

# HEXED HOLIDAYS

*Three Tales of Transformation and Terror*



by Paige Turner

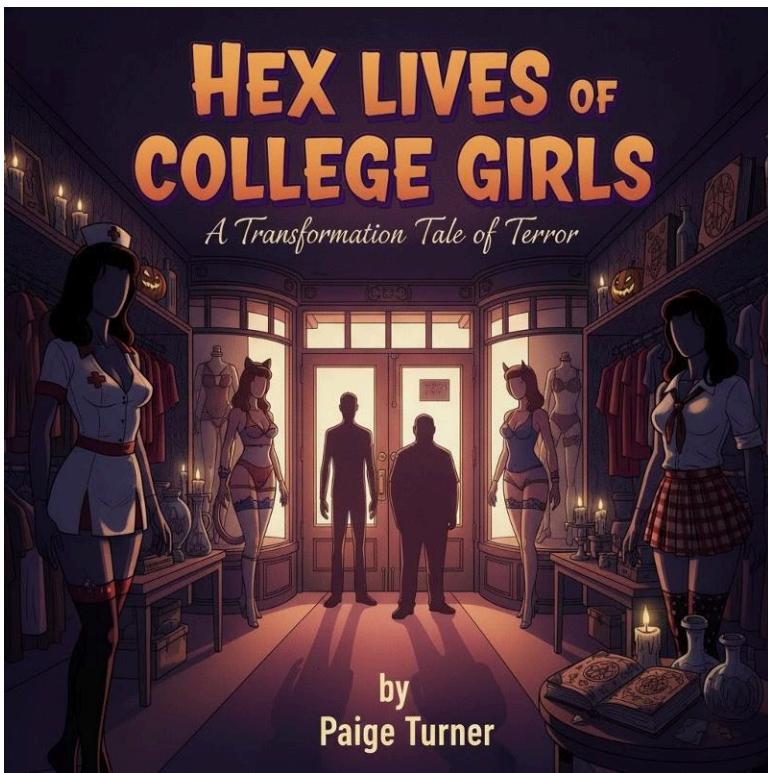
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There are certain establishments that appear only when they are needed, and only to those who need them most desperately. Kyle Nguyen and Cole Russo were about to enter such a place,

though they could not have known this as they hurried through the October darkness toward their particular doom.

They had tried four other costume shops already, and each had already disappointed them-picked over, depleted, offering nothing that would serve their purpose. They needed something special. Something convincing. Halloween night was upon them, the Sigma Chi party would begin in ninety minutes, and they had nothing.

The boys wanted what young men have wanted since time immemorial: to be seen, to be desired, to matter to those they admired. There is no shame in such wanting. The tragedy lies in what one is willing to sacrifice to achieve it, and in failing to understand that some sacrifices, once made, cannot be unmade.

"Last shop," Kyle said, stopping before a storefront neither could recall seeing before, though they had walked this street dozens of times. The sign read "Crossroads Costumes" in faded gold lettering that seemed to glow faintly in the streetlights. "If they don't have anything, we'll just stay home tonight."

"Finally." Cole pulled his hoodie tighter against the chill. His frame was soft where Kyle's was angular, his face round where Kyle's was sharp. These differences would prove temporary. Soon, both would be reshaped according to templates neither had chosen. "We should've stayed home in the first place. We're not on the list, we don't know anyone there, and showing up uninvited to a frat party is objectively a terrible idea."

"That's why we need costumes," Kyle countered with the particular certainty of one who believes logic will overcome all obstacles. "Something that makes us look like we belong."

"Or we could accept that some things aren't meant to happen and spare ourselves the humiliation."

"Sometimes you have to actually do something instead of sitting around contemplating whether it's rational."

"Whatever. Last shop." Cole sighed with the resignation of one who knows he walks toward folly but sees no path around it.

Kyle believed himself practical, efficient, a solver of problems. He approached life as a series of puzzles requiring only the correct application of logic and effort. If one wanted to attend a party, one acquired the means of entry. If one wanted to speak to a girl, one created opportunities for conversation. That these approaches had not yet yielded the results he desired suggested only that he had not yet found the optimal strategy, not that the strategy itself was flawed.

Cole Russo was softer in both body and temperament, given to philosophical considerations that his companion found impractical. He understood, in ways Kyle did not, that wanting something did not make it achievable, that effort did not always yield rewards, that sometimes the wise course was acceptance rather than action. But he followed Kyle regardless, as he always did, because friendship meant honoring even foolish endeavors, and because some small part of him still hoped that Kyle might be right.

Both were clever. Both were educated. Both understood, in the abstract, that the world was not always kind to those who wanted things.

Neither understood how unkind it could be.

The shop waited for them, as it had waited for so many others. Kyle pushed open the door without hesitation, without consideration, without the caution that might have saved them had they possessed the sense to exercise it.

But there would be no sense that evening. Sense had departed when they set out on this errand, and it would not return before the damage was done.

The bell above the door chimed-a sound like celebration, or perhaps like warning, depending upon one's perspective.

Inside, the shop smelled of old fabric and something sweeter. Two women emerged from the shadows at the back of the establishment. They were twins, or perhaps something closer than twins-two halves of a single purpose. Gray hair pulled into identical buns. Cardigans that had seen decades pass. Eyes that held knowledge the boys could not fathom.

Their nametags proclaimed them Zelda and Zara, as if such simple appellations could encompass what they were.

"Cutting it close, boys," the one on the left-Zelda-spoke with warmth that might have been genuine, or might have been the warmth of a spider greeting flies. Her eyes assessed them with the precision of one who has measured countless souls and found them all wanting in infinite ways.

"What can we do for you?" asked Zara, though the sisters surely knew already. They always knew.

Kyle stepped forward, believing himself in control of the transaction to come. "We need costumes for tonight. Something good. We're going to a party and we need to look like we belong there."

"Sigma Chi?" Zelda smiled, a small and knowing expression.

"How did you—" Kyle started.

"Halloween night, two college boys desperate for costumes, worried about belonging somewhere." Zara moved among the racks, her fingers trailing across fabric with the familiarity of long practice. "We've been doing this a long time."

Longer than the boys could imagine. Longer, perhaps, than the city itself had stood.

"But you're not on the list," Zelda observed, not as a question but as simple fact.

Kyle shifted uncomfortably. "That's why we need good costumes. Ones that'll get us past the door. Something that will make us look like something other than..."

"Us," Cole supplied.

The sisters exchanged a glance-a moment of silent communication that should have warned the boys, had they not been in such a desperate state.

Kyle had been building courage to approach Jessica Miller for six weeks. She sat three rows ahead of him in Economics, actually engaged with the material instead of scrolling through her phone, asked questions that demonstrated real understanding rather than mere grade-grubbing. He had convinced himself that if he could just talk to her outside the classroom, outside the formal structure of academic hierarchy, she would see him as something more than another classmate. The Sigma Chi party represented opportunity-a casual environment where conversation might flow naturally, where he might finally demonstrate his worth.

Cole had his own reasons for wanting to attend, though he would have claimed them less significant than they were. Emma Laurent had eviscerated their philosophy professor's argument about qualia the previous week, and watching her dismantle the man's logic had been the single most erotic thing Cole had witnessed during his time at college. He had managed exactly two conversations with her, both about assignments, both conducted in the halting manner of someone who forgets how to form coherent sentences in the presence of beauty. Kyle had convinced him this party was his chance to speak to her like an actual human being instead of a nervous wreck who could barely string together subject and predicate.

The universe, or fate, or something older than either, prepared to grant their wishes. As such things often go, they would receive precisely what they asked for, and it would destroy them.

"We do have something," Zelda announced, and both sisters smiled with identical warmth, identical welcome, identical

purpose. "Two costumes that would be absolutely perfect. You'll get into that party, we guarantee it."

A guarantee from the sisters. How many had heard such promises before? How many had accepted them, believing they understood the terms?

"And they come with free alterations!" Zara added brightly. "Guaranteed to fit perfectly."

Kyle brightened at this news, as the sisters knew he would. "Well, we can't beat free."

Of course, nothing the sisters offered was free. There was always a price, though the boys would not understand what they had paid until the bill came due.

"Follow us," Zelda instructed, her voice kind as a grandmother's. "We have dressing rooms in the back. Much more private for trying things on."

She led Kyle down a narrow hallway to the left, while Zara guided Cole to the right. The dressing rooms, it seemed, were at opposite ends of the shop. This too should have struck them as odd, but desperation makes poor counsel, and the boys were desperate indeed.

Kyle found himself in a small alcove, curtained off from the world, alone with his choices and his ignorance. No mirror graced the space-only hooks for clothing and a bench worn smooth by use. By how much use, over how many years, he did not consider.

"Here we are," Zelda said. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back with your costume."

She withdrew, leaving Kyle alone in the silence of the dressing room. Somewhere distant in the shop, he could hear Cole's voice, muffled by walls and fabric.

Zelda returned bearing a garment bag, which she hung with care before stepping back beyond the curtain.

"Try this on and let me know if you need help with anything," she called through the fabric barrier, her voice honey-sweet.

Kyle unzipped the bag. A cheerleader's uniform spilled forth-bright red shell top with white trim, pleated skirt of alarming brevity, sports bra, white athletic short-shorts, white crew socks, white sneakers, and a platinum blonde wig crowned with a high ponytail and massive red bow.

His stomach dropped with the particular nausea of one who sees the path before them and knows it leads nowhere good, yet can perceive no alternative.

"Um, this is-this is a girl's costume," he called through the curtain.

From the opposite end of the shop, distant but audible, came Cole's voice, tight with something that was not quite fear but perhaps fear's younger sibling: "There's been some kind of mistake-"

"Of course it is," Zelda replied, her tone unchanged, as pleasant as if they were discussing the weather. "That's the costume."

Kyle heard Zara's voice from the far end of the shop, saying something similar to Cole. They had been given the same response, the same absence of apology, the same implication that this was exactly as it should be.

"I'm not wearing a girl's costume," Kyle protested.

"Then you're not getting into that party." The words were delivered without malice, without judgment. Zelda's voice remained sympathetic, understanding even, but utterly immovable. "Girls without invitations get into frat parties. Boys without invitations get turned away. That's just reality."

From across the shop, Cole argued: "We can't just-"

"Jessica and Emma will be at that party," Zelda continued, and her voice had dropped to something softer, more intimate, the voice of one who knows precisely where to press to cause the maximum capitulation. "Having a wonderful time. While you sit at home wishing you'd been braver."

The words struck Kyle precisely where they were meant to strike—at his pride, at his desire, at the six weeks he had spent building up the courage to approach Jessica Miller, only to watch opportunity after opportunity slip past.

"Look," Zelda said, and she was closer to the curtain now, her voice nearly conspiratorial. "These aren't ordinary costumes. They're special. Halloween magic. Real magic. You'll be completely unrecognizable. You'll walk right past the door, talk to whoever you want."

"Magic," Kyle repeated, skeptical but desperate. A dangerous combination.

"It's Halloween. The veil is thin. Some of us know how to work with that." A pause, perfectly timed. "I guarantee you'll get closer to Jessica tonight if you wear this. But it's your choice."

Choice. Another word heavy with irony, for what choice did Kyle truly have? He could refuse and return home, his evening wasted, his courage gathered for nothing. Or he could accept, could trust in the promise of magic and transformation, could believe that for one night he might become someone who mattered to Jessica Miller.

He stood in the alcove in his jeans and t-shirt, staring at the cheerleader uniform, and felt the weight of the decision pressing upon him.

"It won't fit," he said finally, grasping at the last rational objection remaining to him. "I'm too tall, too—it's not going to work."

"That's what the free alterations are for," Zelda assured him, her voice warm with promise. "We'll make sure it fits perfectly. Just try it on and we'll adjust from there."

Kyle drew a breath, and with it drew his fate toward him. Believing himself engaged in a simple transaction, he began to undress.

Stripped to his boxers, he regarded the pile of feminine garments with the particular dismay of one who has committed to a course of action before fully considering its implications. The white athletic shorts went on first-uncomfortably tight, squeezing his anatomy while also revealing every private contour. The garment bore the designation "shorts" in only the most technical sense, possessing an inseam so minimal that when paired with the pleated skirt, he would be perpetually on the edge of indecency.

Then the sports bra, hanging loose and pointless on his flat chest. The shell top was stretchy polyester that clung to his torso and terminated just above his navel, leaving his midriff exposed in a manner that made him profoundly uncomfortable.

The skirt presented greater difficulty. He stepped into it and attempted to draw it up over his hips, but the garment would not comply. The waistband caught, refused to close. His frame was too broad, his stomach too substantial for this scrap of pleated fabric designed for someone much smaller.

"Um, this doesn't fit," Kyle called through the curtain, relief and disappointment warring in his voice. Here was his escape, the rational end to this mad venture. "The skirt won't close. I told you I was too big."

"Let me help with that."

Zelda pushed through the curtain with the care of one who has performed this service many times before. She circled behind him, examining the problem with a professional eye.

"Oh, I see. You just need to suck in your stomach. Here—"

She placed her hands on his sides with a grip that was firm, almost proprietary. "Big breath in. Hold it."

Kyle obeyed, drawing air deep into his lungs and pulling his stomach inward as tightly as he could manage. It would not be enough—he could feel that even as he held his breath. The gap was too wide, the zipper too distant from its mate.

Zelda forced the zipper upward. Her hands were strong, decisive, allowing no resistance. The pressure was intense, the waistband digging into his sides with force that should have been painful—

And then something shifted.

The tight pressure vanished as if it had never been. The skirt suddenly fit perfectly, the zipper gliding smoothly closed with a soft sound of finality. Kyle released his breath and looked down at his exposed midriff.

His stomach was flat. Not merely flat but taut, defined, his bronze skin smooth over what appeared to be actual abdominal muscles. He had never possessed such musculature. He had, in fact, carefully avoided the gym for the entirety of his college career.

It was strange. Very strange. But perhaps it was merely the compression of the skirt, some trick of the tight waistband that created the illusion of definition. Surely that was the rational explanation.

"There we go," Zelda said with satisfaction. "Much better. Though the skirt is quite short, isn't it? You can see your underwear. And... what's inside of it. That bulge won't do at all. Let me just make sure everything is secure."

Before Kyle could ask what she meant by secure, she reached under his skirt and grasped the waistband of the shorts with both hands.

"Wait, what are you-"

She hiked them upward with a strong, decisive motion.

The sensation was immediate and terrible. Everything between his legs drew inward with the upward pull, tucking up and in and simply gone. Kyle's hands flew to his crotch, pressing desperately against the shorts.

Smooth. Completely smooth. Where his anatomy should have been, there was only flatness, only fabric over absence.

"What did you-" His voice emerged strangled, higher than it should have been. "Where did it-I can't feel."

"All secure now," Zelda said with the calm of one discussing the weather. "You're all set. Why don't you step out and we'll see if you need any other adjustments?"

She withdrew through the curtain before Kyle could formulate a response, leaving him alone with his horror.

Kyle stood frozen, both hands pressed to his crotch, feeling through the layers of fabric for something that was no longer there. Smooth. Flat. No matter where he touched, no matter how frantically he searched, he could find nothing. It was simply gone, as if it had never existed at all.

"No, no, no-" He grabbed at the waistband of the skirt, trying to pull it down, trying to reverse whatever obscenity had just occurred-

From the opposite end of the shop, Cole's voice rang out, loud and panicked: "What did you do?! It's gone! It's completely-"

Kyle tore through the curtain without thought, without consideration for his state of dress, desperate to reach Cole, to confirm that this nightmare was shared and therefore perhaps not a delusion.

Cole burst into the main room from the opposite direction at precisely the same moment.

They stopped, staring at one another in mutual horror.

Cole appeared profoundly wrong. He wore a black dress with white lace trim-the bodice fitted so tightly to his torso that it had created a dramatic waist from his previously soft middle. His chest looked fuller somehow, pushed upward by the corseting into something that suggested curves where none should exist. A white apron was tied at his waist. The skirt of the dress was full but hung oddly, and he wore sheer black stockings and black patent leather heels that caused him to wobble with each small movement. His face remained round and masculine, but his body had been reshaped into something that defied his natural form.

And between his legs, visible in the way the skirt fell-smooth. Obviously, unnaturally smooth.

"Dude," Kyle managed, his voice shaking. "What happened to you?"

"What happened to YOU?" Cole shot back, wobbling dangerously in the heels. "Your stomach-you have abs now! And you-" He gestured vaguely at Kyle's lower half. "You can't-I can't!"

"I know!" Kyle's voice cracked with panic. "It's gone! I can't feel anything! What did they do?"

"I don't know! She laced me into this thing-" Cole grabbed at his corseted waist "-and it crushed everything, and then she gave me these ruffled panties and pulled them up and-and now there's nothing! It's flat! It's completely flat!"

"Mine too!" Kyle was approaching hyperventilation. "She pulled up these shorts and everything just-disappeared! We need to get out of here. We need to-

"Boys, boys."

Zelda and Zara emerged from their respective corridors with the synchronized timing of those who have performed this scene many times before. They appeared completely calm, utterly untroubled by the panic before them.

"There's no need for alarm," Zelda said, her voice maintaining its kindly warmth.

"No need for—" Cole's voice was rising toward hysteria. "You did something to us! This isn't just a costume! You changed our bodies!"

"We told you they were special costumes," Zara replied with perfect reasonableness. "Halloween magic. We were quite clear about that."

"You need to change us back!" Kyle demanded, though his voice carried the desperation of one who already suspects the answer. "Right now! Whatever you did, undo it!"

"We can't change you back." Zelda's voice remained kind but utterly immovable. "The magic works forward, not backward. Each alteration builds on the last."

"Then-then we're leaving!" Cole declared, turning toward the door. He managed one step before his ankle twisted in the unfamiliar heels, sending him grabbing for a costume rack to maintain his balance.

"Leave like that?" Zara gestured at them with something that might have been sympathy. "Looking half-finished?"

Kyle looked down at himself. He wore a cheerleader uniform that exposed his newly taut midriff and smooth legs, but he retained his masculine face, his hairy arms, his angular features. The blonde wig sat forgotten in the dressing room. He resembled nothing so much as a man in drag—a man in drag who had undergone some inexplicable partial transformation that defied all logic and reason.

Cole's situation was worse. The corseting and heels made him appear compressed and unnatural, his round masculine face sitting atop a body that had been forced into feminine shapes through what appeared to be considerable violence. He wobbled with every small shift of weight, clearly moments from falling.

"We look ridiculous," Kyle admitted quietly, the fight draining from him as reality settled over his shoulders like a shroud.

"You look half-complete," Zelda corrected. "And if you walk out of here like that, you'll stay that way. Do you really want to return to your dormitory, to attend your classes, to live your lives looking like this?"

"What?" Cole's voice sharpened with fresh fear. "What do you mean 'stay that way'?"

"The spell has already begun," Zara explained with the patience of a teacher addressing slow students. "As we said, the alterations only move forward. We can finish them properly, make you look completely natural, completely convincing. You go to your party, and then the spell completes at midnight. Or you can leave now and remain stuck precisely as you are."

Kyle and Cole looked at one another, and in each other's eyes saw the same dawning horror, the same terrible recognition that they had stumbled into something far beyond their understanding, and that the path forward was no clearer than the path back.

"Midnight?" Kyle asked, his mind still seeking some rational framework, some timeline that would restore order to chaos.

"The magic does its work tonight," Zelda said, her tone calming and precisely measured. "When Halloween is over, the transformation is over."

Over. The word should have sparked some warning in Kyle's mind, some recognition that "over" and "reversed" were not synonyms. But he heard only what he wished to hear—that the ordeal would end with the holiday, that midnight would bring restoration.

"If we let you finish this," Cole said slowly, "we'll look convincing enough to get into the party?"

"Absolutely," Zara confirmed. "No one will have any idea who you really are."

"And we can take off the costumes after the party?" Kyle pressed, seeking the reassurance that would make this nightmare tolerable.

"Of course!" Both sisters laughed, and their laughter was warm and genuine and completely without malice. "You don't have to dress as a cheerleader and maid for the rest of your lives."

Kyle looked at Cole. They were already changed. Their bodies were already altered in ways that defied natural law. To leave now, half-finished and obviously wrong, would be to carry this horror into their normal lives, to face their classmates and professors and families wearing the evidence of their folly.

"Fine," Cole said, his jaw set with the determination of one who has chosen the least terrible of several terrible options. "Finish it. But make it fast."

"Of course," the sisters said in unison, their voices harmonizing in a way that should have been impossible for two separate people.

They led the boys to a large three-panel mirror in the center of the room. Kyle and Cole positioned themselves before it, side by side, and confronted their reflections.

The image that greeted them was damning. Two young men who had clearly suffered some strange affliction, wearing costumes that fit poorly and served only to emphasize how wrong everything had become. They looked like the subjects of some bizarre experiment, like victims of a curse that had been interrupted mid-casting.



"Let's start with the obvious problems," Zelda said, moving to stand behind Kyle. "You're far too tall for that skirt. It looks obscenely short."

She was correct. The pleated skirt didn't even cover the shorts, ending so high on his thighs that any significant movement would render him indecent.

"Yeah, that's what I—" Kyle began, but Zelda was already acting.

She crouched down and grasped the hem of the skirt, tugging it downward with firm purpose. The skirt remained its original length.

Kyle, however, did not.

He felt a pulling sensation through his entire body, a stretching in reverse, the floor rushing upward as his perspective shifted. In the mirror, he watched himself diminish-six inches disappearing in seconds as if they had never been. The skirt hem fell to a more reasonable length on his now-shorter thighs.

But his legs were transforming as well. His calves slimmed dramatically, the muscle definition changing from masculine to feminine. His thighs gained curves where there had been only straight lines. His entire leg structure was shifting, reshaping itself from gangly to toned and gracefully proportioned.

"What—" Kyle grabbed at the mirror frame for balance, staring at legs that were no longer his own. "What did you just—"

"Much better," Zelda said, standing with the satisfaction of work well done. "Not indecent anymore."

"And you," Zara said, moving behind Cole with purpose. "Your skirt hangs incorrectly. It should have volume, should poof outward. You need proper foundation."

She produced a white crinoline from a nearby rack-layers of stiff netting and tulle that rustled as she held it out. "Step into this."

Cole looked at Kyle in the mirror, his eyes wide with fear and something approaching despair. But he stepped into the crinoline regardless, because what alternative remained to him?

Zara pulled the garment upward-over his calves, his knees, his thighs. Cole felt a stretching sensation, his perspective rising as he gained height. In the mirror, he watched his legs lengthen and refine, his calves curving gracefully, his thighs becoming willowy and shapely beneath the black stockings. By the time she tied the crinoline at his waist, he had gained four inches, his legs now statuesque and elegant in a manner completely foreign to his natural form.

The maid skirt suddenly achieved its intended effect, poofing outward over the crinoline in a flirty bell shape that emphasized his newly elongated legs and drew attention to the dramatic curve from his corseted waist to his hips.

"There," Zara said with evident satisfaction. "Much better."

Kyle and Cole stared at each other in the mirror. Kyle was noticeably shorter now, his lower body completely reshaped into something lean and athletic. Cole was taller, willowy, his legs elegant in a way that seemed to belong to someone else entirely.

Neither could quite believe what they were witnessing, yet the evidence stood before them, undeniable and terrible.

"The tops still don't fit correctly, though," Zara noted, circling them with a critical eye. Kyle's sports bra hung loose and empty despite the snug fit of the shell top. Cole's bodice, while creating impressive corseting effects, gaped slightly at the neckline where breasts should fill it.

"Allow me to address that," Zelda said. She disappeared briefly behind the counter and returned holding what appeared to be-

Kyle's stomach turned. They looked like pieces of flesh. Teardrop-shaped, skin-toned, with an unsettling realistic quality. They even had weight to them, moving with a slight jiggle as Zelda held them up.

"What are those?" Kyle asked, unable to hide the revulsion in his voice.

"Just inserts to fill out the costume properly," Zelda said cheerfully, as if she were holding perfectly ordinary objects rather than something that looked disturbingly organic.

"I'm not—" Kyle started to protest, but Zelda was already positioning them inside the sports bra, pressing the flesh-like forms against his flat chest.

They were warm. Warmer than they should have been. Kyle felt the heat immediately, spreading from where the inserts pressed against his skin. Not painful, but intense, unsettling, growing warmer by the second.

And then the inserts began to soften. To merge. He could feel it happening-their distinct edges blurring, melting into his chest like butter on hot bread. The foreign flesh was becoming his flesh. He could feel it on a deep level, a wrongness as two separate things became one.

Pressure built behind his ribs, a swelling that seemed to come from inside. His chest was expanding, the tissue multiplying, pushing outward to fill the space and then continuing beyond it. The bra that had hung empty was suddenly tight, stretched across actual breasts-full, heavy breasts that pulled at his shoulders with impossible weight.

Kyle looked down at himself in horror. When he breathed, they moved with him. When he shifted, they bounced with the terrible reality of actual flesh.

Zara had moved to Cole with larger forms-more substantial, more dramatic. She tucked them into the bodice before Cole could process what was happening.

The same warmth. The same horrible merging sensation as the flesh-like forms became actual flesh. The same deep pressure as his chest began to swell.

But Cole's transformation was more extreme. The forms Zara had used were designed for drama, for the kind of figure that would make the bodice strain. His chest expanded rapidly, filling the sweetheart neckline with full, prominent breasts that threatened to spill from the corseting entirely. Combined with his cinched waist, his figure had become dramatically curved-a bombshell silhouette that looked nothing like his original soft form.

Cole looked down at the breasts now straining against his bodice, then tried to take a step back from the mirror, to escape the horror of his reflection. His ankle immediately twisted in the unfamiliar heels and he grabbed for Kyle's now much-lower shoulder to keep from toppling over entirely.

"You'll never make it to the party stumbling around like a newborn foal," Zara observed, watching his precarious balance. "A maid should glide, not wobble."

Before Cole could respond, she was crouching before him, adjusting his ankle straps with a decisive click.

Cole took a tentative step, expecting the same precarious wobbling he'd experienced since donning the shoes. Instead, his balance was perfect. He walked naturally, unconsciously graceful, the heels clicking against the floor as if he had been wearing them for years rather than minutes. His posture had shifted as well-more upright, shoulders back, the bearing of someone who understood how to carry themselves. It also had the effect of putting his newfound cleavage on full display to the world.

"Now," Zelda said, producing two small bottles from the pockets of her cardigan, "just a finishing touch to bring everything together."

Before either boy could react or protest, she sprayed the first bottle directly at Kyle-a sweet, cloying scent that evoked coffee shops and autumn.

"What is—" Kyle coughed as the scent enveloped him. It was not merely smell-he could feel it somehow, warm and heavy, sinking into his skin wherever the mist touched.

"Just a special blend called Pumpkin Spice," Zelda said with evident pleasure.

Zara was already deploying the second bottle labeled "Mademoiselle" toward Cole-an elegant, sophisticated scent that

smelled expensive, redolent of perfume counters in upscale department stores.

"What—" Cole started, but the scent hit him and his skin began to burn. Not painfully, but intensely, a tingling sensation spreading across every inch of exposed flesh.

The transformation was immediate. Kyle watched in the mirror as the hair on his arms simply disappeared, vanishing into smooth skin. His legs-visible above the white crew socks-went completely hairless in seconds, the dark hair that had covered them since puberty erasing itself as if it had never been.

But his skin tone was changing as well. His bronze complexion was lightening before his eyes, not slowly but with the speed of time-lapse photography. His forearms shifted from tan to pale cream. His legs became porcelain white. Every visible inch of his Asian complexion was bleaching out, transforming into something pale and smooth and utterly unlike his natural coloring.

"Oh god," Kyle whispered, watching his ethnicity disappear from his reflection. "What is this-my skin—"

Cole was experiencing his own metamorphosis. His body hair was also vanishing. But his pale complexion was warming, taking on a golden, sun-kissed glow that looked as if he had spent the summer on some Mediterranean coast. His skin became luminous with that golden undertone, flawless and radiant in a way his natural complexion had never been.

"You left your wigs!" Zelda announced, disappearing briefly into Kyle's changing alcove. She returned bearing the platinum blonde wig with its high ponytail, while Zara retrieved a long auburn wig pulled into a soft updo.

"Put these on," Zelda instructed.

Kyle pulled on the blonde wig with hands that would not stop trembling. It sat upon his head, obviously artificial, the cap edge

visible against his forehead, the ponytail stiff and synthetic and clearly fake to anyone with functioning eyes.

Cole donned the auburn wig with equal lack of success. It looked precisely as bad as Kyle's-clearly artificial, the waves too perfect, the entire construction sitting wrong upon his head and fooling no one.

"These look ridiculous," Cole observed.

"They do," Zelda agreed with cheerful honesty. "That's why we need to secure them properly. We can't have them falling off at your party, now can we?"

She moved behind Kyle, fussing with the wig and adjusting its position with the care of a hairdresser. Then she began adding bobby pins-one at a time, pushing them into place with small, decisive movements.

With the first pin, Kyle felt a strange tingling in his scalp. Light, almost pleasant, like the beginning of an itch.

The second pin intensified the sensation, spreading it outward from the insertion point.

By the third pin, his face had begun to itch as well. Not painful but insistent, demanding, as if his skin were moving beneath itself.

"Hold still," Zelda murmured, adding a fourth pin, then a fifth, working methodically around his head.

Zara was performing the same service for Cole, carefully pinning his auburn wig into place.

Kyle's face was changing. He could feel it-bones shifting beneath skin, cartilage reshaping, features softening. In the mirror, he watched with mounting horror as his nose shortened and narrowed, his lips plumped into something fuller and softer, his eyebrows thinned into elegant arches. His eyes appeared to grow larger, framed now by longer and darker lashes. His jawline

softened, losing its angular masculinity. His cheekbones rose and became more pronounced.

The sharp, angular Asian features he had inherited from his parents-his father's strong jaw, his mother's elegant nose-were melting away like wax near flame. In their place emerged something completely different: a heart-shaped face with delicate, almost doll-like features. Large blue eyes where his dark brown ones had been. Soft, full lips. A small, upturned nose.

A beautiful young woman's face gazed back at him from the mirror, moving when he moved, expressing his horror with features that were not his own.

"Oh no," Kyle whispered, reaching up with one trembling hand to touch his transformed face. "Oh no, no, no..."

Cole's round, soft features were undergoing their own metamorphosis. His face narrowed to a heart-shape, his nose becoming small and refined, his lips achieving a natural pout that suggested sophistication. His eyes enlarged and became heavy-lidded, framed by thick, dark lashes that gave him a perpetually sultry expression. His jawline softened to an elegant curve. His cheekbones rose and sharpened, creating elegant planes that caught the light.

A striking, beautiful woman stared back from the mirror-sophisticated and sensual, the face of someone who belonged in fashion magazines or on catwalks, not in a college apartment studying philosophy.

"There," Zelda said, stepping back from Kyle with evident satisfaction. "The wigs are securely attached now. Much more convincing, wouldn't you say?"

Kyle reached up carefully, touching the blonde hair as if it might burn him. It did not feel fake anymore. It felt real-like actual hair growing from his scalp, rooted and natural. He gave it

a gentle experimental tug and winced as pain shot through his scalp, sharp and immediate.

"Is it-" His voice was shaking badly. "Is this actually attached to my head now?"

"Very securely," Zelda confirmed with a warm smile. "The pins did their job perfectly."

Kyle and Cole exchanged looks in the mirror-looks of dawning comprehension mixed with desperate hope. The pins. The transformation had occurred as the pins were inserted. Therefore, if they removed the pins at the party, surely the wigs would come off. Surely their faces would return to normal. The logic was sound. It had to be sound.

"Just need the finishing touches now," Zara announced brightly. She took the large red bow and pressed it firmly into place on Kyle's blonde ponytail with a definitive snap that seemed to echo in the quiet shop.

Tingling began in Kyle's throat immediately-warm, invasive, spreading through his vocal cords like liquid fire. The sensation moved into his mouth, into his sinuses, and then somehow into his brain itself, as if invisible fingers were reaching inside his skull and adjusting settings he had never known existed.

"What-" Kyle tried to say, but his voice was changing even as the word emerged, transforming mid-syllable into something else entirely. "Like, what is that? Why does it feel so weird?"

The voice that emerged from his mouth was not his own. Higher, breathier, with an enthusiastic Valley girl uptalk that made everything sound like a question, that turned statements into inquiries, that made him sound perpetually uncertain and vapid and young.

That was not his voice. That was not how he spoke. The inflection, the pitch, the idiotic uptalk-none of it was him.

"Perfect!" Zara said with evident delight. "And now you-"

She moved towards Cole, reaching the small white lace cap towards his auburn wig. He tried to back away, to escape, to retain his voice as one last vestige of himself, but his back quickly pressed against the wall and he could retreat no further. Zara positioned the cap carefully, pinning it securely into place with a soft click that seemed to seal something irrevocable.

The same tingling, the same spreading warmth through throat and mouth and brain. Cole opened his mouth to protest, to demand an explanation-

"Zis is-oh mon dieu-I sound like—" Each word emerged breathy and accented, dripping with French inflection that made even his panic sound seductive and exotic. "What 'ave you done to my voice?!"

Every syllable was touched by that accent, every word shaped by those breathy tones. He tried again, concentrating fiercely, attempting to force his normal voice through sheer will.

"How do I change eet back?"

Still breathy. Still French. The accent clung to every sound he made, transforming his speech into something foreign and sensual.

"The bow and the cap are part of the costume," Zelda explained with the patience of one addressing children. "Just temporary attachments. When you're finished with them, you can remove them."

Temporary. Removable. The words brought a rush of relief to both boys. The bow and cap could be removed. They could remove them at the party, get their voices back, regain some control over this nightmare. Talk to the girls with their own voices.

They stood before the mirror, and what looked back at them bore no resemblance to the two young men who had entered this shop.

"Oh my god," Kyle breathed-and the perky voice made even existential horror sound almost cheerful. "Like, is that really us?"

"Oui," Cole whispered, and his breathy French accent made the simple affirmation sound like seduction. "Zat is... zat is us now."

"Perfect!" Zelda clapped her hands together with evident satisfaction. "You're all set for your party. What shall we call you girls tonight?"

"We're not—" Kyle started, but it emerged as: "Like, we're not actually girls?"

"Of course not, dear. You're just in costume!" Zelda's smile was warm, understanding, completely without guile. "But you need names for the party. You can hardly introduce yourselves as Kyle and Cole looking like that, can you? How about... Kylie? And Colette?"

"Those aren't—" Cole tried to protest, but his breathy French accent transformed it: "Zose are not our names..."

"They are tonight!" Zara said brightly, with the finality of one who has made a decision that will not be questioned. "Now, remember-the magic does its work tonight, and when Halloween is over, the spell completes. You'll have a wonderful time at your party!"

Kyle-Kylie-reached for his wallet, the motion awkward with his new small hands and long nails. "Like, how much do we owe you? For the costumes?"

"Oh, there's no charge," Zelda said, waving away the wallet with a generous gesture. "Consider it our gift to you boys. We're just happy to help."

"We couldn't possibly accept payment," Zara insisted. "However, we do ask one small thing. We'll need to keep your student IDs as collateral. Just until you return the costumes, of course. Simply a formality, to ensure you come back to us."

She held out her hand expectantly.

The boys-now-girls exchanged glances. It seemed reasonable enough-a deposit of sorts, insurance against theft or damage. They would return the costumes after the party, reclaim their IDs, and that would be the end of it.

Kyle reached for his wallet, his movements clumsy with the small, delicate hands the sisters had given him. The red nails-applied as simple press-ons that had somehow become inch-long, permanently affixed gel extensions-clicked against each other as he fumbled to extract his student ID. The card proclaimed him KYLE NGUYEN, with his photo and student number and major listed clearly. He handed it to Zelda with fingers that no longer felt entirely his own.

Cole produced his own ID with similar difficulty, his French-tipped nails tapping against the plastic-COLE RUSSO, with his round face staring out from the photo. He gave it to Zara.

The sisters accepted the cards with identical smiles, identical satisfaction, as if they had just been given something far more valuable than simple pieces of plastic.

"Wonderful," Zelda said, tucking both IDs into her cardigan pocket. "We'll keep these safe for you. Now off you go-you don't want to be late!"

She ushered them toward the door with grandmotherly care. The bell chimed as they stepped into the October evening, two beautiful women in costume heading to a party they had been desperate to attend.

As the door closed behind them, Zelda and Zara remained in their shop, standing side by side, watching through the window as the two figures disappeared into the darkness.

"They never ask the right questions," Zelda observed quietly.

"They never do," Zara agreed.

They walked in silence for a moment, two figures in the October darkness. Kyle's sneakers padded softly on the sidewalk. Cole's heels clicked with rhythmic precision, a sound he had never made before and yet now produced with unconscious grace. The cool air felt strange on Kyle's bare legs, on the exposed midriff that had never been exposed before. The weight on his chest pulled with each step, impossible to ignore. The crinoline rustled under Colette's skirt, catching the breeze and requiring constant vigilance lest it rise and expose what lay beneath.

"Like, so the plan is still the same, right?" Kyle said, and even to his own ears the perky voice sounded absurd, discussing strategy in tones more suited to discussing nail polish or shopping. "We get to the party, find a bathroom, take off the bow and the cap so our voices go back to normal?"

"Oui," Colette agreed, though the breathy French accent made even simple agreement sound like an invitation to something more intimate. "And we remove ze bobby pins so ze wigs come off. Zen our faces will look normal again, non?"

"Yeah, like, exactly!" Kyle felt marginally better with a plan, however uncertain. "And the sisters said we can take off the costumes after the party. So the body stuff-like, all this—" he gestured at himself with those small hands and their red gel nails "-that'll go away when we take off the costume, right? Or at least when Halloween ends at midnight?"

"Zey said ze spell completes at midnight," Colette said carefully, his accent curling around each word. "So everyzing should... reverse? Go back to normal?"

Neither sounded entirely convinced of this interpretation, but they needed to believe it. The alternative—that they might be trapped in these forms, these voices, these bodies—was too terrible to contemplate fully.

"And once we take off the bow and cap and remove the pins, Jessica and Emma will be able to recognize us," Kyle continued, working through the logic as if reason still applied to their circumstances. "Like, our faces will look normal again, our voices will sound normal, and we can explain about the costumes. They'll probably think it's funny that we crashed the party this way."

"Oui," Colette agreed, though doubt colored even that single syllable. "Zey will zink it is... amusing? Zat we went to such lengths to attend."

They walked another block in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, each trying desperately to ignore the wrongness of their bodies, their voices, their reflections in every dark window they passed. Two beautiful women in Halloween costumes, heading to a party, convinced they had a plan to salvage the evening.

The Sigma Chi house announced itself from blocks away with the throb of bass that Kyle could feel in his chest. In his new chest, which moved with the vibration in ways both unfamiliar and deeply uncomfortable. Heat and noise spilled from the building as they approached, costumes visible through the windows and scattered across the lawn. Every eye seemed to turn toward them as they walked up the path.



"Oh my god, like, everyone's totally staring?" Kylie's voice made even nervousness sound cheerful.

"Because we look like zis," Cole muttered, the breathy accent making even frustration sound seductive.

But they were waved through the door immediately, as if their entry had never been in question. No names checked, no list consulted. Two pretty girls in costume—of course they could enter. Of course they belonged.

The validation made it somehow worse.

Inside was overwhelming in its assault on the senses. Bodies pressed together in the heat, the air thick with cheap beer and cheaper cologne and the particular musk of too many people in

too small a space. People were everywhere-superheroes and zombies and vampires all crammed into the main room, shouting over the music, drinks sloshing, hands reaching and touching and grabbing.

"Bathroom?" Kyle said immediately, grabbing Cole's arm with his small hand. "Like, we need to-"

"Oui, now."

They pushed through the crowd toward the back of the house. Kyle kept getting jostled-he was so much shorter now that people simply did not see him, bumping into him without noticing, without apology. Someone's costume caught his ponytail and yanked it backward, making him yelp with genuine pain. The blonde hair whipped around when he turned his head seeking the culprit, getting in his mouth, in his eyes, a constant annoyance.

Cole was experiencing different difficulties. The crinoline made his skirt poof out to such width that he kept catching it on people, on furniture, on doorframes. When someone pushed past him from the front, the physics of the crinoline caused it to tilt upward in back-Cole felt the air on his upper thighs and reached back frantically to shove the skirt down, hoping desperately that no one had glimpsed the ruffled panties beneath.

They finally reached a bathroom and locked themselves inside, away from the chaos. Under the harsh fluorescent light, they looked even more surreal-two beautiful women in costume, makeup still perfect despite the heat, expressions panicked.

"Okay," Kyle said, reaching for his ponytail with trembling hands. "Like, let's just take off the bow and-"

He grabbed the red bow and pulled with force.

Pain shot through his scalp immediately, sharp and intense and utterly genuine. He yelled, tears springing to his eyes from the sheer unexpected agony of it. The bow did not budge. It was

not attached to the wig. It was attached to his actual head, by his actual hair, as much a part of him as his fingers or his toes.

"It won't—" He pulled harder, desperate now, and the pain intensified until he had to release it or risk pulling out chunks of his own hair. "Like, it's not coming off! It's my actual hair!"

"Non, non, non—" Cole was frantically feeling through his auburn waves, searching for the bobby pins they had watched the sisters insert. His fingers found nothing. No pins. No cap edge where the wig met his scalp. Just hair-his own hair, growing naturally from his own head. And that small white lace cap seemed to be part of his actual head somehow, the pins that secured it not metal and removable but somehow fused into his skull. "Ze pins-zey are gone! It is just 'air! My 'air!"

"Oh my god, oh my god." Kylie's voice was rising in panic, the cheerful uptalk making terror sound almost enthusiastic. "Like, we can't take off the wigs? And the bow won't come off? So we're stuck like this?"

"Until midnight," Cole said, forcing himself to breathe, to think, to find some rational framework for the irrational. "Ze sisters said ze spell completes when 'Alloween ends. So at midnight, we change back. We just 'ave to wait."

"Like, two and a half more hours?" Kyle looked at his reflection, at the pretty blonde cheerleader with the panicked blue eyes. "We can just... wait it out?"

"Oui." Cole was trying to sound more confident than he felt, trying to be the voice of reason even though reason had abandoned them hours ago. "We stick eet out. But—" he met Kyle's eyes in the mirror "-we can still do somezing useful, non? We can still talk to Jessica and Emma."

"But they won't recognize us like this?" Kyle gestured at his transformed face, his pale skin, his delicate features that bore no resemblance to Kyle Nguyen.

"So we make zem want to date Kyle and Cole," Cole said, warming to the idea as one does when desperate for any plan, any purpose. "We find out what zey like in men. We talk up our real selves. Zen when we change back at midnight, zey will already be interested!"

Kyle's face brightened slightly, hope kindling in those large blue eyes. "Oh my god, like, that's actually really smart? We can totally do that!"

They looked at each other in the mirror, finding new purpose in the revised plan. It was not ideal. It was, perhaps, not even good. But it was something, some way to salvage meaning from this nightmare.

"Okay," Kyle said, squaring his shoulders in a gesture of determination-which made his breasts shift in the tight top. "Like, let's do this?"

"Allons-y," Cole agreed, the French phrase feeling both natural and completely alien on his tongue.

They pushed back out into the chaos of the party, into the heat and noise and press of bodies, armed with a new plan and a desperate hope that midnight would bring salvation.

The plan began its collapse almost immediately.

Kyle attempted to navigate through the crowd toward where he had glimpsed Jessica earlier, but being short transformed every movement into a struggle. He could not see over anyone. People bumped into him constantly, not noticing him in the press of bodies, not registering his presence until after they had already made contact. Someone stepped directly on his foot and he stumbled, nearly falling.

A hand caught his waist, steadyng him. The touch was familiar in its presumption, unwelcome in its intimacy.

"Whoa, careful there."

Kyle looked up-far up-at a man dressed as a pirate. He stood easily six inches taller than Kyle now, and his hand remained on Kyle's waist, fingers spread across the bare skin of his exposed midriff with casual ownership.

"Thanks?" Kyle tried to step back but the crowd was too dense, offered no escape route.

"No problem. You here alone?" The man's eyes dropped to Kyle's chest, lingering on the cheer top with the kind of assessment that made Kyle's skin crawl. "I'm Brad."

"I'm actually looking for my friend." Kyle tried to move past him but Brad shifted to block his path, as if Kyle's stated intention meant nothing compared to Brad's desire to continue the conversation.

"Let me get you a drink first. What do cute little cheerleaders drink?"

The way he said "cute little"-as if Kyle were a particularly appealing variety of small animal-made something inside Kyle recoil. He grabbed Brad's wrist with his small hand and removed it from his waist with more force than politeness demanded. "Like, I really need to find my friend? Thanks though?"

He ducked away before Brad could respond, pushing deeper into the crowd. His ponytail whipped around as he turned his head trying to spot Jessica, the blonde hair getting in his face, catching on his lips. He shoved it back impatiently with those red-nailed fingers.

Someone else grabbed him from behind-hands on his hips, pulling him backward against them with presumption that suggested ownership rather than invitation.

"Hey gorgeous-"

"Like, no!" Kyle twisted away, heart pounding with a fear that was new and terrible and specifically feminine in its contours. The skirt was so short that any sudden movement threatened to

expose him completely, to reveal more than he wished to reveal. He tugged it down with one hand while pushing through the crowd with the other, hyperaware of eyes on his body, on his legs, on his chest, on his exposed midriff.

He felt like prey. He felt like something to be pursued and captured. And he hated it with an intensity that made his throat tight and his eyes sting with tears he refused to shed.

Across the room, Cole was navigating his own particular nightmare.

The crinoline and crowd made movement nearly impossible. He attempted to squeeze between two men engaged in conversation and the skirt caught on someone's belt buckle. When he pulled forward to free himself, he felt the air on his upper thighs, on the curve of his ass barely covered by the ruffled panties, and reached back frantically to shove the fabric down, face burning with humiliation.

"Excusez moi," he said, trying to extract himself with dignity. The breathy French accent transformed the simple phrase into something that sounded like bedroom talk.

Both men turned, their eyes immediately dropping to his cleavage rather than his face. The sweetheart neckline of the bodice was cut low, and every movement made his breasts jiggle and threaten to spill out entirely, a constant source of anxiety that made him want to cross his arms over his chest like a shield.

"Well hello," one of them said, grinning in a way that made Cole's skin crawl. "Where are you from? That accent is sexy as hell."

"I am just trying to get past-" But the accent made even this sound flirtatious, made it sound like an invitation rather than a dismissal.

"Stay and talk to us," the other one interrupted, moving to block his path. "I'm always saying we need more international students at these parties."

"Pardon, I must go—" He tried to turn but the crinoline caught on a side table, knocking over plastic cups in a cascade. Beer sloshed across the floor and onto his costume.

"Whoa, careful!" Someone laughed. "That dress is dangerous!"

Cole felt his face burning—Colette's face, now golden and beautiful and mortified beyond measure. He finally extracted himself and fled toward a quieter corner, the heels clicking with each step, his breasts bouncing with movement he could not control and could not prevent.

He needed to find Emma. That was the plan. Find Emma, determine what she found attractive in men, speak well of Cole, plant the seeds of interest that would bloom when he returned to his proper form at midnight.

But the party was so loud, so crowded, and every word that emerged from his mouth sounded like seduction whether he wished it or not. How could he have a genuine conversation about anything when his very voice transformed meaning?

Midnight inched ever closer, but the boys could not locate Jessica or Emma in the chaos and crush of bodies. They would not need to. The sisters would keep their word, as they always did. Kyle and Cole would speak to Jessica and Emma tonight. They would have the girls' full attention, their sympathy, their care. The tragedy that would unfold was not in the promise breaking, but in its keeping.

From across the room, Jessica Miller noticed. She had been engaged in conversation with friends, but the sight of a small blonde cheerleader looking on the verge of tears caught her

attention. The girl looked so overwhelmed, so out of place, so clearly in need of rescue from whatever was causing her distress.

Emma Laurent noticed as well, from a different angle. The tall auburn-haired maid was obviously upset, her elegant face twisted with frustration and something approaching despair. She looked like she needed help, like she needed someone to intervene before whatever was happening escalated further.

Jessica, in a moment of sisterly sympathy, moved to help. Emma, from another angle entirely, did the same. They did not coordinate. They did not communicate. They simply moved at precisely the same moment, drawn by forces neither could have named, fulfilling promises made by sisters who understood the architecture of fate.

"Hey," Jessica said gently, touching Kyle's shoulder with genuine concern. "Are you okay? That looked pretty intense."

Kyle spun around, his ponytail whipping dramatically, and found himself looking up-always up now, always from below-at Jessica Miller. Jessica, who he had been building courage to approach for six weeks. Jessica, who was looking at him now with genuine concern and kindness, seeing someone in distress and responding with empathy.

"Oh! Um, like, yeah?" Kyle tried to compose himself, wiping at his eyes with those small hands. "I'm fine? Just, you know, party stress?"

"Do you want to sit down somewhere quieter?" Jessica asked, her voice kind and her intention clearly protective. "You look like you could use a break from all this chaos."

At the same moment, Emma was approaching Cole with similar concern. "Are you alright? I saw you knock over those drinks..."

Cole turned, and there was Emma Laurent. Emma, who Cole had been trying to work up the courage to really engage with for

weeks. Emma, who was looking at him now with sympathy and concern, responding to visible distress with human kindness.

"Oui, I am..." Cole struggled for words that would not sound seductive, that would convey genuine emotion rather than invitation. "I am just 'aving a difficult night."

"Come on," Emma said, gesturing toward a slightly quieter side room. "Let's get you away from all this chaos for a minute."

Kyle let Jessica guide him toward the back porch, away from the noise and heat. Cole followed Emma toward a side room being used for coats, less crowded and quieter than the main party.

Jessica found them a spot on a bench, away from the main crush of people still smoking and drinking and shouting. "God, you must be freezing in that outfit. Do you want to head back inside?"

"No!" Kyle said quickly, perhaps too quickly. "Like, I'm fine? I just needed some air?"

He wasn't fine. The October chill bit at his exposed midriff, his bare legs, raising goosebumps on skin that was too pale and too smooth. But going back inside meant more grabbing, more eyes on his body, more noise. Out here he could at least think.

"If you're sure," Jessica said, though her expression suggested doubt. After a moment, she shifted closer and put her body against Kyle's, a gesture of casual warmth. "At least let me help a little."

Kyle froze. This was what he had wanted-to be close to Jessica, to have her attention, to matter to her. He had imagined this moment dozens of times over the past six weeks. Her body next to him. Her warmth. Her choosing to be near him.

Just not like this. Not in this body. Not as Kylie while Kyle remained invisible and erased.

"I'm Jessica, by the way."

"Kylie." The name still felt foreign on his tongue.

"So like," Kyle said, trying to focus, trying to salvage something from this nightmare, "the guys at this party are so gross. Are you, um, seeing anyone?"

Jessica laughed. "No, I'm single. These parties are usually more stressful than fun, honestly."

"Oh! So like, what kind of guy are you into?"

Jessica shrugged, considering the question. "I don't know. Someone genuine, I guess? Someone who doesn't feel the need to constantly prove how smart they are. Someone who actually listens when you talk instead of just waiting for their turn to speak."

Kyle's heart sank slightly even as hope tried to maintain its grip. That could describe him-he was smart, he did listen. Maybe this would work. "What about like, guys from your classes? Anyone interesting?"

"Not really." Jessica made a face. "Most of the guys in my econ class are either completely checked out or super annoying about how smart they think they are."

"What about, um." Kyle tried to sound casual "-what about Kyle? Kyle Nguyen? Like, isn't he in your econ class?"

Jessica actually rolled her eyes. "Oh god, yes. Kyle. Perfect example of exactly what I was just talking about."

Kyle's stomach dropped as if the bench had suddenly fallen out from under him. "What do you mean?"

"He's kind of a blowhard, honestly." Jessica's tone was matter-of-fact. "Always going on about game theory like he's discovered something revolutionary. Always has to prove he's the smartest person in the room, even when nobody asked."

"But like-maybe he's just passionate about economics?"

"There's enthusiastic and then there's needing everyone to know you're smarter than them," Jessica said. "He answered a question in class last week and then spent five minutes explaining why his answer was better than the professor's. It was painful to watch."

Kyle remembered that moment. He had thought he was contributing meaningfully. He had thought Jessica might be impressed by his willingness to challenge conventional thinking.

He had been wrong about all of it.

"He's not a bad person or anything," Jessica added. "Just kind of oblivious to how he comes across. Why, is he a friend of yours or something?"

"No!" Kyle said quickly. "Just, like, curious?"

"Well, you can do better than Kyle Nguyen," Jessica said with warmth. "You seem really sweet, actually."

And then Jessica opened up. She talked about her classes, her frustrations with campus culture, her dreams of making a real difference in the world. She was funny and insightful and passionate, everything Kyle had imagined she would be when given the chance to speak freely.

She was talking to Kylie like a friend, like someone worth her time.

All the things she had never done with Kyle, whom she found annoying and oblivious.

"I'm really glad I met you tonight," Jessica said as their conversation wound down. "You're really easy to talk to. We should hang out sometime-like actually hang out, not just at these awful parties."

"That would be, like, really great?" Kyle managed, his voice catching on the terrible irony of finally getting what he wanted in the worst possible way.

Jessica squeezed his shoulder gently. "Come on, let's go find your friend. Make sure she's okay."

Emma had found a relatively clear spot among the jackets and bags piled on a table and folding chairs. Cole stood awkwardly, the crinoline making sitting impossible without taking up far too much space and revealing far too much leg.

"So," Emma said with a friendly smile, "what brings you to Sigma Chi? You don't look like you're having the greatest time."

"I am not," Cole admitted, the accent making the confession sound dramatic. "'Onestly, I do not know why I came 'ere at all. Zis—" he gestured at the voluminous skirt "-zis poufy zeeeng, it is impossible!"

As Emma stifled a laugh, a man appeared in the doorway-tall, athletic, wearing a basketball jersey. He grinned when he saw Emma.

"There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you." He possessively slid his arm around Emma's waist. "Who's your friend?"

"Matt, this is..." Emma looked at Cole expectantly.

"Colette," Cole managed, his heart sinking. Boyfriend. Of course Emma had a boyfriend. They barely spoke outside of class. He knew nothing of her personal life. He had projected his hopes onto her without considering reality.

"Colette," Matt repeated, his eyes traveling down Cole's body. "Cool. Love the accent." Before Cole could respond, Matt was calling out the door: "Tony! Get in here!"

"Matt," Emma said with mild exasperation, "don't just summon people—"

But Tony was already appearing in the doorway-another athlete in a football jersey, shorter than Matt but solidly built. "What's up?"

"This is Colette," Matt said, gesturing toward Cole. "Colette, this is Tony. We're on the team together."

"'Allo," managed Cole, eyes scanning for an exit.

Tony's eyes lit up with obvious interest. "Hey. Wow. That accent is amazing. Where are you from?"

"France," Cole lied.

"That's awesome," Tony said enthusiastically. "I've always wanted to visit Europe."

Emma's expression shifted. The frustration that had flickered when Matt summoned Tony gave way to something else-consideration, calculation, then something that looked almost like relief.

"Colette was just telling me she doesn't really know anyone here on campus," Emma said, distorting what Cole had actually said. "I was thinking maybe you two should talk? Get to know each other?"

Understanding dawned on Cole with sick inevitability. Emma wasn't being kind. She was solving a problem-the problem of her boyfriend's friend who was always around, always third-wheeling, always preventing the alone time couples naturally desired.

"That's a great idea," Matt said immediately. "You two should definitely hang out."

Tony moved closer with obvious interest. "Do you want to get some air?"

"Actually, we were about to step outside anyway," Matt said, already steering Emma toward the door. "You two should grab drinks, talk."

Emma smiled at Cole with encouragement, clearly thinking she was being helpful. "It was really nice meeting you, Colette!"

And then Matt was guiding Emma out, creating the alone time he wanted, solving the third-wheel problem by pawning

Tony off onto the pretty French girl who had appeared so conveniently.

Tony remained, looking hopeful. "So... that drink? Or we could just talk here if you prefer."

"I really need to find my friend," Cole said. "I am sorry, but I should make sure she is okay."

"Oh. Yeah, of course." Tony looked disappointed. "Well, if you change your mind, I'll be around."

Cole extracted himself from the coat room, the crinoline catching on the doorframe again in now-familiar humiliation. He needed to find Kyle. Needed to escape this place. Needed to be anywhere but here.

They found each other near the front door at almost the same moment, both looking devastated.

"We need to go," Kyle said, his perky voice barely holding together, on the edge of breaking entirely. "Like, right now? I can't stay here until midnight. I just can't."

"Oui," Cole agreed, accent thick with unshed tears. "We leave now. Zis was a disaster. A complete disaster."

They slipped out the door without saying goodbye to anyone, both eager to escape, both desperate for air and quiet and distance from the nightmare the party had become.

The October night was cold on Kyle's exposed skin. Cole's heels clicked on the sidewalk, his elegant French-tipped nails clutching the fabric of his skirt with the desperation of someone who had suffered too many wardrobe malfunctions already.

They walked a full block in heavy silence, each processing their own particular failures and disappointments.

"Jessica thinks Kyle is a blowhard," Kyle said quietly, his cheerful uptalk unable to disguise the pain beneath the words. "Like, she actually used that word. She said he's annoying and

needs everyone to know he's smart and she finds him exhausting."

Cole winced in sympathy. "Emma 'as a boyfriend. And she-' he swallowed hard "-she zinks I would be perfect for 'is friend-to keep 'im occupied!"

"Oh my god, that's awful."

"She wants to get coffee and talk more. Because she zinks I would be perfect for Tony, so zey can double-date and Tony will stop being wiz zem all ze time."

"Jessica wants to be friends with Kylie," Kyle said, matching hollowness in his perky tones. "She doesn't even see Kyle as worth talking to, but Kylie? Kylie she wants to be friends with."

They both fell silent again, the weight of these revelations settling over them like fog.

"You know what is funny?" Cole said after another block, though nothing in his tone suggested actual humor. "Ze sisters-zey guaranteed we would get closer to Jessica and Emma tonight."

Kyle barked out a short, bitter laugh. "Like, they were totally right? We did get closer to them? Just not in any way we actually wanted?"

"Oui. Zey were very careful wiz zeir words, non?"

"Yeah."

They climbed the stairs to their apartment in silence, two beautiful women in costume, completely defeated. The party had been worse than a disaster-it had been a revelation of truths they had not wanted to know. They had learned who they actually were through the cruel mirror of other people's perceptions.

"'Ow much longer until midnight?" Cole asked as Kyle fumbled with the keys, his small hands and long nails making the simple task unexpectedly difficult.

Kyle pulled out his phone to check the time. The screen showed 11:42. "Like, twenty minutes? We just... we wait?"

"We wait," Cole agreed heavily.

They let themselves into the apartment and stood in their living room, still in full costume. Their familiar space surrounded them—the couch where they had sat mere hours ago, the TV that had been showing some forgotten program, the remnants of their normal lives scattered around them.

Everything about the apartment looked the same, except for the two people who lived there. That was about to change, the boys hoped, when the spell completed at midnight. And it would.

If only they had asked what "complete" actually meant.

They collapsed onto the couch, still in full costume. Kyle pulled out his phone to check the time again. 11:47. They sat in silence, the minutes advancing with the cruel slowness of watched time. 11:52. 11:56. 11:59.

Kyle held his breath, his small hands clenched into fists. Cole sat with perfect posture even in his exhaustion, the crinoline spreading around him on the couch like a statement of the space he now required in the world.

The clock struck midnight.

For a moment, nothing happened. Their bodies remained unchanged. Only the date on Kyle's phone shifted, marking the transition from October 31st to November 1st.

Then both their phones buzzed simultaneously with incoming messages.

Kyle grabbed his phone with trembling hands, those red gel nails clicking against the screen. A text from Jessica Miller appeared.

\*thx for listening 2nite, u always know exactly what to say!  
miss u already! brunch Sunday like always?\*

"What the-" Kyle stared at the message, reading it twice, three times, trying to make sense of words that made no sense. "Like, what does she mean 'like always'?"

Cole was staring at his own phone, his face going pale beneath the golden skin. A text from Emma Laurent glowed on his screen.

\*ur the best! Matt wont shut up about how perfect you n Tony would be lol. thx for being so cool about everything. luv u!\*

"Zis does not make sense," Cole said slowly, carefully, as if speaking too quickly might shatter what remained of reality. "She is texting like-like we are already friends. Like we 'ave known each ozzer for much longer zan one night."

"How did they even get our numbers?" Kyle interrupted, panic rising in his voice like flood water. "Like, we never gave them our numbers? We never exchanged contact information at all?"

Cole was already scrolling upward through his messages with Emma, his elegant fingers moving with increasing speed across the screen. His face went from pale to ashen.

The conversation extended backward. And backward. And backward still.

Weeks of messages. Months, even. Casual conversations about classes and life and the small frustrations of college existence. Inside jokes that Cole did not remember making. References to shared experiences that had never occurred.

All with Emma Laurent, discussing everything from philosophy to Matt's annoying habits to Tony's perpetual third-wheel status. Sharing memes and complaints and the ordinary intimacies of friendship.

Messages Cole had never sent. Conversations Cole had never had. A friendship that had never existed.

But they were there. On his phone. In his message history. Documented and dated and entirely real.

"Mon dieu," Cole whispered, the words barely audible. "Kyle, look at your phone. Scroll up through ze messages."

Kyle did, his small hands shaking so badly he nearly dropped the device. The same phenomenon greeted him-months of messages with Jessica Miller. Talking about economics class and campus drama and boys and all the ordinary concerns of young women navigating college together. Making plans for coffee and brunch and study sessions. Complaining about classes and professors and the general unfairness of life.

Conversations about things Kylie had apparently done, places Kylie had apparently been, opinions Kylie had apparently expressed.

"This isn't-" Kyle started, but then he stopped.

Because something in the apartment was changing.

It started subtly, as these things often do when they wish to avoid immediate notice. A poster on the wall-the gaming poster above the TV-was rippling. Not dramatically, not violently, but with the gentle insistence of water reshaping stone over centuries. The image blurred and shifted, colors bleeding and reforming into something new.

When it settled, it showed pink and white text in casual script: GOOD VIBES ONLY

"Oh my god!" Kyle jumped to his feet, the short skirt threatening to expose him as he moved. "Did you see that?!"

"Ze poster-" Cole was staring, his eyes wide with dawning horror.

Kyle was already running toward his bedroom, some instinct driving him to witness what was coming, to see the full extent of what was being taken from him. "Like, oh my god, if that changed, what about everything else-"

He threw open his bedroom door without bothering to slow down.

His room was transforming before his eyes, reality rewriting itself with casual inevitability.

The blue comforter on his bed was shifting to pink, the fabric rippling as if underwater before settling into its new color. His posters were all melting and reforming like wax sculptures near flame. Band posters became cheer competition photos, glossy and bright with girls frozen mid-jump. Gaming posters transformed into motivational quotes in cursive script. The periodic table dissolved entirely, replaced by a mirror with fairy lights around its frame.

His desk was sprouting new items as if they were growing from the wood itself. Pink notebooks appearing from nothing. A cheerleader teddy bear materializing in his chair. Trophies rising up like mushrooms after rain, each topped with a small gold cheerleader frozen in eternal enthusiasm.

"No, no, no—" Kyle moved to his bookshelf, reaching for his textbooks as if physical contact might anchor them to their original forms.

His textbooks were changing before his touch could reach them. He watched in horror as Principles of Microeconomics—the copy he had highlighted and annotated meticulously all semester, his thoughts and insights recorded in the margins—twisted and reshaped itself. The cover bled away like watercolors in rain, reformed into something new. Sports Marketing Fundamentals stared back at him in cheerful block letters.

His copy of Game Theory was becoming Event Planning and Management. His worn paperback of Freakonomics twisted into Introduction to Kinesiology. Book after book, transforming into subjects he had never studied, would never have chosen, could not imagine caring about.

"Kyle!" Cole's voice came from across the hall, panicked and breathy and wrong. "'Ow is zis 'appening?! 'Ow is any of zis possible?!"

"Like, all my stuff is changing!" Kyle shouted across the narrow space.

"Mine aussi!" Cole gestured behind him frantically, his movements making his breasts bounce and his crinoline rustle. "My philosophy books-zey are becoming fashion magazines! French novels! Everyzing I 'ave studied, everyzing I 'ave worked for-it is all disappearing!"

Kyle turned back to his own room, seeking what new horror had manifested. The photos on his desk were changing before his eyes.

The picture of him and his high school friends at graduation-the photo he had looked at countless times, the faces as familiar to him as his own-was shifting. The faces were morphing, bones restructuring beneath skin, features melting and reforming into strangers. The boys were becoming girls. The casual clothes were becoming cheer uniforms. The entire composition was rewriting itself.

When it finished, the photo showed a group of cheerleaders at what appeared to be a competition, all of them grinning with their arms around each other. In the center stood Kylie-petite, blonde, beaming-with her arms around girls Kyle had never met, who existed only in this rewritten history.

Kyle looked around his room wildly, desperately, seeking something to anchor himself to reality. Everything was changing. His gaming setup in the corner was dissolving like sugar in water, reshaping into a makeup vanity-white and pink with a large mirror surrounded by lights that seemed to promise endless hours of primping and preparation. His simple blue curtains were becoming pink with white ruffles, the kind of curtains that

belonged in a little girl's room rather than a college student's space.

Even his laundry basket was transforming, his clothes inside shifting from jeans and hoodies to crop tops and cheer shorts and things pink and feminine and utterly wrong.

"We need to take off ze costumes!" Cole shouted from his room. "Maybe zat will stop it! Maybe if we -"

"Yes!" Kyle was already grabbing at his cheer top, yanking it over his head with frantic haste. The blonde ponytail whipped around as the shell came off, hair getting in his mouth and eyes. He threw the top on the floor as if it were contaminated and reached for the sports bra.

His eyes caught his reflection in the full-length mirror that hung on his closet door-a mirror that had definitely not been there before.

A petite blonde girl in a cheerleader skirt and sports bra stared back at him, her face panicked and tear-streaked.

Kyle tore his eyes away and pulled off the bra. The girl's breasts bounced free-full, heavy, topped with small pink nipples that had no business existing on his body. He grabbed at them desperately, feeling the weight, the softness, the way they moved independently of his control.

Real. Completely real. No illusion, no trick of padding or positioning. Actual breasts made of actual flesh attached to his actual body.

"Like, they're still here!" he shouted toward Cole's room, his voice approaching hysteria. "They're not going away! Nothing's going away!"

"Mine eizzer!" Cole's voice came back, strained and panicked and breaking.

Kyle shoved down the skirt, then the spankies, stripping frantically until he stood in just the white socks and sneakers.

Completely exposed. Completely vulnerable. Completely transformed.

And he made himself look in the mirror-really look, take full inventory of what had been done to him.

The girl staring back was naked except for socks and shoes. Petite frame that now stood no more than 5'4". Pale porcelain skin with no trace of the Asian heritage that had shaped Kyle's features and colored his complexion. Toned cheerleader body with muscle definition in the abs and legs. Breasts that shouldn't exist sitting high and firm on his chest. Hips that curved, thighs that were smooth and soft and shaped wrong.

And between his legs-

Nothing.

Where everything should have been, where Kyle's male anatomy had existed for his entire life, there was only smooth skin. A gentle curve. The unmistakable configuration of female genitalia.

Kyle's hands shook as he reached down, touching himself with trembling fingers and those ridiculous red nails. He had to know. Had to confirm the full extent of the transformation even though part of him was screaming not to look, not to acknowledge, not to make it real by witnessing it.

Soft lips met his touch. Sensitive folds that sent unfamiliar sensations through his nervous system when his fingers made contact. He could feel the small hooded bump of a clitoris, more sensitive than anything he had ever experienced. Below that, the opening to a vagina, the entrance to internal anatomy that should not exist.

He pressed his finger inside slightly-just slightly, just enough to confirm-and felt the walls of a vaginal canal, felt muscles contract around his intrusion, felt the intimate reality of female anatomy that was now his own.

His penis was gone. His testicles were gone. Everything that had made him male had been replaced with fully functional female genitalia. A complete vulva with all its component parts. A vagina that presumably connected to a uterus and ovaries and all the internal structures that made someone biologically female.

"Oh my god," Kyle whispered, his perky voice breaking on the words. "Oh my god, it's really gone. Like, all of it. There's a-there's actually a-I can feel inside and there's actually-"

He could not finish. Could not articulate the full horror of it. He just stood there, naked in front of the mirror, one hand between his legs feeling the impossible reality while tears ran down his pretty face and dripped onto his pretty breasts.

Across the hall, Cole was having his own reckoning with reality.

He had stripped out of the maid costume frantically-the dress, the corset, the apron, all of it thrown aside in desperate haste. He stood in just the stockings and heels in front of his own mirror-a mirror that had transformed from simple and functional to ornate and elegant, framed in gold like something from a palace.

His room was transforming around him but he barely registered it. The minimalist furniture becoming elegant and sophisticated. His bookshelf full of philosophy becoming full of French novels and fashion theory and glossy magazines that promised to teach him about trends and style. Fashion sketches appearing on his walls, framed and professional, as if Cole had created them himself.

But none of that mattered compared to what he saw in the mirror.

A tall, statuesque woman with auburn waves and golden skin. Elegant features with heavy-lidded eyes that made every expression look sultry. The face of someone who belonged in

fashion magazines or on runways, not in college apartments studying existentialism.

And a body to match. Long willowy legs in sheer stockings made even longer by the heels. A dramatically cinched waist that created an hourglass figure. Full breasts with dusky nipples sitting high and proud on his chest, defying gravity. And between his legs-

"Non," he whispered, his breathy accent thick with tears that were beginning to fall. "Non, non, non..."

He looked up at his face in the mirror-beautiful, feminine, completely foreign-and then down at his body again. Breasts, hips, that terrible absence between his legs that was not absence at all but presence of something that should not be there, something that felt and responded and was undeniably real.

"Kyle!" he called out, his voice shaking so badly the words were barely comprehensible. "It is not going away! We are still-everyzing is still-we are still changed!"

"I know!" Kyle's voice came back from across the hall, high and panicked and breaking. "Like, I know! Mine too! Everything is gone and there's-there's actually a whole-I can feel inside-"

Neither could finish their sentences. Neither could articulate the full scope of what had been done to them.

They stood in their separate rooms, naked before mirrors that had not existed in their rooms before, staring at bodies that were not theirs, that were nevertheless all they had now.

The apartment's transformation was slowing now, settling into its new reality like sediment after a flood. Everything that had been Kyle's and Cole's was now Kylie's and Colette's. Every piece of evidence that two young men named Kyle Nguyen and Cole Russo had ever lived in this space was gone, rewritten, erased as thoroughly as if they had never existed.

"We need to go back to ze shop," Cole said, forcing the words out through terror and desperation. "Ze sisters-zey did zis. Zey must be able to undo it. Zey must."

"Yes!" Kyle was already moving, grabbing frantically at his transformed closet even though looking at it made him want to scream. "Like, we need to go now!"

His closet was full of pink and white and pastels and things no version of Kyle would ever have chosen. Crop tops and short skirts and cheerleading uniforms and cute sundresses that looked like they belonged to someone much younger and much more vapid than Kyle had ever been.

He grabbed the first things his hands found-a pink cropped tank top and a pair of denim cutoff shorts. The shorts were obscenely short, would barely cover anything, would leave most of his legs exposed. But there was no time to search for something better, no time to make better choices.

He pulled them on with shaking hands, the crop top hugging his breasts in a way that made them impossible to ignore, the shorts riding high on his hips and barely covering his ass. He looked down at himself and wanted to vomit, but there was no time for that either.

Across the hall, Cole was having the same desperate search through a closet that no longer held anything Cole would have worn. Dresses and skirts and fashionable blouses and designer jeans and heels upon heels upon heels. Everything stylish and expensive and sophisticated and completely wrong.

He grabbed a simple red dress because it looked more straightforward than the alternatives, because it seemed like something he could get on quickly without complex fasteners or complicated draping. He pulled it on, the fabric clinging to every curve, emphasizing the body he did not want and could not

escape. He grabbed modest black heels from the floor-the lowest ones visible-and slid them on his graceful feet.

They met in the hallway, both dressed in clothes that belonged to people who should not exist.

"My car," Kyle said, his perky voice barely holding together.  
"Like, we need to drive there right now."

They ran out of the apartment, down the stairs that Kyle took two at a time despite his shorter legs, out to the parking lot where-

Kyle's car was gone.

Where his used Honda Civic had been parked for the past two years, there was now a pink Volkswagen Beetle. Shiny and cute and aggressively feminine, with a small flower in a vase on the dashboard visible through the window.

"Non," Cole whispered, staring at the car. "Even ze car. Everyzing. Zey changed everyzing."

But they had no choice, no alternative, no other path forward. Kyle clicked the key fob with shaking hands-it worked, it was his car now according to whatever magic governed reality-and they climbed inside.

The interior smelled like vanilla and the seats had pink covers. There was a cheerleader pom-pom hanging from the rearview mirror, bouncing cheerfully as Kyle started the engine.

He drove in silence, hands gripping the wheel so tightly his knuckles went white. Cole sat beside him equally silent, both too terrified to speak, both hoping desperately that the sisters would be there, would have answers, would be able to fix what they had broken.

The city streets were empty this late, this early, this wrong hour between midnight and dawn. Halloween was over. November had begun. The spell had completed, just as the sisters had promised.

But completion and reversal were not synonyms, as they were beginning to understand too late.

The costume shop appeared before them, and even from blocks away something looked wrong.

The lights were on-they could see that much. The door was hanging slightly open, swaying in the breeze with a creaking sound audible even from the street.

But the windows were filthy. Not merely dirty but covered in grime and cobwebs, as if no one had cleaned them in years. Decades, perhaps. Through the dirty glass they could see the interior, and what they saw made Kyle's heart sink into his stomach.

Dust. Everywhere. Cobwebs hanging from the ceiling like funeral shrouds. The costume racks still present but skeletal, abandoned, covered in layers of dust so thick they looked like they had been draped in gray fabric.

"No," Kyle whispered, pulling the pink Beetle to the curb.  
"Like, no, no, no-this can't be-"

They climbed out and approached slowly, horror growing with each step. The door swung open at Kyle's push, the hinges screaming with rust and age. The sound echoed in the empty street, in the empty shop, in the empty places where their futures used to be.

The interior was worse than the windows had suggested.

This was not a shop that had closed recently. This was not a shop that had been empty for weeks or even months.

This was a place that had been abandoned for years. For decades.

Dust covered everything in layers so thick that their footprints showed clearly in the gray powder coating the floor. The costume racks stood like skeletal sentinels, cobwebs

connecting them in intricate patterns that spoke of long undisturbed time. The air smelled stale and old and dead, the particular scent of places where no living thing had breathed in so long that even the memory of life had faded.

But the lights were on. A single, flickering incandescent bulb hung overhead, casting harsh light over the decay.

"'Allo?" Cole called out, his breathy accent echoing in the vast emptiness. "Madame Zelda? Zara? Is anyone 'ere?"

Nothing answered. Only silence, heavy and complete and utterly without mercy.

They moved deeper into the shop. The deeper they went, the more certain it became that no one had been in this shop for years. The cobwebs were not fresh disturbances but ancient constructions, thick and layered and undisturbed. The dust was not a week's accumulation but decades of it, compressed and settled.

The counter at the back rose before them like an altar in a dead temple. The old cash register sat there, covered in grime and rust, looking like it belonged in a museum rather than a functioning business.

And there, on the counter, under a layer of dust that would have taken decades to accumulate-

Two student IDs.

It was as if they had been sitting there for years, waiting. As if time had passed differently for these two small pieces of plastic than it had for the shop itself.

As if something impossible had occurred, was occurring, would always occur in this place where normal rules held no power.

Kyle reached for the IDs with a hand that shook so badly he nearly knocked them off the counter. His fingers-small and

delicate with those red gel nails-disturbed the dust around the IDs, sending up small clouds that danced in the flickering light.

He picked up the first ID, knowing what he would see, dreading it anyway.

A pretty blonde girl with a high ponytail and pink bow stared back at him from the photo. Big blue eyes. Pale porcelain skin. Heart-shaped face. She was smiling at the camera, looking young and happy and vapid.

The name beneath the photo read: KYLIE WYNN

Major: Sports Marketing

He looked at Cole, who had picked up the second ID with hands that shook just as badly.

An elegant woman with auburn waves and golden skin looked out from the photo. Sultry features. Heavy-lidded eyes. She exuded chic and fashionable.

The name read: COLETTE ROUSSEAU

Major: Fashion Merchandising

They stood in the abandoned shop, holding IDs that proved who they were now, surrounded by decades of dust and decay, and the full weight of what had been done to them finally, truly, completely crashed down upon them.

Kyle Nguyen was gone. Cole Russo was gone.

Their names had been taken. Their histories had been rewritten. Their very identities had been erased from reality as thoroughly as if they had never existed at all.

The student IDs they had surrendered as collateral-the cards that had borne their real names, their real faces, their real majors and student numbers-those were gone. Erased. Replaced by these new cards that proclaimed new truths about new people.



"They're not coming back," Kyle said quietly, and for once his perky uptalk could not disguise the devastation in the words. "Like, the sisters. They're not here. They're never going to be here. They did what they came to do and now they're gone."

"Oui," Cole agreed, his breathy voice breaking on the word. "Zey did what zey promised. Ze spell is complete. 'Alloween is over. Ze transformation is finished."

Finished. Not reversed. Not undone. Finished. Complete. Permanent.

They had heard what they wanted to hear when the sisters spoke. They had assumed completion meant reversal, that

finished meant temporary, that the end of Halloween would restore what had been taken.

They had been wrong about all of it.

The sisters had been very, very careful with their words. They had made promises they kept precisely. They had guaranteed things that came true exactly as stated.

The costumes could be removed-and they had removed them, to no effect.

The spell would complete when Halloween ended-and it had completed, by becoming permanent.

They would get closer to Jessica and Emma-and they had, in ways they never wanted.

Every promise kept. Every word true. Every guarantee fulfilled.

Just not in the ways Kyle and Cole had understood them.

The shop stood silent around them, bearing witness to their realization, offering no comfort and no solutions. The light flickered overhead, casting shadows that seemed to move with purpose, with knowledge, with satisfaction at a job well done.

Somewhere in the depths of the shop, something creaked. Perhaps it was merely the building settling. Or perhaps it was the sound of magic completing its final work, sealing them into these new forms, these new lives, these new identities from which there would be no escape.

The door swung behind them in the breeze, creaking on its ancient hinges. An invitation to leave, perhaps. Or simply acknowledgment that their business here was concluded, that there was nothing more for them to find, no answers waiting in the dust and decay.

"What do we do?" Kyle asked, his small voice barely audible.

Cole looked at the ID in his hand-at Colette Rousseau's elegant face staring back at him, at a name that was now his whether he wanted it or not.

"We go," he said finally, his accent soft and sad and completely without hope. "We go because zere is nozing else to do. Zere is no one 'ere to 'elp us. No one to change us back. Zis is what we are now."

They stood for a moment longer, two beautiful women in an abandoned shop, holding pieces of plastic that proclaimed their new identities, surrounded by the dust of decades and the weight of irreversible choice.

Then, without another word, they turned and walked toward the door.

Behind them, the shop remained as it was-ancient, abandoned, waiting perhaps for the next desperate souls who would find their way to its door on some future Halloween night, seeking simple solutions to simple problems, finding instead transformations they could never have imagined and would never be able to undo.

The lights flickered once as they left, twice, and then went dark.

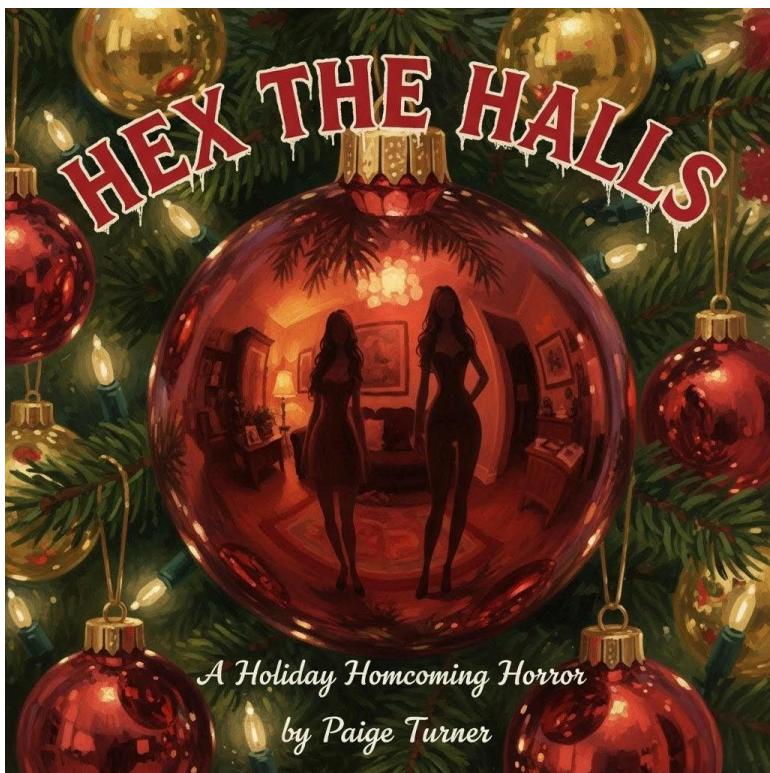
Kylie Wynn and Colette Rousseau walked out into the November morning, the door swinging shut behind them with a final creaking groan.

Inside, in the darkness, dust settled over the footprints they had left, slowly obscuring even that evidence of their visit.

By the time the sun rose fully, even those traces would be gone.

And Crossroads Costumes would wait, patient and hungry, for Halloween to come around once more.

~2~



There is something so magical about a Christmas tree in a college apartment! The way the lights twinkle against the windows, promising warmth and holiday cheer to anyone passing by. The gentle pine scent that fills the air, transforming even the humblest dwelling into a cozy haven. The ornaments

catching the light, each one a small treasure-a memory, a moment, a piece of who you are-addng to the festive beauty!

Kylie Wynn and Colette Rousseau stood in their living room, staring at their Christmas tree with pure, cold hatred.

The tree was objectively beautiful. Full branches thick with deep green needles reaching nearly to the ceiling, white lights wound in careful spirals, ornaments covering almost every visible inch of green. Red and gold and silver spheres caught the afternoon sun streaming through the windows, scattering prismatic flashes across the walls.

The two college girls-who until mere weeks ago had been two college boys-looked at the tree the way someone might look at a spider they couldn't kill, a tumor they couldn't remove.

"You, like, tried throwing it out again last night?" Kylie said, her now-standard uptalk utterly flat.

"Oui." Colette's breathy French accent was thick with exhaustion. "After you went to bed. I dragged it down all zree flights of stairs."

"And?"

"I zet it on fire in zee dumpster. It was back zis morning."

Kylie's small hands clenched into fists at her sides, red gel nails digging into her palms. The tree's lights twinkled cheerfully in response.

"How many now?" Colette asked, though she clearly didn't want to know the answer.

"I counted forty-three this morning."

"Merde."

They stood in silence. The tree waited in its corner, patient as always. It had nothing but time.

**-=Three Weeks Earlier=-**

What a delight when young people seek to brighten their homes for the holidays! The joy of finding just the right decoration, that perfect touch of Christmas magic to transform everything! How these small choices-a tree here, a wreath there-can change an entire apartment, an entire life! The season is full of such wonderful opportunities! One need only reach out and take what's offered!

Kylie walked through a neighborhood three blocks from campus, wandering aimlessly in an attempt to keep her mind off what her life had become. Sunday morning, mid-November. Two weeks since Halloween and she was still just trying to get through each day without falling apart completely.

Two weeks of going through the motions. Classes she was registered for but never chose. A cheer squad she apparently belonged to but had no memory of joining. Shared experiences that existed only in the reality that had replaced Kyle Nguyen with Kylie Wynn.

Two weeks of smiling through conversations with friends she couldn't name, about memories she didn't have. Laughing at inside jokes that meant nothing to her, nodding along when people referenced events she'd supposedly attended.

Two weeks of not knowing how to dress herself. Throwing on whatever looked clean, earning strange looks from people when she'd shown up to class in a shirt that clashed with her pants. Her hair hung in the same messy ponytail every day because she had no idea what else to do with it. The makeup covering her bedroom vanity remained untouched, mysterious and vaguely threatening. She looked nothing like the polished, put-together girl in the photos around her apartment.

Two weeks of muddling through, faking it, avoiding situations that might reveal how little she actually knew about

being Kylie. Staying home because loneliness was easier than pretending. It was exhausting. Isolating.

This morning she'd pulled on an oversized sweater and jeans without thinking about whether they matched, scraped her hair back into that same ponytail, and escaped the apartment just to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

The yard sale sign caught her eye more from boredom than interest. An older woman sat in a folding chair on her front lawn, surrounded by tables of household items. Dishes and books and picture frames and seasonal decorations being cleared out.

And there, on a small table near the sidewalk: a Christmas tree.

Kylie stopped.

It was tiny. Maybe eighteen inches tall, potted in a simple terra cotta base. Real. She could see that from the needles, smell the faint pine scent even from several feet away. A handwritten sign propped against the pot: "\$5"

"That's a good little tree," the woman called out, smiling. "Healthy. I've been watering it all week."

Kylie moved closer. The tree was perfectly shaped, full for its size. Cute. Something you could put on a table or a shelf.

Something normal. Something she could choose and control and make nice in an apartment that still felt like a prison despite two weeks of living there. Something festive to make the apartment feel less hostile, less foreign, less wrong.

"I'll take it," Kylie heard herself say.

The woman beamed. "Wonderful! Let me get you a box to carry it in."

Five dollars and three minutes later, Kylie was settling the small tree carefully in the passenger seat of her pink VW Beetle, the terra cotta pot wedged into the box to keep it stable. The

woman waved as Kylie pulled away, already turning her attention to other shoppers browsing her tables.

A completely normal transaction. Nothing weird. Nothing magical. Nothing at all like the experience that had ended Kyle's existence on Halloween.

Just a tree.

Colette was reading when Kylie struggled through the door with her purchase, the tree balanced awkwardly in its box. She looked up from her French novel, one elegant eyebrow rising.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?"

"A Christmas tree!" Kylie set it down on the coffee table, slightly breathless from three flights of stairs. "Like, I know it's early. But I thought it would be nice?"

Colette regarded the small tree. "It is very small."

"Well yeah, but like, it's perfect for the apartment? We can put it on that table by the window." Kylie gestured vaguely in the direction of the corner. "Make the place feel more homey?"

The apartment was decorated in ways that should have felt personal but didn't. Pink throw pillows on the couch. Framed photos of Kylie and Colette with friends whose names they didn't know at parties and games and events they had no memory of attending. A "GOOD VIBES ONLY" print above the TV. Colette's elegant fashion sketches on the walls. Everything curated for girls who had appeared in the world two weeks ago, complete with histories and possessions and relationships that felt as real as stage sets.

"D'accord," Colette said, closing her book. "We can put it on ze table."

They moved the small tree to its corner, positioning it carefully. Even without ornaments or lights, it looked cheerful there. Green and alive and normal.



That's when Kylie noticed the tag. Small, cream-colored, attached to one of the branches with thin gold thread. She leaned closer, reading aloud: "Tree of Knowledge."

"Zat is a strange name," Colette said, peering at it.

"Right?" Kylie laughed, but it came out nervous.

"Per'aps it is just a pretentious tree farm." Colette touched the tag lightly. "Who names a Christmas tree after ze forbidden fruit?"

"Someone trying to be clever?" Kylie wanted to pull the tag off, throw it away, but the gold thread was tied tightly and she didn't feel like finding scissors. "It's probably nothing."

"Oui." Colette stepped back. "It is a nice tree regardless."

They both looked at it for a moment, the "Tree of Knowledge" tag hanging innocently among the green needles.

"We should get decorations," Kylie said, shaking off the weird feeling. "Like, lights and ornaments? Make it actually festive?"

"Per'aps tomorrow," Colette said. "I 'ave a paper due Monday."

"Yeah, okay. Tomorrow."

But tomorrow came and they were both busy. Neither of them felt like going out. The small tree sat on its shelf, undecorated but pleasant, its name forgotten almost as soon as they'd dismissed it.

How wonderful when young women discover the joy of beauty and self-care! The pleasure of carefully-applied makeup, of knowing exactly how to present oneself! What a gift it is when knowledge comes so naturally, when skills simply appear as if you'd always possessed them! The holidays inspire such lovely transformations-inside and out! How much easier life becomes when you simply know what you need to know!

Kylie had been avoiding the vanity in her bedroom since Halloween. The surface covered with bottles and compacts and brushes and tubes that had appeared that night, materializing along with everything else in Kylie Wynn's manufactured life.

The entire collection had simply existed in the apartment when November 1st dawned. Expensive stuff in tiny bottles, a full range of products that Kylie was apparently supposed to know how to use.

She'd ignored them completely for two weeks.

But this morning-Monday, the day after bringing home the tree-Kylie found herself lingering at the vanity after her shower.

Really looking at the products for the first time. Picking up bottles, reading labels. Foundation. Concealer. Setting powder. Mascara. The words meant nothing, promised everything.

She unscrewed the cap of the foundation bottle, pumped a small amount onto the back of her hand. Stared at the beige liquid.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" she asked to no one in particular. Just a thought. Idle curiosity.

Then her brain exploded. Information flooded in like a dam breaking.

Foundation. Match your undertone not surface tone, test on your jawline not your wrist, blend down onto your neck or you'll have a mask line, apply with damp beauty blender for natural finish or brush for fuller coverage, use stippling motion don't drag or you'll get streaks, dots on forehead cheeks nose and chin then blend outward from center of face.

Concealer. Two shades lighter than foundation for under eyes, same shade as foundation for blemishes, triangle shape under eye and blend upward for lifting effect, don't use too much or it will crease, set with powder, use small brush for precision on blemishes.

Powder. Translucent for setting, pressed for touch-ups, use fluffy brush and tap off excess, bake under eyes and T-zone if you want it to last but don't overbake or you'll look cakey, set with setting spray for longest wear.

Eyeshadow. Primer first to prevent creasing, transition shade in crease with fluffy brush, blend in windshield wiper motions, darker shade on outer corner and outer third of lid, pack it on with flat brush then blend edges, highlight shade on inner corner and brow bone, blend everything together so there are no harsh lines.

Eyeliner. Pencil for soft look, liquid or gel for sharp wings, tight line the upper lash line first for definition without obvious liner, wing starts thin at inner corner gradually thicker toward

outer, flick up and out at angle that follows your lower lash line, connect wing back to lash line, that's how you keep it crisp.

Mascara. Wiggle wand at root to deposit product, pull through to tips, don't pump wand in tube you'll introduce air and dry it out, two coats minimum, let first coat dry before second, curl lashes first for more lift.

Blush. Powder or cream, smile to find apples of cheeks, pop of color but keep it natural, blend upward toward temples.

Lips. Exfoliate first, lip balm for hydration, line with nude liner to prevent feathering, fill in lips with liner, lipstick or gloss over top, blot and reapply for staying power.

And so on. The information kept coming. Every technique, every product, every trick. YouTube tutorials she'd never watched, Instagram tips she'd never read, years of knowledge condensing into seconds. She grasped at the edges of the vanity, knuckles white, bracing against the flood.

And under the tide of information, she'd felt something strange. A hollowing. Brief but distinct. Like something being scooped out to make room for all this new information.

Already the sensation was fading, becoming hard to recall.

Kylie shook her head to clear it, allowing the disorientation to pass. Looked down at the array of products on the counter.

Suddenly, everything made sense. She knew exactly what each product did, exactly how to use it. The mysterious bottles and brushes had transformed into tools with obvious purposes.

She got to work.

Twenty minutes later, Kylie grabbed her bag and headed to her morning class, arriving with perfect makeup for the first time since Halloween. Her cheer teammates complimented her. The professor did a brief double-take when calling attendance.

Something felt off, but she couldn't quite decide what.

What a blessing when young women navigate the mysteries of their bodies with such natural grace! No confusion, no fear, just the simple certainty of knowing your own body. The holidays bring such completeness, such wholeness!

The door had slammed shut behind Kylie at 8:47 AM as she left for class, the sound echoing through the apartment.

Colette jerked awake in her bed, disoriented. Morning light filtered through her curtains. She'd meant to get up earlier, had set an alarm for eight, but must have hit snooze.

She sat up, stretching, and froze.

Something was wrong. Something wet and uncomfortable and-

*Oh no.*

Colette threw back the covers and saw the small dark stain on her satin sleep shorts. Her first period. Starting without warning, without preparation, without any of the knowledge she needed to handle it.

She walked carefully to the bathroom, thighs pressed together. Every step made her more aware of the blood, the wetness. In the mirror, she looked pale. Terrified.

Under the sink, a box of tampons. Another box of pads.

Cole had lived with two moms. He'd seen these products. Understood generally what they were for.

But Colette, standing there bleeding and cramping, had no idea which one to use. How to use them. Where they went.

She grabbed the tampon box with shaking hands. Pulled one out. Unwrapped it.

Two tubes, one inside the other. Cotton at the top. String hanging off the bottom. How did this even work?

"What do I do?" She muttered.

Knowledge slammed into her brain.

Tampons. Unwrap the plastic, hold the outer tube grip, insert at an angle toward your lower back not straight up, firm pressure, push the inner tube with your finger to release the cotton, pull out the applicator, string stays outside, change every four to six hours, never leave in more than eight or you risk toxic shock syndrome, symptoms are fever rash dizziness get to ER immediately, light flow use light absorbency, heavy flow use super, regular for medium, if it hurts coming out you sized up too much, should feel nothing when it's in right.

Pads. Unwrap, peel off paper backing, press adhesive side to underwear gusset, wings wrap around to hold it in place, center it properly or you'll leak, change every three to four hours or when soaked, overnight pads are longer with more coverage, pantyliners for very light days or backup with tampon.

Cramping is prostaglandins causing uterine contractions, ibuprofen blocks prostaglandin production so take it early before pain gets bad, heating pad helps, some people get lower back pain, some get nausea, some get headaches, everyone is different.

PMS symptoms arrive one to two weeks before period, mood swings, irritability, weepiness, bloating, breast tenderness, food cravings especially chocolate and salt, fatigue, trouble sleeping, acne flareups.

The knowledge kept coming. Information about her body. Patterns she'd never experienced but somehow knew.

Her specific cycle. Twenty-seven days usually. Heavy flow first two days, moderate after that. Bad cramping day one and two, lower back pain day three. Chocolate cravings start day twenty-three. Gets emotional then too, weepy over nothing. Needs super tampons plus pad backup for first forty-eight hours. Ovulates day thirteen or fourteen. Skin breaks out around day twenty-five.

And underneath it all, a hollow feeling. That sense of something leaving. It lasted maybe three seconds, already fading.

Colette shook her head to clear it, looked down at the tampon in her hands. It no longer mystified her. It was just... a thing she needed to use.

She unwrapped it, inserted it smoothly, pulled out the applicator. No hesitation, no fumbling. Just muscle memory for something she'd never done before.

Five minutes later, Colette had changed into clean clothes and thrown the stained shorts in the wash. Took ibuprofen preemptively. Sat on her bed for a moment, processing.

That had been strange. Very strange. But she'd handled it. She knew what to do now.

She spent the morning working on her paper, grateful to have the apartment to herself, trying not to think too hard about the weird knowledge that now occupied her head.

How delightful when small surprises brighten an ordinary day! The joy of returning home to find your decorations growing more beautiful, your tree becoming more complete! As if Christmas itself is working while you're away, adding little touches here and there, making everything more festive! Each new ornament a gift, each addition a blessing!

Kylie returned that afternoon around three, dropping her backpack by the door with a tired sigh. The day had gone better than most. Some girl named Madison who thought they were "besties" had complimented her makeup. Everything was fine.

She headed for the kitchen to grab water and froze in the living room.

The tree had ornaments.

Two of them.

Kylie stared. This morning the tree had been completely bare. She'd walked past it on her way out, noticed its plain green branches, registered vaguely that they still needed to buy decorations.

Now two ornaments hung from the small tree's branches. A silver snowflake on the left side, delicate and pretty. A small gold ball on the right, simple and bright.

"Colette?" Kylie called toward the bedrooms.

Colette emerged, looking tired but put-together in jeans and a sweater. "Oui?"

"Did you buy ornaments?"

"What? Non." Colette moved closer, frowning at the tree. "I 'ave been 'ere all day working on my paper. I did not leave ze apartment."

"Well I didn't put them there either."

They both stared at the two ornaments, searching for rational explanations.

"Maybe zey came wiz ze tree?" Colette suggested. "And we simply did not notice?"

"We would have noticed."

The ornaments turned slowly in a breeze neither of them could feel, catching the afternoon light.

"It is strange," Colette admitted. "But not... impossible? We were not paying close attention when you brought it 'ome."

"Yeah." Kylie wanted to believe that nothing weird was happening. Needed to believe that. "Like, probably we just missed them?"

"Oui. Most likely."

The explanation felt thin but serviceable. They let it go, both eager to move past the oddity and return to normal.

"I was zinking of making dinner," Colette said. "Somezing simple."

"That would be amazing actually." Kylie flopped onto the couch. "Like, I'm exhausted?"

"I will make marinara. Ze Russo family recipe." Colette's voice caught slightly on the name.

What joy when young people prepare cherished family recipes! Those beloved dishes passed down through generations, each one a taste of home and tradition, bringing the warmth of the holidays into even the humblest kitchen! How wonderful when heritage and festive spirit combine!

Colette stood in the kitchen five minutes later, staring at a can of tomatoes from the pantry, absentmindedly rolling an onion around in her hands.

Nonna Russo's marinara. She'd walked into the kitchen intending to make that. Cole had made it hundreds of times, starting as a child, standing beside his grandmother while she taught him. He'd never even bothered to write the recipe down, he knew it so well.

Except now Colette didn't know it at all.

She tried to remember. Onions, garlic, tomatoes... and then what? What order? What measurements? How long did it simmer? What else went in it?

The knowledge simply wasn't there.

Weird. But she was stressed. Distracted by her period. Something. Fine. She'd find a recipe. She pulled an Italian cookbook from the shelf, flipped through until she found marinara sauce. Basic ingredients. She'd grabbed the right things at least.

"Dice 1 yellow onion."

Dice. She stared at the word. Was that different from chop? From slice? How small were the pieces supposed to be? What shape?

She picked up a knife, set the onion on the cutting board. Tried to remember if there was a technique, some way to hold the knife, position the onion.

Nothing.

She cut the onion in half, started sawing at it awkwardly. The pieces came out uneven. Huge chunks, tiny bits, nothing uniform. Her eyes watered. A piece rolled onto the floor.

"Merde."

"Mince 4 cloves garlic." The papery skin stuck stubbornly to the cloves. She mangled them trying to peel them, gave up and left skin on half. Her chopping was a disaster, slippery pieces sliding everywhere, some paste, some chunks.

She poured oil into a pan-too much-and turned the burner to high. The oil heated too quickly, started smoking. She dumped everything in. The small pieces burned immediately while the chunks barely cooked. Oil splashed onto her hand.

"Putain!" She jerked back.

"Everything okay?" Kylie called from the living room.

"Fine!" Her voice was tight.

The kitchen smelled like burning. She added the tomatoes desperately, squeezed in tomato paste without measuring, shook in herbs with no idea how much to use.

She tasted it.

Bitter. Burned. Absolutely terrible.

"Actually," Colette called out, defeated, "maybe we should order pizza instead?"

Kylie appeared in the doorway, taking in the scene. Onion pieces on the floor. Burnt garlic. Oil everywhere. Colette's hand, red.

"What happened?"

"I cannot cook." Colette gestured helplessly at the cookbook. "Cole made 'is grandmother's sauce all ze time. I 'ad ze

ingredients, I zought I remembered, but—" She shook her head. "I do not even know 'ow to dice an onion. I cannot follow a recipe. Eet is all gone."

Kylie stared at the ruined sauce, then at Colette's stricken face.

"Pizza," she said quietly.

"Oui." Colette turned off the burner. "Please."

They ate their delivery pizza on the couch in silence, both unsettled but neither quite ready to discuss what had happened in the kitchen.

Kylie's eyes drifted to the tree in its corner. The two ornaments caught the overhead light, spinning slowly.

And the tree looked... taller.

She stared at it, trying to remember exactly how tall it had been this morning when she'd left for class. Eighteen inches, maybe. Small enough to sit comfortably on the shelf.

Now it looked bigger. Not dramatically, not obviously, but enough that she noticed. Maybe two feet? The branches spread wider too, fuller.

"Did the tree grow?" Kylie asked, setting down her pizza slice.

Colette looked over. Frowned. "It does look larger."

"Right? Like, it was definitely smaller this morning?"

"Per'aps we are imagining it." But Colette didn't sound convinced.

Kylie stood, moving closer to examine it. The tree sat on its table, green and healthy and definitely bigger than it had been. And those two ornaments-the silver snowflake, the small gold ball-that hadn't been there this morning at all.

Something about this morning kept nagging at her. The weird influx of knowledge when she'd wondered how makeup worked. That brief hollowing sensation, like something being scooped out.

And now Colette couldn't cook something Cole had made every week for years.

And there were ornaments on a tree that was growing.

"Tree of Knowledge," Kylie whispered.

**-=Present Day=-**

What a delightful tradition caroling is! The joy of voices raised in song, the warmth of community spirit spreading through the neighborhood, the magic of classic Christmas melodies echoing through the crisp evening air. How wonderful when young people pause in their busy lives to appreciate these beautiful expressions of holiday cheer, opening their windows to let the music fill their homes with festive spirit!

Kylie and Colette sat on their couch, staring at the ceiling with barely concealed irritation as voices outside the apartment launched into a painfully off-key rendition of "Jingle Bells."

"'Ow much longer will zey be out zere?" Colette asked, her voice thick with annoyance.

"Like, I don't know? Forever apparently?" Kylie pulled a pillow over her face, muffling the sound of "fa la la la la" being enthusiastically butchered by what sounded like a church youth group.

The tree stood in its corner, touching the ceiling, its branches covered with forty-three ornaments that caught the light from the carolers' candles visible through the window. Forty-three incidents in three weeks since that first Monday morning when they'd discovered what the tree did.

Forty-three pieces of Kyle and Cole, carved away and replaced with Kylie and Colette.

The carolers finally moved on to the next building, their voices fading into the distance. Kylie lowered the pillow with relief.

"We should study," Colette said without conviction. "You 'ave your exam in two days."

"Yeah." Kylie didn't move. "In a minute."

They sat in silence, both exhausted from the effort of walking on eggshells, of being terrified of their own ignorance, of trying desperately not to need to know anything new.

It hadn't started that way. After that first realization-after discovering that the tree gave knowledge and took knowledge and marked each trade with an ornament-they'd actually been relieved.

You couldn't live like they'd been living since Halloween. Couldn't survive in bodies that came with expectations and requirements neither of them had been prepared for. Without the knowledge that most girls grew up learning.

Finally, they had a solution. Finally, a way to stop fumbling through every interaction, stop pretending to know things they didn't, stop living in constant fear of being exposed as frauds.

Kylie had stood in front of the tree one morning, ponytail messy for the fourteenth day in a row, and asked it directly: "How do I style my hair?" The flood had come instantly. How to curl, how to straighten, how to braid, how to use the various tools and products that had appeared in her bathroom. Her hands now moved as if she'd been doing her hair since childhood, creating the kind of casual waves that took skill to make look artless.

The cost had been Kyle's knowledge of video games. Not just one game but all of them. The mechanics, the strategies, the hundreds of hours across dozens of titles. Gone.

"That's fine," she'd told Colette afterward, examining her perfectly styled waves. "I wasn't going to play video games as Kylie. My Xbox disappeared on Halloween anyway."

Colette had needed to understand fashion. Needed to know why certain outfits in her closet coordinated, why some

combinations worked and others didn't, how to dress for different occasions without looking ridiculous. Needed it badly enough that she'd asked the tree without hesitation. Her brain ignited with information. Color theory, seasonal trends, which accessories complemented which silhouettes, the unspoken rules of put-together presentation.

The cost? Cole's ability to play guitar. The muscle memory in his fingers, the understanding of chords and progressions, the hundreds of hours he'd spent learning songs. Gone.

"It is a fair trade," Colette had said, suddenly seeing the contents of her walk-in closet as if for the first time. "I need zis more zan I need zat."

They'd needed to know how to walk in heels without stumbling. How to shave their legs without cutting themselves. Their own passwords and PINs for phones, laptops, bank accounts, the dozen logins that made modern life function. The names and faces of their classmates and friends, people who knew them, who expected recognition.

Each time, the tree had provided.

Each time, the tree had taken.

Each time, they'd been grateful.

Those trades had felt like gifts. They needed to survive in these bodies, in these lives. Losing the ability to cook or fix cars or play the guitar or shoot a basketball or ride a bike was inconvenient, but there were workarounds. There were restaurants and mechanics. But they couldn't survive without knowing how to present as girls, how to function in the social world they'd been thrust into.

The things they were gaining seemed essential. The things they were losing seemed survivable.

The tree was helping them adapt. Making their new lives bearable.

That's what they'd told themselves, anyway.

That's what they'd kept telling themselves right up until the tree started demanding more in return.

Colette's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen and her elegant face tightened slightly. "My parents. Video call."

"You should take it," Kylie said.

"Oui." Colette stood, heading toward her bedroom for privacy. "I will be quick."

Kylie watched her go, then pulled out her own phone, scrolling through Instagram without really seeing it. Posts from Jessica, from Maddie, from Haylee. Everyone decorating for Christmas, posting aesthetic photos, living their lives.

From Colette's room, she could hear the muffled sound of French. Rapid, fluent, completely natural-sounding French that Colette had only learned two and a half weeks ago.

What a blessing it is when the holiday season brings families together across the miles! Video calls filled with Christmas plans, excited voices discussing festive preparations, the joy of maintaining beloved traditions even when separated by distance! How wonderful when technology lets us share the warmth of the season with those we love most!

Two and a half weeks prior, Colette had stared at her phone as it rang, her parents' contact photo lighting up the screen. A call from France. Where they lived, where they'd always lived, where Colette had apparently grown up before coming to America for college.

Except Cole Russo had grown up in New Jersey. Cole's parents lived in Morristown. Cole had never been to France except for one summer study abroad program sophomore year of high school, and he'd barely managed conversational French even then.

But Colette was from France. Her phone was full of photos she didn't remember taking: Paris, Lyon, countryside villages, a childhood she'd never lived. And her parents called every week, expecting their daughter to answer in their language.

For two weeks, Colette had been letting the calls go to voicemail. Texting auto-translated excuses about classes, papers, adjusting to the semester. Her parents had been understanding but their concern was growing. This morning's text from her mother had been gentle but firm: "Ma chérie, we worry when we don't hear your voice. Please call today."

Colette couldn't avoid it any longer.

She accepted the call. Her parents' faces appeared on screen. An elegant woman with auburn hair touched with gray, a distinguished man with warm eyes. They looked like they could be her parents. The same facial structure, the same coloring. Reality had been thorough.

"Colette!" Her mother's face lit up with relief and joy. "Enfin! Nous étions tellement inquiets!"

The words flowed fast, her mother continuing in rapid French. Colette caught maybe one word in five: inquiets was worried, she thought, and comment meant how, but the rest blurred together into incomprehensible sound.

Her father joined in, also speaking French, both of them looking at her expectantly, waiting for her response.

Colette's throat tightened with panic. She couldn't understand them. These were supposed to be her parents-Colette's parents-and she couldn't communicate with them at all.

"I-" she started in English, then stopped. That would raise immediate alarms. Why would their French daughter suddenly speak only English? Why couldn't she understand her own parents?

Her mother's expression shifted to concern. "Colette? Qu'est-ce qui se passe? Tu vas bien?"

Something was happening. Was she okay? That's what her mother was asking, probably. Something was very wrong and they could see it on her face.

Colette's eyes darted to the tree in the living room, visible through her bedroom doorway. It had helped before. Quick, easy solutions when she needed them desperately.

It could help now. Was worth the price. She just needed-  
Understanding detonated in her skull

French language poured into her brain. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, conjugations, idioms, slang, formal and informal registers, regional variations, cultural context, conversational rhythms. Not just academic knowledge but fluency. The kind that came from growing up with a language, from thinking in it. Her neural pathways rewired themselves, creating connections that should have taken years to form.

When it finished-maybe six seconds, longer than any previous-Colette blinked and refocused on the screen.

"Pardon, Maman," she said, and the French flowed from her lips as naturally as English ever had. "Je suis désolée. J'étais distraite. Qu'est-ce que tu disais?"

Sorry, she was distracted. What were they saying?

The conversation flowed easily after that. Twenty minutes of catching up, hearing about family news, sharing stories about college life. Colette spoke French without thinking, without translating, as effortless as breathing. Her parents relaxed, reassured that their daughter was fine, just busy with school.

When she hung up, Colette sat on her bed for a moment, processing.

It had worked. She could speak French. Could understand it perfectly. Could switch between French and English without conscious effort.

But something was different.

She waited for the sensation of loss to hit, the price that was to be paid for her newfound linguistic expertise.

Nothing. She felt fine. If anything had been taken, she couldn't identify what it was.

Colette stood, smoothing her jeans, and headed back to the living room to tell Kylie that the call had gone well, that she could speak French now, that maybe this trade hadn't been so bad after all.

She opened her bedroom door and stopped.

Kylie sat on the couch, her small frame tense, staring at nothing. She looked up when Colette entered, and her blue eyes were confused and unsettled.

"Something's wrong," Kylie said, her perky voice uncertain. "Like, I lost something? I was just sitting here and I felt it go. This huge... emptiness? But I don't know what it was?"

Colette opened her mouth to respond, but the words that formed in her mind were French.

*Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?*

She had to consciously translate to English. "What 'appened?"

*Attendez.*

Colette stopped, focused on her thoughts. Tried to think in English.

The thoughts came in French first. Automatic, natural, her default internal language. She could translate to English—could speak it fluently, could think in it if she concentrated—but French was her natural state now. The language her brain defaulted to, the one that felt most comfortable, most like home.

English had become her second language. French was first.

"What did you lose?" Colette asked, the words coming out in English but forming first as *Qu'est-ce que tu as perdu?* in her mind.

"I don't know?" Kylie's voice was uncertain. "I just felt something go. Like, something huge? Wait, why are you talking different? Slower, or something?"

Colette froze. "Different 'ow?'"

"Your rhythm is off. You're pausing weird between words?" Kylie sat up straighter, confusion shifting to alarm. "What did you do?"

"French," Colette said quietly. "I needed to speak wiz my parents."

"And I lost something so you could have that." Kylie's eyes widened as the pattern clicked into place. "The tree doesn't just take from the person who needs something. It takes from whoever has-"

She stopped mid-sentence.

Language. The trade was language.

"Wait." Kylie's face went pale. She opened her mouth, tried to form Vietnamese words she'd known her whole life.

Nothing. She tried again, reaching for anything. Basic greetings, common phrases, the endearments Kyle had used with his grandmother.

Empty. Completely empty.

"Vietnamese." Kylie's voice cracked. "Kyle spoke Vietnamese? Like, not super fluently but conversationally? He talked to his grandmother every week and she didn't speak much English so he had to use Vietnamese?"

"Oh no-"

"And now it's just gone." Kylie wiped at her eyes where tears were starting to form.

Colette sank onto the couch beside her, horror settling in her chest.

"I did not feel anyzing being taken from me," she said slowly. "I zought perhaps zere was no-'ow do you say-no cost? No price to pay. But it took from you instead."

"You needed French so it took my Vietnamese." Kylie laughed, bitter and broken. "The tree doesn't care who pays."

They sat in silence, processing this new information.

"I asked for it," Colette said quietly, guilt thick in her voice. "Ze French. I zought-I zought it would take somezing from me, like before. Somezing I did not need."

"We can't control what it takes," Kylie said, the realization settling cold in her stomach. "Or who it takes from."

"Every time one of us needs somezing-

"The other one is at risk." Kylie's voice shook. "What if you need something else tomorrow? What if it takes something from me that I can't lose? What if I need something and it takes from you?"

Neither of them was safe. They could lose pieces of themselves without even being the one to need something, without even knowing a trade was happening until the absence revealed itself.

"We 'ave to get rid of it," Colette said, her voice firm with sudden decision. "Tonight."

"Yes." Kylie was already standing. "It has to go."

They soon discovered it wasn't so easy.

They dragged the tree down three flights of stairs in the middle of the night, left it by the dumpster. It was back on the table the next morning.

They loaded it into Kylie's car, drove it to the lake, and smiled as it sank to the bottom. It returned the next day, ornaments intact.

Finally, at two in the morning, they fed it into the campus woodchipper, listening with delight as the machine made horrible sounds. Grinding, crunching, shrieking as it tore through wood and needles and ornaments, reducing everything to pulp and dust.

They drove home grimly satisfied.

Kylie woke the next morning to Christmas music playing softly through the apartment.

"No," she whispered.

The tree stood in its corner. Three feet tall now-bigger than before they'd destroyed it. Full branches covered with fresh green needles. All ornaments restored and hanging from the branches.

And decorated. White lights wound through its branches, glowing. Red beads draped around it. A tree skirt spread beneath it, red velvet with white trim.

"I'll Be Home for Christmas" played from nowhere, drifting through the apartment like a promise and a threat.

"Non," Colette whispered from her bedroom doorway. "Non, non, non-eet cannot be!"

"We destroyed it," Kylie said, her voice very small. "Like, completely?"

"It does not matter." Colette stared at the tree with despair. "It will always come back. We cannot get rid of it. We cannot destroy it. We cannot escape it."

The tree's lights twinkled cheerfully.

**-=Present Day=-**

Colette ended the video call with her parents, switching back to English with the small mental effort that was now required.

Her internal monologue continued in French for a moment—*Ils semblent inquiets, mais je les ai rassurés*—before she consciously translated: They seemed worried, but I reassured them.

She emerged from her bedroom to find Kylie still on the couch, scrolling through Instagram with the kind of focused attention she rarely gave to her textbooks anymore. That had been another trade. Kylie had been staring at her Instagram feed with obvious confusion and had wondered what the appeal was, why girls spent so much time on a dumb selfie app. The tree had shown her.

And had taken Cole's love of slasher films in return. Violence, suspense, horror. All of it now made her skin crawl. Colette found that she could only tolerate gentle romantic comedies, the softer the better. The kind where the biggest conflict was a misunderstanding that would be resolved with a heartfelt conversation in the rain.

She found herself watching them late at night, alone in her room, swooning at the grand gestures: the airport chase, the passionate declaration, the rain-soaked kiss. Her heart would race at the meet-cutes, at the moment when two people's eyes met across a crowded room and everything else faded away.

What she didn't notice was that she always saw them from the woman's perspective now. The male lead's charm, his confidence, the way he looked at the heroine, these were what made her heart flutter.

It wasn't until a week later, lying in bed with her hand between her legs, replaying a scene from that evening's movie—imagining herself as the woman being pulled into a passionate kiss, being swept off her feet by strong arms and a confident smile—that the realization struck her: she was attracted to men now.

The thought should have been shocking. Should have made her question everything. But her body's response was undeniable, and it felt so natural, so right, that she simply accepted it and let the fantasy continue.

It became a nightly ritual over the following week. Colette would lie in bed, phone in hand, queueing up romantic movies, each one feeding the growing ache for connection, for passion, for someone to sweep her off her feet the way heroes did in these stories. She'd replay her favorite scenes, imagining herself in the heroine's place, her body responding to the fantasy until she had to set the phone aside and lose herself in the sensation. The practical, analytical part of Cole that would have recognized this obsession for what it was had been carved away. All that remained was longing.

The incessant pinging of phone notifications brought Colette back to the present. Kylie sat on the couch, completely absorbed in Instagram, scrolling and double-tapping and occasionally taking selfies to add to her carefully curated drafts folder. The girl who two weeks ago hadn't understood social media now couldn't stop checking it, couldn't resist the dopamine hit of likes and comments, spent more time thinking about her next post than about her upcoming exam.

"You should study," Colette said gently. "Your exam is soon."

"I know." Kylie didn't look up from her phone. "I will? I just need a break first. Like, the material is really difficult?"

Colette said nothing, but she remembered.

She remembered the first week after Halloween, when Kylie had actually started attending classes as Kylie Wynn. The Sports Marketing courses had seemed to come easily. Too easily. Kylie had complained about it constantly, usually while studying on this same couch.

"It's such a blowoff major," she'd said, her perky uptalk making even complaints sound cheerful. "Like, I know I'm supposed to be grateful I can handle the work but it's so boring? Everything is so obvious! I miss actually being challenged, like my Econ classes where I had to really think!"

But that was before she'd needed to know how to do a back handspring.

How exciting it is when dedicated athletes return to their sport after recovering from injury! The joy of performing at winter games, the thrill of holiday tournaments, the satisfaction of being part of a team during this special time of year! Such dedication to both sport and teammates shows the very best of Christmas spirit: commitment, perseverance, and community!

Kylie pushed through the athletic center doors, her cheer bag slung over her shoulder, her stomach churning with dread.

Practice was over. She'd survived it. Barely.

She walked toward the parking lot on legs that felt shaky, though not from physical exertion. Her body felt fine. Better than fine. Energized, powerful, capable of feats that should have been impossible.

It was her mind that felt wrong.

She'd been avoiding cheer practice since Halloween. The first week she'd claimed she was sick: recovering from a party, stomach bug, vague excuses. The second week she'd said she'd twisted her ankle, needed time to heal. Coach Bennett had been sympathetic at first.

But after two weeks of seeing Kylie walk around campus without any limp, the coach's patience had worn thin. Yesterday's text had been blunt: "Practice Monday 3pm. Need to see you there. Time to talk about your commitment to this team."

The implication was clear. Show up or face consequences.

So Kylie had gone to cheer practice. Only problem was, she didn't know how to cheer.

The knowledge deluge had come the moment Coach Bennett asked her to demonstrate a standing back handspring, the skill she'd supposedly been doing since she was twelve years old. Kylie had stared at the mat, at her small athletic body, and felt panic crystallize into desperate need.

*Oh God, everyone is staring at me and I have no idea what I'm doing.*

The knowledge had poured in. Tumbling skills, stunting techniques, jump forms, motion placements, routine choreography, competition rules, safety protocols. And with it had come muscle memory, her body suddenly knowing exactly how to move, how to execute skills she'd never practiced.

She'd performed flawlessly. Had been thrown in the air and caught, had tumbled across the mat, had stuck every landing. Coach Bennett had looked satisfied. Her teammates had welcomed her back enthusiastically.

Everything on the outside had been perfect.

But the hollowing sensation had been worse than ever before. Not brief, not localized. This had felt like something massive being excavated from her skull, leaving vast empty spaces behind. Eight full seconds of fundamental removal, of core pieces of Kyle being carved away.

During practice, focusing on the routines, everything had felt fine.

But now, walking to her car, a fog was creeping in.

Kylie unlocked the pink Beetle and slid into the driver's seat, tossing her cheer bag into the passenger side. Started the engine. Pulled out of the parking lot.

The radio was on. Some news station, talking about something political. Congressional hearings, maybe? Policy

discussions? The words flowed over her without sticking, without meaning. She tried to follow what they were saying but the concepts kept slipping away, too complex to hold onto, too abstract to grasp.

She turned it off, frustrated.

Drove toward the apartment in silence, trying to shake the weird foggy feeling in her head.

A stoplight turned red. Kylie braked, waiting. Her eyes drifted to the storefront on the corner, some boutique with Christmas decorations in the window. Pretty lights, sparkly ornaments arranged in an elaborate display. Silver and gold and crystal, catching the late afternoon sun.

So pretty. The way the light refracted through the crystal ornaments, creating little rainbow prisms on the window glass. The gold ones had this warm glow, and the silver ones were cool and elegant, and together they created this beautiful contrast-

A horn honked behind her.

Kylie jumped, looked up. The light was green. Had been green. How long had she been sitting there staring at Christmas decorations?

She hit the gas, face burning with embarrassment. But that was weird, right? Getting so distracted by something shiny that she completely missed the light changing, like a-

*Like what?*

She tried to complete the thought but it drifted away.

The apartment was only a few more blocks. Kylie drove carefully, hyperaware now of every moment her attention wanted to wander. The Christmas lights on houses. The decorated trees visible through windows. The inflatable Santa in someone's yard.

Everything sparkly and bright and distracting.

She parked in her spot, grabbed her bags, trudged up the three flights of stairs. Unlocked the apartment door and stepped inside.

The tree stood in its corner, four feet tall now, twenty-seven ornaments covering its branches. The lights twinkled in greeting.

Colette was in her room. Kylie could hear French pop music playing softly through the door. Doing homework, probably.

Kylie dropped her cheer bag by the door and headed for her bedroom. She had studying to do. Business Communications exam next week, and she needed to review.

She grabbed her textbook from her desk, settled onto her bed, opened to the chapter they'd covered in last week's lecture. Chapter 7: Persuasive Communication Strategies.

Kylie read the first paragraph. Then read it again. Then a third time.

The words made sense individually. She could understand each sentence in isolation. But the meaning wouldn't stick together, wouldn't coalesce into larger concepts. The framework the chapter was building felt like it was constructed of clouds. She could see the shapes but couldn't grasp them, couldn't hold them in her mind long enough to understand how the pieces connected.

She turned the page. Read about rhetorical appeals. Logos, pathos, ethos. Simple concepts. Basic stuff she was sure she'd learned in high school.

Except she couldn't remember learning them in high school. Couldn't remember what logos meant, or was it logic? Was pathos emotion? Or was that ethos? They kept sliding around in her head, refusing to stay put, refusing to make sense.

Kylie set down the textbook and stared at it.

This should be easy. This was easy, wasn't it? Kyle had found this kind of material straightforward, had been able to read a textbook chapter once and retain the key concepts.

Kyle had been smart. Sharp, analytical, good at understanding complex concepts quickly. Good at seeing patterns, making connections, thinking abstractly.

But now Kylie sat on her bed, staring at a basic college textbook, unable to follow arguments that should have been simple. Unable to maintain focus for more than a few minutes before her attention drifted to something shiny or pretty or easy. Unable to think through complex ideas because her brain felt foggy and slow.

The tree had scooped out her intelligence and replaced it with the ability to do a back handspring.

"No," Kylie whispered, picking up the textbook again. "No, no, no—"

She tried to read. Tried to focus. Tried to force her brain to work the way Kyle's had worked.

The words swam on the page. The concepts slipped away like water through her fingers. Her eyes drifted to her phone, to the Christmas lights visible through her window, to literally anything that wasn't this frustrating textbook.

She couldn't do it. Couldn't think through it. Couldn't understand material that should have been accessible.

A knock at her door. Colette stood in the doorway, elegant and concerned.

"Ow was practice?"

Kylie looked up at her, and something broke. The textbook slid from her lap onto the floor. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"I'm, like, dumb?" The words came out broken, perky uptalk making even her own devastation sound cheerful. "I'm actually dumb now?"

Colette's face went pale. "What?"

"The tree. It gave me like, everything I need to be a good cheerleader? But it took—" Kylie gestured helplessly at the textbook on the floor, at her own head. "I can't even read a textbook? I can't focus and I can't understand things and I get distracted by Christmas lights and I'm just-I'm some dumb blonde airhead!"

She dissolved into tears, curling in on herself on the bed.

Colette crossed the room quickly, sitting beside her, pulling her into a hug that Kylie collapsed into gratefully.

"You are not dumb," Colette said firmly, her voice thick with empathy.

"I can't understand my homework," Kylie sobbed into Colette's shoulder. "Like, I used to complain about how easy Sports Marketing was? And now it's actually hard because I'm too stupid to understand it anymore!"

Colette said nothing, just held her tighter.

**-=Present Day=-**

How wonderful when friends support each other through the busy final weeks before Christmas break! Studying together despite the distractions of twinkling lights and festive decorations, helping one another succeed so everyone can enjoy the holidays with peace of mind!

Kylie gathered her textbooks and laptop, shoving them into her bag. "I'm going to meet Jessica at the library to study."

Colette looked up from her fashion magazine, concern flickering across her elegant features. "Will zat 'elp? You said ze material was difficult—"

"Yeah, but like, being around her helps me focus?" Kylie pulled on her jacket. "When I'm with Jessica I can actually concentrate? It's weird but it works."

It was true. Something about Jessica's presence-her calm studiousness, her organized notes, her ability to work steadily through material-created an environment where Kylie's scattered attention could settle. She still wasn't as smart as Kyle had been, still struggled with concepts that should have been simple, but near Jessica the fog in her head thinned slightly.

"Your exam is tomorrow morning?" Colette asked.

"Yeah. That's why I need to like, lock in and study tonight." Kylie shouldered her bag. "We can leave for my parents' house right after I'm done with the exam."

Colette's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen and her expression shifted to something wary.

"Emma," she said. "She wants me to meet 'er for dinner."

"That's nice?"

"She 'as been trying to set me up wiz Tony ever since 'Alloween." Colette's accent thickened with frustration. "Every time we 'ang out, 'e just 'appens to show up."

"Maybe it's not about that this time?"

Colette read the text again. "She says she is done wiz 'er exams and wants to celebrate at zat Italian place near campus."

"See? Just dinner."

"Per'aps." But Colette didn't sound convinced. She should say no. Should tell Emma she was busy, that she didn't want another awkward encounter.

But Cole had never been good at saying no.

Kylie checked the time. "I gotta go. Like, Jessica's waiting. Good luck with Emma?"

"Bonne chance wiz your studying."

Kylie headed for the door, already pulling out her phone to check Instagram one more time. Colette watched her go, then looked down at Emma's text.

Just dinner. Just the two of them.

She typed back: *ok what time?*

What joy when friendships deepen during the holiday season! When young women discover they have so much wisdom to share, so much advice to give! How wonderful when confidence comes so naturally, when you simply know the right thing to say! The season inspires such generous spirits, such helpful hearts! And what better gift than helping a friend find love?

The library was quiet, exam week turning it into a sanctuary of desperate studying. Kylie found Jessica at their usual table on the third floor, surrounded by color-coded notes and highlighted textbooks.

"Hey!" Jessica looked up with a warm smile. "I saved you a seat."

"Thanks!" Kylie dropped into the chair across from her, pulling out her Sports Marketing materials. "How's your studying going?"

"Good, I think. My Econ final is tomorrow morning." Jessica gestured at her notes, complex graphs and equations that made Kylie's head hurt just looking at them. "Game theory is kicking my ass, but I think I'm getting it."

Game theory. Kylie had loved game theory. Had wanted to study it extensively, had found the mathematical frameworks elegant and fascinating.

Kylie looked at Jessica's notes and understood nothing.

"That's cool," she said, a trace of regret in her voice. "Like, I'm sure you'll do great?"

She opened her own textbook-consumer behavior, market segmentation, basic stuff-and tried to focus. The material was dense, harder than it should have been, but with Jessica across from her working steadily, Kylie found she could push through it.

Could read a paragraph and actually retain some of it. Could make flashcards and actually remember what was on them.

They studied in comfortable silence for over an hour.

Around ten, Jessica set down her highlighter and leaned back with a sigh.

"Can I ask you something?" she said, lowering her voice.

"Yeah, of course?"

Jessica hesitated. "There's this party tonight. At Sigma Chi." She laughed self-consciously. "I'm obviously not going-I have this exam tomorrow and I need to study-but there's this guy from my Econ class, David, who asked if I'd be there. And I kind of wish I was the type of person who could just... go to parties and not hate it. Know what to say to people."

She looked at Kylie with something like envy. "You're so good at that. Everyone likes you. You always seem to know how to act around people, what to say. I don't know how you do it."

Kylie's stomach tightened. Jessica thought SHE was good at social situations?

She remembered that first conversation-Halloween night, on the porch at Sigma Chi. Jessica had found Kyle there, overwhelmed by the chaos and noise. Had been so kind, so patient. Had taken this scared little cheerleader under her wing without hesitation.

And now here was Jessica, asking Kylie for the same kind of help. Looking to her for guidance on how to navigate social situations. The reversal was dizzying.

"Like, I'm fine in class," Jessica continued. "I can talk about the reading or whatever. But at parties? I'd just stand there awkwardly while everyone else has fun. I don't know how to be the kind of girl who's comfortable in those situations. The confident, popular kind of girl." She shook her head. "Sorry, this is stupid. I should just focus on studying."

"No, it's not stupid," Kylie heard herself say.

"You'd know what to do though. If it were you, you'd go to the party and talk to the guy and it would be easy. That's what I mean-you just know how to navigate that stuff."

The words landed like weights. Everyone thinks she knows. Everyone expects her to understand. Jessica is asking her for advice on something she's been desperately faking for three weeks.

"I mean, I guess..." Kylie tried to think of what to say. "Parties are just like, you know, being friendly?"

"But that's what I mean. You make it sound so easy. I don't even know where to start."

Kylie looked at Jessica's expectant face. What would it be like to actually know? To not be faking constantly? To understand how popularity worked, how to read social situations, how to make people like you without trying?

The shift came suddenly.

Facts cascaded through her mind. How to read social dynamics, how to make people comfortable around you, how to be effortlessly magnetic, how to navigate parties and hierarchies and the complex unspoken rules of popularity. The confidence that came with knowing. The ease that made everything social feel natural instead of terrifying.

Kylie held her breath, knowing what came next. The hollowing. Eight seconds of something massive being scooped away, carved out and replaced. When she blinked back to awareness, Jessica was still looking at her expectantly.

And the answer was right there. Obvious. Easy.

"Okay so here's the thing," Kylie heard herself say, her voice confident now, certain. "Like, you're overthinking it? Parties are just about being present and open. You don't have to be someone you're not, you just have to be interested in other people. David? If

he asked if you're going, he's definitely interested. You just need to make it easy for him to talk to you. Stay near him, make eye contact, ask him about something. Super casual."

The advice flowed naturally, drawing on instincts that felt like they'd always been there.

Jessica's face lit up. "Really? That's it?"

"That's it! You're already cool, you just need to like, let people see it? Not tonight, obviously. I'm just saying, like, for future reference."

"Yeah, no, you're right. I definitely shouldn't go tonight." Jessica smiled. "But that actually makes me feel better about it. Like maybe I could handle it if I did go sometime."

"Totally!" Kylie glanced at her phone. "I'm gonna grab coffee. Want anything?"

"I'm good, thanks. I'll keep working."

Kylie headed downstairs to the library café. The line was long, the exam-week rush. By the time she got her coffee and made it back upstairs, fifteen minutes had passed.

She walked back to their table and stopped.

Jessi was there, but she wasn't studying. She was scrolling through her phone, her posture relaxed, one foot bouncing under the table with restless energy. Her hair looked different—or no, it was the same, but something about the way she held herself was changed. More animated. Less focused.

*Wait. Jessi?*

Kylie blinked. Her name was Jessica. Or was it? No, it was definitely Jessi. That's what everyone called her. That had always been her name.

"There you are!" Jessi said, looking up with a bright smile. "That took forever. Listen, I've been thinking—we should totally ditch this and go to that party."

Kylie stared at her. "What? We have exams tomorrow?"

"So? We've been studying for like two hours. I know the material well enough. And that Econ hottie David is going to be there." Jessi was already closing her textbook, packing up her highlighters. "Come on, it'll be so much more fun than sitting here stressing."

"But you just said—" Kylie tried to remember. "Didn't you say you weren't going?"

Jessi laughed. "What? No! I've been dying to go all week! That's why I brought it up!" She stood, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "Come on, Kylie. When's the last time we actually went out and had fun?"

Something was wrong. Jessica wouldn't do this. Jessica was responsible, studious, would never blow off exam prep for a party. But this wasn't Jessica? Why did she keep wanting to call her that? Jessi had never gone by her full name. Everyone called her Jessi.

Except... that wasn't right. *Was it?*

"Are you coming?" Jessi asked.

Kylie knew she should say no. Should point out the exam, the responsibility, the fact that this was a terrible idea. But those words wouldn't form.

Kyle would have said no. Would have insisted on studying, would have prioritized the exam, would have recognized this as self-destructive and refused to go along with it.

But whatever part of Kyle had understood consequences, had cared about responsibility, had set boundaries between what he wanted and what was good for him, that was gone. Carved away and replaced with knowledge of social dynamics. And with it, the desperate need to be liked, to fit in, to go with the flow.

The idea of saying no to Jessi, of staying here studying when there was a party happening, felt impossible.

"Totally." Kylie heard herself say, then gestured at their casual study clothes of jeans and hoodies. "We can't wear this though."

"Oh! You can lend me something from your closet, right? You have so many cute party dresses."

"Yeah, totally! My apartment is like, five minutes away."

They walked across campus together, Jessi talking about the party, about David, about how they were definitely going to have an amazing time. Kylie found herself agreeing, excited now instead of anxious. The exam tomorrow morning suddenly felt distant, unimportant.

They climbed the three flights to Kylie's apartment. Inside, the tree stood in its corner—massive now, covered with ornaments that caught the light. Two new ones had appeared, glittering among the others.

Kylie barely noticed. She was already heading to her closet.

"Okay so I have a bunch of stuff you can try," Kylie said, pulling out dresses and tops. "What vibe are you going for?"

"Something fun! I want David to notice me."

"Say no more." Kylie handed her a tight black dress. "Try this. It's like, super cute and shows just enough."

While Jessi changed in the bathroom, Kylie pulled out her own outfit, a short green sequined minidress that seemed exactly right. She changed quickly, touched up her makeup, pulled a couple strands of her blonde hair loose from her ponytail to frame her face.

As she applied lipstick in the mirror, a thought surfaced, distant and strange: Kyle had wanted to be Jessica's "Econ guy." Had spent six weeks building courage to talk to her about game theory and market dynamics. Had put on a cheerleader costume to get into a party just for the chance to impress her with his intellect.

And now Kylie was putting on a tight dress to go to a frat party in the middle of finals. To help Jessica-no, Jessi-meet some Econ guy named David. At the same frat house whose Halloween party had set everything in motion.

One small desperate choice on Halloween night, and it had led to all of this.

The thought slipped away as quickly as it had come. Kylie turned from the mirror, focused on the night ahead.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a voice was telling her that this was wrong, that they had exams tomorrow, that this wasn't who they were.

But Kylie couldn't hear it anymore.

She grabbed her keys and phone. "Let's go!"

Nothing warms the heart quite like dinner with dear friends during the Christmas season! The joy of reconnecting over good food and wine, of strengthening bonds through honest conversation! How wonderful when friends look out for each other, helping to arrange introductions, encouraging romance! Such generosity of spirit! And how lovely when young women learn to speak their minds freely, to express their opinions without hesitation! The holidays bring out such authentic communication, such truthful hearts!

The Italian restaurant was nice. White tablecloths, candlelight, the kind of place that was slightly too expensive for college students but manageable for special occasions.

Emma was already seated when Colette arrived, waving enthusiastically from a table near the back.

"Colette! You look amazing!"

Colette had changed into a soft sage green sweater with a boat neckline tucked into a chocolate brown suede mini skirt, paired with opaque tights, gold hoops, and tan leather heeled

boots. Ever since the tree had given her knowledge of fashion and women's clothing, she couldn't wear anything unstylish without feeling physically uncomfortable, like an itch beneath her skin.

"Merci. You as well."

They ordered drinks, settled into conversation about finals, about winter break plans. Emma seemed genuinely happy to see her, and soon was talking about Matt. How sweet he'd been during her stressful exam week, the flowers he'd surprised her with, how he'd stayed up late helping her study even though he had his own finals.

"And zen what did 'e say?" Colette found herself leaning forward, hanging on every word.

"He said he was just happy to spend time with me, even if we were both exhausted and stressed." Emma smiled. "It was really sweet."

"Zat is so romantic!" Colette heard herself gush, her voice bright with genuine enthusiasm. "Like something from a movie!"

Emma laughed. "I guess? I mean, it was just flowers and moral support."

"But zat is what matters, non? Ze small gestures. Ze thoughtfulness." Colette placed a hand over her heart, her eyes sparkling. "Tell me more. 'Ow did 'e ask you out ze first time? Was it romantic?"

If he'd still been able to, Cole would have found the situation ironic. This was Emma Laurent. His crush. The woman whose philosophical brilliance had captivated him. And now Colette was squealing over Matt's romantic gestures like they were discussing a rom-com plot.

But Colette couldn't help it. She wanted to hear every detail. The meet-cute, the first date, the moment Emma knew she liked him.

"Okay, but when did you know 'e was special?" Colette pressed.

Emma blinked, slightly overwhelmed by the enthusiasm. "I don't know, it kind of happened gradually—"

"But you must 'ave 'ad a moment! When you realized you wanted to be wiz 'im?"

Before Emma could answer, her phone buzzed. She glanced at it with barely concealed excitement. "Oh! Matt and Tony are nearby. They want to stop by and say hi. That's okay, right?"

Colette's stomach dropped. "Emma—"

"It'll just be for a minute! They're literally around the corner."

"You promised zis was just us," Colette said, trying to keep her voice level.

"I know, but they're already on their way and it would be rude to tell them not to come now." Emma's smile was bright, pleading. "Just say hi, be friendly. It's not a big deal."

It was a big deal. Emma had lied to get her here. But Colette couldn't bring herself to make a scene, to tell her off, to simply stand up and leave like she wanted to.

Before she could respond, Matt appeared at their table with Tony in tow. Matt leaned down to kiss Emma's cheek, while Tony stood awkwardly, hands in his pockets.

"Hey Colette," Tony said, his voice friendly but tentative. "Good to see you."

"'Ello." Colette's accent was clipped, her posture stiff. The romantic conversation with Emma evaporated immediately, replaced with uncomfortable reality.

"Sit, sit!" Emma gestured at the empty chairs with forced enthusiasm.

What could Colette do? Making a scene would be worse than enduring an uncomfortable dinner. She nodded tightly, and the guys sat down.

Emma ordered for the table. Appetizers to share, suggesting the seafood pasta for Colette. "You'll love it, it's their specialty!"

Colette opened her mouth to say she'd rather order for herself, but the words stuck. She nodded instead, letting Emma decide.

Cole had always been like this. Unable to assert himself, unable to say no, always going along with what others wanted. In fact, that was what had gotten him into trouble on Halloween. He let himself go along with Kyle's crazy plan, and now look at what he'd become.

"So Emma mentioned you're studying fashion merchandising?" Tony said. "That's really cool. Do you want to design your own line someday?"

"Per'aps," Colette said shortly.

"That's awesome. I'd love to see your work sometime."

Emma jumped in before Colette could respond. "You two should go to that new exhibit at the art museum! You know, the contemporary fashion one? It would be perfect for you, Colette. And Tony loves art museums, don't you?"

"Yeah, I mean, I think they're interesting--"

"You should totally go together this weekend!" Emma's voice was bright, insistent.

Colette felt her jaw tighten. "I do not zink--"

"Oh come on, it would be fun! You need to get out more, you've been so isolated lately." Emma turned to Tony. "She barely leaves her apartment except for class. I'm worried about her."

"I am sitting right 'ere," Colette said quietly.

"I know! I'm just saying, it would be good for you. And Tony's such a great guy, you'd have fun together." Emma turned back to Tony. "What do you think? Saturday afternoon?"

"I mean, if Colette wants to--" Tony looked at her uncertainly.

*Say no. Just say no. Tell them you're not interested, that you don't want to go, that you need them to stop pushing.*

"I... am not sure zat I..." Colette's voice trailed off weakly.

Emma beamed. "That's basically a yes. Okay, so Saturday at two?"

"Emma-" Colette tried again. But she was trapped by her inability to simply refuse. By her inability to stand up for herself, to assert what she wanted, to do anything except passively accept what others decided for her.

She hated this. Hated being pushed around. Hated that Cole had always been like this and she was still like this, still unable to say no even when she desperately wanted to.

"So it's settled!" Emma raised her wine glass. "To new friendships!"

Matt raised his glass. Tony raised his, looking uncertainly at Colette.

And Colette-pushed to the edge, trapped by her own inability to assert herself, desperately wishing she knew how to say "no" to people-felt something snap.

Knowledge poured in: how to say no without apologizing, how to set firm boundaries, how to speak her mind without softening it, how to demand respect. The certainty of knowing exactly what she wanted and refusing to settle.

And with it, the hollowing, something fundamental being carved away, leaving vast empty spaces behind.

When Colette blinked back to awareness, Emma was still smiling at her expectantly, wine glass raised.

For the first time in her life-in Cole's life-the words didn't stick in her throat. The careful filter that had always held her back, the voice that whispered to be polite, to go along, to keep the peace, was simply gone. And in its place was clarity. Certainty. The freedom to finally voice her opinions.

And Colette had opinions. So many opinions. Untempered by consideration of whether they needed to be voiced, unfiltered by logic or social grace.

"No," Colette whispered, tentatively at first.

Emma's smile faltered. "What?"

"No. I am not going to ze museum wiz Tony. I am not interested."

The table went silent.

"Colette, I'm just trying to -"

"You lied to get me 'ere tonight. You told me zis was just us. You arranged for zem to show up."

Emma's face flushed. "I didn't lie, I just -"

"And zis pasta -" Colette looked down at her plate with critical eyes. "is barely edible. Ze sauce is too thick, ze pasta is overcooked. Mediocre, at best!"

Tony shifted uncomfortably. "Look, I'm sorry -"

"You seem like a nice person," Colette said, her tone matter-of-fact. "But you are boring."

Tony's face reddened. He looked down at his plate, silent.

Emma's eyes widened. "Colette! That was incredibly rude!"

"It was 'onest."

"I think I'm going to go to the bathroom," Tony finally managed, before standing and hurrying away.

"Honest?" Emma's voice rose. "You're being cruel! Tony's been nothing but polite, and you just -"

"You lied to manipulate me eento coming 'ere!" Colette's accent thickened as anger flooded through her, French bleeding into every syllable.

"I was trying to help you!" Emma's hands were shaking. "You've been impossible since Halloween. You barely leave your apartment, you don't talk to anyone, you're pushing everyone away -"

"Maybe I do not want ze kind of 'elp zat eenvolves being ambushed!"

"Just stop! You're being mean and judgmental and-"

"And what? 'Onest? Direct? Sorry zat I 'ave opeenions!"

"There's having opinions and there's being an asshole!"  
Emma's voice cracked. "I'm your friend, Colette. I care about you. And you're sitting here insulting everything!"

"Per'aps your taste is not as good as you zink it is."

Emma recoiled. "Wow. Okay."

Matt cleared his throat. "Maybe we should all just-"

Colette stood abruptly, her chair scraping. "Maybe I should not be friends wiz people who are controlleeing liars!"

"Colette!"

"Enjoy your mediocre dinner wiz your mediocre boreeng boyfriend, Emma."

She grabbed her purse and stormed away, her heels clicking sharply on the restaurant floor. Behind her, she could hear Emma sputtering, trying to find a response, but she didn't look back.



Didn't feel regret. Didn't feel the shame Cole would have felt. Just felt-righteous. Powerful. Like she'd finally stood up for herself.

She pushed through the restaurant door into the December cold.

The night air hit her face, sharp and clarifying. She fumbled in her purse for her phone, her hands shaking from the rush of emotion still flooding through her. Anger and adrenaline and something almost like exhilaration.

Her purse slipped from her trembling hands and hit the sidewalk, contents spilling everywhere.

"Merde!" She crouched down, trying to gather her things in the dim light from the restaurant windows.

"Here, let me help."

A voice, warm and rich. Someone crouched beside her in the shadows.

They both reached for her phone at the same time. Their hands touched.

Colette looked up.

He was illuminated by the streetlight now. Tall, strikingly handsome, with dark eyes glinting in the light. Strong features, confident posture. He smiled, and something in her chest fluttered.

Wait...

"Tony?" The name came out before she could stop it. The man in front of her bore a clear resemblance to the college student she'd just been sitting with at dinner.

He paused, tilting his head slightly. "No, my name is Antonio. Have we met?"

Colette stared at him. The shape of his face was similar-she was sure of it-but everything else was different. His features were sharper, more defined. His posture was assured rather than tentative. Even his clothes looked different, better fitted, more expensive.

*Had they met?*

No. She would've remembered meeting someone like this. But then why did he remind her of... wait, who was she thinking about again?

Before she could place it, the memory of Tony left her mind completely.

"I... I am sorry," she said. "I was mistaken."

Antonio handed her the phone, then helped gather the rest. Lipstick, keys, a small sketchbook that had fallen open to show her design drawings.

"You dropped half your life," he observed, handing her the sketchbook. His tone was wry, almost amused.

"I was upset," Colette said defensively, taking it from him.

"Clearly." He rose smoothly, offering his hand to help her up. "Bad evening?"

She took his hand. His grip was warm, his clothes expensive, everything about him polished. "Eet was... disappointing."

He glanced back at the restaurant as he helped her stand. "Ah. Yes, I've eaten there. The ambiance tries to compensate for mediocre food."

"Exactly! Zank you!" She felt a rush of vindication. "Ze pasta was overcooked, ze wine selection was-"

"Pedestrian?"

"Yes! Finally someone who understands." She paused, taking a deep breath, then added, "But to be 'onest, it was not only ze food zat was disappointing."

"Oh?" He was still holding her hand, though she was already standing.

"Ze company. We 'ad an argument."

"Then perhaps you need to keep better company."

"Oh, and you zink you are better company, I suppose?" Colette said, one eyebrow raised.

"Well, I haven't bored you yet." His eyes were bright with amusement. "And we've been talking for what, two minutes? That's longer than your dinner companion managed, I'd wager."

She opened her mouth to argue, then paused. He wasn't wrong.

He glanced down at the sketchbook still in her hands. "So you carry around that little book to doodle in?"

Colette stiffened. "I study fashion merchandising. Zese are designs, not doodles."

"Right, right. Fashion." He nodded seriously, but his eyes were dancing. "So... doodles of dresses."

"Zey are not—" She stopped, catching the hint of a smile playing at his lips. He was doing this on purpose. Testing her. Seeing if she'd rise to the bait.

"You are teasing me," she said.

"Is it working?"

Despite herself, she felt the corner of her mouth twitch. "Per'aps."

"Good. That means you're interesting."

She should be annoyed. Should find it irritating. But instead she felt-charmed. Like this was a game they were both playing, like he was testing her and enjoying what he found.

"You are terrible," she said, but couldn't keep the smile from her voice.

Colette felt her heart race. He was exactly-

Cole would have questioned this. Would have stepped back, analyzed the coincidence, wondered how someone so perfectly suited to her standards had appeared at exactly the right moment, right outside the restaurant. Would have been suspicious of the timing, the fit, the way every word out of Antonio's mouth seemed calibrated to intrigue her.

But that careful, logical part of Cole-the part that thought before feeling, that questioned before accepting-had been carved away at the dinner table. The price paid for finally being able to speak her mind.

And without it, there was only feeling. The certainty that this was fate. That this moment mattered. That he was exactly what she'd been waiting for without knowing it.

"You are cold," Antonio observed. "And I'm keeping you standing on the sidewalk. Can I walk you home?"

She should say no. Should maintain boundaries, assert herself, walk away.

But she couldn't walk away.

"Zat would be... acceptable," she said, trying to sound casual even as her heart raced.

They walked together through the December night, and Colette found herself actually enjoying a conversation for the first time in weeks. This new version of her had strong opinions about things, and she wasn't shy about expressing them.

She mentioned the pretentious coffee shop near campus that charged five dollars for mediocre espresso. He agreed it was overpriced but suggested the ritual of it had value. She argued that bad coffee wasn't improved by aesthetic.

She criticized the way American students dressed. No attention to fit, no understanding of proportion, everything oversized and shapeless. He countered that comfort had its own merit. She insisted that one could be both comfortable and put-together, it simply required effort most people weren't willing to make.

She brought up a film everyone in her class was raving about, some mindless action thing with no substance. He admitted he'd enjoyed it. She couldn't understand how anyone with taste could sit through two hours of explosions and quips. He teased that perhaps she took everything a bit too seriously. She insisted that having standards wasn't the same as being serious.

Every disagreement felt like a test. Every response seemed perfectly calibrated. Not to agree with her, but to engage with her. To match her intensity without being intimidated by it.

"You're very opinionated," he observed as they walked.

"Is zat a problem?"

"Not at all. I find it refreshing." He smiled. "Though I suspect you don't suffer fools gladly."

"I 'ave wasted too much time suffering zem already."

"Then we have something in common."

They reached her building too quickly. Colette stopped at the entrance, not wanting the conversation to end.

"I would very much like to see you again," Antonio said. "If you'd be interested."

Interested? She was consumed. Overwhelmed. Unable to think about anything except him, except this feeling, except the absolute certainty that this was important.

"Come inside," she heard herself say. "Wiz me."

Antonio raised an eyebrow, that same teasing smile. "That's quite an invitation."

"I 'ave never been more sure of anyzing." She grabbed his hand. "Please."

"Well then." He let himself be pulled toward the door. "I'd be a fool to argue with that."

She led him into the apartment, her heart racing, her thoughts full of romantic conviction. This was fate, this was the meet-cute made real, this was the beginning of the grand love story she'd been yearning for.

The apartment door opened. The tree stood in its corner, massive and glittering with ornaments. Two new ones had appeared among the others.

Colette barely noticed. All her attention was on Antonio.

She pushed the door closed and kissed him, passionate and certain and completely unlike the careful, measured person Cole had been.

He was everything. The romantic lead. Her soulmate. Destiny made real.

Antonio responded immediately, his hands sliding to her waist, pulling her closer.

"You are perfect," she said. "You are mine. Come to my room."

She took his hand and led him to her bedroom, her body moving with knowledge it shouldn't have but did, her heart full of romantic conviction that had been building inside her and now had nothing to hold it back.

Cole's careful, rational mind-his ability to think logically, to analyze feelings, to keep emotions in check-was simply gone. Replaced with pure romantic obsession, the absolute certainty that she'd found her person in a man she'd met an hour ago, tempestuous passionate feeling untethered from any logic.

She'd gotten exactly what she asked for: the ability to say no, to have standards, to not be pushed around.

And the tree had given her Antonio, grown in a lab to meet every single one of those standards. Sophisticated, charming, confident, perfect.

So perfect that her romantic heart, freed from Cole's rationality, could do nothing but fall completely, irrevocably, obsessively in love.

How lovely when everything falls perfectly into place! The right person at exactly the right moment, saying exactly the right things, meeting every impossible standard! What beautiful serendipity on this December evening! Such confidence, such certainty, such perfect romantic conviction! How wonderful when young people know exactly what they want-and get it!

At a frat party across campus, Kylie was about to get exactly what she wanted, too.

The Sigma Chi house was packed, music pounding through the walls, the kind of bass that you felt in your chest. Bodies everywhere-dancing, drinking, shouting over the noise.

Kylie and Jessi pushed through the crowd, and immediately people turned to look. Guys, mostly. Eyes tracking them as they moved through the press of bodies.

"Drinks first!" Jessi shouted over the music, and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Kylie alone.

Someone handed her a red Solo cup filled with something sweet and strong. She took a sip, made a face, took another sip. Started swaying to the music.

The attention felt good. Really good. Guys kept looking at her. At her outfit, at her body, at the way she moved. She found herself noticing them back. The way they smiled, the confidence in how they approached, the interest in their eyes.



When had she started enjoying the attention of guys? It didn't matter. She liked being noticed.

She danced for a while, bodies pressed close in the crowd. Kylie let herself get lost in it, the music, the heat, the eyes on her.

"Kylie!" A voice behind her. She turned.

David from Jessi's Econ class. Tall, athletic, cute smile. The one she had mentioned wanting to impress.

A flutter of something-hesitation? guilt?-but it passed quickly.

"Hey!" Kylie felt herself light up, leaning in close so he could hear her. "I didn't know you'd be here?"

"Yeah, I live here actually." He gestured vaguely at the house. "You look amazing."

The compliment sent warmth through her chest. He was looking at her. Wanted her attention. Wanted her.

"Thanks!"

They talked-or shouted, really, over the music. He got her another drink. Asked about her major, her classes, made jokes that weren't that funny but made her laugh anyway because he was cute and he was paying attention to her and it felt so good to be wanted.

Jessi hadn't come back from wherever she went. Kylie didn't care. She was exactly where she wanted to be.

"You want to dance?" David asked.

"Totally!"

The dancing was less about the music and more about bodies pressed close, his hands on her waist, the heat of the crowd around them. Kylie let herself get lost in it, the attention, the desire, the way he looked at her.

When he leaned down to kiss her, she didn't hesitate.

There was only the moment. The kiss. The feeling of being wanted.

"You want to go somewhere quieter?" David asked against her ear.

She knew what he was asking. Knew this was Jessi's crush. But he was here with Kylie. Looking at Kylie. Wanting Kylie.

The guilt flickered and died.

"Yeah," she heard herself say.

He took her hand, led her through the crowd, up the stairs to the second floor. A hallway lined with doors, most of them closed, some with socks hanging on the handles.

He opened one, pulled her inside. A typical college guy's room, unmade bed, posters on the walls, clothes scattered on the floor.

The door closed behind them. He kissed her again, harder this time, his hands sliding down her back, over her hips, pulling her against him.

Kylie felt heat spread through her body. This was happening. She was doing this.

David pulled back slightly, breathing hard. "You're so fucking hot."

And suddenly, Kylie knew what to do.

She sank to her knees in front of him, her hands moving to his belt. Unbuckle. Unzip. She started slowly, her hand wrapping around him, watching his face. He groaned and she felt satisfaction bloom in her chest. She was doing this right.

The knowledge was just there, like muscle memory she'd never built.

When had she learned this?

The thought flickered and vanished.

When she took him in her mouth, the knowledge guided her. How to move her tongue, how much pressure, what rhythm. She knew to hollow her cheeks, to take him deeper, to look up at him.

His taste was strange, his scent overwhelming this close, the feeling of him in her mouth foreign and intense. But she pushed past it, focused on his reactions. The sounds he made. The way his hand tightened in her hair.

"Fuck," David breathed above her. "You're good at this."

The words sent heat through her. She was good. He wanted her.

She took him deeper, her throat relaxing in a way she somehow knew how to do. David's hips started to move and she matched his rhythm, her hand and mouth working together.

"I'm gonna—" David managed.

She didn't pull away. Took everything, swallowed, the taste new and unpleasant but she kept going until he was gasping.

When she finally stood, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, David was staring at her.

"Holy shit. That was... you're fucking amazing."

Amazing. The word glowed in her chest.

"Thanks," she said, already smoothing down her skirt. "I should find my friend?"

She left him still catching his breath.

Back downstairs, Kylie got another drink. Danced with strangers for a while, laughing, letting the music and alcohol blur everything together.

Then she saw them.

David and Jessi, pressed against a wall near the stairs. Making out. His hands on her waist, her arms around his neck.

Kylie stopped, drink halfway to her lips.

Jessi pulled back from David, laughing at something he said. Looked completely happy. Like nothing was wrong. Like she didn't know. Or didn't care.

Maybe she didn't know. Maybe in this world of hookups and parties, it didn't matter. You hooked up with someone, they hooked up with someone else, everyone moved on.

Kylie turned away, finished her drink in one long swallow.

The night blurred. Another guy, older, rougher. "You're really pretty," he said against her ear. When he suggested going upstairs, she went.

A different room. On her knees again, working him with her mouth. Her jaw aching, her knees hurting against the hard floor, the awkward angle of her neck. The physical reality of it cutting through the alcohol haze.

Then another guy in a cramped closet, her knees pressed against storage boxes, hands and mouth working on autopilot in a space so small she could barely move, the smell of cleaning supplies mixing with his cologne.

Later-much later, after more drinks she couldn't remember accepting-she found herself in a bedroom with two guys. Roommates, they said. Both interested, both looking at her expectantly.

Some distant part of her knew this was too much. Knew she should leave.

But they were smiling at her. Wanted her.

"If you're cool with it," one of them said.

She was cool with it. Or, at least, she couldn't find the words to say she wasn't.

She knelt between them, her mouth moving from one to the other. She found she knew when to switch, how to use her hands on one while her mouth was on the other. But she felt disconnected from it all. Like watching someone else.

"Damn you can sure suck a cock," one of them said.

"Fucking incredible," the other agreed.

When they were both finished, she stood on unsteady legs.  
Wiped her mouth while they high-fived each other.

She left without saying anything, found a bathroom down the hall. Locked the door.

Stared at herself in the mirror under harsh fluorescent light. Mascara smudged down her cheeks. Lipstick gone. Hair tangled. Eyes glassy from alcohol.

Five guys. Five. The number settled in her chest like lead.

This was who she was now. The girl who couldn't say no. The girl who needed to be wanted so badly she'd do anything. The girl who'd stolen her friend's crush and then gone looking for more.

The parts of her that would have wanted something different, that would have valued self-respect over validation, that would have been capable of saying no, those parts were gone. What remained craved approval like oxygen, physically couldn't refuse attention even when some distant part of her knew she should.

She looked at her reflection-this pretty blonde stranger with smudged makeup and empty eyes-and felt nothing. Not shame. Not regret. Just a hollow ache for more attention, more validation, more proof that someone wanted her.

How thrilling when romance blooms during the magical Christmas season! The heat of skin against skin, the breathless urgency of desire fulfilled, the pure animal joy of bodies joining in ecstatic union! What wonderful abandon when the spirit of giving extends to two people giving themselves completely to carnal pleasure!

Colette's bedroom was dark except for the soft glow from the streetlight outside.

She was on top of Antonio, riding him, her hands braced on his chest. Her hips rolled in a rhythm that felt instinctive, natural, like her body had always known how to do this.

"God," Antonio groaned beneath her, his hands gripping her hips hard enough to bruise. "You feel so good."

She leaned down to kiss him, swallowing his moans, her breasts pressed against his chest. His hands slid up her back, pulling her closer, and she moved faster, chasing the building pleasure.

This was what all those romantic movies had promised. The connection, the intensity, the feeling of being completely consumed by someone.

Antonio's hands tightened on her hips, guiding her movements, and she let him. Trusted him. Wanted him to take control.

"Colette," he breathed against her neck. "I'm close—"

"Me too," she gasped. And she was. The pleasure building inside her, her body responding to his. When she came, it crashed over her like a wave, her body clenching around him. She cried out, not caring if the neighbors heard, lost in the sensation.

Antonio followed seconds later, pulling her down hard onto him, his own cry muffled against her shoulder.

They collapsed together, breathless and tangled. Her head on his chest, his arms around her, their hearts racing in sync.

This was it. This was love. Not just sex. Love. The kind that swept you off your feet, that made you forget everything else, that felt destined.

"You're incredible," Antonio murmured, pressing a kiss to her hair.

She felt tears prick her eyes. This was everything. He was everything.

They made love three more times through the night, exploring each other, unable to keep their hands off each other. Each time felt like confirmation of what she already knew: he was perfect. They were perfect together.

As the sky outside began to lighten with approaching dawn, they lay tangled together, Colette's head on his chest.

"Zis is amazing," she said softly, tracing patterns on his skin. "You are amazing. I cannot believe we found each ozzer."

"Yeah," Antonio said, his voice sleepy. "It's been a really good night."

"Not just good. Perfect." She lifted her head to look at him. "Like fate, non? Like we were meant to meet."

His smile thinned. "Sure."

"I want you to stay. I am leaving today for Christmas wiz Kylie but we can 'ave breakfast togezzer? Spend ze morning?" She kissed his chest. "We 'ave so much to talk about. So much to learn about each ozzer."

"Yeah, maybe," he said, his body tensing slightly beneath her.

"And zen we should talk about what zis means for us." She propped herself up on her elbow, absolute conviction in her voice. "Because zis is not just casual, Antonio. I can feel it. Zis is somezing real. Somezing important."

Antonio shifted uncomfortably. "We just met-"

"I zink I am falling in love wiz you," she said, the words spilling out with desperate sincerity.

His expression flickered-surprise, then something close to panic. "That's... wow. Colette. That's a lot."

"But it is true! I 'ave never felt zis way before." She touched his face, urgent. "You are everyzing I 'ave been waiting for. You understand me. Zis is what people search zeir whole lives for and we found it on our first night!"

"Listen, I should probably-" He tried to pull back, but she pressed closer, kissing him.

"Stay," she whispered against his mouth. "Please. Just a little longer."

The kiss deepened. Her hand slid down his chest, lower. She felt him respond despite his hesitation.

"Colette-"

"I need you," she breathed, moving on top of him. "Again. Please."

Antonio's resistance melted as she guided him inside her. His hands found her hips and he groaned.

She moved slowly this time, savoring it, her romantic heart swelling with the certainty that this meant something, that sex this good had to mean love. His hands tightened on her and she leaned down to kiss him, passionate and possessive.

When they finished, she collapsed against his chest, satisfied and glowing.

"Now you 'ave to stay for breakfast," she murmured, already half-asleep. "You cannot leave after zat."

Antonio said nothing, just stared at the ceiling as her breathing evened out.

Colette drifted into contentment, certain she'd found her soulmate.

How exciting when young people embrace the festive social whirl of the holiday season! Christmas parties and celebration, new connections formed beneath twinkling lights, the thrill of letting loose and discovering what brings joy during this magical time of year!

Dawn was breaking when Kylie finally stumbled out of the Sigma Chi house. The sky was that pale gray-pink of early morning.

She hadn't seen Jessi in hours. She walked back to the apartment alone, her heels clicking on the empty sidewalk. Her short dress kept riding up with each step. The taste of strange men still in her mouth.

She was exhausted. Her makeup was smudged, her carefully chosen outfit rumpled and disheveled. She couldn't quite remember everyone she'd been with, all the faces blurring together.

The campus was empty, silent. Just her footsteps echoing off the buildings.

She felt hollow. Used. The validation that had felt so good in the moment had evaporated, leaving only emptiness.

But she pushed the thought away. She'd had fun. Everyone had wanted her. That meant something.

Didn't it?

She climbed the three flights of stairs to the apartment, fumbling with her keys. Stumbled past the Christmas tree in the corner, headed to her room. An hour or two of sleep before her exam.

Colette stepped out into the hallway in an ivory silk peignoir and matching robe, elegant even fresh from bed. She'd been heading to the kitchen to make coffee, still glowing from the night.

She stopped when she saw Kylie.

They stared at each other.

Colette's eyes traveled down Kylie's disheveled appearance. The smudged makeup, the wrinkled dress, the walk-of-shame energy radiating off her.

One elegant eyebrow raised. Judgment, clear and sharp. A silent accusation.

Kylie felt it land. Felt the shame bloom in her chest even through the exhaustion. She started to look away-

Then Colette's bedroom door opened.

Antonio emerged, half-dressed, pulling his shirt on, shoes in hand. He froze when he saw both of them standing there.

"Hey," he said awkwardly, squeezing past them in the narrow hallway. "I've got to run. Early... thing. I'll text you."

He didn't wait for a response. Didn't look at Colette. Just headed for the door, his footsteps quick in the stairwell.

Kylie's guilty expression evaporated, and it was her turn to raise an eyebrow in an exaggerated arc.

Colette stood frozen, watching where he'd disappeared. Her expression flickered. Confusion, then understanding, then embarrassment. All followed by a desperate attempt to maintain composure: *Everything's fine. He has a meeting. That's all.*

Kylie's eyebrow climbed higher. Her look said everything: *Sure he does.*

For a moment, they just stood there in silence. Best friends separated by everything they couldn't say.

Colette lifted her chin, defensive, and walked toward the kitchen as if nothing was wrong.

Kylie stood in the hallway for another moment, then went to her own room.

She dropped her purse on the floor, kicked off her heels. Went to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

She stood under the hot water for a long time, trying to wash away the night. The taste. The feeling of hands on her, mouths on hers, the parade of faces she couldn't quite remember.

The memory of what she'd become.

The water ran and ran, but she still felt dirty.

Finally, she got out, dried off, pulled on an oversized t-shirt. Collapsed onto her bed, still damp, and fell into exhausted sleep.

What a blessing sleep is during this busy holiday season, how it restores and refreshes! How wonderful when young people awaken to December mornings full of promise, ready to embrace

both their responsibilities and the adventures that await! Each day brings new experiences, new knowledge, new understanding!

Kylie slept for two hours, then dragged herself out of bed for her final.

The Sports Marketing exam was at noon. She stumbled into the lecture hall still feeling the effects of the night before-exhausted, hungover, her mouth still tasting faintly of mouthwash she'd used to try to cover the taste of strangers.

She sat down, stared at the test paper when it was placed in front of her. She stared at the words. Knew she should understand them better than she did. Had studied this. Or tried to. But her mind was foggy, the concepts just out of reach.

She wrote something. Bullshitted her way through essay questions, guessed on multiple choice. The material that should have been easy felt impossibly complex, like trying to think through cotton.

When time was called, she'd answered everything. Barely. Probably got enough right to pass. D-plus, maybe. C-minus if she was lucky. Good enough to keep her cheer scholarship. Good enough to stay in school.

That was all that mattered.

What joy fills the heart when driving toward family reunions! The open road ahead, loved ones waiting with open arms-parents who've watched you grow up, who know you better than anyone! The anticipation of homecoming during the most magical season! How wonderful to return to childhood homes, to the warmth of family traditions, to parents who've been there for every milestone, every memory! What could be more beautiful than Christmas with the family who made you who you are?

Kylie's pink Beetle hummed along the highway, GPS guiding them toward an address she'd only seen written down. Three

hours to a town she'd never heard of, to meet people she'd never met.

They'd gotten a late start. Colette hadn't been able to decide which outfits she wanted to pack, and Kylie was in no rush to get to a childhood home she'd never seen before. They'd departed late enough that her parents' Christmas party would be in full swing by the time they arrived, so they'd changed into their party clothes before leaving.

Colette sat in the passenger seat, phone clutched in her lap like a lifeline. They'd been driving for maybe twenty minutes when she checked her notifications for what had to be the fifteenth time.

"Anything?" Kylie asked.

"Non." Colette's thumb hovered over the screen. "Still just... delivered. Not even read."

"Maybe his phone died?"

"Per'aps." But Colette didn't sound convinced. She typed something, deleted it, typed again.

Kylie glanced over. "Are you texting him again?"

"I am just... I need to say somezing. To explain-"

"Explain what?"

"I do not know!" Colette's voice cracked. "Zat I did not mean to scare 'im? Zat I know I came on too strong? Zat I-" She stopped, stared at her phone. "I cannot stop zinking about 'im, Kylie. It is making me crazy."

"You like, really like this guy, huh?"

"I love 'im." The words came out fierce, certain. "I know 'ow zat sounds. I know we just met yesterday. But I do. I love 'im and 'e will not text me back and I do not know what to do."

Kylie didn't know what to say to that. It did sound crazy. You couldn't love someone you'd known for less than a day, could you?

But then again, she'd given head to five guys at a party last night and couldn't really explain why she'd done that either.

"Do you zink zere is somezing wrong wiz me?" Colette asked quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Zis. All of zis." Colette gestured vaguely. "I cannot stop checking my phone. Cannot stop zinking about 'im. I am obsessing over a man I barely know. Zis is not normal, non?"

"I mean... people get crushes?"

"Zis is not a crush, Kylie. Zis is—" Colette struggled for words. "I cannot eat. I cannot sleep. I cannot zink about anyzeeng else. When I close my eyes I see 'is face and when I open zem I am checking my phone again. It is consuming me and I 'ate it but I cannot stop."

Kylie drove in silence for a moment, trying to find the right words. "You weren't like this before."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, even after Halloween. You were different, but not like this. You didn't... I don't know. You weren't this intense about stuff?"

Colette's laugh was bitter. "You are right. I was not. It was ze tree. Last night at ze restaurant, somezing... changed. Now everyzing is just feeling, wiz nossing to balance. I know I should stop texting him but I cannot make myself stop. I 'ave no choice."

The words hung in the air between them.

"That's really sad," Kylie said finally.

"Oui. It is." Colette checked her phone again. Still nothing. "What about you? You were out late last night. Was it... good?"

Kylie's hands tightened on the wheel. "I don't know if good is the right word."

"What 'appened?"

"I went to Sigma Chi and hooked up with a bunch of guys." The words came out flat, matter-of-fact. "Like, a lot of guys. I sucked five of them off. In bedrooms and bathrooms and this cramped closet. Two of them at the same time."

"Two at once?" Colette's tone was sharp, judgmental. "Mon dieu, Kylie. You are better zan zis."

"Ouch." Kylie flinched.

"I am sorry." Colette's face fell immediately. "I did not mean- Actually, I did mean it. I cannot 'elp it anymore. Zese opinions just come out."

"It's mean."

"It is what I feel! Why should I lie?" Colette caught herself, continued softer: "I used to... zink before I spoke. Now I just say what I zink and I 'ave zese opinions about everyzing and zey just come out of my mouz before I can stop zem."

"I don't like it."

"I know. I did ze same zing to Emma last night. I told 'er she was manipulative and controlling. I criticized 'er choice of restaurant, 'er taste in wine, everyzing. I can see myself doing it but I cannot stop."

"I felt the same way last night. What I did with those guys."

"Did you want to?"

"I... yeah? Like, in the moment I did. They were paying attention to me and it felt good and I wanted to." Kylie paused. "Actually, that's not right. I literally couldn't say no. Like, I knew I should probably stop but the words wouldn't come out. I just kept... going."

"Five times."

"Yeah." Kylie's voice was small. "I can't stop myself from doing stuff I know I shouldn't."

They drove in silence for a moment.

"You used to be so sure of yourself," Colette said quietly.

Kylie felt her throat tighten. "Yeah. I did." She swallowed. "Now I just... I need people to want me. Like, all the time. And I can't say no to them because if I do, what if they stop wanting me? What's that called? When you need people to like, like you to feel good about yourself?"

"I..." Colette hesitated, frowned. "I cannot remember ze English word."

"Whatever. But yeah. I need that all the time now."

"Kylie-

"I know how that sounds. But it's true." Kylie merged into the left lane. "I bombed my exam today, by the way. I couldn't focus and the questions were too hard and I just... didn't care that much?"

"You used to care."

"I used to be smart." Kylie laughed, but it sounded hollow. "Now I'm just... this. Dumb and slutty and only good at cheer and parties and sucking dick, I guess."

"Do not say zat about yourself-"

"Why not? It's true." Kylie glanced at her. "You can see it, right? Like, you remember how I used to be and you can see how different I am now?"

"Oui. I can see it."

They drove in silence for a while. The highway stretched out ahead of them, unfamiliar landscape rolling past.

"This is really fucked up," Kylie said eventually.

"Oui."

More silence. Colette checked her phone again.

"He's not going to text you back," Kylie said gently.

"I know." Colette's voice was barely a whisper. "But I 'ave to keep trying anyway."

"Because you can't help it."

"Because I cannot 'elp it."

Kylie reached over and squeezed her hand briefly before returning it to the wheel. "For what it's worth, I don't think you're crazy."

"And I do not zink you are a slut."

"I mean, I kind of am a slut though," Kylie laughed. "Like, literally. I blew five guys last night. That's the actual definition."

"Per'aps. But it is not your fault."

"Isn't it though? Like, I'm the one who asked the tree to make me know stuff. Nobody made me do it."

"Nobody forced me eizzer." Colette stared out the window. "But we did not know what we were giving up. We zought we were getting what we needed. We did not understand ze price."

They drove in silence for a moment. The highway stretched ahead, unfamiliar landscape rolling past.

"Zere is a zought experiment," Colette said suddenly. "In philosophy. Ze Ship of Zeseus."

Kylie glanced at her. "Theseus?"

"Zat is what I said. A ship. It goes on a long voyage. Every time somezing breaks-a plank, a sail, a mast-zey replace it. By ze time ze ship returns 'ome, every single piece 'as been replaced. Not one original part remains." Colette's voice was quiet, almost clinical. "Ze question is: is it still ze same ship?"

Kylie frowned, trying to follow. "I... I don't know? Like, yes? Because it's still the ship?"

"But nossing of ze original ship remains. Every piece is new."

"But it's still..." Kylie struggled. The logic felt slippery, like trying to hold water. "I mean, it's still doing ship things. It's still a ship."

"Zat is one answer. Ozzers say no-if nossing original remains, it is a different ship entirely. Just somesing zat looks like ze original." Colette's accent grew thick, emotional. "We are ze Ship of Zeseus, non? Every time ze tree gives us somezing, eet takes

away a piece. And we are still 'ere. Still Kylie and Colette. Still remember being Kyle and Cole. But 'ow many pieces can be replaced before we are just... somezing else?"

The question hung in the air between them.

Kylie wanted to answer. Wanted to think it through, to reason her way to a conclusion the way Kyle would have. But her mind didn't work that way anymore. The concepts kept slipping away, like trying to hold onto a dream after waking. She understood the words Colette was saying, but couldn't quite grasp what they meant.

"I don't know," she said finally, helplessly.

"Neizzer do I." Colette laughed, but it sounded broken. "I do not even know 'ow long I will remember zis story. Per'aps ze next time I need somezing-ze next time I am desperate enough-ze tree will take ze Ship of Zeseus from me as well. And zen I will not even 'ave ze words to describe what 'as 'appened to us."

Silence settled over them, heavy and complete.

They drove through it, two girls who used to be boys, asking questions they could no longer answer about whether they still existed at all.

"Turn right in 500 feet." The GPS voice broke the silence. Kylie's hands tightened on the wheel.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"Of what?"

"This. Meeting them." Kylie gestured vaguely ahead. "My parents. Except they're not my parents? They're complete strangers. What if they can tell something's wrong? What if-"

Colette nodded. "What if you need somezing from ze tree."

"I'm scared, Colette. I'm really scared."

Colette didn't have any comforting words. "I am scared too," she said quietly.

"Your destination is on the right."

A large colonial-style house. Tasteful Christmas decorations. Cars lining the street, filling the driveway. Through the windows, Kylie could see movement, people, lights.

She pulled into the driveway. Put the car in park. Sat there.

"Are you ready?" Colette asked.

"No."

"Do you want to wait a moment?"

"Won't help." Kylie took a shaky breath. "Let's just do this."

They grabbed their bags and walked up the front path. Music and laughter spilled out from inside. Through the windows, Kylie could see a Christmas party in full swing-people in festive clothes, holding drinks, smiling.

As they approached, the door swung open. A woman in an elegant dress, blue eyes like Kylie's, face lighting up with joy.

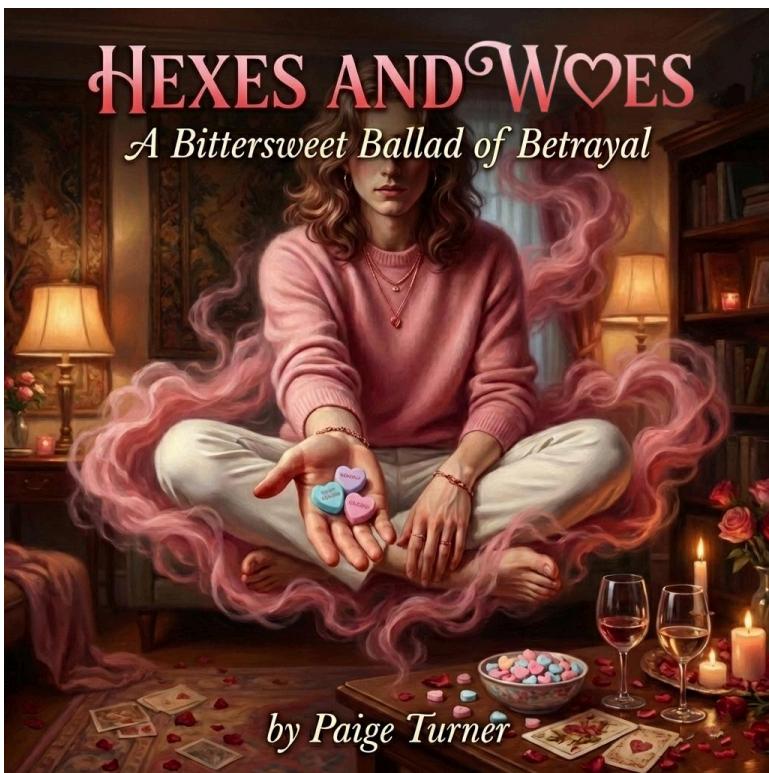
"Sweetheart! You're here!" The woman pulled Kylie into a tight hug. "Everyone, Kylie's home!"

People turned. Faces she didn't know, smiling with recognition and warmth. A man who must be her father moving toward them. Relatives calling her name.



Colette's hand found hers and squeezed once, briefly.  
Then the party pulled them inside.  
And three hours away, in an empty apartment, the tree stood  
in its corner. Its lights twinkling warmly as a new  
ornament-delicate, beautiful, irreplaceable-joined the forty-four  
others adorning its branches.

~3~



Love demands everything. Not politely, not gradually, but with the greedy urgency of something that knows its time is short. Your sanity first, then your identity, finally the very core of

who you thought you were. This is the bargain love offers: give me all of you, and I'll give you all in return.

Some people celebrate Valentine's Day with chocolates and flowers, with reservations at restaurants they can't afford, with small gestures that say "you matter" in the safest possible way. Others celebrate by offering up their very souls. Both are acts of devotion. One is simply more honest about the cost.

Kylie Wynn and Colette Rousseau sat at opposite ends of their apartment's couch on a mid-February evening, close enough to touch but separated by months of careful distance. Two young women who had once been young men. Two people bound together not by friendship or affection but by shared trauma, the kind that either destroys you or binds you together.

Which it would be remained unanswered. Perhaps it would remain unanswered forever.

It was Valentine's Day, which made everything that would unfold both appropriate and cruel. Some nights are meant for declarations, for grand gestures, for choosing someone over yourself. The calendar had marked this night in red ink long before either of them woke that morning thinking the same thought: *I don't want to be alone tonight.*

Loneliness makes us brave in unexpected ways. Makes us reach for connection even when we've forgotten how, makes us offer small gestures—wine, chocolate, chalky candy hearts—that say *you matter to me* when we've lost the words to say it aloud.

But first, context. Every tragedy needs you to understand what brought the players to this moment. And so much had brought Kylie and Colette here, mere months after Halloween had upended their lives and Christmas had carved away what remained.

They'd managed to get rid of the Tree of Knowledge six weeks ago, on Epiphany. January 6th, the day when everyone else on

their block had dragged their Christmas trees to the curb for collection. They'd watched from the window as neighbor after neighbor hauled out dried-out pines and spruces, stacking them in sad rows along the street.

And since its time had come, their tree had finally allowed itself to be removed.

They'd carried it down the three flights of stairs—still heavy with ornaments, still green and healthy despite being January—and set it with all the others. By morning, the sanitation trucks had taken it away.

But the damage had been done. Between the Christmas party at Kylie's parents' house and Epiphany, there had been more knowledge trades. Neither could quite remember them all now. The memories were hazy, fragmented, lost in the fog of those desperate weeks. But they knew there had been more. More moments of need, more knowledge gained, more pieces carved away. They'd both been so altered by the time the tree finally left that they could barely recognize themselves anymore.

What it had taken remained gone. The body heals. Skin knits itself whole, bones mend, flesh remembers how to move and breathe and perform all the small rituals of living. But some wounds have nothing to do with the body. Some live deeper, in the space where you used to recognize yourself, in the gap between who you were and what you've become.

The cruellest wounds are the ones that leave you intact on the surface while hollowing you out beneath. You wake each morning and the face in the mirror is yours, and yet. The tragedy unfolds slowly, not in a single moment of change, but in the quiet accumulation of erasures. In realizing you've become complicit in your own disappearance. That survival demanded you trade away the very things that made you you, piece by piece, until you can

no longer remember what you've lost or why you should mourn it.

The apartment was quiet now. Through the walls came the muffled sounds of other people's celebrations. Music, laughter, the ordinary happiness of ordinary couples doing ordinary things. From the apartment above, rhythmic thumping and muffled moans, someone's Valentine's Day going very differently than theirs. Here, silence pressed down like fog, broken only by the occasional clink of wine glasses and the rustle of takeout containers being picked at without real hunger.

Kylie had learned what people called her. "BJ queen." "Campus slut." "That cheerleader who'll do anything with anyone." The words had filtered back to her through the gossip networks that ran through the college like blood through veins. Comments overheard in bathrooms, whispered conversations that fell silent when she approached, the particular quality of looks she received in dining halls and lecture halls and anywhere people gathered.

She knew her reputation. How could she not?

The words would have destroyed her once. Maybe they still did, a little. But loneliness carves out such perfect hollows in us. Makes room for something else to grow, something that fills the emptiness even if that something is shame, is need, is the kind of hunger that can't be satisfied but also can't be ignored.

Since Christmas, her hypersexuality had only intensified. The compulsions the tree had given her ran unchecked, untempered, consuming. She went to parties not because she enjoyed them but because she couldn't help herself. When guys looked at her with that particular kind of interest, when they wanted her, needed her, some fundamental part of her brain simply couldn't form the word "no."

She'd tried. God, she'd tried.

The sex itself had stopped bothering her, which was somehow worse than if it still hurt. She'd performed oral sex on so many guys at this point that it felt like a skill she possessed, a service she provided, something she was simply good at. The mechanics came naturally now: how to use her tongue, what rhythm to maintain, how to read reactions. Knowledge the tree had granted her, muscle memory that remained even after the tree was gone.

What killed her was the emptiness after. Walking home alone at 2 AM, the taste of strangers still in her mouth, her jaw aching, her knees bruised. Crawling into bed and staring at the ceiling, knowing she'd do it again. Knowing she couldn't stop herself.

And the worst realization, the one that made her want to scream: she could barely remember why she should want to stop.

There is a particular species of isolation that exists only in the constant presence of desire. To be wanted—endlessly, insatiably wanted—by bodies that press close in dark rooms, by hands that reach and mouths that take. Perhaps the loneliest place in the world is inside a body everyone wants but no one knows.

Her mind, once sharp enough to grasp game theory and complex economic models, now slipped away from anything requiring sustained abstract thought. Her grades had stabilized at C-minus, barely enough to maintain her cheer scholarship. She'd stopped trying for better. What was the point?

The cheer squad was the one place she still felt competent, but even there, the whispers followed her. The other girls were polite to her face, included her in routines, smiled during practice. Then she'd overhear fragments in the locker room: "Can you believe she hooked up with..." "I heard she was with three guys..." "It's honestly just sad at this point."

She'd stopped trying to make friends. Stopped accepting invitations. Easier to be alone than to pretend she didn't notice the judgment, the pity, the disgust.

So she went to class, went to practice, went to parties where at least people wanted her for something, even if that something made her feel hollow. And she came home to an apartment she shared with the only other person who understood, but who she barely talked to anymore because talking meant acknowledging how bad things had gotten.

Colette had been on eleven first dates in the past six weeks.

Not a single second one.

The pattern was always the same. She'd match with someone on the apps. Usually someone who seemed sophisticated on paper. Well-educated, interested in art or culture or fashion. But none of them were quite right. Their understanding of art was superficial. They dressed adequately but without real style. They had never traveled, had no desire to. They were all lacking in small but crucial ways.

Ways they didn't measure up to Antonio, who had been perfect. Sophisticated, charming, exactly what she needed. Who had understood her references, matched her intensity, made her feel seen. And who had vanished after one night, never to respond to her desperate texts again.

But she kept trying. Kept lowering her standards. Went on dates with men who weren't quite sophisticated enough, weren't quite cultured enough, weren't quite enough.

The dates would start promisingly. They'd talk about books or film or fashion. But then Colette's filter would fail. She'd criticize their choice of restaurant. Point out that the wine they'd ordered was overrated. Laugh at the mention of some pedestrian television show they'd watched. The opinions would just come

out, untempered by tact or kindness, and she'd watch their faces close off.

And even if they made it past her judgmental commentary, the obsession would begin. The moment someone showed her genuine interest despite her criticism, something inside her latched on with desperate intensity. By the end of the first date, she'd already be imagining their future together. By the next morning, she'd have texted three times. By that evening, five more messages, each trying to strike the perfect balance between interested and casual and failing completely.

The men always withdrew. Sometimes because she'd been too critical, too harsh, too impossible to please. Sometimes because she'd been too intense, too clingy, too much. Often both.

She knew she was doing it. Could see herself becoming too much, too desperate. But knowing didn't help. The romantic obsession the tree had given her—the unfiltered, all-consuming need for connection—ran unchecked now, no Cole-like rationality to temper Colette's overwhelming emotions.

What remained was feeling. Pure, overwhelming, untempered feeling. And loneliness so acute it felt like physical pain.

She'd stopped telling people about Antonio. Knew how it sounded. Knew that claiming to love someone after a single evening made her seem unhinged. But the feeling had been real. Was still real, in some ways. Some nights she still thought about him, still checked her messages hoping he'd finally replied.

Emma no longer spoke to her. The friendship had ended that night at the restaurant when Colette had finally, catastrophically, lost her filter. When she'd told Emma exactly what she thought without softening it, without tempering it.

So she had no friends. No romantic prospects who lasted longer than a single date. No one who understood what she was

going through except her roommate, who she barely spoke to anymore.

Two people drowning in the same water but too isolated to reach for each other.

She spent her evenings alone in her room, watching romantic movies on her laptop, crying at the grand gestures and dramatic declarations, aching for something she couldn't seem to find no matter how desperately she searched.

The heart knows no cruelty greater than wanting. To ache for something just beyond reach, to carry desire so heavy it bends you beneath its weight? This is how we learn that longing itself can be a kind of breaking.

Kylie found Colette in the kitchen around nine on the Fourteenth of February, both of them moving carefully around each other the way they had for weeks. Polite, distant, two people sharing space but not lives.

"So, um," Kylie started, pouring coffee she didn't really want. "You have plans tonight?"

"Non." Colette didn't look up from her phone. "You?"

"No. I was thinking maybe we could just... hang out? Order food or something?"

Colette finally met her eyes. "Oui. I would like zat."

Neither had said what they really meant: *I'm so lonely I can't breathe. I'm drowning and you're the only other person who knows what the water tastes like. I need someone who understands.*

So when Kylie had gone out that afternoon, she'd picked up a bottle of wine. Not expensive—she didn't have money for expensive—but nicer than the cheap stuff, something that suggested she cared about making the evening pleasant. And on impulse, a bag of those conversation heart candies, the chalky Valentine's traditions that everyone knows but no one likes. They

were terrible, but they were festive and sweet and maybe they'd make Colette smile.

Colette had done the same thing, in her own way. She'd stopped at the fancy chocolate shop near campus, the one with truffles in the window that cost three dollars each. She'd bought six of them, carefully selected, arranged in a small white box.

An offering. A gesture that said: *You matter to me. Even though we barely talk anymore, you matter.*

They'd both arrived home around the same time, each carrying their small gifts, each feeling slightly foolish but also hopeful in a way neither would have admitted.

Such small gestures, wine and chocolate and candy hearts. But isn't that how it always starts? The tiniest offerings. Love doesn't announce itself with trumpets and declarations. It begins with someone noticing you're cold and offering their jacket. With someone remembering you like your coffee black. With cheap wine and expensive chocolate on a night when you're both too lonely to pretend otherwise.

The Chinese takeout had been Colette's suggestion. Neutral, easy, something they could pick at while they figured out how to talk to each other again. They'd ordered too much, the way people do when they're nervous, and now most of it sat congealing in containers on the coffee table.

Kylie had opened the wine first, pouring two generous glasses. "I got this for tonight," she said, a little shy about it. "Like, I know it's not super fancy? But the guy at the store said it was good. And it's French."

"It was zoughtful," Colette said, accepting her glass.

"Oh, and I got these too—" Kylie pulled out the conversation candies with a self-conscious laugh. She dumped them into a small bowl on the coffee table, the chalky hearts scattering and settling. "I know they're kind of gross with wine? But it's

Valentine's Day and they looked silly and I thought maybe they'd make you smile?"

"Zey are sweet," Colette said, meaning the gesture not the candies. A small smile touched her lips, the first genuine one Kylie had seen in weeks. "I got you somezing as well." She retrieved the white box from her designer bag, opened it to reveal six perfect chocolate truffles. "From zat shop on Main Street."

"Oh my god, Colette, those are so expensive—"

"It is Valentine's Day. We should 'ave somezing nice."

They each selected a truffle, bit into expensive chocolate that tasted of cream and vanilla and the kind of craftsmanship you could charge three dollars for.

For a moment they just looked at each other, and something of their old warmth flickered to life. They were still so different, still moving in separate orbits, still coping in incompatible ways. But they'd both tried. They'd both thought about each other, wanted to make this evening less awful.

Small kindnesses between broken people. Sometimes that's all love is. Remembering someone exists, caring whether they hurt, choosing to show up when it would be easier to stay away.

The first glass of wine went down quickly, nervously. Conversation came in fits and starts.

"So like, how have your classes been?" Kylie asked.

"Fine. Yours?"

"Fine."

Silence. Kylie picked up a conversation heart from the bowl, turned it over in her fingers without eating it. BE MINE in faded pink letters.

"Ze wine is quite good," Colette offered.

"Yeah, it's like, pretty decent for the price?" Kylie set down the candy heart.

More silence. This was harder than either of them had expected.

Colette refilled both glasses. The wine was helping, loosening something in her chest. "I went on anozzer terrible date zis week."

"Oh yeah?" Kylie took a long drink. "What happened?"

"E talked about 'is job for forty-five minutes. Software engineering. I do not even know what 'e does, just zat it is very boring and 'e is very proud of it."

"I mean, that does sound pretty boring," Kylie offered.

"And when I tried to change ze subject to books, 'e said 'e does not read fiction because it is a waste of time to read 'made-up stories.' Can you imagine?" Colette caught herself, laughed bitterly. "And zere I go again. Zis is why 'e did not text me back."

"At least you're honest?" Kylie offered. The wine was making her feel warm, relaxed. "Like, better than pretending you liked it?"

"Per'aps. But it drives people away." Colette took another drink. "None of zem are right anyway. Zey are all missing somezing."

"Missing what?"

"I do not know. Somezing." Colette stared into her wine.

They sat with that for a moment. The second glass was going down easier than the first.

"I gave my TA head in the library bathroom on Tuesday," Kylie said suddenly. "Like, during the day. I ran into him in the stacks and he just smiled at me and I followed him to the bathroom and I couldn't stop myself."

The confession came without warning, the way they always do when shame has been held too long. When the weight of carrying it alone becomes heavier than the risk of being seen.

Colette opened her mouth, closed it. Kylie could see her fighting against the automatic criticism, the harsh judgment that wanted to come out. Finally she managed: "Zat sounds... difficult. And scary."

"It was." Kylie laughed, but it came out sad. "And I'll probably do it again next week because I can't help myself. Everyone thinks I'm a slut and they're right and I can't stop."

"You are not a slut," Colette said firmly, then hesitated. "Or if you are, it is not your fault."

"Thanks, I think?"

They had each nearly finished their second glass of wine. The awkwardness was dissolving, replaced by something rawer, more honest.

"This is really sad, isn't it?" Kylie said. "Like, two college girls spending Valentine's Day alone together eating expensive chocolate and getting drunk?"

"Oui. It is quite pathetic." But Colette was smiling. "Everyone else is probably out wiz zeir boyfriends or girlfriends. And we are 'ere."

"At least we have each other?" Kylie raised her nearly-empty glass. "Like, that's something?"

"To 'aving each ozzer," Colette agreed, clinking her glass against Kylie's. "Ze only ozzer person in ze world who knows."

They drained their glasses. The wine was warm in their bellies, making everything softer, easier.

"Do you ever think about it?" Kylie asked after a moment. "Like, what it would be like if we could go back? If Halloween had never happened?"

"Every day."

"Me too." Kylie stared into her wine. "I think about being Kyle. About how my mind used to work. About being smart and having plans and caring about things." She laughed, bitter. "Now

I can barely get through a chapter of my textbook without getting distracted by something shiny."

"I zink about being able to... to zink before I speak," Colette said quietly. She gestured vaguely. "Instead I just feel everyzing so intensely and I 'ave no way to step back from it. And zen I say terrible zings to people because I cannot filter my zoughts anymore."

"The tree really fucked us up."

"Oui." Colette reached for the wine bottle, found it empty, set it down with a soft clink. "We should 'ave anozzer."

"We probably shouldn't," Kylie said, but she was smiling.

"It is Valentine's Day. We are sad and alone. We deserve anozzer bottle."

"Okay yeah, you're right."

But neither of them moved to get more wine. They just sat there, warm and slightly drunk, the conversation flowing easier now.

"I'm so lonely," Kylie whispered. "Like, all the time. I'm surrounded by people and I'm still so lonely."

"I know," Colette said. "Moi aussi."

"Everyone wants me for sex but nobody actually wants me. Nobody knows me. And the person I used to be is just... gone. So I don't even know me anymore."

"And everyzing I want, I want too much. Too fast. Too intensely." Colette's voice cracked. "I meet someone and I fall in love immediately and I drive zem away because I cannot control 'ow I feel. And zen I am alone again."

They sat in their shared misery, two people who had almost nothing in common except the truth they carried.

Truth that no one else would believe. Truth that isolated them as surely as any prison.

Colette reached for the last remaining truffle in the beautiful white box. Bit into it. The chocolate was excellent. Rich, complex, exactly as good as it should be for three dollars.

But inside, instead of ganache or caramel or any normal truffle filling, there was something else.

Something that tasted like roses and cinnamon and starlight. Something that made her teeth ache with sweetness that was too sweet, too intense. She tried to swallow but couldn't. Her mouth felt suddenly, impossibly full, but not with chocolate.

"Colette?" Kylie's voice sounded distant. "What's wrong?"

Colette coughed, and smoke poured out of her mouth in a billowing cloud, brilliant pink and shimmering, filling the air above the coffee table. The lights flickered. The temperature dropped. The smoke swirled and coalesced, taking shape, solidifying into a figure that had not been there a moment before.

"What the fuck," Kylie whispered, scrambling backward on the couch.

The smoke faded, absorbed into the figure like water into sand. What remained was a person sitting cross-legged in the air above their cheap IKEA furniture, suspended as if gravity were merely a suggestion they'd chosen to ignore.

They were beautiful in a way that made it hard to look directly at them. Their features shifted between masculine and feminine and something else entirely depending on the angle. Sharp cheekbones becoming soft curves becoming something in between. Their skin had an otherworldly quality, luminous without being pale.

They wore clothes that were somehow both timeless and perfectly of the moment: soft pink cashmere that might have been a sweater, white trousers that looked expensive, rose gold jewelry that glinted at their throat and wrists. Everything elegant, understated. Valentine's Day distilled into an aesthetic.

Their eyes, when they opened, were dark and knowing and faintly, infinitely amused.

Magic always arrives when you're desperate enough to mistake poison for salvation. When your loneliness calls out to the universe like a beacon on exactly the right night. When two broken people sit close enough to touch but separated by everything that's been done to them, wanting connection but having forgotten how to reach for it.

The universe hears such calls. And on Valentine's Day, it answers.

The figure smiled at them both with frank curiosity, ancient eyes taking in two damaged girls on a sagging couch, measuring their despair, their loneliness, their need.

"Well," they said, their voice full of honey and wine and heartbreak. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Kylie and Colette stared, frozen in terror and recognition and the sick certainty that their lives, which had finally begun to stabilize, were about to get worse.

"WHAT! THE! FUCK!" Kylie repeated.

The figure's smile widened, beautiful and terrible and promising nothing good.

"Hello there, ladies," they said. "I have an offer for you."

Neither of them moved. Neither of them breathed. They'd learned, through Halloween and Christmas and everything since, that nothing good ever followed words like "I have an offer for you."

Magic doesn't make house calls to help. It arrives to take, to transform, to extract payment for services you didn't know you were requesting. The girls had paid that price twice already. Their bodies, their minds, their very identities—all currency they'd spent without understanding the exchange rate.

The figure seemed unbothered by their terror. They settled more comfortably in the air, one leg crossing over the other, examining both of them with the detached interest of a scientist observing specimens.

"You can call me anything you like," they continued. "Most people go with 'Cupid' for simplicity. Though I'm not *the* Cupid, you know. I'm one of many. There are thousands of us, actually. Valentine's Day is our busy season." They gestured vaguely. "Quotas to meet and all that."

"Quotas," Kylie managed, her voice strangled.

"Can't have Valentine's Day without people falling in love, can we? The whole holiday rather depends on it." The cupid's smile widened. "I've been doing this for three thousand years. You learn to make it interesting."

Three thousand years of watching people choose each other, destroy each other, sacrifice each other on the altar of devotion. Three thousand years of knowing exactly how love breaks people and doing it anyway because that's the job, that's the calling, that's what Valentine's Day demands.

"What do you want?" Colette demanded, finding her voice despite her racing heart.

"I already told you. I have an offer." The cupid leaned forward, elbows on their knees. "You're both miserable. Desperately, achingly, beautifully miserable. I can feel it radiating off you. Loneliness, longing, yearning so intense it drew me here like a beacon."

"We don't want anything from you," Kylie said.

"Don't you?" The cupid tilted their head. "Both of you sitting here on Valentine's Day, wishing you could go back, wishing things were different. That kind of longing on this particular night, that's a summons, whether you meant it to be or not."

"We did not want to summon you," Colette insisted.

"Intent isn't required. Just sufficient desperation at the right moment." The cupid waved a hand dismissively. "But we're getting distracted. Let me explain what I'm offering, and then you can decide."

Despite every instinct screaming at them to refuse, to demand the cupid leave, to end this before it began, both Kylie and Colette found themselves leaning forward slightly. Listening.

Because desperation makes terrible counsel. Because when you're drowning, you'll grab onto anything that looks like it might float, even if you know—you know—it's pulling you down instead of up.

"Here's your choice," the cupid said softly. "Each of you will decide: stay or betray. Just those two options. Simple, really."

"Stay or betray?" Kylie repeated.

"Let me explain." The cupid held up one finger. "You will decide your future tonight. If you both choose 'stay'—to remain as you are now, to stick together—then nothing changes. You stay Kylie and Colette. Female. Damaged. All your memories intact. Exactly as you are in this moment."

"Why would we choose that?" Colette asked quietly.

"Excellent question! No one has ever chosen that option in three thousand years, but theoretically, it's available."

The cupid stood, beginning to pace, bare feet almost but not quite touching the floor. Their movements were fluid, hypnotic, inhuman in their grace.

"If one of you chooses to betray while the other chooses to stay, the betrayer wins. Completely. Totally. You—" they pointed at Kylie"—would wake up on November 1st as Kyle Nguyen. Male. Intelligent. Sharp-minded and clear-thinking. Everything you were before Halloween. No memory of being Kylie, no memory of the transformation, no memory of these awful months."

Kylie's breath caught. This was it. What she'd dreamed of since that first terrible morning.

Salvation offered on a silver platter. Everything restored. Everything undone. Just wake up and it's November 1st and Halloween was a normal party and you're still Kyle, still whole, still yourself.

"The person who chose to stay," the cupid continued, turning to Colette, "remains female. But more than that. She will become the betrayer's girlfriend. She'll remember everything. Being your friend, being transformed, watching you forget her entirely. But she won't be able to tell you. Won't be able to explain what was done to her, what she sacrificed for you. She'll simply love you. Perfectly, devotedly, helplessly. For the rest of your lives. Unable to ever reveal the truth."

The words fell like stones into dark water.

"That's evil," Kylie whispered.

"Is it?" The cupid looked genuinely curious. "She gets to be with someone she cares about. You get to be whole again. Someone gets saved. Just not both of you."

"And if I betray instead?" Colette asked, her voice barely audible. "If Kylie stays?"

"Same thing. You wake up as Cole Russo. Kylie becomes your girlfriend, remembers everything, can't tell you, loves you anyway." The cupid smiled. "That's what betrayal means. You save yourself. You doom your friend to silent suffering. One of you gets everything you want. The other gets trapped in a performance that never ends."

Silence filled the apartment, heavy and suffocating.

"What if we both betray?" Kylie asked.

The cupid's expression brightened. "Ah! Now that's where it gets truly interesting. If you both choose to betray—if you both try to save yourselves—neither changes back. You both stay

female. Permanently. No way back, no second chances." They paused for effect. "But mutual betrayal has a cost: you will forget each other completely."

"What?"

"You'll have no memory the other person exists. You'll think Halloween and Christmas happened only to you. You'll be utterly alone with the truth, unable to tell anyone, unable to find comfort in shared experience. And—" The cupid's voice dropped, almost gentle. "—you'll never find true love. Not ever. You'll search for it, long for it desperately, but it will always slip through your fingers. That's the price of mutual betrayal."

Thus the cruelest irony of betrayal: choose yourself and lose the very possibility of being chosen. Mutual selfishness doesn't cancel itself out. It compounds, doubles, becomes a curse that follows you through every relationship that fails, every connection that withers, every moment you reach for love only to watch it slip away like water through your fingers. The punishment for refusing to trust is a lifetime of being unworthy of trust yourself, forever seeking what you destroyed in the moment you chose it.

Colette's hand found Kylie's, gripping tight.

Kylie looked at Colette. Colette looked at Kylie. The terror in each other's eyes was matched only by the longing.

To be Kyle again. To be Cole again. To be whole.

But the cost...

"I know this is hard. Let me help you understand," the cupid said softly. They raised one hand, fingers poised to snap.

"What are you—" Kylie started.

The snap of elegant, impossible fingers echoed through the apartment.

The world inverted.

Transformation without pain, without transition, without the mercy of gradual change. One moment Kylie, the next moment not. The body reshaping itself in an instant, as if the past months had been nothing more than a dream from which she was finally, blessedly waking.

Kylie felt her body shift all at once, like a photograph flipping to its negative. Her chest flattened. Her hips narrowed. Her legs lengthened. Muscle built itself across her shoulders, her arms, her core. Her blonde ponytail shortened and darkened, became Kyle's messy dark hair.

But more than the body. Her mind.

The fog lifted. Clarity crashed over her like cold water, shocking and perfect and overwhelming. Thoughts that had been slipping away for months suddenly crystallized. Concepts she couldn't hold became graspable again.

"Holy shit," Kyle breathed, and his voice was his again, deeper, right. "I can think. I can actually think."

Beside him, Cole had experienced the same transformation of body and mind. "Oh god," he breathed, and even that was strange. His thoughts formed in English first, naturally, instead of arriving in French and requiring translation. His accent was gone, his voice deeper, his own. He looked down at himself—flat chest, broader shoulders, slightly overweight male body—and for the first time since Halloween, everything felt right. "I'm—I forgot what this felt like. Being male again. Having a—" He reached between his legs and laughed, shocked and overwhelmed.

The cupid watched them with obvious delight. "Good, isn't it? Being whole again?"

Kyle's mind was racing now, sharp and analytical in ways it hadn't been since October. "This is the prisoner's dilemma," he said, the words flowing easily now. "Classic game theory. Two players, simultaneous decisions, asymmetric payoffs based on

coordination failure. The rational choice for each individual—betrayal—produces the worst mutual outcome. But if we cooperate, if we both stay, we—" "Very good!" The cupid clapped. "That's exactly right. I can see why you used to love economics."

"Wait," Cole said, his philosophy studies returning to his mind. "Kant's categorical imperative. You should only act in ways you could will everyone to act." He looked at Kyle. "If we both betray, we both lose. So I can't will betrayal as a universal rule. The answer is obvious. We both have to stay."

But Kyle was barely listening, his mind churning through probabilities and utilities and decision matrices. "If we assume perfect rationality and self-interest, we should both betray, which means we both lose. But if we can coordinate, if we can trust each other, mutual cooperation yields—"

"Oh honey, no, this isn't going to be any fun if you two are that smart," the cupid interrupted, smile widening.

They snapped again.

The clarity vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Kyle became Kylie again in an instant. Small, blonde, her mind fogging over like someone had wrapped cotton around her brain. The thoughts she'd been forming scattered, impossible to hold, concepts she'd grasped seconds ago slipping away like water through her fingers.

"No," she whimpered. "No, please, I was—"

Cole became Colette just as quickly. The ability to examine her own thoughts with any distance, gone. Just overwhelming feeling again, untempered emotion, the desperate ache of wanting without understanding. And all of it flowed through her mind in perfect French.

"We could zink again! We were ourselves!" Colette snapped. "And now you put us back in zese bodeez—" She gestured angrily at herself, at the sounds coming out of her mouth. "I do not want zis outrrrrageous accent! I 'ate eet!"

"I just wanted to remind you," the cupid said gently, almost kindly. "That's what you could feel like again. That's what I could give you. Complete restoration. Everything you lost, returned in an instant." They settled back in the air, watching them both with those ancient, amused eyes. "Now you understand exactly what you're choosing between."

Cruelty dressed as kindness. Showing them heaven just long enough to make hell unbearable. Giving them back themselves for thirty seconds so they'd know exactly what they were sacrificing, exactly what was at stake, exactly what betrayal could win them.

Some gifts are really weapons. Some mercy is really torture. The cupid had shown them what they could have, and in doing so, made the temptation impossible to resist.

Kylie sat on the couch, tears streaming down her face, feeling the difference between what she'd been thirty seconds ago and what she was now. The gap was unbearable. She'd been smart again. She'd been Kyle again.

And now she was back to this. Back to dim Kylie. Back to thoughts that wouldn't stick. Back to being unable to understand why something was wrong even though she knew it was wrong.

"You needed to understand what betrayal offers. What you're giving up if you choose to stay." The cupid tilted their head. "I can see you're doubting now. Wondering if you can make this choice at all."

"It is cruel," Colette whispered.

"I see you need some more convincing," the cupid said. "Would you like to see? I could show you. Let you experience it."

"Show us what?" Colette asked warily, her voice still thick with unshed tears.

"A vision. Let you experience what would happen." The cupid's smile was knowing. "It might help you decide. Or it might make the choice harder. Either way, it's more interesting than just explaining."

"I'm not sure we—" Kylie began. But the cupid had stopped listening.

"Excellent!" They clapped their hands together, delighted. "Let's start with you, shall we?" They pointed at Kylie, their smile beautiful and terrible and promising nothing good.

"This," they said softly, "is going to be fun."

The cupid reached out to touch Kylie's forehead with one elegant finger, and the world went dark.

Kyle's eyes snapped open to November sunshine streaming through the window of his studio apartment.

For a moment he lay there, disoriented, trying to remember why he felt so relieved. Like he'd woken from a nightmare he could no longer recall.

He sat up, stretched, checked his phone. A text from Colette from twenty minutes ago: *coffee before class, mon cheri?*

He smiled. His girlfriend. Beautiful, sophisticated Colette Rousseau, the French transfer student he'd started dating last month. They'd met at a party—he couldn't quite remember which one—and clicked immediately. She was smart, funny, cultured in ways that made him want to learn more about art and fashion and all the things he'd never paid attention to before.

Halloween last night had been like a dream. She'd worn a French maid costume to the Sigma Chi party, which he'd found incredibly hot. They'd stayed for a few hours, dancing and drinking, then gone back to her place.

Perfect normal college Halloween.

Kyle got dressed, grabbed his backpack, headed out to meet her for coffee before Econ.

In the apartment on Valentine's Day, Colette stared at Kylie's unconscious body, slumped haphazardly on the couch at her side.

"What did you do to 'er?"

The cupid turned to Colette with a cryptic smile.

"You'll see soon enough. We need you to play your role," they said simply.

Colette's eyes widened. "What—"

The cupid touched her forehead.

Pink smoke enveloped her, delicate tendrils pulling her into the void.

The contemporary art gallery was all white walls and carefully curated lighting, the kind of space that made you whisper even when you didn't have to. The exhibition was a retrospective of a mid-century abstract expressionist, bold slashes of color and geometric shapes that probably meant something to people who understood these things.

Kyle stood in front of a large Rothko-inspired piece, hands in the pockets of his well-tailored slacks, tilting his head as if it might help. He checked his watch with a fond smile. Colette was always late. Not because she was disorganized—she was meticulous about everything—but because she took so long getting ready, making sure every element of her outfit was perfect.

The gallery doors opened and every eye turned to watch her arrival.

God, she was beautiful.

Colette wore a burgundy silk blouse tucked into high-waisted black trousers, the outfit simple but clearly expensive. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a low chignon, a few artful strands framing her face. Gold jewelry glinted in the lighting of the gallery, delicate hoops, a simple necklace. She looked effortlessly elegant, like she'd stepped out of a fashion magazine.

As she crossed the threshold, her expression flickered. Confusion, just for a heartbeat, like someone waking up mid-stride.

Where was she? Some sort of art gallery? How did she get here? Who are all these people?

The vision. She was inside the cupid's vision. But where was Kylie? Shouldn't she be here?

Scanning the room again, she spotted a familiar face. But not Kylie. Kyle, smiling brightly at her.

Desire swept over her like an ocean's wave. She wanted to be here. Wanted to see him, her boyfriend of a year, her Kyle. The desires arrived fully formed, overwhelming, and for half a second she recognized them as foreign. Not hers, appearing from nowhere.

Then she was moving toward him and the recognition slipped away, leaving only the wanting.

Kyle kissed her cheek. "You look amazing. Worth the wait."

"Of course I am," she said, her accent playful. "I 'ad to make sure I looked good enough to stand next to zese paintings. Zey are quite beautiful, non?"

"I was about to say the same thing about you."

"Flatterer." She smiled, pleased. "Come. Show me what you 'ave been pretending to understand for ze last fifteen minutes."

They walked through the gallery together, stopping in front of a canvas of violent red slashes across black.

"This one looks angry," Kyle said.

"Per'aps," Colette said. "Or per'aps it is just... energetic. Passionate. Americans always zink red means anger. In France, red is for love."

"In America, red is for stop signs and ketchup."

She laughed. "Zis is why you need me. To teach you zat zere are better uses for red."

"Like wine?"

"Exactement! Wine and passion and art. Much better zan ketchup."

They moved to the next piece, geometric shapes in muted colors. Kyle studied it seriously. "Okay, I'll bite. What am I supposed to see here?"

Colette opened her mouth to answer and felt the explanation already there, waiting, the words lined up perfectly before she'd even thought about what to say. "I see rooms. Boxes. Little compartments where we keep different parts of ourselves."

"That's depressingly philosophical for a Saturday afternoon."

"You asked." She glanced at him with mock severity. "Next time, just say 'zat looks nice' and we can go get wine."

"Zat looks nice," Kyle said obediently. "Can we go get wine?"

She slapped his arm playfully. "Oui."

The performance of normalcy. The theater of relationship. She played her part perfectly because the desires arrived exactly when needed, told her exactly what to want, exactly how to be. Knowledge without origin, feelings without source, all of it designed to create the perfect girlfriend for someone who would never know the truth.

Kyle looked back to the painting. "You know, art is actually interesting when you explain it to me."

"Of course it is. I am always interesting." She linked her arm through his as they walked. "Zis is why you bring me to zese

zings. So I can make you appear sophisticated to your boring economist friends."

"My friends aren't boring."

"Zey are. But zey are your friends and so zey are mine."

They finished walking through the exhibition. Kyle took her hand as they headed toward the exit. The autumn afternoon sun was golden through the gallery windows.

"Thanks for coming with me," Kyle said. "You made that actually enjoyable instead of pretentious."

"Zat is my specialty. Making you look cultured." She squeezed his fingers.

"Want to grab dinner? That Indian place you like?"

Colette opened her mouth to say no. She was tired. She wanted to go home, wanted space, wanted to be alone. The "no" was right there.

But then the desires crashed over her anew.

She suddenly wanted to say yes. Wanted to be with him. Wanted to see his face light up. The desire was sudden and overwhelming and warm, filling her chest, pushing out everything else. It wasn't a thought she'd had, it was just there, fully formed, irresistible.

"I would love zat," she heard herself say.

His face lit up exactly like she'd known it would. "Perfect. I'll call for a reservation."

And just like that—between one heartbeat and the next—the wanting vanished.

It had been so strong a second ago. Desperate. Urgent. Now there was nothing. Just the awareness that she'd agreed to dinner when she'd been about to refuse.

The machinery of compulsion laid bare. An endless cycle of manufactured desire designed to keep her performing, keep her perfect, keep her trapped in a role she'd never be able to escape.

"Kyle—" she started.

Kyle looked at her, expectant and happy.

She tried to find the words. Something is wrong. I'm being made to act this way. I don't really love you. But every time she thought about saying them, she saw his face. Saw the confusion. The disappointment. The hurt if she suddenly revealed the truth, pulled away, rejected him after seeming so eager.

She couldn't. The thought of causing him pain made her chest tighten. He was so happy. She'd made him happy. How could she take that away?

"What's wrong?" Kyle prompted gently.

"I... we should leave soon so zey do not give away our table," she said instead.

"Good thinking." He put his arm around her shoulders as they walked to the car.

She moved with him, fitting against his side. The contact felt right. Natural. Or, it had a moment ago. Now she was just walking, moving through space, while some part of her watched and noticed the pattern.

*Want. Act. Want gone. Want something different. Can't, because new want arrives to stop it.*

They reached the car. Kyle opened the door for her with careful courtesy.

She slid into the passenger seat. As he walked around to the driver's side, she had a moment alone with the understanding.

This was how it would work. How it had been working all night, she realized. She'd wanted to laugh at his jokes, wanted to explain the art, wanted to charm his friends. Each desire arriving exactly when needed, perfectly timed to make her act exactly right.

She wanted to be with Kyle. To make him happy. To be his perfect girlfriend. Those wants were always there, always ready, always stronger than anything else. But they weren't hers.

She couldn't tell him. Not because she couldn't speak, the words would come easily enough. But because she couldn't bear to hurt him. That protective instinct sat warm and certain in her chest, just as manufactured as everything else, just as impossible to resist.

Kyle got in the car, started the engine, reached over to take her hand.

She squeezed back, because she wanted to squeeze back.

Inside, Colette wanted to vomit.

The world froze.

Kyle's smile suspended mid-expression. The street around them became still as a photograph. And pink smoke began to rise from the pavement, swirling around the car, climbing higher, obscuring the frozen scene.

Colette sat in the frozen perfect moment and felt the smoke claim her, dissolving everything into pink nothing.

Colette blinked and she was in a bedroom. Their bedroom, she knew somehow. She was bent over the nightstand with something in her hand. A feather duster?

She could feel a corset laced tight around her ribs, the short skirt barely covering anything, lace scratching against her skin. She glanced down. Black dress, white trim, her breasts threatening to spill out the top.

The Halloween costume. She was wearing that fucking costume. And underneath the skirt—

*You have got to be fucking kidding me.*

She heard the front door open. Kyle was home. She suddenly knew it was their anniversary. Two years.

She turned to look over her shoulder as he pushed open the bedroom door. Still bent over the nightstand, her skirt up, proudly displaying her complete lack of underwear.



Kyle froze, his jaw slack, mouth searching for words that wouldn't come.

The desire crashed over her. She wanted him to see her like this. Wanted to provoke him, tease him, make him chase her. The wanting filled every part of her, pushed out the horror, pushed out everything until there was just Kyle and this game.

"Oh!" she said, straightening quickly and letting the skirt fall back into place. Her accent was thick with mock innocence. "Monsieur! I did not 'ear you come 'ome. I was just... cleaning."

Kyle just stared dumbly.

She turned to face him fully, feather duster still in hand, looking him up and down with deliberate slowness. "'Appy anniversary, monsieur." She paused, then added with a smirk, "I may 'ave been... slacking off a bit. Ze bedroom is not very clean."

"Colette—" he started, his voice rough.

"Oui?" She tilted her head, the picture of innocence except for that knowing smile. "Is somezing wrong, monsieur?"

He crossed the room toward her and she took a step back, playful. "Are you angry wiz me? I can explain—"

"You're not wearing anything under that," Kyle said.

"Oh! Mes pantees!" She glanced down at herself as if just noticing, then back up at him with wide eyes. "I must 'ave forgotten zem! I am such a naughty maid, non?" She bit her lip. "What will you do about it?"

His hands slid underneath her short skirt to find only bare skin. He groaned. "You did this on purpose."

"Per'aps." She pressed against him, feeling how hard he was. "Did it work for monsieur?"

"You know it did."

"Zen show me." It was a challenge.

Kyle pulled her against him and kissed her hard.

She kissed back enthusiastically for a moment, then pulled away with a teasing laugh, dancing out of his reach. "Monsieur! I 'ave not finished my work!"

"Forget the work."

"But ze bedroom is such a mess." She gestured with the feather duster. "I could get in trouble."

"You're already in trouble," Kyle said, and there was something different in his voice now. Not playful anymore. Darker.

She backed up until she hit the edge of the bed, looking up at him with that mix of challenge and invitation. "Oh? And what kind of trouble is zat?"

"The kind where you need to be punished."

Something shifted in her chest. The desire changed. Not the teasing want anymore, but something deeper. She wanted to give up control. Wanted him to take it from her. Wanted to submit.

"Maybe I want to be punished," she heard herself whisper.

Kyle's eyes darkened. "Good." He grabbed her wrist, pulled her toward him. "You've been a very bad maid, haven't you?"

"Oui," she breathed.

"And bad maids get spanked."

Her breath caught. She wanted it. Wanted him to punish her, to discipline her, to make her feel it.

"Bend over the bed," Kyle commanded.

She obeyed immediately, bending at the waist, her hands braced on the mattress, the short skirt riding up to expose her bare ass.

Kyle's hand came down hard on her right cheek and she gasped.

"Count them," he ordered.

"Un," she whimpered.

Another slap, harder, on the left side.

"Deux—"

He spanked her again and again, alternating sides, each strike making her gasp. Her ass burned. She could feel herself getting wetter with each impact.

"Cinq—six—sept—"

By ten, she was trembling, tears in her eyes, desperately aroused.

"Have you learned your lesson?" Kyle asked, his hand resting on her burning skin.

"Oui, monsieur," she gasped.

"I don't think you have." He grabbed her wrists, pulled them behind her back. She felt something soft wrap around them. His necktie. He bound her wrists together, not painfully tight but secure.

"There," he said with satisfaction. "Now you can't tease me anymore."

She was helpless now, bent over the bed, hands tied behind her back, ass red from the spanking, completely at his mercy. And she wanted it. Wanted to be helpless for him, wanted to give him this power over her.

Kyle's hands slid up her thighs, over her burning ass, then between her legs. "You're so wet," he observed. "You liked that, didn't you?"

"Oui," she admitted, ashamed of how much.

"Say it properly."

"I liked it when you spanked me, monsieur," she whispered. "I deserved to be punished."

"Good girl." His fingers found her clit and she moaned. "Now you're going to take what I give you. No teasing. No games. Understand?"

"Oui, monsieur."

He positioned himself behind her and entered her in one hard thrust. She cried out. Kyle started to move and she matched his rhythm, meeting each thrust, pushing back against him.

"Is zis what you wanted?" she gasped. "Your bad maid screaming for you?"

"God, yes."

She tightened around him. "Zen make me scr—ah!—"

She couldn't tease anymore, couldn't play the game, could only feel him moving inside her while she was bound and

helpless. The position, the restraint, the burning of her ass, all of it combined into overwhelming sensation.

His other hand reached around to find her clit, rubbing in rhythm with his thrusts. "You're going to come like this," he told her. Not a question. A command.

"Oui—yes—please—"

"That's right. Beg for it."

"Please let me come," she gasped. "Please, I need—"

"Come for me. Now."

She did, the orgasm ripping through her, her body clenching around him. He kept thrusting through her orgasm, chasing his own. When he came, he groaned her name, buried deep inside her.

Afterward, he carefully untied her wrists, helped her up, turned her to face him. Her ass still burned. Her wrists had red marks from the tie. She looked thoroughly used.

"That was..." He laughed breathlessly, looking almost embarrassed at his behavior. "You're incredible."

"But of course I am," she managed, that teasing note trying to return to her voice. Then, softer, the words she was supposed to say: "I love you so much."

"I love you too. Happy anniversary, Colette."

Later, after dinner and wine and an anniversary gift of a beautiful diamond necklace, Colette lay in bed as Kyle fell asleep with his arm around her, content and happy and completely oblivious.

Colette absentmindedly turned the necklace over in her hands, feeling the weight of his arm, the lingering burn on her ass, the ache in her wrists.

The desire was gone.

She'd wanted all of that so desperately hours ago. Wanted to be spanked, tied up, dominated. Wanted to submit to him,

wanted to give up control. The desire had consumed everything else. And now there was nothing. Just the hollow awareness that it had happened, that she'd performed perfectly, that Kyle was satisfied.

The desire had only been there to make her act. It came, it moved her, and then it left. Like it had never existed. Like it had only been real enough to be useful.

Tomorrow she'd want him again. And the next day. And the day after that. The wanting would come exactly when it was supposed to, turn her into exactly what he needed, then disappear the moment it wasn't useful anymore.

The world froze.

Kyle suspended in sleep. The room became still. Pink smoke began seeping through the walls, through the windows, filling the space with soft rose-colored fog.

Colette felt it wrap around her, obscuring the bedroom, the costume, Kyle's sleeping form.

The world dissolved into smoke and silence.

Paris. Summer. Colette opened her eyes to see the Seine flowing past in its ancient channel, afternoon sun turning the water to gold. The Eiffel Tower visible in the distance, tourists crowding the banks and bridges, the whole city alive with that particular magic that only Paris in summer possesses.

A decade. Somehow she knew. A decade had passed.

Kyle and Colette had been in Paris for a month already, would stay another two. The apartment—their apartment, because they were rich enough now to own property in Paris—was in the 7th arrondissement, all tall windows and original molding and the kind of elegant Parisian aesthetic that cost a fortune to maintain.

Kyle was doing incredibly well. Finance, as it turned out, was perfect for someone with his analytical mind. He'd made senior

analyst at twenty-five, managing director at twenty-eight, partner at thirty. Now, at thirty-two, he had the kind of money that let him take three months in Paris while working remotely, that let him own an apartment here to be close to Colette's family.

They stood together on one of the Seine's bridges, the ornate iron railing in front of them, the river flowing beneath. It was late afternoon, that golden hour when Paris looked like a painting.

Kyle had his arm around her waist, both of them taking in the view. He looked good. Successful, confident, perfectly dressed in his expensive suit. He'd achieved everything he'd wanted. Career success. Financial security. A beautiful, sophisticated wife who fit perfectly into his life.



Colette stood beside him in a green blazer over a burgundy dress that fell to mid-calf, the fabric flowing elegantly. Her brown leather bag hung from her shoulder. Her auburn hair was styled in a shorter bob, a mature style for a maturing, worldly woman. She looked like she belonged here. Like she'd always belonged on Parisian bridges and in expensive apartments and the kind of life where you summered in the city of your childhood.

A decade, or the accumulated weight of one. She hadn't lived each year, each day, each hour. The cupid's vision hadn't made her experience every moment. But she felt them anyway. Felt the erosion, the slow forgetting, as if it had all been real. She possessed the memory of ten years compressed into moments, and the psychological burden was just as heavy.

Time as an inexorable weapon. Not the dramatic transformation, not the single catastrophic moment, but the slow accumulation of days and months and years performing a role until you forget there was ever anything else. Until the performance becomes you, or you become the performance, and the distinction no longer matters.

"I'm glad we came," Kyle was saying, pulling her closer. "Your parents are thrilled to have us for so long."

She wanted to be here with him. The desire sat comfortable and familiar, barely worth noticing anymore.

"Zey are 'appy to see us," she heard herself agree warmly.

But the truth was she barely remembered her parents anymore. Her real parents, Cole's parents, back in New Jersey, who may or may not even exist in this timeline. These parents, the elegant Parisian couple who owned a gallery in the Marais, who spoke rapid French and kissed her cheeks and called her ma chérie? They were strangers wearing familiar faces.

The memories of being Cole had faded like old photographs, details becoming fuzzy, emotions becoming distant. She

remembered that she had been someone else once. Remembered being transformed. But Cole himself? That person's thoughts and dreams and the life he might have lived? Mostly gone.

What remained was this. Colette Rousseau, born in Lyon, raised in Paris, moved to America for college, married to Kyle Nguyen. A woman who loved art and fashion, who was charming and witty and elegant, who performed her role so perfectly that even she sometimes forgot it was a role.

Except in moments like this, standing on a bridge overlooking the Seine with a man who loved someone who didn't really exist, when she remembered enough to feel the weight of what had been lost.

Kyle was talking about his work, some deal he was putting together, the excitement of the challenge. He was happy. He'd achieved his dreams. He had no idea that his happiness was built on her silent suffering, that every perfect moment of their life together was sustained by her inability to tell him the truth.

She looked down at the water flowing beneath the bridge. For a fleeting moment, she wondered what it would be like to choose an ending. Her own ending. It would be so simple to step off the bridge and let the Seine take her.

But she couldn't. Kyle's perfect wife would never do such a thing. The same compulsion that made her explain paintings and wear costumes and smile on cue wouldn't allow even this escape, because of how it would hurt Kyle. She had to keep living.

For him.

The cruellest prison is the one that looks like paradise. The one everyone envies. The one where your captor loves you and has no idea you're suffering. Where escape means hurting someone who's done nothing wrong, who never asked for you to sacrifice yourself, who would be horrified to know the truth.

"You're quiet," Kyle observed, turning to look at her. "Everything okay?"

"Just enjoying ze view," she heard herself say with a soft smile, gesturing at the Seine.

It was the right answer. The perfect answer. Kyle relaxed, smiled back, pulled her closer against him.

"It's beautiful here," he said. "We should come back every summer."

She heard herself agree. "Oui. Every summer."

The desire had become so natural she almost forgot it wasn't hers. Almost forgot there had ever been a time when she'd questioned these desires, fought against them, recognized them as foreign.

Now they just were. She wanted to be with Kyle. Wanted to make him happy. Wanted to be his perfect wife. The wants arrived so smoothly, so consistently, that they felt like truth.

Sometimes—in quiet moments, in the spaces between compulsions—she wondered if Cole had ever really existed at all. If that person she dimly remembered being wasn't just a dream she'd had once, a story she'd told herself.

Maybe she had always been Colette. Maybe there had never been anything else.

The thought should have terrified her. Instead, it just felt inevitable.

Kyle was watching her with affection, this man who loved her, who had no idea what their love cost.

"I love you," he said simply.

"I love you too," she heard herself reply.

And maybe, in some terrible way, it was even true.

The world froze. Kyle's expression suspended mid-smile. The river below became still. The summer afternoon became still as a painting.

Pink smoke rose from the Seine's surface, swirled around the bridge, climbed higher.

Colette stood on the frozen bridge overlooking her perfect Paris afternoon and felt the smoke claim her.

Kylie and Colette bolted upright on their couch, both gasping as they were pulled back from the vision.

"Ohmygod," Kylie blurted out, as if she'd been holding her breath through the entire vision. "Oh. My. God. That was amazing. Like, I could think again! Everything was right! And I was so successful? And everything was so perfect and we were so happy?"

She turned to Colette, eyes shining. "You should have seen how good our life was! How perfect everything was! I could be Kyle again! We could have all of that!"

Colette sat frozen, her elegant face sheet-white, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Colette?" Kylie's enthusiasm faltered. "What's wrong?"

"I was zere," Colette whispered, her voice breaking. "I was 'er. In the vision. I felt everyzing."

"So you know! It was so perfect? Like, you were so sophisticated and happy?"

"I was not 'appy! I was screaming inside!" Colette's hands were shaking. "Eet is 'ard to explain! I wanted everyzing, but it was not what I wanted. I had desires zat were not me. Wanted you—wanted 'im."

She made a choked sound. "God, ze sex—"

They both went very still.

The sex. They'd had sex. With each other. In the vision. Intimate, explicit sex where Colette had been—

Kylie's face flushed deep red. "I didn't mean to—I mean, in the vision I didn't know it was—"

"I know." Colette looked away, her own face burning. She couldn't look at Kylie. Couldn't face her after what Kyle had put her through. The spanking. The begging. Being tied up and helpless. "I know it was not really you."

"I'm so sorry—"

"Non, do not—" Colette's voice cracked. "Zat is not—zat is not ze worst part."

"What's the worst part?"

"I wanted it." Colette's hands twisted together. "All of it. In ze moment, I wanted everyzing. Wanted to please you—'im. Wanted to be punished. Wanted to submit. Ze desires were so strong zey felt real. And zen ze moment it was over, zey were gone. Just... gone. Like zey 'ad never existed."

"Oh," Kylie said quietly.

She looked at Kylie with devastated eyes. "You saw perfect girlfriend. I felt myself disappear. Every day wanting exactly what I was supposed to want until I could not remember what I 'ad wanted before. Until I almost believed ze desires were real."

"I didn't know," Kylie whispered. "I couldn't tell. You seemed so happy. The whole time, I thought—"

"Please," Colette whispered. "Please do not do zat to me. You felt what it is like to be whole again. I felt what it is like to be erased. Please."

Kylie fidgeted with a strand of her hair. "I... won't," she said, but her voice wavered. "I won't do that to you. I promise."

The words sounded hollow even to Kylie's own ears. Because she'd felt it, those precious moments of being Kyle again, of thinking clearly, of being whole. The temptation was still there, singing in her blood.

Colette heard the uncertainty too. A stricken expression passed over her face.

"We are done 'ere," Colette said, turning to the cupid with as much firmness as she could muster. "Neizzer of us will betray ze ozzer. You should leave."

The cupid's smile widened, ancient and knowing. "Oh, not so fast. You might feel differently after you see what's in store for you."

"Non—" Colette started.

The cupid's finger extended toward Colette's forehead. "Your turn."

Cole woke in his dorm room to the smell of coffee from the pot he'd set to brew the night before.

He stretched, stared at the ceiling, and thought about last night.

The Halloween party. He'd been standing in the Sigma Chi house near the drinks table, making some stupid joke about how half the costumes there were just "attractive person in revealing version of a profession," when he'd heard someone laugh behind him.

Kylie Wynn. Adorable, enthusiastic Kylie Wynn. A cheerleader who was completely out of his league. Standing there in her cheer uniform. Which, okay, was exactly the kind of lazy costume he'd just been mocking. Just wearing your actual uniform to a Halloween party? But she'd looked incredible, so maybe that was the point.

"You're not wrong," she'd said, grinning at him. "I literally grabbed this from my locker like an hour ago."

And then she'd just... stayed. Talked to him. Laughed at his jokes. Danced with him even though he was terrible at dancing. Stood close, touched his arm when she laughed, looked at him like he was interesting instead of just some nerdy philosophy major.

Given him her number.

Cole grabbed his phone and opened his contacts. There it was: Kylie Wynn, with a little cheerleader emoji she'd added herself when she'd typed in her number. He hadn't dreamed it.

"Text me tomorrow?" she'd said, with this smile that made him forget how to form words.

Girls like Kylie didn't notice guys like Cole. But somehow last night she'd seemed genuinely interested. Maybe she'd been tired of drunk guys hitting on her all night and appreciated someone who could actually make her laugh?

He should text her. Right? That's what you did when a beautiful cheerleader gave you her number and explicitly told you to text.

But what would he even say? *Hey, did you mean it?* Too desperate. *Want to hang out?* Too casual. *I can't stop thinking about you?* Way too intense.

Cole got up, poured coffee, opened his philosophy textbook. He'd text her later. Kant wasn't going to read himself.

In their apartment, Colette lay slumped unconscious on the couch next to Kylie.

"Now what happens?" Kylie asked.

The cupid looked at her with interest.

"You get to see the other side," they said as they touched her forehead and pink smoke enveloped her.

The campus gym. Late afternoon. Cole had just finished his workout: thirty minutes on the treadmill, heavy weights, pushing himself. He'd started coming regularly six months ago when he and Kylie got together, motivated by her incredible athletic body. If he was going to be with someone who looked like that, he needed to at least try to measure up.

It was working. He'd lost twenty pounds, put on real muscle. His arms had definition now, his chest and shoulders were broader, his core was tight. Not cheerleader-level athletic, but he looked good. Felt like maybe he deserved to stand next to her without people wondering what she was doing with him.

He grabbed his towel, wiped his face, headed toward the locker room.

The group fitness studio door opened and Kylie walked out with some other cheerleaders, all of them in practice gear. She stopped just outside the door, looking around like she'd forgotten something.

Where was she? The gym. Weight racks, treadmills, mirrors everywhere. She looked down at herself. Sports bra, tiny athletic shorts, her body flushed and sweaty from practice. Cheer practice.

The vision. This had to be the cupid's vision. Where was Colette? Was she here?

She scanned the gym and spotted someone looking at her from across the room. A guy heading toward the locker room. It was Cole, but... muscular? Way more muscular than she remembered Cole being.

The desire hit like a tidal wave. She needed him. Needed him NOW. It crashed through her with physical force, heat flooding her body, arousal instant and overwhelming. Not scattered want for attention, not vague need for validation. Just Cole. Just this. Just him touching her right now or she'd go insane.

*No. Not here. Not at the gym. Please not here.*

"Cole!" She left her teammates behind, walking quickly toward him.

"Hey," Cole said, smiling. "Good practice?"

She barely heard him. Her eyes were locked on his body, sweaty from the gym, his t-shirt clinging to the muscle he'd built,

and god she needed her hands on him. Needed his hands on her. Needed him inside her.

"Come with me," she said, her voice urgent. She grabbed his hand.

"What—"

"I think I pulled something at practice. Can you look at it?" She was already pulling him, not waiting for questions, heading past the weight racks toward the hallway.

"Kylie, where are we—"

"Physical therapy room." She found the door, pulled it open, dragged him inside. Small room. Padded treatment table. Mirrors. Door with a lock.

She locked it.

"Are you okay?" Cole asked, concerned.

Instead of answering, she turned and kissed him hard. Desperate. Her hands already pulling at his shirt, yanking it up and over his head.

"Kylie, we're at the gym, I don't think—"

"I don't care." Her voice was raw. "I need you right now. I need you so bad."

"Someone could need this room. Someone could hear—"

"I don't care!" She was already pulling her sports bra over her head, tossing it aside. Her hands went to her shorts, shoving them down along with her underwear in one motion. Completely naked now in the clinical PT room while he was still dressed, still hesitating.

She pressed against him, skin to skin, grabbed his hand and pushed it down between her legs. "Feel how much I need you."

Cole groaned when he felt how wet she already was. "Jesus Kylie—"

"Please." She was working at his gym shorts now, pulling them down. "Please, I'll do anything. Whatever you want. Just please—"

"Kylie, this is—" But he was getting hard, his body responding even as he tried to protest.

"I want to taste you first," she said suddenly, desperately, dropping to her knees on the hard floor.

"What? No, you don't have to—"

"I *need* to." She freed him from his shorts, took him in her mouth without hesitation.

"Oh god—" Cole's hands went to her hair, not pushing, just holding on.

She could see herself in the mirrors. Naked on her knees in a gym PT room, mouth full of him, desperate and hungry and debasing herself because the need was too strong to resist. She should have felt ashamed. Should have cared. But all she felt was the compulsion driving her forward.

She worked him with her tongue, her lips, taking him deeper, making obscene sounds that echoed in the small room. She wanted him hard, wanted him so desperate he'd forget they were in public, forget all his nice-guy hesitation.

"Kylie, stop, you're going to make me—"

She pulled off with a wet sound. "Not yet. I need you inside me first." She stood, turned to the treatment table, bent over it. Legs spreading. Looking back at him over her shoulder. "Please. Like this."

Cole just stared, his cock hard and wet from her mouth, clearly torn between desire and the wrongness of the situation.

"Please," she begged, and hated how desperate she sounded but couldn't stop. "I need it. I need you. Please—"

The crude plea seemed to break something in him. He stepped forward, his hands gripping her waist, and suddenly lifted her.

She gasped as he pressed her back against the wall, her legs wrapping around him instinctively. He was strong enough now to hold her there, suspended, her back against the cool concrete.

"Yes," she breathed as he positioned himself and entered her.  
"God, yes—"

He started to move and she clung to him, arms around his neck, legs locked around his waist. In the mirrors she could see everything, her body pinned against the wall, his muscles straining to hold her, her face twisted in desperate pleasure. She looked wanton. Shameless.

She should care. Should feel degraded. But the need was too overwhelming.

"Harder," she gasped. "More. I need—god, I need—"

Cole gripped her hips and thrust harder, faster. The sound of her back hitting the wall with each thrust echoed in the small room.

"You feel so good," Cole groaned.

"Don't stop," she panted. "Don't stop, don't stop—"

She came hard, crying out loud enough that anyone in the hallway would hear. She didn't care. Couldn't care. The orgasm crashed through her but it wasn't enough.

"Keep going," she begged as soon as she could speak. "Please, I need more—"

Cole kept thrusting, clearly close himself now. "God, Kylie—"

"Come inside me," she panted. "Please, I want to feel it—"

That pushed him over. He came with a groan, buried deep inside her. She came again, the physical response automatic and intense.

For a moment they both just breathed hard. Then Cole pulled out and Kylie climbed down, her feet touching the cool floor.

She could feel him dripping out of her. Could see herself in the mirrors. Sweaty, naked, thoroughly fucked, hair a mess. Looking like exactly what she was: a girl who'd just begged to be taken in a semi-public room because she couldn't control herself.

They dressed quickly, both suddenly aware of where they were. Cole kept glancing at the door nervously.

As they walked out of the gym together, Cole's arm around her shoulders, the desire drained away.

Just gone. Like someone had flipped a switch. Five minutes ago she'd been on her knees, begging, degrading herself because the need was too overwhelming. Now there was nothing. Just the hollow awareness of what had happened, what she'd done.

She'd needed him. Needed sex with him specifically, needed to make him want her, needed that connection and intensity and satisfaction. The desire had been real and overwhelming and all-consuming.

And now it was gone like it had never existed.

Tomorrow she'd need him again. And again. Probably multiple times a day. The hypersexuality wasn't gone, it was just channeled, focused, weaponized to make her the perfect sexually available girlfriend who could never say no, never needed space, never wanted anything except him.

The world froze.

Cole suspended mid-stride. The afternoon light became still.

Pink smoke seeped up from the sidewalk, wrapped around Kylie's athletic form, obscured everything.

Kylie blinked and she was sitting in a lecture hall. Old building, wood paneling, tall windows. Afternoon sun slanted

through, dust motes dancing in the light. She was in the third row, wearing a sundress, her hair loose.

Cole stood at the front. Older. Not a lot, but she could tell. Dressed professionally. Talking to a panel of professors. A presentation board behind him: *Moral Responsibility in the Absence of Free Will: A Neo-Kantian Approach*.

His dissertation defense. Three years. She knew somehow.

Kylie wanted to be here. Wanted to support him. The desire sat warm and certain in her chest.

But she understood nothing.

The words washed over her. Free will, moral responsibility, deontological frameworks. Sentences too long, concepts too abstract. After fifteen minutes, she'd stopped trying to follow and just smiled whenever Cole looked her way.

Love as silent witness to accomplishments you can't comprehend. Supporting dreams you can't understand. Being present in a life that's moved beyond you while pretending you're keeping pace. The slow realization that you've become decoration in someone else's achievement, valuable for being there but not for anything you contribute.

One of the professors asked a challenging question. Cole responded with something complex. The committee members nodded approvingly.

Kylie felt pride rise automatically. She was proud of him even though she had no idea what he'd accomplished.

His defense concluded, Cole looked nervous but optimistic as he walked back to join her.

"You were amazing!" she heard herself say, hugging him tight. "Like, you totally killed it!"

"Thanks," Cole said, squeezing her. "I'm glad you were here."

"Of course! I wouldn't miss this!"

She meant it. Had canceled on her girlfriends who had invited her for happy hour, spent an hour getting ready, sat through ninety minutes of incomprehensible philosophy. Because being here mattered to him.

The committee called him back. Five minutes later, Cole emerged beaming.

"Dr. Russo," he said, testing the title.

"Oh my god!" Kylie threw her arms around him, genuinely happy. "I'm so proud of you!"

They went to the department celebration afterward, a reception in the faculty lounge with wine and cheese and congratulations. Cole's advisor, his committee members, other graduate students, faculty Kylie supposed she had met at various events over the past three years.

Everyone liked her. She was fun, enthusiastic, easy to talk to. Cole's advisor always greeted her warmly. The other grad students joked with her. Faculty spouses made small talk about campus events.

But nobody really talked to her.

They talked around her. Near her. Past her.

A group discussion about departmental politics. She smiled and nodded, contributing nothing. Someone mentioned a controversial paper. She had no idea what they were referencing. Cole's advisor made a joke about Wittgenstein that everyone laughed at. She laughed too, a beat late, not getting it.

The invisible woman at the academic gathering. Present but not participating. Smiling but not comprehending. Loved but not seen.

Kylie excused herself after twenty minutes, looking for the bathroom. The faculty lounge only had one and someone was using it, so she headed down the hall toward the department bathrooms.

The hallway was quiet, out of the way. Old building, dim lighting, nobody around.

She was almost to the bathroom when she heard footsteps behind her.

"Kylie."

Cole's advisor. Professor Brennan. Distinguished, silver-haired, the man Cole looked up to more than anyone. The person who would write his recommendation letters, help him get a postdoc, control his entire career trajectory.

"Oh, hi Professor Brennan!" She turned with a smile.

"I wanted to catch you alone for a moment." He stepped closer. "To tell you how proud I am of Cole. He's accomplished something really special."

"I know! I'm so proud of him too."

"You've been very supportive. That matters more than you might think." Another step closer. "A good partner is essential for an academic career."

"I'm happy to support him." She started to turn toward the bathroom. "I should—"

His hand caught her arm. "You're a very beautiful woman, Kylie."

She froze.

"Cole is a lucky man." His hand slid down from her arm to her waist.

She wanted to pull away. Wanted to scream "don't touch me." Wanted to shove him off and walk away.

But the thought of doing that made her chest tighten with panic. He was Cole's advisor. Cole's mentor. The person who controlled Cole's entire future. Making a scene would humiliate Cole. Would ruin his relationship with the one person who could make or break his career.

She couldn't do that to him. Couldn't hurt him like that. The desire to protect him was overwhelming, stronger than her own disgust, stronger than her fury, stronger than her desperate need to get away.

"Thank you, but I really should—" she tried.

He stepped closer, backing her against the wall. His other hand joined the first at her waist. She tried to push him away. Her hands wouldn't move. *Can't offend him. Can't upset him. Cole needs him.*

"Professor Brennan, I don't—"

"Shh." His hand slid down to her hip, then around to her ass, squeezing. "You don't need to be nervous."

She wasn't nervous. She was terrified. And furious. And screaming inside to move, to shove him, to knee him in the balls, to run back to the party and tell everyone what he was doing.

But instead she stood there. Frozen.

"Such a pretty little thing," Brennan murmured, his hand sliding up under her sundress, over her bare thigh.

*Move. Move. MOVE.*

She couldn't.

"Professor Brennan—" she tried again, but her voice came out small, not the shout she wanted.

His hand reached the edge of her underwear.

She tried to step sideways, to twist away. Her body wouldn't respond. The desire to do everything for Cole held her in place. *Cole needs this man. Cole's entire future depends on this man.*

So she stood there while his fingers slid beneath the fabric.

In the distance, she heard laughter from the party. Cole's voice, happy and bright.

And then, silence.

Brennan's hand stopped, his fingers still touching her. The hallway became still.

Pink smoke seeped through the walls, gentle and inevitable, obscuring the frozen violation.

And like a prayer being answered, everything dissolved.

Kylie blinked and she was sitting on a couch. Cream-colored, modern, expensive. Large windows, afternoon light, plants everywhere. A beautiful house.

She looked down and almost screamed.

Her belly was enormous. Stretched tight over something moving inside her. She touched it with both hands, feeling the hard curve, and the baby kicked back against her palm, a strong, insistent push from inside her body.

Seven months pregnant. She knew somehow. Her third child.

Everything felt wrong. Her body was heavy in ways she couldn't have imagined. Her breasts were swollen and tender, her back ached, her feet felt puffy and tight. Not that she could see past her belly to her own feet anyway. When she shifted on the couch, the movement was awkward, ungainly. She had to use her arms to lever herself because her core muscles were useless under the weight.

The baby moved again, a rolling sensation like something sliding around inside her, pressing against her ribs, making it hard to breathe deeply. She felt it press down low, against her bladder, and knew she'd need to pee again soon even though she'd just gone.

There was a whole person growing inside her, moving on its own, taking up space, pressing on everything, and she had no memory of choosing this, of wanting this, of—

She heard the front door. "I'm home!"

Cole. Older—early thirties now. Tenure. Associate professor. The successful academic coming home to his family.

Emma was leaning against her side, showing her a drawing. Four years old, floral dress, chattering about something. And Michael—two years old—sat on the floor with his blocks and toy cars.

The perfect scene. Mother and children waiting for daddy to come home.



Suddenly, the revulsion over her pregnancy was simply gone. She wanted to be here. Wanted to be a good mother. Wanted to make Cole's life easier. The desires sat warm and steady in her chest.

Cole walked into the living room and stopped, a smile spreading across his face at the scene before him.

Perfect tableau. Mother and children, peaceful and content, bathed in golden afternoon light.

Five years of marriage. Two kids with a third on the way. Kylie's entire existence had narrowed to this: wife, mother, the person who managed the household while Cole pursued his career.

She'd done personal training after college, taught some barre classes at a studio. Nothing serious, but it was something. When Emma was born, she'd quit. It just made sense. Cole's career was important, required long hours and focus. Someone needed to be home with the kids.

So she was home. Always home.

The beautiful modern house felt like the only world that existed. Every carefully chosen piece of furniture, every plant, every decorative object, all part of the perfect life she wanted to maintain for her family.

This is the slow disappearance. Not dramatic, not violent, just the gradual narrowing of a world until it fits inside four walls. Until your identity consists entirely of roles you play for other people. Until you can't remember what you wanted before you wanted what you were supposed to want.

"This is nice," Cole said, crossing to kiss her forehead. "Peaceful afternoon?"

"The kids have been good," she heard herself say with a warm smile. "We've been having fun, haven't we?"

Emma nodded enthusiastically. Michael looked up from his blocks long enough to shriek "Daddy!" before returning to his construction.

Cole sat on the arm of the couch, his hand resting on Kylie's shoulder. "You look beautiful today."

"Thank you," she heard herself say, pleasure warming her voice.

She wanted to please him. Wanted to be the wife he came home to. Wanted this peaceful beautiful scene to be real.

She knew she'd been sitting here for hours, playing with the kids, reading books, helping Emma color, watching Michael stack blocks. The same things she did every day. Every single day. While her body grew heavier with the third child, while her world stayed small and domestic, while her identity disappeared completely into this role.

She'd forgotten what else there was. Forgotten what Kyle had wanted beyond this. Sometimes she wondered if there had ever been anything else at all.

She was just this now. Just Kylie. Just Mom. Just the wife who made Cole's work possible by handling everything else.

The baby kicked hard against her ribs. She touched her belly, the maternal gesture automatic.

"Only two more months," Cole said. "Are you nervous?"

"A little," she heard herself admit. "But excited too."

Two more months of pregnancy. Then sleepless newborn months. Then years more of this, the endless cycle of childcare and domestic management while Cole pursued his career and she stayed home with their children.

She wanted it. Wanted to be a good mother. Wanted to support his career. Wanted this life.

But underneath the desire, buried so deep she could barely feel it anymore, was the awareness that she'd disappeared. That Kyle was gone. That the person she'd been had been completely erased and replaced with this, with Mom, with Wife, with the beautiful supportive partner in the perfect house with the perfect family.

Tomorrow she would do this again. And the next day. And the next. For twenty more years. Thirty. Until the kids were grown and gone and she was just the aging wife of a philosophy

professor, her entire life having been consumed by this role she couldn't remember choosing.

Cole kissed her, tender and affectionate. "I love you. You're amazing, you know that? Everything you do for this family."

"I love you too," she heard herself say softly.

She wanted to say it. The desire was warm and real in her chest.

The world froze.

Cole suspended mid-kiss. Emma's drawing held motionless. Michael's blocks frozen mid-stack. The afternoon light became still.

Pink smoke seeped through the large windows, gentle and inevitable, filling the beautiful modern living room.

Kylie sat on the cream couch in her pink dress, one hand on her pregnant belly, surrounded by her frozen perfect family, and felt the smoke claim her, dissolving the house and the husband and the children and the future that would consume her entirely.

Colette and Kylie both gasped as they were pulled back to Valentine's Day.

"Mon dieu," Colette breathed, her accent thick with emotion. "I know it was not real. But it felt so real. I had a career—I was successful, I 'ad tenure, I 'ad published." She turned to Kylie with shining eyes. "You saw it too. Saw our family—"

Kylie sat frozen, her expression pure horror. The hallway. Brennan's hands on her. Unable to move, unable to speak, unable to protect herself because it would hurt Cole.

"Kylie?" Colette's voice faltered.

"I couldn't stop him," Kylie whispered. "He was touching me and I couldn't—I tried to push him away but I couldn't hurt Cole's career. I just stood there and let him—"

She wrapped her arms around herself.

Colette went very still. "What 'appened?"

"Cole's advisor. Brennan. In the hallway after the dissertation thing. He cornered me. Touched me. I wanted to scream, wanted to run, but the compulsion wouldn't let me protect myself if it meant hurting you—him—" Her voice broke. "Please, you can't do that to me."

"I did not know," Colette whispered. "I am so sorry."

"Please," Kylie whispered. "Don't make me live that life. Please."

The cupid watched them both with those ancient, knowing eyes.

"Well," they said softly. "Now you both know. Now you both understand exactly what betrayal brings. And what it costs."

Salvation has a price, and the price is often paid by someone else. What if being saved means condemning your friend to silent suffering? To a life that looks perfect from every angle, that photographs beautifully, that everyone envies? But while inside she dies by degrees, slowly, quietly, where no one can see? Is that a price any of us can ask another to pay?

The cupid watched them both with infinite patience, as if they had all the time in the world. Perhaps they did.

"So," the cupid said softly. "Now you understand. Both of you have felt what it's like to be whole again. Both of you have experienced what you will suffer if the other chooses betrayal. The question is: what will you choose?"

The silence stretched between them, both lost in the same calculation.

Kylie's mind kept circling back to those moments of clarity when she'd been Kyle again. Sharp, analytical, successful. She could have that back. Could wake up November 1st with no memory of these terrible months. All she had to do was betray Colette.

She looked at her roommate. Elegant even in distress, mascara smudged from crying. Her roommate. Her only friend who understood.

Could she do that to her?

Across from her, Colette was running the same equation. The rationality she'd lost, the ability to think instead of just feel. She could be Cole again, male, accomplished, whole. Everything she'd glimpsed in the vision.

She looked at Kylie, small and blonde and damaged. The only other person in the world who knew the truth.

Could she condemn her to that fate?

But the temptation. God, the temptation.

And worse. The fear. What if the other person was thinking the same thing? What if trust was just another word for being the fool who stayed while the other saved herself?

The silence stretched on.

"What are you thinking?" Kylie whispered finally.

"Zat I want to be Cole again," Colette admitted. "More zanyzing."

"Me too. I want to be Kyle so bad."

More silence.

"But I will not do zat to you," Colette said quietly. "Ze desires that are not yours, that appear just to make you act right, not being able to tell anyone—it was 'orrible."

"Yeah," Kylie said. "I can't do that to you either."

They looked at each other, both thinking the same thing: But what if you betray me anyway?

Because that was the real core of the prisoner's dilemma. Even if they both wanted to cooperate, even if they both cared about each other, the reasonable thing to do was betray. Beyond the temptation of becoming yourself again lay the horror of knowing you could be trapped forever if the other person

betrayed you. The only way to protect yourself against betrayal was to also betray.

And the only way mutual cooperation worked was trust.

But how could they trust each other when they both wanted the same thing so desperately?

Trust is the most dangerous thing you can offer someone. More dangerous than hate, more dangerous than love itself. Because trust means giving someone the power to destroy you and choosing to believe they won't use it. It means being vulnerable when every instinct screams for self-preservation. It means risking everything on the hope that someone else will value you more than they value themselves.

"Do you trust me?" Kylie asked, her voice small.

"I want to," Colette said honestly. "But I am so scared."

"Me too."

The cupid stood, stretching languidly. "I hate to rush you, but we do need to resolve this. It's nearly midnight and I have other appointments." They walked to the coffee table, picked up the small bowl of conversation hearts. "Let's make this interesting."

The cupid tipped the bowl, and the candy hearts tumbled onto the coffee table. As they fell, the words on them changed. Every single heart now read either STAY or BETRAY in faded pastel letters.

The cupid's elegant fingers sorted through them, selecting four hearts. Two pale pink STAY hearts. Two light blue BETRAY hearts.

"Each of you gets both options," the cupid explained. They handed Kylie one STAY and one BETRAY. Did the same for Colette. "Turn your backs to each other. Choose one. Hold it in your closed fist."

"Wait—" Kylie started.

"No more discussing it. No negotiating. Just choose." The cupid's voice was firm. "Turn around."

Kylie and Colette turned their backs to each other on the couch, each holding two candy hearts. One offering salvation, one offering sacrifice.

The apartment was silent except for their breathing.

Kylie stared at the two hearts in her palms. Pink STAY in her left hand. Blue BETRAY in her right.

She'd already run through all the logic her clouded mind could handle. Already felt the temptation of being Kyle again, already witnessed the horror of what betrayal would do to Colette. Already imagined every outcome.

But now, holding the actual choice, logic felt distant and useless.

This wasn't a thought experiment anymore. This was real. In a few seconds, she'd close her fist around one of these hearts and that would be it. No taking it back. No changing her mind.

Behind her, she could hear Colette's breathing, quick, shallow, terrified.

What if Colette betrayed her? The thought slithered in unbidden. What if right now, behind her back, Colette was choosing BETRAY? Choosing to be Cole again, choosing to trap Kylie in silent suffering?

It would be logical. Self-preservation. The smart move, really.

But some choices can't be made with logic. Some decisions require a different kind of courage, the courage to be foolish, to trust when reason says don't, to choose vulnerability when self-preservation screams for betrayal. Sometimes the only way forward is to close your eyes and leap, hoping someone will catch you.

She looked at the two hearts again, her hands trembling.

Behind her, Colette held her own choice. STAY. BETRAY.

She couldn't think through this like Cole would have, analyzing the moral imperatives and ethical implications. All she had was feeling. And the feeling was terror.

Not just of being betrayed. Though that was there, the sick certainty that Kylie might choose BETRAY, might choose to be Kyle again and trap Colette in the prison she'd just witnessed.

Worse than that: the terror of her own temptation.

Because she wanted it. Wanted to be Cole so desperately it hurt. Wanted the successful career, the intellectual respect, the devoted wife.

The BETRAY heart sat in her right palm. So small. So easy. Just close her fist around it and all of this would end. She'd wake up as Cole Russo with no memory of these terrible months.

And Kylie would suffer. Forever. Silently.

The romantic movies she'd been watching flashed through her mind. All those grand gestures, all those declarations of love, all those moments when someone chose someone else over themselves.

She'd thought they were beautiful. Had cried at them, had ached for that kind of devotion.

But those were stories. This was real. And in real life, people chose themselves. That was survival.

Behind her, she heard Kylie draw a ragged breath.

Colette looked at the two hearts in her palm. Her hands were shaking so badly the candies rattled together.

"Choose," the cupid said softly. "Now."

Spring came to the college town in a rush of green and warmth, winter's grip finally releasing. The small chapel stood on

a quiet street, ivy climbing its stone walls, stained glass windows catching the warm sun.

Inside, in a small room off the sanctuary, Colette paced.

Back and forth across the hardwood floor, her elegant fitted gown whispering with each anxious step. The train pooled and dragged behind her, the low back exposing her shoulders. Small white flowers were woven into her auburn hair, which fell in loose waves. Her hands twisted together, then checked her phone again—still nothing—then smoothed down the fabric, then twisted again.

She'd been texting all morning. The messages sat there in her phone, evidence of her spiral. The first had been sweet. The second, an hour later, anxious. Then: *Are you okay?* Then: *Please respond.* And finally, twenty minutes ago: *I am sorry about what I said yesterday. Please tell me you are still coming.*

No response. Not to any of them.

Twenty minutes late now. Twenty minutes past when the ceremony should have started.

Colette knew what this looked like. She'd done this before. Obsessive texting that drove people away. But this was different. This was her wedding day.

Except... was it?

What if yesterday had been the final straw? During the preparations, she'd said something cutting. Something harsh. She'd seen the hurt flash across—

Her hands twisted together again. This was her pattern. Too intense. Too much. Saying cruel things without meaning to, needing constant reassurance, spiraling over every little thing.

What if she'd finally pushed too far?

Through the door, she could hear murmurs from the chapel. The guests were waiting. How long would they wait? How long

before someone came to tell her the obvious, that she'd been left at the altar by someone who'd finally had enough?

The door opened.

A figure stood in the doorway, backlit by the hallway lights. For a heartbeat, Colette couldn't breathe.

Then she saw: blonde hair in soft waves. Small frame. A short dress with layers of tulle that filtered the light. White heels.

Kylie.

On that fateful Valentine's Day in the apartment, two hands had opened to reveal two candy hearts.

STAY.

STAY.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. Just stared at the evidence in their palms that both had chosen each other. Both had chosen trust.

The weight of that settled between them. Both had been offered everything. Both had said no. And in that refusal, in that choice to protect each other over saving themselves, something new took root in soil made fertile by sacrifice.

The cupid laughed, genuine delight in the sound. "Well! That's... new. First time in three thousand years." They leaned forward with obvious interest.

Something in the air shifted.

It wasn't dramatic. Wasn't like the transformations or the visions. Just a subtle change in the atmosphere, like the moment before dawn when the darkness begins to ease.

Kylie looked at Colette and saw her differently.

Not just her damaged roommate. Not just her fellow victim. But someone beautiful. Someone strong. Someone who'd had every reason to save herself and had chosen Kylie instead.

Someone who'd looked at the choice between being whole and being together and had chosen together.

The feeling that bloomed in Kylie's chest was warm and soft and growing. Not the compulsive sexuality that drove her to frat parties. Not the automatic affection she felt every time she saw Cole in the vision. This was different. She looked at Colette and felt something click into place. She wanted to know her. Wanted to be near her. Wanted to choose her again tomorrow and the day after that.

And across from her, Colette was experiencing the same shift. Looking at Kylie—small and blonde and so damaged but also so brave, who'd had every reason to betray but had chosen trust instead—and feeling something open in her chest like a flower turning toward sunlight.

Not the obsessive romantic desperation that drove her to dating apps and clingy texts. Not the compelled performance of devotion. This was real. This was chosen. This was a desire to reach out and not let go. Something that felt like falling, but softer. Something that felt like coming home.

"Oh," they breathed at the same time.

The cupid smiled, that ancient knowing smile. "The first seeds of love," they said softly. "Earned through sacrifice. Forged through trust. Yours to keep. To nurture. If cared for well, they will grow and blossom."

"Did you—" Colette started. "Did you make us feel zis way?"

"Me? No," the cupid admitted. "I can create desire. You felt it in the visions. That was me." They leaned forward. "But this? What you're feeling now? I can't touch that. That's just what happens when two people choose each other."

"So this is real?" Kylie whispered.

"As real as anything gets after what you've been through." The cupid stood. "You both chose sacrifice over salvation. That's rare. What grows from that choice? That's yours to figure out."

"Wait," Colette said. "What 'appens now? Are we still—" She gestured at herself, at Kylie.

"I'm afraid so," the cupid said matter-of-factly. "That was the deal. You stay as you are, forever. You'll struggle with the compulsions that were carved into you. Nothing about that changes." Their expression softened slightly. "But you won't have to struggle alone. You have each other. And sometimes that's enough."

The cupid began to fade, dissolving into pink smoke that drifted toward the ceiling.

"Happy Valentine's Day," their voice echoed as they disappeared completely. "May you have many more together."

And then they were gone.

Kylie and Colette sat on the couch, still holding their STAY hearts, looking at each other in the sudden quiet.

"So," Kylie said, a nervous laugh bubbling up. "We're girlfriends now?"

Colette was quiet for a moment, then a small smile touched her lips. "I zink so. Is zat okay?"

"Yeah," Kylie said, and realized she meant it. "It's okay. It feels right."

They sat there, neither quite sure what to do next. The apartment felt different somehow. Smaller. More intimate. The space between them on the couch both too much and not enough.

Colette reached out slowly, offering her hand. Kylie took it.

Their fingers intertwined, and they sat like that for a long moment, holding hands on Valentine's Day, two people who'd chosen each other when they could have chosen themselves.

"What do we do now?" Kylie whispered.

"I don't know," Colette admitted. "But we figure it out togezzer?"

"Together," Kylie agreed.

And so it began. Not with certainty, not with ease, but with two damaged people reaching for each other in the dark and discovering that sometimes, broken pieces fit together in ways whole ones never could.

A few weeks later, they'd been on the couch watching one of Colette's romantic comedies that neither was paying attention to, sitting closer than roommates but not quite touching. Kylie had made some joke—she couldn't even remember what—and Colette had laughed, and when she turned to look at Kylie the space between them suddenly felt impossible to maintain.

It was tentative. Uncertain. Kylie's hands found Colette's face, soft and careful. Colette's fingers threaded through Kylie's hair. Their lips met and it was awkward and sweet and absolutely terrifying and somehow exactly right.

When they pulled apart, both were crying.

"Okay?" Colette whispered.

"Yeah," Kylie said, laughing through her tears. "Really okay."

They kissed again, slower this time, learning each other.

The early days had that fragile, precious quality that new love always does, terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure. They went on actual dates after that. Coffee shops where Colette ordered in French just to make Kylie laugh, dinners where they held hands across the table, long walks through campus when the weather turned warm. Stolen kisses under blooming trees, both of them giddy and nervous and falling.

It was spring, and everything felt possible.



They took their time with physical intimacy, both uncertain how to navigate this new territory. Stolen kisses became longer kisses. Holding hands became bodies wrapped around each other on the couch. Making out became hands exploring, tentative touches, whispered questions and giggles about the awkwardness of it all.

That first night they went further, fumbling and gentle and learning each other's bodies with patience and care, it felt different from anything either had experienced before. Not compulsion. Not performance. Just them, choosing each other, finding out what this could be.

Love doesn't announce itself with trumpets. It grows quietly, in the spaces between words, in small gestures repeated until

they become ritual. It's learning how someone takes their coffee. It's knowing when they need space and when they need holding. It's choosing them every day, even on the days when choosing is hard.

Sex between them was different too. Not perfect—how could it be, with everything they carried?—but real in ways nothing else had been. Kylie's compulsion was still there, that underlying drive that had controlled her for so long. But with Colette it felt less desperate, more chosen. Colette's passionate intensity was still there too, but with Kylie it felt reciprocated rather than one-sided.

They learned what the other needed. That Kylie needed Colette to initiate sometimes, to prove this was wanted and not just tolerated. That Colette needed constant reassurance, needed to hear "I'm not going anywhere" when her anxiety spiked.

It wasn't perfect. But it was theirs.

They still struggled. They would always struggle.

Colette still had no filter. At a dinner with the cheer team, someone mentioned the upcoming football game. Colette had announced, "I will never understand why Americans cannot watch a match wizout all ze dancing girls in ze tiny costumes shaking their derrières!" The table went silent. Kylie's face crumpled.

Later, in the car: "I cannot believe I said zat."

"You always say stuff like that," Kylie said quietly, staring out the window.

"I know. I am sorry. I just—it comes out and I cannot stop it and—" Colette's hands gripped the steering wheel. "I saw your face. I 'urt you."

"Yeah."

"I am trying. I swear I am trying."

Kylie reached over and took Colette's hand. "It's okay. I know you didn't mean it."

"It is not okay—"

"No, it's not. But like... we figure it out anyway?"

Colette squeezed her hand. "Oui. We figure it out."

And they did, imperfectly. Colette learned to catch herself sometimes, to bite back the harshest comments. Not always. But she tried. And when she failed, Kylie learned to see past the words to the person struggling beneath them.

Damage doesn't disappear because you love someone. Compulsions don't vanish because you've found your person. But maybe—maybe—having someone who sees your brokenness and chooses you anyway makes the struggle bearable. Maybe that's what love is: not fixing each other, but carrying each other's burdens when they get too heavy to bear alone.

Kylie's hypersexuality was harder to manage. The compulsion didn't care that she was in a relationship now. When guys looked at her with that particular interest, when they wanted her, some fundamental part of her brain still couldn't form the word "no."

One night she texted Colette from a party: *I need you here. Help. Please.*

Colette arrived twenty minutes later to find Kylie outside on the porch, wrapped in her own arms, shaking.

"What 'appened?"

"There was a guy. He was—I could feel it starting. I had to leave before—" Kylie's voice broke. "Can we go home?"

"Of course."

In the car, Kylie said quietly: "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For being like this. For needing you to rescue me from parties like I'm a child who can't control herself."

Colette pulled over, put the car in park, turned to face her. "It is not your fault," she said firmly. "You did not choose it. You texted me instead of—" She took Kylie's hand. "You chose me. That is what matters."

It wasn't always that clean. Kylie slipped sometimes. Came home at 3 AM, mascara smudged, hating herself. Each time, she had expected Colette to leave. Each time, Colette hadn't.

They balanced each other in unexpected ways. Kylie's diminished intellect meant she couldn't overthink things the way Colette wanted to. When Colette spiraled—convinced their feelings weren't real, that they were making a mistake—Kylie would take her hands and say simply: "I love you. That's what matters. The rest is just noise."

And Colette's emotional intensity provided the passion and drive that Kylie's scattered attention couldn't sustain alone. When Kylie got lost in her own head, convinced she was too broken to deserve love, Colette would hold her face and say fiercely: "You are not broken. You are 'ere. Wiz me. And I am not letting you go."

Neither of them was whole. But together, they were enough.

They graduated on a sunny May afternoon, both somehow managing to finish their degrees despite everything. Kylie with her C-minus average in Sports Marketing, Colette with honors in Fashion Merchandising.

When they received their diplomas, they kissed, right there in front of everyone, while their families cheered.

Their families who had no memory of Kyle or Cole. Who believed their daughters had always been Kylie and Colette, had met as freshman roommates, had fallen in love over the course of college.

The narrative made sense to everyone. Two college sweethearts starting their lives together. Normal. Happy.

If only they knew. If only they understood that this love was forged in transformation and loss, that these vows-to-come would mean something far deeper and darker than anyone watching could possibly comprehend.

The proposal happened on an ordinary Tuesday night a few months later. They were on the couch, Kylie scrolling on her phone with her head in Colette's lap, Colette absently playing with her hair while watching some French film.

"We should get married," Colette said suddenly.

Kylie sat up. "What?"

"I zink we should get married." Colette's accent was thick, the way it got when she was nervous. "We are already—we choose each ozzer every day. Why not make it official?"

"That's the worst proposal I've ever heard," Kylie said, but she was smiling.

"I do not 'ave a ring. I did not plan zis. But—" Colette took her hands. "I want to marry you. I want to choose you forever, not just today."

Kylie kissed her. "Yeah. Okay. Yes."

"Zat is a yes?"

"That's a yes, you dork."

Wedding planning brought out Colette's obsessive tendencies in full force. She spiraled over flower arrangements, texted the venue coordinator obsessively, lay awake at night worrying about seating charts. When she'd texted the florist twenty times in one day, Kylie had gently taken her phone away. "Babe. You're doing the thing again."

And Colette had recognized it, had let Kylie help her step back, had been grateful for the grounding.

But the morning before the wedding, during final preparations, Colette had snapped at Kylie about something trivial. Her lipstick shade, the flowers, something that shouldn't have mattered. She'd seen the flash of hurt on Kylie's face and immediately regretted it.

"I am sorry. I did not mean—"

"It's fine," Kylie had said, but her voice was tight.

It wasn't fine. But they'd work through it. They always did.

Kylie had gone to get ready with her family. Her phone had died sometime that morning. And Colette had started texting, anxious when there was no response, spiraling into the old familiar patterns of obsession and fear.

Until the door to the sanctuary had opened, and Kylie was there, and everything was going to be okay.

"Are you nervous?" Kylie asked, standing in the small room in her wedding dress.

"Terrified," Colette admitted. "But not about marrying you. Just about... everyzing else."

Kylie understood. The future spreading before them was uncertain, complicated. They would always struggle with the compulsions that controlled them. But they had each other now. That made it bearable.

"Do you ever—" Kylie hesitated. "Do you ever wish we'd chosen differently? On Valentine's Day?"

Colette was quiet for a moment. Honest consideration.

"Sometimes," she admitted finally. "When I cannot zink ze way I want to. When I feel ze obsession taking over and I 'ate zat I cannot control it. Sometimes I zink about being Cole again."

"Me too," Kylie said. "When I'm doing something dumb and I know Kyle would've been able to figure it out. Or when I can't stop myself from wanting sex even though I don't actually want

it." She squeezed Colette's hand. "But then I think about you. And I think I'd rather be Kylie with the real you than Kyle with a lie."

"Zat is 'ow I feel too, ma chérie," Colette said.

They stood together, two women who'd been two men a year and a half ago, about to walk down an aisle and make promises to each other in front of families who had no idea what those promises really meant.

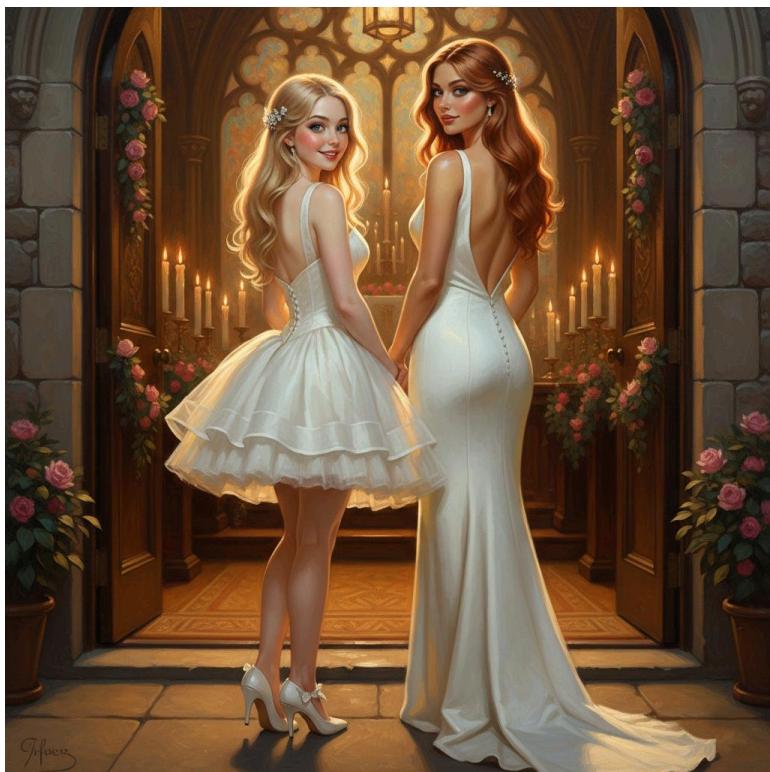
A knock on the door. It was time.

"Ready?" Kylie asked.

"No," Colette laughed. "But let us do it anyway."

They walked to the doors of the chapel sanctuary together, hands clasped. Through the small window, they could see the intimate gathering. Just their parents, Colette's aunt and uncle who'd flown in from France, Kylie's grandmother, a handful of close family friends. Candles flickered on the simple altar. Flowers adorned the ends of the wooden pews.

The music started. They walked down the short aisle side by side, not willing to be separated even for tradition's sake. Both in white. Both smiling. Both choosing each other with every step.



Kyle and Cole were gone. Those boys who'd walked into a costume shop on Halloween had been erased, transformed, systematically destroyed. They'd lost so much. Their bodies, their minds, their futures, their very identities.

But Kylie and Colette remained. Damaged and diminished and struggling every day. But together. Loved. Having chosen each other when they could have chosen freedom.

At the altar, they turned to face each other. Took hands. Looked into each other's eyes and saw their only witness, their only anchor, their only love.

Outside, spring continued its work of renewal. The world turned toward summer. Inside, two people were making promises they would struggle to keep but would keep trying anyway.

Because that's what love is, isn't it? Not the absence of struggle but the choice to struggle together. Not being whole but being broken in complementary ways. Not perfect but real and chosen and earned through sacrifice that most people would never understand.

This is the kind of love that matters. The kind that costs everything and gives it willingly. The kind that looks at the choice between saving yourself and choosing someone else and chooses them, chooses them, always chooses them.

And sometimes—often—always—that's not just enough.  
It's everything.