out of oxygen long before they can ever make it there.
Philia

Had anyone asked him, he would have told them that he hates winter. Dark and cold and much too long, it surely has to be his least favorite season. Not that he likes any of the others much better. For the most part, he doesn’t care about them, hardly notices summer turning into fall, fall bleeding into winter, winter blooming into spring.

He’s long stopped caring about the years coming and going, about the time that’s passing him by, speeding through him like an express train through an old, rundown town, barely registering with his heart when it does. And when it’s gone, vanished again in the literal blink of an eye, like it never existed in the first place, like he no longer does - an empty vessel, a bottomless pit, a black hole - he can’t honestly say that he misses it.

And, up until now, he would have sworn that that’s been for the best.

Standing by his side, her breath pale against the numbing air, she’s blinking thoughtfully as the frost patiently kisses her face, captivated by the soft, dusty illusions of light that sit heavy on her eyelashes like wintery, frozen dandelions, like a zillion wishes just waiting to be made.

She adores the falling snow and he’s telling himself that that’s what he’s adoring too, that the smile appearing on his face has nothing to do with her, with the stubborn, feisty, beautiful girl now letting go of his arm, and running, spinning in circles, dancing her own little merry dance amidst her fellow snowflakes, her face turned to the sky, her laughter the sound of little bells - clear and bright and innocent - and soon to be swallowed by the greedy, soundless night.

He looks on, then walks, watching each heavy footfall sink into the crystalline snow as he’s making his way over to her, slowly, hesitantly, struggling with his cane in the deepening snow. His leg is killing him, the alcohol in his system failing to mask the pain sufficiently, but as he plows through, he’s pushing both aside with long, steady strides, jaw set and forehead creasing.

(Mind over matter. If only it were that easy.)

She’s lying in the snow and he pauses again, stops and turns around to see their path laid out behind him in the otherwise pristine white.

Glancing upward it's easy to tell that, were it not for this brilliant blanket at their feet, the night would seem overcast and dim, for the sky is a blanket of dark cloud - just like his mind, laden and heavy with gloomy thoughts and unbidden ghosts of his past.

The footprints they have made will be wiped out before morning.

“Am I in trouble, Sir?” She’s blinking up at him like he hung the moon and stars, a literal angel in the snow, and he can’t help but smile at her folly of youth, her unchecked joy, the spontaneous bursts of energy and life that come with both.

He shakes his head, melted snow dripping from his hair and showering her face in droplets.

She giggles.

(Has he ever heard her giggle?)

She’s got no idea what she’s doing. The snowy lamb walking right into the wolves’ den, unafraid and doe-eyed, and all too trusting, and if he were anyone else, she’d be in lying in the ditch
somewhere come first light of dawn, her delicate body soiled and broken.

He’s not going to let that happen.

“This can hardly be beneficial to your health, Miss French,” he says, offering her his hand once more. “Or mine.”

She’s one with the powdery, heavenly beauty around them, gentle and lush - and cold to the touch, her hand bitterly raw against his warm palm, making him shudder involuntarily, as he’s pulling her to her feet.

He brushes the remaining snow off her back. “Now come, and quick, you must be frozen to the marrow, young lady. Chop-chop!”

The one spreading on her face must be the cheekiest grin she’s given him yet; her eyes sparkly, a lively glow to her cheeks, and her complexion nothing short of absolutely radiant; soft skin the color of opening rosebuds.

“Yes, Sir. Whatever you say, Sir.” She sticks out her tongue at him, her cheek earning her a gentle, warning smack on the bum.

That does sober her up somewhat, and has her retreat into his coat like a confounded turtle for a moment, leaving only her curls visible over the lapels, her glowing red ears peeking out in between strands of hair.

He has to stifle a laugh to a cough, and she looks round at him, an incredulous look of indignation on her very pink face. It’s making both of them burst into laughter.

(Oh, Lacey. Lacey, Lacey.)

When they finally make it to her house, which is in walking distance of her parents’ flower shop, but still a positive world tour away from his home, Gold’s confidence wavers.

The bleeding snow has him soaked to the bone, and he’s at the end of his tethers, the pain in his leg unbearable and nearly blinding him. By now, he’s much more leaning onto her for support than she is holding onto him. His jaw is clamped shut and his teeth are pushing and grinding against each other so forcefully, he’s almost surprised they can’t hear it in the next town over, and even more amazed he hasn’t managed to break a tooth yet.

Cold sweat breaking out on his forehead, his muscles are trembling from the prolonged effort, no matter how hard he’s willing them not to.

(Fuck mind, if matter is useless junk.)

His legs are about to collapse under him, nothing he can do and no way around it.

“Would you like to come inside for a spell, Dr. Gold?” she asks, her tone casual, but the worry and apprehension in her eyes making him cringe. “Warm up for a bit?” She smiles uncertainly. “I guess, I should try to dry your coat off a little bit at least, before handing it back to you? --- Sorry.”

“Why, thank you,” he presses out between numb lips, his voice strained and thin, while trying not to pant audibly. “Are you quite sure your parents won’t mind my staying a couple of minutes?”

“They’re not here,” she says, unlocking the door using a spare key attached to the underside of a small, inconspicuous (and thus blatantly obvious) stone turtle.
The poor thing had been swallowed whole and concealed deep within the belly of the roaring, spitting, raging snow monster, but, luckily for the turtle and for them, it had yet to be digested by the inconsolable beast, when Lacey had come to the rescue and wrenched it free.

(He just wants out of the cold. Catch his breath for a moment or two.)

She twists the knob, kicking the lower left corner with her foot and pushing with a hand pressed to the middle, but never lets go of his arm, and he’s not sure anymore whether that’s for her own benefit or his. “Old hinges, just a tad bitchy,” she explains. “Don’t bother with the shoes.”

Once the door is finally open, they huddle out of the gusty winter wind and the ongoing snowfall, into the safety and shelter of her family home.

Inside it's toasty warm and smelling of a variety of flowers and damp earth, the smell getting stronger and stronger, as they maneuver their way around the many flower pots and gardening tools, scattered literally everywhere in the already narrow, dimly lit hallway.

It’s a winter garden in a rectangular, elongated shoebox - beautiful and wild and vibrant; growing and blooming, just like she is, and it’s balm on his raw nerve ends.

“Sorry, it’s a zoo in here,” she says a little self-consciously, guiding him safely into the kitchen by his arm, and only letting go after having successfully deposited his wobbly, unsteady arse in one of the wooden chairs at the table.

The counters and appliances are old and worn, giving the place a homey feel. The heater and fridge gurgle and hum, content and at ease with their existence, wedged in between cupboards that have been painted the same mossy, dark green as the counter tops, the table and the chairs. He runs his hand over the smooth wood of the back of his chair, marvelling at the fine craftsmanship. Vines, of what he believes to be poison ivy, or wild grape, or maybe some exotic rambler rose, are covering all the legs in the room and every chair back, carefully carved into the wood before painting.

The fridge is plastered with drawings: stick-figures, animals, surprisingly detailed flowers and leaves, a hand turkey, and, as the centerpiece, three perfect, symmetrical hearts - one blue, one yellow, and one green, reading Lacey, Mum and Papa in big, bold letters underneath.

All the remaining space is taken up by old photographs and faded postcards, not a spec of white, metallic silver, or green (or whatever else the original color might have been when the thing came in the box) visible underneath all the paper, the clippings and the many-colored magnets (all shaped like vegetables and seeds).

The walls are the color of sun beams, giving the entire kitchen the feel of a garden during a still, pleasantly warm summer’s day - not too hot and not too cold, the temperature, humidity and light just right for a lazy afternoon spend stretched out in the hammock, reading a good book under the translucent canopy of leaves and listening to birdsong, the little curious buggers hopping about in the apple tree and chirping proudly, as if fancying striking up a conversation.

The mental image alone is blissfully relaxing and tranquil.

(He used to always whistle back.)

“They potter about the house like maniacs, filling every nook and cranny with the green stuff,” she huffs dismissively, shrugging out of the coat and placing it over the heating. He doesn’t have the heart to tell her that fine wool doesn’t take very well to directly applied, dry heat.

“It’s quite charming,” he says, and she gives him a look that says he’s full of shite, or premium
fertilizer, whichever name he prefers to call it by. “No, really, I mean it.”

She’s standing by the window, warming her hands on the heating, her breath fogging up the icy pane. The wooden frame is framing both the window and her looking out, like a gorgeous, rare oil painting, while more and more snow silently falls from the heavens outside, softly tugging in the world, sending it off to the land of dreams under a glittering, thick duvet of white, and kissing it goodnight with a cool, soft kiss pressed gently to its forehead.

“Take those sunflowers, for instance,” he says, indicating the beautiful spray sitting in a clear vase on one of the counters. “Aren’t they just darling?”

She turns, mouth falling open, closes it again to smile at him, a deep blush spreading over her cheeks and temples, the after-image of snow, the visual burn-in, glistening bright in her eyes, flecking the clear blue with the most peculiar white spots, like little clouds.

Never ceasing to smile, she pushes a strand of hair behind her ear, pads over to the wall cupboard over the sink and reaches for a large mug, rising on her tippy toes to grab the handle and pull it off its shelf. Mug in hand, she hesitates, turning back to him, head cocked to one side, contemplating him.

“Wanna cuppa?” As soon as the words have left her, she squeezes her eyes shut, scrunching up her nose most adorably, and blushes an even deeper shade of red. “Um, I meant, would you maybe care for some tea, Sir?”

“That would be most divine. Thank you, Miss French.” So she slips up whenever she’s nervous or flustered, too. Lovely.

“Uh, what can I get you?” She rummages inside the wall cupboard some more, endearingly rattled, producing a rather impressive tea collection from it, lining up box after box neatly on the nearest counter.

She could just have read out the labels to him from inside the cabinet, that would have worked just fine, but who is he to stop her busy hustling and bustling? Let her be a fussy, adorable little bee, in charge of the tea, to her buzzing heart’s content.

“We got, uh, chamomile, a mint blend - no make that two - hibiscus and echinacea, sage tea,” Her face drops, a disgusted look etching into her features, before she shudders, shaking it off, and goes back to her line and list. “Chai, Chinese green and white, licorice mint, chocolate chili, Japanese matcha, moonlighter or stinging nettle, St. John’s wort, cherry-banana, fennel, Turkish apple, Earl Grey, and three different English Breakfast blends that all taste exactly the same, but come in different boxes,” she finishes, rather breathlessly, looking at him, expectant, ready to bounce and fetch on the word go.

Only, it’s not a go, because his head is reeling. Blimey, that’s a rather extensive list, isn’t it? He’s quite astounded by the little cupboard’s capacity, though, to be fair, not entirely convinced that half the teas on her list actually qualify as such, eligible to make a decent, proper cup.

She’s still waiting, eyes on his face, lips pressed together, and bouncing on the balls of her feet. A dynamo stuck in ‘parking’.

He should put her out of her misery.

“Earl Grey would be most wonderful,” he says. “No sugar, milk-first, please.”

She’s scrunching up her nose again and rubbing it, clearly disappointed by his conservative choice, but dutifully sets about preparing their cups, adding the loose leaf tea to the infusers with steady
hands and filling up the kettle with fresh, cold water from the tap.

She places a saucer, two silver spoons, and their waiting cups on the table. Her cup is more of a big-bellied mug with a large sunflower on it; his is regular size, white with a neat blue pattern. Both look hand-painted, and he wonders whether her family’s passion for handiwork also includes pottery and painting.

She sits down opposite, watching him and drumming her fingers on the table absentmindedly, until he shuts the noise down with a long, questioning look and a slightly elevated eyebrow.

(Why the constant fidgeting? Why the inability to keep still and quiet? It’s making him nervous.)

“Earl Grey?” she asks, a little hurt on behalf of her wondrous tea collection. “All the tea in the world, and you’re going with Earl Grey.”

“I beg your pardon, young lady?” He chortles, amused by her sour expression. “A properly prepared Earl Grey is the best, I’m afraid. Why settle for less, if you know what’s to your liking and what your heart desires?”

She mulls that over for a few seconds, eyes narrowing a little. “Suppose that’s true.”

“Aye,” he says, tapping the rim of his cup with a forefinger. “The secret’s in the milk, Miss French. You add it first - after warming the cup, mind - and nothing much can go wrong after that.” He scratches his chin and she giggles. “Unless the water’s shitty. Then it can’t be helped.”

“So the secret’s in the milk and the proof is in the pudding?” She jests, smirking. “How so?”

“Historically, the milk-in-first rule was to protect the fine bone china the tea was served in,” he explains, trying not to be too offended at her gap in tea-related knowledge. “Nowadays, it’s a highly individual thing.”

“Huh.” is all he gets at that, her monosyllabic answer not bespeaking her eloquence, intelligence - or a very good upbringing. It’s only standing in as verbal confirmation of receipt. She’s received the transmission, his string of sounds has reached her ears, but she isn’t necessarily acknowledging the sounds’ meaning or his intent for having made them, her response barring any indication of having decoded, processed or interpreted the sound-string. She’s heard him speak, that’s all. How wonderful. Not very good manners.

“Gee, give a girl time to think, will you?” she laughs, rolling her eyes at the ceiling, and gets up to warm their cups, fetch the milk from the fridge and pour it, then adds water from the whistling, steaming kettle, breathing in the steam and the smell, smiling.

“They probably seal the coats of paint differently now,” she says slowly, thinking. “So it won’t bleed out or stain as quickly. The glaze made the milk optional.”

“Do you paint, Miss French?” he asks, intrigued.

“Nah, not really, used to make these,” she points at her cup. “But the fumes gave Papa a headache, so we took all the paint and glue out of the house.”

He runs the pad of his thumb over the pattern on his cup. “That’s a real shame. It is good work. But, of course, family and health come first.”

She gives him a small smile, but says nothing, and they sip in silence, her glancing out at the hazy fog and snow, him looking in, trying to figure out what he has said that has upset her.
She sighs and gets up again to grab another spoon and a honey jar from one of the cabinets, stirring an indecent amount of the golden liquid into her tea.

“Now, that’s an interesting way to take your tea, Miss French,” he remarks, hoping to rekindle light conversation.

She jumps and he wishes he hadn’t spoken.

“My mum, she d-does that,” she blurs, heat travelling to her cheeks in that characteristic way that’s telling him she’s lying. What is she lying about? The honey? The mother? The mother’s tea-making habits? Why would either of the three warrant a lie? “Did,” she amends after a beat, looking down at her hands clutching her mug like a floating device, the fresh color draining from her cheeks just as fast as it had appeared there.

(Oh.)

“Oh, did she -”

“No!” Her eyes find his for a millisecond, then plunge back into her tea like two lumps of sugar, rippling the calm, dark, surface. “She --- she’s not the same, since ---” Hands curved around her mug, knuckles white as whipped cream, her face is hard as a batch of burned scones on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

He’s holding his breath, withdrawing mentally to retreat as far as possible out of her space without actually shifting in his chair, feeling that any sudden movements might startle her.

“She’s not doing so great.”

He can see the struggle on her face. The struggle of having to form the words in her mind, squeezing the required air from her lungs, willing her organs to constrict the airflow just right, and press the inevitable truth past her trembling lips.

He wants to reach out and cup her face, brush the curtain of curls away from it, tell her that she doesn’t need them to shield herself and hide her anguish from him. He’s no stranger to pain.

With an unpleasant jolt, he recognizes the lost girl sitting in the chair opposite, holding onto a warm drink for dear life, and staring out at him from inside her eyes, her shadow growing longer and meaner on the cheerful yellow wall.

Another lost child, alone and desperately seeking guidance, much like he himself had once been. 

Lost girl looking for Polaris.

And just like that, sitting at an old, battered kitchen table that’s not his own at an ungodly hour, the taste of his favorite tea blend turning bitter on his tongue, Roan Gold, the cold and untouchable Dr. Roan Gold, doesn’t know if he’s feeling for her or for himself; if the ache in his chest is hers or his or theirs. The only thing he knows is that, for better or worse, he’s made a decision.

“I’m very sorry to hear it, Miss French,” he says, unable to help the detached and all-too-formal tone, while he’s actually everything but - is rapidly becoming dangerously attached to this broken girl, and casually walking into yet another disaster with his eyes wide open. They are already in the thick of it, but sitting idly, chatting mid-explosion, on a Thursday night, long past acceptable hours, in a kitchen he shouldn’t even be in.

He shouldn’t be here, but he is. And now he can’t leave. “I do wish her a speedy recovery.”
“Thank you,” she breathes, lifting her drink to her mouth. Her tea’s burning her lips, her throat, making her eyes water and face contort, but the sting surely doesn’t compare to the turmoil, the tempest that has to be roaring inside - and it’s only now that he finally understands.

(Creating a tempest in a teacup is far less scary than having a tempest-tossed, young and foolish heart in your chest.)

“So I take it your father is -” he begins softly, treading the terrain with utmost caution, a birdwatcher on the prowl in the underbrush.

She jumps to her feet, as if stung, tea sloshing and splashing; dark, wet blotches on chipped, green paint. “No!”

He hears the twigs break underfoot, snapping clear in two under the weight, and she’s taking flight, scared, unsure whether to fight or flee.

He’s no threat. He’s just another bird. A repugnant, maimed, sorry creature with a broken wing and missing toes, that has long forgotten how to sing. An old, miserable bird without a song.

She spins round, slams her mug into the sink, grabs the dish sponge, squeezes it, then drops it again. Her eyes find the sunflowers in their tall, clear vase on the counter, her teeth her bottom lip, and her shaking hands the dials on the water heater, fiddling them nervously.

They both watch the little red plastic ball rise higher and higher, bobbing merrily on the soaring water.

“He’s working,” he states, fixing the spot between her shoulder blades, watching her breathe and her walls fly up to shut the world out. “Always working late.” He doesn’t mean to pry, but to change the subject abruptly now would suggest indifference. He’s not indifferent. Perhaps he’s never been. Perhaps that will one day be his undoing. Perhaps that day is now.

They listen in silence as the water boils.

She opens the tap, adding washing-up liquid and the pile of dirty dishes that have been awaiting their turn patiently, sitting on the rack beside the sink for god-knows-how-long, and charges, brillo pad scraping porcelain, aluminum, copper and defenseless pale skin alike, the steaming hot water singing her hands. “Yes.”

He gets to his feet slowly, grimacing, empties his cup in one large gulp, and makes to stand beside her, his movements small and careful. He wants to grab her hands and remove them from the boiling water, before they end up covered in blisters and second-degree burns. “It might not look it, but he’s grateful.”

He holds out his cup and she takes it from him, like a shy squirrel handed a nut. And just like the old man on the park bench, he smiles at her with the warmth of a late, reddish-brown autumn sun in his heart, and reaches for another nut from the tattered hat that’s lying next to him, filled to the brim with the best golden hazelnuts, and walnuts and a few handfuls of peanuts to share between the two of them, holding it out to her, waiting, nothing but kindness in his eyes and patience in his fingertips.

He reaches for the dishtowel and starts drying up. She’s watching him out of the corner of wary eyes, opens her mouth to speak, shakes her head, bites her cheek. “You’re needed, Lacey, and much more appreciated than you might think.”

She drops the mug, soapy water splashing her shirt, and rounds on him, watery bushfire flaring in her eyes. “Did I ask?!”
“No,” he reaches around her, fishing the cup out of the sink and proceeds drying it calmly. “I’m sorry, Miss French. It’s not my place --- *Ouch!*”

He’s cut his palm and thumb, the white cloth in his hand quickly turning strawberry red. “It’s chipped-—” He looks at his hands, bewildered, and they both stare at the fast-growing stain, their eyes meeting over the red turning maroon. “My apologies.”

She’s the first to shake the spell and to tear her eyes away. “Don’t be daft --- Sir!” She rushes past him, out of the kitchen, calling back over her shoulder. “I’m the one who broke it. Dang it!”

“Hang on! Just a sec!” He can hear opening and closing of cabinets, frantic hands searching their contents, her voice coming from what, judging by the reverberating sound, has to be the bathroom down the hall. “Just keep the towel pressed to it! Tightly. --- Rats!”

He looks down at his hands again, his blood seeping into the white fabric, soiling the lovely floral pattern, and slowly congealing, drying, the unpleasant color of rust. It’s just a small cut, not even deep, it’s hardly going to cost him his life. The concern in her voice is darling, but very much unnecessary.

“Besides, it’s already ruined anyway!”

(*That’s more like it.*)

“No offense!”

“None taken,” He grins. “Though were I gravely injured, I would surely have bled half to death by now. May I suggest storing the first-aid supplies in a more accessible location and organized manner?”

She half groans, half laughs, then reappears in the door a few moments later, giving him an exasperated look, one hand resting on her hip, a pair of scissors and a plaster roll clutched tightly in the other. The plaster. It’s *pink*.

Bemused, he lets her push him back into his chair and lift the towel off his hand gingerly.

“It’s pink, Miss French.” he chuckles, and she freezes in her movements for a moment, forehead creasing, halfway through measuring the amount of plaster needed - going by rule of thumb and adding some extra, for good measure.

“Salmon,” she corrects, taking his hand in both of hers and examining the injury. “The color’s called *Salmon*, Sir.” She places the cloth part over the cut and starts peeling off the plastic coverings, pulling in opposite directions. “Why are all men colorblind? Is that innate or learnt?”

He laughs at the jab. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“Besides, the only other choices would have been *Disney Princesses,*” she smirks. “Or glow-in-the-dark stars.”

They both laugh.

“Done. All patched-up.” She makes to let go, casting her eyes down. “--- Sorry I snapped at you.”

He catches her hands in one of his.

(*The uninjured one, not covered in pink - apologies, salmon-colored - plaster.*)
“Thank you. And that’s quite alright.” He slips the ghost of a finger under her chin, his other hand only hinting at the motion, pretending, not actually making contact, but she raises her head and lifts her eyes to his, regardless. “Though, for the record, I would have preferred the stars over the ***salmon.***”

“Noted.”

The clock on the microwave behind her tells him that it’s twenty-three minutes past midnight, the red, digital digits glaring at him reproachfully, and reminding him that he should be on his way. Should have been long gone.

She’s safe and sound, he’s seen to it, like he said he would, and he should leave it at that, should leave her home while a tea cup’s still the only thing that’s broken, the only damage he has done.

He lets go of her hands. “It’s late, Miss French.”

She follows his line of vision, turning her head. When she turns it back, the warm red is back in her cheeks – round, full, delicious red apples - and her pink lip is once more trapped between her relentless teeth. She worries it, glancing out of the window again quickly, and the movement of her neck draws his eyes to places they have no business being, noting the lovely lush pinks and reds covering her chest, standing out most marvellously and alluringly against her dark shirt.

(***He should leave. Instantly.***)

“To step outside in this heavy snowfall would be ***ill-advised,***” she parrots, a playful spark glinting in her eyes, and moves closer, causing him to retreat further back in his chair.

Cheeky lass. Clever. Very clever, but she’s not wrong. The snow’s several inches higher than when they first got here and the walk home will be hell, his walking stick no match against such beautiful force of nature. “Well, then maybe I’ll need to trespass on your warm hospitality a little while longer indeed, Miss French, wait it out,” he says, cursing himself in his head. He knows how it sounds and where this is headed; knows in which direction her hormonal thoughts are racing, and he should not encourage it. If only he wasn’t so reluctant to return to the ice cold chill outside. “If it’s not too much trouble or running interference with your plans. I don’t wish to keep you from completing your chores and getting a Good Night’s sleep.”

(*Way to go, Gold, havering like a bleeding idiot!*)

He raises a brow, swinging his eyes to the unfinished plates in the sink, the bloody chipped cup still on the table, and the laundry basket waiting on the floor in the corner, wondering who he’s kidding. Part of him wants this just as much as she does, maybe even more, which is exactly the reason it shouldn’t happen, should ***never*** happen. He can’t let it.

She’s his student.

This time even he would be hard-pressed to find a feasible explanation and a good excuse for the selection of sordid actions playing out in his mind like an adult movie of the choose-your-own-adventure variety.

He should be ashamed of himself.

“No worries,” she says, voice dangerously low and silky, and moves yet closer, broken singing bird turned feline predator, zeroing in to eat up her prey, neck and crop. “It’s no trouble at all.” She’s stepping in between his willingly parting legs, a slender hand hesitating, then resting boldly on his left thigh, her piercing eyes never turning away from his, causing his brain to short-circuit.
He watches her hand, gobsomacked, swallows hard, his throat bobbing and his cock springing to attention, straining against the confines of his pants. Closing his eyes and saying an urgent, hurried prayer, he wishes she weren’t standing quite so sodding close, the wretched sweet chamomile clouding up what’s left of his senses and judgement alike, and her legs preventing his from closing, and him from getting a handle on --- the situation.

“Miss French ---” he chokes out and she licks her parting lips.

Unable to form the words, he just grabs her by the waist, gently, but with decision, and removes her from his pericutaneous, intimate space, restoring a sufficient, safe distance between them.

Breaking character, unable to keep up the façade of adulterous seductress any longer, she slips out of the role, loud flickers of doubt deafening in her watering eyes, the fresh moisture washing up all her latent, screaming insecurities, and waking up the demons dozing just below her carefully arranged surface - demons that usually conceal themselves and their many ugly heads under manifold layers of unseemly behavior, and play hide-and-seek between all those empty words that are way too big for her pretty mouth.

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“No,” he says softly, collecting her wrists in his hand, restraining her ever so gently, and Lacey feels like crying at the clear rebuff, her eyes burning. No matter how gently he’s letting her down, it’s still rejection - he doesn’t want her, and it hurts more than anything he could ever do to her with that stupid stick of his.

She lets out a shaky breath, a small, broken sound somewhere between a sigh and a sob.

“This isn’t what you want, Lacey.” He raises her wrists to his lips, feathering gentle kisses - one each - to their insides, his lips brushing the sensitive skin ever so lightly, setting her stuttering heart ablaze.

(--- Oh!)

Two chaste, tender kisses, pressed to her pulse points like red-hot wax, is all it takes to strike the deal, to make her his, now and forever, sealed with a kiss.
The house is alive, buzzing like a beehive, overflowing with sounds and scents, and he almost drops his keys in the hallway, when his brain catches up with his surroundings and her sweet voice hits his ears.

_And your love light shines like cardboard_
_Not your work shoes are glistening_
_She's a PhD in ‘I told you so’_
_You've a knighthood in ‘I'm not listening’_

She’s dancing around the kitchen, singing along to the little radio and wiping down every surface in time to the music. Her cheeks are flushed, her hands busy, her curls bouncing up and down, and, standing in the door, he hardly recognizes his daughter or their kitchen.

For one thing, Lacey's wearing a dress - a sleeveless blur of color tied around her waist with a teal sash. Sun yellow, dusty tan, and sky blue posies are growing right out of the fabric, bright and cheerful like spring, clashing magnificently with the harsh winter morning outside.

_She'll grab your sweaty bollocks_
_Then slowly raise her knee_
_Don't marry her, fuck me_

He hasn’t seen her in a dress in forever. Hasn’t heard her sing in so long he’d almost forgotten she could.

_And the Sunday sun shines down on San Francisco Bay_
_And you realise you can't make it anyway_
_You have to wash the car_
_Take the kiddies to the park_
_Don't marry her, fuck me_

She twirls, her dress swinging around her legs, spots him standing there, and her face splits into a wide smile. “Papa!” She rushes over to kiss him on the cheek. “Good morning!”

“G-Good morning.” He has trouble finding his voice. The words feel rough and unpleasant against his throat. The kitchen smells of cinnamon and pancakes, she’s wearing her mother’s perfume, and he can’t help looking around in awe and wonder, expecting, in his tired out state of mind, the love of his life to join them any second now, taking their little girl by the hands to spin her around, and in and out, in and out, before they’re all sitting down for breakfast.

He clears his throat, the ghost of laughter filling his ears, his eyes darting to the table. It’s only set for two.

She’s biting her lip, hands clasped behind her back, waiting. He’s supposed to say something.

“W-hat about school?”

Her smile wavers. Wrong question.
He never knows what to say. That used to be all her.

“Snow day,” she says, lifting one shoulder and letting it fall. She’s still looking at him, her big blue eyes bright and clear like the morning sky. Too bright. He squints, head and heart pounding in sync.

“You - made breakfast,” he says, with as much feeling in his voice as he can muster. Yes, she has. Eggs and pancakes and juice and bread on the table, the coffee machine gurgling in the corner, flowers in a vase, napkins. “That’s great -” but he isn’t hungry, he’s just tired. “Thank you.”

He smiles, dragging the corners of his mouth upwards like wet cement and slips into his usual seat, but it’s really his covers that he wants to slip under.

She turns the radio down, pours him a cup - two sugars and a splash of milk - and sits down opposite. “Migraine?” She nudges the butter in his direction. “Should I get the curtains, Papa?”

Irritated, his fingers tightening around his knife, he waves her concern away - not quite sure why it’s bugging him so much. “It’s fine.”

“Okay.”

They butter their toast slices in silence.

“I couldn’t get away yesterday. Sorry.” He only saw her text after Astrid woke him up this morning. It’s not that he’s forgotten, but he can’t let up now. Not if he hopes to ever get on top of all the paperwork and the additional holiday orders. Besides, she was with her mother and her friend. Lacey’s perfectly fine to spend a night by herself - she’s not eight anymore.

“It’s okay.”

He nods, washing down bites of egg, bread and cheese with gulps of scaldingly hot coffee, swallowing back the nausea creeping up from the pit of his stomach and tickling the back of his throat.

“Got plans? A snowball fight or two?”

“No.” She grins. “Not a bad idea, though. Maybe after I’m done here.”

The washer beeps, the high-pitched sound cutting through his brain with a blow, slicing it in two, and they both wince. He covers his eyes with a heavy hand, pinches the bridge of his nose, and counts back from ten slowly, taking steadying, small breaths through his nose.

“If you leave your clothes out, I can wash ‘em with the next load. Iron’s still hot. If you want to get some rest ---?”

“I said, it’s fine!” He doesn’t mean to snap, make her face fall like that. She just wants to help, he knows. He’s too exhausted to be around her right now. Why is he always saying the wrong things?

“--- okay,” she breathes, dropping both her toast and her gaze onto her plate.

Her voice is so small, and he’s so sorry. For everything. If only he wasn’t so awfully tired all the time.

They both look at her hands, her nervous, sticky fingers, coated in crumbs and honey, holding onto the half-emptied glass of orange juice. Her nails are the same color as her dress and covered in the tiniest painted blossoms he has ever seen.
He looks at his coffee mug, the faded ladybugs smiling back at him encouragingly, and takes a deep breath. Nicky wouldn’t have liked this at all. She always told him to talk to her more - and to listen, to really listen, carefully. He’s not tried hard enough, he knows that. Maybe he can make it up to them - someday, when there are enough hours in his days again and only the right words on his tongue. Not now, not like this. He’d only make it worse.

“Thank you for breakfast, grub,” he says, as gently as the throbbing pain in his head allows. “I’ll take a few hours.” He reaches across the table to cover her hand with his own. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” She shrugs, looking up and smiling bravely - smiling like it doesn’t matter, smiling with The Bay glistening in her eyes.

It matters. It does.

His heart as heavy as his eyes and arms and legs, he lets go and gets to his feet slowly; carries his mug, knife and plate over to the sink, absentmindedly running the water to let it soak. He dries his hands on the dish towel, his eyes sweeping over the counters and the stove. Everything is as clean as a whistle.

“Have a good day.” He stops to stand behind her chair, a hand on her shoulder, a hasty kiss pressed to the crown of her head, then draws back and leaves the room to hoist himself up the many crooked stairs to his study, his tired legs screaming in protest.

He cares, he does - and he can only pray she knows.

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“I love you too,” she whispers at her half-eaten toast, unbidden sadness quickly bleeding into her mind like damp black paint, but she pushes it away and herself to her feet before it can get to her heart. It’s okay, he’s just tired. She knows that. It has nothing to do with her.

Humming quietly, so as not to disturb her dad, she stores away the leftover food, cleans the table and the dishes, then unloads the washer and carries the basket into the utility room.

(It’s more of a broom closet, really. If theirs was the Dursley’s house, the utility room would be where they’d make Harry sleep). The room only holds their dryer and ceiling clothesline, and a small cabinet for the cleaning utensils and iron. She puts the washing in the dryer and returns to the kitchen.

The wild energy that has kept her spinning like a top all morning is wearing off. She doesn’t feel like cleaning anymore. Or like dancing.

It’s not even noon yet, but she woke up so early that she’s managed to vacuum and air out every room in the house, mop the bathroom and kitchen, scrub every tile, water tap, sink and the tub, change the bedding on both their beds and do three loads of laundry - bedding and curtains included - and then prepare breakfast.

The house smells of cinnamon and snow, Radiant washing powder and Febreze, earth and flowers.

Like it would if she were here.

Lacey shuffles into the living room, closing the door behind her, turns on the TV and glowers at the mountain of clean clothes, towels and sheets piled up on the sofa, waiting to be ironed, folded and put away. She should have done this sooner. Mum is right - he’s Mr. Pig and she’s Piglet and nothing in this house ever gets done without her.
She flips through the channels, skipping over an impressive number of cooking and makeover shows, finally deciding on Scooby Doo reruns on Cartoon Network, then makes to stand behind the ironing board, grasps the iron and the first shirt, and sets to work.

*He didn’t stay.*

Lacey doesn’t remember falling asleep to the low hum of the fridge and the familiar ruckus of the washer.

She remembers watching him read, studying his face as he’s turning the pages. She remembers the sound of her pen flying over her pad (*he doesn’t ask why she’s writing her paper at one in the morning*). She remembers the kitchen light catching in his eyes as he looks at her over the top of his book. His eyes are warm and smooth - one, constant golden brown from afar, but, if you get really really close, you can see the beautiful shades, the flecks of black and deeper browns, making those pretty, imperfect rings around the iris.

He must have scooped her up into his arms, moved her over onto the bench, and gotten the quilt from the living room to cover her with it before he left.

Lacey smiles to herself, lip caught between her teeth, inhaling the iron’s soft, warm steam.

Imagining it’s his suits she’s ironing - not her dad’s blueys and patchy pants - she allows her mind to wander, to get lost in his eyes, and, suddenly, it’s no longer this living room she’s standing in, no longer her parents’ house, and he’s coming home on his lunch break, calling her name from the hallway, his keys jingling as he drops them into the bowl she’s made and painted, painted deep blue and glistening gold, and she listens for his steps echoing in the quiet hall (*maybe the little ones are sleeping?*), hears him open doors, looking for her in the kitchen, and then the library, and she bites her tongue not to giggle and give herself away.

When he finds her, she doesn’t speak, doesn’t turn around, and he walks right up behind her to wrap his arms around her waist, his cologne and aftershave filling the air around them. Smiling, she leans back against him, his body warm against hers, and looks up to kiss him, her heart fluttering in her chest as he’s leaning in, his lips brushing hers, and -

“Shhh --- *ugar!*” Lacey glares at the iron, sucking on the burn on her left hand, and, mumbling curses against her stinging skin, leaves the living room to rinse it under ice cold water.

“You got roos loose,” she tells her reflection in the bathroom mirror, making faces and scrunching up her nose, ignoring the silly blush in her cheeks.

Lacey isn’t stupid. She knows what it would look like and why he’s told her no. People already think she bangs like a dunny door in a force 9 Gale, no reputation left to ruin there, but for him it’s about more than that. She’s read Nabokov, she gets it - even if she doesn’t like it. But she’s no Lolita, no innocent, gullible girl, and it will be December soon. She *will* make him change his mind.

She irons and folds, carefully keeping her thoughts away from the edge of the abyss in her mind, away from the dark place that whispers horrible things into her ear from the inside. It’s easier during the day. Easier to pretend everything is abso-*fucking*-lutely fine - and actually almost believe it herself.

Tiptoeing up and down the stairs, she carries basket-load after basket-load upstairs and puts everything away. Dad never sleeps in the bedroom anymore. He’s moved his pillow and duvet into his study across the hall, is sleeping on the little shabby sofa instead, night after night, day after day - as though they had a fight and she threw him out, which makes zero sense. They never fight.
The doorbell rings. Lacey cusses under her breath, her heart leaping into her mouth, and rushes back downstairs as quietly as possible to answer the door before the morons can ring a second time and wake up her dad for good.

_The morons_ turns out to be just one singular moron - wearing a skiing jacket, black earmuffs, a knitted red scarf, and a goofy grin. Ruby Lucas - with two snow tubes on tow rope in toe.

Lacey raises a brow. _Really?_

“Peace offering,” Ruby says, holding up the rope. She’s still grinning, her breath white against the cool air, little puffs of smoke from a calumet. “Come on, Lace, you can’t say no. Please? I got provisions and everything!”

Lacey loves snow and snow tubing, but she’s also still angry with Ruby. She hesitates.

Stay home and finish homework like a _good girl_ or go push ex-bff down a steep hill on inflatable snow tube repeatedly? --- Fine.

She smirks, narrowing her eyes. “Ookay,” she says slowly, stepping aside to let Ruby pass. “No dogs allowed inside. I just cleaned this shit.”

_(God, will the girl wipe that grin off her face already?! It looks stupid.)_

“Got it,” Ruby turns, jumps down the stairs and ties the rope around the garden fence, then hurries back to the door, steps out of her blood-red snow boots, and, leaving them on the doormat, walks past Lacey, shrugging out of her jacket and dropping it next to the shoe rack - together with her bulging kit bag.

Her _Hello Kitty_ clad toes wriggling excitedly, she rocks back and forth on the balls of her feet, running her eyes over Lacey. “_Martha Stewart Friday?_” She snorts. “Girl, you need to change!”

Lacey flips her off. “Bite me, Rubes! And get your butt into the kitchen. I’ll be back down in a sec.”

Ruby blows her a kiss, flips her long, shiny hair back over her shoulder, and strides into the kitchen, swaying her hips in perfect little figure eights, sniggering and snorting.

“Screw you!” Lacey calls after her, then rushes up the stairs to her room to change. If she _wanted_ to go snow tubing in her dress she bloody well would - and nothing _Miss Hello Kitty Socks_ downstairs says could make her change her mind! - But she doesn’t.

She strips down to her underwear, pulling the dress over her head, careful not to rip it, and opens her closet. Navigating the blaring chaos inside like the back of her hand, she pulls out a pair of tight black jeans, a black shirt and hoodie, and her Doc Martens with the rose pattern lined shaft.

In the light that flows through the high windows of her room, she puts on the pants, watching herself in the long mirror, pausing before pulling them all the way up. Her fingertips run over the deep purple welts on the back of her thighs. Against her ghostly white skin and pastel pink panties they are grotesque, but the discomfort and itching aren’t all that bad anymore, even if the skin’s still tender.

Catching her own eye in the mirror, Lacey quickly zips up her jeans, slips into shirt and hoodie, and puts on her boots, lacing them up with the ribbon and cuffing them down, closing the buckle on the back to keep the shaft down in place.

Headband, gloves and scarf clutched in hand, she tiptoes back downstairs, listening for movement or
sound from the study, but apparently dad’s out like a light.

Upon returning to the kitchen, she finds Ruby has made herself at home in her absence, raided the fridge, found the pancakes in their little container and has managed to wolf down her second (or third) breakfast at top speed, making a sticky mess on the kitchen table.

“Hey Gibbler!” Lacey laughs, dropping her things on the counter, then takes out a Thermos flask from the cupboard and fills the kettle with fresh water to boil. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Always,” Ruby grins, licking her fingers. She kicks back demonstratively, pulling a second chair closer with her feet to rest them on it. Lacey rolls her eyes and gets on her hands and knees to search for the damn lid between pots and pans.

“I need to retract my previous statement,” Ruby solemnly announces to the kitchen at large, making Lacey roll her eyes harder and shake her head from inside the cupboard. (Always so extra.) “Martha Steward sure knows how to make hella glorious pancakes!”

“Hey! You listening?” When Lacey doesn’t respond, Ruby playfully kicks her butt, her foot barely making contact, but it’s enough to have Lacey wince and jump - and bump her head.

“Oi!” she reemerges, face flushed and eyes flashing. “Cool it!”

Ruby raises her hands. “I come in peace and mean no harm!” She laughs.

“Tell that to the bump on my head!” Lacey snaps, getting to her feet, lid in one hand, the other massaging the tender spot on her forehead. “Doofus.” She stands, hands on hips, and glares at her friend, who takes one long look at her, then collapses against the table in a helpless fit of giggles.

“Lace ---” Ruby gasps. “Just put that flower back, will you?”

Before she can retort or throw the lid at Ruby’s head, the kettle whistles, and Lacey decides to be the bigger person and just finish making her tea. Ignoring Ruby, she gets the milk from the fridge, pours some into the Thermos, then proceeds to prepare a pot of Earl Grey.

“So, how did Granny take that midterm?” She asks, sitting down, resting her chin on her hands and her elbows on the table. Ruby sobers up instantly.

“That’s low, Lace.”

“I’m smoll. Low just comes natural.”

Ruby pulls an agonized face. “Blew up, of course,” she says, shrugging. “I’m surprised you didn’t hear. The rest of town sure did. But at least she’s signed the thing. What did your dad say?”

“Haven’t told him yet.” She hesitates, her heart beating faster. “Maybe I’ll ask Mum to sign it.”

The pause that follows is loud in her ears, sticky, and uncomfortable.

Lacey holds her breath, doesn’t blink, doesn’t move, refuses to look down, refuses to feel a single thing. The moment passes. Then another.

“How is she?” Ruby whispers, a tentative hand reaching out, and boops Lacey’s elbow with her index finger. Her concerned face adds ‘--- And how are you?’, but Lacey chooses to ignore that part of the question. Of course, Ruby knows. Granny probably told her. Granny always knows everything.
“Alive.”

They look at each other.

“It’s something, I guess.” Lacey blows out a breath and pushes back her chair, getting to her feet and turning her back to Ruby, as she’s pouring the tea from the pot into the Thermos.

(Ruby’s only ever had a ... Granny. Can you miss something you never had?)

Neither of them speaks, the tea splashes and sloshes, and the fridge hums, blissfully unaware of the sudden tension in the room.

Ruby’s chair scrapes across the floor, Lacey screws on the lid.

“Ready?” Ruby asks, appearing by her side and placing the Tupperware and fork in the sink. She’s her cheery, bubbly self again, and they exchange another quick look. They don’t talk about mothers. They just don’t.

“Yeah,” Lacey says, holding out the tea. “Put that in your bag, will you?” She grabs a napkin, left over from breakfast and unused, scribbles a quick note for her dad, then grasps headband, scarf and gloves, and follows Ruby out into the hall.

“How long does Granny think we’ll be out there exactly?” She asks, adjusting her headband and wrapping her scarf around her neck.

Ruby looks up, hands still fumbling with the buckle of her bag, and smirks. “We could get hungry and not have an instant choice of at least three different foods readily available. That would be a tragedy.”

They both laugh.

“Oh!” Ruby slides her Thermos inside. They hear it bump against what has to be another of its kind. “Granny said to tell you that she made lots of that soup you like! We got a whole flask. Should keep us warm, huh?”

Lacey smiles.

It’s so tempting to just let things go back to the way they were, so easy to pretend last summer never happened - and she’s always been one to take the easy roads in life, hasn’t she? Maybe she doesn’t need that apology. Maybe a flask of hot vegetable soup and an air-filled doughnut on a leash are enough.

Chapter End Notes

*song is Don’t Marry Her by The Beautiful South
Filtered through their rapidly pumping hearts and stretching lungs, the crisp winter air is breathless laughter and shrill exclamations, as Lacey and Ruby update and sync their lists of people to love, people to hate, and songs to fuck them to - should the circumstances arise.

Ruby claims she’d bang Peter and Vic to Taylor Swift, if she had to - that’s how much she cares about the damn soundtrack, Lace - but Lacey knows it’s all talk and mirrors, nothing but blow dryers. Ruby Lucas is a hopeless romantic, a candles and rose petals on the pillow kind of girl, despite the fishnets, mini skirts, and the bold red lingerie in her top drawer.

They are sitting on their snow tubes, heels digging into the snow, cold lips sipping at steaming soup, their ears and noses red as Christmas lights, and, in that moment, throning on the hilltop, the world around them - the beautiful, candied winter world - is all hers. From the tall dark trees, their branches heavy with white frosting, to the peaceful frozen lake just visible over their tops in the distance, the place is serene, special - perhaps even magical - a white and green treasure hidden deep in the woods.

Lacey inhales it’s richness greedily, gulps it down together with the warming broth from her cup. The voracious black holes that are her pupils suck in the beauty and it rides her bloodstream to be pressed between the valves of her humming heart. For later. For-ever.

She will never tell Ruby this, but it feels good to have her best friend back.

All heavy thoughts and feelings safely left behind in her kitchen - like ginormous black dogs abandoned by the side of the road - her heart feels lighter than it has in days, maybe months. But the darkness is still there, kneeling in a dingy corner of her mind, gnawing on the edges of her happiness with pointed teeth, watching her move and laugh out of horrible hollow eyes. What if the treacherous beasts grow bored of waiting for her at home like good monsters and decide to follow her up here? Maybe she should have chained them to a wall.

A sharp, piercing wolf whistle cuts through the calm, suddenly, apprising them of the imminent arrival of others. Ruby and Lacey turn their heads towards the trees and Ruby whistles back, using the middle and index fingers on both hands.

Marco, Polo.

Another signal-whistle and a couple minutes later, Mei-Li and Zora, Emma, Graham, and - to Lacey’s astonishment - a very red-faced and slightly disheveled-looking Mary-Margaret Blanchard (Minus One. Where is loverboy today?) have joined them on the top, expanding their little powwow by three tubes and two old-ass wooden sleds.

“It’s beautiful up here!” Zora exclaims, wide-eyed and wriggling excitedly on Mei-Li’s lap. She tilts her head back to smile at her girlfriend, who promptly wraps her arms around her middle and readjusts them both, planting her feet firmly on the ground, so their sled won’t move or topple over. Then she gently kisses the tip of Zora’s nose.

Rebel and Good Girl, Badass and Beauty, Warrior and Princess - they’d make the perfect protagonists in a progressive Young Adult novel; absolutely adorable and abundantly annoying in their doting sweetness. If it were anyone else, Lacey would roll her eyes so far back into her head she’d go blind permanently.
“Told you,” Mei-Li says, rubbing Zora’s lavender-mitten-clad hands between her own to keep them warm. Like an oyster around its pearl, she has molded her body perfectly around her precious cargo - to shield, to protect, to defend - and, quite unbidden, Lacey’s mind travels from sea, to land, to sky, the oyster transforming into a black crow, its massive wings warm around her shoulders, the dark feathers like velvet against her cold cheek.

It is then that Mei-Li shifts her attention, catches her looking before she can pretend she isn’t. Their eyes meet for a hair’s breadth, for the literal blink of an eye only, but Lacey’s stomach turns regardless, hot butterflies shooting up into her mouth at the disturbance and making her cough on her soup. *Caught red-handed.*

Graham thumps her on the back and she drops her cup, the snow at her feet turning a sickly mustard color. Mei-Li always just *knows* things, knows people’s darkest, deepest secrets just from looking at them, somehow and without trying, which is why Lacey would much rather have her for a friend than a foe - but not really that either. The girl gives her the creeps. And she’d rather not share this one with the class, thank you very much.

“You alright?” Graham asks. Always pleasant, always helpful.

“Fine,” she croaks. “Hot.” Two sets of raised eyebrows seem to be catching the lie, but don’t call her out on it. Or maybe she’s being paranoid.

Lacey clears her throat, hefting her gaze onto the only safe face in the circle. “So, Mary, where’s David today?” They don’t talk, not at school, which is why Mary jumps a little. Like she’s Snow White, in her matching off-white coat, scarf and bobble hat, and Lacey’s the big bad wolf out to lure her innocent, chaste arse away from the right path to rip her to shreds in the dark - *wait, no, wrong story.*

“He’s at the store with his brother,” Mary says, blushing a little. She digs her phone out of her coat pocket to check for messages or the time or just to give her nervous hands something to do and her shy eyes an excuse to break contact. Lacey would very much like to know how Mary and her spanking new tube came to be out here with them, because they clearly don’t want to be. Like, *at all.*

“They’ll get here eventually,” Graham offers, stepping in as human buffer and tension-sponge, before Lacey can open her mouth to inquire any further. “We’ll keep you entertained, don’t you worry.” He’s donning his best toothpaste-smile. It would give Mary’s dashing boyfriend a run for his money.

“And well-fed,” chimes in Ruby, her booming voice like a merchant’s at a fair; shooting right over the hill’s edge, thundering down into the valley and echoing off the little summer cabins, deserted and boarded up for the winter. Once a saleswoman’s granddaughter, always a saleswoman’s granddaughter. It’s in her blood. She can’t help it. “If anyone’s hungry, Granny had me bring half the diner.”

Emma, who’s been slouching in her tube, bolts upright and all but jumps to her feet and straight onto Ruby’s lap. “Please tell me you brought bearclaws?” Her voice is ridiculously full of longing. No one should be lusting after pastry that hard. “Or cake? Muffins? Anything soft and coated in, say, at least double-layers of frosting?”

Ruby cocks her head to one side. “Yes, yes, I think I might have just what you’re looking for. Left side-pocket” Lacey can see the laughter twitch in her friend’s facial muscles, but Ruby’s tone is all business. Granny would be proud. Another happy customer well-served, another hungry child fed.

“I love you!” Emma groans, falling back on her inflatable doughnut, and throws her arms up - as if to
worship Ruby or her bulging bag of sugary treats, or, perhaps, to thank the heavens above for such a sweet morning. *Dolce Vita* and all that.

Laughing, Ruby sinks into a lazy half-bow, which, due to her current sitting position, looks more like a crunch or push-up straight out of a fitness tape. *Show-off.* “My pleasure.”

Everyone laughs. Even Mary (*but politely behind a gloved hand, of course*).

“Her Mom put her on a diet,” Graham explains, his eyes glinting with unexpected mischief. Emma kicks his sled. “Says maybe it’s all that sugar that’s eroding her pea brain - though, to be fair, Miss Fisher didn’t quite phrase it like thaaa-”

In a chain reaction of events, a domino effect of kick, shove, push and pull, all sleds and tubes launch down the steep hill, gravity propelling their helpless riders to the bottom of the grade at full pelt.

Controlling the course and speed of a snow tube when riding on snow is extremely difficult. While a sled rider might be able to drag their arms and feet on the snow to brake or steer to some degree, attempting this on a tube will only cause it to spin, so Lacey lets nature’s icy hands take the wheel on this one instead, the absolute and inescapable lack of control a warming tickle under her skin.

Hurtling down face first, she holds both handles tightly; the icy wind rushing past her ears, snow hissing under her tube and whipping up into her face. It’s stinging her eyes and stifling her breathing - and she’s loving every breathless second.

Wonderful velocity, the sensation of mad speed, is making the blood rush in her ears and her heart whoop with joy, as she shoots through the forest at a sacrilegious pace, trees flying by too quickly, an indiscernible green and brown mass blurring in her peripheral vision. If she strikes one and cracks open her skull, so be it, Lacey thinks, lowering her head against the wind, and lets go, her arms spreading out like wings.

(*I’m the King of the World!*)

Exhilarating and reckless, that perfect combo to make her body tingle and her mind purr, has her heart hammering against her tube, high voltage burning through her veins. And it’s getting her hooked again, her quivering thoughts drunk on her sensations, craving more. *Always* more. Faster, higher, *more*. When she hits that familiar high, welcoming the old friend to help her fly, her face relaxes and she shuts her eyes, a feral grin bursting into a series of wild, high-pitched giggles, black stars catching fire behind her closed eyelids.

The crash is inevitable and so it happens, sending her flying for real, bellyflopping in the snow shortly after. Still laughing, Lacey rolls over onto her back, taking inventory and gathering her senses; allowing her mind to marvel at the harsh softness of the snow underneath and her eyes to get lost in the vastness of the baby blue sky overhead for a moment, before she snaps out of it, becoming *compos mentis* again.


Lacey sits up, her head spinning a little, and blinks against the bright sun, shading her face with a hand. Her tube is the first vehicle that’s been involved in a multiple pile-up that, no doubt, looks worse than it is.

“Apples!”

Graham gives her the thumbs up. He’s helping a very pale Mary to her feet, but they are both
grinning. Finally, *Good girl* let her hair down.

“Bananas!” Ruby shouts from somewhere to her left. “Oranges! Cherries! Pears! -” Lacey scoops up two handfuls of snow, pressing it into ammo. “Shut your face, moron!” But her missile misses its target and Ruby barks with laughter. “What?! I thought we were listing fruit!”

“The hell, Humbert?! You sure about that career in law enforcement? Thanks for almost getting everyone killed just now.” Emma punches Graham’s shoulder in passing, then drags her tube out from under the rubble, flopping down on it, arms folded in front of her chest.

“You’re the one who kicked me, Em” Graham retorts. “Only fair I gave you a taste of your own medicine.” He hands Mary her tube, but declines her offer to share, and sits down on the ground between the two girls.

“Vigilantism is generally frowned upon by the *good guys*, you know” Lacey interjects. Emma beams at her. “But then it’s the *good guys* who *claim* that they’re the *good guys* that you have to watch out for, sooo ---”

“Just what I’ve been saying. Better to stick with the girls,” Mei-Li is still wrapped around Zora like a second skin, the two of them sitting in the snow, leaning against a turned-over sled. Theirs or Graham’s. “Just save yourselves the trouble, Ladies.”

Zora giggles, settling back.

“Maybe I *should* go Vag*etarian,*” Ruby muses, lying back and pulling her knees up. “Too bad I really *like* sausage.”

The girls snort with laughter. Only Graham looks slightly uncomfortable. Perhaps, it’s because they usually save this for bathroom breaks and he’s finding himself very much lost, so suddenly stuck in the middle of stall-talk.

*(Someone toss a tampon, scar the poor boy for life.)*

“Well, you *can* have both, can’t you? Should make for a healthier meal and a more balanced-out diet, come to think of it,” Mary remarks dryly, and Lacey nearly chokes on her own spit. *Wait, what? Bisexuality is a thing, you know.*

*(Miss Goody Two-Shoes is full of surprises today.)*

“Ear, ear!” Mei-Li fake-toasts Mary. “Though, personally, I wouldn’t put meat, fat and seasoning in a casing made from intestines into my mouth.” She shrugs. “Tastes differ.”

Emma’s stomach grumbles so loudly, they might have checked the sky for the approaching storm, had it not been so perfectly clear all day.

“What?! You try surviving on half a grapefruit, see how that works out for y’all!” Emma snaps defensively, her face quickly rivaling a lobster’s.

“Lies!” Graham points at Emma. “You had porridge for breakfast!” He grins. “It was delicious.” Lacey and Ruby exchange a knowing look. *Yeah, right.*

Emma ignores him. “Can we just get back to the food, please?”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Ruby pushes herself up, brushes the snow off her butt, and goes to untangle their tubes. *Great, now we have to climb back up,*” she mumbles, eyes on the hilltop. “Lace,
catch!"

Her tube slides towards her. Lacey stops it and grabs the rope. It’s drenched. “Ta!”

The snow is firm underfoot, the crunchy top layer glistening in the sun, as they make their way back to the top of the slope, headed for their spot and stuff. Ruby and Lacey are walking side by side, chatting and laughing, their snow tubes sliding and bobbing behind them, playfully bumping into each other every now and then, like two excited puppies taken on their first-ever winter walk.

Mei-Li and Zora are a little ahead of them, Emma, Graham and Mary following behind. “Can we do it again?” Zora asks, swinging their linked hands, and Mei-Li squeezes hers in response. (She should really stop the inappropriate staring.) “If it’s what you want,” Mei-Li says. “Sure.”

They aren’t going to do it again, not for another couple hours. Instead they eat and talk, and before long, are joined by David, his brother James and their classmate Will, who haven’t brought sleds or snow tubes, but booze and cigarettes.

Lacey chews her bottom lip nervously, eyeing the bottle that’s making rounds. She isn’t paying attention to the conversations anymore - she’s too busy talking herself in and out of things. She does decline Mei-Li’s offer to share a smoke (She’s not quitting, she says, she couldn’t do that, haha, but she’s trying to smoke less, that’s something, right?), but when Will passes her the bottle of whatever-cheap-crap, she takes a long pull. And then another, the alcohol burning on her tongue and in her throat, and warming her from the inside out. He can’t expect her to abandon all her habits at once. She’s allowed a bloody day off. It’s the weekend. And what the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve over, anyway.

(Fuck it.)

If she’s drinking, she might as well get shit-faced. And if she’s getting shit-faced, she might as well smoke that stupid cigarette. Who cares? Not Lacey, that’s who. Lacey doesn’t give a fuck. And that’s just the way she likes it. She takes another sip, another pull, another drag, her blood turning to alcohol, her head filling with smoke. Time passes, the light fades. They laugh and drink and talk and nearly break every brittle bone in their careless, cold bodies, riding their tubes and sleds down the hill like it’s the devil that’s riding them.

Lacey’s falling over the edge in her mind, flying down the hill on someone’s lap - is it Graham? Is it James? - She doesn’t even know or care whose hands are feeling her up; whose soft, warm body she’s landing on; doesn’t care who is pulling her with him, rolling around in the snow, straddling her, whispering disgusting obscenities in her ear, giving her chills. She’s half in, half out of her body, slipping, sliding, floating, laughing in his face, and he’s on top of her, leaning in slowly ---

Whack. A snowball hits the side of his head, and he swears loudly, letting up, his weight wonderfully lifted from her body. "Snowball fight!" That’s Will’s voice yelling from what feels like another galaxy. Lacey blinks up at the stars, her laughter frozen on her face, and within seconds the air is thick with shouts and snowballs. Compact ones, solid and icy, that hurt like a motherf--- and softer ones that burst open on impact, showering their target in glittering, crystalline fragments.

So, a snowball fight in the dark is how they’ll end the night, she muses.

Lacey ducks down behind the sled, using it as a shield, and comes up with a hastily fashioned weapon sitting in her palm. When an adversarial snowball hits her right in the chest, the fight is definitely on. (Duck and cover, build a stash, keep your head down!) Her cold hands pick up snow like they want to be snowballs themselves, even if her stiff fingers no longer wish to bend. But frozen to the bone or not, a snowball fight is a snowball fight and Lacey doesn’t quit when
Another icy missile whizzes through the air and hits her cover. The stupidest grin plastered on her face, she whips her arm back to send one of her own flying toward enemy turf. An angry yell. Cursing. Impact. She lets out a whoop and the fight around her intensifies. The best thing she can do right now is taunt the others into releasing all their ammo and then run out into the open with hers. It works like a charm every time. Lacey had gotten snowball fights down to a science when she was a kid - best snowball size, best snowball density, just the right swing in her throwing arm. Snowball fights are war and wars just gotta be won.

"You're dead!" Ruby shouts, running towards her, and in that instant Lacey knows she has a whole stack ready to pelt her with, because that's exactly what she would do.

"Yeah? Wanna bet?" she calls out from her hiding place. "Game on, moron! You're going down!" She’s counting the seconds in her head (t-10 until strike, t-9 until strike, ...), her hands in the snow, frantically making a stockpile to defend hearth and home with. From the sudden lull in the action she knows Ruby must have stopped to do the same, to try and replenish what she’s already used.

"You're gonna lose, Lace!" Ruby taunts, a little out of breath, her confident voice much closer now. It has to be the booze that’s making her slow and sloppy. Before she’s ready, Ruby’s towering over her, laden with ammo and wearing that same face she has when she's got Lacey beat at Scrabble (all two and a half times that’s ever happened), but this is no war of words, and Lacey will fight dirty if she has to.

With a laugh and a shriek, Ruby charges and gives her a face-wash. Lacey wrestles her for life and death, kicking and pinching, but, ultimately, has no choice but to hoist a white flag and surrender, pledging her sword in her conqueror’s service. Their legs outstretched, the soles of their shoes pressing against each other, they prepare more ammo before going back to battle.

With numb hands and feet, her face raw and legs like lead weights from straining through the deep snow all day, Lacey knows she will be feeling this night tomorrow and the day after that. She waves at Will, Graham, Emma and Ruby who, upon seeing her push open her front door, wish her good night and continue their walk into town.

It’s late, she’s tired and frozen half to death, her body aching all over. Lacey kicks off her boots, drops her jacket on the floor. (Where the hell are her gloves, her scarf and the headband?) Dad’s not home, of course not. Heading to the bathroom, to run herself a hot bath, Lacey feels the alcohol burn in her bloodstream and pound in her head. With fingers so numb they are nearly useless, she turns on the faucet, then sinks down onto the toilet seat, resting her head against the cool tiles to watch the water rush into the tub and the room fill with steam.

The smoke smell in her hair and clothes is making her want to claw off her stinging skin. She pulls her sweater, shirt and bra over her head, unbuttons her jeans and jerks them off, nearly toppling over. Her sore body is covered in dark, angry bruises - bruises from reckless sledding, falling, throwing herself into the snow and at people; bruises from being pinned down and squished under dead weight, her back pressed into the snow, her eyes fixed on the stars in the open night sky ---

Lacey shakes her head violently, rubs her wrists, and stands. She steps out of her panties, holding onto the side of the tub for balance. Facing her distorted reflection in the steaming water, she looks away quickly, steps in, and, taking deep, controlled breaths, lets herself sink into the tub, sliding down until she is completely submerged, the scalding hot water up to her chin. Fighting the tears
burning behind her eyelids, her hands travel over her body. The hot water and the familiar scents around her do nothing to clear her head.

=====

Lacey’s stomach is in knots the entire weekend. She stays in all of Saturday and Sunday, feigning first a hangover/headache (who’s asking?) and then a cold, turning down Ruby and Emma and Will, and finally turns off her phone for good. She tries to study, but Friday’s fresh bruises and Tuesday’s faded ones are making it near-impossible for her to concentrate on any of the material. Her work’s no good and she knows it. And it’s making her dread Monday morning even more.

Pitilessly, Monday comes around regardless, cold and grim and overcast, and even though there’s no Maths class on her schedule today, Lacey’s belly is doing cartwheels and flips, making her positively motion sick. She doesn’t even touch her lunch, despite it being pizza day at the cafeteria, offering her slice of pepperoni pizza and her chocolate milk to a delighted Emma instead.

After her last class has ended, and having received no word to the contrary, Lacey dawdles behind until the hallway has cleared, then slowly walks up to the second floor, dragging her feet. Unease gnawing at her, she pushes open the glass door and turns into the corridor where all the teachers keep their offices. His is the last one to the right, furthest from the teacher’s lounge and opposite Principal Mill’s office. Why the hell has she done it? What in the world had possessed her that night to break his stupid, stupid rules and think it would be a good idea, would be just fine, when in reality, it was the stupidest thing she could have done? She has taken them, his rules, taken them and smashed them to smithereens like fine china against a brick wall. And if she keeps it quiet, she’s breaking yet another rule. Right under his disapproving, disappointed nose. She can’t do that. --- Can she?

Feeling both gloomy and anxious, Lacey takes a deep breath and knocks on his door.
“Enter!”

It’s personified guilt that does and shuts his door quietly behind her, braided hair and immaculate uniform under a dark blue coat, and he has to cover his mouth with a quick hand and clear his throat to hide the smile softening his face. What has she done now? By the looks of it - nothing short of triple homicide. Busy weekend. “Good afternoon, Miss French.”

And there’s the blush again, turning her face into a beautiful painting with each skilled stroke of a loving brush. Underneath the breathless pink, however, she looks tired and worn and so unbelievably miserable, he wants to reach out and touch the sadness, grasp it firmly with both hands and pull it off her, like a heavy, old blanket, before it suffocates the delicate flower underneath.

“Good afternoon,” she says, playing with the black hair tie on her wrist. “Sir.” Snap. Her eyes fly around the room like a pair of pale blue butterflies, wings fluttering fast, the tiniest ripple in the dry, comfortable warmth in his office. They touch down on the spines of his many books - lightly, briefly - travelling over titles and names; never lingering, never settling down long enough to be caught, never still for more than a split second at a time. Snap. Snap, snap.

“Please, have a seat,” he says, indicating the chair opposite his desk, and she lets her bag slide off her shoulder, shrugs out of her coat and sits, hands folded neatly in her lap, one foot placed next to the other.

“Did you have an enjoyable weekend?” He asks. She starts, hesitates, nods. Snap, snap, snap.

The sound of elastic on skin has him wanting to escape his own, crawl out of it and shed it, like a serpent. If he’s the snake, she’s the bunny, the suddenly timid fawn caught in the headlights. He won’t turn them off. Not yet. It’s her choice and he’s willing to give it to her and wait and see.

“I hope you made good use of your time,” he says, his voice rising slightly, elevating his words to the calm plane between a statement and a question. She looks up briefly, choosing statement. “Although our agreement extends beyond the subject of mathematics - given your surprisingly poor performance in midterms, I’d like to make it this week’s priority.” It’s taking all of his willpower and self-restraint not to grab the silver scissors from his desk and cut the ties that are leaving ugly red marks on her wrists. He touches a finger to his lips. No. This is school. He’s her teacher. No more blurring the lines. “Please, take out a pencil, pen, ruler and your calculator. Would you like a glass of water or cup of tea before we begin, Miss French?”

“No, thank you, Sir.” She says, producing a fir green leather pencil case and a ruler from her bag, her lips closing like a vault, dispelling all the reds and pinks from the soft, plump curve. “Sir? I- I don’t have my calculator,” she says softly, unwarranted mortification that’s not matching the severity of the minor misdemeanour swinging on each breathless syllable like children playing on a swing set. It’s not the calculator. He watches her clean fingernails attack the cuticles on her left hand, picking, tearing, pulling at the defenseless, broken skin. “It’s - we don’t have class Monday. I- can go and fetch it from my locker, I’ll just be a min-”

She makes to get up, but he shakes his head, hands motioning her back into her seat like a snake charmer’s. Perhaps she’s the serpent, but not the bad kind. The kind that, when under duress, makes a hell of a racket and tries to appear twice its size, and then gets trampled to death by some oaf,
simply because it happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, backed into a corner and frightened half to death. “No need,” he says, sliding one of his own calculators across the table. “There are more than enough in this room.”

She nods, her fingertips hovering over the black keys. “Thank you. I’ll bring it next time.”

“Tomorrow,” he amends gently, watching her tense frame. What is it?

“Tomorrow.” She echoes, puts her eyes down, moves the calculator a little closer and aligns it with her pencil case and ruler, the three forming a neat little row. He swallows back the taste of strong Earl Grey with a splash of milk on his tongue and blinks against ghosts of green and sun yellow swimming on his retina.

Looking at his wristwatch, Gold extracts the required papers from a stack to his left. “Is there anything else?” There is, but she’s choosing not to share, not to voice it, to shake her head instead. “Well then, let’s begin.” He slides the stapled papers over to her, face down. “This is a mock midterm. It’s different questions, of course, but covers the same material. I’d like you to give it your best shot. I do not expect perfect, just a clearer picture of the work that needs to be done.”

She looks at him like he’s proposed the killing of her favorite cute, fluffy pet animal. It’s not unicorn butchery, just Maths (though he’s well-aware some do equate the two). She swallows hard, clinging to her bottom lip by her teeth, nods again and reaches for her pen like it’s her sword - a blunt, nearly-useless joke of a weapon to slay the mean dragon with, but it’s all she’s got.

He takes one of the many hourglasses from the shelf behind him - medium-size, solid gold, fine emerald sand - and places it on the desk between them, turning it over. “You may begin.” He’s read somewhere that green is a less aggressive color, better suited for marking tests and papers, more encouraging, friendly, uplifting, and should therefore be used to replace the old and tested red. It probably was in one of the teaching journals, in a hip piece on dynamic assessment. He doesn’t believe in coddling students. A mistake is a mistake, and a change of color doesn’t change that.

They work in silence, her puzzling over problems, him marking exam papers (in frivolous, old-fashioned, unfriendly red), occasionally looking up to check on her progress, taking in her flushed cheeks, her lovely face screwed up in concentration. Good girl.

The minutes tick - or rather trickle - by and soon it’s time for him to collect the test from her, noting with satisfaction that she’s completed it, at least. “Did you find it difficult?” he asks. She shrugs non-committally, clamping up instantly once more. What is it that she’s fighting so hard to keep under lock and key and away from his eyes and ears? “We’ll go over it tomorrow.”

(Has she ever been this quiet? He almost misses the backtalk.)

“Miss French?” He gives her a questioning look over the top of his glasses. “You attended your classes today, haven’t you?” He’s not been looking for her in the corridors, hasn’t searched for the hurricane of mahogany hair framing her beautiful face in the crowds of students, of course not, he hasn’t, but, looking out of the window of the teacher’s lounge, he’d spotted her standing in a circle with Misses Lucas and Fisher during break, talking and gesturing animatedly, then leading the latter away by her hand - in the direction of the girls’ bathrooms, Miss Lucas following suit.

“Yes. Yes, Sir.”

“And you’ve completed all your assignments that were due for today?”

“Yes.” She’s worrying her bottom lip again. Warm and getting warmer.
“But -?” He prompts, folding his hands over the hourglass, and scans her conscience-stricken face very, very closely.

“You said --- I mean, I haven’t -” she falters, and his mouth twitches.

She blows out a breath. “I broke the damn rules, okay?!” she hurls the words across the table like they are something disgusting, dying perhaps, half-rotten and reeking of decay, then crosses her arms in front of her chest and sinks back low in her chair, tilting her head a little, eyeing him out of the corner of her eyes, waiting, wary.

He’s not fooled. It’s no declaration of war, no attack, just her signature rattle.

“How so? Elaborate, please.”

She huffs impatiently, rolls her eyes at the ceiling. Rattle, rattle, rattle. “There might have been booze,” she says, flippant. “Smokes.”

“Ah,” he says softly, getting to his feet. She sinks a little lower. “I see.” He places the hourglass back on its shelf. “If I recall, you were told to lay off both, isn’t that correct?”

Her eyes flash at him angrily, her temper flaring up. “Yes,” she scoffs. Attitude, attitude, 5’2” of nothing but attitude.

“Remind me why.” With his back to her, she can’t see the corners of his mouth twitch, and he makes sure his voice remains calm and level, betraying absolutely nothing. He can feel her eyes burn holes into his shoulder blades and the back of his head, as she’s droning out the expected answers.

“It’s unhealthy.”

“Yes. And?”

She takes a beat. “Illegal.”

“Correct.” He turns around to face her, reaches for his cane leaning against the side of his desk, and walks around the small room, slowly, as if pondering something, as if lost deep in thought. “So you did not abide by the agreement.” He stops directly behind her. “What happens when you break a rule, Miss French?” He puts a hand on the back of her chair.

“I get punished?” She licks her lip nervously, craning her neck to look up at him. “Sir?”

“Aye,” he says, slowly, watching her shoulders fly up defensively. “However,” He pauses and runs his thumb over the unyielding wood. “In light of your honest confession, I might be persuaded to forgo harsher punishment and offer you a little deal instead ---” he trails off, studying her for her reaction.

“A - a deal?” Her eyes narrow a little, fresh color appearing in her cheeks. “What deal?” He doesn’t even want to know where her mind might have been jumping there. Nowhere good, that’s for sure, nowhere it has any business being.

“A paper, Miss French,” he tells her, curtly. “Why don’t you go off and write me something interesting.”

“You want me to write an essay on how alcohol and cigarettes are the devil? ---” she asks, eyebrows shooting up, the hint of a sneer in her tone.
“I said *interesting*, Miss French.” He repeats, voice stern. “I don’t care what it is that you come up with, but make no mistake, young lady, it better be good - or I will have no choice but to collect on that penalty after all! Do you understand me?”

The small smirk vanishes from her face immediately. “O-okay. I mean, yes. Yes, I understand, *Sir*.”

“Good,” He moves back behind his desk, sitting down. “You have four days to complete the assignment. I’m expecting your testimony of penance on my desk by Friday.”

She nods. Waits.

“I don’t have to tell you, I presume, that any more rule-breaking on your part would be tactically unwise and that, should I catch wind of it, our little deal is terminated with immediate effect?”

She shakes her head.

“Alright. Then that would be all for today, Miss French. You may go.”

After a moment's hesitation, she scrambles to her feet, collects her writing utensils, shrugs into her coat and buttons it, throwing him shy glances after every other button or so, but he’s pretending to be thoroughly engrossed in the marking of her mock-exam.

“Good day, Sir.”

He looks up briefly. “Good day, Miss French. See you tomorrow.”

=====  

Hefting her bag on her shoulder, Lacey sighs as she opens the glass door. At least she hasn’t lied. And she’s escaped a second highly unpleasant encounter with his walking stick - even if only narrowly and perhaps, temporarily, should she fail to deliver on that *interesting* assignment he’s set her. Her stomach lurches.

“What’s the jerk kept you for this time?”

Lacey starts, her heart leaping into her mouth and jumping out between her teeth to make a run for it. Ruby’s anxious face appears in her line of vision, splitting into a mischievous grin the next second. “Hello? Earth to Lace?”

Impatiently, Lacey swats her friend’s waving hand away and shrugs. What’s Ruby doing here? “Stupid midterm,” she grumbles, slightly disgruntled, willing her breathing to level out. “What are you still doing up here?”

Ruby grimaces. “Flower power session.” *Flower power* is what she calls her sessions with Dr. Hopper, her anger management counselling. Lacey hadn’t known she still went.

“How are the flowers?” she asks, grinning, as they hurry down the steps to get out of the depressing concrete hellhole as fast as humanly possible. Ruby elbows her in the ribs.

“How are the flowers?” she asks, grinning, as they hurry down the steps to get out of the depressing concrete hellhole as fast as humanly possible. Ruby elbows her in the ribs.

“Why, *empowered*, of course. Thank you for asking.” She yanks open the door and they escape into the chill afternoon air. The sky is still heavy with dark clouds, but it’s not raining. Thankfully. “How much did your midterm suck then? That bad?”

Lacey shoots her a warning look. “I just had an off day that day, that’s all.”

“I’m having more *off* ones than *on* ones lately,” Ruby admits glumly, kicking at a pile of grey slush.
“Granny wants me to get a tutor.” Her lip curls over her teeth. “Can you imagine, more time spent in that creativity coffin, cramming all that crap into my brain for absolutely no reason. I’m ecstatic!”

“What’s kicking your ass?” Lacey puts an arm around Ruby’s middle. “Do I need to get my boots?”

“Like your boots are any better than mine,” Ruby glances at her. “At least you’re smart.” She sighs. “Not using your brain on principle is pretty dumb, though, you know.”

Lacey decides to let it slide. Perhaps Ruby has a point. Perhaps they all do.

“You’re not stupid, Rubes,” she says. “And Granny --- I don’t know, means well?”

Ruby gapes at her, horrified. “Don’t do that. Oh God, Lace, please, I beg you!”

They both laugh, the snow and ice and slush squishing and sloshing under their boots as they continue walking into town, their arms linked. You don’t want to be seen riding the late bus home from school with the retards and dimwits - and suffer sudden social death. Walking is better.

“What’s Dr. Jekyll riding your ass for, anyway? What’s his deal?” Ruby asks suddenly, just as they are passing by the library, and Lacey chews her lip, trying and failing not to think about him riding her anything. She stops to get her phone from her bag, rummaging for it unnecessarily long, in an attempt at burying her embarrassment in the folds of her scarf.

“No idea,” she says, punching in the shop’s number.

If only she knew. She had been sure, after their walk in the snow, so sure, but then he had pushed her away - only to press his lips to her wrists mere moments later. And now he was acting like none of it had actually happened, like Thursday night was something she had entirely dreamed up in her delirious mind. And, hadn’t it been for the remainder of the snow still lying on the ground, she might have been inclined to believe him. He had been so distant, so indifferent towards her today, her heart sinking at his cold voice and stern gaze; any foolish hopes she might or might not have been entertaining shattered all at once, any thought of bringing up Thursday instantly forgotten.

(Why?)

Lacey shudders, unable to make heads or tails of anything anymore. “Hey, Astrid, it’s me -” she says, talking into her phone. “Yeah. Tell him I’m at Ruby’s? Thanks. --- Sure. Bye.” She turns to Ruby and they continue walking. “Let’s call Emma later. Study together?” She suggests. “Get everyone off our cases?”

Ruby groans, but nods. “We’re doomed, Lace.” They hurry up the steps to the diner together. “Might as well eat first.”

Lacey follows Ruby inside, the warmth hitting her in the face like an airbag. She shrugs off her coat, hanging it on a peg, where it wrestles all the others for space, then slides into the booth opposite Ruby, her stomach growling, her thoughts still hung up on him and his stupid face.

Within seconds, Ruby’s grandmother has materialized at their table, like a genie from a bottle, donning an apron and a warm, maternal smile that’s making Lacey’s insides clench.

“Ruby, you’re late!” Granny scolds, a hand on her hip. “Good to see you, Lacey dear, what can I get you, pet?” The sudden change in her voice is dizzying. Lacey blinks at her.

“Uh, ice tea, please,” she says, attempting a small smile, but avoids eye contact. “The chicken parm?”
Granny smiles at her fondly. “The usual - coming right up, love.”

Ruby kicks her shin under the table. “Uh, is it okay if I stay over to study after?” She asks. “We really need to cram a bit. Emma’s coming too.”

“Emma Fisher?” Granny asks, forehead creasing.

“And Mary, Mary-Margaret Blanchard?” Ruby pipes up. Lacey glares at her from across the table. *Girl. What.* “She’s top of the class, you know.”

“You asked the Blanchard girl to tutor?” Brows raised, Granny wipes her hands on her apron. “Didn’t think you had it in you.” Ruby’s face resembles curdled milk. “Alright, fine, I’ll have Ashley take over your shift, Ruby, so you girls can study. God knows you need it.” She shakes her head. “Let me know when the girls get here, so I can have some cookies and pop ready for everyone.” With that, she turns on her heels, bustling off to take care of other customers and their needs.

Ruby rests her head on the table, her feet kicking its leg. “Sorry,” she mumbles, her voice muffled against the tabletop. “So, so, sorry, Lace. I *am* a moron!”

Cracking up, Lacey puts a hand on Ruby’s arm, patting it reassuringly. “No worries,” she says, while, in reality, all she ever does is worry constantly. Especially now that her fate, or rather her bum’s fate, hinges on a bloody paper on *god-knows-what* for Dr. *what-the-hell*. She’s fucked. “Perhaps Mary *can* help us?”
They should go and visit her more often. It baffles him how - even now - she always knows just what to say to her, knows how to reach her in ways he never could. He should have taken her sooner. He knows that now. But he’s trying, he really is, and he will make the room and the time, business be damned, if that’s what it takes, if that’s what’s going to make his girls happy!

Moe looks over at his daughter. Lacey’s wearing a washed out t-shirt with the faded print peeling off the fabric (half a music band he doesn’t recognize), sweats and her UGG slippers (ugg-ly indeed). Her feet tucked away under her body, she sits curled up in the old armchair like a sleepy kitten, her eyes glued to the telly. Her wet hair is falling over her shoulders in shiny waves and soft ringlets and it reminds him of when she was little.

“How was school today?” He asks, as casually as possible, a quivering piece of duck trapped between his chopsticks like a dog in a fence. He would much rather go and fetch the old knife and fork from the kitchen drawer, but Nicky always says to keep trying at things you aren’t good at, to try and do better, and to never give up until you get there. And she’s made it perfectly clear that that rule applies to all things in life - big and small - from figure skating to filing your taxes. And it certainly doesn’t stop at eating Chinese takeout with the red plastic chopsticks it comes with.

So he is trying. And positively starving.

She glances at him. “Fine. Lit quiz tomorrow.”

“I hear there’s a study group now?” He smiles at her. His duck plummets back into the sanctuary of the spicy noodle-pond. “Granny Lucas told me when I picked up dinner.”

“Dobber.” Lacey rolls her eyes at the kissing people on the screen, still half-engrossed in the cheesy rom com they are watching.

Well, she is.

He chuckles. “She just likes what she’s seeing. You girls being responsible and all. Taking your education seriously.” He slurps up some noodles from his container and points a greasy chopstick at her. “That’s a good thing, Lacey.”

And he likes what he’s seeing too. He’s seeing it alright - even if she thinks he isn’t looking.

Naturally, he had been rather alarmed when he had had to scribble his signature on the dotted line of that test a few days back, but Lacey has assured him that it’s nothing, that she’s just been so worried about Mama lately. She says she knows the material. And that she is already looking into ways to make up for the grade; is, in fact, working on some papers for extra credit or something. That had soothed his frazzled nerves and mollified him somewhat.

He’s been keeping a closer eye on things though - just to make sure. Astrid has agreed to take on more shifts for a while so he can make it home for dinner more often. He’s tried lunch too at first, but Lacey’s right - there’s no point. They both have busy schedules, she eats at school with her friends anyway, and then stays to work in the library for at least an hour after school finishes. And, according to Granny, the girls are planning on meeting three times a week to study now. She’s reserved a ‘study booth’ for them - in the back where It’s quieter and where she can easily keep watch and ward. He trusts the widow Lucas to see to it that the girls aren’t wanting for anything - or getting into any sort of trouble - while under her expert care and careful supervision.
“Dad, stop,” she says, a shy smile in her voice and soft color warming her cheeks. “I’m watching this!” She nods at the television and folds her arms across her chest, huffing pointedly.

“Just saying,” His chopsticks dive into his dinner once more. (Lacey’s stir-fried noodles sit on the coffee table, half-eaten and fully forgotten.) “Junior year is important and we want to get you into a good college, don’t we?”

Her head snaps round to gape at him, but whatever she’s wanted to say doesn’t make it past her slightly parted lips, the unspoken words dying somewhere in her throat. She swallows hard. It’s her but-face, the one they both make when they’re about to refute an argument or explain to him how he’s being stupid again. She shakes her head.

“Yeah.” She shoots him another unreadable look, then turns her attention back to the movie.

He sighs. “We’ll save it for another day, grub. Just think about it, okay?”

She sucks on her lower lip. “I am.”

“Good.”

He gets it. Replanting’s always been a sensitive issue for his little flower. She’s afraid to leave, go off into the unknown on her own. It’s hard to put down roots and grow when you’re scared of new soil. He doesn’t know how to take her fears away though, doesn’t know how to make it better. Perhaps, after the holiday season, he could take a couple days off to look at schools with her - go on a little road trip together, have some fun.

Fun, he mouths soundlessly, watching her profile in the harsh blue light. The word tastes stale and cold, like sucking on a tarnished silver spoon.

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Cookies are dancing around Emma’s head like puppets on strings about to break into a crazy musical number, and she can no more focus on the words in front of her than conjure up a fairy or magic pixie to do it for her. Even if she’s avoiding looking at the plate directly, just thinking of the sweet treats makes her fingers tingle and her breathing deepen, the anticipation burning holes in her rumbling stomach. Frustrated, she squirms in her seat, adjusting her limbs slightly, and lets out a long breath, trying to concentrate. She’s been sitting cross-legged for so long her toes have gone perfectly numb, but she’s way too annoyed to do anything about it right now. Let them die, shrivel up and fall off her for all she cares, she thinks, glowering at her open history book. If she gets rid of the dead weight before heading home tonight, perhaps the stupid needle will move in the right direction in the morning and - finally - end her unjust sentence.

(Would it be weird if she asked for a clamp for her nose?)

The soft smell is teasing her like a persistent mosquito. The scent lingering, inviting, overpowering every other scent in the spacious room. All the candles and air fresheners and the soft undertones of laundry detergent and whatever flowery perfume Mrs. Blanchard uses - or, maybe, the sickly sweet vanilla and peach isn’t actually hers but Mary’s - don’t stand a chance against the rich buttery aroma with hints of cocoa, honey dew, orange preserves and nuts.

Emma glances across the table at Mary. She definitely looks like a vanilla kind of girl, bent low over her book, studiously scribbling notes into her notebook in a ridiculously neat hand. They could bomb the town and best pupil Blanchard would still be taking notes until someone told her to stop - or until she’d be blown to pieces, her detached fingers still curled around her pretty fountain pen like iron.
Freshly baked cookies. Is there anything more delightful after a hard day of school, after hours and hours that decided to last for several centuries, than to come home to a plate of delicious cookies and a glass of milk? So very tempting to grab one and simply indulge in the decadent pleasure.

In Mary’s house cookies are like air and water, always there and taken for granted. In Emma’s they are an oasis in the desert, more often than not a mirage. When Mary sees cookies she acts like she’s bored, when Emma sees them they are suddenly crucial to her survival on Earth. Mary eats cookies like she’s performing a chore, dignified and diligent, nibbling on the edges like a cute bunny rabbit. Emma can only eat them like producing a mess is her only intention and she wonders if, had she grown up in Mary’s house, she would be like her too, skinny and uninterested in freshly baked goods, or whether she’d be her three hundred pound sister.

Mary’s mother makes cookies from white flour, butter and sugar. She even puts in chocolate chips. Emma’s mom regards every meal as an opportunity to trick her into eating more ground flax seed and pureed sweet potato. Her flour is always multi-grain, the fat kept to a bare minimum of non-transfat margarine or coconut oil, and the little sugar she adds is only ever coconut or honey. She crams in all kinds of nuts and seeds too, so the final product usually strongly resembles a pile of bear poop. When she was thirteen, Emma had scored something of a victory and convinced her to start adding raisins, which greatly improved the taste, but did nothing for the shitty look.

Emma swings her eyes to the gold-rimmed plate in the middle of the table. There are so many different types, from your typical chocolate chip to the exotic, from white chocolate and macadamia nut right through to sprouted grains and wheat germ. There’s oatmeal, rum raisin and almond cherry. Pralines too, rich toffee and ginger, and what looks like it could be pistachio or mint. Unlike their store-bought counterparts, the cookies are irregular in shape and size, still mostly round but with enough imperfections to be perfect.

It’s the gingerbread men with their gum-drop buttons that hold her attention the longest. Even though Christmas is still a little over a whole month away, there are four of them framing the cookies in their midst like knights guarding a treasure - one knight in shining armor for each girl currently sitting around the table - and she can’t tear her eyes away from the perfection that is their little faces, their buttoned coats, and their smooth skin in that incredible shade of deep amber.

She doesn’t have to taste hers to know that they are the real deal, to know that she’s finally found them.

The ones she once bought from the store - years ago - had been a very far cry from the biscuit-like one she remembers and a very bitter disappointment. A delicious gingerbread Santa, white beard and wide sugary grin, is her only, but also her most vivid memory of her almost-forever-family, of the one Christmas she had had with them, before they took her back to the store when their real daughter arrived - before Boston, before Ingrid, before Storybrooke; long before she changed her name and spent an entire afternoon crying under the covers, clutching her new school ID to her chest like a drowning madwoman. In her memory, it’s so crunchy she can hear the bite from a block away.

These ones look softer, the ginger more pronounced, and they are undoubtedly moreish than anything she’s ever tasted in her entire existence. Just from looking at them, she can tell that they’ll cause the best kind of sensory overload, a form of sugar high paralysis, and her mouth waters like the Niagara Falls.

Emma inhales, her lips creeping upward, before she reaches for an oatmeal chocolate chip - much to the disapproval of her mother’s voice in her head. A sugar high is one thing, another lecture on health and moderation quite another; but she lets her scowl and simply grabs a second one with her free hand. One bite tells her the cook has a thing for salt, either that or her taste buds have become as
defective as her brain. A satisfactory crunch reverberates in her ears as she crams them into her mouth one after the other, and, chewing quickly, she reaches for more. The cookies have a slightly rough texture, their surface cracked like dry desert ground, but on the inside they aren’t dry. Once past their rough shell, a silky, fragile heart breaks free and reveals its deepest, darkest, chocolatey secrets.

They crumble and melt on her tongue, so deliciously tasty that she might have cried if it weren’t such a silly thing to do. With each bite, currents of delightful flavors are flooding her mouth, her senses basking in the luscious taste, drunk on friable crunches, tangs of lemon and orange zest, pangs of acidity, butter and sugar. Indescribable pleasure pulses through her, the sweetness lighting up her brain like colorful Christmas lights on a tree.

They are incredible and she’s not sure she will be able to stop before she’s cleared the entire plate, right down to the very last crumb.

Uh-oh.

“Is there anything else I can get you, my dears?”

Her head snaps up and she blushes furiously, taking in the beautiful woman that has entered the room. Shiny black hair twisted into a high bun, kind blue eyes, pale skin like powdered sugar and a slim frame wrapped in a beautiful dress. Emma watches in awe, as her slender fingers travel to the string of pearls round her neck, touching them ever so lightly. She’s never met Mary’s mother before. Mrs. Blanchard looks like she’s jumped right out of a vintage cereal or juice box commercial - the doting wife and mother, the perfect woman from one of Ingrid’s favorite movies set in the 1950s. Always smiling, smiling, smiling, not a single strand of hair ever out of place.

Mary has looked up from her books at long last. The look on her face is so eerily similar to her mother’s now, it’s a little unsettling, and when she speaks, her voice has taken on the exact same honeyed tones, like she’s a miniature version, a travel-sized clone from a very flawless blueprint. Emma shudders.

“Would any of you care for more lemonade? A warm cup of tea? Or perhaps some salty snacks?” She looks round at Emma, Ruby and Lacey. No one answers, Ruby shrugs and Lacey looks like she’s trying her damnest not to burst into a fit of hysterical giggles. Mary takes it in her stride, the Stepford smile never leaving her face. “I believe, we could all do with a little break and another round of refreshments and snacks. Thank you, mother.”

“Of course, dear,” Mrs. Stepford answers, her voice a spoonful of honey dissolving in warmed milk, sweet maple syrup dripping from a batch of hot, fluffy pancakes - brand name, of course, Canadian import even, not knock-off store brand. “If you’d have the table cleared in about fifteen minutes, I’ll bring out another tray ---” She pauses, checks the grandfather clock on the opposite wall, then her face cracks into an even wider smile that would have turned anyone diabetic in a flash. “Or, given the time, perhaps your friends would like to stay for supper? Since it’s Friday, we can make an exception today and order out - for Pizza or Thai - and have your father give everyone a lift home after. If you girls would like that, and with your parents’ permission, of course.”

Mary sits up a little straighter, beaming, only to deflate again a second later, almost too afraid to look at their faces - in case it’s refusal and rejection meeting her there. Emma swallows the sudden lump in her throat with the rest of her cookie to speak up. “That’s a brilliant idea!” She says, a little too loudly - as always - and reaches across the table to take Mary’s hand and quickly squeeze it, before withdrawing hers again. “We’d love to! It’s so kind of you to offer to have us, Mrs. Blanchard.”

“Yes, thank you.” Ruby chimes in. Emma can see her kick Lacey’s shin under the table. She grins.
“Sure, if it’s not too much trouble?” Lacey says.

“Nonsense, it’s my pleasure, girls! You deserve a little treat after working so hard all afternoon!” Mary’s mother declares and turns for the adjoining kitchen to retrieve an off-white dinosaur of a phone and hand it to Lacey. “Johanna told me you haven’t taken a single break since lunch,” Mrs. Blanchard says, equal parts proud and concerned.

Mary shrugs, smiling apologetically. “Sorry. We --- forgot.”

Emma wonders if she’s Alice and if this is the other end of the rabbit hole, where up is down and left is right and you are scolded for doing your homework. Amused, she leans back in her chair, puts her hands behind her head and looks around, listening to Lacey talk on the phone.

Instead of an island or peninsula, the heart of the live-in Blanchard kitchen, with its creamy colored cabinets and tin ceiling tiles over the cooktop, is the massive walnut table that they are sitting at. With their books and things all scattered across it, it doesn’t look it anymore, but Emma is sure it can easily seat a small dinner party or accommodate a very large family gathering. The wall behind Mary and Lacey is brickwork, greys and reds framing the carved fireplace mantle and surround, the floors are dark hardwood and she’s already more than half-convinced the Blanchards have magically shrunk an entire castle and stuffed it into a regular row house. Perhaps they are wizards and Mrs. Blanchard’s washing powder is actually magic.

After they have taken turns calling their parents via landline - like it’s 1998 - and Mary’s mother has personally confirmed they have parental permission to stay, they pack away their schoolwork and call Angelo’s for Pizza. Two small, vegetarian with minimum cheese, one extra-large pepperoni cheese crust and a medium pineapple pizza that provokes a heated debate on perverse eating habits and possible undetected teen pregnancy.

Forty minutes later, they have taken the party to the living room floor, leaning against sofas and armchairs and footrests rather than sitting on them.

“I could sleep until Monday!” Ruby belches loudly, and stretching, lies down across the fuzzy rug with her head in Lacey’s lap. Emma watches Lacey stroke the sleek black hair off her forehead, laughing heartily as she does so, and shaking her own head, loose curls of dark auburn bouncing around her face.

“I hope you’ve enjoyed our live broadcast from the local barn, latest commentary was brought to you by the head grunter!” Lacey comments, they laugh, and Ruby points a warning finger at her before joining in.

Emma has never been one to hang with other girls much - too much backstabbing and scheming, at least guys are usually dicks to your face - but with every passing minute she finds herself growing fonder of the little, mismatched group. Perhaps this is what they’re all raving about in the magazines she doesn’t read, not really, with their glitter nail polish extras and diet tips and hair tutorials and the stupid photo stories featuring holiday romances and pony club adventures.

“Besides, hello? Sleeping through Saturday night? Are you ninety?!” Ruby promptly fake-snores in her lap, Lacey rolls her eyes and attempts pushing her off, and Mary laughs softly, perched atop her cushion and sitting on her heels, her back as straight as a line.

Yawning, Emma can’t quite find it in her to blame Ruby. The carpet’s really very soft and she’s warm and comfy and wonderfully full. “We should do this more often.” Her snoozing heart, suddenly seized with deranged desire for friendship-bracelet-making, has her speak without thinking,
another one of her specialties, and she finds herself instantly pelted with cheese crust for it.

“You mad?!” Ruby taps the side of her head. “My brain’s noodle soup. Not doing this again tomorrow! Let a girl have her well-deserved weekend!” With a glance at Mary, she scrambles over to collect her projectiles off Emma’s tummy and the armchair behind her. “Sorry, Mary.” She bends over Emma to check for stains, her long hair tickling Emma’s face. “No grease - we’re good.”

“No,” Emma says, pushing herself up into a sitting position, as Ruby’s lying back down opposite again. “I meant, I don’t know --- go out or something.”

Lacey cocks her head. “Go where? This place’s a dump.”

Damn. She hasn’t thought this through. “Uh,” she stammers, her brain slowly shifting back into gear. “Dunno,” she shrugs. “Frat party? --- Tomorrow?” She definitely has the queen bee’s attention now and it’s making her face burn scarlet. “August can get us in.”

“No bad, Fisher, not bad. Guess we won’t be dying of boredom after all. Rubes?” She pauses braiding Ruby’s hair to tug on it a little. “You in?”

“Sure,” Ruby keeps her eyes closed, her hands folded over her middle in post-pizza Zen. “Not riding the bus, rapists ride the bus,” she mumbles.

Emma turns to look at Mary. “You coming with?”

Mary hesitates. Emma knows she shouldn’t have put her on the spot like that, but she just had to get out of the limelight or her skin would have melted right off her buzzing bones. Imagine the stains!

“Saved a carpet today.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be allowed ---” she trails off, clearly in two minds about the whole affair. “Maybe, if David ---”

“Oh boo! No boyfriends on girls’ night!” Lacey says.

“You just have to sell it right,” Ruby interjects, then bolts upright, nearly knocking out a couple of teeth in the motion, but Lacey’s quick enough to dodge the collision and subsequent trip to the ER for stitches. “Guys! I have a brilliant beyond brilliant idea!”

“Watch it, Parker!” Lacey growls.

“No, seriously!” Ruby exclaims, a fleeting check over her shoulder and a glance toward the door, and then beckons them closer, all sleepiness forgotten. “Listen. How about we tell the powers that be that we’re taking a tour, to check out the campus and maybe talk to some students? Get ‘the true feel’ of the place? They’ll eat it right up - you know, college prep and responsibility, and we’d be going as study group --- it’s perfect! We might even get a lift out of it?”

“Objection!” Lacey threads her fingers together and rests her chin on them, her gaze travelling over each of their faces in turn.

“Sustained ---” Ruby groans. “What?”

“Parties are at night, genius? How do we sell that?”

“And we need to get back,” Emma says.

They are silent for a moment, thinking.
“David has a truck,” Mary suggests. “But - if he’s not supposed to come ---”

“Handsome has wheels?” Lacey whistles through her teeth, impressed at last.

“Technically, he’s not allowed to drive without a licensed driver or at night. And we’re not immediate family ---”

“He’d do it if you asked?” Lacey presses.

“Probably,” Mary doesn’t sound too thrilled with the idea. Well, this one she’s brought on herself. “He’s a reasonable driver and he doesn’t drink,” she says slowly. “It should be fine if we’re not staying too late --- I guess? I’ve wanted to take a look at their curriculum, actually, it’s not a bad school.”

Ruby throws an arm around her shoulders and brings Mary in closer into their conspiratorial circle. “So, you’re in? Yes? Yes?” Mary giggles. “Aaand she’s in and we got wheels, Ladies! Give it up for Ree.”

Mary’s eyebrows shoot up. “Ree?”

“High time for a nickname, girl,” Lacey smirks, patting Ruby on the back for her creativity. “If you introduce yourself as Mary-Margaret, you’re not getting past the door. And neither are we.”

Not wanting to be excluded, Emma shuffles closer and leans forward, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Some douche canoes might actually dig it. Good girl gone bad in a plaid skirt. Very catholic boarding school.”

Ruby raises her hands. “I’m too sober for this conversation!”

“Yeah, gross.” Lacey laughs, leaning in and shifting her weight onto her knees, but she’s not meeting Emma’s eyes. Perhaps the chairlady of the bad girls club isn’t quite as bad as she’s having everyone believe - or, maybe, the opposite’s true and Lacey French has far more skeletons hidden away in her closet than anyone realizes. Emma searches Lacey’s flushed face. Yep, there’s a lie right there. But she doesn’t know what it is. Yet.

“So, outfits?” Emma tosses the verbal ball, and watches, fascinated, as Lacey, the high-and-mighty Lacey French, volleys the shot right over the net in a beautiful backhand volley, redirecting all attention to Ruby instead. Bullseye, baby.

They continue their planning and scheming in hushed voices until Mrs. Blanchard comes in to suggest they break it up for the evening, but, of course, they are very welcome to resume another day and come by again. Mary, the dutiful new recruit that she is, wastes no time to tell her delighted mother about their college tour plans for the next day, and it’s a blessing that Mrs. Blanchard attributes her very red face to the lateness of the hour and an excess of empty carbs rather than the omitted truth of a college frat party.

Mother and daughter see them to the door and, in the general chatter and commotion in the hallway - the tying of shoelaces, buttoning of coats and zipping of schoolbags, no-one is paying her any mind, as she’s dashing back to the living room, after having mumbled something about a missing earring. They never pay enough attention to her to notice that she’s only ever been wearing one to begin with.

Standing in the door, heart pounding and arms and legs tingling with anticipation, Emma holds her breath, steps nearer to the table and, after checking that no-one has followed her, quickly swipes the expensive fountain pen into her jacket pocket, turns and walks away, a cheerful smile on her face,
her legs pillars of strawberry Jell-O.

Mrs. Blanchard is waiting for her at the open front door.

“Found it!” She brushes her hair back from her right ear to show off the small silver hoop dangling there. “Must have gotten caught on something.”

“Wonderful, pet. Everyone’s waiting for you at the car.”

Emma nods, smiling, her heart going two hundred miles per hour. “Thank you for having us.” She swings her bag over one shoulder.

“Any time, Emma-dear. Give your mother my best, will you? Her creations might be posing a serious challenge to my waistline every summer, but the Rocky Road especially is absolutely divine!” She laughs and Emma’s stomach churns with guilt.

“Will do. Bye, Mrs. Blanchard!”

Her legs an odd combination of stiff and wobbly, Emma walks the few steps to the driveway, waves again and hugs Mary goodbye, then squeezes into the backseat with Ruby and Lacey.

Mary’s stupid pen is burning red hot at her side. She struggles to keep her hands steady enough to buckle up and, when the car is finally moving and everyone’s talking, she is not paying the slightest bit of attention to the conversation, but is thinking of cookies and gingerbread, lemonade and vanilla, and her mother’s ice cream instead. Emma wonders, yet again and dimly, in the last decent parts of her brain she’s got left, why the hell she has to be like this and do all the things she does - even when she really doesn’t mean to.
There are no chapter titles, but I’ve been referring to this one as God dammit, Lacey in my head.

Songs: X and X

They are in the bathroom, in the farthest stall from the door. She’s sitting on the closed lid of a gurgling toilet, and Lacey’s pushed the curtains of hair from her face and pulled them up into a high ponytail. Emma’s eyes are closed and her head’s tilted up toward her like she’s the sun as Lacey dabs on her own personal mix of Carbon, Ambience and Bisque onto Emma’s closed, quivering eyelids.

Mere minutes ago they had been upstairs, in a room jam-packed with college students, reeking of natty light and sweat. Emma, still recovering from the shock of actually having gotten them in by giving her brother’s name at the door, had stood quietly, sipping on her drink and surveilling the scene. She had watched Lacey immediately launch into action, already tonsils-deep in some guy some five minutes later, and Mary chatting up a science geek to vanish out onto the veranda to talk rare bird populations of North and South America. Ruby had joined the jocks on the dancefloor and gotten herself roped into a serious tournament of four-a-side beer pong, which, for all Emma knows, is probably still in session.

She had stood there, concentrating hard on not making faces whenever the warm keg beer touched her lips, and had felt nothing but secondhand-embarrassment at the grinding action going on in the corners and pity for the blonde dancing in the middle of the pool table, clearly under the impression that she was the hottest thing since sliced bread, and even more clearly also heavily under the influence already. The latest hits had been playing in the room and body-thumping electro-noise blared in the basement. She witnessed too many failed attempts to pick up girls and guys alike, and too many drunken PDAs with complete strangers to count, someone ran the beer pong table, and, within the hour, the floor had become so disgusting you wouldn’t have dared take off your shoes. People were absolute idiots, and she had somehow wound up surrounded from all sides.

Finally, Emma had settled down on the windowsill, dying of revulsion and boredom, her eyes growing weary of the boys who looked barely old enough to have finished high school themselves - some wearing neon green shirts that said sober monitor - and she had found herself following Lacey about the room instead, with her eyes only, like a pathetic puppy dog dumped to wait outside the store.

And then Lacey had popped up next to her, loud and confident, in her killer heels and tight-fitting little black dress that barely covered anything, asking who she’s been making eyes at, and deciding that she would be her wingwoman for the night.

And now they’re in the downstairs bathroom, because Emma had asked, “How do you get your eyes like that?”, and Lacey’s planted a glossy kiss on her cheek and grabbed her hand.

“I’ll show you.”

Emma feels her face grow hot.
There is the piss and pot stink of the bathroom, her back pressed hard against the cold silver flush, and Lacey hunched over her, filling her face with a curious combination of pastel pink flowers, cinnamon and smoke-scented hair, and she’s like, “Relax,” but it’s hard, because this is Lacey French, queen bee of queen bees, and the fact of her straddling Emma on the toilet, giving her her smokey eyes, certainly isn’t helping.

Emma clenches her fluttering lids tight, then relaxes them again. “Okay?” She asks, imploring her eyelids to goddamn be cool, just calm down already. Lacey’s giving her this, giving her her signature look, war paint of the bad girls club, in an impromptu initiation ritual of sorts. She’s sharing her secret, sharing it with Emma, so she better not mess it up.

“Well,” Lacey laughs, her breath a warm, sweet breeze of cherry and mint on Emma’s face. “Actually, not really.” She twists her body a bit to the side and bends backwards to reach for her bottle on the floor, and Emma can’t help but admire her flexibility.

“Years of ballet, wasted,” She presses the bottle into her hand, grinning like an alley cat, and Emma quickly takes a pull of whatever it is; and whatever it is burns and makes her cough, and Lacey pulls the wand away, waiting for her coughing fit to subside. “You’re a lightweight, Fisher,” she jests. “I suggest serious training. On the job. Starting now.”

Emma laughs, but the sound comes out nervous and small and absolutely not cool at all. Damn it.

“Look up,” she says, so Emma looks up at the holes in the ceiling, at the cracked tiles and the dark water stains, as Lacey’s setting to work on her lash line. Emma feels her lids quiver under the gentle, controlled strokes, helpless to stop the earthquakes rippling through her, and she just wants to slam her eyes shut tight, worried Lacey’s going to get really pissed at her for not keeping it together long enough to get her eyes fixed.

Instead Lacey resumes telling her about that jerk she’s dated - or not dated - for a bit there, a while back, who went full psycho on her ass when she dumped him, and would she believe it, he’s calling her again, blowing up her phone at three in the morning, and, oh god, she swears, if he’s showing up outside her house with a boom box on his shoulder blasting *Time of My Life*, and he would, he totally would, he’s just that kinda guy, she’s leaving the state.

“What a tool,” Emma’s eyes leak in the effort to relax and she breathes out through her nose in frustration. Lacey should tell Will, she says, because Will has it bad for her, didn’t she know? He’d beat that douche up for her, if she asked. But Lacey’s all like hell no, and she’s had no idea, actually, where has she heard? And it’s really sweet, of course it is, Will is a nice guy, but he doesn’t know how to handle a girl like Lacey, whatever that’s supposed to mean.

Emma’s head is swimming. Make up and bubble gum and boys, and it’s really bloody hot in here.

“You know when they watch you sleep, that’s when things are going south. And not in the R-rated sense of the expression, unfortunately.”

“Totally,” Emma nods like she gets it, like she’s been there a thousand times before. What’s wrong with watching someone sleep, though? Unless you are a sparkly vampire, that is. “Way psycho.”

“Oi, stop moving, you’re fucking it up!” Lacey says, so she stops nodding and holds her breath again. “Yeah, I’ll have to tell him to take a nice, long one-way trip to the Bahamas, Bermudas or the blazes,” she says sniggering, pressing her pencil deep into the inner corner of each of Emma’s eyes. “He’s gonna cry.”

“Oh,” Emma says, because she can’t think of anything better to say. Lacey’s so close, her eyelashes
are tickling her cheek and they are breathing in the same funky air. “That’s kinda sad?”

“Try pathetic.”

Yeah, that too. She starts to nod, but catches herself just in time.

“Seriously, hold still,” Lacey says. Emma watches her grab the black liquid liner from her small floral zipper pouch, green fabric, patterned all over with white flowers or maybe they are four-leaf clovers, 70’s vintage, retro, one of a kind. “I don’t wanna waste it. Cost me big bikkies.” Cost her what now? Whatever it is, she feels it pay off as a cold stabby stream across her waterline, little pointed strokes that make it hard not to flinch and fuck up spectacularly.

“There, all done,” she says, at long last, and Emma shifts on the toilet seat. “Paws off or it’ll smudge,” and when Emma carefully opens one eye, Lacey has already drifted away from her and out of the stall and is checking herself out in one of the cracked mirrors above the sink, stuffing her pouch back into her bra and hitching up her dress.

She tries not to blink and to keep her eyes from watering, tries even harder not to look at her, at the dark red her lips are covered with, which she is now reapplying in the mirror. Her eyelids are lined thickly on top with the same liquid liner, heavy and imperious, her long lashes blacker than black. Emma can’t stop looking at Lacey’s reflection like she’s from another galaxy, even though they’ve been hanging out more lately.

“We’re done?” She asks, her voice rather raspy. She clears her throat.

Lacey finishes putting on lipstick, applying the last specks of color with the pad of her index finger, and Emma watches her add a fresh coat of eyeliner to one eye, her mouth falling open, her facial muscles pulled taunt in concentration, and she says “Yeah,” stretching up on her toes as better to see herself in the broken glass.

It’s easy to imagine Lacey as a dancer, strong and graceful, in some sun-drenched, upscale studio with warm wooden flooring and walls lined with long, polished mirrors, rising to dance on the very tip of her toes, holding herself up with ease, floating and twirling weightlessly across the room, poised and balanced, like a cerulean ribbon in the wind. She’d perform a perfect pirouette, her feet barely touching the breathing wood, and the room would smell of sun-warmed lavender.

Lacey’s dress hikes up a little higher and Emma starts. She stares at the angry welts, the slightly faded purply blue bruises edged with yellow like inverted galaxies, and her heart clenches painfully, sucking all color from her universe, before it explodes right out of her chest.

Fuck.

“How does it look? Does it look okay?” She says, quickly getting to her feet to go stand next to Lacey, and accidentally flushes the toilet.

Lacey laughs. “Go on, take a look,” she says, gesturing toward the mirror beside her, but Emma doesn’t want to go see. She doesn’t care what it looks like anymore. “You sure this was a good idea?” She asks, glancing at Lacey’s face in the mirror and feeling guilty. It was her idea. Hers. Lacey raises a brow at her, so Emma quickly adds, “What if we get in trouble for this?” to signal that she’s not talking about the makeup here. The makeup is perfect.

She’s saying “Fiddlesticks,” and shaking her head, but Emma can see her eyes cloud, the moment of hesitation right there, plainly visible on her face --- or perhaps she’s imagining things now, maybe it’s not what it looks like. She tries thinking of snow days and sledding, internally nodding along at
herself, but she can’t quite shake the nagging, uneasy feeling that’s growing in the pit of her stomach.

Lacey waves the coat of eyeliner dry with a hand.

“Love your dress, by the way,” Emma says into the silence, and Lacey’s face lights up with a genuine smile.

“Thanks, that’s so nice,” She blows her a little tipsy kiss in the mirror and fishes her bag out of her bra again to safely store away the lipstick and eyeliner, but her fingers fumble with the tiny silver zipper and everything spills out into the sink instead. “Oops,” she says, a finger pressed to her lips, and they both laugh.

Unintentionally, Emma’s gaze drops to the cleavage that’s spilling next, spilling right over the scooped neckline of Lacey’s dress, pale, freckled porcelain patches of skin hugged by a thin bra that she can only see the outline of, as Lacey scoops everything back up.

Makeup, credit card, loose change and a bobby pin or two.

Emma takes a deep breath.

“Oh my god,” she finally looks at herself in the mirror, momentarily stunned, looking at one eye, the other eye, then the other again, and, taking it all in, she must admit she’s feeling pretty hot, almost. “Holy smokes,” she breathes, and licks and then smacks her glossy pink lips together, little bursts of sticky cherry coke flavor popping on her taste buds. Between her smokey eyes, the messy ponytail and her favorite white tank top, things aren’t half-bad, actually. “Thanks so much for this, Lacey. Seriously.”

“It’s just eyes,” Lacey shrugs. “It’s nothing,” but she’s still smiling.

Emma takes a step back and looks at her middle, turning sideways to make doubly sure. She frowns. “I don’t look fat, do I?”

With her eyes all smoky and her belly full of liquid courage from mysterious brown bottles, she’s totally not hungry. She feels almost like she could be Lacey. Lacey, who, with each swaying movement of her hips and each alluring twist of her body, has everyone swooning over her without realizing it. Lacey, who boys serenade like they do in the movies, burning her photographs when she breaks their hearts. Emma sucks in her tummy.

Lacey rounds on her, staring in disbelief. She says, “Pig’s arse, you are!” Her eyes flashing like she’s actually angry with her. She says she wishes she had Emma’s hair, so shiny and soft, and also her legs, hello, she’d chop them off right now, hand her a knife, she’s serious. How she would kill for legs like that, toned and long, the bomb in them skinny jeans, and she doesn’t even have to wear heels. Stupid heels that cut up the balls of her feet and make her toes bleed, does she even understand how awesome that is? And maybe she wants to get her eyes checked, just a thought, high time for some contacts, because she’s hot, and anyone who can’t see that can go fuck themselves. By the time she’s done and has put an arm around Emma and turned her back round to face the mirror for another look like she is her personal life coach, Emma’s face is an overripe tomato.

She raises her hands in front of her body in surrender. “Okay, okay. Not fat, alright, got it! Jesus,” They smile at each other. “You know, a simple ‘no’ would have done the trick.”

Lacey flips her hair over her shoulder, filling the space around them with flowery spice. She pokes
Emma on the side playfully. “Let’s go back up there, yer mug, I need another drink!”

“All right,” Emma says, and runs her tongue over her teeth, tasting cinnamon and butterflies.

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When they emerge from the bathroom, there is Ruby waiting and pushing herself off the wall with a bored expression, strolling over to meet them, swaying her hips.

“Fucking finally! What were you two doing in there?!”

Why hasn’t she just followed them inside if she’s that impatient, it’s a free country. Emma feels Ruby’s eyes travel over her burning face and instantly dart to the black liquid that’s still drying there and blurring her vision, unmistakably marking her as one of them. She keeps perfectly still, levelly holding Ruby’s gaze. Her heart is pounding so loud in her ears, it’s drowning out the the music and the laughter wafting down from the upstairs room. Then Ruby blinks and she wins.

“Here! I got us these,” Ruby tosses a pack of cigarettes which almost hits Emma across the face, slicing her cheek open, and Lacey catches it with a lazy hand and surprisingly good reflexes, nods her thanks, and shakes one out to put it behind her ear, where it is greedily swallowed by her mane of lush curls.

“Cheers.” She throws the cigs back at Ruby, who pockets them in her back pocket. “You’re a lifesaver.”

They start walking back up the stairs, walking the same measured steps side by side, she and Lacey easily falling into step, and Emma doesn’t miss Ruby’s little frown, barely there until it isn’t. “What on earth took you so long anyway?” Ruby says, hurrying after them, talking exclusively to Lacey like Emma’s air. Less than air, probably. Dried dirt under her fingernails, mud under her boots. “I’ve nearly died twice out here.”

“Chill, Rubes. Eyeliner emergency,” Lacey says, smirking. “Our dear Emma here has found a nice, young caveman she quite fancies.” She giggles, patting Emma’s arm affectionately, and leans into her in a way that’s supposed to say, hey, I’m just pulling your leg here, and Emma is still marveling at the fact that she understands this, that she has suddenly become fluent in girl like it’s her native tongue and she’s just forgotten about it, oh, for the past 16 years or so, for some reason, it happens, when the music hits them like a techno truck, the impact of the crash reverberating in her spine, whiplashing her right back into the present and out of her reverie.

“Oooh,” At long last, Ruby manages to squeeze in and link arms with Lacey, and there’s no mistaking the look that’s exchanged then, silently and quickly, no missing the sharp blades hissing in the air, the daggers thrown like they’re in a circus ring - only they’d not be missing their target, cutting the ears right off instead. “Who?” Ruby asks, as though there hadn’t just been a battlefield strewn with dead bodies spanning out between Emma and herself, and she scans the crowd, feigning interest where there is absolutely none. None at all.

Emma’s not dumb. She too can play this game. She hooks her arm through Ruby’s other one, whispering, “Him!” and nods in the direction of a dark-haired guy shooting pool with his buddies. She even has the decency to blush on cue, even if it’s only by accident.

He’s a reasonable choice, objectively handsome, tall, dark and brooding, and he looks like maybe he too owns a motorcycle. Emma would like that. She watches him take his next shot, impressed, as the red-and-white ball cleanly disappears into the pocket and he proceeds to circle the table to sink ball after ball at a leisurely pace, almost like he’s bored by his own talent. He is good, and he’s wearing a
leather jacket, and, oh, she’s also seen him turn down Ruby earlier. Not that that has anything to do with anything, really, but yes, reasonable, quite reasonable, indeed.

Ruby pulls a disgusted face. “Good luck with that, he’s a dick!”

“Oh, come on, you don’t know him, Rubes,” Lacey’s voice is rather louder and shriller than would be strictly necessary, but then she’s also more trashed than that too, and the music’s drowning out everything they are saying anyway. Emma looks at her, a sinking feeling in her stomach. Lacey doesn’t notice how all the guys are eyeing her up, isn’t even aware of their small, piggish eyes and grabby hands, how they are undressing her to jump her bones, or maybe she is, and she just doesn’t care, but Emma doesn’t like it. She doesn’t like it one bit.

“Go ‘n’ get him, gurl,” Lacey says, giggling and making the three of them sway a little.


Lacey looks at her, takes a deep breath and says “Okay,” then saunters over to the pool table, and Emma has no choice but to run after her, mortified. “Wait! Lacey!”

Too late.

“Hey, handsome,” Lacey says, in what’s clearly meant to be her sexy voice, but she’s slurring her words, alcohol and accent weighing them down and dragging them back into the mud. Handsome doesn’t seem to mind. He’s raising his brows at her, grinning in that lazy way bad boys do, with only one side of his mouth curving upwards. She leans forward, and he’s getting a nice eyeful of of the creamy-white skin running over the neckline of her snug black dress. When he lowers his eyes, his smile widens. “Yes, sweetheart?”

Emma wants to grab Lacey’s hand and pull her back, pull her off the table, just --- away, but her hands are frozen in fists at her sides. Lacey is playing with her hair, twisting a curl around her fingers. “My friend likes you,” she says, smiling coyly, and Emma wishes the ground would swallow her right up. “I thought you should know.”

"Ah, well, is that so?” he asks, his voice like velvet, and somehow sinister. His eyes do this little dip from their faces to their chests. "And does your friend have a name?" He turns his full attention to Emma, who feels her stomach lurch at something, something elusive, jumping out at her from behind the deep, clear blue, but she can’t quite put her finger on it.

She steps in front of Lacey and swiftly takes the cue from his hands.

Forcing him to step out of her way, Emma moves around to the other side, her eyes on the bright balls littering the table, and she releases the breath she’s been holding, adjusts her stance and leans forward to take her shot. “My name is Emma,” she tells him, hitting her target and sinking it in the corner pocket, “Emma Fisher.”

Pool is like shooting fish in a barrel, almost quite literally, and Emma continues sinking balls with ease, feeling a lot calmer and more confident, but aware of everyone’s eyes on her, and she cackles inwardly at the thought of Ruby, who hasn’t followed them and is surely shooting burning arrows through her back from across the room right about now, ready to pounce and claw her eyes out.

She meets Handsome’s eyes before firmly sinking the last solid, straightens her back, and, in passing and smiling sweetly at his stunned face, pushes the cue back into his hands. Then she hoists herself up to sit on the edge of the table, legs stretching and ankles crossing, leaning back on her arms and tilting her head to fix him steadily. His move.
“Nice to meet you, Emma,” His voice lingers on her name, as if testing it out for size or flavor. It seems to suit his taste, for he’s giving her a little nod and a small appreciative smile, and then turns his attention to the table, setting up another game. “Where’d you learn to play like that?”

Emma has to crane her neck to keep him in view. “Oh, here and there,” she returns airily, aware of how cocky she sounds.

“Mystery woman, I like that,” He shoots her a crooked smile and raises both eyebrows exaggeratedly, which is to say for a couple of seconds, but it’s long enough to ensure there’s heat in her cheeks and that the battle she’s fighting - against the smile tugging up the corners of her own mouth - will be a lost one. She may have won the pool game, but he’s winning the war.

Up close, he really is handsome, she muses watching him play, buff even, with dark stubble on his chin and toned forearms that are guiding his cue ever so smoothly, his strokes swinging back and forth, straight and perfect, and, when he’s leaning across her lap on his last stroke of their second game, pausing at the cue ball and pulling his cue back slowly before hitting the winning shot, his black, untidy hair smells like musk and leather and places where the forest meets the sea, and Emma would bet her tingling behind that he does have a bike - a Harley, black and silver XL Sportster, fast and thrilling.

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Mission accomplished.

Grinning to herself, Lacey backs away from the table to leave the two kids to it. But instead of looking for Ruby in the crowd, she turns on her heels and makes her way through the party, goes from the kitchen - to score another cup of punch - into the hall, and quietly slips out the front door and into the night, the cool air wonderfully brisk and refreshing on her heated skin. Outside, she sinks down on the lawn, not quite as graceful as one might have expected from a former ballerina perhaps (well, maybe a shickered one), but she’s alone out here, and nobody’s seen anything. Heaving a sigh of relief, she puts her hands behind her head and lies back on her palms to stare up at the stars, listening to her heart thump inside her chest and feeling her body reverberate with the soft aftershocks of the music.

Everything feels dulled down, perfectly serene inside and out, the punch sweet and pleasant in her mouth like ripe grapes in late summer, and she genuinely would have called it a good night, had it not been for a polished pair of black shiny shoes suddenly appearing at her side without so much as a warning, bursting her merry bubble.

“Miss French?”

The universe is an arse.

Feeling faintly sick, she sits up. Maybe she shouldn’t have polished off everything that poured and then some, but it’s too late for that kind of epiphany now - several vodkas, some keg beer and and at least four cups of punch too late, to be exact. And hadn’t there been a bottle of Jaeger at some point? Where’s that gotten to? She blows a curl out of her face.

He is wearing a black suit, a silver tie, and a chagrined expression.

“How ya going, Dr. Gold?” She throws him an endearing smile, and he blinks at her, starts to open his mouth to speak and then closes it again. The moment sags and decides to last for several hours, but she’s too full to care, has been off her face since eleven, give or take a little, and what does it matter if she’s sprung and dead as a doornail? Nothing she can do about that now, so she might as
well try and make the best of the situation. “What brings you here on this fine night, Sir?” She asks him, or believes she’s asking him, anyway - she’s still deaf and words have turned into silly little buggers, fuzzy cotton-ball-creatures that are bouncing around on her tongue and running rogue.

She staggers to her feet, grins at him over her shoulder, and sits down on the little mossy wall, patting the cold square of stone next to her invitingly, but he’s not too favorably impressed, and her smile, a smile so used to winning, falters a little. “That a weird way of saying no?” She asks, even though he hasn’t said anything. Not yet.

(_Don’t just stand there, make a noise!)_

He just looks at her and she at him, and the world stops for a breathless second before it’s set back into motion, going backwards and spinning, and all she can see through the blur is him, and herself and the funny concrete wall that’s come up between them. She blinks and reaches out a hand to touch it, but it recoils from her touch and shoots away from her outstretched fingers so fast, flashes of light burst in her eyes and she has to slam them shut and hold onto the garden wall to keep steady.

Lacey puts her face in her hand, breathing deeply against her cool, damp skin. It reeks of beer and sweat and moldy earth.

When she lifts her gaze again, he’s gone, has vanished just like that and without a word, like he’s evaporated into the soft drizzle that’s showering her upturned face in itty bitty drops as she turns her eyes to the sky again, her mind and mood clouding over, and her reeling head and turning stomach coming to a full, shuddering stop.

She’s feeling crook.

Lacey runs a trembling hand over her face, shivering. Has she lost her mind? Is she now so far off her rocker that she’s started seeing things? Not dead people exactly, but people nonetheless, people frowning at her disapproving deep in the dead hours of night. Like, _what_? had that even been --- _real_? She looks down at the red plastic cup in her hand and pokes it with a probing finger. Not people, _him_. Shrugging, she knocks back the rest of the murky, lukewarm swill.

“Cheers big ears, Mama,” she says, toasting the night sky. She’s not having any more punch tonight.

_Only, of course she is._ And, of course, she’s going back inside, the wave of heat and sweat and molecules of saliva hitting her square in the face and making her gag.

But if the world is spinning, she just has to spin with it, dancing, laughing and hugging people, plonking down on chairs and laps; And he’s built like a brick shit house, the flannel of his shirt soft against her palms, one strong arm around her middle; and he asks her, does she like to play games, but he’s not talking hockey anymore, his skin flush against hers, but Lacey _doesn’t mind_ --- _doesn’t mind_ --- _doesn’t mind_ --- _mind what’s happening between her widely parted thighs_, and their breath is steaming the windows, her fingers drawing lines; and there’s the heat of his body, pulsing - teeth and spit and sting - and so she smiles; not an unwelcoming smile, and she catches her own dead eye in the rearview mirror, her insides on fire, but she _can’t cry, can’t cry, can’t cry_; not in the back of a parked jeep, wrists tied together with a pair of dirty gym socks, getting terrible head from a random guy.
Lacey's in trouble ...

She clearly has potential. A lively young mind and sharp wit, Lacey French is a diamond in the rough (the very, very rough): good-natured, bright and surprisingly well-behaved and eloquent when she wants to be. On a good day, she’ll be interested in everything he has to say and listening intently, completing her work without much complaint, but the minute he turns his back on her, she goes and shows nothing but disregard for the rules, their agreement, and his efforts to teach her about more than just numbers.

Gold sits, seething silently, but he’s keeping his temper in check. What’s done is done, she’s young and foolish, and her Saturday night escapades shouldn’t be cause for his perfectly good Monday to be ruined. His mouth twitches. Quite frankly, he’s surprised she turned up at all. Does she think him stupid? What is going on in that pretty head of hers, her skull as thick as stone or brick, so hell-bent on banging against a wall, any wall, every wall in her path?

He’s been quietly instructing her after class, taking the time out of his busy schedule to sit her down in his office and explain patiently, trying, apparently in vain, to coax her into adopting a better attitude and smooth out her rough edges, but this is all he’s getting in return. Sneers and lies and backtalk, and absolutely no consideration for his person or time whatsoever. No respect, no gratitude, only resistance and resentment.

Well, you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.

He regards her carefully, the wayward child with her cool poise and detached way of caring very much about all the wrong things, studies every detail of her bright beauty, a blue sea wave swelling onto his heart and leaving it soaked in silent melancholy in its wake. It can’t be helped. He doesn’t have enough hours in the day to make up for a lifetime of adults who have let her get used to having her way with them.

“Miss French,” He takes off his glasses, and holding them in one hand, pinches the bridge of his nose. “I assume you already know what I’m about to tell you, so I feel no particular desire to spend many words on the matter, words that will, undoubtedly, go right over your head anyway. You have made it perfectly clear that you are not willing to listen and I am very much done talking.”

There is no answer, no agreement or protest following his statement, and, if anything, her apathy makes him even more furious. Her unwavering indifference is a strain to watch, not because it hurts his feelings - which it doesn’t, really - but because it’s hurting her and will come to cost her dearly in the foreseeable future. Her future. If only he could get her to care about that. But she’s not ready.

“Please, gather your things, go on with your afternoon however you see fit, and close the door on your way out.”

(Crickets. Nothing but crickets. Well then.)

He looks up, catching the troubled look on her face. Hesitation.
"Perhaps all isn’t lost. If she wants his help, however, she will have to ask for it. And if she asks for it, she will have to abide by the rules. It’s her choice, but he’s going to tell her in no uncertain terms that he’s not someone she can play her little games with. Theirs is an unequal relationship, he’s the adult, the teacher, her guardian, and she’s a child in desperate need of guidance and correction. If she stays, she’s to fully understand and accept that by the end of today’s detention with him. He’s set down the rules and the consequences for breaking them and will hold her to them, no matter what.

“Now,” he says slowly, putting down the glasses on the desk and immediately picking them back up by the temple cover.

Whatever she decides to do, today will mark a turning point in their relationship. Either she walks out of his office now and things between them go back to the way they were on his first day here, or she decides to stay and he promises to teach her for as long as it takes and to make damn sure she learns and shines and takes the world by storm, as it is within her capacity to do, as she’s supposed to be doing. But his guidance and counsel will come at a cost, and he wonders if she’s truly prepared to pay the price. It’s a steep one, he knows that, but most things in life, most lessons learnt, do not come cheap.

“I believe you heard me, Miss French,” He’s speaking carefully to her, almost softly, and it’s making things a million times worse than she’s already feeling. Lacey worries her bottom lip, holding her breath. “You may go. I have no intention of wasting anyone’s time. Especially not mine.”

She squirms nervously and drops her gaze to his hands, watching his long fingers move papers from one stack to his left to another on his right. Her heart is hammering in her throat, choking her and rendering her mute, and she sits and blinks, and blinks some more, braiding and unbraiding her fingers in her lap, in and out, in and out, trying to catch her breath and clear her head.

(Now what?)

She could go, get up from the uncomfortable visitor's chair now and leave, and all of this would be over in a minute, would be over for good. Only, she realizes, feeling hot tears spring into her eyes, she really doesn’t want that.

“Please,” she says quietly. “Please, Sir. May I stay? I’d really like to stay and work.” He looks at her sharply, and her heart plummets back down and shoots right through into her stomach like an asteroid. She draws a shaky breath. “I - I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to waste your time. Please.”

“And yet here we are,” he says under his breath, wiping his eyes, his face, the glasses, and puts them on again, folds the handkerchief and puts it back neatly in the breast pocket of his shirt. He clears his throat, joins the tips of his fingers together. She feels like bursting into tears.

(No. No, no, no. Please!)  

“Let me make one thing unmistakably clear: you are free to go. If you wish to stay and continue your work with me here, you may do so, but not before acknowledging that I am doing you a courtesy when you’ve shown me nothing but disrespect,”

She is glass. Glass shattering with each word that’s hitting her ringing eardrums. And she can’t stop her lower lip from trembling. Lacey looks down at the tips of her shoes, silver buckles and black bows. Oh God, she really doesn’t want to cry, not now, not sitting here all clamped up and miserable, like a 10-year-old getting a right royal dressing-down. What’s he so cross about, anyway, and why is it bothering her so much? It shouldn’t fucking hurt like this. She doesn’t care what he thinks, doesn’t care what anyone thinks!
“I’m sorry. I truly a-”

“I wasn’t done speaking yet, young lady,” he coolly cuts across her apology, a frosty slap in the face, and she hears the glass crack and splinter under the weight of his severe tone. It doesn’t carry, just looks it, and she’s going to fall through and drown in the freezing water. “For every action there is a reaction, for every decision, a consequence. If you decide to proceed, you will have to own up to your recent mistakes, the poor choices you’ve made, and face the repercussions,” He pauses, cocks his head to the side. “Miss French, are you truly ready to do that?”

(Please, just please.)

She nods, not trusting her voice to speak. (Yes, yes, anything, dammit, if he just stops looking at her like that!) Her chest is heaving, her heart and lungs and throat rubbed raw, and she blinks away the sting of tears in her eyes, but doesn’t dare lower them again.

Another Pause. A beat. Two. Three.

“Very well then. What do you have to say for yourself?” He’s fixing her with his most disapproving stare, and her skin crawls. She wants to look away, look anywhere that is not his face, but she can’t.

“I - we just --- really, I can explain everything,” she begins, sitting up, but really, she can’t explain anything. She doesn’t know why she did it. Again. “It’s just, August, Emma’s brother - well, sort-of-brother, they’re not actually related - he goes there, and ---”

He cuts her off with such a glare that she falls silent as if struck.

“Miss French! I absolutely do not want to hear your poor attempts at excuses!” He says firmly. “The excuses, the lying, the drinking. That is going to end here and now, is that understood?” His voice is calm, but there’s finality in it that doesn’t brook dissent on her part.

“Yes, Sir,” she says meekly, feeling an uncomfortable flutter in her belly as his expression darkens.

“This is the second time you’ve deliberately, openly disobeyed the rules. The second time you’re trying to explain the matter away, and the second time I’ll have to punish you for it, because apparently the first time didn’t stick.”

Lacey glances around nervously, her eyes darting to the side of his desk, to the long, hard piece of wood peacefully resting against it. Remembering her encounter with his walking stick rather well and all too vividly, she does have a great deal to say on the matter of further punishment, but is holding her tongue. She’s not that stupid. And he’s right. She fucked up. Big time. Lacey bows her head.

“As you will agree, the writing assignment I set you for your last indiscretion - while completed in a timely manner and of surprisingly decent quality - if highly unusual in content and format, but acceptable, if simply from a lack of clearer instruction on my part -”

She looks up at this, at the words almost sounding like praise, and on any other given day, she would have challenged him on how she’s clearly been within bounds to hand in what she had, and didn’t he think it was funny, comical even, and should she go and recite it for him, because she’s practiced and knows all the words by heart - but not today. Today she doesn’t feel like cracking jokes or teasing him until his blood boils like water in a kettle. Chances are it already is.

“-- will not suffice today. Before we resume our work, I think it best I take care of the matter at hand immediately.” He looks at her over the top of his glasses, his eyebrows drawing together, and she’s got fire ants crawling up her legs and all over her body.
“Up,” he commands. “And get yourself behind your chair, Miss French!” Looking at him with alarm, she slides out of her seat at once and stumbles to her feet, her legs and arms suddenly too long and too wobbly to coordinate movement properly, but she manages to do as instructed and stands - with her hands clasping one another, her insides growing warm in a very unpleasant way.

“Hands at your sides! Feet together! Stand up straight!” he barks, and she jumps, her stomach churning in fear. “And let me assure you, young lady, that by the end of this afternoon, your bottom is going to be considerably redder than your face.”

Lacey blushes, her cheeks burning red, her heart and stomach dropping simultaneously.

*(Oh God, not again.)*

She squeezes her eyes shut.

She does feel a little foolish standing at attention while he moves his chair out from behind the desk to set it a little to the side like he’s got all the time in the world (*now he’s got time!*), and then settles comfortably back into it, smoothing down his waistcoat and pants, rolling up first his left sleeve and then the right, and straightens his tie. He regards her for a long moment, with what seems to be a habitually deep dissatisfaction, and she waits, silently, her face and ears on fire.

Finally, he beckons her over.

Her legs feel like lead or wood or anything else that’s pretty much stiff and absolutely useless for walking. They are shaking so much she is barely able to take the ten steps over to him. With a rising sense of panic, she stops when he directs her to and stands directly before him, her quivering legs pressed tightly together, hands clasped in front of her body, fidgeting nervously.

His prolonged silence has the effect of winding her up like a watch and filling her with utter terror. Out of the corner of her eye she can see his cane - it’s still there, sitting idly and untouched by the desk, but the sight is doing nothing to relieve the tension. She’s *very much* in the cactus here.

He looks up at her, gaze level. “Miss French, tell me, what happens when you break a rule?”

Her mouth goes dry. “I get punished,” she whispers back, unease and infinite unpleasant possibilities trickling through her spine.

Their knees are almost touching, only a hair left between the kneecaps, and she both wants to take a step back and bolt for the door *and* bend hers a bit to bridge the remaining distance between them. Lacey looks down at her left wrist. No hair tie. She grabs it anyway.

“I have had just about as much as I can take of your impertinence and recklessness,” he lectures, and a flash of defiance crosses her face. He has no right to talk to her like this or treat her this way, she’s practically an adult and perfectly capable of making her own decisions! It’s just the choices that are wrong, *sometimes*. This is silly, and no, she won’t go along with it. “Look, Sir, I already said I was sorry, and there’s no way, no goddamn way, that I am letting you do this again! Once was more than enough.”

He freezes, but only for a second. Then he looks her directly in the eye, fixing her with his sternest and most determined look. “You may be under the impression, Miss French, that this is an open discussion. It’s not. I am, however, sure you are very well aware that I do not permit cursing and swearing in my classroom - or inside my office, for that matter. Consider this your final warning regarding improper language use: past this point, you can no longer bank on any more indulgence from me. I expect you to follow my rules, to the letter, or suffer the consequences.”
With that, he grips her by one arm and guides her across his knee in one swift, fluent motion. “Rules are there for a purpose and we won’t be leaving this room until I am convinced that you have learnt not to treat them as if they apply to everyone but you.” SMACK! He slaps his hand down once - good and hard - onto her upturned bottom, and Lacey’s mouth flies open to let out a gasp of pain, shock and bewilderment, and perhaps also to protest the unfortunate turn her afternoon has taken, but the words have momentarily forsaken her. “Not only have you broken the rules, and repeatedly, but you have defied me, young lady, and I won’t have it.”

Now all the way over his lap, her head down and bottom up high like a disobedient child about to be chastised, her current predicament is easily the most embarrassing tight spot she’s ever been in. Even through their clothing she can feel the warmth of his thighs on her belly and boobs, a twisted, awkward intimacy that makes the blood rush to her face so much faster. Lacey squirms and wiggles on his lap, but he maintains a firm grip on her and, without warning, covers the seat of her skirt in a string of stinging smacks, his large hand landing decisive, powerful blows on both sides of her bottom, the sudden pain a fast, rhythmic stream in her consciousness.

“Owwww! Dr. Gold! Please!” Lacey squeals, her eyes wide with disbelief, and reaches back desperately with her hand in vain attempt to deter the unjust, stop the horrible humiliation and protect her bum from punishment. “Stop it! You --- you c-can’t do that! You’re hurting me!”

Unimpressed, he catches her hand and carefully pins it to the small of her back without breaking his stride. “You shall receive a sound spanking for your Saturday night escapades, Miss French. For breaking the rules and endangering yourself - even when I explicitly told you not to.” So, no drunken Fata Morgana then. How nice.) Lacey’s other hand finds the chair leg and grips it tightly. “I suggest you grip the legs very well, for if you rise from my lap or attempt to cover yourself with your hands again, it will not count and I shall proceed with extra vigor,” he informs her, releasing her arm, and the spanking continues unabated.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

Lacey gasps and grits her teeth. Even with the extra protection her skirt offers, the heat trapped under layers of tweed and cotton is growing fiercer, her bum smarting unbearably - and more so with each merciless slap, but she’s determined not to bawl like a baby. She’s not going to give him the satisfaction. Absolutely not, she isn’t!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

He continues in steady rhythm, showering her backside with hard slaps, and the pain and the position are doing the rest, defeating her every attempt at composure. “OWww,” she whines. “I get it! No more! No more, please!” She struggles to get off his knees and away from the hand and the heat, but he presses his left elbow against her back, forcing her back down. “Not so fast, young lady. Where do you think you’re going? We aren’t even halfway through,” he says, and she can’t get more than a “But, ---” in, which he completely ignores. “You are going to learn, here and now, what will happen to you every time you dare lie, swear, skip, drink or smoke! And I don’t believe we’re there yet.”

Carefully, he folds up her uniform skirt, drawing it steadily upwards by the hem, and Lacey, feeling the cloth rise up her trembling legs, launches an immediate protest, arching her back and twisting her body violently, trying in earnest to escape his grasp whilst shooting her arm back in an effort to push her skirt back down. “Enough! No, don’t! Stop that!”

“And to add insult to injury,” he censures, completely dismissing the hue and cry. “Not only do you pretermit everything you’re told, but you intentionally seek out those situations that are unsafe, situations that pose a great threat to your person, your health, and your physical and mental integrity - all of them potentially harmful and most highly dangerous. That stops now. I won’t allow it.” Two
loud slaps squarely on the back of her exposed thighs draw two equally loud squeals from her, and she stills on his lap long enough for him to push her firmly back into position. Her skirt is now all the way up. He tucks it under the waistband.

(Is it another apology he wants? What is that she has to say to bring this detention from hell to a speedy conclusion and get her bum out of the crossfire?)

“Alright, alright! I’ve learned my lesson. I’m very sorry, Dr. Gold, and I’ll never break another rule again, okay?” She can only just keep her toes and fingertips on the floor. Her head and chest are down lower now, making her all the more aware that her skirt is up and her bottom perched high. He snorts, evidently not believing a word. “It really hurts,” she tries again. “Please let me up.”

He doesn’t. He resumes the spanking, smacking her hard and fast over her panties, and the thin cotton might as well not have been there at all. Gasping at the terrible sting of it and straining not to cry or bolt as the pain comes up like fire seconds after each impact, Lacey grasps the chair legs in her now sweating hands, all escape plans driven clear from her mind, great tears rolling down her face.

“Dr. Gold!”

He pauses just long enough to slip his fingers into the waistband of her panties, pulling them down quickly and baring her bottom, and Lacey wails at the sheer humiliating indignity of it all, her hands flying to her face to hide the tears, the shame and herself behind them. He tugs her panties down to the back of her thighs, then continues to spank her with determination and vigor, alternating from side to side as he’s taking her to task, and little cries escape from her lips in time with the spanks as she kicks and struggles, sobbing into her hands.

“Oooh, please, no more!” she cries. “I’ve had enough! Please stop! Pleeease stop!”

She pleads and she wails, but he won’t be moved. “I’ll be the one to decide when you’ve had enough, young lady,” he says, not slowing down in the least. “And I won’t stop until you are well and truly sorry for not living up to your agreement with me, and for not living up to your full potential. And I expect you to take your well-deserved punishment without any more fuss!” He reaches and pushes her panties all the way down to her ankles, barely pausing long enough for her to catch her breath, before he delivers another dozen firm spanks on her flaming bottom, leaving not an inch of skin unscathed.

“It’s enough! It’s enough!” Lacey howls, and kicks her legs up in an effort to shake away the pain.

He strokes her tender thighs again. “Legs down!” he commands, and, as soon as she has obeyed, traps them with his own, restricting her movements effectively. She wails loudly, no longer worried about keeping anything together, and he brings his hand down hard on her sit spots. Then he strikes her smartly where bottom meets thigh, again and again, building a painful burn that makes her struggle wildly and throw her head back, wailing and whimpering and gasping through her sobs.

“Owwww, PLEASE!” she squeals and churns and bawls, and he pauses for a moment to run the palm of his hand over her blistering behind before taking hold of her hip and pulling her closer against him so she can’t wiggle away. Lacey badly wants to apologize, anything to stop the awful punishment, but she is unable to speak. She can only splutter and weep, until he decides the punishment is over, while he keeps beating the living daylights out of her very sorry bottom.

(Shes sorry, so very sorry, she shouldn’t have done it, any of it, and she knows there is nothing she can do about it now, but she would, she truly would!)

The relentless slaps ringing in her every nerve, the pain lights up places she’d rather had remained
dark, fires up synapses she had long believed dead, electrical impulses traveling fast, crisscrossing her memory and releasing the hounds, opening hearth and home to storms and floods, and she can’t keep the gates closed, can’t push the demons down, can’t cut the wires he is splicing fast enough to return to the safety of the back of her mind, to that blissful non-sentient state that’s so well out of reach. He’s leaving her no choice but to care and to feel, truly feel with every fiber of her being, a falling sensation in the pit of her stomach, and Lacey is crying hard now, choking through her sobs and tears.

She is falling, falling, falling, stripped and defenseless, clutching his trouser leg in one hand and the chair leg with the other. He connects her to the world, to her own skin, and she becomes someone different. Someone softer. Someone so unbearably sad --- it’s threatening to tear her apart at the seams. She’s hurting, hurting so much she can’t breathe, feeling like she’s been turned inside out and will be throwing up her bleeding heart with the next body-shaking sob for sure - or the one after next, or the one after that.

After what seems to Lacey another eternity, he stops.

She has gone limp over his lap and is sobbing in misery and awful, mind-bending embarrassment, but she doesn’t dare move away, doesn’t attempt to stagger up, just remains as she is, crying her literal heart out, until he guides her upright, quickly checks her face, and, mindful of her sore bottom, pulls her gently onto his lap to wrap her in his big arms, bringing her close so she can rest against his chest and cry.

And cry she does.

“I’m so sorry!” she chokes out between her sobs, and then gasps for air, in desperate need for there to be more of it. He doesn’t answer immediately, just continues to hold her until she slowly begins to calm down, her body heaving from the aftereffects of the long, hard cry every other minute or so. “It hurts,” she whispers in a tiny voice, the words muffled against his chest.

“It’s supposed to, Miss French. And I’m afraid you deserved it,” he says after a while, continuing to stroke her head. Then he unwraps her arms from around his neck, maintaining his steadying grip on them. “Lacey, look at me.” She raises her eyes, though with quite some difficulty, and he anxiously searches her face again, before he slips her a handkerchief from his pocket, which she dabs to her eyes, a little embarrassed. Well, more than a little.

“You deserved it for two reasons. First and foremost, because you violated our agreement and put yourself in harm’s way. I feel quite certain the spanking you just suffered has impressed upon you that I expect you to follow the rules and act in a sensible and respectful manner at all times henceforth?” She nods, clutching the handkerchief in her small fist. “Secondly, I wished to make it absolutely clear that I am both willing and able to put you over my knee and spank your bare bottom whenever I determine you need it. Are we clear on that as well?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Lacey nods again, but his words make her cheeks burn and her lip quiver. She hands back the handkerchief. “Yes, Dr. Gold.”

“Very good.” He brushes a lock of mahogany hair away from her flushed cheek. “Then up with you, young lady,” her orders softly. “And fix your uniform.”

Lacey rises stiffly and reaches back to let her skirt down, cringing as the rough fabric falls over her burning bottom and thighs, then bends over a little awkwardly to pull up her panties, grimacing once more as the flaming skin is pulled tight.

“Since you have taken your punishment well and I can see that you are truly remorseful, I shall allow
you to return immediately to your seat, but be warned that, should I have to repeat the lesson, you
will find yourself in the corner with your well-spanked bottom on display to me and any visitors who
might happen by,” he says, motioning her back to the visitor’s chair, before he moves to settle behind
his desk. And a much subdued Lacey returns to her seat in silence, setting her weight gingerly down
on the hot, aggravated skin. She wipes the rest of her tears on the back of her hand and tries to
compose herself, but can’t help the continuing sniffling and hiccupping, her face burning nearly as
red as her bum and thighs.

As soon as they’ve both returned to their seats on opposite sides of his desk, she makes another
attempt to apologize, but meaning every word this time. “Dr. Gold, I really am sorry. I will never do
anything like that again, I swear,” she reaches for a tremulous smile, her eyes wide, large teardrops
clinging to her eyelashes like morning dew.

He does return the smile, but turns it into a soft chuckle. “Of course you will, Lacey. Let’s hope for
both our sakes that it won’t be all that soon though, alright?”

Drawing up her shoulders, she bites her bottom lip and breathes a soft “Okay,” into the air between
them, where it hovers for a long moment before falling softly downward and sinking onto the desk
like a fluffy feather.

He says, “take out a piece of paper, please,” and she doesn’t question it, just gets her writing pad
from her bag and places it on the desk, then looks at him readily. “Have you learnt your lesson, Miss
French?” Her stomach doesn’t clench at the question. His eyes are soft and warm and safe. She nods.
“Then please, kindly repeat the rules back to me?”

Lacey clears her throat and, after another deep breath or two, has located her voice, so she goes, “no
lying, no skipping class, no smoking, no drinking,” ticking each item off in her head. Then there is a
beat before she concludes, “don’t do the thing if it’s stupid.”

“Correct. Now write down what you just said,” he instructs.

(Why?)

She complies a little reluctantly, wordlessly accepting the pen he’s handing her. It’s cold and heavy
between her fingers. Feeling his eyes on her, she begins to write. When she’s finished, she holds the
pad out to him, showing him the list.

“No,” he says, scowling at her, and slides it back like it’s coated in cow dung. “This won’t do. We
will have to work on your penmanship. It’s atrocious. Again. Properly this time, if you please. Start
with appending today’s date.”

“But, ---” Indignant, she draws a sharp breath at his scathing criticism, but quickly deflates again
when she lowers her gaze to look at the page in front of her. Okay, yes, her scrawl is almost as
unintelligible as her dad’s. But what does that matter? It’s much quicker this way, people are nosy
fucks who don’t need to read everything she writes, and she usually uses her phone or computer for
that anyway. Pulling a face, but stifling all further protest, she rips the page from its spiral binding
and crumples it in her fist, then picks up the pen to begin again. She writes the date at the top of the
new page, taking great care to write clearly, and gasps.

She’s more than familiar with her dad’s horrible hand, with the tiny, harried letters racing over the
pages in a headless hurry, holding onto their hats, dropping their keys and losing their slippers mid-
run, slightly bent double as if bracing against strong winds, as if, even rushing like that, their pace is
still insufficient to get the job done on time. She sees it all the time - at home, in the shop, and
whenever she’s picking up a pen herself. They joke about it. Astrid jokes about it. Ruby even
stopped attempting to copy her notes or the homework, claiming that she writes in bloody code. And perhaps she does, or maybe she just doesn’t care to make her writing more legible for other people’s sake.

Lacey picks at a cuticle. The date glistening in blue ink in front of her isn’t the usual smudge and blur, it’s not her at all. It’s neat and pretty. It’s dangerous - and making her sick to the stomach. The gentle, round letters look nothing like her or dad - they are soft and open, sweet and kind, sunny and warm, and they smell of damp earth, chamomile and roses. She wants to rip the page from the pad and tear it into shreds.

“Lacey? Are you alright?”

She hears him speak, speak her name, startled at the sudden sound cutting through the silence, but the words take a moment to fully register with her brain. She starts and drops her pen. “Yeah, yes, sorry,” The ink is smudged, the paper stained and crumpled at the edges, and, touching a finger to a stain in wonder, she realizes they are tears. Her tears. Embarrassed, Lacey sucks in a breath and hastily runs the back of her hand over her eyes. (The fuck, Lacey, get it together!) She takes another shuddering breath and relaxing her jaw and shoulders, tries to chase the fog from her head and the mist from her eyes. “Sorry, Sir. I’ll have to start over.” She shifts in her seat, drawing up a leg to sit on the heel.

“That’s quite alright,” he says, and she feels his eyes on her burning face, her trembling fingers, her numb lip. “Take all the time you need.” Isn’t that an odd thing to say about copying down a list of rules, Lacey wonders dimly, but her thoughts are cushioned by clouds of white cotton, her train of thought diverted and prevented from ever entering central station. She flips a page and rewrites the date, closing herself off to the pretty loops and swirls appearing before her eyes. Just words, they are just words.

When she’s done listing the rules, she puts down the pen and wordlessly slides the paper over to him for inspection. “Better,” he says, not unkindly this time, and yet he slides it right back again. She’s too exhausted to fight him on this, ready to just accept the verdict and try again, but his hands stop her from balling up the sheet, and she looks at him, confused. He’s smiling.

“Leave it. It’s fine as it is,” he says, not letting go of her hand and making her blush, and she doesn’t understand, but then he runs the pad of his thumb over her cracked cuticles and she winces. “I’d like to make another amendment,” he says slowly, inspecting her nails and fingers, and carefully brushes the bruised knuckles with a caring caress, then turns their joined hands, better to see her wrist and the inside of her forearm. “To the list.”

Lacey’s mouth falls open, her heart skipping a beat and thumping hard, and she wants to speak, to pull her hand away, but he’s stroking the inside of her wrist now, trailing the red marks there, his touch light as a feather, and it’s sending little jolts straight through her heart and fresh tears to her eyes. “Rule number six,” he says, moving a single finger slowly up and down the inside of her forearm, and her eyes flutter shut. “You will not engage in any harmful behavior or put yourself in danger - that includes everything from biting your nails to the consumption of potentially harmful substances at, oh, let’s say fraternity parties.”

Old spice, beer and used gym clothes.

Lacey’s eyes fly open.

She doesn’t know if it’s the words or the touch or both, but her foolish heart can’t take it - the
concern, the caress - and she can’t brush the tears away, because he’s got both her hands safely in
his. But perhaps she doesn’t need to. He’s seen her cry before. Hell, he’s seen her cry more than
anyone, and he’s seen her practically naked too, and he’s still here, holding her hands, despite her
very best efforts to lash him away, and maybe it’s okay, it’s okay if she cries a little bit. Or a lot bit.

Lacey couldn’t have stopped the small sobs from escaping her, or her skin from tingling all over, or
her hands from clutching his, even if she had tried - but she isn’t trying.

He lets her have a moment to collect herself before he continues to speak. But then of course he’s
saying, “Lacey, I want to make sure we are clear on this one,” in that urgent voice, and she’s in
mental shambles again. “If you’d be so kind as to add it to the list?” He lets go of her hands and
indicates pen and paper, and she nods, wiping the tears and snot on her sleeve.

“I - I can’t make it p-pretty,” She laughs shakily, the sound wet like a rainy evening in late autumn.
“P-lease, don’t make me rewrite the whole thing again.”

He raises a brow at her, but she knows it’s okay, she’s okay, they’re okay. “Just put it on there,” he
says, and reaches into one of his drawers to produce another silk handkerchief from it and place it in
front of her. The neat little square is ugly as fuck - mismatched, glum colors and lame patterns - but
for a moment they both look at it with reverence, almost fondly, as if it were a living, breathing thing,
fiercely loved against all the odds.

“Thank you,” she says in a small voice, no longer trying to decipher what it is exactly that she’s
thanking him for, and she watches her pen glide across the white paper, the ink forming another
bullet point and more words in round, open letters that look like they’re a little cold, shivering slightly
on their snowy canvas. She doesn’t think about what the words mean, she can’t, but they are here
now, in blue and white, and she blows out a breath, feeling the rush of relief flood her body before
her eyes take in the entirety of the list, it’s weight and magnitude threatening to crush her like a bug.
She balks, certain the words will close in on her and bury her alive.

“Um, Sir?” Lacey’s feeling queasy, hot panic bubbling up inside her, ready to erupt from her skin
any second now, and she can’t keep the hint of hysteria from creeping into her voice, but she has to
speak, has to say something, explain, make him understand. “I- I can’t, it’s --- I’m sorry.” Her breath
whistles through her teeth, she buries her face in her hands, and he’s saying, “Lacey, look at me,” but
she can’t, not now, it’s too much and she can’t do it, and he’s going to realize it too, and drop her
like the hot mess that she is. Trembling in frustration, Lacey presses both palms hard to her forehead
and slams her burning eyes shut.

But there is his gentle touch again, his warm hands, patiently peeling her fingers away like she’s a
flower not yet in full bloom and they are her petals. Or perhaps she’s an orange and he’s simply
hungry? She blinks at him through the tears welling in her eyes. Flower or fruit, he’s her sun and she
deadly afraid of winter. It’s coming, she can feel it in her bones, and she knows the next will be her
last, but she’s not ready to die.

“I can see that you are worried, and I know it might seem like a lot right now, but let me assure you,
there’s nothing on that list that you can’t handle.”


He shakes his head. “There is one more thing I’d like you to add,” he says, and raises a calming hand
before she can do anything but glare incredulously. “Let’s try and move away from everything you
say you can’t do to focus on what you most definitely can.”

“Which is what?” She shoots back, way snottier than she wants to or feels like, but he’s kidding
himself if he believes she won’t fuck this up. She glowers fiercely at her useless, ink-stained hands. “You can ask for help.”

(Oh. Oh.)

Her head snaps up, and she feels herself blush again. Right. “Right, sorry, ---” she stammers, but he’s not angry with her for the slip. He indicates her pen again, so she picks it up. What, is she supposed to write, ‘Lacey may ask for help,’ now ‘because she’s going to fuck up on her own.’ --- or what? She hesitates, worrying her bottom lip, and looks at him for - something. Clarification, perhaps, because this is stupid.

“I don’t mind how you word it,” he says, as if he’s read her thoughts. “But please do it in a way that is meaningful to you, Lacey.” She wrinkles her nose and he laughs softly. “What I mean is that I’d like you to understand that you can always come to me for help, whether it’s schoolwork,” he pauses, and she watches his Adam’s apple bob. “Or something else you find yourself struggling with. My job is to see to it that you succeed, Miss French, not to chastise you for failing on your own.” So, he thinks she is going to fail by herself, then? Lacey crosses her arms defensively. “You may not need my help, but I’m here, should you realize you want it. My door is always open. I need you to know that.”

He’s pierced another hole in her armor, he and his bloody open door, and there goes her indignation and all the hot air, both leaving her in a whoosh to give the floor to the waterworks. “Really?” Lacey wails, talking more to herself than to him, and she snatches the ugly silk square off the table - just in case - to ball it up between her fidgeting fingers. She huffs, gritting her teeth and rolling her eyes at the ceiling. “Alright, great, noted.”

Mopping her eyes with the soft silk, she glances at him over the seam. He’s dead serious, his offer sincere, and she doesn’t know what to do with that piece of information, because part of her wants to fly into his arms, wants him to hold her again while she sobs hysterically against his chest - which is in equal parts weirdly beautiful and pretty disturbing - and the other part wants to take the stapler, tape and punch from his desk and throw them at his stupid head.

“You are obviously a bright girl, Miss French, but it has come to my attention that social activities are completely missing from your résumé,” he says, and she lowers the handkerchief to look at him properly, slightly startled by the new topic. “Why is that? Nothing here appeal to you? Have you given any thought to joining a sports team or club?”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized it was compulsory,” she grumbles, her voice strangely defensive.

“Sassiness isn’t going to get you very far with me, Miss French,” he says crossly, but his expression softens at once, and she sighs, her hands continuously kneading the silk in her lap. “Extracurricular activities are a vital part of your college application, because they can help you stand out from the thousands of applications colleges receive by highlighting a particular skill or interest of yours that makes you unique and memorable. Colleges like to admit students who are involved in their communities, interact well with others, and work hard to develop their talents and passions. In particular, admissions look for strong work ethic and perseverance, leadership experience, passion and dedication, initiative, and the ability to change, adapt and grow.” He studies her over his steepled hands. “When applying to college, what activity you do is not nearly as important as why you are doing it or the effort you put into it. There has to be something you are passionate about, Miss French, surely?”

He’s making her dizzy. Lacey is fixing a spot behind his left ear, her hands gripping her thighs, nails digging into the soft flesh and muscle tissue, and her mind’s flying across oceans and crossing
borders, taking her to large rooms with barres and mirrors, and she thinks about how, in another life, there was another girl.

A happy girl, who took her first ballet class when she was only three years old, and ever since then has known that she wants to be a ballerina. During the school year, she would take ballet classes six days a week, and beginning in year four of primary school she spent her summers at intensive ballet camps. Then, when she was only 11, she was accepted into a pre-professional program, one of the most competitive youth ballet troupes in the country, which involved practicing and performing roughly 30 hours a week. The girl danced day in and day out, danced in the mornings and late at night, stretching her legs at the dinner table, twirling around the kitchen when she did the dishes, and memorizing complex choreography while completing her schoolwork. She danced until her feet bled and her shoes broke, dreaming about being selected for roles in big company productions that are seen by hundreds of people each night. The girl has loved ballet nearly her entire life, and she plans to continue working as a ballerina and mentoring children and teenagers who are interested in ballet when her active career ends.

But then it had rained most of December and with the rain came the funeral, and with the funeral came the trucks, and the girl never even gets to go back for her second year. The end.

The girl isn’t Lacey and Lacey isn’t the girl, but perhaps she can find something to keep her hands busy and make him happy. “Yes, Sir.” she says, sitting very upright. “You wish me to write that down too? Find a job? Volunteer?”

“That’s right. Break what you need to do down into small steps. Write the first step, whatever you think it should be.”

She writes, adding ‘Ask for help.’ and ‘Think about job.’ to the list, which does sound cringeworthy stupid in her head, and clumsy and dumb, but she doesn’t know how else to put it, and he’s adamant she put down something, so the garbage will have to do.

“All right, Miss French. How long will it take you to complete step one?”

“A couple weeks. Possibly longer. After Christmas, maybe.”

“Not good enough. Let’s think about it for a minute,” he says, his hands forming a near perfect equilateral triangle. “If I may make a suggestion, I believe the soup kitchen is always grateful for an extra pair of helping hands.”

“No! Not there!” The words explode out of her in a gasp and she claps a hand over her mouth, eyes widening, but her reaction makes him smile and lower his raised eyebrows, and he lets it slide, though not without cautioning, “don’t get shirty with me, young lady! You are, of course, free to choose differently.”

“Give me a week?” she says, voice pleading. She’d rather eat razor blades than set foot in Medusa’s kitchen. “Just a week.”

He nods, motioning for her list. “Now we have an agreement.”

Her fingers trembling slightly, she slides the paper across the desk for the nth time this afternoon, and he picks it up, pushes his glasses up on his forehead and studies it closely and carefully. Then he takes out another pen, draws two ridiculously straight lines at the bottom --- and signs the thing. Lacey gapes at him.

He moves the paper toward her and she almost drops her pen. She — she’s supposed to sign it? Sign
it too? But --- why? She looks at the words again, at the rules that make her furious, and, thinking of the consequences for breaking them that make her skin crawl with embarrassment, her eyes zoom in on the word ‘help’. It is such a plain word, but it’s giving her butterflies. A whole bellyful. Silly little butterflies fluttering around her tummy in circles and swirls. With a feeling of mingled dread and foreboding, accomplishment and hope, her eyes dart to his name next, his elegantly curved signature in royal blue ink at the bottom, and she’s sure her heart is going to combust as she scribbles her own, indefinitely less beautiful, signature next to it. She folds the paper into quarters, and hands it back to him, her cheeks burning maroon.

“Excellent, thank you,” he says, sliding the list into a cream-colored envelope. “That was a tough afternoon but I think we’ve reached a very good conclusion. Good job, Miss French, very well done.”

She blinks at him, at his smiling face and kind eyes, slightly puzzled as to what exactly she’s supposed to have done well today. He’s not talking about the arguing, surely, or her having her ass handed to her - quite literally and rather painfully. And he can’t possibly mean the crying either, although she’s sure done a lot of that today. She’s a world-class crier, top-notch. Lacey rubs a tried, stinging eye - party because it itches and party to have an excuse to break eye contact. She shrugs.

He holds out the envelope to her, saying, “Please, take this. Take it home, take it to heart,” and she nods, mechanically reaching out a hand to take it from him and put it in her bag. She’s a stone underwater, a wellie stuck in swamp mud, a hedgehog out and about in the middle of winter - heavy, tired and slow, a little disoriented and vaguely hungry.

“Uh-huh,” she says, and she’s hearing herself say, “Thank you for finding the time for today, Sir,” sometime after that, and “I promise,” but, when she’s setting off at a brisk walk into town a little while later, breathing hot clouds of breath into her soft scarf, her bottom glowing red under her skirt, Lacey doesn’t recall what it was that she’s promised him, the rest of their meeting lost somewhere in the no-man’s-land between her head and her heart, the words swimming on her bloodstream, lost at sea.

He watches her go from behind the window. Although the afternoon has gone as well as he could have hoped for, he’s feeling rather restless, vague worry tugging on the corners of his mind. He pushes it aside firmly, but it only ends up in his stomach then, so he finally gives up, deciding that maybe work will help take his mind off things. As he is about to sit back down, Gold notices the wet spots still drying on his chest where Miss French had rested her head against him. His shirt is wet from her tears. For the briefest moment he’s feeling sorry for her, and his determination and confidence wavers, but then he’s thinking of all the poor behavior he’s already witnessed, behavior that puts her at great risk and her future in jeopardy, dangerous behavior which he can no longer tolerate if he cares about her at all. And that, he realizes with a deep sigh, that he does, even if it will be his undoing.
It’s the weekend. Usually a time of joy and freedom, today feels nothing of the sort, the walk into town a welcome distraction from her gloomy thoughts. Stretching her legs always helps to clear her head and she doesn’t mind the soft drizzle on her face. As she passes the diner, Ruby looks up to greet her and Regina smiles and stops to chat for a minute. About the weather, a wild running trail Ruby has discovered last week, and about how Mrs. Lucas’ insistence that she work every Saturday and Sunday morning clearly qualifies as child abuse. And couldn’t she go in, grab her usual coffee and kale salad, and then have a word with her, please, before she goes, because it sucks. Regina laughs. A tense, quiet laugh that you laugh when you live in a small town where everyone knows everyone’s business, and you have something to hide.

After coffee and salad, she hits the town.

As per usual, there would be whatever dignified dinner her mother had orchestrated and deemed appropriate for the occasion. A stiff and uncomfortable affair, like celebrating the holiday on the cover of a glossy magazine. A perfect picture - but it had no heart. And just like she always did, she would be sitting at the large table, all smiles and her back one straight line, the napkin neatly placed in her lap. She would sit with her mouth clamped shut, thinking about Hermès scarves twisting themselves around her body like vines, tying her down until she could no longer breathe, while she listened to some handsome young man in expensive clothing talk about himself and explain the world to her. He’d occasionally pay her a requisite compliment too, because that was what you did, what decency demanded you do. And her mother always chose decent men to invite to dinner. Oh yes, decent men who came from good stock and might yet succeed in making an honest woman out of her.

Shaking the thought like shrugging out of an itchy wool sweater, Regina focuses on her list instead. A list that only exists in her head, because her head is the only place such a list will ever be safe. Her salary does not allow for grandeur, but that is not what she’s after. She’s not her mother and not interested in spending exorbitant amounts of money on lavish spreads. She likes things to be simple and honest. And she knows that whatever food she serves and whatever gift she picks, she will be doing so with love in her heart- and he will know and appreciate that.

Filling her basket with various fall vegetables, squash, sweet corn, and potatoes at Storybrooke Produce, she then opts for canned cranberry sauce and a basic on-sale turkey at Notions. She can make it taste just as good as any expensive Butterball, organic or heritage. The secret is the brine. You just had to properly thaw and then brine it. Next on her list is Game of Thorns - for flowers and decorations - but she doesn’t linger long, because the nuns are everywhere and they make her nervous. Even if they are only there to discuss the flower arrangements for the convent and the soup kitchen.

Afterwards, she walks over to Mal’s to drop off her shopping and they have a cup of tea, chatting and laughing, while her daughter, Lily, busies herself carefully brushing and braiding Regina’s hair. Lily is a sweet child, but has a fiery temper - not unlike her own. With Lily it can be sunshine and blue skies one moment and heavy thunderstorms and lightning rolling in off the shore the next, but Regina loves the girl all the same. And so does her mother.

When it’s time to leave, Regina mentally drags her feet, stalling, playing for time she does not have. She doesn’t want to go, doesn’t want to get up from the table, walk out the door and away from the
kind words and the warm, fuzzy feeling in her belly; Leave the smells of tea and lemon shortbread, or the soothing weight of the small body on her lap behind, the little deft fingers raking, braiding and unbraiding. She sighs.

“When are you going to tell her?” Mal asks, stirring her tea with a spoon.

“I’m fine,” Regina says automatically.

“Are you?” Mal puts the spoon down, takes a sip, her eyes never leaving Regina’s face. “If it were me, dear, I’d be livid. I’d leave. I’d set the place on fire.”

Regina laughs dryly, covering Lily’s ears. Best not to give the girl any ideas. “Spread your wings and fly away, I know.” If only it were that easy. She nurses her own drink for a moment, relishing the warmth, then says, “she’s taking Rocinante,” before she can stop herself, the words crumbling in her mouth and forming a doughy lump in her throat. That’s the thing that’s been scratching her, isn’t it? The reason she’s still sitting here, petrified, discontent and worry bittering up her mouth.

“Don’t let her,” Mal’s voice is sharp, but her expression gentle. She covers Regina’s cold hand with her own. “She can’t if you won’t let her, Regina.” Regina feels her heart beat faster. Coming from Mal, it all sounds so simple. Stand up to her, speak her mind, gather her things and go. She can picture it now, taste the white-hot words on her lips as they leave her, tangy and salty. The sensation of shouting reverberating in her body, everything’s flying from her mouth, erupting, bursting out into the open. The rush and relief. Blood humming in her ears, drapes and carpets catching fire, sparks and smoke filling the air. In her mind’s eye, she’s reaching out a hand, feels the flames sizzle under her fingertips, a heavy buzz under her skin as she’s going toe to toe with her. She won’t back down. She will never cower again.

And then she looks up at her hard face --- and breaks out in a cold sweat.

Regina swallows hard. “I want to,” she says, pushing past the mental image with a shudder. “You know that.” Mal pats her hand reassuringly. “But she’s—”

“Regina?” Lily has stopped braiding. A small finger tracing something on her cheek. Big brown eyes searching her face. She shifts on her lap. “Why are you crying?”

“I—” Regina quickly brushes the sadness away with a shaky hand, to replace it with a warm smile. “I’m okay, monkey, nothing to worry about.” She tightens her arms around the girl’s middle a little, pulling her closer and rocking them. Lily swings her legs. “Rocy, he’s sick,” she explains to Lily’s wild mop of curly, brown hair and Lily keeps perfectly still, listening intently, with her breath held. “But I’m getting him medicine today that will make it all better.” Her voice is bright, all edges and corners carefully cushioned. “Promise.”

Lily quickly checks her face again, searching for the lie there, as if she’s already felt it in her touch, in the gentle tickles and squeezes, and is able to tell the truth simply from listening to the beat of Regina’s stumbling heart.

She nods, pursing her lips the same way her mother does, but doesn’t speak. Instead, she leans in closer to rest her head against Regina’s chest, and flings her short arms around her neck, allowing all the warmth and comforting energy to pass onto Regina in the heartwarming gesture.

The soft “It’s going to be alright,” whispered against her heart, sends another wave of shivers down Regina’s spine. She kisses the top of Lily’s head. Lily is too young to understand and Mal will make sure she will grow up without ever having to learn to.
“We will come and visit you both when we get back. Won’t we, Lilith?” Mal asks, but she’s really talking to Regina, letting her know that they’ll continue this later, after the holiday at the latest, because she still has things to say on the matter. She’ll be there to help her in any way she can, Regina knows. If only that were enough. If only the two of them hadn’t already given her far more than she deserved.

Regina is both feeling a lot better and a whole lot worse when she enters the pet shelter a little while later, ducking inside under her umbrella and closing it quickly to keep the floor dry.

“Good afternoon, Miss Mills. How may I help you?”

Behind the counter, her dark hair and blue blouse standing out against the silvery forest wallpaper and bold lettering, is Lacey French, the florist’s daughter. One of her students - but not the one Regina had been expecting to see.

“Lacey - hello. Good afternoon,” she says, a little taken aback, hovering by the grey seats for a second, before she walks up to her. “How are you today?”

She always asks. Every time she meets a student in town or talks to them in the hallways at school. Just in case there is something on their chests and they need a safe place to put it. Just in case they’ve not heard the question at home today. Just in case nobody else ever thought to ask them.

“I’m fine, thank you. How are you?” She sounds chirpy and bright, but on a girl like Lacey that sort of voice is as false as a mask. Regina studies her. The tree silhouettes on the window pane make the light dance across her face - like it does on water. The girl shifts her weight, her eyes flickering to the countertop, to her own hands resting on the edge, then back to Regina.

Still waters.

She smiles at Lacey. “I’m good. Thank you for asking. --- I’m here to pick up a prescription for Rocinante.” That draws a blank, so she adds, “my horse. Antibiotics. And his usual supplements and meds.”

“Right,” Lacey says quickly, a soft pink appearing in her cheeks. “Sorry.”

As she rifles through the files on the filing rack, searching for the right one, and then swiftly scans the pages for the brand names and shelf numbers, Regina watches her in silence, thinking.

She doesn’t know the girl well, her subject being an all-time favorite for cutting and all kinds of made-up excuses, and when Lacey had first started Storybrooke High, she had handed in a note from her father and another from her teacher, explaining, and excusing her from class and all its activities, because she was a dancer and anything involving balls, bats, helmets, rackets, goal lines, shin guards, personal fouls or high fives could cause serious injury and jeopardize her future dance career.

Well then.

So Lacey got to sit on the bench - with the ones who had cramps or were on their periods for the fifth week in a row - listening to her IPod with her nose stuck in a book. It used to be a new one every week. The classics mostly. Regina remembers that. The girl had read and read, ignoring everyone and everything else.

After a while, she had stopped bringing the books. Then, the music. Then she no longer showed up to class at all. Regina never reported her for that, hasn’t done so to this day, actually - even though she does have her suspicions about the ballet classes. Whenever she asks Lacey about it, however,
she simply shrugs and grins, telling her that anything happening out on the field is still absolutely out, and then makes to untie her shoelaces and roll down her knee socks to show off her messed up feet for proof - should that be necessary. Plus, she has cramps.

The girl handing her Rocinate’s pills and pellets, gels and creams in a small plastic bag - together with the receipt, a free tissue pack and three samples of horse treats - while nervously bobbing on her toes, seems to be an entirely different person from the one she had watched the little girl grow into over the past few years. She’s polite and sweet, and appears genuinely concerned, smiling shyly as she mumbles get well wishes for Rocy.

Lacey’s name occasionally comes up in meetings or during breaks in the teachers' lounge. All the teachers are aware of the girl’s situation at home - absent mother with health issues, working father - though none of them have the details to protect the family’s privacy. They are aware of her spotty attendance record and have been asked to report absences immediately - if not to the headmistress, at least to Dr Hopper, the school counselor, so as to enable him to check in on Lacey in time and run interference to prevent her academic downfall. Lacey is smart, but some of her colleagues also label her lazy, disruptive, a problem child. There are only a few who stick up for her, Regina included - even if she has nothing but her gut feeling to go on to support her claim that all Lacey needs is more time and a tight-knit support system. Someone to believe in her. Hope.

The last time Lacey’s name had came up - shortly after midterms - it had been to call attention to a positive trend in her grades and behavior. She’s attending classes, her work is improving, she’s handing in papers and participating in activities for extra credit.

Océanne is positively fawning over the girl and her exquisite singing voice - a lovely, most welcome addition to her theatre- and music group. They have started practicing carols for Christmas and are planning the annual bake- and candles sale, and she says, although a bit bossy, Lacey’s doing wonderful on the organization committee. You could tell that her father ran a very successful business, she had said, beaming at them.

“Thank you, Lacey.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Mills.”

Regina asks her, if she has pets of her own, and Lacey shakes her head. She used to have fish at home, she tells her, a long time ago, and a donkey, cows and sheep - at her grandparent’s place, when she was little. Has she ever ridden a horse? - Yes, a neighbor’s, but no lessons.

That’s when she remembers and pulls the stack of papers from her bag, inquiring whether they would put a couple up in here, and Lacey promises to ask Mr Nolan or David about it. Regina leaves a few on the counter, her heart heavy again as she says goodbye and turns to go.

**Prized steed for share/part loan.**

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She hasn’t thought about the rules. Between school, time spent in his office, meeting the girls, and work there’s just not enough time to think about them - let alone time to break them. For one thing,
she’s too busy, and for another, she doesn’t really want to. Admittedly, that realization had startled her a bit. Lacey is a firm believer in rule-breaking. That’s the whole point of their stupid existence after all, isn’t it? Rules are meant to be tested and broken. They’re made that way. But somehow this is different. His rules are different. He’s different.

She’s not following the rules every time, all the time. Of course not. She wouldn’t be human, wouldn’t be herself if she were. She still lies, occasionally, and if the lie serves a specific purpose. But her lies are smaller now, gravitating more towards white than black. They’re less acidic too, less biting, less aggressive somehow, and she wonders, if lies shouldn’t better be rated based on a harshness scale rather than scattered across some grayscale gradient.

Her lies are gentle and small these days, talking in hushed, friendly voices, smiling and bowing their heads, not wanting to step on anyone’s toes. They don’t mean anyone any harm - not even Medusa, probably - and she, more than anyone else in town, deserves only her very best force 9s and 10s. Lacey got them specially reserved for her, like bottles of fine wine. Perhaps lies also matured with age, if kept bottled up tightly long enough.

She would tell him about them, about the pretty little lies that are trotting one step behind her and her rose-patterned dome brolly, following her about town like a flock of polite tourists in their matching yellow raincoats and wellies, in awe of the old buildings and finding the silver lining in even the abysmal weather. But he doesn’t ask about them, and she doesn’t bring them up.

They’ve had rain, lots of rain, nothing but rain for days. The rain should be snow, but it isn’t. Temperatures are too high. They are so unusually high in fact, that Emma’s mum might be reopening Any Given Sundae for a Thanksgiving special. Emma says, she’s only half-joking, and that they shouldn’t be surprised to find the doors open and the chalkboard sign happily heralding the arrival of Pumpkin-Brunée and Turkey-Truffles - or something else equally disturbing and disgusting from her mother’s wild, unpalatable creations-cabinet. Miss Fisher, apparently, has been wanting to turn the parlor into a part-time café or coffee shop during the winter months for ages, but the Mayor and Town Council (which pretty much means the Mayor gets two votes on everything) keep throwing stones in her path. She’s calling it her personal, never ending game of Barricade.

Lacey wouldn’t mind a coffee franchise. Storybrooke would still be Storybrooke and it would be no Starbucks, but it would be something. Granny has rationed their lattés and mochas and told them to go to bed earlier and get some sleep, if they’re that tired. Ruby tried explaining that it’s got to do with being a Junior, that Juniors and Seniors just came that way, that school made them that way, because- graduation, duh -but Granny wouldn’t have any of it.

Today, it’s raining too - cats and dogs, has been pouring non-stop since Lacey left the house for her shift at 7:15, and she’s grateful to be working indoors, with a solid roof over her head and good central heating that’s keeping the place toasty at all times.

The shelter smells of kibble and birch, there is a framed picture of a winter woods scene with birch trees on the wall and they are using real birch tree trunks as decorations and message board. Lacey likes that. She doesn’t mind the wet dog smell that mingle with the scent on rainy days. Damp dogs are still better than wet feet. And she likes the dogs. It’s the people she’s got trouble with. Not all of them, just the ones that come in to drop off a family member - no biggie! - promising to be back to take them home with them again real soon --- just wait here and be a good boy for the nice lady now. Atta boy!

--- They never show.

So it’s up to Lacey to make extra sure the new pups get treats and lots of cuddles and attention to help get them settled in for the night. Her job to dry their tears.
Her boss wouldn’t like it - the man is all business and doesn’t believe in coddling the animals - but he doesn’t know. He’s not the one keeping the books, David is, and he won’t notice the increase in treat-expenses or the blankets and toys that go missing from the shelves and end up in the back. The way Lacey sees it, it’s an investment. The treats and toys make the animals happy and happy animals have a higher chance at getting adopted -which is what they want, right? So everyone wins.

Mr Nolan had been more than happy to hire her on the spot, without ever having talked to her before, without reading anything she’s got in print - no letters of recommendation or character reference letters needed. Not even a CV. He gave her the job, just like that, simply because David had put in a good word for her. Well, not so much for her as against his brother, who, apparently is unreliability personified (no way to go from here but up. A random girl from the streets can’t be worse than James, can she, so why not give it a shot?).

Initially, she had only jumped at the opportunity, because anything that isn’t a job at hell’s kitchen, but Lacey’s finding that she’s actually enjoying work. She likes the shelter with its silver wallpaper, old armchairs and stone-age filing system. Likes the calm and quiet. When it’s slow, she reorganizes the meds cabinets and shelves, reads to the cats and dogs in their kennels in the back (it calms them down), or watches the colorful fish in their fish tank.

When David shows up at the end of her shifts - usually with Mary in tow - she’ll take a dog or two out for a long walk.

“You’d take the mutts on hikes during a blizzard, Lace, but when I ask you to come jogging with me ---” Ruby had complained the other week, so they are meeting up to go together now, whenever Ruby’s shifts at the diner and their studying allows; And it’s even more fun then - with Ruby half walking, half jogging beside her, occasionally sprinting ahead to check out new trails they might want to try another day, and with the two of them teaching their charges new tricks that make them laugh until their sides hurt and they are short of breath.

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“Miss Mills, huh?” Ruby asks, propping herself up on her pillow with one arm. “She’s nice. For a teacher I mean. With that family.”

(Yeah, she definitely has some Miss Honey kind of thing going on, that one.)

“Uh-huh. S’pose so. I wouldn’t know, would I?” She grins down at Ruby from her bed. Her friend’s face is cast in warm light from her bedside lamp. The last proper Christmas gift Mum gave her - a bouquet of flowers, heart-shaped bulbs in red, blue and yellow, swaying slightly on their wire-made petioles, as if touched by a gentle breeze. Two of them no longer work.

“When’s the last time you’ve even been to ballet?” Ruby’s eyes narrow. “I should rat you out, you know. P.E. is not that bad.”

Lacey throws her pillow at her, but Ruby’s anticipating the attack and blocks it with her other hand, sending it flying right back where it came from. It hits her square in the face. “Oi, Rubes!”

“Like I said, P.E. - where you learn to throw stuff.” Ruby laughs. And, after glowering at her for the appropriate amount of time, Lacey joins in.

“And when on earth would I do that?” She demands, when they have calmed down. “I hardly get to eat and sleep as it is. Don’t want to spend my time running track, driven around the football field like cattle!”
Ruby scoffs. “Two weeks and theatre has already gone to your head. I’m appalled.”

Lacey rolls her eyes. All they do is sing - mostly carols now, with Christmas fast approaching - make decorations for the bake sale, and argue over the important question whether or not selling scented candles alongside the traditional beeswax ones this year would be taking things one step too far.

“You know; you should work out more. You don’t have the stamina for social butterfly. Not at the rate you’re going.” Ruby throws her a dark look, her expression a little sour, tone accusatory.

Lacey bristles. Ruby’s her best friend, but can be just a little bit on the possessive side. It’s not her fault he’s made her join some stupid club, and get a job, and take on more course work and other crap than she can possibly handle in a day! She’s doing the best she can. Something’s gotta give, dammit!

“Is that right, princess?” she snaps. “Wasn’t your ass that got busted tho, was it?! Maybe I should dob you in too. See how you enjoy the hoops!”

She hasn’t told them, hasn’t told anyone - how could she have? But she’s had to say something, explain why she’s not into going clubbing much these days - into drinking, smoking, snogging strangers behind bars. My dad, had seemed as good an explanation as any. She’s got them all fooled into believing it’s her clueless papa who’s forbade her from engaging - unless she wants to be stuck at home until graduation or be shipped off to some fancy boarding school on the other side of the world. They think she’s going through the motions for her dad until the storm passes, miming the model student after the frat party fiasco, after having gotten caught red-handed.

Ruby sits up on her knees, her sleeping bag sliding off her shoulders. “Was your idea!”

“Was not!”

“Was too!”

They glare at each other. Ruby quirks an eyebrow.

Lacey stares her down, unblinking, until Ruby finally bursts out laughing, her body going floppy with the giggles - like little kids do - as she’s riding them out.

“Moron,” Lacey mumbles under her breath.

“It’s just-” Ruby hiccups, now belly down on her mattress. She takes a breath and pushes herself up into a sitting position. “I understand that you seem to be under the impression that everything you’re doing right now is helping you patch up the rocky relationship with your father --- and I can see that you feel it’s absolutely essential that you do it, but really, I am concerned that you might find yourself turning into someone you do not want to see looking back at you when you look in the mirror in the morning.” She pretends to be pushing up glasses on her nose, a mischievous glint in her eyes, and folds her hands neatly in front of her. Grasshopper in the house.

But then, suddenly and without warning, she’s physically deflating with some strange sadness, sagging and curling in on herself, grabbing her pillow and hugging it to her middle. “Fuck it, Lace, you’re turning into Mary-Margaret on me!”

Lacey isn’t sure that that would be such a bad thing to happen, actually. A small part of her is ready to admit that the idea of rules and boundaries makes her feel safe and cared for. What does it matter if it comes at a price? At the price of having to be a good girl? --- His good girl.

Oddly enough, being treated like a child, offensive as it might be, has also given her a freedom she
hasn’t known in a very long time. He’s freed her from feeling pushed by people, from the suffocating pressure of *too much, too soon*. It’s not her decision anymore. House rules mean she has an excuse not to join in, a reason to say no - without having to think twice about it. He’s set the rules and cares what she does. Even when he’s not around. There’s a comfort in knowing that. Clear rules and immediate consequences - like the white lines on black tarmac - make it easier to know where she should be placed and see where she is going.

“There’s something you’re not telling me! I know it!” Ruby accuses, hugging the pillow a little tighter, shoulders slumping over it like a dragon’s wings over a cracked golden egg.

*(She can’t. She just --- can’t.)*

Lacey blows out a breath. “It’s --- Ruby, I ---” She pushes her hair back, sniffs, rubs her nose. “Mum. She’s getting worse. Thanksgiving. I don’t want to.”

She’s done it. Said the magic word. *Mother*. Ruby goes rigid as if frozen, her mouth falling open. When her voice reemerges, it does so as a whisper. A whisper so low, it’s barely even there. “*Shit, Lace.*” She drops the pillow.

To her left, a red heart flickers, the light inside it dimmed to a weak glimmer as Lacey turns her head to look at it, eyes drawn to the sudden visual noise. She bites her lip. She shouldn’t have played the mum-card. Not on Ruby. It’s a big one to tell anyone, but has grown obscenely and unexpectedly large on her friend’s shocked face - and it’s scaring both of them. What else could she have done though, Lacey wonders, her eyes pleading with the universe in the jittery semi darkness of her little bedroom. What else would have stopped the questions and accusations from coming? Icy hands have clutched her stomach, kneading and twisting it, wringing it out like wet bed linen.

The silence stretches. It gaps and expands to engulf them in a tight, airless bubble.

*Liar.*

Lacey drags in a shaky breath. She’s a soft drink in a bottle, shaken while still capped, fizzing up, about to explode. Ruby looks like she’s seasick.

*The sound of their breathing. Fast and shallow.*

Lacey’s eyes have gone funny and everything is smudged. The reds, the blues, the yellows. Ruby’s watery green glows in the dark as she throws her arms open wide, reaching out. The road ahead is a blur and it makes it hard to see those white lines she should not be crossing. With a strangled noise, Lacey swerves off the bed and throws herself into the embrace. It smells of Ruby, underlined with marmite. She feels her eyes sting with tears and cheeks flood with color.

They hug for a long moment. Pull apart slowly.

“Sorry.” Her voice is glassy.

“Me too.” Ruby tries not to look overly worried and forces a smile. Her eyes are dark, filled with the shadows of the forest, the wind howling in the irises.

*(She can’t do this. She has to-)*

Lacey turns off the light and pulls at her duvet, wrapping herself in it as she lies down beside Ruby on the mattress. Side by side, with their arms touching, they lie and breathe. *Just breathe.*

“Ruby—” Lacey says after a minute. *Out in the hallway, she can hear the bedroom door swing and*
the voices of her parents, swallowed up by it as it is softly closed behind them. She swallows.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Ruby says into the duvet, reaches for a corner and carefully dabs at Lacey’s eyes. Then she thumbs at something on her cheek, before crawling down deeper into her sleeping bag and wrapping her arms around Lacey in a warm bear hug. “Good night, Lace.”

“Night.”

Listening to Ruby’s steady heartbeat, Lacey remains still and cold under her heavy duvet, staring up at the ceiling in the inky dark.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Thanksgiving.
... Thanksgiving is here.

Where there should be order, is chaos. Where there should be a neat, chronological filing system, is rank growth. Some days, she is an abandoned building, a haunted house - no glass in the windows and no curtains, the weathered walls within long bereft of photographs. There is only moss and dirt here. Asynchronous, wild vines where the names and stories should have been.

The man who visits every week, he is so kind and his face so familiar, and he tells her about the flowers when he comes to see her, tells her all about his flowers - how they are growing in his garden, how many colors there are, what shapes and sizes and smells. When she closes her eyes, she can see them. See them so clearly, she could paint them. They brought her paints and brushes, but nobody’s shown her what to do. *The girl.*

The girl can draw, can’t she?

Sometimes, he talks about the girl too.

Today, they have come together. The girl is wearing blue jeans, but he’s in a dinner jacket, and she feels a little underdressed in her simple cotton dress - even with the cashmere cardigan and the silk shawl around her neck - and the silver slippers sparkling on her feet. She’s painted her toenails last night. *A frivolous fuchsia.* It’s her secret and it’s making her grin and giggle like the cat that ate the canary.

"Mum," the girl says, holding her hands. She has given her flowers, roses.

* Duchesse de Brabant.*

She frowns, clicks her heels nervously, wriggles her toes.

“*You look beautiful tonight,*” he’s saying, and she looks up to smile at him. She likes the handsome visitor. It’s so good of him to come see her so often.

He’s brought photographs, pictures of a young woman and man years ago, wedding pictures. There’s a baby, a house by the sea, a tire swing and a garden bench - vibrant blue as summer sky, covered in sunflower paintings. And there is the girl, patches of sky, and grass, and sunflower on her dress, and hands, and face; a broad, toothy grin for the camera, showing off her missing baby teeth. *Cute, darling child.* She smiles at the pictures. So sweet of him to come and show her, tell her about his garden, about his girl.

As she lets the glossy images pass through her fingers, he glances at her, anxious for signs of recognition, she knows, recognition that isn’t going to come. She refrains from biting her lip. She likes him, likes to hear about the garden and the girl, and she wants to please him, show him she's grateful for the stories and the company, so she says, "Thank you so much, you and your wife have such a lovely home!"

*She’s said something wrong,* but doesn't know what it is. His face falls a little and he’s got that look
in his eyes, like a child lost in a crowd, and it’s just such a silly, small thing, really, but it makes her want to apologize for whatever it is she has done wrong now, immediately. She just can’t get the words right anymore. Why, oh why would he be looking at her like that? Should she have said, ‘It’s so good of your wife to let you see me so often’ instead, or, ‘Such pretty pictures. You said you were married?’

Perhaps, his wife is dead. She doesn’t recall.

The girl squeezes her hand, playing with their fingers, humming a tune under her breath.

*She knows this one.*

“Lacey,” When they came today, she remembered to call them by their names, and he almost cried. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that Sister Thalia had reminded her just before they arrived. Some days, she manages to find the breadcrumbs all by herself, following the yellow brick road to a sunlit clearing. Those are the good days. If only it weren’t for the faces and the voices, perhaps she wouldn’t get everything mixed up in her head so easily.

*Song.* “How’s school? What’s… the verdict on the candles?”

“Traditional.”

“Now, that’s a shame.”

“Yeah. The bees will thank us,” she laughs. *Bees. Bee. Bumblebee.* “And they do smell nice.”

“That they do, Bumblebee.”

She remembers *stirring*… stirring the hot, sluggish mass. For… *the colors*. The room, it smells of *roses*, roses from the hot wax on the stove. And there are roses on her oven mitts too, her hands and cheeks growing warmer and warmer as she keeps stirring clockwise at a steady pace. *Small hands.*

Small hands in her hands. Small hands holding the big spoon. Careful with the small hands.

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“Can we make a koala?” - “Yes, we can, love.”

“And platypus… platypus… more than one platypus?” - “One platypus, two platypus, platypuses or platypodes. *Not* platypi -common, but etymologically incorrect.”

“Platypuses. … Can we make those?” - “Yes, chicken. How about an echidna or a wombat? You want to make those too? Maybe a … Christmas Beetle?”

“Nuuuh… a baby joey in a mummy kangaroo’s pouch!” - “A little tricky, don’t you reckon?”

*The small hands, they have a voice and a face and a name. Lacey.*

*And she’s singing: “There was an old lady who swallowed a mozzie …”*

---

… I don’t know why she swallowed the mozzie. She’s gotta be Aussie!

She’s laughing to herself and rubbing Lacey’s knuckles. What a silly little song it is. But it has all the animals. Lacey loves the animals.
“How are the dogs doing? Who is feeding them today?”

Lacey beams at her. Her little girl is growing up so fast, right before her eyes. Sometimes, she’s afraid to blink and miss it all. She’s becoming a mature young woman, learning to balance school and a job and her dancing. She has to keep an eye on her - make sure she doesn’t take on too much. She’s always wanted too much, too soon; to run before she could crawl.

“David is. He takes care of the animals when the shelter is closed.”

David. David. She can’t place the name. Has she heard it before? She must have. But she can’t ask, because Lacey will think she hasn’t listened to her. It upsets her when she forgets what her new friends are called. There are so many names in her head, so many new faces to put them all to. Starting at a new school is never easy. It takes her awhile to get everyone’s names and faces right. And when Lacey talks, she talks too many miles per hour, rattling off the names so fast she can’t keep track. She’s so excited to make new friends.

“The owner’s son. He and his brother go to my school. David’s in my Maths class.”

Math. They call it Math here. “That’s nice,” she says, studying Lacey’s face. She looks a bit tired. Has she been up all night reading again? “He’s… do you like him?” She tickles Lacey’s side, making her squeak and huff and glare.

She’s at that age, is she not, and perhaps, it would be better if she had a little less on her plate right now, if she could just enjoy being a teenager. Try new things, make good, silly memories. Make all the little mistakes that you make, with very little damage done, and leave the scary, big ones for later. She has to learn how to make mistakes and fix them, how to get back up when she falls. It’s important.

“No, Mum, no. David’s my friend’s boyfriend! We’re just- I just work there.” Lacey laughs.

Her friend. Which friend? “I see,” she says, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “but there is someone else that you like?” Lacey blushes, glances at her father. It’s not fair to put her on the spot like this, she knows that, but when do they ever get to sit down and talk anymore? She’s working so much, and he’s trying to help out at home, and help her with the paperwork and all the suits on the phone - and it helps - but it’s not enough.

They can’t drop the ball. Not ever, not even a little bit, not this one. It’s so precious and so fragile, only to be handled with the utmost care and loving. Sometimes she worries it might already be chipped. Hairline fractures.

“Muuum,” Lacey whines, but there’s a shy smile peeking out from underneath all that embarrassed pink on her face. She has a someone, a person.

Whenever Lacey’s ready, she’ll be here.

He chuckles. She’s almost forgotten he’s in the room with them. He’s been so quiet lately. It has not been easy. But things will get better, they always do.

“Let’s go eat, grub.” He takes Lacey’s hands, pulls her up and sends her spinning into a twirl.

Outside, the clock tower chimes. Inside, her head is ready to explode.

Holding onto the edge of the bed, she exhales and inhales - slow and steady, slow and steady - tries to breathe through the pain throbbing behind her eyes and temples, and squints at the floorboards to keep the noise and harsh light at bay.
“Mum?”

Lacey’s on her toes. She’s not supposed to be on her toes without proper warm up, with no support for her feet. Who has bought her those boots? They look new and hardly appropriate for the occasion. She doesn’t remember paying for them. He’s going to spoil her rotten.

“Don’t call her that, dear.” Grub, The Very Hungry Caterpillar. They don’t need to be fighting that battle again. Names are powerful. He has to be more careful with them, with his words, especially around Lacey. She’s such a sensitive child.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t mind. I like it,” He looks guilty. She’s sorry. She didn’t mean to snap. “It’s fine, Papa, really.”

She takes another deep breath. Silence. Her head is killing her.

***

They go downstairs to eat in a fancy great hall, and she listens to Lacey talk, and, yes, she knows this place, she’s been here before, they serve great food - the soup is really good, they should try it with the olive bread and salty butter - and they get excited about how excited that makes her, even though she tries not to show it.

Lacey laughs, and she laughs, and he’s laughing too.

There’s more spreads than she can possibly try in one sitting, the Turkey is done just right, and whatever they’ve put in their cranberry sauce must be pure magic, because she has never tasted anything so good in her entire life. Maybe at her granny’s house when she was a young girl - back in England that was - before she got taken away, before her mother packed her bags and moved them thousands of miles away across the ocean.

She tells them this, and Lacey gapes at her. Surely she must have heard this story before? She’s told her about her great-grandmother, told her a great deal, she can’t have forgotten it all?

“She was a really good cook,” she says, nodding enthusiastically. “Unfortunately, none of that rubbed off on the next generation.” She sighs, then grins. “It must have skipped one.”

“Or two,” he snorts. She taps his shin with her foot.

“Three, definitely three,” Lacey laughs, and they chime in.

***

After dinner, there is pudding. Oh, and there is Tally. The girl with the roses. Does she work in the gardens? She must be, but her habit is clean.

Roses. They need water. Has she turned off the stove? The house will smell like roses and candle wax for weeks. No need to make that burned wax. No need to set the place on fire.

She shifts in her seat. She doesn't remember and it’s making her dizzy.

She can’t remember if she’s blown out the candles, but she’s watched the wax seal melt in the flames, the letter folding in on itself and crumbling to ashes in the fireplace. That letter is dangerous. Every word a warning, the black ink speaking of deadly threat.

She puts the spoon down and looks around. What is this place? Where is this place? The people,
they’re dressed in such peculiar fashion: Maidens walking about in dark blue robes - servants perhaps - and the ladies of the court - or whatever gathering she’s somehow ended up being a part of - parading a variety of dresses, long and short, but festive. What is it they are celebrating? Some are wearing men’s clothing, pants woven from colorful fabrics she’s never seen before.

*Belle*, her Belle, she’s dressed like them, like a stable boy almost - pants, boots, and a shirt that looks like it might have been snatched from a knight’s chambers.

Her heart beating out a panicked tattoo against her ribs, she glances at his face. He’s talking, talking to her about *home*, but this isn’t their home, isn’t *Avonlea* - it can’t be - and it’s *not* him. The man, he walks and talks like him, but any potion or glamour could do that. She mustn’t fall for it.

Her chest hurts.

The food in front of her looks and smells familiar, but it’s unwise to accept any food or drink coming from an unknown source in a foreign realm. That’s what she’s done, isn’t it? Travel realms? But *which* realm is *this*, and why has she come here? Has she meant to go here for a reason or simply wound up in this place by accident? Is she... *lost*? And if she is, what about *them* - are *they* lost too?

There is a hurricane spinning within her head and this isn’t Kansas anymore.

She clicks her heels under the table. *Nothing*.

“Belle?” she whispers, and for a moment she feels the soft wings of hope flutter in her chest as the girl turns to look at her, but then her face darkens, and she knows she’s made a terrible mistake.

**Who are they and what is she doing here?**

“Everything alright over here? Nicolette?” The maiden, she’s smiling at her and she bites her lip, releasing it at once. It’s dangerous to give yourself away as an outsider. She’s already in danger.

The light reflects off something, drawing her eyes there. *A little silver brooch*. It's so small, you can barely tell it’s there. *A rose*.

The knot in her chest loosens. A friend, a little bird, come to reveal itself to her, tell her she’s not alone. She’s got a friend in this place. She smiles back. “Yes, everything’s fine, thank you,” she says.

***

He’s taking her upstairs, their arms linked. Apparently, they're married, fancy that, her- a bride! Whenever did that happen?! Last she recalls, it had been the night of the formal and she dancing with the shy, podgy boy who gave her a beautiful bouquet of Agapanthus, Acacia, Alyssum and Cyclamen.

The man, he’s got kind eyes too.

She isn’t scared, she just doesn’t understand what happened between then and now - *maybe he can tell her*?

He looks so sad. She wants to make him smile, recall something to make him feel better, but it just isn't there. It's so odd, the way he talks to her, touches her, calms her down - he knows her so well and she can't return the favor. She doesn’t even know his name. It's like meeting someone in the supermarket who grins and waves and you can't place them at all.

For all she knows, she's known these folks for five minutes, and now she’s supposed to be their *wife*,
their… mother?! She doesn’t know the first thing about being anyone’s mother. The girl doesn’t even look like her. She must be a big bag of bones and recessive genes. How odd that the VCE is still crammed in there, and they aren’t even teenagers anymore, but she’s got no recollection of actually growing up. You’d think the brain would know to prioritize better.

***

_The ghosts. They are dancing in the shadows, the in-betweens._

Watching them, she would stare at the wall, wondering what her name was. The nurses would come and remind her. They would show her framed photographs, and she would smile at them and not ask questions. The people look like a family. The man would come. And a young girl. She won’t ask their names. A nurse will explain to her later, but she won’t remember. She’s lost, she knows that, but there’s nothing she can do, no directions she could ask and follow. Time passes right through her, and she’s staring silently - everything gone, but the dancing ghosts on the walls.

They don’t like when she talks about them, when she gets the names and facts wrong.

She must have read it somewhere. _It’s just a story_. If only she would remember where. She’s been looking in the library, goes to find the faces and the voices every day. There are _so many books_.

They let her read.

=======

_It’s fine, it’s fine, it’s fine._

She’s said it so much, and perhaps it’s true, who knows? She can’t tell anymore.

“It’s just the way she copes, kiddo.” Yes, she knows that, and she tells him she doesn’t mind, but in her heart of hearts she does. She says, “I’m going to Ruby’s,” and he doesn’t tell her no, tell her it’s too late to call, that the night isn’t safe for a girl her age. He doesn’t remind her to put on her warm jacket. In less than five minutes, she is outside and alone with her thoughts and the damp, cool bottle cradled against her middle.

The night is a filthy, low clouds sort of a creature, rain spitting meanly in her face, the cold clawing at her hands and ears and eyes. _It is bitterly cold. So cold, the Rolls almost wouldn’t start. So cold they almost walked there. So cold she had hoped they wouldn’t have to go at all._ The darkness is heavy, suffocating, the clouds pressing in as if to crush her. It is a dead thing, the sky, it crawls and looms, dreary and dreadful like a half-rotten corpse come back to life to haunt her thoughts and dreams. She won’t be sleeping tonight.

A sudden flash of lightning and thunder rumbling like a ravenous monster a split second later, has her breaking into a run, and Lacey runs until her lungs and legs have caught fire.

She dreads the moment she will have to stop to draw breath and think; face the general sense of jitteriness she’s been feeling all day. She hadn’t wanted her dad to know how fearful she felt, and now she’s worked herself into a state with nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

The bottle under her sweater is burning holes in her belly. She can’t drown her thoughts tonight and it’s entirely _his_ fault.
She doesn’t know what has her do it, but when he answers the door, there is no turning back.

“Miss French?” His tie is loose, his hair tousled, like he’s slept on it and it stuck that way. He smells of booze. Hypocrite.

She holds out the bottle and he looks at her like he’s seeing ghosts. Or perhaps he’s seeing double.

“I- I wanted to yell at you about… something,” she begins, then stops herself. What is she even saying? If part of her hadn’t wanted him, wanted him even in this strange, charged moment of braindead madness, she would have been funny and flirtatious, cracking a joke or two about how she’s brought more refreshments, since - judging by his state - he must be running pretty low, but because she does want him - him and his stupid hair, the stubble on his chin - her mouth is full of sawdust and her brain malfunctioning as if it were she who was drunk off her arse.

(What is she doing here?)

His eyebrow twitches. “Why don’t you come in and think about it,” He stands aside to let her through, and she finds herself standing in his hallway.

(Coats on hooks, shoes in a neat line on a rack, two black umbrellas in a stand by the door. Her wet blue jeans clinging to her thighs.)

Lacey curls her fingers into the palm of her hand, not even feeling them dig in.

His house is indeed Victorian, with wooden panels along the corridor, ornate chandeliers, and oil paintings of fruit in bowls and old bearded men in tunics and ruffs. Stairs lead upstairs, but she’s following him through to a tall, galleried room with a rug spread out over old wood and flagstones, and a fireplace big enough to park a fancy-ass car in.

A long, polished wood table has been set for three.

(Does he have company?)

She stops, taken aback, unsure.

The dining chairs are cream leather, but inlaid with a fine burgundy silk; wild wine leaves embroidered so delicately, they might have been blown in through an open window one beautiful fall afternoon and simply sunk in, but she knows they must have taken hours and hours to sew.

(Who’s made them? Does he… sew?)

He looks at her and she quickly averts her gaze to look out the window, feeling the water seep into her boots and socks, and drip onto the floor. It is a high polished wood, dark and free of either dust or clutter, but now wet from the small puddles she’s leaving in her wake.

She bites her lip.

The white curtains are linen, the kind of white that is untouched by hands. Almost hidden cords are used to open and close them. A spiral staircase connects the room to the library gallery. At least there are books. There is no TV, no comfy seats, cushions or patchwork throws to hint at cozy evenings spent sitting and reading in front of the fire. There’s just the dining table and the beautiful chairs arranged around it.

And there is he, standing a little way away, his eyes scanning her face and seeing right into her very core. “Ah, well,” he says with a small chuckle, but she’s still not looking at him, clutching the damn
bottle to her chest like a lifebuoy. His eyes travel over her and she shudders. “Wait here, please. I’ll
be right back.”

The room is like a perfect magazine cover. She’s afraid to do anything, touch or sit without explicitly
having been told to do so - in case she wrinkles the fabric or stains it with something she doesn’t
even know is on her jeans. It reminds her of a foyer or a ballroom, not just in the space but in the
artwork too. She scans for a personal touch, something that doesn't suggest a hired designer chose it.
There is enough room here for a large family dinner, though she doubts he cooks. It’s too clean, too
perfect - cold in its dark tranquility. The soft jazz, just audible as background noise, somehow makes
it even less personal. There are no photographs on the walls, no knickknacks or keepsakes on display
- like the place is staged for sale. The only item with a soul, a life of its own, is the record player on
the credenza.

She waits for a minute or so, but then can’t help herself. Squatting down, she pokes through his
collection curiously. There are no CDs, just records. Most are in mint condition, but some have torn
sleeves, and she wonders if he got them second-hand or if they are worn from use. There is a lot of
jazz, classical music, and some old-school rock - AC/DC, Guns N’ Roses, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin,
The Stones, that kind of thing; The Beatles, Bowie, Simon and Garfunkel - as well as some stuff she
hasn’t expected, like Van Halen, ABBA and the odd musical record (Cats. Seriously, of all musicals
he owns… Cats.). Lacey laughs.

“My music amuse you?”

She gives an almighty jolt. He’s back, watching her with glittering eyes. “You… only have records.
And a gramophone,” She sucks in her bottom lip, and he regards her thoughtfully, not blinking once.

“I’m old, not ancient,” He laughs, dry and rough. “Besides, the sound is better.”

“Debatable.”

“Hardly,” He steps smoothly closer, so close she can feel his warmth, count the dark hairs on his
face. He wraps her in a robe - tartan, heavy wool, swallowing her whole; like the whale once did the
boy with no strings and his maker. “Don’t argue with me, Miss French,” He smirks, and she feels her
cheeks flood with color. “You want to hold onto that a little while longer?” he asks, his eyes
swinging to her cheap bottle of rum, as he rolls up the sleeves for her. “Seems to be important.”

He’s taking the mickey out of her, but can she blame him? Running through a thunderstorm, to your
teacher’s house, on Thanksgiving. He must think she’s a few sandwiches short of a picnic. It runs in
the family.

“I don’t want it!” she blurts. “No, actually I do. So… here.”

“Ah,” he says, sobering, and swiftly exchanges the bottle for a pair of thick socks. Outside thunder
booms and claps. “In that case - why don’t I take care of it for you, and you go take those boots off?”

The music changes while she pulls her boots and wet socks off in the hallway, almost falling arse
over tit in his tent of a robe. It’s warm and soft, and she wonders if she’s lost her mind. What must he
be thinking of her, showing up like this? It doesn’t feel wrong, but it should.

When she returns, he’s gone from the room, a fire going in the fireplace. Real wood-fire, blazing
cheerily, sending its warmth and light far out into the room. The curtains are partially drawn, keeping
out the turbulent night.

She sighs.
“Just make yourself at home, Miss French,” he calls from another room. “Dry off.”

She hears the clattering of crockery and cutlery, and decides to follow the sound to a small, but practical kitchen; spotless and well equipped - utensils on hooks, matching cups - minimalistic and absolutely uncluttered - from the stack of clean folded tea towels and the professional knife block in one corner, to the fresh herbs and green plants hung from beams in neat rows.

He’s behind the peninsula, filling a kettle for tea, his back to her. Two cups and saucers, sugar and milk on a tray. It’s only tea, but watching him prepare it feels taboo somehow, like she’s intruding on something private and personal that’s not meant for her eyes. She hovers in the doorway, like a drowned bat in his too-large robe and socks, the gentle swish from the dishwasher and efficient hum of the refrigerator familiar and soothing, a soft warmth spreading through her from her toes. Ceramic floor tiles, underfloor heating. She could stand here and watch him forever.

Her eyes travel over his hair, his neck, his back; the deep blue damask silk of his shirt, the rolled shirtsleeves and his bare forearms. She wants to go to him, wrap her arms around him, breathe his scent, and-

He turns around and she hurriedly averts her gaze, fixing the sink behind him instead. A plastic tray and a spoon on the gleaming surface. Packaging that reads ‘Roast Turkey Dinner’.

“Do you need something?” he asks.

“Um, no, I -” Strands of hair have twisted free to curl around her face in ringlets, dark and heavy from the rain. She brushes them away. “Can I help?”

His hands still and he smiles at her.

The room gives away more than it means to. On the wall are pictures of a boy that looks just like him, a brother, she’s thinking, then - a son. Deceased most likely, given the careful placement and size of the beautiful, white frame. Around it are smaller pictures of the two of them, birthday parties and the likes. He’s younger in them, probably by more than a couple of years. Everything else is of the boy and a woman, but Lacey can’t make out her face. Most of her is obscured by the plants. The photographs are black and white, not casual family snaps, but arranged to look like such by a professional. Any one of them wouldn’t look out of place in a spread of Hello.

Every decoration on the wall is feminine, there are those ubiquitous statements of love and friendship engraved into plaques that make her hack and retch. They’re not her at all. She’s never exactly been the romantic type. And, she’s not sure she could ever fill the shoes of the woman on the wall, no doubt, her wonderfulness is enhanced by the rose-tinted glasses of his selective memories. Who could ever compete with that? Certainly not her. She’s just Lacey, and his robe is so much bigger than she is.

He slides his hands slowly backwards and forwards along the edge of the counter. “That’s quite alright, thank you.”

“Okay,” she breathes.

The silence is tugging at her, and she whirls on her heel and runs - mentally, not physically - from the room, pussyfooting back to the fire, back to the safety of not seeing or thinking a thing.

***

She’s sitting on the rug, biting her cuticles, tearing bits of skin off with her teeth and swallowing them. Her hair is all disheveled and she reeks of cold and night and rain. She’s thinking she’ll thank
him, excuse herself, and walk back out of the door with the stained glass panes; forget this evening ever happened, when he enters with the tea.

He can't be more than forty-five or so, but walks wobbly without his cane. His left leg has the fluidity of youth, but the right is trembling like he’s got trouble controlling it. She's seen eighty-year-olds walk better than that.

“Here, let me-” He raises his eyebrows in what she hopes is a sign of pleasant surprise as she scurries to her feet to take the tray from him and carefully set it on the floor, patting the spot next to her and looking up expectantly.

He sits then, with heavy awkwardness - so much more pronounced than the night they walked home in the snow. As she takes in his cheekbones, lips, and lined face, his skin sweet caramel lit by firelight, she just wants to eat him up. There's something so… beautiful, so real, in that vulnerable side of his.

“So, Miss French, what brings you-” he asks mildly, his eyes sending out a warm, gentle glow her way. “Why did you come here?”

She turns to face him slowly, her arms folded around herself protectively, watching him, but not speaking.

He tries again. “What happened?”

There is silence for a moment.

The fireplace is their tiny sun for the evening, casting long shadows over the rug. The flames curl and sway, flicking this way and that, crackling as they burn the dry wood. It's so good to feel their warmth, even if it's from only one direction. She watches in strained calm and cautious joy, holding her hands out to get just a little more of the heat.

“You want to know what happened to me today?” she asks. “Had to introduce myself to my mother again. Almost fell off the roof in the rain.”

“Are you alright?”

That’s lovely somehow, the fact that he’s worried about whether she is hurt. She could tell him, tell him about Mum and her ghosts, and he would listen - really listen - but she doesn’t feel like talking about it. She shakes her head. All the longing in her is arcing out to him, but she’s afraid to go there, because she’s not sure what comes next.

He’s staring across at her, waiting for her to say something, something more, and she notices the red under his eyes, and how his chapped lips are the same color too. A pale, washed-out red. Tired, sad. He notices her noticing.

“I’m okay,” she assures him, running her hand up and down the length of her arm. A heavy cloud of concern is moving across his face. She wants him to hold her, to take her in his arms and tell her it is going to be alright, and she’s embarrassed by that, and so is he it seems, like they’ve been caught overstepping some invisible line and someone is about to lay a little judgement on them.

“Thank you.” As she blushes, his look of solicitude becomes a shy smile.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

(Yes. No.)
His voice is warm and rich; her heart beats faster than its build to do. He's waiting for a response, but she can’t focus on forming the words properly. The humming in her head has gotten so loud. “No. Do you?”

She has no idea what’s made her say it, what she even means by it, but he does. Looking at her with an expression she has never seen before, a little muscle works in his jaw.

“No.”

He takes a deep breath as if trying to compose himself.

The large room seems to still around them.

“She’s forgotten me, you know. They say something’s wrong with her head,” She hears the words, how they twist and regroup in the air. There’s only the crackling of the fire. Dead wood being devoured by hungry flame. “Alzheimer's. Early onset.”

“He didn’t come,” he says after a minute. “I knew he wouldn’t. And yet…”

“And yet,” she echoes.

She can sense the darkness coiled up in him. Seeing him like this hurts - little paper cuts in her heart - and it scares her to her toes. He’s so strong, her biggest protector, he’s got all the answers - doesn’t he?! - and she can’t bear it.

Lacey sits, one hand clasping the toe of her sock-clad foot. She looks down at her leg. In the firelight it kinda looks like flames are dancing and licking up her jeans. With the nail of her thumb in her mouth, she scans the room again - to have an excuse to look away and think - biting down harder than she’s intended and swallowing the fragment. She lets out a laugh, releasing some of the tension.

His eyes show the same kind of gentle concern her dad’s used to have when she fell and hurt her knee, pain rolling down her cheeks. He lays his hand lightly on her shoulder and, instead of flinching away like she usually does, she leans into his touch, feeling soothed and comforted by it.

“Look, Lacey-” He leaves his hand there, speaking with such a soft voice, his words are calming her more by the way they are spoken than by what they actually are. It feels as though she is wrapped in a blanket of his caring, not just his wool robes. How can she not consider him in all her actions now, now that she knows how profoundly he cares for her?

She leans forwards, putting her hands on his chest. She can feel his breathing hitch under her palms, his chest rising and falling rapidly, and she raises her eyes to his. The light from the fire is golden in them, and she feels the familiar flip in her belly as his fingers travel down to rest on the small of her back. She slides her hands up to his shoulders, around his neck, feeling the pulse in his throat, his breath on her lips; and she licks them, noting how his own part at the sight.

*It is just a kiss.* Not a passionate one, but no innocent cheek kiss either. It is just a kiss, but a kiss on the lips; a kiss that makes her heart sing and beat a million miles an hour; a kiss that leaves her weak at the knees; a kiss that whispers into her ear until she realizes she loves him.

_She’s in love with him._

He never leaves her mind, he's always there - mentally, if not physically. It's incomprehensible. He's become her one stable force, her stable pillar in a world filled with chaos, and she so desperately needs him in her life. She loves him so much for just being here with her, for seeing her when nobody else is. She’s in love with that just as much as she’s in love with him, and she can’t believe
she’s only just realized that.

(Her startled heart is dancing around in her chest - light, so light, flying and twirling and jumping. There’s no oxygen in her lungs.)

The feeling is so strange - it stretches throughout her whole body, filling and engulfing her. It’s overwhelming, yet makes her feel completely safe. It has no bound, nor length, nor depth; it just is.

It is strange – frightening even – how you can go from someone being a complete stranger, to then being completely infatuated by them, and wondering how it ever was that you were able to live life without them - because you sure as hell couldn’t imagine being without them now - or ever again.

He’s given her freedom in confinement, peace in upheaval.

She knows she’s young, and most people will consider her love foolish and naïve, but it’s true; true when she says that she loves him more than she's ever loved anyone and wants him more than she's ever wanted anything. He’s her sun, her moon and stars, and, as cheesy as it sounds, he’s her anchor. The one constant in a world made from uncertainty.

His hand reaches for hers and her heart leaps.

He’s kissing her back - tentatively, passionately and then, tenderly. He slides the heavy, woolen robe down her shoulders, and she feels little sparks of static dance over her skin. She’s not sure whether they’re from her shirt or from where his hands have touched her.

He kisses her - and it’s nothing like the kisses she knows, has come to expect from boys in bars and men in dark alleyways. His lips press against hers with love and affection, as his warm hands are roaming all over her shoulders, her back, her body - leaving a trail of tingling sparks in their wake. He tastes like November, like spiked hot chocolate on stormy evenings and crisp autumn air.

I will be patient with you. I will be kind to you. I will never grow angry with you. I will respect you, and I will listen to you. I will never forsake you. I understand that you are not perfect, and I still want to be here with you. You are important to me. I will provide for you. I will protect you. I will be there for you. --- Shorter version: I love you.

He kisses her and the world falls away. It is soft and slow, comforting in ways that words can never be. This is the love she's waited for, the home from home she’s been praying for. His hand resting below her ear, his thumb caressing her cheek as their breaths mingle. She runs her fingers down his spine, pulling him closer until there is no space left between them, and she feels the beating of his heart against her chest. For a moment everything is so calm and safe, like nothing can hurt her ever again, the world stopping still on its axis. No time, no wind, no rain. Just him. She doesn’t know what love is made of, but she imagines it to be the color of his eyes.

She looks up at him. The swirls of emotion she sees make her gasp. Lust and desire. However, before she can ponder that any further, decide how it makes her feel, he’s yanked her to him and covered her mouth with another hungry kiss. As their lips crush together - clumsy, sloppy, wet - she is walking on air. It is magic, the way his lips connect with hers, their bodies molding together. A perfect fit.

She feels his body press in, soft and warm. “You’re so beautiful.”

Confidence is a skill you learn by doing the brave thing over and over again.

His breath tickles in her ear. She wrinkles her nose. “Shut up and kiss me.”
His mouth is so warm, his lips so much softer than she’s imagined they would be - imagined during countless sleepless nights and her half-conscious dreams, her buzzing body heavy and sticky with sleep. Rolling her head to the side, she opens her mouth with a low moan, her chest rising and falling dramatically under his ministrations. He smiles into the kiss. Her fingers tug at his soft hair.

“I love you...,” she whispers; and, as their eyes make contact, something snaps in his.

“Lacey-” He swallows, shakes his head a little as if he’s having trouble taking in what she’s just said, his hand coming to rest on her shoulder. “Wait.”

Then he looks at her - and something breaks in her too.
He shouldn't have answered the door, shouldn't have invited her in. There is no way he can explain
this away, no way to justify what he’s just done. He can’t ever take it back. And what worries him
the most is that he doesn't want to.

“Lacey—”

Those eyes, those big, beautiful eyes. *Wet watercolor blue*. They will be his downfall.

He draws back - slowly, gently, as if it’s going to hurt less that way, even when he knows it won’t -
and she lets him go, hands releasing his neck all too readily and sinking to her middle like heavy
stones. New building bricks in her walls.

“I know,” she breathes. “But—”

She’s half expected this, won’t fight it, but he still catches the faint gleam, the small glimmer of hope
that glistens in her eyes before it dies and rolls down her cheeks. Hope against hope. Hope for an
outcome very different from this one. Hope, hope, *foolish, gullible*, hope. He’s taken it from her and
he’s so very sorry.

“No,” It holds a hint of metal that word, but he can’t risk it. Breaking her now would shatter them
both. “Please, listen to me—”

“It's okay. It's okay. I get it.”

She is glass. So cold and fragile in his clammy hands he’s afraid to apply any pressure. He can
already feel the cracks under his palms and one wrong move, one careless word, might just be what
damages her beyond repair.

“Do you?”

“You’re my teacher,” she states, hardening, steeling herself, bracing for impact. If only it *were* that
simple. If only he had left it at that. “It’s just…”

“This shouldn’t be happening.” He wants to cushion his words, make them warm and soft for her to
fall back on, but his tongue is as sharp as a butcher’s knife and it’s turning everything raw and
bloody instead.

“Are you… you’re not sorry it did?”

Such a brave question, but no straightforward answer. Is he sorry? Yes. For a million convoluted
reasons that would take him forever to explain. Does he want her? Want her in ways that he can’t
and should never have her?

“I—” *Should have known better, don’t want you to get hurt, don’t want to be the one to hurt you.* Not
good enough. “I care about you, Lacey.”

For a moment, the ‘but’ lingers unspoken between them, electrifying the air and magnifying the
tapping rain and the hissing fire.

“If,” she bites her lip, lets out a breath, drops her shoulders. “If you weren’t… my teacher, I mean.
Would you…?”
He studies her face. She’s trying so hard not to care about whatever happens next, about what he’s going to say. He can lie or tell her the truth, burn in hell or drown in high water, and either answer will change everything between them, undo all their hard work, and send her right back to square one.

His moment of weakness will cost them both.

“If I was older-” She looks away and he follows her line of vision to the fidgeting fingers dancing in her lap. Curse his fond heart. “You do want me?” No more than a whisper, sounds so brittle they won’t survive long outside her body.

The kind thing to do would be to end their suffering and to do it quickly, but he doesn’t speak.

Yes, of course he wants her. All of her. The fierce, beautiful girl sitting next to him - so close their bodies are still touching, their personal spaces blurred and blended into one - and all her future versions, too. Wants the woman she’s going to be. One day. So much.

But that woman isn’t now and that day isn’t today.

“It’s not that, Lacey.” He cups her nervous hands in his, before they can do any harm. “Well, actually, no, of course it is.”

Is it her or the dry wood splintering in the fire?

She jerks her hands away and he exhales; rubs one hand down his face before continuing into his palm. “It should be. Not just because of my job. I’m supposed to guide you, not lead you astray.”

She scoffs at that and it makes him smile just a little. She might not be Red Riding Hood, skipping through the woods with a pretty picnic basket swinging jauntily on her arm, but he’s definitely more of a monster than meets the eye.

“And…” --- And what, exactly?

Her lip quivers. He closes his eyes briefly. It’ll all be in shambles.

“...I can’t. We can’t. Not like this. Not now.”

If only he could make her understand how dangerous this is. How close they are to the fire. If only she were old enough to see the danger herself.

“Lacey. Just…”

Better she hates him for not burning her now than when it’s already too late, with her heart as black as coal. Maybe her foundation is just strong enough to bear the weight of this. It has to be.

“Not yet.”

He watches his words hit her like a wave would a cockleshell, but Lacey doesn’t scream, doesn’t cry, doesn’t run from him. Instead, her face splits into a warm, teary smile. Slowly, easily, gently. Like the sun rising over the sea. It’s lighting up her face until it touches her eyes, her beautiful features wreathed in the splendor of a winter dawn.

“Oh,” she says, breathless. “I- I get that. It’s okay.” Her hands find his. “I promise I won’t try to kiss you again. Not unless you want me to, Dr Gold.” A hint of cheek touches her lips, but she’s running her thumb over his knuckles with such soothing reassurance he knows to spot the softness behind it.
“Is it okay if I stay a little longer? Just... watch the fire with you?”

Relief washes down his back and sizzles into the warmed wood underneath them. His body is buzzing. His mind awed. His heart leaps and his soul is smiling back at her.

“I would like that very much, Miss French.”

It’s a strange truth, but the truth nonetheless.

“I will tell my driver to take you home once we are done.”

======

Despite his bad choices the world hasn’t ended. He feels a little resentful about that. There should have been consequences to his actions and their absence is what keeps him up at night. He cannot put the matter to rest if there is no closure, no repercussions.

She should report him. He should turn himself in. Neither is going to happen.

Perhaps he can let it slide just this once? Go back to how things were and forget the way she tastes, how her lips feel on his. He can still care for her, watch over her, without that memory. He doesn’t need it - and neither does she.

As November turns into December, she’s already forgotten. She’s talking and joking with him like Thanksgiving never happened, nothing in her behavior or words suggestive of the breach.

He tells himself it’s a good thing.

And he’s glad, of course. Glad he hasn’t managed to ruin yet another life. But there’s a certain sadness that comes with the realization, too. Surprise at how quickly she’s bounced back from his mistakes. Apparently, she’s more resilient than he’s given her credit for.

He watches her, almost anxiously, ready to leap into action at the first sign of distress or discomfort in his presence, but before he knows it, it’s the last day, the start of winter break, and she’s in his office for their last afternoon session.

She sits across from him, her cheeks ablaze with joy and pride as he goes over her progress report.

She has done good, not just academically, and his heart nearly bursts at the smile his praise prompts. A shy one, unfolding beautifully until it’s in full bloom. He wants to reach out a hand and pluck it. Put it in a vase on his desk. Just to have something to look at once she’s gone.

“I-” Her smile moves, like a sunflower in a warm breeze. “I wanted to thank you, Dr Gold. For everything.”

She holds out a colorful object to him, wrapped in cellophane and pretty ribbons. He blinks at it in confusion. There’s paint under her fingernails.

He must remember to breathe. He nods.

“T-Thank you, Miss French.”

He’s so stunned by the gesture, it takes him a moment to react at all, their fingers brushing against each other and creating a warm glow that spreads to his heart.

*It’s a cup. She has made him a cup.*
“You’re welcome, Dr Gold. … Merry Christmas?” She laughs nervously. “I hope you like it.”

Her laugh, her flushed face, the slight quiver in her voice, and the way she wrinkles her nose—everything about her is wonderful and disarmingly charming; and he longs to express his gratitude in a more profound way, one that will honor her gift and hard work and make sure it is seen, but he can’t maneuver the words past the lump in his throat.

He clears it, eyes zooming in on blue and yellow. Blue as summer sky. Vibrant canola fields playing tag with sunbeams. The air rich with gold dust and lush fragrance. The content feeling of never ending days pleasantly heavy in your belly. Rows and rows of yellow, flying past your open window and outstretched hand until they kiss the horizon ahead. The road leads nowhere, it’s the journey that matters.

“It is beautiful,” he says, their eyes meeting. “I will treasure it and handle it with great care so it may last me long and bring me joy for years to come.”

He watches her exhale a shaky breath. His heart has stopped completely.

“It’s … just a teacup,” she whispers, but her gift is no more a simple teacup than she is an ordinary girl. He needs her to know that.

“Have a wonderful holiday, Miss French.”

There’s something about Lacey that makes him feel so young inside, but not in a blind, childish way. She draws out the hopeful side of him, the best side, all the facets and fragments of himself that only require a little air and light to strive for growth, to push towards health and wholeness. Could he have eternity to be sitting here with this girl, he would sink into serenity.

“My door is always open.”

His fingers brought together in a centering gesture, he watches her over them; watches as she buttons her coat and puts on her scarf, gloves and hat.

She pauses. Smiles at him again. Even under layers of sheep wool and cotton, her energy vibrates in such a unique way, his own is drawn to it like a moth to a flame. He wonders if she can feel it too. It is a selfish desire, a dark and dangerous one, destructive in its intensity.

“See you next year, Dr Gold.”

***

Outside the day fades. The building is a house of unanswered prayer, quiet and empty on a Thursday afternoon. Everyone has left the school hours ago, the cleaning staff going last and locking the doors on their way out.

Gold is still in his office. He’s told them he likes to work late before a break, start the next year with a clean slate and empty desk. He’s just odd that way. He reads and organizes, his gaze occasionally drawn to the speck of color sitting on his desk, the joyful ribbons coaxing a fleeting smile onto his lips every now and then.

He’s half made up his mind to leave the office and go into town to buy something festive, decorations perhaps, a case of fine wine for her and a rare record and new drumsticks and picks from the music store for him, when he opens his e-mails one last time, the list refreshes, and all enthusiasm and holiday spirit leave him in a deep, long sigh.
I have received your letter dated November 28, 2000 regarding inmate Bailey Jones and your request to visit him one hour every other week. Your request is denied due to unfavorable background investigation. Be assured that Mr. Jones has available to him the assistance of the EMTC Librarian, as well as that of the inmate law clerks, whose job assignments and training are specifically designed to meet the needs of inmates such as Mr. Jones.

I trust that this letter addresses your concerns.

Sincerely,

Wendy Darling

Cc: 291-127-0245 Administrative Review for Denial of Visiting Application

The words are ringing in his ears like subway trains, slicing his brain clean through like hot knives through butter, and the next thing he knows is a sharp stinging pain in his leg and right hand as he sits on the floor, amidst shards of glass, torn up books and shredded papers.

Breathing heavily, he lifts his hand to his face to look at it. Thick, red blood is running down his forearm, seeping into his sleeve, and dripping onto the carpet.

He shakes his head. Tries flexing his fingers and winces.

(No. It can’t be.)

He turns his head, slowly, to look around and assess the damage: bookcases knocked over, visitor’s chair missing one leg, leg-shaped dent in the wall, window open (but intact), computer monitor on the floor, screen smashed to smithereens. Keyboard nowhere to be found.

He groans. Color and vibrancy and sound press in on his consciousness with a throbbing headache behind his eyes and temples. His head is boiling.

(Great, just great.)

He feels through the mess with his uninjured hand blindly, finding his trusted cane not too far away, and heaves himself to his feet with great effort and more agonized groans of discomfort.

(Bleedin’ idiot.)
With a jolt, a white hot thought flashes through him and he snaps his head round so fast, it knocks him right off balance again and sends him tumbling back to the ground in a miserable heap.

(The cup. Her cup.)

It is still there, on his desk, unharmed.

An innocent beacon of joy. A brief flicker of light in the all-encompassing darkness.

A darkness that has, yet again, broken through all his defenses and consumed him from the inside out in a whirlwind of blind rage, chewing on him like colorless gum until his bones crack and splinter between its teeth, then spitting him out into the rubble - nothing but bloody flesh and raw misery.

He runs his hands down his face, not caring about the salty, tangy smell or the pain; hiding himself behind them as the soundless sobs burst from his lips.
She doesn’t take the bus, she runs. Runs the entire way home, the wind in her hair and her feet flying. She feels every step as her feet hit the ground, feels the air as it rushes in and races towards her organs. She feels her toes and her fingertips, her own weight pleasantly heavy and filling out each and every inch of her body.

Lacey leaps and jumps, laughing as she sticks the landing, then twirls on the spot. She doesn’t care if anyone sees, if anyone thinks anything by it. She’s not dancing for them. If anything, she’s dancing for herself. If anything, she’s dancing for him.

Spinning, she recalls his face - the strange mixture of pride and gratitude on it, and her heart thuds, ringing out like church bells across town, a metronome to her steps and turns.

*(He’d liked it. Liked her cup.)*

Lacey smiles as she pushes open the gate and walks across the lawn.

Three steps from the front door she stops, blinks, turns her head. The Rolls isn’t in the driveway, but there’s a wreath on the door - the colors and flower spray so beautiful it puts a lump in her throat and moisture in her eyes.

Lacey reaches out a trembling hand to touch it. There’s a note pinned to it.

*Welcome home, kiddo. Get ready.*

Get ready? Get ready for what? Her heart thudding even faster, she digs out her keys from her pocket, drops them twice, kicks the doormat, and finally manages to shove the right one into the lock and jerks it round, her hand and knee pushing against the door.

It’s no longer stuck. The hinges don’t creak.

Lacey trips, almost loses her balance and nearly falls face first onto the floor.

As she scrambles back up, brushes off her hands on her tights and takes a deep breath, the familiar
plants and pots salute her, all leaves dusted and earth watered.

The tools are nowhere to be seen.

Lacey steps out of her shoes and leaves them next to her dad’s polished yellow work gummies, which wink at her from their rightful place on the shoe rack.

_Surprise._

Calling out, she quickly shrugs out of her coat, throws it across the banister, and runs straight into the living room, scarf still tied around her neck and hat sticking to her warm forehead.

There’s no answer, just a scent.

Lacey freezes in the doorway, a hand clapped over her mouth to muffle the scream.

On a sturdy stand in the middle of the room, more tips than she could have counted in the breathless seconds that followed, there stands a gorgeous pine tree - full and proud, and absolutely perfect.

Lacey beams.

Running her fingers over the prickly tips like a pro surfer riding a wave, she breathes deeply and happily, basking in the smells and sensations until her toes collide with something solid and noisy.

It’s the ornament box, with a sticky note that reads: “Hey dreamer, look up!”

She sticks out her tongue and her gaze travels up - to the next piece of paper, pinned to the tree with a peg.

_**Hello Lacey, I am Christmas Tree. Nice to meet you.**_ (Dork.)

Lacey grins and gently takes and shakes a tip in welcome. “Hello, Mr Christmas Tree, I’m Lacey,” she giggles. “That’s not what you’ll be wearing to the party, is it?” She raises her brows at the silent green presence. “Allow me to assist you with that.”

Lacey curtseys, then opens the box at her feet and begins scattering straw, ornaments and seasonal knickknacks on the floor. Last to appear are several unopened packets of tinsel from the bottom of the box - not just the snake kind, but the stuff that’s loose strips too. She blows the dust from the lids, wrinkles her nose and bites her lip in anticipation.

Perhaps it’s because she’s taking so long to figure out where everything should go to make it look just right, but when the sound of another key turning in the lock shakes her from her reverie, she’s surprised it’s almost completely dark in the room, the remainder of daylight in a tight embrace with the horizon for a kiss and a good night’s sleep.

“Lacey?”

Dad’s voice calls her to her numb feet and out into the hall, half an excited verbal outburst ready on her lips and arms prepared to fly around his neck on sight.

“Pa-”

Lacey stops dead.
It is her father, who is hanging up winter clothes on free pegs and turning towards her with a wide smile and his arms thrown just as wide, but he’s not alone. Just behind him, her cheeks rosy and her smile so bright it eclipses his without trying, is her mother.

“Sorry we’re late, pet,” she says, placing her briefcase on the next to last bottom step like she always does. “I would have walked, but your father insisted on picking me up and poor old Rolls almost didn’t make it.”

Lacey can’t move. She can’t speak. Her ears are ringing and she has to concentrate hard just to breathe.

“Have you eaten yet, chicken?” Mum walks towards her, the concerned crinkle appearing between her eyes as she takes off her gloves and holds them in one hand. “Why are you wearing your hat? Are you cold?”

She pushes the sweaty wool up her forehead. Her cool palm feels wonderful on Lacey’s hot skin.

“Oh, I- I forgot.”

She had.

“And your scarf!” Mum laughs, shakes her head. “I’ll whip something up for us,” She rubs Lacey’s arms, then kisses the crown of her head and floats past into the kitchen, and Lacey is shocked to find her heart still beating in her chest and her legs still supporting her bodyweight. “Please put on your slippers, it’s freezing out!”

Lacey gapes at her dad. His shoulder lifts and falls in a half-shrug. He smiles tentatively.

She lunges forward and wraps her arms around him, stifling a sob on his chest.

“Our for the holiday,” His warm breath tickles her earlobe. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up. Wasn’t sure if…” He hugs her back tightly, his warm, strong hands sending shivers down her spine.

“Moe? Could you get the other bags from the car, please? There’s no milk in the fridge.” They hear the fridge close, followed by the clatter of pans and pots and the sound of running water from the tap.

“The milk, right!” He exclaims under his breath, making Lacey laugh. “Yes, dear!” He smiles down at her, ruffles her hair. “Your old man’s got work to do, grub. See if you can help your mama?”

Lacey wipes at her eyes with a hand and steps back. “Okay.”

She watches him go, walk out into the dark evening with a happy swing in his step, leaving the door wide behind him - despite the cold.

“Are there slippers on those feet yet?” Mum calls from the kitchen, making Lacey jump. “I didn’t hear slippers.”

Lacey bites the inside of her cheek.

“In a second, Mum!” She hollers back, giddy reds warming her face.

“Oh, I know your seconds alright!” Mum laughs. “Coat, slippers, and then, please, change out of your uniform and put it in the wash.”

“Yes, Mum!”
Lacey all but bounds up the stairs.

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It's the year 2000 and the Christmas tree is ridiculous. Glass angels and sparkling stars.

Lacey steps back to admire her work with a satisfied grin. “Watcha think?” she asks, fully aware that she’s talking to a piece of wood. “Not too shabby, if I dare say so myself.”

“He’s a hunk.” Mum enters the living room in her night gown, bathrobe and uggies, kissing Lacey’s cheek on her way to the comfy armchair. She puts their steaming mugs down on coasters on the coffee table and smiles up at the tree.

Lacey isn’t sure if she’s talking about the pine or Dad and she screws up her face just in case.

“Mum!”

Her mother turns, furrows her brow. “There’s something missing, sweetpea,” she says, pointing to the top, and now Lacey can see it too. She hurries to check the box and packets again.

“Gotcha!”

She unwraps the bit of newspaper and discloses a silvery ornament, holding it up in triumph for everyone to see: a frail thing like a silver plum, with deep rosy indentations on each side and glittery wings attached to its back. They’re thin, but they never break.

Mum says it’s fairy magic.

Lacey hugs the tiny fairy to her chest. She doesn’t know exactly how it became her ornament. Her parents had had it since long before she was born. It had been her mama’s as a girl, but somehow became hers. To Lacey, the delicate fairy is the most beautiful ornament in the world.

“Don’t drop her!” She hops from foot to foot as Dad wobbles on the step ladder, reaching to hang it.

“She’s a fairy, she can fly.” Mum plugs in the lights and in a mere second, their beautiful tree is ablaze in the living room - with twinkling lights, ornaments and love. He makes the most beautiful tree anyone has ever seen. A perfect photograph, a forever memory.

Lacey almost explodes, her feet itching to get going. “I know someone else who can,” she says, and takes Mum’s hands to pull her with her.

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She likes waking up in the middle of the night to soft rain and knowing she’s still got hours to enjoy by herself before the new day begins. She likes over-worn pyjamas and comfy chairs, toasty warm blankets and the smell of books and complete silence - except for the sound of her hands turning the pages. The weight of words and paper, familiar and comforting, and the voices of fictional characters going on adventures in her head. They make her forget all her worries and responsibilities - just for a little while.

Feeling as content as a cat in a box, she sits and reads.

The Christmas lights fill the room with a warm glow, merrily dancing on every surface and leaving behind a trail of fairy dust. Fairies, angels and stars. They sparkle, they shine - they light up the tree and the eyes of all who look upon them: therein lies the magic of Christmas ornaments. The tree
holds all the family ones, and she feels great joy at spotting those her daughter has made, precious treasures from long ago. They, more than anything, make the season real and put a song in her heart.

Humming to herself, Nicky doesn’t put the book down once as she walks into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water; and her eyes keep dashing down the pages, devouring the suspense and heartache, as she uncaps the orange bottle, shakes out two pills and pops them into her mouth like mint and chocolate beans. She leaves the bottle upside down on the counter and refills the kettle, then shuffles back to her favorite reading spot.

Just as she marks a page, a beautifully crafted paragraph about the pursuit of excellence in ballet, poetry and music in Stalin-era Russia, to read to Lacey over breakfast, a human hurricane thunders down the stairs and bursts through the door, howling and moaning, whirling in snowflakes across the wood floor and rugs, and billowing the curtains wildly.

She sets aside the book and reaches out for the trembling torrent of tears that dives for her outstretched arms.

“Sunflower-”

She wraps them both up in her dressing gown. Her baby is cold and shivering like a drowned kitten.

“Shh, just a dream, pet. Just a dream.”

She rocks them gently, strokes her daughter’s head and rubs her back. She doesn’t need to ask.

Lacey’s breathing comes fast and shallow as her sobbing ebbs away, the waves breaking on safe shores and the storm finding solace in the warm embrace. Everyone needs a lighthouse every now and then. Nothing wrong with that.

Nicky buries her face in the tousled mess. Even though they lose their warmth and most of the soft baby smell growing up, she can still find it. Find it with her eyes closed, underneath all that artificial vanilla and the copious amounts of body lotion - reminiscent of candy stores and funfairs. Underneath all that is her sweet girl, her happy sunflower. Her Lacey.

“Baby?” She brushes a strand of hair behind Lacey’s ear and tugs her top down to keep her warm. Lacey hiccups on her lap. “Uh-huh.”

“Get me the book?”

Her face glistens as she looks up.

Nicky takes it in both her hands, kisses the tip of Lacey’s nose and gently brushes the wetness and salt away. “You know which one,” she whispers conspiratorially, although only the spirits and the fairies are listening in on their conversation - and they already know everything.

“Now?” Lacey’s voice is small, but there’s a tiny spark in her eyes, a little light of her own.

“Absolutely! Who’s going to stop us?”

She feels the soft touch of Lacey’s fingers searching out her own, followed by a warm, gentle squeeze. Then Lacey untangles herself from the embrace and clambers off to walk to the kitchen. She blows her nose noisily, the bin opens and closes.

“Were you making tea, Mum?”
Oh, shoot. The water. “Yes, love, I was about to.”

“I’ll turn it on.”

Lacey returns with the book, handling the chunky thing like a bird’s egg. Her little bookworm. She’s chewing her lip.

“Come on now,” Nicky says, patting her lap, and Lacey crawls back onto the armchair with her and, once everyone’s settled, warm and cosy, flips open the cover.

Her hands are unsteady.

Snuggling up closer and smoothing down Lacey’s sleeves, Nicky rests her chin on her daughter’s shoulder. “So, what does the Lady fancy?”

Lacey giggles. She flips through the book until it lands on a well-worn page and trusted words. Of course.

“Shortbread,” she declares. “Orange and chocolate chip.”

“Excellent. Remind me what we need, pet?”

She clears her throat importantly and reads, tracing the cute drawings of ingredients and the nicely shaded sketch of the finished treat with her fingertips as she goes:

Nana’s Shortbread
A BEAUTIFUL, HUMBLE SHORTBREAD RECIPE
Helps with: bumps and bruises, broken hearts.
Antidote to: bad dreams, monsters under beds, winter winds and rain clouds.
Best with: a cup of hot tea, hugs and kisses.
- a lovely present for someone special -

INGREDIENTS
200 g plain flour, plus some extra for dusting
125 g soft butter
50 g caster sugar, plus extra for sprinkling over
Splash of icing sugar
Pinch of salt (unless the butter is salted)
1 tsp quality cinnamon
Zest of 1 orange
30 g the more the better!!! chocolate CHIPS (good-quality dark chocolate, 70% cocoa solids)
- nicest when the flavours are subtle -

MAKE THE MAGIC HAPPEN
1. Preheat the oven to 170°C/325°F/gas 3.
2. With a wooden spoon, mix the butter and sugar together until creamy. Add in the flour, salt and cinnamon, a little at a time, and combine together in a mixing bowl, using your fingertips. Squash, pat and push into a dough. Don’t knead, you just want to pat it down flat. Gently, gently, let it breathe and breathe in those delicious smells!
3. Add orange zest and chocolate (if using chocolate chips, push these into the dough at the end, after you’ve rolled it out).
4. Roll that dough! Make it 1cm thick (won’t rise much) — do this directly on a baking sheet so you don’t have to move it later. Cut into the shape you like – square, round, or a few small fingers. Use a heart-shaped biscuit cutter and put your heart into it. A little love goes a long way.

5. There’s nothing too broken that LOVE can’t fix! If it splits or tears, just press it back together – but remember, the less you work the dough, the shorter and better these biscuits will be.

6. Sprinkle over some caster sugar, then pop the baking sheet into the oven and cook for 20 to 30 minutes. Keep an eye on it – you want a lovely light golden colour (honey, hayfields in summer).

7. Leave on a wire rack to cool, dust with icing sugar and kisses to taste; then put away in a tin or serve with a nice cup of tea and a warm hug.

Before long, sweet smells are wafting from the kitchen and filling the house, hiding the smell of damp earth and painting over the terrors of the night with jokes and laughter, as the sun peeks into the windows, slightly bemused and still drowsy with sleep.

“Mum!” Lacey exclaims, dropping the dish towel and the spoons she’s been drying. “Look, Mum! Snow!” She spins around to face her, grinning and pointing out the window. Then she sucks on her chocolate-covered fingertip and thumb. “Awesome!”

Her little girl’s happiness is infectious. It starts as a tingle in Nicky’s fingers and toes, much like the feeling she gets when she’s anxious, but instead of chilly and worrisome, this one is as warm as their freshly-baked cookies. She feels it pass through her like a summer breeze, playing with her hair and taking away all the stress of her days to leave her feeling refreshed and calm inside. As the air stills again, she savours the memory of its gentle touch, a blissful evocation of days spent at the beach newly awakened in her heart. Oh, how she loved those days when they strolled down, hot sand on toes, and simply talked, laughed and made silly jokes.

“Yes, it’s beautiful, sweetpea. Nature’s own brand of icing sugar.”

“Ours is better,” Lacey picks up the spatula and pulls a bit of the dough off, letting it melt slowly on her tongue with a look of utter satisfaction and pleasure on her face. “Way better.”

She smiles. Even a bleak box mix can become real magic with yummy butter, an extra egg, milk and warm hugs and kisses. All you need is some almond extract and a little love. There’s not a trace of last night’s tears left.

“What’s this? The bloody fairy of Christmas past?! You two will be the death of me!”

“Over 10 words before 7. That’s a record,” Lacey remarks, then shouts up the stairs, “Love you too, dad! Good morning!” And they both collapse into fits of giggles, laughing together, along to the sound of the shower running and the boiler creaking, until they are bent double over the counter and sink, holding their sides.
This is a purple patchwork quilt and I don’t know where it came from.

She can’t sleep. If she does, her brain goes haywire. She can’t talk herself down when she’s asleep. Of course she knows it’s only temporary. For the holidays, Dad has said, and she’s not stupid. Mum isn’t fine, she’s stable. That’s a world of difference. Still, waking up to a house smelling of cinnamon and flowers, Lacey is trying her hardest to be grateful.

Downstairs, Mum sits at her vanity table sewing. Her foot taps the pedal, pushing it down in her own gentle rhythm, and her hands carefully adjust the fabrics and materials. Lacey watches in silence. The machine splutters and hums. She’s not even here, not really, and her brain is so sick it needs medication to keep her in this world, yet her mother’s first instinct is to worry about others, to care, to put them first.

She’s making the plushies again.

“Can I help?” Lacey asks, stepping closer.

Mum doesn’t take her eyes off her work, but her smile becomes so warm Lacey can feel it in her chest.

“You could help me sort these,” she suggests, indicating the shoe boxes on the floor with a small nod.

Lacey peers into them and sighs. What a mess. “Okay.”

She sinks down on the rug and, sitting on her bottom with her knees bent, feet tucked under and legs splayed out to the side, begins upturning boxes and sorting their contents into piles.

“Pet, remember: criss-cross applesauce,” Mum cautions softly. She still has eyes in the back of her head, apparently. Despite everything. “It’s bad for your knees.”

It’s not, but Lacey readjusts anyway.

“Could you hand me a paw?”

She surveys her piles. “Bear or tiger?”

“Tiger,” Mum answers after a slight pause. “This one has earned the stripes. It’s been through a lot.”

The paw changes hands.

“Mum?” Lacey's voice wobbles on the vowel like a highwire-walker. It’s hard to talk with your stomach in your throat.

Something in the simple not-so-simple word makes the pedal stop and her mother turn around in her seat.
“Yes?”

(She can’t do it, can’t say it. She doesn’t know where to start. Bad idea.)

“I-”

Mum waits patiently for her to go on, but her mind is blank. It’s only her heart drumming in her ears and thudding in her head. She doesn’t have the words.

Lacey shrugs.

Mum’s eyebrows are arched.

“The festival is today. Do you want to go?” It’s not what she’s meant to say. It’s safe.

Mum tilts her head, watching her. “I don’t know, baby.” She glances at the spare parts on the floor and smiles. “Maybe when Papa’s back. It’s so much nicer when it’s dark out. We could meet you there? At your booth?” she suggests.

“Okay.”

This concludes her attempting to be brave. Lacey babbles on for a bit - about the candles and Miss Melody and the weather forecast - keeping her mouth and hands busy until the tightness in her chest loosens and she can breathe again. All the lemon zest in the world won’t make her forget what he tastes like, won’t stop that tickling in her chest. She can still feel his lips on hers whenever, and maybe that’s enough - no matter what happens next.

Mum continues attaching donor-organs and limbs, stitching up broken wings, and sewing on matching buttons for fresh pairs of eyes. The hospital will be very pleased with this batch. Lacey makes a mental note to search the library for sewing handbooks and patterns. Or google.

Tomorrow is Christmas, which is why Dad is working late. Everyone wants for fir sprigs and flowers; everyone wants a pretty home for the holidays. She almost cries when he comes home before stores close and nails a mistletoe to the top of the door frame, making Mum blush. Outside, the sun dips the rooftops into soft pastels, quickly slipping behind the row of cozy homes. As the evening sky fades away, the pink and orange hues are replaced with dark shades of blue, whilst the amber lights of the street lamps click on and spill out on the cobbled street.

After dinner, Mum is tired. The pills give her headaches and make her dizzy sometimes, nothing to worry about. Her eyes are clear and she’s laughing, a comfy blanket burrito in Dad’s arms on the sofa. He’s made hot chocolate with fresh whipped cream. Lacey smiles. She doesn’t mind going by herself. Ruby and Emma will be there. It’s going to be fun.

She laces up her boots and shrugs on her coat, heart starting to thump excitedly.

"You have a great time, sweetpea," Mum says as Lacey swoops down to kiss her cheek, her curls tumbling over her shoulder and falling into her face. "Give Ruby my love."

"Sure thing." Dad squeezes her shoulder and smiles at Mum. It means: Have fun, kiddo. I got this. And she’s not worried. Everything is fine. "I'll see you crazy kids later."

***

Lacey bounces down the steps with a cocoa-covered heart, making her way out into the evening and pulling a black beret down on her head. Her breath mists in front of her as she walks briskly down
the street. It’s almost eight, and she doesn’t want to be late. She passes by Granny’s Diner, its bright windows and the muted buzz of laughter making her smile, and turns onto Main Street, making her way past darkened shop fronts until she reaches the little church at the end.

Then she gasps.

It’s the Festival of Lights. Along the wintry path hundreds of lanterns illuminate the way, guiding people to the cluster of selling booths. The light is cast every color by the tinted panes, and Lacey can’t help but be reminded of candy canes and fairy floss. It’s as if the town has been iced by *The Magic Porridge Pot* people - and it’s even more beautiful than the cake Mum made for her 11th birthday. The church square is filled with folks in their winter garb, thick woolen jackets, mittens and scarfs. Most carry a lamp or candle, their gentle puffs of breath framed by the soft glow before they dissolve into the night.

Lacey takes a deep breath. The air is crisp in a way that cleans lungs and covers everything it touches in fine crystal - from the stalls’ rooftops to people’s very red noses. She could eat the air and drink the spices, so heady is the fragrance of caramel apples, cinnamon and cumin, and the fruity beckoning call of the hot punch that’s carrying on it. Someone is making fresh waffles. Probably Ruby.

Lacey’s mouth waters at the prospect of the irresistible, crispy treats, studded with dark, succulent cherries. The cherries melt into candy-like jewels in the fluffy dough and make it extra sweet. You don’t need hot chocolate sauce or sprinkles, or any kind of topping really, when there’s cherries. Granny’s cherry waffles are the best.

“Lace! Hey, Lace!” Emma skids to a halt in front of her. Her nose and ears are as red as the squares on her lumberjack shirt. She draws up her shoulders and holds out a paper cup. “Shit it’s cold! Here. Scored some punch.”

“Ta,” Lacey takes a tentative sip. *Christmas with a splash of alcohol.* She covers the cup with a gloved hand. They walk. “Forgot your jacket?”

“Sort of. Left it at his place.” She grins a little sheepishly and pushes a flyaway strand of hair behind her left ear. “Won’t get it back until next year.” She shrugs.

“He’s out of town?”

“Yeah,” Emma sighs and Lacey knows exactly what she means. “He left this morning. Got an early present though. Look!” Her face lights up as she dangles the bracelet in front of Lacey’s face. It’s a simple leather string with a heart charm. Cheap.

“Cheesy, I know.” Emma waves a dismissive hand, but of course she likes it. She wouldn’t be wearing the thing if she didn’t.

Lacey smiles, savoring the taste of spiced orange, red berries and plum on her tongue. “I think it’s sweet.”

As they amble along arm in arm, the elegantly decorated, wooden stalls slowly reveal all their hidden wonders, attracting long queues of bustling townsfolk and all sorts of guests from neighboring backwaters. The festive stalls, illuminated with blinking Christmas lights, sparkly ornaments and
brightly colored signs, are lined up in neat rows along either side of the square behind the church and laden with varieties of delectable treats, jasmine scented fragrances, skillfully hand-crafted greeting cards, jewelry, homemade knitwear, candles, and many other choices of decoratively wrapped gifts to allure last-minute-shoppers and occupy them for endless periods of time.

The warm smiles of the people behind the stalls - as they toss freshly roasted, golden brown chestnuts and sweet almonds into paper cones, or carefully pour creamy hot chocolate into mugs, adding generous layers of whipped cream - are returned by the beaming children, who eagerly await their Santa-themed drinks, and quickly spreading onto the chatty parents, who are red-faced and just as giddy as their offspring, most likely nursing their second or third cup of Fairy’s punch or eggnog already.

“Do you love him?” She doesn’t know what’s made her ask. She doesn’t actually care about the answer. “The sex any good?”

Emma chokes on her drink, covering her mouth with her free arm and coughing into it heartily. “Personal much?” She makes a frog-face that matches her breathless croak. “The hell, Lace.”

Lacey laughs. “What? It’s not worth it if the sex is shite.”

Emma shakes her head, wipes her nose on the back of her hand. “If you must know,” she mumbles into her glove, shooting Lacey a dark look. “I think I’ve earned that waffle. And the chocolate sauce.” She points ahead to where they can see the people in the familiar red skirts and aprons handing out baked goods and returning to their steaming battle stations to make more. Granny’s waffles are always in high demand.

“Good for you!” Lacey wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. “How about cream and sprinkles? Got those covered too?”

Emma lets go of her arm and, in three long strides, gets a little ahead, then turns around and continues walking backwards. “YOU are IMPOSSIBLE!”

Lacey curtseys mid-walk. “I think I’m going with the Greek yogurt and cinnamon sauce. And some almonds. Cherries love almonds. Add a bit of crunch to the creamy.”

Emma grunts and pulls her beanie into her face.

“Good evening. What can I-” Ruby grins down at them. “Thank God, it’s you two. People are crazy. Whatcha want? --- Oh, you know what?” She makes to untie her apron at the back and takes off her oven mitts. “-TAKING FIVE!” She hollers over her shoulder, grabs three waffles on plates, douses them in sauce and sprinkles, and slides out the side entrance to meet them.

“Here you go. My treat.”

Emma and Lacey peer down at the helplessly drowning heart shapes on their sagging paper plates, then look at each other. Emma pokes a piece with her finger and Lacey bursts out laughing.

“You serve THAT to all your customers - or just the special ones?” She asks. Ruby smacks her shoulder.

“Fuck off, Lace!”

“I wonder how many calories are in this… Emma? Should be a couple laps, some cardio…” Lacey trails off with a wicked grin, and Emma freezes mid-chew, chocolate-covered plastic fork pointing at Ruby. She swallows hard. “What she said!”
“What are you people talking about?!” Ruby rests her hands on her hips. Her fork quivers in her waffle, plate on the bar table.

Lacey shrugs, sucks some crumbs and chocolate off her thumb. “Sex,” she says. “Why?”

Emma groans. Ruby doesn’t even blink.

“Well? Dish then! --- Who’s pregnant?”

Emma sets down her plate, knife and fork. “You two are horrible.”

“Ashley,” Lacey says.

“And-?” Ruby takes a sip of Lacey’s drink and grimaces. Yeah.

“Not me,” Lacey laughs. “I’m on the pill.”

“Smart girl,” Ruby jerks a heart off with her hand, rolls it up between her thumb and forefinger, and plops it into her mouth before licking her fingers clean. Lacey rolls her eyes.

“They’re getting married, Ashley and Sean, aren’t they?” Emma asks.

It had been quite the scandal, the banker’s son getting his high school-girlfriend pregnant, and now that Mr Herman had grudgingly allowed his son to do the right thing and make an honest woman out of the little wench - like he put it - people were shuddering with pleasant indignation when recounting the story.

Lacey bites her lip. Ashley’s a year ahead of them, a senior, and Sean only left for college two summers ago, but people still act like he’s robbed the cradle and the whole affair is something only to be talked about in hushed voices and scandalized whispers.


“Before or after?” Lacey swirls sprinkles around on her plate. They melt into the sticky muck.


“Getting married at 18. That’s…” Emma points a finger at her temple, turning it in a small circle a few times.

“Who cares about age?! But people should marry for love, not because they accidentally put one in the oven.”

“I guess,” Emma agrees.

Ruby’s eyebrows shoot up her forehead. “Wouldn’t have taken you for the romantic type, Lace. Marriage?!” She leans over the table to mime feeling Lacey’s forehead to gauge her temperature. “You sick?”

Lacey swats her hand away.

“I’m just saying, you should wait. No, not with that…” she adds, taking in their expressions. “Just… wait and marry the right person, you know?”

*Wait for someone who bumps mouths clumsily with yours, because they’re too busy smiling to kiss you properly. Yeah. Wait for that. Wait for the right set of lips, soft and rough, for the right eyes that*
hold yours while you drown in them, for the right set of arms to become your roots and wings as they carry you through the night.

(What the actual-)

“Okay. Who is he?” Ruby stares at Lacey with the intensity of a store detective grilling a shoplifter. Lacey bites her cheek and shoves a soggy waffle-heart in her mouth. “I want a name!”

“Do we know him?” Emma moves a little closer. “Someone from the party?”

Lacey’s stomach clenches. The waffle is disgusting. It tastes like cardboard, boys’ locker rooms, and big, sweaty hands closing around her throat.

“There’s no guy,” she chokes out between her teeth.

“There’s always a guy,” Ruby remarks dryly, suppressing that spark of humor that’s glinting in her eye. Lacey wants to strangle her, wipe that stupid grin clean off her stupid face.

“Oh, piss off, Ruby!” Lacey snaps.

“Fine! Don’t tell us then! Suit yourself.” Ruby throws her hands up. The church bells chime. *Eight fifteen.* “I gotta get back. See you later.” Leaving her plate spinning on the table, Ruby turns on her heels and stalks off without looking back at them.

“Jesus. What’s gotten into her?” Emma offers, but Lacey isn’t listening. She’s looking out over the constant stream of people passing them by - groups of friends, families, couples holding hands - without really looking at anyone or anything in particular. Kids giggling at their creamy chocolate mustaches. The loud, spirited laughter of drunken almost-adults. Kissing mouths and grogging hands. Continuous chatter surrounding her, growing into a welcome vivacious buzz in her ears.

“Isn’t that Miss Mills?” Emma points and Lacey’s eyes focus for near, zeroing in on their teacher who is standing a little while away, in the shadows at the confectionery stall, swaying softly in the arms of a dark haired stranger like they’re dancing to their own, private music that only they can hear. He’s holding her by the waist, gently, gently, her hands wrapped around his neck like wings, and they only have eyes for one another. A small gingerbread heart, red ribbon. Lacey averts her gaze and bites down on her tongue until she tastes blood.

(They can’t even hold hands! They can never hold hands!)

She wants to buy one of those ugly hearts on red string and throw it at his head.

“Hey! Lacey?”

“Huh?” Lacey turns the elastic on her wrist round and round like a wedding band on a bony finger. “Yeah, that’s her.” *Snap. Snap. Snap.* “But --- who’s he?”

“No idea,” Emma looks at the intriguing stranger with interest and sighs wistfully. “This heart-crap is bullshit,” she mutters, chin resting on palm.

(This heart-crap is bullshit, indeed.)

“She can’t even hold hands! They can never hold hands!” Miss Melody comes fluttering their way, parting the crowds, her many shawls flying behind her and coat buttons straining, threatening to pop off and shoot in all directions like bullets. She clutches her shell-necklace. “Quick, quick! It’s almost eight thirty!”
She ushers them to the large Christmas tree in the center of the square like an overexcited hen would her chicks, and continues fussing over all her brood until Emma and Lacey find themselves standing smack dab in middle row - in front of the tree, next to the nativity scene staged by the theatre kids, and sandwiched between Mary-Margaret (who’s cold-shouldering them both) and Zora (who looks like she might faint without Mei-Li by her side any minute now). 

“Places, places everyone!” Miss Melody trills. She flaps her arms wildly, Emma passes her laughter off as a violent fit of sneezes, and, at the stroke of eight thirty on the old town clock comes the first wave of songs; songs of joy and light and thanks to echo in Lacey’s cold, hollow body and float into the homes of even the town curmudgeons who’ve preferred to stay in tonight, hiding behind salmon-colored walls and glass-paned oak doors.

Lacey sings, watching the notes float to the stars on translucent clouds of dead air.

(\textit{She doesn’t want anyone to know she loves him. Because once someone else knows, it becomes real.})

Tonight even the windows of hell will be open wide despite the cold. The sisters believe the music to have a stronger effect on their charges than any medicine they could ever administer from plastic cups or stir into the colorless mashed potatoes and gravy.

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Allured by the scent of freshly baked Christmas cake coming from the bakery booth amidst the busy streets of Storybrooke’s Christmas Market, he takes his lingering gaze off of the enormous Christmas tree adorned with sparkling ornaments and glowing fairy lights draped around it. Strolling alongside the magnificently fitted out stalls, rolling a chocolate mint on his tongue, he watches as people swarm in and out of the bustling square like bees.

He turns his head in the direction of the music and there she is: suede boots, royal blue coat, beret nestled cheekily in her hair. The winter air plays with her soft curls, making them glisten in the tree’s great glow. Her beautiful voice blends perfectly with the rest, yet stands out as clear as day. It’s only her he’s listening to.

As he stops, someone bumps into him, nearly knocking his cane right out of his hand. People just keep walking, not sparing him a glance. A sea of black shoes and coats and hats. Gold scrambles to keep his balance, to find footing on icy ground. The music has stopped. He looks around, but she’s gone - just like that, in the blink of an eye. Where did she go?

He turns left. He turns right. No Lacey.

The crowd flows down the marked path the same way the Thames always meets its banks. The mood of the people swirls in unseen currents beneath the surface of their faces, somehow turning the smiles lopsided and ominous. In a hundred frozen faces there isn’t a single true smile or expression of real joy. The only sound is their feet on the muddy tarmac and the howl of the wind rising above it as it rattles at the lanterns, making the colors flicker and dance.

\textit{Don’t mess with the fairies.}

Gold looks at the men, women and children, searching for a familiar face. Every one of them must be feeling the bite of winter through their tired clothes and worn boots. His own coat isn’t nearly enough to shield his body from the night, simply held together by shabby patches and sheer power of will. There are no buttons. His stiff fingers find and fumble with loose string instead and come away empty.
Under cover of the night, the clouds drift apart unseen overhead, revealing twinkling balls of gas eons ago or yet to be born. The temperature drops and Gold pulls his coat a little tighter around himself. Maybe he should head home. As he looks up at the night sky, a single snowflake swirls on the wind and sinks down, soft like a feather, onto his nose. He blinks.

“Dr Gold?”

There she is, radiant as the sun, a warming smile stretching her face as wide as it would go.

“Good evening, Miss French.”

She moves to stand beside him and they look at the sky together. He has seen this before, hasn’t he, Gold wonders, watching the snow adorn her hair like sparkly diamonds on dark satin. Her softness makes the brutal into the beautiful. White as snow, red as blood, black as ebony. He watches the snow melt on her eyelashes. They are dripping with dew. When she smiles, she smiles with her eyes too. Bright and vibrant and full of life.

He’s almost knocked off balance with the sheer force of his longing for her then. For her, for her light. There is so much light in her and around her everything is brimming over, and everything is finally enough. His heart aches to be with her, to stay here and look at her forever, to touch her rosy cheeks and feel her warm skin under his fingertips.

They stand in silence and watch the snow fall. Her hair is tied up away from her face. The moon and stars shine on to her cheekbones and fingertips as she fumbles with the elastic and pulls on her ponytail. He admires her while she admires the sky at a distance.

Without looking away, she moves to take his hand, presses her palm to his, then laces their fingers through each other’s until he can no longer tell one from the other. She doesn’t say a word, just smiles. And he’s smiling too.

Love. Love is complex. Love is work. Love is dirty. But love is also beautiful. Incredible. Good. Love is everything. God, love hurts, but it hurts so damn good.

She gives their linked hands a little tug and they are walking, holding hands with heartbeats in their throats, blending into the crowd like a circus clown does at a child’s wake. He doesn’t care. For some reason holding hands seems more intimate to him than anything else. More intimate than kissing, more intimate than hugging, more intimate because two people’s worlds come together and become one when they trust each other enough to let them. Two hands, two lives, two hearts that interlock for just one glorious moment. Everything he loves about her - he can feel it in her hand. He can feel all of her.

She pulls him a little closer, soft laughter, clear like sleigh bells, tickling his ear. He licks his lips, tasting fields of blueberries on the tip of his tongue, round and ripe and juicy, taut skin bursting open under gentle pressure, texture and flavor exploding in his mouth.

Her tongue sweeps across Ice-Cream-Sundae teeth and he wants to know which kind is her favorite - is it rich, dark chocolate? Light, gentle vanilla? Perhaps it’s late summer berries, staining hands and painting mouths cool velvet reds and deep saturated violets.

She laughs and all of a sudden, he realizes her laughter has become his favorite sound.

“Strawberry,” she tells him, as if he has asked out loud; as if the question mark thought in fervent whisper has trailed down her neckline and lapped around her small, sweet curves - teasing, tantalizing, making the pretty porcelain pebble quite so deliciously. Oh, how her hands tremble. How
the red blotches on her chest come into bloom, growing bigger and bigger. How she peers shyly up at him in warm-blooded wonder. How he’s too busy counting the freckles on her nose to remember to breathe.

**Love and lust are conjoined twins.** Of the same mind and sharing vital organs. Can one survive without the other? Think, breathe, live?

There’s that static again. That crackling in the air that’s always there whenever they go within a foot of each other. Even when she’s a mouthy, doe-eyed lass of only sixteen years and he’s the world’s most despicable creature, and there should be nothing, it is enough to make the little baby hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Enough that she’s a little afraid for her life when his other hand brushes her cheek. Afraid one of them might be instantly electrocuted, afraid his touch is going to destroy them both.

She looks both ways before telling him she loves him, low under her breath, and when she hugs him her eyes scan the vast sky, as if the stars had eyes and ears and mouths that could give them away. On a winter’s night like this even the stars are whispering to each other.

*I love you.* It means: I am not just here for the pretty parts. I am here with you no matter what.

The hug, it breaks, but their eyes are still embracing, holding each other close, tugging and pulling between them. Eye contact is way more intimate than words will ever be. A kiss that has been exchanged a thousand times between the eyes before it reaches the lips becomes more than a kiss.

He looks at her, and he just loves her, and it terrifies him. It terrifies him what he would do for her.

**What he would do to her.**

“Don't tell me who I can and cannot love!” Her eyes say, hot anger bubbling beneath that wonderful strawberry skin. “Don't you dare put limits, put boundaries on my feelings, shackle my heart, and confine the fire to my veins and let it consume me from within. Oh, who is to say what is or is not appropriate in love and war?”

This lost girl who stands so quiet and grave at her own mouth of hell. This girl who is all fire, flame and blazing innocence - does anyone truly wonder why he wants her? Tilting her head, she offers an endearing smile. A smile that melts his core. Before they were here, he was one; now he is a half, yet somehow so much more than he ever was before.

**Sixteen, that still small voice whispers, she’s sixteen.**

He tips her cheek into his open palm and presses a hard kiss to her lips. She tastes like messy hair and wild parties, like a life not yet lived; late nights and long hours; quick friends and slow loves; dry mouths and wet lips; cheap liquor, campfires, and the pain of losing green. She tastes like fruit. Ambrosial and forbidden.

Their bodies mold together, each the perfect complement of the other, and Gold’s cock pushes against the fly of his pants. The enormity of his desire disgusts him, but to burn with it and keep quiet about it would be the greatest punishment they could bring on themselves.

“Doesn’t that astonish you,” her lips mouth. “You want me. Say it again.”

*(It’s wrong, It’s wrong, It’s wrong, I want you.)*

As he deepens the kiss, they sink to the ground in freeze frame shots, and where they land winter melts into spring and comes into leaf in a flash of sensations, a quick summer’s branches heavy with
more of that intoxicating nectar on her red, swollen lips. He smiles at the soft rise and fall of her
chest, the way her hair is knotted into tangles against his palm, the way her lips part for the pad of his
thumb as he traces them.

Yet something about her screams innocence. The freckles splattering the bridge of her nose maybe,
or perhaps the way she looks up at him, biting on the corner of her bottom lip, her hair fanning out all
around her like a dark halo, her auburn curls and the blush in her cheeks standing out so pointedly
against the backdrop of the lush green grass.

*A fragile flower.*

Well, what happens to a delicate flower when you touch it, or tamper with it, or forget to water it;
don’t provide it with its necessary light and good soil? It ends up withering and dying. A promise to
nurture, to provide, to care for - is a very noble, but possessive one to make. It’s as possessive as it is
beautiful - for people aren’t flowers, and ought not to be treated as such. Flowers like people need the
space to retain their capacity of looking after themselves to a great degree or risk losing their sense of
self-dependency. Sheltering a rosebud from the cold is kindness, sheltering it from hard rain cruelty.

Remontant [ri-mont-tuh nt] adjective 1. (of certain roses) blooming more than once in a season.

April is the cruelest month, breeding roses out of dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull
roots with spring rain, but this is the start of summer and she a remontant rose, her long green stem
still fragile as glass, but her heavenly fragrance inviting him to stay - once in June and, perhaps, again
in the early fall.

Before he can stop it, the image of those berry-stained lips - nibbling, exploring, whispering - against
his burning, sordid skin invades his thoughts, sliding to the forefront of his brain with a mixture of
hope and elation, and yet the most poignant regret. Freckles and seeds, palms open towards the sky,
she reminds him of sunrises on foggy, chilly mornings and bright sunflowers, which are his favorite
kind - and he wants to do with her what spring does with the cherry trees. He wants her to fuck him
with everything she’s got.

The thing with October is, it gets in your very blood. Unapologetically. Almost ruthlessly. Bright
smiles, tender lips and welcoming petals - he will pick apart each one.

Tongues tied into knots like cherry stems, sweetness exploding in a big bang of flavor, autumn kills
the summer with the softest kiss. She tastes like green apple candies, like coconut chocolates,
lavender icing coating her lips as if she were meant to be ravished by a hungry soul. His weight
defeats her, though she tugs at him roughly and moans his name between her quivering lips, bleeding
for him and calling it strawberry syrup as his treacherous virility takes the untouched paradise
between her parted thighs.

She pulls him closer, and he drowns her in hurricane rains, in blowing leaves that turn the color of
fire. He bites her neck and kisses her mouth, deeply and urgently, devouring every last drop of her
essence; consuming, teasing; hard and gentle; sweet nothings like dirty rich soil setting her ablaze -
and she flowers into a universe, burns more brilliant than the sun itself, collapses into his embrace,
her body broken into a thousand questions.

She is the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

***

With a jolt, Gold bolts awake, unsticking his face from the cool, fogged up glass.
“Mr Roan, Sir?” Dove looks sharply at him in the rear-view mirror, a concerned crease cutting across his smooth forehead for just one moment like lightning against a backdrop of heavy storm clouds. “We’ll be arriving at The Four Seasons in under five minutes,” he informs him. “Anything else I can do for you, Sir? I’d be more than happy to be of assistance.”

“That would be all for now, Dove. --- Thank you.”

Dove nods and Gold toggles the switch that raises the car's privacy screen.

Letting out a breath, he rubs his stiff neck, wondering dimly if he’s spent the entire ride with his head lolled off over the back of the seat like that, drooling onto the sticky seat belt that’s biting into his irritated skin.

“Fucksake!”

Red hot shame invades his face as realization slowly dawns on him and drags his mortified mental faculties into full consciousness.

Well.

He’ll have plenty of time to excoriate himself for his lapse of character over the Christmas holidays.

Several bottles of red swill are a large part of the deliquescence of his adherence to morals, he’s sure of it, and it would be comfortably convenient to blame it all on the drink entirely, his common decency temporarily laid to waste by lack of sleep and nightly excess of alcohol, but Gold knows better than to let himself off the hook that easily.
It’s the night before Christmas. He’s radically cleaned the place and put flowers everywhere. Lacey has outdone herself with the decorations and helped her mother bake. The girls have set out cookies and a tall glass of milk for Santa, and carrot sticks for Rudolph, which Nicky and he munch on, giggling like teenagers at a sleepover, before she falls asleep on the sofa and he carries her upstairs.

He has stuffed their stockings with a few nuts, an apple and a candy bar each. Nicky’s holds a small pouch of flower seeds and a new pair of gardening gloves; Lacey’s a paint brush set, neatly held together with satin ribbon. Not much by yesteryear's standards, but to his girls this bounty will be nothing short of a small treasure. Nicky says it’s the simple things in life that bring the most joy, and to count their blessings and be thankful for them every day. He is thankful. For every extra day he gets to spend with her. For every morning she wakes up lucid and happy and healthy. For every moment Lacey has her mother home with her. He’s doing his best, but girls Lacey’s age need their mothers - to confide in and argue with. Try as he might, he can never be both.

When he woke her up this morning and Lacey told him no more Christmas presents ever with the gravest face, he laughed and asked why, but his heart had already sunk into his slippers. Lacey didn't really know, she said, only that every time she unwrapped a present she didn't feel how she was supposed to feel, Dad. He should have asked her about her feelings then, he knows, but instead asked her if she still wanted Christmas food, and Lacey had nodded fervently. Yes, the food her mother spent so long preparing was important.

Then, to his surprise, she suggested taking flowers to church that evening. He had smiled, nodded. And so it was that, at ten at night on December 24th, after they had had a filling dinner and - gathered around their beautiful tree - had gotten their first piece of Christmas candy, the three of them - dressed in boots, warm coats and scarfs - walked through the biting cold toward the steeple that poked above the glistening roofs: beeswax candles in one hand and fragrant flowers in the other, talking and laughing, their feet crunching on the frosted path and the air burning in their lungs.

***

She starts Christmas morning by casually leaning in the kitchen doorway, reading a book, acting like she doesn’t know there’s mistletoe right above her head, and he couldn’t be more in love.

Smiling, he shuffles past, planting one on her.

“Your book is upside down,” he mumbles against her soft, warm lips, feeling her smile. It’s a sweet kiss, tasting like lazy mornings and warm beds, as rich and nutty as the steaming pot of coffee that’s waiting on the breakfast table.

It is set for three. Coffee, poached eggs, and bacon. He’s never been this hungry.

“Really?” Nicky grins as wide as her cheeks will stretch. She laces their fingers together, pulls him closer as she deepens the kiss, and now it’s his turn to smile into it: At her side, her free hand is holding her book, thumb inconspicuously marking the right page so she won’t lose her spot. Everything in the house is a bookmark. Except for actual bookmarks, she says. They are too pretty. The fairies keep taking them. Fairies are drawn to all things beautiful, doesn’t he know? - No wonder they are drawn to her.

“Merry Christmas,” he says, easing back, holding her close with his arms around her middle.
Her eyes are bright and impossibly blue.

“Merry Christmas.”

She kisses his cheek, points at the ceiling with a smirk, and he watches her go, his loving gaze lingering until she’s out of sight, and his heart thudding in sync with her footfalls on the stairs.

_Time to wake up their baby girl. Time to put on a brave face._

Because that’s what love is - a mutual regard and affection from one person to another. Not just romantic love, but self-sacrificial kind of love. It’s putting on a brave face and pouring the dark hot liquid into cheerful mugs while humming carols under your breath to keep the troubles from showing on your face. It’s cutting the crust off her bread slices, because the meds make her gums sore and sensitive (but she doesn’t want to switch to something softer. Lacey is still growing and needs wholegrain and sunflower seeds.). It’s folding the laundry while she takes a nap, and rubbing her back when she wakes up crying and yelling about a past or a present that isn’t real.

As long as she takes her medication, everything is fine. They switched her to something else, another long, complicated name he cannot yet pronounce or remember. It’s on the labels and the bills, and he should know - in case of emergency. He has to be able to give them a name, her daily dosage, and a time frame - but for now, he’s carrying a spare bottle in his pocket and hoping for the best.

It’s Christmas. Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. Nothing bad happens on Christmas.

***

He sits in the dark and waits for the sunrise to dip the open shutters into orange and gold. The sun will kiss the frost from the windows, throwing light across the carpet and making it all better. She’s sleeping at last, but there is no point in him trying to get some rest as well. A new day is dawning and he needs to be strong for the both of them today. It’s important.

Moe runs a hand down his face, rubbing it over his mouth. The faint aroma of chocolate wafts in from the kitchen, reminding him of work still to be done. He heaves himself out of the old armchair, shuffles to the fridge, takes out butter, eggs, carrots, and whipped cream, then closes the kitchen door silently. He’s lucky he’s a florist: He’s got good hands. They might be large and calloused hands, but they are steady - even when the rest of him is not - and, even when drowsy with sleep, his eyes still catch every detail. And that’s where the devil lies.

Kneading the sweet dough, he’s thinking of pizza nights. Dough from scratch, sauce from scratch, cheese from - well, from the store. They don’t go that far. He loves the making of the base, the dough for the crust. Tomatoes, salt, oregano. The feeling of flour and water in his hands, first separate and then merging into a silky whole. The yeast and gluten making it a living, breathing thing that moves when you poke it with a sticky, webbed finger. It breathes into your palms as you tuck it in - someplace safe and warm and sheltered - and give it time to grow, just like a flower bud.

Their hands covered in flour, they would open a bottle of red wine, clinking their glasses together in celebration. Any night could be a special night - you just had to make it so. Curled up on the couch, sharing the same light blanket, her freezing feet tucked under his, they would eat the pizza they made, simply watch whatever’s on TV, and fall asleep in a wine and wheat coma.

Love is cooking together. It’s making something enjoyable with each other and sharing it, creating many little moments. That’s what he thinks - is thinking still - despite everything.

A quick glance at the clock on the microwave tells him that, give or take half an hour, exactly
seventeen years ago, they had welcomed their best work yet into this world, the most wonderful gift life had given them.

Everything will be bright and happy on his daughter’s birthday, he’ll be damned. There will be cake with chocolate frosting, balloons and music. She deserved that - and so much more.

Cake in the oven, frosting and cream waiting in the fridge, he cleans until every surface gleams and sparkles, waters the plants, and sets out the balloons and candles. He checks the time again, squinting at the dancing red digits, smoothing down invisible creases and crinkles in the tablecloth as he leans on the table for support. The fabric is so brilliantly white it hurts, but he likes to skim his fingertips over the fine needlework with his eyes closed. Feeling the neat stitches and soft threat is soothing, a tactile mantra repeatedly whispered against his skin.

Like a place mat, a pretty wreath of flowers, carefully embroidered by hand, adorns one side of the cloth, indicating Lacey’s place at the table. The flowers are tradition. As are the balloon-curtain in the doorway and the carrot-chocolate cake. And, of course, the flower hair wreath that he still has to twine before she comes down to blow out the candles and make her birthday wish. He cannot forget about the crown. Every girl is a princess, and his princess can’t make her wish without her flower crown.

When the light has filled the room for some time, he begins to worry. She never sleeps late, even when the books or meds have kept her up all night. Sleeping in late can only mean one thing.

The curtains are drawn, the room dark. He goes to her and touches her forehead. Fever. Damn it. He must have brought it home from the shop, or maybe it's the new pills. He knows she's bound to get some bugs with her immune system so sheltered and weak, but the timing is lousy, to say the least.

“Love?” He touches her shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she rasps. Her eyes are red and sticky with sleep. “Holiday bug. It’s fine.”

*Holiday bug* is what she used to call it when she came down with something as soon as school was out and the stress lifted from her shoulders. This isn't that, but he can't tell her that. She wouldn't understand. Upsetting her now would only make it worse.

“Tea,” he announces, rubbing his hands together and smiling down at her. “Ginger and honey?” His voice is calm, almost bright. He ought not to make it bigger than it has to be. “And cake in bed. Lacey will like that.”

She nods, looking troubled. “The cake! It’s not ready! I wanted to get up early and—”

“Not to worry, my love, not to worry. It’s all taken care of.” *Well, except for the flower crown.* “Cake, presents, table cloth. The balloons - they go on the cake, right? And the candle curtain? Chocolate in the oven?”

She smiles.

“Ain't that right, love?” He grins.

Her laugh starts as silver bells and ends in a barking cough. He frowns.

He takes her hands and raises them above her head, rubbing her back patiently. “There. Alright. We got this.”

“Dad?”
Lacey’s in the doorway, standing there with the hall light behind her casting her outline onto the bedroom floor. She is wearing a cartoon t-shirt. That little motherless deer with the long legs and big eyes.

“Everything okay?” Her hand goes to her chest, shielding herself with her book. It’s well-loved, a tattered copy with fragile binding and crinkled edges. The spine is cracked, the pages worn and torn. It’s practically falling to shambles.

“Grub,” he turns his head smiling, and holds out a hand. “C’mere. Nothing a little tea and honey won’t fix.”

Looking sceptical, she allows herself to be pulled into the hug.

“Happy Birthday, Lacey.”

She mumbles something against his chest.

He kisses her head. Her hair smells like roses. The pink bottle.

In his mind’s eye, the bathtub is painted almost directly from above and the scene a playful teasing between the mother and daughter; the mother is laughing and a small toy watering can is resting on the edge of the bathtub.

Moe swallows hard.

“Go on. I’ll get the cake.”

He gives her an encouraging pat on the backside, avoids two pairs of wide blue eyes, and dashes downstairs to the kitchen.

Tea, cake, flower crown. No. Flower crown, tea, cake, candles, plates and present.

When he returns with the cake - seventeen green and yellow candles flickering merrily - Lacey is crying on the bed, her back pressed to her mother’s chest, and the open book lying on the duvet before them. She doesn’t want anyone to see, but it’s hard not to notice the slow heaving sobs. The light from the glowing candles makes her cheeks glisten.

Nicky looks crestfallen. She’s fidgeting with the book - the pages, the edges - staring down at the printed words over Lacey’s shoulder like they alone hold the answers to life, the universe, and everything.

Both of them look up at exactly the same time, watching him standing there: In his striped pajamas and worn slippers, rose crown dangling from his left arm, balancing the cake plate on his slippery palms. His arms start to tremble. Everything’s suddenly so heavy, he wishes he’d taken the plastic instead of the glass plate. Also, he’s forgotten the present, left it sitting on the counter downstairs - pretty paper, singing card and all.

“Maurice?” Her voice quivers. Low, but thick with emotion. Fear, confusion, anguish.

His heart curls up into itself and he almost drops everything.

======

It started with the wistful blows of Where did I put this? or Did I just do that, then turned to What is my name, Where is this place? And, Do I know you? - Each stage another flesh wound to her soul.
And now she is watching her demented mother water plastic flowers on the porch in December, and another part of her is dying.

Mum’s head is on the bung again. She’s crouching down, talking to fake leaves and petals like they are her friends, the bead necklace hanging from her fragile neck, but no longer holding meaning or memory to her beautiful, fading mind.

Lacey feels like she is fading too, her skin both loose and too tight at the same time. Everything itches and tingles.

*(She loves Christmas. It’s so pure. The same Christmas songs she’s been listening to since she was a baby, decorations everywhere, presents, and dinner. It just feels so warm and happy. It’s the only thing she looks forward to all year. The past couple of days, it almost felt like that again - and now everything is ruined forever.)*

Her dad steps out onto the porch with a jacket and the quilt from the couch draped over his arm. He looks so tired.

*(This is not how things are supposed to be, isn’t what love should feel like. Loving someone shouldn’t hurt like this.)*

“Oh, Maurice! Maurice, is that you?” She turns towards him, shielding her eyes against the setting sun. “I have looked for you everywhere, but could not find you. Why are they keeping me here, Maurice?”

And when he pats her hand and wraps her in the quilt, guiding her back inside through the sliding doors, Lacey’s heart has shattered and stopped completely.

*(Love. When your heart melts like butter on hot toast at the sight of someone. When you feel lightheaded and free. When you ache to be with them, to look at them, to touch them. That is love.)*

Without a word she shoots through, slams the door hard; She hopes their stupid brains rattle in their stupid skulls.

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Standing on the doormat, she taps a gentle knock on the door. Again. Then louder. Lacey knocks and knocks and knocks until the pretty glass panes tremble in their frames and her knuckles have turned painfully red - and still there is no answer.

White puffs of air immediately whisked away by the wind, her anger flares up and evaporates, and she decides to go and check around back. Perhaps he’s playing that *Cats* record. Perhaps he’s dozed off in front of the fireplace. Perhaps the kettle whistled so loudly, he hasn’t heard her.

Her hands hurt, her nose is running.

His car isn’t in the driveway and all the windows are dark.

Lacey sucks in air, a tiny gasp of surprise, and sinks to the ground, her back to the backdoor. Arms folded around herself protectively, she tucks her knees in and rests her chin on them, staring off into the evening and looking at nothing in particular.

The street lights switch on, she hears a few cars drive by, but none of them slow down and turn. The gravel doesn’t crunch. He isn’t here and he’s not coming. Not for her, not tonight. *Open door* her ass.
Eyes flicking to the doorknob briefly, her shaking fingers dial Ruby’s number.

She waits, hiccupping softly, the last of her tears rolling down her prickling cheeks, but her best friend isn’t picking up her phone, and Lacey can’t quite believe she’s actually had a fuck or two left to give. With those now gone to wherever the hell the rest of them went, she pushes herself to her feet, ends the call, and dials Emma’s number instead.

She’s done feeling sorry for herself and so done waiting around for… people.

Emma picks up on the fifth ring, her voice thick and muffled. “Yeah?”

Apparently, she’s not the only one in dire need of some liquid happiness tonight. “Hey, it’s me. Want to get out of the house?”

“Girl, you’ve got no idea!” Emma half groans, half laughs. She pauses and Lacey can hear the sly smile creep onto her friend’s face by the way her voice changes. “When and where?”

“Call your brother. I bet he knows.” Lacey grins, running the back of her hand over her face. “Or one of his stupid friends. I’ll get us there.”

At the other end of the line Emma hesitates, taking a few breaths before she answers, and Lacey stops walking, standing halfway between the driveway and the front door.

“You sure?”


“Shit- I mean, sure. I mean, Happy B-”

“Yeah, yeah. Leave the confetti and the booze for later. You get the location; I’ll get the car.”

Piece of cake.

Lacey hangs up before Emma can say anything else and calls the house, letting the answering machine know she’ll be having a birthday sleepover with her girls, and Dad to call her mobile if he needs to get a hold of her. She leaves no location, but he won’t notice. He’s probably deliriously writing invoices or maybe already passed out at the kitchen table to sleep until next year. He won’t miss her.

And neither will she.

Speaking of missing people - there has to be a pathetic scrub with wheels in this town or the next hellhole over, who misses her enough to play designated driver for the night.

Tongue between her teeth and snot rattling in her nostrils, Lacey flicks through her contacts with dead fingers, quickly scanning the list of names, and trying and failing to match faces to them. (Why is everyone and their father called Mike, Chris, Matt, Josh or Jake? Seriously, people, be more creative!). She can’t show up with some idiot named Mike with a mug for a face. Wherever it is they are going. But maybe she doesn’t have to.

She texts Ruby next, warning her to keep her trap shut - should anyone ask about them - and inviting her to call, get her lazy arse outside, and join them - if she wants to, but the stupid check marks remain resolutely grey.

Well, Ruby can suit herself then.
Something cold and wet touches her nose. Lacey looks up and, with a grimace, flips the sky off. The universe can keep its icing sugar. She doesn’t want or need it anymore.

More snowflakes settle on Lacey’s face - softer than the kisses her mother used to leave there, and just as cold as the memories have turned in her heart. In this swirl of white, the world will be washed and left out to dry - like clean sheets, a new page in a new book. She doesn’t want the books anymore either.

Down the street, under the growing layers of frozen water, lie the paths she used to walk as a child, heading into town alongside her mother, striding and skipping, their linked hands swinging with every step. Part of her wants to turn the pages back and dwell on the fine details between the lines: the little crinkles around her eyes that deepen when she smiles; how, on rainy days, she always wore Dad’s wellies with four layers of socks rather than her own; how she never got too old to splash in the puddles, laughing and throwing up her arms as she twirled. But life is pulling Lacey forward into the unknown with one hand, and erasing all traces of her past with the other.

Her thoughts heavier than the clouds, she turns around to find her footprints in the snow. Maybe, when she gets home, she’ll look for hers: her letters, her favorite novels, her recipe book.

“She's gone and won’t come back,” Lacey tells herself firmly, though it hurts to hear the truth said out loud like that. She needs to hear it. “Spring will come, but she won’t.”

Lacey clenches her fists, cheeks reddening with anger, and picks up a pebble, throwing it at the silent house. It falls to the ground with a soft thud. Blinking away fresh tears, she picks up two more and throws them too. They hit the door, and she hears the cracks before spotting the red and blue shards in the snow.

Standing, hands by her sides and fists clenched, she sucks her teeth.

Well, shit. Now what?

He’s not home and the door --- well, it’s practically open now, isn’t it? Lacey takes a few more tentative steps forward, hesitates another split second, then reaches through the hole, careful not to cut herself on the sharp edges, and turns the lock from the inside.

With her heart pounding wildly, she stares into the dark, empty hallway for a moment, casting her eyes around the room as she enters. Trespassing. Breaking and entering. He can add that to his list of all the things wrong with her then - if he wants to - and see if she cares. She holds her breath and closes the door behind her. No alarm. Good. Maybe she can get her rum back.
Thorns

Chapter Summary

It has to get worse before it gets better.

**Chapter warnings:** Heads-up, some abuse, domestic- and substance- (substances, pl.), ahead. Also, a case study in bad parenting: Exhibit A.

Chapter Notes

*For the music crowd:* [One][Two][Three]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She turns the key in the lock and opens the door. The hallway greets her warmly, but silently.

Home, the small voice purrs, it smells like home.

It’s dark. Lacey doesn’t turn on the lights, looks down at her feet, following the red string on one boot like she would in a coloring book. Instead of a cartoon treasure chest, it leads her eyes to her shin, and she decides to keep her boots on.

“Where have you been?” Her father’s voice asks from the kitchen.

“Out. With a friend.”

“It’s late.”

She stops in the doorway. He’s not turned the ceiling light on, just the under-cabinet lights. Chunky T12 fluorescents from the 1980s. They flicker and buzz, and have that aggravating warm-up period every time you turn them on.

“So?”

“It’s a school night.”

“I know.”

*Why is he home? Why is he awake? Did he wait up for her? Why? She’s missed dinner; There are no pots or pans, no dirty dishes in the sink.* - And apparently, so has he.

“The school called.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?!”

Silence.
“They are… concerned.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. You’re missing classes.”

Lacey shrugs. “I— wasn’t feeling well?”

Lies. Probably, maybe. In her head it doesn’t sound true.

*Unwell.*

She’s not sick. She’s not sad.

The truth is: she’s not *anything*. She stopped being anything a while ago.

“Didn’t feel like it.”

“According to the school, you haven’t felt like it in a while.”

The shrug, she’s thinking it, but her shoulders don’t move.

Lacey looks at her father. He’s waiting for her to say something. To react. To defend herself against his accusations. To explain.

She looks at him. His hands. His face. His eyes.

*Tired.*

She isn’t tired.

“Lacey,” he says. Slowly. “Where have you been?” His words have sharp edges. The kind that leave your throat sore and burn on your tongue. Hot and bitter.

They should ring in her ears, but they don’t.


He sighs. Deep, and heavy, and old. A breath that’s been held for too long.

“Which friend?”

“A friend from school.”

Billy’s older than she is, Lacey thinks, watching her father push himself to his feet. Too old to be a student at Storybrooke High. She used to see him around - at school, but that might have been a long time ago. She’s not sure. He’s got a job at the servo now, and he’s old enough to buy whatever he wants. The good stuff. And the bad.

“The school no one's seen you at in weeks?”

A human steam engine, he’s working himself up. It’s happening right in front of her eyes. She can see it happen, and it would be wise to stop him before he gathers too much speed. Lacey knows this, but she doesn’t recall how to do it, and her mind is stuck somewhere between try harder and why bother.

“Yes.”
“Lacey!”

It’s like watching a car crash happen. The bright headlights, a horn sounding its final warning, tires screeching - or maybe it’s a scream.

“Yes?”

Lacey isn’t scared. She’s perfectly calm, starting to grow bored with their conversation. She looks at her hands. *What does he want from her?*

Behind him, the fridge shifts down a gear, a ping and a pause before it resumes the usual humming. It’s deeper at night. A person breathing, fast asleep and lost in the world of dreams.

*(Do dreams go bad? If you store them in a dark and cool place, how long do they keep for?)*

“*Which friend?!*”

She studies his forced patience with the curiosity of a biologist spotting a species thought to be extinct.

Lacey opens her mouth to answer, but the gaping hole in her belly calls her attention inwards. She looks at the fridge. She wants to be alone. She wants to make eggs.

“Billy,” she says, taking a step towards the table. He needs to leave, so she can concentrate on whether she wants them scrambled or not, decide between tomatoes, cheese, and bacon. She glances at the row of cupboards. She knows they are there, even when they are hiding in the dark. And, if she’s lucky, so is a can of baked beans.

Her stomach clenches, but murmurs its approval. Good idea.

“*Billy.*” Her father repeats the name. “A boy.”

*Yes, a boy.*

Lacey waits, eyes shifting from the fridge to the stove to the table, and back again.

“It’s your last shot, Lacey. School. This year. You know that, right?”

*Her last shot at what exactly?*

She doesn’t say anything. The smiley-face magnets on the freezer are frowning at her. Their eyes glow red in the dark, and she has to look somewhere else.

Her father is drumming on the table, lightly, with two or three fingers. She hates it.

“This morning,” he says. “Where did you say you were going?”

She answers automatically. “School.”

“And did you? Go?”

“Yes.”

“And then?”

She’s hungry, she’s bored shitless, and his stupid questions make her head throb. She squints at him.
What’s with all the questions? What’s he care all of a sudden?

“I left.”

“You left.”

When she looks at him, Dad’s face is a couple shades redder. It reminds her of a parrot. In her mind, what’s left of his thinning hair turns into a green and blue mohawk. *Spikes, hair gel.* Lacey laughs.

His eyes widen a little, there’s a beat before he speaks again.

“Sit down.”

Swallowing back giggles before they emerge feels a lot like gulping down air when drinking soda too fast. It hurts, the sound trying to escape through her nose.

She’s turning into a helium-filled balloon. Large. Floating under the ceiling. Then she remembers that, although helium is volatile, it is chemically inactive and, therefore, non-flammable, and indeed fire-retardant. Perhaps she’s filled with something other than helium then.

“W-why?”

He runs a hand up and down his face to smooth out and re-coat the surface with a more neutral expression, like erasing an Etch A Sketch.

“*Turn the dials and you’ll see what I mean…*” she breathes. “*Yeah, your funtime starts with Etch A Sketch.*”

She’s laughing again, and Dad looks like he’s trying his hardest not to explode in her face.

“I said, sit down.”

He looks right at her and Lacey looks right back without flinching or blinking.

Just go away, she tells him in her mind, but he stays standing there, slightly hunched over the table.

Lacey doesn’t move.

“I know it’s been hard,” he says now, squeezing the words past his teeth like toothpaste from an empty tube. “I’m just worried. You’re not helping yourself at all acting like this. Look at you. It’s like you enjoy making yourself miserable.”

*Has he talked to Grasshopper?*

She notices a faint echo of anger, far away, reverberating somewhere in her body. Her little toe, perhaps.

Seeing him eye her short skirt and ripped tights, she crosses her arms over her light jacket.

“I don’t enjoy it,” she mutters, curling her toes in her boots.

“What was that?”

“I said, I don’t *enjoy* being miserable!”

*Too sharp, too loud.*
She’s not miserable.

He blinks. “What the heck happened to your clothes?”

“It’s just holes.”

He stares at her a long time before taking a deep breath.

“It looks like you got jumped.”

She doesn’t sit down, doesn’t spare him another glance, goes straight to the fridge and yanks it open. Bottles rattle in the door. Juice, milk, and soda slosh around in their containers and cans.

“What are you doing?” he demands.

She says nothing.

The harsh light stings in her eyes, she can’t see.

“Lacey!”

Her eyes closed, she lets the cool air caress her eyelids and cheeks.

Dad’s hand is on her shoulder, pulling her back, away from the light. His other one shuts the fridge door.

“Hey! I’m hungry.”

She shrugs his hand off, steps back, then moves a little towards him again, and demonstratively puts her hand on the fridge door handle.

She gives it a small tug, but he’s holding it closed.

“What?!”

“Sit down at the table, Lacey.”

Oh, she bloody won’t! He can rot in this kitchen waiting for it. She’d rather starve.

“Now.”

She looks in his general direction, but keeps her focus somewhere just next to his ear.

Then she spots the bottles on the counter.

A neat row of empty glass bottles. Tall, pint-sized, stout-bodied. Brown, green, clear; arranged in order of size. Some of the labels peeled off. Her eyes zoom in on a clear bottle with a black label highlighting the words *Jamaica Rum*.

“You went through my stuff?!” Her voice sounds shrill and panicked - *guilty* - even to her own ears.

Lacey slams her eyes shut to keep everything where it belongs. The inside on the inside, the outside tightly wrapped around it like cellophane.

She can’t breathe.
He doesn’t answer. Instead, she hears the faucet turn on and the sound of glass shattering against stainless steel.

She peeks out of one eye, holding onto the fridge door for dear life.

*Her bottles.*

All the liquid courage from under her bed, her stash from behind the cupboard and her desk. The rum she keeps hidden away behind the classics for a rainy day. He’s dragged it all out into the open, poured it down the drain.

“What’s it look like?”

*The miniature bottles from her sock- and underwear-drawers.*

Everything. He’s taken- *everything.*

“How- how dare you!” She’s shrieking now.

The smashing stops. He looks up at her, his lips curled into a disgusted sneer.

“Don’t use that tone with me, Lacey!”

She swallows. The back of her throat prickles, closing up like it used to do before an allergy attack. She hasn’t had one in years.

She wants to scream, and scream, and scream. The silence makes her eardrums bleed.

“What’s all this?!” Her father gestures towards her ruined collection. One big, agitated wave of a hand.

When she doesn’t answer, he stops the water and turns his entire body towards her. A brick wall in human form blocking her path, and glowering down at her, judging her out of reproachful, bloodshot eyes.

“Tonight. Did you *drink? Are you on* anything?” he asks, giving her the third degree.

She’s stone-cold sober. And she’s got nothing left to take the edge off, take the sting away. He’s made sure of that.

“No!”

He dries his hands on a dish towel. Steps closer.

Lacey feel her face flood with color.

“I smell alcohol,” he says. “Don’t lie to me!”

She lifts her eyes to his, her stare unflinching.

“So do I,” she spits.

Dad takes a swift step forward and slaps her across the face, his palm making a loud, wet noise against her cheek.

*It stings.*
Stunned, Lacey staggers backwards and sways. She clutches her face, her vision blurring.

“Didn’t hurt,” she whispers into the eerie silence.

He groans.

Her father slaps the table to punctuate points. He raises his voice when he gets mad. He makes goofy analogies and uses weird metaphors. Most of his jokes aren’t funny.

He has never hit her before.

“Lacey—”

She’s shaking, her body covered with gooseflesh. With each breath it seems harder to fill her lungs up properly, like a pair of hands is holding her at the waist and squeezing her so tight, it's making her ribs poke out.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t—” she gasps.

He closes his eyes, just for a moment. And then he turns and walks out of the kitchen, leaving the last of the empty bottles on the counter.

The shock burns through her, shaking the ground under her feet before it falls out.

One moment she’s standing alone in the middle of the room, the next she’s dashed upstairs and flung herself onto her bed, face-first.

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She waits for the tears, but they don’t come, and eventually she grows tired of waiting. Just as well.

Lacey sits up, turns the bedside lamp on. The hearts flicker.

It’s quiet. She figures, he’ll probably hide out in his study for the rest of the night, which might be the best thing for both of them.

Her room is a mess. Half of it is hers, the other half his. He’s left a trail of destruction on his way through, his fingerprints all over her things, with no intention of erasing the evidence after he’s done with them. He’s opened her dresser drawers, tipped their contents onto the floor. Searched her closet - door left open just a crack. You have to slam it for it to stay shut.

Her books are on their shelves - but in the wrong order.

He must have stripped her bed, then made it again. The sheets aren’t tucked in properly. Lacey traces the creases and crinkles with a finger, listening to her own breathing and keeping her mind as blank as possible.

*The papers.*

If he’s checked under the mattress, removed the covers, he’s found all the papers.

*His handwriting.*

Lacey’s heart beats a little faster. She looks around for the water bottle that she keeps by the bed. She doesn’t need it all that often, mostly waters her plants with what’s left of it once all the fizz is gone. She’s not worried about that now, unscrews the lid quickly and takes a big gulp.
Dad must not have known what to make of her curious collection of marked essays and old homework assignments under the bed.

Casting her eyes around the room, she localizes it piled up in a neat stack on her desk. *Harmless schoolwork*. What’s missing from its usual place, however, is her computer. The cord is still there, a black cable leading to the outlet strip hidden from view under the desk. The case is there. Beneath the papers. A pink and mint green cork case with a zipper.

*He’s taken her laptop.*

Perhaps that should make her mad, she is a teenager after all, but it doesn’t. There’s nothing on there his eyes mustn’t see. She knows how to clear her searches and browser history. She doesn’t store passwords or digital diary entries. There’s no compromising photographic evidence of any kind. If he manages to guess her password, all he’s going to find is half-finished homework that was due weeks ago. He can keep the computer, if he wants. She’s still got her phone.

Lacey crosses the room, drags the paper bin out from under the desk and over to where she needs it to be, and sweeps all traces of him, all her memories, off the desk and clear from her mind in one swift move of her right arm. The cork case goes too. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Pleased with herself, she returns to her bed to find that, not only has her father taken some of her belongings with him, he’s also left something else behind. Something she hadn’t noticed before: A stack of mail on her pillow.

It’s not much: two large envelopes, a small one that’s been opened and read, a postcard, and a small parcel, also pre-opened before deemed safe to pass onto the intended recipient.

Lacey sits cross-legged, mail scattered in her lap.

The opened letter - it’s from the school. As soon as she spots the head and crest, she lets the paper slide back into the envelope, balls it up, and throws it in the general direction of the bin. A miss.

Only a couple minutes later, the large white squares and what came in them follow suit, though she dumps this load in herself, rather than have it fly half-way across the room and miss the target. Information packets, glossy brochures from various colleges across the country, thanking her for showing an interest and telling her how they’re *oh-so-looking forward* to receiving her application.

Lacey isn’t interested.

The postcard, she keeps. On the front - A pretty painting. It’s from a woman she doesn’t know, the wife of some distant relative, and addressed to her father; and she only skims the text, because her name’s mentioned (towards the end, in close proximity to ‘regards’, and next to the word ‘dear’). She likes the stamps: a beach landscape, Byron Bay. And a cute koala.

Just when she wants to turn her attention to the brown paper and string parcel, there comes a soft knock at her door.

“Lacey?”

Her father’s voice is low; he’s breathing the question mark into the oak.

The door stays closed.

He doesn’t turn the knob. If he had, he would have found it unlocked, but Lacey won’t invite him in.
She looks at the door, licks her lips. She can still feel his hand on her skin.

“I don’t want to see you!”

She makes sure her voice cracks in the right places. Just because. She’s not angry. She isn’t sad. He deserves it.

There’s no immediate answer, but she’s sure he’s still there. Just outside her door.

“How could you scare me like that?” he asks. “You know you’ve got my heart- you know it.”

He sounds as if he wants it back, Lacey thinks, eyeing the knob and crossing her arms over her chest. No, she won’t make this easy for him. Why should she?

“Go away!”

Part of her wants him not to listen, but he does.

Lacey throws the parcel against the door, and lets herself fall back on the bed, her head hitting the pillow. She glares at the ceiling.

_Fine._

She waits on the bed with her arms wrapped tightly around herself. He doesn’t come back.

She turns her head. _Bolshoi Ballet, Giselle. 1958._ The print is black and white, but the outlines gleam a little in the hearts’ gentle glow emanating from beside her bed.

Lacey studies the woman, the dancer. Her eyes are closed, and Lacey can almost hear the music play while watching her. Every muscle in the graceful body is listening intently, but, if you didn’t already know, you wouldn’t have guessed it from the woman’s tranquil, dream-like expression. She’s dancing en pointe, her big dress and pretty flowers whirling all around her.

Lacey’s hands whirl through the air as if in a dance and, in this exhilaration of movement, she paints abstract pictures in her head. _Giselle, Act I: Finale._ She can see the music.

It keeps playing.

_Albrecth arrives to lay flowers on Giselle’s grave_, Lacey thinks. The longer she keeps her eyes on the flowers in the poster, however, the less they look like beautiful blossoms and begin to look a lot like birds. Flocks of extravagant, aggressive and territorial birds, zealous, harassing the dancer, pecking at her dress, her hands, and face.

_Wild beasts that poke your eyes out while you sleep._

They turn their grotesque heads towards Lacey, beaks open as if stuck mid-screech, and she covers her head with her arms.

She needs to get out of here.

Seeking refuge in the upstairs bathroom, her heart rate returns to normal. She fans herself, runs cold water over her wrists, and puts a damp hand on her neck. It’s her parent’s private bathroom, adjacent to the big bedroom, but she won’t run into her father here. Since he’s taken Mum back, their bedroom is a ghost town once more, and he’s afraid of haunted places.

Lacey isn’t scared of the dead. She fears the living.
She flips on the lights, and takes a deep breath as they drain the sticky darkness from her veins. She’s feeling calm again, perfectly relaxed. She picks up Mum’s heavy hairbrush, feeling the pleasant weight in her hand, and starts messing with her hair, brushing it out, piling it up on her head like a turban, letting it fall over her shoulders and into her face.

One moment, one mistake.

A single act of violence, an open-handed smack - and it has left a red welt behind. Just below her eye, there’s a small cut where his wedding ring has caught her. Lacey goes real close to the mirror, stares into pores, realizes how weird skin is. *Strawberry fields forever.* Pores, pores, a red line.

She looks at her eyes.

“Girl, you have THEM PUPILS,” Billy laughs, leaning back on one hand to get a better view of her face. She’s barefoot, wearing jeans, sitting on the hood of his Dodge and drinking warm beer in soft summer rain, a piece of sweet blotter art in her pocket. “Like, you see other people’s auras with that shit, man.”

She stares hard into them. They are like Mum’s. Maybe she really can see her own aura, or Mum’s, in there - if she looks hard and long enough.

It’s crazy having colored eyes. Her friends with dark eyes - like Billy - they will eat tabs and just go about in public like it's no big deal. She, on the other hand, has very light blue eyes, so if she goes out and meets people it's the most obvious thing ever.

Billy gets really aggressive when he’s dosed sometimes. He’s told her, but she’s never seen him like that. He’s a really laid-back guy.

“And that one time? Man, I legit thought I was a mouse!” he tells her, one night, behind the shop, roaring with laughter. “Wild.”

Lacey is no mouse. Lacey’s just Lacey.

I’m looking into what I’m looking out of, she thinks. Then: Eyes are the window to your soul.

Her window is bright blue, with pulsing black holes for pupils. It’s a nice picture - a clear, blue, summer sky and the black, endless nothing coexisting peacefully side by side. They morph, and melt, and pulse, and do all sorts of crazy things. It's easy to get weirded out by it, but she’s not. She likes it.

Lacey turns the brush upside down, starts singing into it under her breath while combing a hand through her hair.

“Now there's a look in your eyes, like black holes in the sky….”

She trails off with a low humming noise.

*Pink Floyd, Shine on You Crazy Diamond. 1975.*

Her lips are the wrong color. She rubs a knuckle into her forehead and closes her eyes.

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Dad has left. She is alone.

Lacey roams around the house like a lost sheep, going from room to room, sitting down here, opening a cupboard there, fidgeting with a thing or another. There’s nothing on TV. She flips
through the channels, backwards and forwards, fast and slow, with the sound off. She puts the remote down, shuffles into the bathroom to get the right bottle, and paints her nails. *Blue*. She doesn’t stop until she has achieved a well-bodied look. Then she remembers the eggs.

Only, she doesn’t want eggs anymore.

In the kitchen, she sits on the corner bench and waits for the water to boil. The once artsy wallpaper of hand-painted irises on yellow canvas behind her is grimy with years of grubby finger marks and coffee spills. Where the old paste is beginning to fail, the once seamless overlap becomes noticeable. The rot. It’s tangible.

Lacey runs first her eyes, then a finger up and down the cracks as she listens to the water bubble and hiss inside the kettle. Her fingertip feels a tear, perhaps a curious child tried to peel the paper from the curling edge here, once.

Another tear makes her shudder. They give the room a damp and depressing feel.

Lacey pushes herself up off the bench, opens the fridge, drinks milk right from the carton until it gurgles and plashes in her belly. The kettle whistles.

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The stinging in her cheek where her father has slapped her, it’s almost gone, and Lacey has returned to her room, left the door ajar, pulled on a jumper, and wrapped herself in her duvet. She’s slurping sesame noodles from a bowl-sized cup, the broth only lukewarm. It can be made with long pasta, sesame paste, and a bit of chili sauce, thinned with broth or water. A little onion, cilantro, and cucumber can be added for little extra bursts of flavor.

Outside the sky has turned a slightly lighter shade of black, the change barely visible to the untrained eye.

Lacey wants to snap a picture. Stick it on her fridge and look at it, and smile every time she gets the milk out. Or the eggs. Perhaps she’ll have pancakes for breakfast today. *Later. Alone.* And it is not fair, so bloody not fair, that all the other kids will get to do that with their parents, but she can’t, she’s an orphan now, and she wants to grow up faster, leave town, tell them all to go suck it, and never turn back.

What’s she supposed to do now, she wonders, eyes sweeping the room like drooping wipers. Alphabetize her textbook collection? Teach herself how to crochet? She’s out of juice.

*Where is Dad?*

She gets up to close and lock the door, and proceeds to eat her dinner in noisy silence at her desk, though it almost chokes her. Then she notices the glint of moonlight reflecting off something on the floor.

A small, but perfectly square brown paper parcel, stuck over with airmail stamps and tied with gold string.

*Gold.*

Her whole body tenses up. Emotions roll in like a hurricane, and they knock her around, catapulting her right out of her chair and onto the floor. On her hands and knees, and dragging the duvet behind her like a crab or snail does its shell, she scrambles towards the parcel.
The carpet sets her knees on fire. She’s in the breach.

Once within reach, she grabs the parcel, making a quick dash backwards and out of the danger zone. The desk chair clatters to the ground and just misses her legs.

Lacey tries to think.

Brown paper packages just aren’t the real thing unless they’re tied up with string, are they? The parcel is light as a feather in her hands. A tiny, wrapped up bird bone, covered in holiday postage stamps. Bird bones are hollow.

Lacey breathes out through her nose. Her tongue has glued itself to the roof of her mouth.

She’s too scared to turn the damn thing over and look at the address. *At her own name in his handwriting.* Other than the piece of string holding it together, she’s got no reason to believe it’s he who’s sent her this mysterious parcel - why should he mail her something? - but she knows who the sender is, knows it in every cell of her body, she just knows.

A sick, guilty feeling swells in her stomach as she takes one end of the string between two fingers and pulls. The knot comes undone at once, revealing the heart of her unbidden treasure.

Lacey holds her breath.

She hasn’t seen or heard from him in over a month. Maybe longer. He just up and left town during winter break and never returned. Leave of absence is the official explanation, but Lacey knows better.

*It’s her. She’s driven him away.*

She’d been kidding herself believing that he would stay. They never do.

Inside the paper is something rectangular and hard, a small box of some sort, carefully wrapped up in one of his silk handkerchiefs.

Her eyes prickle, her palms grow hot.

She’s looked it up. Any regularly appointed teacher may apply for a leave of absence. Leaves of absence with partial pay include military leaves and sabbatical leaves for study and for restoration of health. There are also leaves of absence without pay available for those who meet specific criteria and require time for the adjustment of personal affairs. Teachers can apply for a leave for a situation requiring their full-time attention, such as taking care of a sick family member or for child care.

He’s not military, he’s not studying, he isn’t sick. He’s never mentioned an elderly aunt or a terminally-ill child. It’s her. She’s the sickness that’s been eating away at him, and he ran. Ran to save himself.

There’s no letter, card, or note. Just silk. And in it, hidden like an oyster’s pearl, a black leather snap-tab gift box. A teardrop-shaped snap tab.

Lacey looks blank.

She quickly opens the box to get it over with, and without thinking, her heart pounding with anticipation and horror.

A necklace. Star-pendant. Gold on velvet. Sweet and sentimental, and, no doubt, obnoxiously
expensive. He doesn’t do cheap. The delicate star - it has a beauty mark. White. A white diamond? Has he lost his mind?!

She shivers.

Hot, and cold, then hot again.

*What --- *She feels the air grow thin, watches the lights come down around her.*

Finally, she emerges from her shocked stupor, frail and exhausted, gasping for air. Cold sweat on her face and back.

Balancing the box on her palm, covering it with her other hand, she staggers to her feet, and blindly stumbles towards the bed, allowing herself to crash into it.

It is silent aside from her breathless gasps.

She twists to pull her feet onto her bed and chokes back a scream.

*She can’t be bought. He can’t buy her! Well, at least, he thinks she’s expensive. How is that for comfort?*

Lacey bites her lip, again and again, until she tastes rust and salt.

She doesn’t scream, she howls. Drops the box and claps a hand over her mouth.

Then, suddenly, she realizes the weight and significance of that wail; tears choke her, all that’s coming out are strangled noises, and she breaks down, slumped against the headrest, starting to cry, sobbing like a child.

***

It’s a persistent tapping noise in her consciousness that hauls her back into her body. There isn’t a part of her that doesn’t hurt. Her eyes are glued shut with dried tears and sleep.

Lacey unsticks her face from the pillowcase, and lifts her reeling head.

Something’s knocking against her window. No. *Someone*, and they are tapping it softly, but persistently.

Lacey drags herself out of bed. She hates sleeping fully clothed. Her eyes are slits - and on fire. Lit matches.

Outside her window, on their front lawn, stands Ruby. She’s throwing pebbles at her window with precision and determination.

*What the hell?!*

Lacey opens it, and the next pebble shoots past her left ear and crash-lands on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

PS: ... and that's over 100k, ladies and gentlemen! VGG officially qualifies as "long-ass
fic" now, right? xDD
They are in the hallway. Ruby’s wearing her signature red - a short jacket, a pair of boots, and dark denim jeans. Lacey’s in yesterday’s clothes. Neither of them speaks; for a long moment, as though waiting for the other to go first. Then Ruby breaks the silence.


(Go? Go where? There’s nowhere to go in this one-way town.)

Lacey watches her friend shift her weight from one foot to the other, and back again. Always Ruby. Always on the go.

“Go?” She asks.

“I’m leaving tonight.”

That’s all she gets, which is also very Ruby. Ruby when she’s made a decision. A decision that’s final. The only thing Lacey doesn’t understand is why. Why now?

“Where are you going?”

They’ve talked about this before. Countless times. Mostly when they were younger. They would grab their backpacks, pack a few things, and run; get the hell out of this miserable dump, take the next bus, and go somewhere, anywhere. Somewhere else, somewhere far away, somewhere warmer, somewhere where things were better. Better how? That hadn’t mattered. Just better.

“New York.” Ruby’s voice is firm.

Something’s very, very wrong.

“The bus?” Lacey studies Ruby’s face. She already knows the answer. It’s going to be a long bus ride.

Ruby says nothing, wipes her nose on the back of her hand. Her knuckles are bloody, trails of dried blood running down her fingers and seeping into the spaces between them like webs.

It’s not the first time. She knows what to do. She knows not to ask questions.

“What time is it?”

There’s no clock on the wall, but Lacey turns her head anyway. Nods towards the kitchen. It’s the middle of the night. It’s freezing balls. The early bus doesn’t leave for hours.

“No idea.” Ruby allows her to steer them into the kitchen. It’s 4:08 am.

“Sit,” she says, pushing Ruby into a chair in the semi-dark. “Don’t get blood everywhere. I’ll be right back. The early bus doesn’t leave for hours.”

***

She doesn’t cry. She isn’t sure her body even knows how. She can’t remember the last time she cried. She always thought it must have been at the funeral - a funeral she now knows never happened.
Her friend Lacey, on the other hand, looks like she’s cried way too much.

“Don’t get blood everywhere. I’ll be right back.”

Ruby nods.

“The early bus doesn’t leave for hours.”

Her girl’s eyes are red. There’s a small cut on her cheek. Her face is pale and puffy.

Lacey smiles at her, just a little bit, a soft shadow of a smile flashing over her features, then she turns, and leaves the room.

Ruby feels the heat rise and spread out in her belly and chest, and makes a fist in her lap. It doesn’t matter that the skin on her knuckles is broken and she’s bleeding onto her jeans. The sting is warm and familiar, almost comforting. It’s nothing like the pain she’ll inflict on whoever made Lacey cry. Nothing like the feeling of having your teeth smashed in. Ruby nods to herself, flexing her fingers and braiding them together. Her hands might be bruised, but she can still use them for good, throw one well-aimed punch or two, no problem. Blood never bothered her.

Like Lacey said, there’s still time.

Ruby gets up to get a cool drink. She doesn’t need light to navigate Lacey’s kitchen. She knows it well and would have found a clean glass or mug in seconds, but decides to cut it short and drink directly from the tap. Less fuss.

She stretches her legs, rolls her shoulders, and sits back down.

***

Lacey moves quickly, tends to each cut and bruise with steady, practiced hands.

Ruby sits on her chair, quite the model patient, keeping perfectly still while watching her friend handle scissors, clean bandages, and plaster that glows in the dark. The stars, they glow and sparkle because the lights are dimmed - both literally, in the kitchen, and figuratively, in Lacey’s eyes.

She doesn’t need to ask, but maybe she should have, Ruby scolds herself in her head. They haven’t talked much since Christmas.

“Hold still. I’m not done yet.” Lacey admonishes. She moves a little closer and dabs on that ointment she always uses for everything. A clear, sluggish paste that smells of vanilla and cinnamon if you close your eyes. Balsam of Peru. She’s read the label years ago.

Maybe it was a guy. One of the football players. Guys can be dicks. Dicks who can’t keep their hands to themselves and their tiny pricks in their pants. Maybe she’s been crying on the bathroom floor all night.

Ruby’s tongue sweeps across her teeth, front and back, then the tip finds and touches each tooth individually. She counts them in her head until the steam in her chest is gone.

Everyone has their fair share of drama. That’s just how the world works. Too bad you can’t slap ointment on the cracks, soothe everything that’s wrong in life with a red tube of vanilla paste and patch things up with cosmic plaster.

***
“She’s dead to me,” Ruby says, as if answering a question Lacey hasn’t asked. *What happened.*

“Okay.” Lacey doesn’t push. She cuts plaster. She waits.

Ruby takes a breath.

“She lied to me, Lace. Everything’s just one big, fat, pile of horseshit!” Her free hand makes an impatient gesture to emphasize the statement. The words might lack passion, Ruby’s voice strangely void of emotion, but she is making up for it in body language. As usual.

“Amen.”

_Horseshit._ That’s putting it mildly. Either that, or it’s a very big horse.

“Did you punch it? The damn horse?”

That makes Ruby laugh, first through her nose, then she barks like a dog.

“Should have. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“It’s why you got me, *Pinky.*” Lacey says, tapping a finger to her forehead, grinning.

“Very funny. *Hilarious.*”

“I know.”

Ruby looks around. “Where’s your dad anyway?” She asks suddenly, and Lacey shakes her head, something bitter on her tongue.

“Don’t know. Don’t care.” Feeling Ruby’s eyes on her, she opens a drawer, drops the scissors inside, and shuts it with her hip.

“There. All done.”

“You mean, I spent *forever* throwing pebbles at your window like a tool- *for nothing?!”* Ruby glares at her. “I could have used the doorbell?!”

“Yes.”

Ruby inspects her hands, makes fists, relaxes them again.

“And what happened to your phone?” She mutters.

“My phone?”

“Yes, *your phone.* You know, that handy little device people keep on themselves to send and receive messages, and, oh, I don’t know, *answer* calls.” Ruby looks up at her. “Several times, Lace. Like, every five minutes. For an hour.”

“Sorry. I was asleep.” Ruby looks her up and down, raises one eyebrow and purses her lips, but she doesn’t comment on what she sees. Thankfully. “Battery must have died. … Or something.”

Lacey shrugs.

Ruby gives her a flat look, her face saying, “Yours or-?”

“So,” she says, rubbing her hands together. “When are we leaving exactly?”
A little too quickly, a little too brightly.

“We?”

“Yes, we.” Lacey widens her stance, balances her weight out on both feet. Her hands find her hips. “You don’t think I’m letting you do this alone, do you? We both go, remember?”

For a moment, Ruby looks like she’s going to protest and tell her to stay behind, and Lacey’s heart clenches in her chest like a dry sponge yearning for water, but then her best friend’s face melts into a soft smile, and she can breathe easy again.

“You serious?”

Lacey turns, squats down to get her Thermos from the cupboard, and slams it on the counter, unscrewing the lid.


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“Lace! Lace, wake up!”

Lacey opens her eyes as the bus rolls past the stone piers supporting the bridge, catching glimpses of the city through the criss-cross steel beams, its tall buildings stretching into the sunrise-colored sky to welcome the new morning. She raises her arms above her head, stretching and yawning with them.

“That was fast-”

Ruby shoots her a glance. “Yeah, feels like that when you’re single-handedly cutting down what’s left of the world’s rain forests in one night, I’m sure.”

Lacey punches her on the arm.

Ruby makes to retaliate, but instead her eyes grow large and she points out the window. “Look! No wonder they call it concrete jungle,” she says, leaning over her and pressing her face against the glass like a kid.

“Wow. Will you look at that!”

When Lacey turns her head to see what has caught Ruby’s undivided attention and could possibly be worth all the *oooh-ing* and *ahhh-ing*, the driver hits the breaks. Ruby tumbles into her lap, and Lacey just avoids a head-seat-collision.

Someone leans on their horn, another car answers, and, within a minute, a flurry of horns blares from all sides like a pack of pissed off crazy canines during the full moon.

“Welcome to New York!” Their driver hollers over the ruckus. “Get used to it.”

New York is loud, though not very fast. It takes them forever to get from where they are now to wherever the hell they are going. The city moves at an angry, noisy crawl, howling and screeching, and by the time they pull up to the curb and the bus doors swing open to puke most of the passengers out onto the street, Lacey’s ears are ringing, her head is twice its size, and she’s feeling faintly seasick.

“Next time, I vote airplane.” She coughs.
“What, you rich now?” Ruby laughs, throwing her arms up and wide, turning her face to the sky before she twirls on the spot. “Isn’t this amazing?! Come on!”

Ruby leads the way, striding confidently through the station and towards the subway entrance.

“You know where we are going, yeah?” Lacey asks as they squeeze into a packed carriage. It smells of cold cigarette smoke, sweat, and cheap aftershave, and she expects the ground to be littered with dirt, pieces of old newspaper, and sweet wrappers, but it isn’t. She can only see shoes.

The train rattles into the next station and someone nearly elbows her in the face.

“Asshole,” she mutters as people rush past, rising on her toes to try and get some of the oxygen reserved for tall humans only. She shoots Ruby dirty looks, but Ruby doesn’t pay her any mind. She’s looking around, soaking everything and everyone up greedily while grinning like an idiot. Then she studies the map above the door.

Lacey huffs and closes her eyes.

After two changes they get off the subway and board another, quieter train that runs above ground. Lacey feels less claustrophobic as she rests her forehead against the cold glass, watching the city and its people fly past. This train is less crowded than the subway, only a couple people headed into the same direction they are, and it's a huge relief. She doesn’t much fancy being squished to death by smelly strangers.

“Here we are!” Ruby exclaims, grabbing her hand.

Their stop is a small station with only two platforms, and Ruby and she are the only people to leave the train. Even though the sun is steadily climbing the sky, around here the light already seems like it’s dimming into dusk, tall buildings throwing their long shadows, the streets half-asleep under a blanket of smog.

Ruby digs her phone out of her pocket, turning it round a few times and tapping the screen to get her bearings, and they start to walk, following the blue marker.

“I think it’s this way,” Ruby says, pointing down a smaller back alley. They follow it to the next crossroads, where they stand for a few moments; the tarmac spread out in front of them, grey and nearly empty, the sight of it giving Lacey a hint of the heebie-jeebies.

“You sure you got the right address?” she asks for the hundredth time since they got onto the bus in Storybrooke two nights ago, speeding up to link her arm through Ruby’s and falling into step with her.

“Positive.” Ruby looks at her phone, then scans their surroundings, her eyes peeled for a far-off destination.

To their right there’s the distant sound of traffic. The marker on Ruby’s phone points them in its direction and Lacey breathes a sigh of relief.

“Hey! Why you grilling me?!”

They pass a man in dirty clothes, matted beard, and very few teeth as he smiles at Lacey before sipping out of a brown paper bag.

“You lost, love?” he squints at them, staggers closer, licks his chapped lips. He’s got piggy little eyes, nasty black beetles that gleam in the sunlight as he shields them with a trembling hand. The
stench - it’s literally breathtaking. “No place for pretty little things this place, na mean?”

Lacey can see that alright. And smell it. Days-old garbage rotting away in open dumpsters, a curious mix of seafood, foul eggs, and public restrooms no one ever cleans. Dormant night clubs advertising their lap dances for only $5, a wedding chapel that’s got ‘bad idea’ and ‘gin and desperation’ written all over it.

Lacey sucks her teeth. “We’re good, ta!”

She ducks her head, and they quicken their pace in unison, going as fast as they dare without actually running, then take a sharp left, and walk along a slightly busier street. It’s only half as creepy.

There are shops here, a few motels. The kind people go to for a cheap and discreet shag once in a while - no reservations necessary.

Sitting smack-dab between two peculiarly fine *établissements*, Lacey even spots a cute little ice cream parlor, its friendly face painted pastel colors, exaggeratedly bright and upbeat against the grimy glumness dominating the rest of the street. The place is boarded up, barriers pulled almost all the way down to the ground. Someone has kicked in the door - or what’s left of it. In passing, she can glimpse broken chairs, upturned tables, and what must have been the counter, once upon a time, covered up with tarpaulin that’s more holes than it is plastic.

Lacey frowns.

“I hate seeing places like that,” she mumbles, tugging on Ruby’s arm. “You know what I mean?”

But Ruby isn’t listening. Or looking.

Her forehead creased in concentration, she’s staring at her phone, looking up every so often to check the street signs or street numbers, or whatever else crazy trail of invisible clues they are following along the thick blue line to god-knows-where.

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

They keep walking. Lacey shuffles along beside Ruby, her Uggs dragging on the pavement. The toes are getting dusty, dirt and sand forming grey half-moons on the fabric. Her stomach grumbles angrily. They have eaten their sandwiches on the bus, all she’s got left are dry saltine crackers.

Lacey fingers the credit card in her pocket, the plastic growing warm.

“Your father insisted. For emergencies,” Mum says, grinning as she hands her a cone, a tissue wrapped around it to catch the soon-melting ice cream, just in case, before it sticks to their hands and drips onto the pavement. In another life. In summer.

Well this counts.

They take another left and head up another alley, just as inviting as the last. They follow it until it releases them onto a busier and bigger street, the number of cars and inviting storefronts growing steadily and exponentially, and the noise level increasing by the minute.

Yet there’s next to no pedestrian traffic.

The stores here probably aren’t called that, but *boutiques*. Small, posh places that sell things to
people who don’t read price tags, so all the goods in the display windows have none.

“Almost there-” Ruby mutters, eyes glued to her phone. “Okay.”

They stop and look at the building in front of them, at each other, then back at the building again.

Ruby’s phone has led them somewhere alright, Lacey thinks as they stand and stare for a couple of held breaths longer, unsure whether to enter or not.

She isn’t convinced that this is where Ruby meant to go, and neither, it seems, is Ruby, who’s repeatedly tapping her phone then sliding it back into her pocket with a sharp intake of breath.

According to the wisdom of the internet, this is it then. - And ‘it’ is no house, no apartment building, however shabby or nice those might be in NYC, it’s yet another night club.

Secluded from prying eyes by tinted windows, all they can see from the sidewalk is exposed brick, the door, and an unassuming logo in the bottom corner of the largest window.

“Nightshade,” Lacey mouths, reading the simple lettering. “That’s where she lives?!”

Ruby shrugs. “Dunno.”

Lacey sees Ruby’s pulse throb in her neck, watching the nerves travel up and into her face and turning her ears pink. Ruby isn’t scared of anything, but she sure looks terrified now.

Lacey bites her lip.

“Let’s find out then.”

She takes Ruby by the hand and, pulling her with her and faking confidence she doesn’t feel, steps through the door and into a cool and quiet room. The AC must be running full blast, the skin on her exposed arms pebbling instantly, but you can’t hear a thing. It’s unnerving. Lacey lets the cool air roll down her shoulders and back, willing her body to adapt and not give her away.

“Here goes nothing.”

Dragging Ruby along behind her, their footfalls echo on the floor as Lacey strides across the fancy foyer - an office foyer remodeled with marble and dark wood to resemble a five-star hotel lobby, probably - and walks right up to the front desk (slash bar) with a tall woman standing behind it.

She’s beautiful - perfect skin and shiny curls, but her lips are a little too red and a little too big. As are her boobs.

Her outfit, however, blends right in with the overall color-scheme of the place - dark wood, white marble, shades of violet - giving off the same chilly vibe, like part of a study in color theory, showcasing the perceptual and psychological effects to the observed contrast in landscape light - between the colors associated with daylight or sunset, and the colors associated with a gray or overcast day.

“Hi,” Lacey says. “Good morning.”

The woman flips her hair back over one shoulder. She doesn’t smile.

Lacey’s eyes dart to the nearest bar stool, then back again. Violet velvet.

It’s an odd choice really, picking only cool and dark hues of blue violet for your nightclub interiors,
when it’s the warm colors that arouse or stimulate a person, while cool colors calm and relax.

Lacey is feeling none of those things.

The woman appears bored, but her eyes are sharp as she gives her a once over that makes Lacey’s skin prickle.

“Yes?” She raises one eyebrow. By maybe half an inch. And her lip curls just the tiniest bit.

The woman’s hair is such a dark brown, it’s almost black. Brown is a dark, unsaturated warm color that few people think of as visually active or psychologically arousing. It all comes down to higher saturation and lighter value of warm pigments in contrast to cool pigments.

“Can I help you?”

Lacey takes a deep breath, clears her throat as quietly as possible. Her eyes would rather look anywhere but at the haughty face in front of her, but she can’t do that. First one to blink loses.

“We- we are looking for someone?” Lacey says, her heart stuttering in her chest but her voice coming out normal. Thank god.

The woman looks vaguely familiar, like someone she’s seen on TV, but perhaps it’s the pantsuit. Should she ever grow bored of her receptionist job at a nightclub, she could easily change career paths and become a lawyer or a judge instead, anytime. She’s got the accusatory stare down to a T and would look just right in a courtroom, drilling those bilious green eyes into a mass murderer until he cracks.

Lacey gestures towards Ruby.

“Um…”

As the woman’s focus shifts from her to Ruby, a trail of sweat snakes down Lacey’s back, cold trickles running down her body from the point where the clasp is holding her strapless bra in place. Just standing here makes her feel ridiculously guilty for no reason and, when the phone behind the desk rings - a shrill, unpleasant sound that crushes the thick silence like slush ice - she jumps and bites her cheek.

(Ouch.)

“Nightshade.” The woman holds up a finger. Her perfectly manicured nails are definitely fake - but the expensive kind, and blood-red. “Absolutely. The usual?”

As she listens to the person on the other end, she points first at Ruby, then Lacey, and waves them towards the back with a decisive nod.

“I understand, Sir. That can be arranged. Of course.”

She covers the mouthpiece, a hint of annoyance crossing her face.

“Downstairs dressing room, girls. Third door on the left.”

Lacey and Ruby exchange a puzzled look.

The woman cocks her head to one side, cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder as she uh-huhs and yes-sirs along to the caller’s muffled voice, her eyes narrowing.
She covers the phone again. “Antonio?”

A bouncer who’d make any quarterback go green with envy, Antonio is a farkin’ giant. A small giant perhaps, compared to others of his kind, but measured by human standards definitely a giant. He smiles as he approaches, and, like a hen gathers her chicks, ushers them towards the back and the curtain he’s guarding. He’s gentle, but assertive, quickly removing them from the receptionist lady’s sight and holding his curtain for them, revealing the doorway and a flight of stairs hidden behind it.

“Here you go. Down the steps, right on past the restrooms. You’ll want the third door; you know the one-” He winks at Ruby. “Got posters and stickers all over it.”

So they duck under the large arm and the heavy fabric, and do as they’re told.

======

“Come in!” A voice answers. “I’ll only be another minute.”

Behind the third door on the left, the old posters and half peeled-off stickers, lies a dressing room, much like the ones from Lacey’s memory: a long vanity table, five chairs facing five mirrors, LED spots and fairy lights, open makeup chests, water bottles, flowers. A box of tissues. A hair dryer. An empty ashtray. Gleaming silver scissors, tweezers, and eyelash curlers. Trapped heat and hairspray; and crammed in everywhere are rolling garment racks, costumes wrestling each other for hangers, space, and survival. The room is overflowing with colors and fabrics - leopard print, glitter and tulle - and making Lacey’s eyes water.

To their left there’s a row of double tier lockers: two open, four closed. A coat on a hook, a pair of flats, and a couple worn socks and sheer tights, thrown pell-mell over the carpet. A red umbrella in a corner. Someone has draped a purple feather boa over the back of a chair.

And, sitting on the one next to it, her back turned to the door and them, there’s a woman.

The woman’s back is a ruler; her long hair a shiny, black curtain. The fabric doesn’t rustle when she lowers her hand in the mirror - the one that’s been holding the lipstick to her full, curvy lips - just flows right on down her back like a steady stream. She is young. And she is beautiful. And her eyes - wide and green - Lacey has known them all her life. Well, most of it anyway.

“Um, hi,” Ruby says, holding onto Lacey’s hand in a way that makes broken fingers a high possibility.

The room smells sweet and powdery. If memories had smells, and you could pluck them from the air and stick them into jars, the label on this one would read: The back of Mum’s closet. 1989. Hide and seek. They used to do that all the time, play hide and seek around the house, Lacey only now remembers, and it makes her feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

She squeezes Ruby’s hand. It’s going to be alright. It’s all going to be just fine. She knows it.

“Ruby! Oh, you came! How wonderful!”

The woman slides out of her chair to greet them, pulling them further into the room and engulfing Ruby in a hug like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

When the hug ends, she hears Ruby gasp.

They are still holding hands and Lacey can no longer feel any of her fingers.
The woman smiles at Lacey. “And you brought a friend. Hi there.”

Her teeth are white, and straight, and a little pointy.

“Hi,” Lacey says, suppressing a shudder as she holds out her hand. “I’m Lacey.”

“Nice to meet you, Lacey. I’m Adora.”

She’s very, very beautiful, but her hands are cold. Ruby’s hands are warm. Always.

Lacey lets go.

“I’m so happy to see you!” Adora beams at Ruby, who has turned white as a sheet. Lacey takes a swift step sideways, in case she has to play human cushion in the next two minutes. “But girls, sit. Sit!” Adora motions for the other chairs. “Can I get you anything? A soda?”

They shake their heads.

With joint effort from both her and Adora, Ruby makes it safely over and into a chair.

“How- how did you know?” she stammers, kneading her hands in her lap and ruining some of Lacey’s neat handiwork. “I mean-”

Adora’s hands covering Ruby’s cause both Ruby and Lacey to look up at her face.

“Dear,” she says sweetly. It’s so quiet in the room, Lacey is sure she can hear Ruby’s heart hammer away in its cage. Or perhaps, that’s her own? “I would recognize you anywhere.”

Well, that’s an easy feat to accomplish when all you have to look out for is your own reflection, Lacey thinks, leaning back a little as Adora leans in closer, the pendant on her necklace swinging, rocking back and forth gently like a hand on a cradle, and drawing Lacey’s eyes to the movement.

*It’s a wolf.*

A curious choice for a woman so poised and elegant. If anything, Adora Lucas would be a big cat, not a wolf.

“I always knew you would come. Someday.”

Lacey almost laughs, something sharp and bitter lodged in her throat. It’s none of her business, and perhaps she’s being unfair, but if Adora had wanted to be with her daughter so badly, all she would have had to do was get in her car and come get her.

Adora shifts her attention, just for the briefest of moments, her eyes meeting Lacey’s for just under a second, for the literal blink of an eye, before she continues talking to Ruby.

Lacey’s arms goose-pimple.

“You’ve grown so much. You’re beautiful,” she says, cupping Ruby’s face.

Tears are welling up in her friend’s eyes, and the surge of red hot rage, bubbling in her belly like an active volcano about to erupt, takes Lacey by surprise. She’s got nothing to be pissed about. *Nothing.*

Ruby wriggles free, her hands balled into fists, straining the dressing. “She lied to me! She told me you were --- dead!”
“Oh my word!”

Adora throws her head back laughing. She’s got a tinkling laugh; girlish, sweet and sticky - and nothing like a bark.

“Sorry.”

She wipes a tear from the corner of her eye, clears her throat.

“It’s not a lie, Ruby. I am sure to her I am.”

She stretches her hands toward Ruby’s again, her eyes staying on her.

“That makes no sense.”

“Perhaps not.”

“And it’s still a lie.”

“My mother- Your grandmother, she only did what she thought was best.”

Ruby gathers herself, pushing away from Adora a little, tugging on their linked hands. “For who?”

(whom.)

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Adora sighs, then smiles and swings their hands a little - like a kid would. “But you’re here now. That’s what matters. The past-”

“How can you just be OKAY with it?!”

Ruby’s voice cracks. Whether out of anger, frustration, or sadness, Lacey can’t tell. Only that it’s the single most heartbreaking thing she’s ever heard. She scoots to the edge of her seat, leans closer, and places a reassuring hand on Ruby’s arm.

“You - you knew! And - you never came for me?!”

Lacey can feel the angry tremors run through Ruby’s body and sizzle into the carpet, like lightning bolts hitting damp soil in a thunderstorm.

“No, no! Ruby. Listen to me.” Adora shoots her a quick glance and Lacey eases back reluctantly, allowing her to move her hands to Ruby’s shoulders. “She would have called the cops. She would have taken you to the other side of the world, away from me. I just did what I had to do to protect you from that madness.”

The look on Adora’s face isn’t what Lacey would have expected it to be. It’s no plea for forgiveness or understanding, no apology of any kind, for the years and years of absence she’s inflicted on her daughter. There’s only conviction and certainty there. Her face isn’t the face of a contrite mother, bursting with grief for a long-lost child, spending her days yearning and longing to be reunited. It’s the face of expediency, self-righteousness, and coldness. Maybe there’s even a flicker of ferocity there, of something mean, and wild, and wicked - just beneath the pretty surface. Or maybe not.

Lacey pinches her own arm hard, twisting the skin until it hurts.

Who is she to ruin this for Ruby, for her best friend?! And all because, what, because she’s got no mum of her own? So no one else is allowed one either? Or, at least, not one that isn’t warped in the head?
When she feels the sting of tears, she lets go, a numb patch of skin on her arm and a warm tingle in her belly. Maybe she's the crazy bitch in the family. The unhinged one.

“She told me she would do whatever it took to keep you with her, raise you as her own,” Adora continues, speaking imploringly, her forehead inches from Ruby’s. “But deep in my heart—” her left hand slides from Ruby’s shoulder to find the right spot on her chest - “I knew. I always knew you were my girl, and nothing she’d say or do was going to change that. I knew you’d come and find me when the time was right.”

Ruby draws a shaky breath.

“I- I would have come sooner,” she says softly. “But she-! She---! She’s a —” There’s a tiny sob, followed by an angry sound, like something wet being dragged on mud, then a split second of silence.

“A monster! She called you a monster. --- She’s … the monster!”

“Only because she thinks that’s what she is. She’s afraid.”

Adora wraps Ruby in her arms, holding her tight. But unlike Lacey’s mum, she doesn’t shush or coo, hum or sing, or stroke gently; She doesn’t rock them. She just holds her daughter, steady like a rock.

*Calm. Sure. Strong.*

Lacey can’t help but admire that strength.

“The moment you listen to your fear, believe in what people say about you, that’s when you become it.”

If Ruby is fire, Adora is ice. Different sides of the same coin.

“You don’t have to be angry anymore. It’s not your anger.”
Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: Nightshade is a dingy strip club. While there's no explicit abuse, rape, or anything like that in the chapter, there is some pretty heavy stuff hinted at or alluded to, so please read with caution.

**Soundtrack**: [Wonderful, Wonderful - The Killers](http://example.com)

Her club is a house set between a high fashion boutique and a law firm, secluded from prying eyes, hiding in plain sight behind blacked-out windows and a heavy security door.

“What do you mean - you don’t know?!”

Dark and dingy, with a strong odor of smoke and engine oil that lingers in the air, the heart of the club is a raised dance stage lined with brass stripper poles. Two women are up there as he and his ex-wife enter, each wearing only a G-string, a flimsy piece of fabric preserving their modesty, held in place by thin golden chain.

She stops, and he almost walks into her.

“So he doesn’t want to see you.” She turns slowly, heaving a long, theatrical sigh. “I don’t know what to tell you, Roan. The boy has a mind of his own.”

Hadn’t she been a good two heads taller than him - by nature and by courtesy of her murderous Louboutins - maybe his glare wouldn’t have been lost on her cleavage.

“So that’s what you tell yourself, is it? *Boys will be boys*?”

Unlike him, Milah is perfectly calm, her chest gently rising and falling as she towers over him, face impassive, waiting, watching. Through her blouse, he can see the unyielding black bodice she wears underneath. Her armor. Her favorite. And it’s laced too tightly, it always is.

“Oh, Roan-”

Even worse than the pity in her tone, is her total indifference towards her son, towards *their* son.

He balls his fists, relaxes them again, folds his hands over his cane.

“Spare me that.”

Feeling the memory of silk and string ghost over his palms, he wonders whose hands have laced her into her chosen confinement tonight; wonders if they did it right. Is it tight enough to make her head swim and lungs burn? Tight enough to have her struggle - just a little - with each breath? If it is, he knows the red marks and imprint on her skin will last her until morning.

There are four girls working the poles now, their briefest of underwear stuffed with currency. The dancers glisten with sweat, and the smell of that sweat is almost bittersweet.
“He won’t see you either.”

He watches her closely for her reaction. It’s so small, it’s almost imperceptible. And, to anyone else, nothing in her demeanor would have seemed the least bit indicative, but she can’t hide it from him.

He sneers.

“I don’t have time for this. I’m working.”

“By all means - don’t let me keep you.”

He gestures to the stage, where one of her girls grapples with a pole, pivoting to reveal a white tummy and scarring on the inside of her left thigh: pinkish-pale lines carved into plump flesh just below what she’s barely keeping private. Like age-rings on a tree, they are drawn horizontally, six or seven inches long, and illuminated by the spotlights. He watches the dancer’s movements for a moment, admiring her clit-pink Lucite heels with sequined uppers. “I’ll just-”

"Do what you have to do."

Swallowing down his comeback and the upsurge of bile, he leaves her standing in the middle of the room. The night is young. There’s plenty of time to continue this, she’s not going anywhere, and he’s far too sober to get into it, to go any deeper. If he is to peel away any more layers, he’s going to need disinfectant and a comfortably numb mind to do it.

The interior of Nightshade is as original as its name. Pretending to be an upscale strip club rather than the dirty hellhole he knows it to be, it draws a ridiculous crowd of young professionals, businessmen, some Northwest Side neighborhood voyeurs, and, of course, classically, your funky old men, ogling the young dancers and fishing their last greasy dollar bills out of the waistbands of their stained pants- for a few minutes alone time with their fantasy, and a one-on-one dance in a private room.

He knows, a nice pocketful of cash will get you far more than that.

Navigating around the battered collection of tables and chairs set before the stage, heading towards the long bar off to the side, he parts the stuffy air and men’s drunken, wet laughter like a pine-striped arrow (-albeit a crooked one). Their cigarette smoke twists and curls around him, forms fuzzy swirls and a haze of cold nicotine in the dank, yeasty semi-darkness, visible only by the age-speckled bar lights. Every cell in his body screams for a long, hard drag outside; for maybe half a pack smoked in peace in the back alley, pacing the pavement to blow off some steam.

He can feel her eyes on his back, on his neck; feel the dancers on stage, and the poles stretching from floor to ceiling; the heavy beat of rap music pulsating from the speakers set above the stage. He doesn’t turn around.

Along the wall behind the bar gleams every hue of amber liquid in inverted bottles; every vice that he has been advised to avoid. He raises a finger to call the barista, and when she does not appear at once to take his order, sits down on a bar stool and watches her scrub the glass of the chiller cabinet- no doubt- recently re-stuffed with anything and everything sickly-sweet to fix the girls whatever garish swill they desire, slurping it faster than pepsi-cola to make... life... a little more bearable.

He listens to the music and people’s conversations without paying attention. The counter feels cool and smooth under his fingertips. His seat is uncomfortable, the peanuts stale and too salty.

“Scotch, on the rocks.” The barista says, and, without waiting for confirmation, pours him one,
sliding the drink across the bar on a dark purple napkin.

It stops right in front of him.

The ice clinks and the glass fogs up against his palm as he raises it to toast her, and, without taking the time to smell or taste it, he throws it all down his throat in two gulps, the burning sensation most welcome.

“Aye. Another one, please, dearie.”

She is young, but attempting to age herself up with makeup and an elegant updo, her dark brown hair piled on top of her head. She would be beautiful— with her olive skin, hazel eyes, and full lips, but the false face she’s painted over her own, and the severe hairstyle and formal wear, neither suit nor flatter her. In stark contrast to her dancers, Milah has her staff and servers all buttoned-up, working in elegant uniforms: suits, dresses, aprons, and black leather shoes. Even the bouncers at the door have to wear a tux.

Nice place, he had offered the first time he’d been here. You also do wedding receptions?

The girl fixes him another drink.

“You don’t come here.”

“No, I don’t.”

He sips a small amount of whisky this time, only enough to cover the surface of his tongue. Slowly counting to ten in his head, he holds it in his mouth, swirls it around. The burn of the alcohol abates and makes room for the sweetness of wood spices and characteristic oak flavors. It goes down smooth.

“You don’t come here either.”

The barista grins. Then her face falls a little before she can catch it and rearrange it into something more monetizable.

“Nope. It's not what I learned at dance school.”

“Ballet or modern?”

Her face lights up briefly. “One, then the other. … Then neither.”

He makes a sympathetic grunting noise.

“Why neither?”

She shrugs. “Life happened, folks kicked me out, so I went into the table dancing clubs and started doing exotic dance- which was great for me because it was my own style, and then that's the first time I had seen poles, but I wasn't really interested and…” She laughs. “Neither are you, sorry. Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” He allows the ice cubes to melt enough so the volume is doubled in the glass. “I am, actually.”

Placing a couple bills on the counter, he taps the rim of his glass with a finger, and she nods, understanding.
She gives him a genuine smile. “It’s supposed to be the other way around, Sir?”

“Let’s just pretend then that I just bared my soul to you and shared my deepest, darkest secrets in the most excruciatingly inappropriate manner, shall we?”

The corners of her eyes crinkle as she laughs. There’s a spark in them, a fire, and he’s glad nightlife hasn’t snuffed it out yet.

“Deal.”

They let the conversation trail off and keep each other company in- what he likes to interpret as- amicable silence, each thinking their own thoughts and doing their own thing, and her occasionally reappearing to check on him and the state of his drink.

In the belly of the beast, this den of debauchery, the night shift is in full swing. The smoky air is the color of a bad bruise, reeking of indifference. Along with him, there are other men sitting at the bar now, filling half the stools, most turned toward the dancers, some just staring blindly into their drinks like drunks the world over.

The bar is busier than when he first got here, and so is the Nightshade’s basement as a whole. Every seat in front of the stage is taken, every table laden with drinks and snacks, and each of Milah’s girls is temporarily spoken for by her personal boogieman, slipping in and out of the door at regular intervals like the stuff that little girls’ nightmares are made from.

In the center of the stage, a stripper paces her invisible kennel in glow-in-the dark underwear, a gleaming blood-red, grimacing at everyone who dares to look away like a caged predator.

She somehow looks fifteen and fifty at the same time. She’s lived.

“Busy night, ay?” he remarks, taking yet another sip from yet another drink as the stripper on stage removes her bikini top. Perhaps he should just ask for a bottle of gin and smokes and be done with it.

Six girls are working the poles, while another ten or so are taking turns working the floor, trying to persuade their customers to buy them a feckin’ 6oz bottle of the cheapest champagne they have for thirty dollars a pop and, to spend another crisp twenty-five on a private lap dance. A lot of their clientele are single, already pissed wankers, high on booze and power, who just need to hear the right things come out of a pretty lassie’s mouth to unzip their pants and wallets. Soon, they’ll be giving the girls all their money.

The bartender has refilled his drink before he can set the glass down, quickly returning with fresh ice.

He discreetly slides her a Benjamin.

She smiles tightly.

“Penny for your thoughts, love?”

She looks at him and sighs.

“Sir, you don’t want to hear it.”

He swirls the ice cubes in his drink, finishes it too quickly. His world is tinted warm colors and the dull ruckus pleasantly muffled, the alcohol draped around his shoulders like a cozy blanket.

“Let me be the judge of that?”
She hesitates, then says, “I wouldn’t mind if all patrons were more like yourself, Sir.”

She leans over the counter, pushing a fly-away strand of hair behind her right ear and, lowering her voice—despite the loud music drowning out all private conversation anyway, continues, saying: “I didn’t think guys were all that bad until I started being a dancer. No offense—but men are fucking pigs—that’s all there is to it. It just took this job to make me realize it.”

As she checks over her shoulder and goes to draw a Pint for a particularly loud and impatient bloke, red-faced, with a mustache and no neck, he notices a pride of disarmingly childlike dancers waiting for their show in a dark corner near the bar, drinking soda pop and smoking menthol cigarettes. One of them, a young blonde, is wearing a pleated mini-skirt, a black bra, and crooked pigtails; she flinches and squeaks as a passing... pig... slaps her butt and grabs a feel up her skirt, and Gold’s stomach turns.

He sucks his teeth and returns his attention to the bar, away from the twisted baby parade doused in body glitter, to find a fresh drink and the bartender dutifully waiting for him. He grimaces as the whisky burns his throat on its way down.

“I don’t disagree, Miss.”

Met with his approval, she elaborates on her previous statement, taking up speed, her innate fire crackling: “Just get some dirty old man in here-” She vaguely nods towards the room. “And the girls... I mean...” She huffs in frustration, and he follows the movement of her arm and covertly pointing pointer finger to a young girl working a pole on the fringe of the limelight.

“Look at her! They claim they don’t hire minors, but, wow… tell me she’s 21?!”

He turns in his seat to see better- in spite of himself- and sees... Miss French... on the stage, lasciviously dancing on the pole. She holds the entire club’s attention when she drops down into a full split as the song’s beat drops, simultaneously getting cheers from the men watching, and encouraging hoots and hollers from the other dancers in the room.

She wraps one leg around the pole and spins, provoking appreciative whistles from the penis gallery.

His heart is banging against his ribs in speed-metal time.

Lacey whirls around her shiny brass pole. Her high heels touch down and she dances, and then walks around the post.

“They love her,” the bartender says with a hint of irritation in her voice.

“Disgusting.”

The ringing noise in his ears is louder than the music, several discussions at the bar overlap and drift nonsensically across his consciousness. He’s sweating in his three-piece, unable to tear his gaze away, unable to move a muscle. The rows of tables and chairs between them are a blurry ocean, faces and colors swimming in his vision. An ocean he cannot cross.

This is okay, he thinks to himself. Even in his alcoholic stupor his heart rate and flushed face know otherwise. This is shite. --- Bloody hell!

“Dearie!” he calls for the bartender who is tending to someone else’s whim, “‘ow ‘bout a ‘rink, ‘iskey.”

The girl turns her head; the professional smile she's worn all night quite gone. Her eyes are pink, lids
sagging, and her face hangs loose and long.

He closes his eyes, runs a hand over his face and rubs his mouth. It’s as dry as the Gobi Desert.

Behind his closed eyelids, the lowest level of the Satin Dolls flashes like a naked lightbulb in an empty room. A rundown club where young girls strip- stripped- out of economic need or to please their pimps; a place where their stories are not glamorous or liberating, but emotionally demanding and physically exhausting. There’s its three levels: the kitchens and restaurant space on first, the sealed-off VIP-area on second, and the staircase to the guest rooms for private... dances. And there’s the basement dance floor, and those raised platforms with the poles... the three rows of tables and chairs mostly full, with a few in the last row occupied by exotic-looking men gesturing rapidly.

A pale, fair-haired girl in nothing but knee-high socks and black ballet shoes is dancing slowly, haughtily, to Billie Holiday. ... She curtsies at the end of the song...

“What do you want, sweetheart?” A balding man at the tip rail chortles, and it sounds like a nicotine milkshake. His throaty laugh is a rattling engine running on gasoline and pipe tobacco. “How do you like it, hmm?”

Lacey is still dancing. His mind refuses to think ‘seductively’, but that’s what it is, and they are all following her every move as she floats and twists and bends her body; hungry eyes focused exclusively on her intimate parts; frothing mouths leering and shouting.

She’s making a fool of herself, not using her smarts.

Lacey’s hips revolve in circles, her eyes half closed. She lifts her arms high, moves to the song, and a smile spreads across her face.

She’s endangering herself- and there is nothing he can do about it.

He watches her gyrate, watches the men stare dully, transfixed, occasionally luring her closer by extending a hand that holds a folded bill. When she reaches the edge of the stage, squats and rolls her hips to the beat of the music, the men stuff the bills into the high leg cut of her black Lycra-teddy.

Her dazzling smile is so sweet and bright and innocent; it is painful to look at.

“Don’t be shy, lass,” he coos, his gold earring catching a glint of light as he looks down, part of a barbed-wire tattoo that encircles his neck showing through the open collar of his shirt. He has matching tattoos on his upper arms. “Remember, whenever you’re scared all you have to do is look inside.” He touches her chest, and the girl nods unsmiling, squirming a little on his lap. He yanks the long dirty-blond hair fiercely as the music changes to a song with a faster beat. “We’re all braver than we think, if we just look deep enough.” He pulls her toward him by her hair and starts to kiss her neck. “Morraine, baby, will you be brave for me?”

Her face glistens under the green and blue flashing lights. The smoke machine mists out smoke. She takes a shuddering breath. “Yes, daddy.”

Gold slams his flat hand on the counter, breathes hard through his nose.

Milah and her people, they are aiming for cool elegance and class here, but he has seen enough of the night and its creatures to know they are giving the donkeys strawberries, feeding jam to the pigs. The men who come here- all their money, expensive haircuts, and tailored suits can’t sufficiently camouflage the monsters breathing and living underneath.

Lacey twirls, the movement catching his eye; and he watches, his heart aching, clenching and
unclenching in his chest until he numbs the pain with more alcohol, raising his glass for her when their eyes meet.

“A double,” he tells the bartender as he turns his back on the stage. She exchanges his glass for a bigger one without comment.

The music changes. The whisky sears his throat. Burning life back into him, dispelling the numbness and sense of unreality, firing him with something like peace. He empties one glass, then another. Before the third drink is poured, he feels someone melting their warm body to his from behind and he knows Miss French has arrived.

She takes a stool, settles next to him. She’s still in costume, with thick makeup and false eyelashes, but has pulled a mini-dress over her teddy. Her feather-boa is draped over the stool next to her.

“You enjoy that, Dr Gold?”

“Did you?” he says, before he can stop himself. The decision’s made. It doesn’t matter now.

She rolls her eyes, plays with her hair.

“Maybe.”

She watches him for a moment.

“Pfft. Figures.”

“Pardon me?”

“You always in such a hurry to leave town to get to a place like this?” she asks his right earlobe as he stares down into his glass, watching the ice melt. His lip twitches.

“I lead a lonely life, Miss French.”

“Don’t we all. --- Hey, Lil!” She waves at the barista, who turns around and shoots him a quizzical look, her eyebrows shooting up like firecrackers. Wouldn’t have taken you for one of those, her expression reads. Should have known better. “Dirty Shirley Temple?”

He bites his tongue. 
It’s not like that! -

Or is it?

The barista, Lil -probably short for Lillian or something fancy like that; a bland, suburban, private school girl name that doesn’t fit the young woman at all- takes it in her stride, and does as she’s asked, but never takes her eyes off the pair of them; and he sees her go extra easy on the spirits without Lacey noticing, making her Shirley Temple far more virgin than her getup.

The tinkle of glass on glass as Lillian mixes her cocktail is buried under loud saxophone notes that jump and dance in the smoky room. Lacey’s dress hangs from her shoulder, hugging her form as she stares at the swirling liquor, twiddling her hair in a seemingly absent-minded way. When she raises heavily made up eyes to him, an unguarded, raw look in their blue depths, he knows his troubles have only just begun.

She leans on the bar, her dark curls lying over the other shoulder of her scoop back dress. “Got a smoke?”
“I don’t smoke,” their bartender apologizes. “Fiery whiskey is my thing. Tons.”

Lacey laughs a tinkling laugh, spots his B and H Premiums and her lighter and snags them from the counter. They are the gold packaging, full flavor variety, and he hasn’t touched them all night.

“You mind?”

She takes the cellophane off the top, also takes the top part off, then closes the pack and lightly drums two fingers on the back, flips it back around, and fishes for the first cigarette. The lucky.

“That your luck or mine?” she asks, balancing it on her finger. It’s a completely white cigarette, white filter and everything, with the Benson & Hedges gold font right on the bottom of the filter, just below two thin gold lines. The tobacco is mostly Virginia blend, so it’s a much brighter leaf-tone, a mild sweet smell coming off of it through the small perforation holes.

He lifts one shoulder and lets it drop, giving her a weak half-smile.

Oh Lacey, learning all the wrong things.

“It doesn’t work that way, Miss French.”

He watches in silence as she packs it a bit, tapping the bottom on the counter and checking for progress until she’s satisfied.

She does a couple inhales. Her drink arrives.

The B and H go down very smooth, no problem going down whatsoever. They’re not sore on the throat, not harsh, a very mild flavor on the sweeter side, and a mild intensity. A very nice smoke. Given the price he’s paying per pack, they sodding should be.

“Oh course it doesn’t.”

She fixes him in a look that would make anyone else shrivel and draw back in defeat, but he meets her gaze with the soft smile of one who knows the upper hand is still truly his, all the aces in his deck. He holds out a hand that’s met with pack and lighter, and carefully lights up one of his own to add to the hazy cloud. It lingers and spirals in the stagnant air between them, clinging to their hair, their faces, their lips.

She folds one leg over the other, dangling her rose heel, showing more leg; yet her face stays aloof, disinterested. It’s a film noir standoff of sexual power, and she’s taking it over the top, making that obscenely pink mouth round, dropping her jaw, and blowing O’s in his face.

She is a quick study.

“Miss French.”

“Adora taught me.” She is slurring her words, her accent thick and nasal. “Ruby’s Mum. She’s… cool.”

Her pupils are blown and she smells like sweat and powder, mixed with the odor of cigarette smoke, spilled booze, and stale beer that seems to be permeating every inch of the room, making it difficult to breathe.

“She said we could hang for a bit, get whatever we want,” she babbles giggling girlishly, bolstered by booze and adrenaline, overly-confident in the role she’s playing, in the fake persona she’s
adopted. “But no chatting up the customers.” Her sticky fingers make quotation marks around the word, then curl around her pink straw. She takes a long pull, hollowing out her cheeks. The paper umbrella quakes. It’s definitely not a fancy club soda. “Or we’ll all get in trouble.”

She bats her dark eyelashes at him. “Are you a customer, Dr Gold?”

“You’re already in trouble,” he explains, growing hotter by the moment. He shucks off his vest and drapes it over the counter. “And you know it. --- What happened, Lacey? How did you-?”

“Says who!?” She cuts across him, putting one hand on her hip and holding her cigarette in the other.

“I do. And you know why.”

She lolls her head to one side, pushing out her glossy lips just a little. “You’re spoiling all the good fun, Dr Gold!” she complains.

“You call this fun?”

Her hand movements as she takes the cigarette to her mouth aren’t uncoordinated or jerky, don’t look unnatural. He watches her pull off it, suck in the smoke.

“You don’t?” She takes a breath, inhales air with the smoke still in her mouth, drawing it into her lungs.

He clears his throat.

“You smell like a brewery, Miss French,” he says, stubbing his own out on the ashtray they’ve quietly been provided with. “And a brothel.”

She sucks in a breath and exhales sharply, blowing tendrils of hair into the air.

“Fuck you.” She wets her lip, takes a sip of her drink. “Respectfully, Sir. Fuck you.”

“Miss French! I beg your pardon!”

She snorts. Absolutely un-ladylike and yet strangely sweet, doing this so completely adorable coy little thing where she makes her eyes wide and innocent and then, when he still scowls at her, she goes all spoiled brat, pouting and kicking her leg, and his systolic reading spikes, his heart pumping blood both up and down his body.

“You just- called me a… tart, Sir.”

“I said you smelled like one. There’s a difference. --- You are not supposed to be here, Lacey.”

She turns away from him, gaze lingering on the many many bottles on the wall. Her cigarette is burned all the way down, the ashes gleaming sadly in the tray. “Where else would I be?”

At home, in bed, sleeping. “This isn’t the place.”

Her cheeks are pink, her eyes watery. She presses her lips together until they turn white.

“Miss French?”

“Then why are you here?” she asks as though it’s his fault, and perhaps, in some way, it is.

He raises a finger to signal the bartender, orders another round: scotch for himself, soda for the lady-
tramp who has her elbow on the counter, propping up her chin.

“I- I don’t want to go… back.” she chokes out in a voice that doesn’t sound like her. “Just… just leave me here?”

He wants to reach out, cup her face, take her into his arms and hold her. She looks so small, so tired, so... sad. Even under layers of makeup and glitter, in a short black dress, she’s just a young girl from a small town who is very far away from home.

She is a child. And he won’t lose another one. Not tonight.

Leaving his drink untouched, he sits up straighter. “I can’t do that. … I’m sorry.”

She swallows hard.

“I won’t go.” The protest must be ringing hollow even to her own ears. She flashes a quirky smile, mocking herself. “What do you care anyway?”

He couldn’t save Morraine, his wife, his son, or himself, but he’s determined to save her, if he can. His own battles will be fought later. They can wait. They’re already lost anyway.

“You don’t?” He asks softly, watching her shoulders slump. He knows the answer and it makes anger rise in the pit of his stomach. Loving oneself isn’t something that can be taught. Not by someone else. “Finish your club soda, Miss French.”

They sit in silence for a bit, each nursing their drink and dwelling on private thoughts.

He pays what’s on his tab and hers, discretely, with only plastic exchanging hands and pointed looks travelling between himself and the girl behind the bar, no spoken words needed.

A loud slurping noise signals the finishing touches to her soda, and he stands, shrugging into his vest and grabbing his cane.

"Closing time, Miss French.” He holds his hand out to her. “We’re going home.”

“No.” She returns to the empty can, fidgeting with it.

“Yes. Now.”

Her eyes refuse to latch on to his. She wobbles on the bar stool, her legs buckling when she stands, and he catches her by the arm, carefully setting her back on her feet. They must be killing her in those shoes. Where does one even go to buy such a hideous pair? Then something else she’s told him comes back to him, and the answer is crystal clear.

“Where is Miss Lucas?”

“She’s around here somewhere.” Lacey makes a show of looking around the room and squinting. “I can’t see shit in this pisshole of a joint. It’s the lighting.”

“You’re cute.” He grabs her by the hand and drags her towards the door.

She cusses under her breath, stumbles, and cusses again, and he ignores the miniature mutiny entirely.

No one is paying them any mind as they wind through the crowd, and the implications are making him sick to his stomach. He could take her anywhere, do anything to her, and no one in the room
would care, would bat so much as an eye at any of it, so used to the sight and the newspaper headlines in the morning.

No one cares about the lost ones. They brought it on themselves. They asked for it.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Milah draws herself up to her full height on her heels, hands on hips and blocking the doorway. Her gaze jumps between them, then lingers on his face for just a moment too long before she tsks at him and turns her head away to demonstrate her disgust.

“Taking this underage lady and her friend home where they belong,” he snaps. “You’re lucky I’m not calling Vice.”

He should. He really should. But he doesn’t want the police involved.

She purses her lips. “You know the girl?”

“They are students of mine.”

“Stu- oh, don’t tell me you’re teaching now.” Milah gives a dry laugh. “YOU. A teacher! That’s… hysterical.”

Her eyes tell him that her guard is up. She’s on the qui vive, wary, worried. A thing like this - it’s a club owner’s worst nightmare. Have this blow up and she’s out of business for good, a stampede of vice detectives and uniforms stomping everything she’s built into the ground, leaving only metaphorical dust and rubble behind. If she’s lucky, most of it goes away with money, with fines paid, plus maybe, a little extra so they let her off the hook easy. If she’s not, and anyone presses charges, it ends in court.

Milah turns her attention to Lacey, who has taken a step back, half hiding behind him. “I recognize you!” she says. “You’re the one who came in with Adora’s girl. You’re her friend?”

“One of your dancers, I presume?” He lets go of Lacey’s hand, but steps in front of her.

“Yes.”

“Is she here?”

“Yeah. She’s in back.” Milah inclines her head towards a dark velvet curtain between the stage and the bar. “She’s doing a private lap dance.”

“Get her,” he orders sternly, watching her tense up. It almost works.

“That’s a sixty-buck gig for her! Maybe more, you know how it is. She’s not going to be too happy I break it up...” She’s rattled -by what exactly, he isn’t sure- and rambling, running out of air before she can finish her sentence. Her chest heaves from the effort of drawing a deep enough breath. “It’s bad for business, Roan.”

“Guess what, Milah? I’m not here to bring rainbows and pots of Gold into your lives,” he says, fixing her darkly. “I don’t care if she’s busy. I don’t care whose dicks won’t get their happy endings tonight. All I care about is getting these girls out of here before things go South.”

“I’m working,” Milah offers feebly.

He leans in closer. “You better talk to me, Milah. You better quit the shite, and help me.”

They have Lacey’s head swiveling back and forth between them as though she is watching a fast
ping-pong match. Small beads of sweat have formed on Milah’s upper lip.

“Hey, look, I don’t want the mess and the hassle any more than you do, alright? I don’t remember who she was talking to, not her girl anyway. She’s not back there with them, okay?”

“Then you better find out where she is before I lose my patience and call the cops after all,” he growls, but behind the hard front his stomach is in knots, his insides growing hot with the dreadful possibilities that are flashing through his mind. Where is the Lucas girl? “They would love to shake this place down!”

“Just a good Samaritan, huh?” Milah scoffs. “Rescuing the damsel in distress, playing the hero. Oh, wouldn’t you love that!”

He’s not playing this game with her. Not now. “The girl, Milah ... now!”

“Calm down! I’m going.”

As she moves away, he leans closer to Lacey, pointing toward a free table in the back. “Let’s sit down for a moment.”

She lets him lead her into a chair and wordlessly accepts the tall glass of club soda he orders for her, gingerly fishing out the lemon slice and dropping it in the dirty ashtray. The rising cold ashes make her cough. She sneezes, scrunches up her eyes, then rubs them with a dirty knuckle, smudging her makeup.

“Now what?” she asks into the silence.

“Now we wait.”

She takes a sip, then bends down and slides out of a heel with a sigh, rubbing her foot.

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Adora is dressed in her blood-red underwear, a black see-through rayon beach-robe, and a sour expression when she comes to their table a few minutes later.

“Boss said you needed to speak to me?” she says, looking down her nose at him. “What’s this about? You just cost me money.”

“Life’s unfair.” He matches her stare. “Have a seat.”

“I’d rather not.” She isn’t sure what to make of him or the situation. He feels her gaze travel over him as she remains standing, so he returns the favor and does the same. “Who are you? And what do you want?”

She is a beautiful woman, hard around the eyes and with far too much makeup, but someone who would be eye-catching if she cleared herself up. She has a lean body, with full breasts and curves in all the right places, and shapely legs on end. Her eyes are a vivid green and seem to jump out of her sharply defined face. Framed by long curtains of shiny black hair- or perhaps it’s a very dark brown, it is hard to tell in this light- she reminds him of a dark forest at night.

Yes, she has definitely lived, but up close Adora Lucas still bears all the signs of someone having grown up beautiful and loved by all.

Adora. He wonders if the name is more prophecy or curse; something that fit the girl out of the
womb, or something she has had to grow into to make it true.

“My name is Gold,” he tells her. “Roan Gold.”

In that moment, the resemblance between mother and daughter is so striking, their confused expressions exactly the same, he has to stifle a laugh. Then she spots Lacey.

“What’s going on? Lacey, dear?”

Lacey chews her tongue, looking back and forth between them.

“That’s… Dr Gold, Adora,” she says finally, with a soft sigh. “He’s… our… Maths teacher.”

“Teacher?” Adora echoes, still struggling to put two and two together. A mother should know her own daughter’s age, shouldn’t she?

“I’m taking the girls home, Miss… Lucas?”

Her head snaps back around. “Did my… mother send you?” she snaps.

“No one sent me.”

She lets out a little laugh. Her eyes are narrow slits. She doesn’t believe him, but that doesn’t matter. He’s not here to convince the woman of anything.

“So, I take it you have no idea where your daughter is at this moment?”

She glares at him, but answers, “She wasn’t feeling well. I told her she could go lie down backstage. … Changing room?” She adds, when his frown deepens. “Look, I have to finish my shift, I’m losing money here. If Ruby wants to go with you, fine, but if she doesn’t, you leave her alone, alright? Listen, I don’t want any trouble.”

“Neither do I.” He gives her a little nod.

She shrugs, opens her mouth as if to say something, but then seems to think better of it. “We’re done here?”

“Yes, thank you. Have a safe night.”

She blinks at him surprised, and he knows exactly what she’s thinking: Why would he care what my night is like? And, yeah, it’s not like he cares about her or her night in particular, but whoever she is, her life is hard, and she deserves to make it through the night safe and sound. Just like everyone else.

She gives him a fleeting smile and tugs her robe tighter around her, then turns to leave.

“Hey, Gold?” she says over her shoulder. “Tell my mother… tell my mother, I’m sorry.”

***

They find Ruby in the dressing room, just as promised, but she’s not sleeping or digging through the dancers’ costume stock and makeup bags. Her back against a locker, she’s sitting on the floor in a dark corner, crying. Her anguish is lost in the hubbub and din from what’s going on in the basement.

She doesn’t look up when he and Lacey enter the room, and he immediately feels a sense of foreboding. Something in his gut that’s better at assessing the situation than his mind is, is telling him to stay clear and not to approach the crying girl.
“Lacey,” he breathes. “See what she needs?”

Lacey looks at him wide-eyed.

“I should not be in here, but I’ll be right outside the door- in the lobby- if you need me. Don’t go back downstairs.”

Lacey nods and he clears his throat, making his voice steadier and a tad stern. “Get changed, retrieve your belongings. Leave everything that isn’t yours. Then meet me in the lobby. You have twenty-five minutes.” He points to the clock on the wall.

Leaving the girls to themselves and closing the door behind him, he lets out a long breath. So far so good. Now he better call Dove and get the car out front and ready to go in half an hour. Dove won’t ask questions, won’t ask why he is to pack up their things, check out of the hotel, and drive him back to Storybrooke in the middle of the night with two teenage runaways in tow. That’s why he likes the man. He knows when to keep his mouth shut.

He makes a few calls, tells the bouncer -Antonio- to fetch him if he’s needed, and goes outside to smoke a last B and H. He really should quit.

When he returns, the TV in the lobby is playing an old rerun of Lassie in black-and-white. Miss Lucas sits on the old-fashioned velvet couch, looking as if she’s just thrown up. Miss French by her side has one arm around her, their attention riveted on little Jeff. Two shabby backpacks are lying at their feet.

He exchanges a silent nod with Antonio, who, apparently, has been keeping watch over more than his curtain in his absence. He gives a little wave and smiles tightly. He’ll let them watch the adventures of the boy and his dog until Dove arrives.

When he does, Gold pulls open the door and steps aside. “Ladies first,” he says.

“You’re cute,” Lacey snaps back under her breath, maneuvering Ruby towards the car.

Clearly, the wind has shifted again, he thinks, and, ‘She who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind.’

Humming with unspoken things, the long car ride back to Storybrooke is a silent one. Not soon after the city’s skyline has become miniscule in the rearview mirror and then vanished from view, Miss Lucas starts to snore. They hear her snores in between the song changes on the radio. No one speaks.
Most of Storybrooke is still asleep, enjoying the peace and quiet of Saturday morning in a small town. There are only a few places that have their lights on and their doors open, and it’s only the baker’s shop that has the sign in the window say ‘open’ this early on weekends.

When they drive past at the appropriately slow crawl that common sense and the old streets demand, the bakery is closed, and Gold assumes they must be running their usual deliveries - bread for the diner, bread for the nursery, bread for the nuns.

Behind Granny's Diner the sky is dipping its toes into the new morning. The sun’s harbingers are tinting the horizon a warmer hue, streaks of soft orange breaking through the bluish-black as they pull up to the curb.

No sooner has the engine died at Dove’s steady hands, when the front door opens and the Widow Lucas comes hurrying down the steps to meet them.

“Dr Gold! Thank you for your call. The girls-”

“Alright,” he says, hand resting on the back-seat door. “For the moment. A little shaken, I reckon. Tired. It’s been a long night.” He looks her in the eyes, hesitates. “Your… your daughter sends her regards.”

At the mention of Adora, Mrs. Lucas’ face and body go rigid, temporarily turning her to stone; cold and hard - and Gold knows better than to dwell on the subject. She nods. “I understand.”

He opens the door and steps aside as the woman all but pulls her granddaughter out of the car and into a long hug.

“Ruby! Heavens, girl-”

Her concerned hands roam and flutter, pat down hair and shoulders and hands. He recognizes the steps to this dance, the look in her eyes, the question.

“Are you hurt?” Ten fingers, ten toes. A deep breath. “What were you thinking?!”

“Granny, I-”

“Hush.” She rubs Ruby’s arms. “Good gracious, child, you're freezing!” She turns Ruby to face her and takes in the dirt on her face and her matted hair. “And you're filthy. What on earth have you been doing, Ruby?”

Ruby doesn’t answer, and he half expects Lacey to pipe up from the backseat and interfere.

Crickets.

Perhaps she too has finally fallen asleep, exhaustion and the long car ride getting the better of her. He doesn’t know what it is about cars, about riding in the backseat at night, but it’s a special kind of magic that no child can resist for very long before succumbing to it; a spell that never once failed him with Bae.
Ruby shivers.

“You’d better come inside quick,” Mrs. Lucas says, and still holding onto Ruby, leads her inside the diner. He watches her take the girl through the room up to the counter and make her sit down. A moment later, there’s a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and yet another after that, a tall mug placed in front of her.

*Tea. Hot Chocolate.*

Gold catches the Widow Lucas’ eye, and she nods tightly, a silent ‘thank you.’ on her lips.

Shaking his stupor, he lifts a hand in farewell, shuts the back-seat door quietly, and slips back into the passenger seat.

“Game of Thorns, sir?”

A glance in the rear-view mirror tells him Miss French is wide awake and listening, despite sitting with her arms and legs crossed and her face turned away to look out of the window.

“Yes.”

Lacey’s hand follows her seat belt down to the buckle. Her fingers twitch, ready to pull the trigger, but even if she does try, the child safety lock will prevent the door from being yanked open while the car is in motion. Same goes for the windows and privacy screen. He knows it, and she knows it too.

“Windows are dark, sir,” Dove remarks, eyeing the flower shop through the passenger window. His hands haven’t left the wheel; the motor is still running. His statement doubles as a question - and it’s one Gold doesn’t know the answer to. *Now what?*

“We’re stopping,” he tells Dove, taking out his phone and twisting in his seat to hand it to their sulking passenger. “If you’d be so kind, Miss French?”

“Which one?” she asks through gritted teeth. It’s the first time he’s heard her speak since they left New York. The silence that follows, inside the car and outside on the street, is a loud one. He watches her fingers hover over the keypad.

He has tried the flower shop. He has tried her house. “Does your father own a mobile phone?”

Lacey’s lip curls. She rolls her eyes. “Here. He’s not going to pick up.”

She hands back the phone, and true to her word, the call connects but isn’t answered. There’s no answering machine. Gold looks at the small telephone in his hands.

Wherever Moe French is, he’s not at home and not at his shop. Mrs. Lucas had told him as much when he’d called the diner earlier that night. She had also told him, the florist’s truck was parked outside his house, so she had assumed that he must be out looking for the girls on foot.

He had left a message on the shop’s machine, letting the man know when to expect their arrival and how to contact him, should he wish or need to.

They had tried the house first on their way into town, rung the bell, knocked at the door, but there had been no concerned parent at the doorstep; No one eagerly awaiting the safe return of his lost child; No one to clasp her in his arms, scolding and soothing at the same time, awash with relief.

Gold flips his phone shut.
“Miss French, Mrs. Lucas and I are certain that your father should be returning from his search for you and Miss Lucas very soon. In the meantime—”

“Yeah, right,” she scoffs, crossing her arms like a shield made from flesh and bone, her fingers digging into her left arm. Her gaze swings to the empty street and rakes across the glistening tarmac, climbs two streetlamps, and crashes into the dark store front.

She blinks, fidgets in her seat. Her lower lip is trapped between her teeth.

“Just… just let me out, I can walk from here. It’s not fa—”

“No. Absolutely not.”

Her hands try the door to find it locked. She pulls on it harder.

“Miss French.”

“What?!” She lets herself fall back against the seat with a thud. “Just let me—”

“No.”

She glares at him, and he returns her glare with interest. Less heated, but equally determined.

“Until we hear from your father, your safety is my responsibility. You are my responsibility.”

He nods towards the road, and Dove starts the car.

“You- How—”

Even the gentle purr of the engine seems to enrage her further. Lacey’s face bypasses red and turns maroon. She gapes at him, open-mouthed and breathless.

“Stop!”

Her head swivels around to watch her father’s shop and the town center slowly disappear as they glide past.

Bless the man, Gold thinks glancing at the stoic captain to their ship on wheels, trying his best to keep her steady and not to rock the boat any more than necessary.

She yanks on the door handle again. “I said, stop! Dr Gold! Hey!”

Just when he’s braced himself for the inevitable explosion to follow, Lacey deflates, burrowing deeper into her seat, her arms hugging rather than shielding her now, and he heaves a long sigh.

“You need a hot drink,” he says, “and then, you’d better tell me what’s been going on.”

Something in her eyes flickers. She turns her head away.

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When they arrive, gravel crunches under wheels and shoes, then something else cracks under his weight, and Gold looks down, confused.

“Now that’s odd.”

He holds Lacey back by the arm, studying the broken panes and glass shards on the ground. “Dove.”
“Back in five.” Dove’s hand flies to his right leg. It’s where he keeps his knives. Hopefully he won’t need them tonight. “Best to wait in the car, sir.”

They do, in tense silence, and when Dove returns and shakes his head, Lacey positively jumps out of the car to get away from him as fast as possible.

He looks at Dove who shrugs one shoulder and taps his cap. Gold nods his thanks.

“Miss French—” he groans grabbing his cane, and struggles to get out of the car and up the driveway fast enough to keep up with the hurricane on heels that this night has unleashed - once again - on his life and his home. “Now, will you—”

“I could outrun you, you know!”

Lacey stomps inside ahead of him and, without turning any of the lights on, immediately disappears into the small downstairs bathroom, locking herself in.

He follows suit slowly, walks up to the locked door and frowns at it, listening.

It’s quiet on the other side. It’s just his breathing.

His hand raised, fist poised to knock, his cold knuckles lean against the door as if looking for support, as if taking a moment to breathe-

(How does she know where that bathroom is?)

Then he knocks once, with decision.

“Miss French? When you can control yourself again, I expect you to join me in the study. Is that understood? We need to talk.”

(She undoubtedly knows where that is too - and when she gets there, she can explain to him how.)

He doesn’t wait for her answer, but goes straight upstairs, takes off his coat, drapes it over the back of his chair, and pours himself a glass of water from the jug on his desk. It’s been sitting there from before he left for the city and the water tastes accordingly, much more suitable for a plant or a flower rather than a person, but, other than himself, there are no living beings in the room.

Allowing himself to sink onto the little leather sofa in the middle of his spacious study, the frown on his face deepens. Tapping his glass, he lets his eyes drift over the spines of his many, many books as he takes stock. There’s unease bubbling in his chest, concern needling the pit of his stomach, and, perhaps, the sting of fresh road burn to his wounded pride somewhere illusive, sending heat to his neck and palms.

He sits quietly for a while, feeling his heart rate slow down and the throbbing in his head dwindle as he dilutes it with lukewarm water.

The door is ajar, but there comes a knock anyway.

“Enter.”

She does, but only takes three or four steps into the room before stopping again. “Holy shit. There’s more books in here than I could read in a lifetime,” she breathes, craning her neck to follow the tall shelves to the high ceiling, her eyes filling with joy and wonder before they cloud over and her walls fly up again, turning her beautiful smile into a smirk.
“You can’t keep me here, you know,” she sneers. “What would the sheriff say?”

He keeps perfectly still, his glance brushing her face before he answers in a bored voice, keeping his attention on the glass in his hand, “You’re free to go, Miss French,” he says, lazily gesturing to the door behind her. “I’m not stopping you.”

As anticipated, his reaction startles and confuses her, stops whatever script she’s laid out in her head like a trap on the first line of Act I, Scene I.

Met with a clear rebuff, she draws a deep breath that betrays her indignation and her face falls in a way that’s betraying her true age as well. There, under layers of makeup and her skimpy dress, flashes the real Lacey. The girl who is angry, disappointed, and utterly lost.

“Fine! I’ll go. I’ll go right now!” Her voice trembles. “And you’re going to regret it. Forever. And all you’ll have then... all you’ll have left…”

With tears threatening to spill, she holds eye contact with him - bravely, fiercely - as her voice breaks, but her threat is an empty one - and they both know it. She won’t go, because she has nowhere else to go; won’t even stalk out of the study while he does not move from his spot, because she has things to say and wants him to hear them.

“Temper your rage, Miss French,” he says, “and we shall discuss things calmly and rationally.”

His free hand pats the seat next to him, then he offers it to her.

“Stick it up your arse!”

She’s spoiling for a fight, persisting in her bullheaded resistance, appearing to lack the basic composure to concede the field.

He smiles mildly. Of course she does.

“What are you smiling at?!?”

When he doesn’t answer, she turns on the spot and huffs off, stomping down the stairs. He watches the table clock tick, then her steps ascend the stairs again, more slowly this time, heavier.

“Dr Gold?”

“Please, enter,” he says pleasantly, “and close the door behind you? You’re going to catch your death standing in a draught like that all morning.”

She makes a face, but reluctantly follows his instructions.

(A distraught Lacey in the wrong clothes.)

“Now what… sir?” She adds with some effort.

“Now we talk about how you broke every conceivable rule in the book, and you get to enlighten me as to why… as to what fascinating thought process could possibly be behind those decisions that led to you being someplace you had absolutely no business being.”

“That wasn’t my… I just… I just wanted to help Ruby! That’s all I did!”

“Come here,” he says, and she takes a few hesitant steps forward. “What are your aspirations, Lacey?” He asks, his voice gentle. “Dancing on poles in a nightclub, selling your body and your soul
to those men, to booze and drugs? For a couple of years, as long as you possibly can, before either of the two, or both, give out? Tell me, were you on your way to being… brutally... raped and murdered?"

He has to force himself to say the words out loud.

She stares at him.

“Because there are quicker ways to achieve this goal; faster and much less painful ways to die, Lacey.”

“Whoa.” She raises her hands in front of her body. “You’re sick.”

“So you agree that your reasoning and recent behavior leaves much to be desired? That such an endeavor as the one you and Miss Lucas just embarked on, should be labeled foolish at best and reckless and perilous at worst?”

She shakes her head, mouths like a fish.

“Tell me then, and tell me truthfully, should you get off with a slap on the wrist?”

His eyes find hers and pin them until she squirms under his gaze and caves in to the weight of the question.

“I- I don’t know!” Her voice is as brittle as fine china. She rolls her eyes at the ceiling in an attempt not to cry. “No. Whatever… No! You don’t get to---! You can’t…”

“Very well then. Do you have anything to say for yourself?” he asks, unable to keep the edge out of his voice.

She doesn’t answer.

“Young lady?!”

A perfect picture of defiance and glaring indignation, Lacey lingers by the side of the sofa, her thighs pressing into the armrest, her arms crossed over her chest.

In her ongoing petulant temper tantrum, her beautiful face is stuck halfway between a frown and a pout; her eyes are narrowed, her jaw working furiously. Whatever she’s so vigorously grinding up between those teeth clearly wants and needs out, the pent-up tension almost tangible, buzzing under his fingernails and vibrating against his skin - but he knows she won’t tell him. Wouldn’t tell him, even if she could.

“Come here,” he says again, taking her hand and gently running his thumb over her knuckles. “We are talking about this.”

She huffs impatiently and makes to pull away, like a stubborn filly shying away from the bridle. Moody and irritable, she’s clearly in no shape to talk, wound up so tightly it’s painful to watch.

“You made me worry, Lacey,” he explains, tightening his grip. “I know you know better.”

Her whole body is quivering. She doesn’t speak, shakes her head, can’t look him in the eye.

She shrugs, and half-heartedly attempts to get away again, but he’s not letting go and she isn’t really trying.
“I know you can’t talk right now,” he says softly, grabbing her by the arm and elbow, and slowly pulls her across his lap, holding her there with one forearm across her back. “But you need to, Lacey.”

They inhale and exhale together.

He can feel her body tensing up. A spiral spring, a rubber band pulled back too tightly and about to snap. She’s a grenade ignited, and he’s got roughly four seconds.

“YOU WEREN’T EVEN THERE!” she yells, exploding in movement, pushing against him, her legs kicking out wildly and both hands flying back to challenge his hold. “Screw you! Bloody let me ---!”

He flinches as her nails accidentally scrape his skin, making a mental note to have her trim them later.

“Go to blazes!” She hisses, furious like a wounded serpent, her ankles crossing and uncrossing in mid-air. “Dammit! FUCK!”

Struggling and panting, resisting the inevitable with all that she’s got, she keeps fighting him, and this, and herself; coating his beautiful furniture in repulsive expletives shooting from her fair mouth in one long, pink, glossy string until she runs out of air and foul language.

He will pardon her French - this time.

Silent and patient, his grip on her remains gentle but firm. He’s going to wait it out.

At long last, she stills on his lap, her breath leaving her in a defeated sigh. The storm has subsided.

She buries her face in the dark silk cushions, and he has to stifle the urge to cut things short, pull her up into a tight hug and cradle her in his arms. All he wants to do is to hold her and whisper sweet nothings in her ear until everything’s right in her world again, but it won’t work. Not yet, not now.

“No, Lacey,” he says calmly, his free hand stroking her back reassuringly. “No.”

Her reply comes muffled and is lost between the silk.

“You may cry out freely,” he tells her, pulling her ridiculously short dress above her waist so her slim legs are fully exposed from the top of her ankles to the edge of her panty legs, revealing a pair of white cotton scanties embroidered with beautiful, delicate rose blossoms.

(Oh, Lacey.)

On the surface, she’s emulating the look of a much older woman of questionable morals, her tarty getup miles away from age-appropriate, but beneath the provocative front, her underwear is oddly preteen and somehow equally improper.

Gold smiles softly.

“And then we’ll talk,”

He leaves the white garment, kneading and squeezing, tenderly caressing, smoothing his hand over the soft fabric and the pale skin to warm her up.

“Alright?”

She doesn’t answer, just lifts her head enough to take a shuddering breath and folds her arms to bury
her face in them, exhaling loudly into the cushions.

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She feels his hand rest on her bottom and, turning her head, squeezes her eyes shut, her burning cheek nestling against the cool, soft silk.

“Why are you getting a spanking, Lacey?” he asks in his stern voice. He’s not a saturnine man, but when he gets like this, he’s a man who speaks with precision and pedantic care, and it makes slow shivers creep down her spine.

She swallows. “Ran, got drunk, went... dancing?” she mumbles.

“Yes. And you broke the law, violated our agreement, and put your life in danger. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What happens when you break the rules?”

Her heart stutters and stammers in her chest.

“I get punished,” she whispers back. She hates answering that question, but he makes her do it anyway.

“Is this the first time I've punished you for something like this?”

“No.”

“Pardon me?”

“No, sir;” she amends.

She hears him breathing quietly. She wants it over with. She wants him to get on with it already and end the damn lecture, but she knows he will not begin until he is good and ready. She knows, he knows, how much she hates the anticipation, so he uses it to his advantage. The bastard.

“No, it is not.”

This is it. The moment of acceptance; the moment of quiet as she braces herself, her emotions boiling, churning, spinning together, threatening to eat her alive.

_Fear. Dread. Guilt._

With bated breath, she waits for the rest of the lecture, but gasps in surprise as she feels the first stinging swat of his open hand. It is a light swat, not all that painful, and she braces herself as he swats her again, and again.

Then he begins to spank in earnest.

He strikes maybe five or six times, then stops and rubs her bottom for a minute or two. As he rubs, he takes the hand that she’s shot back on reflex and holds it. Not tightly, at least not like he would if he was really pinning it down. He’s pinning it to her back, yes, but their fingers are braided together, and wildly enough, this feels much more like hand-holding than any actual hand-holding has ever done.

“Good girl,” he mutters. “Very good girl.”
As more swats follow, she closes her eyes, listens to her own heartbeat and his breathing. If she concentrates on his hand holding hers the pain doesn’t even matter. Her body doesn’t matter. This night doesn’t matter.

“Everything is fine,” he says somewhere closer to her ear. “We just need to take things one step at a time… We’ll work it out…”

She lets the words wash over her, but it feels wrong. His reassurances, the softness - it’s so much worse than the lecturing, though she can’t say why.

“Bullshit!” She lets go of his hand, jerks hers away. “YOU DON’T CARE!”

He pauses, exhales. His voice is still calm when he speaks, but it's sharper around the edges.

“Do you think I want you to get hurt?”

Swat! Swat! Swat!

“Do you think I am that kind of person? A … heartless beast?”

“No, no,” she moans, fresh tears clogging up her throat, her hands grasping the cushion so tightly her knuckles are white. “But you…, but you…”

“I don't enjoy punishing you,” he continues as he spanks her a little harder, “and I do care. Even if you don’t, Miss French!”

She can’t help it. She writhes and squirms, trying to get away - somehow swim off his knees maybe, her ‘fight or flight’ mode kicking in.

“Ow! Dr Gold!”

It’s unbearable. She can’t take it anymore. Not so much the spanking, though she sure feels it by now, but his concern where anger should have been; and his reassurances where indifference was supposed to be.

Every slap of his hand, slow and steady, lights her on fire, a burning sensation screaming across her bum. She feels like screaming too.

“Stop! Stop it!”

Lacey tries to propel herself forward, but he holds fast.

He pauses, rests his hand for a moment, and rubs her aching backside.

“We are not done, young lady,” he says, and she groans. She’s going to implode. How can she possibly take any more?

“Dr Gold, please,” she pleads.

“No. We are done when I say we are done. I want this to be the last time I spank you for this.”

He returns his attention and hand to her bottom.

She howls and squirms, but she can’t get away.

As he spanks her over, and over, and over again, she feels herself getting to that weird place that
she’s been to before. She knows she deserves it, and it doesn’t hurt that bad, really, but it takes a while for the weight to be lifted off her chest, and by the time she can breathe again, her eyes sting so bad she can hardly see.

The spanking goes on and on. Every time she thinks it has reached its crescendo and will be over, it begins again.

All she can do is take it.

Lacey sinks into herself, retreating inward. No more fighting; No more trying to get away; No more yelling at him to stop, or yelping as he swats her.

She makes quiet little noises as hespanks her. Everything goes still.

The pain moves her focus from her racing brain into her body, and it feels like she is being chastised for her bad thoughts rather than her actions — like all those doubts, and worries, and tears are being whacked out of her, one smack at a time. And there is his voice again - constant, soothing - and nothing changes, so she has no choice, but to sink down further into this strange feeling of weightlessness until she’s lost in it. It’s out of her control. She is in the hands of someone bigger and stronger than herself.

The realization translates into an odd sense of calm and power. His words then finally make sense to her. She knows what he is saying is right. She knows that she has been careless and reckless and stupid, and that she really has to make a change.

“Shh. It’s alright. You’re doing good.”

She wants to please him, and he wants to support her, not destroy her or punish her the way she does to herself when the tension builds in her body like it’s a fizzing soda can.

(*He cares.*)

Even through her tears, she is vaguely aware of him stopping. She takes a breath, not even realizing she’s been holding it for too long, and gasps between sobs. Her heart is pounding, and she's broken out in a light sweat that makes her skin crawl.

(*But- but then why does he leave her?)

Chapter End Notes

So, Gold is trying to do something here and it mostly works, but I still feel the need to say that *everything* about this is less than ideal. They are both intoxicated, for one thing, which, brushing aside every other red flag in this fic, is a definite no-no. You don’t ‘play’ drunk.

Okay, carry on.
Okay, so the last chapter and this one actually go together and posting one without the other felt incomplete. Also, this chapter has THE SCENE, finally. You know THE SCENE. The one your brain conjures up somewhere around chapter two or three, and that you fall deeply and utterly in love with, but have to write 500 miles (and then write 500 more) to even get remotely close to. I’ve written the miles and here it is, and I’m too giddy and too impatient to wait and stall posting. Enjoy! :3

He waits for a moment so Lacey can feel the full effect of the punishment she has received, studying the red that has risen on her backside and feeling the heat radiating off her as he gently returns his hand to her bottom.

“We're done,” he says softly as he begins massaging the tender spots. “Are you going to run off and break the law again?” He loosens his grip and leans in closer to brush her curls, now matted by sweat, away from her face.

“No, sir,” she hiccups. “No, no... I won't. I'm s-sorry.”

Tears flow freely as she releases all her pent-up emotions: the anger, sadness and remorse that she's been holding onto, pouring them all out into the open and right down the drain.

“I'm so... sorry. Please...” She hiccups again. “Don’t...”

He lifts her up and wraps her in his arms, and her sobs break on his chest as she cries softly. He isn’t the kind of man who offers awkward pats and tells a girl not to cry. He just holds her, offers shelter and lets her weep.

Gradually, her weeping slows and gives way to soft, shuddering breaths. When the shaking eases and the tears slow, he brushes a light kiss over her temple.

Yes, he scolds and smacks, but he uses it to buoy her mood. It’s like he’s giving her a massage, an orgasm, or a home-cooked meal. The same level of love, caring, and attentiveness is involved. He tunes into her emotions, untangling and brushing them out for her until she can do it herself. It’s not about punishment. It’s not about pain. It’s about her.

“Yes, of course I forgive you,” he says softly. “I know you said, you don't know if you care, if I care, if anyone cares,” he begins, “and I'm not sure if this is the right time to discuss it, but I'd like to.”

She sniffs.

“I've seen the changes in you since we've begun… in both of us,” he continues, as she turns her head awkwardly to look at him, cheeks flushed and eyes glistening. “But either we're both in this together, or we don't continue.”

Her unguarded, docile and vulnerable expression makes his heart melt.

“What happened, Lacey?”
“I was angry.”

“Can you tell me why?”

Abashed, she lowers her gaze, fidgets with his shirt button without undoing it.

“What do you need, Lacey?” He tries again, ignoring what her hands are doing to his clothing and his pulse.

“Everyone leaves! It’s not cool.” Her breath hitching and face aglow with shame and tears, she looks up at him, then falters. “Why… why does everyone... leave, sir?”

She asks him this in the sweetest tone of voice, her face filled with fear, as if she has asked an entirely different question.

It’s my fault, isn’t it?

He cradles her in his arms, holds her like something precious. If he were to be one word, it would be sorry.

“I let you down,” he says, rubbing her back. “And for that I am truly sorry, Lacey.”

She nestles deeper into their embrace with a sigh.

“It’s not your fault. --- But your actions are still your own, regardless of motivation or intent, and you could have gotten badly hurt tonight.”

“I know… I just…” Her voice is muffled, slow and tired. She yawns against his chest.

“Shh, it’s alright. We’ll talk more on the matter later. It’s been a long night.”

He holds her by the arms and studies her face. They are both exhausted. They both need some rest. They can get to the heart of the matter later.

“Come,” he says, slowly guiding her to her feet and taking her by the hand. “You can barely keep your eyes open.”

***

He takes her into the hall, hesitates, then makes a left for the master bedroom. The sheets are clean and haven’t been slept in. He’ll kip down on the sofa, then find out where her useless father is.

The blinds are closed. The room is dark and cool as they enter. He leads her right through to the bed, turns on the bedside lamp, and motions for her to take a seat.

“Go sit down, Lacey. I’ll be right with you,” he says and she instinctively obeys. She sinks down on the bedspread and comforter, careful to stretch out slowly, so as not to make her aching bottom scream in protest and agony with every move.

“Okay?”

Tearfully, she nods, and her eyes follow him as he limps to the en-suite bathroom to retrieve first, a bar of sheep's milk soap, a towel, and two face flannels - the latter three embroidered with beautiful lavender posies - then draws hot water from the tub and carries it over to the bed stand in a shallow bowl, careful not to spill anything onto the carpets.
He sets soap, towel and flannels out on the bed, rolls up the sleeves of his cream silk shirt. Then he opens a drawer and adds a thick pair of grey woolen socks.

Watching her, he inclines his head to his right - her left - and gently nudges her knee so she scoots closer to the bed stand and moves to sit on the edge of the bed. She has toed off her heels and laced footsies, and her feet rub against each other uncertainly.

He sinks to his knees in front of her. “Okay?”

“Oh,” she breathes.

Reaching into the bowl, he rubs some soap on a wet flannel and squeezes out the excess water. Then he lifts her chin, smiles into her reddened and bloodshot eyes, and begins to wash her face, rinsing the flannel and going back again, dabbing the hot cloth on Lacey’s temples and across her forehead. He washes her arms, holding first her left hand in the hot flannel and working the cloth up to her elbow, then reaching for her right hand.

Lacey flinches, and immediately his eyes find hers, silently repeating his question and receiving a little nod in response.

He takes her right hand in his next, massaging it with the cloth, gently working it along her arm to the elbow, then rinsing again.

It is as he kneels on the floor, taking one filthy bare foot after the other and washing the dirt and grime away with the second flannel, that Gold realizes he has become mesmerized by the scene playing out quietly in front of him.

Lacey has closed her eyes and changed position slowly to go with his movements, and though he can’t put his finger on it, it is as if she were talking to him without opening her mouth, so that he - as if he couldn’t help himself - leans toward her.

“It’s getting warmer now. Nice.” It is a rounded voice, a broad country voice. Lacey speaks deliberately, with retracted and raised diphthongs, somewhere between Steve Irwin and Paul Hogan, pronouncing her vowels with the requisite nasally-ness, and adding a nod when her statement is finished. Her a’s have turned into lazy e’s.

Gold says nothing, just looks at her and smiles, but not with his mouth. No, it’s his eyes that smile. Then he touches Lacey’s hand, taking it into his own. Lacey begins to cry softly, and perhaps very strange to any non-existent onlookers, he doesn’t reach out to put a hand on her knee, or try to stop her or pull her into a hug as a parent might have done. No, he just kneels and nods, as if he has all the time in the world.

Lacey speaks again. “Yeh ‘ands, they’re right soft, sir.”

Tears spill, plump drops on rosy cheeks. Oh, he knows. Just as he knows how to wait, how to use the silence as a lever to pry Lacey’s eyes to his.

His gaze steady on her tearful one, Gold smiles. “Thank you. I used to be a shoeshine boy, years ago, in The Old Smoke. That’s what the women used to say: that my hands were soft despite the hard work.”

Lacey nods.

“Have you ever polished a pair of shoes, Lacey? Or boots?”
She looks at him, slightly puzzled, waiting for him to say more, to elaborate, to explain why he’s asking her these questions, but instead he simply continues what he’s doing, leaving her to ponder in silence as he finishes drying her feet.

“No,” she says, wiggling the toes on her left foot. “But I baked them.”

Lacey grins continuously as he folds up the towel, daring him to ask. He lifts an eyebrow.

“You know, dead pointe shoes. Stick them in the oven. It dries the sweat out and re-hardens the glue.”

He places a sock over her toes, rolls it up, and reaches for her other foot. “I didn’t know that.”

She looks smug, then yawns, and Gold touches her knee, rubbing the hem of her dress between his fingertips. He lifts it a little.

“Okay?”

Lacey bites her lip. “Okay.”

With some effort, he gets to his feet and sits next to her.

She turns toward him. He takes her hands, his thumbs drawing perfect circles onto her skin. Then he lifts her arms, raising them high, and she leaves them there as he lifts her dress, gently pulling it upward and over her head.

She’s in her underwear, black bra and white rose-blossom panties. Her skin pebbles.

Before his eyes or mind can wander, he gets up, opens his wardrobe, and returns with one of his shirts, carefully draping it around Lacey’s shoulders. He helps her with it, gently, eases her arms through it, then brushes at Lacey’s hair with his fingertips.

Slowly, his eyes on hers, Gold buttons the shirt as her tummy twitches and her chest heaves. Her lips and cheeks are a strong red. His royal blue velvet shirt compliments her skin tone and hair color, bringing out her stunning eyes even more.

Her eyes are damp.

“Now,” he says gently. “Let me turn down the covers for you?”

Her lower lip beginning to wobble, her eyelashes wet with the beginnings of tears, Lacey’s gaze goes to his sheets. She hesitates. “Just to sleep?”

“Just to sleep,” he assures.

“Will you tuck me in?”

He sighs and stands next to the bed. Lacey smiles shyly, crawls into bed and shimmies down so she’s lying on her back blinking up at him. Her cheeks are glowing. Gold smooths the duvet over her.

“Comfortable?” He almost bends to kiss the tip of her nose then, but brushes his hand over her curls instead. Under the covers, she digs, snuggling down deep, burrowing into her pillow. Her hair is fanned out all around her. “Get some rest now, Lacey. I’ll be right next door if you need anything.”

He pulls the duvet up under her chin and turns to go.
“Dr Gold?” Bright-eyed, her eyes filled with concern, Lacey pushes to sitting, gives a little frown.

“Negotiations are closed for the day,” Gently, firmly, Gold puts the heel of his hand to Lacey’s forehead and nudges her back down. “And so, young lady, are you.”

“That’s not proper,” she whines. “Please, sir?”

He looks at her. Shakes his head with a soft chuckle. “Arms in or out?”

“Out.” Lacey places her arms on top of the sheet.

With a smile, he crouches down and begins tucking it underneath her, around her sides and beneath her toes, working all the way down her petite body until she looks like a small swaddled bundle of bliss.

“How’s that?” he asks, sitting on the side of the bed. “Any better?”

Lacey’s pretty mouth curves. “Mm-hmm.”

“Can I go now?”

She bobs her head up and down.

He taps a finger to his lips as he rises. And he knows that when he goes out, he’ll leave the door open a couple of inches so the hallway light slants in, the way his son always liked it. Just because it feels right. “I’ll get you some water.”

“Dr Gold?” Lacey says when he moves to turn off the bedside lamp.

On to the ploy, Gold narrows his eyes. “Yes, Miss French?”

“Um…” Her eyes flicker to the lamp, to him, and back again. “I… uh…” She draws a long breath, and when she lets it out, he feels his heart stumble as it misses a beat.

“Roan? Could you stay?” She smiles, and slides over, hopeful, leaving him space. “Please?”

Roan, Gold thinks. Not Dr Gold, not even - very often - sir. It is a beautiful sound, his name, the way she says it: the ‘r’ rolling off her tongue, the vowels gently forming in the pretty mouth with its dip deep in the top lip until they are full and round.

Gold kneels down next to the bed, strokes his fingers over Lacey’s cheek. “Do you want me to?”

“I asked you.”

He looks at her, and through the impossible waves of love wonders how, at the same time, he can be both the luckiest man alive and the poorest bastard that ever lived.
Trust

Chapter Summary

It took us a while, but yep, I rolled the dice and they landed on dumb decisions all around, so here we are.

Chapter Notes

Song choice: [This gooey thing]

The bed is soft and warm. She feels his arms go around her, holding her tight; feels herself falling asleep curled into the comfort of him, the way he smells, his warm body against hers.

Everything is okay.

She is safe. She is warm. She is happier than she’s ever been.

The weight of his arm draped over her, more comforting than any blanket could ever be, she listens to him breathe; listens to his heart beat out a steady rhythm.

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

There really is no reason for her to cry, not now, not anymore, not ever; and maybe it’s the shock of that, which makes her eyes burn and her throat close up.

Lacey wants to reach out and touch his face; to open her eyes and look into his - deeply, madly, truly - just like before, but refrains and keeps still. She doesn’t want to be one of those girls - those women - who get all emotional and clingy in bed. Men don’t like that, do they?

“Lacey?”

She doesn’t speak, doesn’t stir; she scarcely breathes.

“Are you alright?”

Their bodies are skin on skin and he still pulls her closer, stroking her head and neck and shoulders, his other hand rubbing the small of her back and coming to rest on her bum. He’s so gentle, so attentive, it makes her want to sob and hold on for dear life in earnest, which is stupid and silly, because she is happy, and he’s everything, and the moment, this moment - it’s perfect.

“Mm-hmm.”

Outside, soft rain is falling, tapping the window like a shy creature. He moves under her, readjusting them.

“Are you sure?” With a hot sigh, his lips brush her neck and he begins stroking her thighs.
It is dark, and he can’t see, but she blushed anyway.

“Uh-huh.”

She buries her face in his chest, hiding and laughing at her own reaction. His skin is perfumed by sweat and salt - a musky, earthy scent - as is her own, and the bed sheets too; and for a wild second, Lacey wishes they were hers, and that this was her bed, so that, when next she slept alone, his smell would be there to make her feel safe and warm, and happy.

She runs her hand over his chest, the soft hairs tickling the tips of her fingers. She can feel the bones through his skin, the ribs at the bottom of his ribcage sticking out as though trying to pierce through him, his heart rattling on the bars of its cage.

It’s rough and weathered, his skin, rougher than she imagined it to be. She thought it would be smooth and soft, like running your hands over rolled-out wet clay, but it’s as coarse as working hard slab. She feels every crack, every tear; pieces of him held together like patchwork. There are scars all over his body. They are hard to see in the dark, but she sees them with her hands, and her heart wonders.

Lacey opens her eyes and angles her head to look at him. “Roan?”

His hair has grown so long; a dark, tousled mess, streaked with grey. She clutches it in her hands, combs through the salt and pepper, almost feeling it scratch at her skin. Long and lank, and a little matted - but he suits it. The way it frames his face, his cheekbones, his… beautiful, kind eyes, makes her lust for him more than she can put into words.

“Can I kiss you?” She leans in halfway and then waits for him to close the gap.

The kiss is long, and slow, and meaningful; and it makes her cry. Only a little bit.

“Shh. Lacey.”

His thumbs on her cheeks, hands cupping her face, she sighs and gives into the soft, fluttering feeling inside, touching her forehead to his as she draws a shaky breath.

Everything has changed.

It is only his eyes that remain the same, coloured brown hues that can be colder than frozen soil in winter, yet, when she lifts her gaze to them again, she finds nothing but warmth in their depths. In his eyes, she sees him - all of him - and she sees herself.

“I, uh…”

It’s her who has changed. Not on the outside, but the inside feels different.

She had become jealous of anyone who found love, and bitter towards anyone who felt joy; and as she looks upon herself now, looks at her own reflection in his soft eyes glistening with love, she knows none of this can be real.

Him, her, this.

It must all be a dream, she tells herself, a buzzing panic rising within and her heart pounding, a blissful dream she does not wish to wake from.

She sobs.
Lacey wants to stay with him forever. She can’t look away; she doesn’t want to. She wants those eyes to be the last thing she ever sees.

“Roan, I—"

_I love you_, she wants to scream. _I love you more than you know. I need you, and I love you. Please, stay with me_. But what use would screaming be? He is right here; body to body, nose to nose. So why doesn’t she whisper the words instead?

_She needs him to hear her._

“I love you,” she blurts as she lets her mouth crash into his, hard and urgent.

His lips part in surprise, swallowing her confession whole, and she feels his jaws working on it before he gulps it down.

“Sweetheart,” he says, rolling over and pulling her with him. “Oh, sweetheart.”

He’s between her legs; for a split second his hands are everywhere, but it’s nothing like earlier; not like when he made her blood flash from comfortably warm to desperately hot, and she felt him move inside - move and push and spill - where the ache had been greatest. He’s not filling that void again, just holding her close.

“Lacey…” His voice breaks.

Lacey has been hugged before, but never like this since her mother… _left_. There is something so warm, so familiar; something that feels right, smells right. He could have been a drowning man sinking to his certain death, and she would have followed him to the bottom of the sea, no questions asked. She lets her body sag, her mind shut off, and he cradles her in his arms like a cherished treasure. The world falls away and time stops.

In that embrace, she feels the knot in her belly loosen and hope raise its head from the damp sand. Perhaps it has been here all along, but without his love was trapped, like seeds in the ground before the sun warms them.

He brushes at her hair with shaky fingers and kisses her; the kiss so tender, her heart melts in her chest and the dull pang of it makes her gasp against his lips.

_Oh, yes, she would. She would drown with him. She would drown for him!_

He kisses her again. It’s a soft, uncertain kiss, followed by a pause where people look each other in the eyes and then pull each other back into a more passionate pash in the movies, but this isn’t that, it’s real life, and the passion doesn’t happen. The kiss just ends.

Breathless, they look at each other.

It’s almost too perfect, lying here cocooned and snug in the warm bed, their limbs intertwined like vines of ivy or wild wine, their hands and fingers made from climbing roses, growing and stretching toward one another before braiding together forever.

He clears his throat.

Lacey’s face is wet with happy tears; only her pounding heart keeps her from assuming they must be in heaven. _Also, angels don’t have sex, do they?_ She wipes a hand across her face, water mixing with dried salt and sweat.
She licks her lips.

“You haven’t said it back,” she says softly.

He squeezes her hand. “I want to.”

He brushes a hand over her shoulder, then leans in to press a kiss on her curls.

In answer to the gesture, Lacey shoots out a mile-wide grin that’s supposed to show him it’s alright. She doesn’t need the words. Sometimes actions speak louder than words anyway, and he’s said plenty, and said it loud and clear tonight. He might as well have shouted it from the clock tower - or sounded the bells.

The thought makes her giggle. She bites her lip and looks up at him, reaching for his face to pull him in for another kiss. She makes it as long as she can, as certain as she can, before they have to come back up for air.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” he echoes. His voice is thick and throaty.

The sound reverberates in her bones, the undercurrent chipping her heart.
Chapter Summary

Last chapter. Epilogue and prologue at the same time.

Chapter Notes

Okay, there's death and funerals in this. Just fyi.

Music: [this] and [that]

It was the drought that made her eyes water as she walked up to the church. The tiny building shimmered under burning blue sky like a brick carcass. A feast for blowflies. Squinting against the sun, she saw them buzz towards it, small and disgusting; clouds of solemn black bodies seeking out wet wounds and crawling inside the gaping mouth to settle behind glassy, unseeing eyes.

They hadn’t spotted her yet.

Lacey smoothed down her dress and put on her sunglasses. The late afternoon heat draped itself around her, stifling and stiff like bone dry washing left out on the rotary line too long. She allowed herself a moment of weakness; a moment to scan the crowd, although she didn’t have time. She had dragged her heels the whole way, making detours, making excuses, blowing out the one-day journey to more than five. Satisfied no one looked familiar, she walked down the path and up the stone steps, and was instantly swept up in the black and grey scrum trickling through the doors.

Touching the wide brim of her hat, Lacey glanced back over her shoulder at the road leading back out of town. The funeral, the wake, the meeting and she was gone. Twenty hours, she reminded herself. Tops. Clutching that thought firmly, she turned back around and walked with the swarm, hands holding onto her hat and dress as a sudden hot gust sent hems flying.

The church - It was smaller than she remembered. There were more mourners than seats, arrivals quickly filling up the remaining bench-space as people covertly jostled each other for the advantage, brushed up against one another, and scooted over to make non-existent room.

Shoulder to shoulder with strangers, Lacey let herself be swept deeper into the congregation. She noticed the empty front pew and swerved, carving out a spot for herself along the wall, next to a short man whose shirt strained taut across his belly. The guy gave her a nod, and went back to humming quietly to himself with his eyes closed, and Lacey went back to staring straight ahead, pretending she hadn’t seen - and didn’t smell - his dark pit stains.

Lacey took off her hat and discretely fanned herself. More people arrived. She couldn’t help but glance around at them all, her eyes nervous and flitting between them like little birds. Slowly, the unfamiliar faces came more sharply into focus. Hot jolts of surprise burned through her as she took in lines and crows’ feet, greying hair, and gained weight; and unbidden recognition trickled down her
back and made her shudder.

An older man three rows back caught Lacey’s eye with a nod and she smiled politely, trying to recall a name to go with the friendly, bespectacled face, the thinning ginger hair, and the sad smile so gentle and heavy, she had to turn her head away to breathe. What was his name? She tried to remember, but couldn’t focus. A teacher. The man had been a teacher. She could just about picture him in a classroom, attempting to bring ornithology or woodwork or something equally dull alive for a flock of bored teenagers, but something was wrong with the picture and the memory kept flitting away before she could grab it and take a closer look.

The man nodded at the bench beside him, scooting a little to indicate he would make room, but Lacey shook her head and turned back to the front. She avoided small talk at all costs. It was a rule that had served her well, and now was not the time to break the habit.

Fuck, the coffin was large. Shiny black and larger than she had thought it would be. It was too large, like a shoe bought a few sizes too big, and Lacey felt a sudden panic at the thought without understanding why. Shouldn’t it fit? Imagining all that extra space inside made her dizzy. Someone had put a wreath on the coffin in an attempt to make it less appalling. Lying there, all cheerful and bright, only made it look worse. This was all wrong.

Small children with combed hair and pressed school uniforms stared at the ugly monstrosity in front of them, aghast or morbidly curious, but blissfully failing to grasp its full meaning as they edged a little closer to their mothers and fathers.

Above the coffin, he stared down at them all from a blown-up photograph. His lifeless smile was overlarge and nowhere near his pixelated eyes. Lacey recognized the picture from the newspaper clipping. Beneath, the name of the dead was spelled out in flickering candlelight. Moe.

Lacey stared at her father’s picture. The receding hairline and lined face. He looked older than she remembered, but then it had nearly been a decade. A decade of calls gone unanswered, letters unopened and tossed. And now, here they were.

“Bloody tragedy.” The man at her side spoke out of nowhere. His arms were crossed, hands balled to fists, and he had the grumpiest look on his face Lacey had ever seen on a person.

“It is,” Lacey said.

“You knew him well?”

“Not really. He was -” For a dizzy moment Lacey couldn’t think of a word to describe the old man in the too-large coffin. She grasped about in her mind, coming away empty but for clichéd descriptions that lodged in her throat and threatened to choke her. “I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“Sorry, sister. You don’t live round this way, do you?” The man shifted to fix her properly in his gaze, and Lacey quickly averted her eyes to look at her feet.

“No. Not from around here.”

“I can tell. The accent.” The man frowned, trying to place her. “Feels like I’ve seen you, though.”

“I’m from Melbourne,” Lacey said, studying the floor tiles.

“That right? Down Under. Huh. Your police force and government corrupt too?” With a scornful snort he drove his hands into the pockets of his pants, and Lacey noticed the faded grease and oil
stains that hadn’t quite come out in the wash. “They should be investigating the bloody mayor and her people for letting things get this bad.” The man nodded to where her father’s dead body lay in a cold, hard box all alone. “We’re out here trying to serve the community, the children, and they are blabbering on about… duty of care and… responsibility like it isn’t their fault the damn thing collapsed right on top of the poor bastard’s head. It’s a fu-” He broke off. Looked around the church. “It’s an effing scandal, that’s what it is.”

Lacey said nothing as they both dwelled on their private thoughts in silence. Fault. Whose fault was this? The potential sources of blame had been trashed out at length in the Mirror, every printed word burned into Lacey’s memory from the moment she had skimmed the pages of the article for the first time.

**Boy, 7, stuck in historic mine since Saturday rescued. Shaft collapse kills local hero.**

After heavy downpours, a mine shaft has collapsed at the historic mine in Storybrooke, Maine, creating a hole 15 meters deep and eight meters wide. … Rescue services criticized over death of florist Moe French, 51, the heroic man who… … little Fisher boy unscathed … Authorities say they have relied heavily on the information from… "We’ve had numerous collapses,” said Leroy Brotherton. "Especially around the old mine shafts. Basically the ground sinks. Maybe all at once. Maybe…”

“You okay?” He nudged her arm and Lacey started, quickly running a hand over her eyes.


“Yeah. Fine,” Lacey mumbled. “No one looking into this then? The mining accident?”

“No. I suppose not.” Leroy glowered in the general direction of the candles. “They’d rather have a dead hero than…” He said more but Lacey didn’t hear him. Her gaze had shifted from the candles and the coffin to the mourners in the front pew. The space reserved for family. To be stared at and pitied by everyone else, bowing their heads and whispering, secretly grateful it wasn’t them.

It had been eight years, but Lacey recognized Mother Medusa straight away; she and her nuns in habits so black they looked like a stretch of sky on a night without stars. Lacey stared at the black line their straight backs formed until her eyes burned. Then she blinked, and her gaze riveted on the figure sitting next to Medusa. *Mother.*

Her mother’s face was grey. Her eyes appeared sunken into her head. She was sitting dutifully in her spot in the front row, but her head was turned. She was ignoring the blonde nun sobbing into her handkerchief to her left, Medusa’s bony hand on her arm, and the large box holding the remains of her husband, the love of her life. Instead, she was staring directly at Lacey.

Her eyes were dry and dull.

Somewhere up in the back, a few notes of music piped out from the organ. The funeral was starting. Mum inclined her head in a tiny nod and Lacey unconsciously put a hand on her belly. *She shouldn’t have opened the letter. She shouldn’t have come here.*

It was Lacey who looked away first.

It was hard to watch the photograph and hear the speeches, but Lacey didn’t feel it. She stared down at the floor for a full minute. When she looked back, they were still speaking, and the music was still playing, and her father was still looking at her with that grotesque smile frozen on his face, but she didn’t feel a thing.
As an older woman turned her gaze away from the front, her eyes landed on Lacey. Lacey didn’t know her, but she gave a nod of recognition and smiled in a way that had Lacey’s empty stomach convulse in a sudden craving for hot soup and a slice of fresh bread. Queasy, Lacey looked away. When she glanced back, the woman was still smiling warmly. Her eyebrows suddenly puckered into a frown, and she turned to the woman next to her. Lacey didn’t need to hear her or read her lips to know what she whispered.

The French girl is back.

An uneasy weight settled in Lacey’s chest. Twenty hours. Then she would be gone. Again.
Forever.

Chapter End Notes

So this is a time jump (like the ones we all *adore* so much on the show. Please, forgive me.). To be honest, VGG was supposed to end with the first smut scene and, after that, my present-time outline only went as far as the sex in the last chapter. For everything else, I need Lacey to be a little older. If you're interested in what happened 8 years ago and what happens next, I might add a second installment to the series, but I'll need a show of hands to make sure it's worth the effort and I'm not just talking to myself. :D

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