

April's Fool

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I nervously adjusted my glasses, and then tucked my hair behind my ears. After a pause, where I took a moment to savour the excitement, I stepped forth and pushed open the door to the comic book store; the familiar scent of ink and paper giving me that rush that always made me all giddy. With college and my part-time job, the comic book store had kind of become my only reprieve from the drudgery of my goal-focused life. Expectations have always been heavy in my culture, particularly when they're coming from parents. My mother had always been the typical example of an Asian tiger mom and nothing had ever been good enough for her. Every day of my life had been a constant grind, and when she was not checking up on me about my studies, she was ensuring that I put in the hours at the coffee shop. I'd been at that stupid coffee shop since the day I turned eighteen, and I've found it to be nothing but a distraction all the way through my studies. It doesn't really fit with the whole Asian mother thing, does it? Expecting me to juggle a job around my studies with the risk that my grades may drop. However, my mother had always considered herself a genius, and she insisted that I experience what it's like to work in such a low-paying, hard-grinding job so that I'll never end up there. So that I'd realise that my brain is a much better tool than my body.

My heart quickened as I spotted April browsing through the shelves, her eyes alight with excitement as she flipped through the pages of a comic. She looked up and grinned as she saw me, her excitement infectious. "Hey, Jing! Check this out, they just released the new issue of The Bumbler," she announced, and her voice was filled with enthusiasm as she held up the comic. Her eyes sparkled with anticipation of my similarly giddy response.

We'd lived next to April's family for just over a year, and though I'd found her annoying at the beginning, especially since she was a couple of years younger than myself, I rapidly realised that we did indeed have a lot in common; comics and graphic novels being our major shared interest. She wasn't beautiful or popular either, so as a friend, I wasn't at all threatened or intimidated. Mother didn't approve of my friendship

with April for a multitude of exhaustive reasons, most of which I'd put down to the fact that she just enjoyed being a bother in typical Asian-mother style. In the past she'd commented that April set a bad example and would lead me astray. When I'd pushed her to explain, she'd simply waved the subject away, even though it hadn't made any sense. April was basically like a mouse, and didn't put a foot wrong anywhere, because she simply didn't have the confidence to. She'd done okay in school, as far as I knew, and she'd never got herself into any trouble, again, as far as I knew. Every time we hung out, it was to go to the comic book store or just spend the night watching anime or whatever. Sometimes, much to my shame, we'd childishly play dress up and pretend to be our favourite characters. Honestly, it was all kind of cringe stuff that was mostly made up of guilty pleasures, and I did a lot of it to humour April, as if like an aunt. It was the kind of stuff I wouldn't want anyone outside of April knowing about. But, in her company, I was able to totally be myself, and since we were both women, the age difference had never seemed to matter. So, it was extremely annoying that my mother was always trying to cause a wedge between us, as, in some regards, April was my only refuge from my mother's interfering and controlling ways. Whenever I made April smile, it would remind me, that actually, I wasn't a let-down or failure as Mother insisted, but rather, I had value as a friend. Still, despite my friendship being the one area of my life where I could find solace, Mother still intruded. She still dictated my schedule and enforced her will whenever she could. She reminded me again and again, that without her fantastic parenting, I would be as useless and misguided as April was.

Yet, having spoken to April's own mom on a number of occasions, Mother had no choice other than to tolerate our friendship on the basis of avoiding confrontation. That was simply the way of maintaining face within our culture. Whenever April visited, Mother would be all smiles and welcoming, but as soon as she departed, my mother would be all curses and complaining, insisting that April came over too often.

Part of me enjoyed April's presence for the very fact that it annoyed Mother so much, and I saw our friendship as kind of a rebellion; one aspect of my life that my mother wasn't able to control. Often, I'd head over to April's too, clutching the most recent comic from the store, paid for by my own money, just to prove to her what a fantastic friend I was.

I looked across the store, and forced a smile, my stomach fluttering with nerves. I never did like being out in public, feeling like I was up for judgement by whoever passed me by. I'd always felt safer at home, my nose buried in my books, but April had insisted we came out regularly to see the new releases, often so she could pick out whichever one she wanted me to buy. That was kind of an understanding that had developed between us. Since she didn't work, I was always the one that made the purchases. I didn't mind, and I supposed, in the haven of nerdism, surrounded by our shared passions, a couple of dollars here and there was worth it if it meant we got to enjoy our hobby. Popular and cliquy girls, the kind that had tormented me all the way through high school would never think to step foot in such a place, so, within those walls, April and I could be ourselves.

"Is that the one you want?" I asked, while stepping up next to her and looking at the cover. "Did we finish with the previous issue?"

April rolled her eyes behind the comically-thick lenses of her glasses, and she scratched at the wiry hair behind her ear. "Yes, duh," she said in a most adorable way. "We already went through that one a load of times. I can't wait to read this one."

I nodded, and eased it from her iron grip. "I suppose it doesn't cost too much," I said while glancing over the price. It'll have to be the last one this month though. I don't want Mother asking questions."

April huffed, and then crossed her arms. "Will she ever stop her snooping?"

"Not likely," I said, and then I joined her with my own huff.

Mother had been a stickler for watching over me my entire life in the most infuriating ways. Wherever I went, I always felt as if she was lingering in the shadows, ready to pounce upon whatever imaginary mistake I'd apparently made. It had most definitely been tiresome, and her interfering had certainly been annoying, but there wasn't a lot I could do about her, especially living in her house and all. She'd insisted upon that, not wanting me to waste money on college accommodation, and having me pay into our own house as rent instead made sense in her selfish head. So, she'd kept me on a tight leash as a result. It had always been ingrained within our culture to respect and obey our parents, and Mother had insisted throughout my life that she always knew best. Therefore, my path through life had always seemed beyond my

control, as if it was a decision I'd not been permitted to make myself. Mother had decided where I went to school, and Mother selected the course I would be studying at college. When I had graduated with first class honours, Mother had insisted upon me gaining a master's degree. As Graduation approached, I knew, that once that was over with, Mother would direct me again. Whether it be a career or perhaps a doctorate, that was a decision not for me to make. I suppose that in some ways it was freeing, I mean, having those decisions made for me. There was always something calming about having that weight lifted from my shoulders. It was like I could just run on automation.

Anyway, since my bank statements were delivered by mail, and Mother saw it as her right to open whatever I received, it was impossible for me to ever hide anything. Most of my earnings from the coffee shop went straight into Mother's rent, my daily expenses, and with the rest being filtered to my savings. I did occasionally buy April a comic or graphic novel. Oh, Mother had noticed of course, and communicated her displeasure, but since my grades had always been immaculate, I had been permitted a solitary exception. Besides, since April had been jobless since she'd graduated high school, it had always fallen upon myself to be the provider when it came to new reading material. I didn't mind, as I'd intended to buy the comics anyway, but it kind of made me feel good to share it with April, like I was providing her with something she could never obtain herself. Besides, her excitement whenever we came to the store was always adorable, and I'd usually let her pick out the one she wanted.

As we wandered through the aisles, April's erratic energy filled the air, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy whenever she laughed at something another customer said or eagerly discussed the latest superhero movie with the cashier. Ever since we'd started going there, she'd gradually built up quite the rapport with the regulars and the staff, whereas I'd kind of remained a bit of a wallflower. I'd never been one to get out and socialise, which I suppose is why I've always been so invested in comics and the like. April had really been the first friend I'd had that I could genuinely afford that title. Perhaps I developed somewhat of a possessive attitude towards her because of that, but, people should care about their friends, shouldn't they?

It hadn't all been easy for April though. She's always liked to talk with the nerdy boys at the store, but none of them had ever shown an interest in her. I'd wiped away

plenty of tears as a result. The problem with April has always been that she possesses a stereotypically nerdy look. Her hair is ridiculously frizzy and voluminous, spraying out from all angles of her head. She kind of looks like a troll as a result. To make it even worse, as long as I've known her, she's always worn the most asinine, nerdy glasses. She can barely see without them, which means the lenses are thick as hell. Whenever she'd wear them, her eyes appeared miniscule, as if part of her face had been shrunk much smaller than the rest. As a result, boys did not find her attractive. Now, don't get me wrong, April was indeed cute, in her own way, especially her enthusiastic personality, but, boys can be shallow, and they simply didn't care about stuff like that. As a result, April was rejected a lot, and whenever another one occurred, she gradually retreated into her shell.

It's not like I've ever been a stunner either. I'm slightly taller than April, but that doesn't mean a lot since she barely hit five foot. My hair style has always been uniform, fitting to Asian school standards and trimmed just above the shoulders, despite the fact I've never been to the continent. In harmony with April, I've always worn glasses too. Mine have never been as nerdy as hers, but I've never attracted the attention of any boys either.

Sometimes I did feel a little embarrassed as I lingered in the aisles of the store, especially when April was trying, and failing, to interact with boys her own age. Being three years older, that had always been a sticking point, especially with our mothers. But, since we lived next door to each other, and we had similar interests, it made sense to me. After the first few months, April's mother actually began encouraging the friendship in hope I could set a good example; that my academic achievements would inspire April to pursue a similar education and apply for scholarships. I've never rubbed off on her in that way however, and April has never shown any interest in anything except having fun. Whenever I've mentioned her future, or a career, she'd always just wrinkle her nose, shrug and then swiftly redirect the conversation. One time, she had even told me that her dream was to do nothing, and she planned to one day marry someone rich. I had nodded sympathetically, though, doubted that endeavour being successful. I mean, she was nice, but, with the way she looked, she was hardly trophy wife material, was she? I hadn't said that to her, of course, and I'd simply enquired if she'd met any nice boys recently. The answer was no, of course. The same answer I gave when she'd asked me the same question. Boys had always been a distraction,

according to Mother, and one day I would be paired with a suitable match whom had her approval.

Lost in my thoughts, I barely noticed when April stopped in front of a display of vintage action figures, her eyes lighting up with delight as she examined each one with childlike wonder. She looked back at me, her smile widening as she held up a particularly rare figure. "Can we get this?" she asked, and she waved it around; her frizzy hair hilariously swaying from side to side.

"One comic book or graphic novel," I said firmly. Like I said, I've never minded buying something to share with her, but I wasn't about to splurge my savings on something I have no need for. Mother would pounce upon such a purchase, and I would have a lot of explaining to do.

"Please," April said while clutching the figure with both hands and pressing its head against her chin. "It's so cool."

"Maybe when you get a job," I said, while taking the figure from her and putting it back on the shelf. "You can buy it yourself."

"Pffft," she said childishly. "What time do you have to go to your shift anyway?"

"Right after we're done here," I said. "I start around six."

"Sucks to be you," she said. "I'd hate to have a job like that."

"Well, one of us has to earn a wage," I retorted, before poking my tongue out at her. I'd never liked the job either, but I'd hardly had a choice in taking it. "Otherwise who is going to pay for this?" I waved the comic in her face, before nodding towards the cashier. "Come on. I'll settle up and you can take it home with you. You can have the first read."

Her smile was worth the price alone.

"Hey, April," I said a couple of days later as I clutched my books to my chest. The bus ride from college had been awfully stuffy and humid, as always. I'd mentioned to

Mother that I wanted to buy a car with my savings, but she'd always insisted that such a thing was a waste of money. It would be worth the cost, as far as I was concerned, if it meant I'd never have to ride the dreaded, overcrowded bus ever again. "Where you headed?"

April adjusted her glasses and, as always, she was ever her reserved self. She tugged at the strap of her backpack, toeing the floor before she looked away over my shoulder. "Nowhere," she said. "Well, my mom sent me to buy some groceries. Kind of sucks."

"Well, that sounds fun," I said, trying to remain friendly. "Did you get anything for yourself?"

"No," she said with disappointment. "There was only a couple of cents left after I'd bought everything on the list. Such a bummer."

"Maybe next time?" I said, while trying to perk her mood.

"What you doing tonight?" she asked, and I glanced towards my house. Mother was already staring at me through the window, arms crossed and the definition of disapproval. I grimaced, wondering what I'd done wrong again. Despite my immaculate grades, and my strong work ethic, it was never good enough for my mother. All my life, she had always found fault somewhere. I'd receive constant criticism for the most minor of infractions, yet I couldn't recall when I'd ever received praise. Even when I'd graduated top of my high school class, and then repeated that achievement three years later when I came out top in my bachelor's, Mother had shown no emotion at all. All of her concern and energy had been directed towards my next goal. She'd always intended for me to work in a notable career of prestige. Doctor, lawyer, diplomat, that kind of thing. The sort of noteworthy role where she could show off and brag to her friends. That's what my entire educational route had always been geared towards: Mother wanted to impress other people and accept the praise for *my* achievements. That's why I found myself studying the law, despite it boring me to death. I was dreading the moment when I'd actually graduate and then find myself parachuted into some role that would drain away what was left of my enthusiasm for life. I looked enviously at April sometimes due to that reason. She had no stress, and her mother wasn't pushing her. It had been a year since she graduated high school, and what had she done since? Absolutely nothing. Just lazing around the house and

watching television. How she got away with it was a mystery, but I knew damn well that my own mother would never tolerate such idle behaviour.

With a final glance at my mother, her expression unwavering, I spied an opportunity. "Nothing much," I said. "I have a couple of hours to burn before my night shift. You want to come over and catch up on our series?"

"I was hoping you'd say that," April said, and she removed her backpack and tossed it through the front door, not even bothering to unpack or put it away for her mother.

My own mother scowled as we headed towards my house together.

The soft glow of the TV illuminated my dimly lit room as April and I settled onto my bed; a colourful array of blankets and pillows strewn haphazardly around. We'd been working our way through the series for the past few weeks, watching an episode or two whenever we had the chance. Of course, we had to work around my schedule, but if April would have had her way, she most definitely would have ploughed through the entire series in one day. She'd always had that kind of personality, with her acting without any consideration of the consequences. I reasoned that was why her mother only ever gave her the exact money when she sent her out for groceries; April would likely have spent whatever was left over on some stupid crap that had caught her eye. I'd actually made that mistake one time when she'd asked to buy another comic from the store. I'd had to rush off to my shift, and April had been dragging her ass to pick which one we should get between her two favourites, so I'd given her a twenty and told her to go ahead and get it. April had bought both comics that day, and I'd not received any change. It hadn't mattered that it was *my* money. All that had mattered was that April had gotten what she wanted. I hadn't trusted her to make the purchase since.

"Are you ready for this, Jing?" April asked, her eyes beady behind her glasses, her anticipation evident as she trembled with excitement. She scrolled through the list of anime titles she'd torrented and picked out the one we'd been working our way

through. I knew where she'd gotten them from, but I always played ignorant, especially since I was studying for a law degree. Mother would have been furious if she ever found out, stating how April had encouraged illegal activities within our home, but I had always viewed it as harmless. She had no money after all, so she was merely playing the hand she was dealt. She'd previously asked me to buy her a DVD in the store, but I had refused, having already picked up a comic that week which she'd managed to lose right after she'd finished it. Like I said, I didn't mind paying occasionally, but I didn't want things to get out of hand.

"What episode are we up to now?" I asked.

April didn't answer. Instead, she simply scrolled down and picked one out. I smiled to myself thoughtfully; her tunnel vision when she was excited about something always being amusing. Throughout the episode, I stole glances at her, admiring the way her eyes lit up with excitement and her laughter filled the room with warmth.

When the final credits rolled, I yawned and stretched, then checked my watch and exhaled with regret. "We'll have to stop it there I'm afraid," I said. "I have to be getting to work."

"Bummer," April said while looking all comically sad. She bit her lip grumpily and stared at me with vibrating eyes through those thick, nerdy glasses. "Can't you call in sick or something?"

"I don't do that," I said, almost offended that she'd even suggest such a thing. "They won't be able to find cover at this short notice."

April shrugged. "Why do you care? It's, like, some big corporation. It's not like it's your family shop or anything?"

"Yeah, but still. I have responsibilities. I can't let people down, and it's, like, well, like I said, I have responsibilities."

April pouted. "Well, can I just keep watching it here?" she asked. "My mom is probably back by now and I don't want to have to do chores or anything."

"If you stay here," I said with a chuckle. "You'll probably end up doing even more chores if my mother catches you."

"True," April said while cocking her head, and the pair of us burst into laughter. "Your mom is such a drag."

As I saw her home, April stopped at her door. She turned and looked at me quizzically. "What are you doing tomorrow?" she asked.

I chewed my lip, and then nodded my head slightly. Sometimes, having her around me all the time, buzzing like a little bee could be annoying. But, I supposed I saw a lot of myself in her. I knew what it was like to grow up as an outcast. To be considered nerdy, or geeky, or whatever, just because of the way we looked. I supposed I deserved it somewhat, especially considering my commitment to studies, but April had always been more carefree and focused on fun. She wasn't an academic, and she'd never been anywhere near to the top of the class. She was basically judged for the way she looked, and I sympathised with that. Sometimes though, I just needed a little alone time to myself. I did have responsibilities after all. "I'm not sure," I said. "Probably studying, and then afterwards I have to—"

"On a Saturday?" she asked in whiney disbelief. "Who studies on the weekend? The weekends are supposed to be for fun."

"What's your idea of weekend fun these days then?"

"We could go shopping."

I tried to disguise my amusement, chewing my lip again as I suppressed a laugh. "April," I said calmly. "You don't have any money."

"I know that," she growled. "But I still like looking. It makes me happy to dress up and try on new outfits."

"Can't you go alone?" I asked. "I have things I need to do."

Instead of responding, April simply hit me with an extravagant, petulant pout.

I let out a deep sigh, feeling so weak as her obvious little performance worked. "I can come for a couple of hours, since I have to head into town to work anyway. That satisfy you?"

April simply smirked, happy to have gotten her way before she merrily skipped inside her house.

The next day, while we were walking through the mall, April hopped ahead excitedly. I tried not to laugh as her frizzy hair bounced all over the place, though I supposed it was amusing in an adorable way. I'd always looked at myself as kind of the cool and collected leader between us. The calm voice of reason whereas April was a loose cannon. It probably helped that I was a few years older, and actually doing something with my life. Despite hating it, my work at the coffee shop had actually grounded me as an adult. April though, despite being nearly twenty, still possessed an almost infantile attitude towards her wants. When she desired something, she *needed* it at all costs, regardless of whether she could afford it or whether it would put her in financial straits. She'd received some birthday money from her grandma shortly after I'd met her, and she'd wasted it on a new phone that she'd immediately dropped, cracking the screen. Ever since, she'd been whining about how it wasn't fair that she had to use a phone with a cracked screen. She looked at my own phone with jealousy and complained how she wanted a new one. When I'd suggest she get a job to buy herself one, she'd merely put her nose in the air and tut.

She'd even suggested stealing a few items to me on a couple of occasions, which I'd swiftly talked her out of. Especially the one time when we were looking around in a gaming shop. She'd had her eye on a new keyboard, with all the bells and whistles. It lit up in a variety of colours and she was smitten. April just *had* to have that keyboard. In her head, she was going to slip it beneath her frilly blouse and skip away unheeded. Maybe she had some ridiculous notion of burying it in her cleavage, if she even had one. Of course, I hadn't allowed such a thing to happen, and she would have looked like a silly bandit with the short skirt and second-hand slip-ons she'd been wearing at the time.

That was another issue that had made April an outcast. She didn't just look like a dork, but she dressed like one too. She seemed to mix and match the oddest combinations; made up of whatever her mother had grabbed her from the thrift store. She walked around with cute little patches sewn into her ill-fitting clothes; to cover up the holes that lay beneath. Sometimes she'd wear things emblazoned with her

favourite cartoon or manga characters, clearly sized for a child, but which she'd somehow managed to squeeze herself into. All of it only made her ordeal so much worse. Sure, it was passable in the comic book store, but everywhere else, people would point and laugh at her. To top it off were the thick, dweeby glasses that were ever present. Of course, it wasn't her fault that she needed them, but she could have at least invested in something a bit more stylish instead of picking the blocky, scientist-like pair. Or, even better, she could have worn contact lenses for once in her life. Her mother could have helped her out with that one, putting a little aside to save her daughter from further ridicule. Even if the bills were tight, I mean, prioritise. My own mother watched me like a hawk, but I was still allowed to dress civilly.

And then there was April's hair, well, that had long ago appeared beyond saving. She'd probably have benefitted from shaving it off, rather waltzing around with a brambled bush on her head.

I'd even suggested to her at one point that maybe she should try a wardrobe a bit more mainstream and socially acceptable. She'd merely grimaced. "I'm dressing in my style," she'd said while flicking her hair around. "How am I supposed to wear *that*? I'll look like even more of a fool. Do you see how much it costs?" She'd held the extortionate price tag up to me. "Are you going to buy me this, Jing?"

"Ummm, well, no," I'd said, feeling rather foolish at having suggested it. The thing cost about a month's worth of my wages, so it was obviously out of April's reach. Perhaps she'd thought I was even mocking her.

Before I could limit the damage that day, she'd pointed accusingly at the smart, fancy dress. It hadn't been the sort of thing I'd have the confidence to wear either, but I'd only been trying to help. I'd often get nervous when out in public and around other people, and I'd only suggested it when I'd noticed some girls pointing and giggling in April's direction. "The day I look like a pinup model," she'd said sarcastically, "is the day I'll wear something like that." She'd marched off in a huff, as if I'd insulted her or something, before she turned and stopped at the end of the aisle. "Which is never, in case you didn't get it. I can't help the way I look, alright?"

"Alright," I'd whispered to myself, blushing slightly as her outburst had drawn further unwanted attention. I'd never raised the subject again.

Ever since, the mall visits had kind of become an escape for April. They didn't do anything for me, but I indulged her fantasies because I knew how difficult it was to be uncool. I was most definitely uncool, falling under the bracket of studious Asian. I had some interest from a few jock assholes that just wanted to tick their fetish box, but as soon as I opened my mouth and bored them to death with my lack of game, they swiftly moved onto the next in line who happened to share my ethnicity. Not that it mattered, as Mother would have got rid of them straight away. No one showed any interest in me for who I was besides being Asian, so I was just as much of a loner as April was. If anything, she was far more gregarious than I was, despite the limitations of her looks. She was actually fun and light-hearted most of the time; it was just her appearance that drew her mockery and steered the boys away.

Anyway, as we'd shop, April would like to dress up in the quirkiest combination of clothes. She'd pluck various items from the rails, then head off to the fitting room, coming out looking as if she'd tumbled into a laundry hamper. Each time, I'd nod my head with approval, despite finding the outfit offensive to the eyes and fearing it would only draw her further derision. Even if she was only trying it on, and had no intention of buying it, some other customer might possibly see her as she traipsed around and flick her a look of disdain; enough to shatter her confidence all over again. So, I tolerated the visits, and smiled through, looking upon her as if a younger sister that I was nurturing and steering from harm.

On that Saturday, I was standing patiently while she tried on a variety of combinations that would have been more suited to Halloween than an actual daily outfit. But, as I looked upon her, I did feel pity too, because a lot of the judgement was biased against April's nerdy looks. For a beautiful, hot girl, it would never matter what they were wearing. All of the ridiculous outfits that April put together would likely have been considered cute if they were worn by a different girl. It was a horrible thing to admit, but, as painful as it was, it was the truth.

I'd been waiting around for a few minutes, when she came out of the fitting room wearing a brown crop-top, and she looked utterly ridiculous. Her pale, scrawny shoulders seemed so at odds with the mound of bushy brunette hair encircling her ears. To highlight my opinion further, another prettier girl stepped out of the next fitting room down. She was wearing the exact same top and she practically shone in it. Her

flowing blonde hair and sparkly blue eyes were accentuated by the brown tinge of the material, and April immediately frowned and darted back behind the safety of the cubicle curtain.

"It's not fair," she bemoaned as we headed to the next store. "If I looked like *her*. If I had hair like *her*. If I didn't have to wear glasses like *her*." She growled in frustration. "Then I would have looked amazing!"

"You *did* look amazing," I said unconvincingly.

"Amazingly stupid," April responded with a scowl.

From that point on, her mood was rather muted. She still tried on a few things, but there just wasn't the same enthusiasm, and as the time ticked away, I realised I would have to make a move towards work soonish. April would have to catch the bus home alone. Despite her childish antics, she was an adult, and it wasn't my responsibility to watch over her at all times.

She was busy looking in the hosiery section when I stepped closer, ready to break the news. "April," I said gently. "I have to be going—"

"Look at these," she squealed while clutching something in her hand. "Aren't they the cutest?"

I paused for a moment, but as it was the happiest she'd been during the past hour's browsing, I kept quiet while she merrily danced around. Once she'd calmed down, I leaned in for a closer look. "What are they?"

"They're stockings, duh," she said with a roll of her eyes. "But the linen is patterned in the shape of kitties."

"Oh, right. That's nice," I said with a shrug. When I noticed her face dropping again, I tried to be more jovial. "They're so cute," I said. "You'll look wonderful in them."

April's frown remained, and then she petulantly shoved them back onto the rail. "Don't make fun," she said. "You know I can't afford them."

I just watched her for a moment while she tutted and stared at the floor. I knew I had to leave, but she looked so sad, like a lost little puppy, that I couldn't bear to

abandon her at that moment. I tongued the inside of my cheek, and then allowed my emotions to get the better of me. "How much are they?"

She sighed as she examined the price tag dangling from a little piece of string. "Too much."

"That's not a number."

"Okay, Mrs Mathematician," she sniped without even looking up.

"I'm studying law, actually," I said sarcastically. "Just tell me the number already."

"They're \$9.99."

"Okay," I said, while thinking for a moment.

"See, too expensive." She finally looked up, and her forehead was wrinkled with annoyance. "Sometimes I wish I had a job like you. You must be able to buy whatever you want." She then squinted. "Well, I don't want to work, but I'd like to get paid."

"Well, it has its upsides," I said with a shrug while envisioning my healthy bank account. "But I have to be sensible. I can't just go around buying whatever I want, and, it's hard work." I grimaced while recalling all those hours in the coffee shop while standing around on my feet. The hustle and bustle of collecting and preparing everyone's orders while the line ran out of the door. Sometimes it felt like an inferno in that cramped place, and I'd glance desperately at the clock while willing the minutes to tick by faster. To make it all the worse, I was on a pitiful wage and had to rely on tips to get me across the line of making it all worthwhile. The only solace was that I had a nice little war-chest built up ready for graduation, likely to be spent on whatever Mother deemed appropriate. "It's tough. It's not like going to the park or anything."

"Yes, but you get paid," she said while staring at me in thought. "That must be nice, getting to buy whatever you want." She then pouted. "I wish I could do that. I still have to ask my mom for everything." She huffed. "And she usually says no."

At that, I couldn't help but let out a little giggle. "Really? Still?"

She lightly pushed me in the shoulder. "Hey, don't be mean. It's not fun having no money, you know?"

"Well, you could get a job, like me? I can even ask if we have any openings—"

"No thanks," she said with a scoff, and then she pulled a pair of nylons from the rail. "I'm happy with dreaming for the time being. I suppose I'll have to get a job one day, even though the thought leaves me feeling sick."

"Why?" I asked. "We all have to work one day."

She sighed despondently. "I'm just not good at anything, and I don't ever see myself working in a regular job. Honestly, it gives me the creeps. I literally feel sick at the thought of having to work in an office around other people." She turned to face me, then flicked her hand up and down the length of her body, highlighting her dorky choice of outfit along with her geeky glasses. "Do I look like the sort of person that has a day job?"

"I can see you working in STEM or something," I said, and I tried not to smile while looking at her glasses. With her frizzy hair and overall nerd-like look, I could definitely see in her some kind of wacky, mad-scientist sort of role. "I think you'll fit right in."

"Ugh," she said, sounding as if she was disgusted. "I don't have the brains for any of that. I guess I'll just have to marry a rich guy. Too bad no one will date me."

"Right," I said, and it all felt so weird listening to her sulk and talk so casually about the future. I was almost envious of her lack of plan and no sense of direction. It was like she had a freedom that I'd never been granted; even if she did spend most of the time lamenting her fortune. My future had always been planned out by my mother, and she'd never have humoured the idea of me being so misguided and care-free. I was going to be a lawyer, whether I wanted to be one or not.

As April continued to look through the hosiery, and having no way of paying for any of it, I became overly curious. We'd been friends for about a year, but with April, everything was always so childish and focused on irrelevant, trivial nonsense. She'd left high school almost two years ago and it was time to grow up. She couldn't pretend she was a little kid forever, wearing her tacky clothes and acting like things such as bills and adult responsibilities didn't exist. "So...what's your plan?" I tongued the inside of my lip. "Are you seriously planning to marry big?"

"I don't know," she said. "I seriously wish I could just stay home, playing games, watching anime and stuff and not have to do anything."

"Well, that's not realistic, is it, April?" I said. "Come on, be serious."

"It's my dream," she said, and she scowled at me as if I'd mortally offended her. "That's all I want to do. Just dress up, look pretty. Maybe I could share my outfits on a page. Maybe someone will sponsor me or something."

I had to blink for a second. "What?" I asked, and I was honestly surprised. April most definitely didn't seem the sort to have that kind of confidence. She was painfully self-conscious when it came to her appearance. We both were in that regard, especially with the way we were so shy around everyone else. But, April literally couldn't handle criticism when it came to her wardrobe choices, and I was fearful that throwing herself to the wolves would be detrimental to her mental health. Yet, I didn't want to crush her 'dream' or whatever she called it. So, I just waited at her side, looking pensive with my tongue clamped between teeth.

"Oh, well," she said while flicking the same kitty stockings with her fingertip. "Maybe I'll buy these another time, thousands of years from now."

I tried not to smile at her overly melancholic drama, but then a thought occurred to me. I glanced at the stockings, and they were no more expensive than the usual comics I bought. If Mother interrogated me, I could always just pretend I needed new socks or underwear. "How about I get them for you?"

"Really?" she asked and her eyes widened to the side of a peanut behind her glasses. "They're not too expensive?"

I looked at the price-tag again. They cost next to nothing, and after working for so many years and saving all of my earnings, I wouldn't even notice such an expense. Other than the comics, which I viewed as kind of a reward for all of my studying, I didn't really spend much else. Living with Mother of course saved on expenses, and whenever I hung out with April, we kind of didn't spend anything due to the restrictions of her own budget. We just browsed, and drifted around, as we were doing at that very moment. Yet, she seemed so dejected, that I was moved to make the day an exception. "It's not a lot," I said. "And isn't Christmas coming up? We can call this an early gift." I smiled at her, and it felt good to be able to help her out in that way. She was almost like some needy pet that was completely helpless in the world, and there I was, a working girl that had my life planned out. I was actually proud, and for the first

time in my life, I kind of understood why my mother was so insistent about me having responsibilities and appreciating the value of hard work and finances. She didn't want me to end up misguided and clueless like April. She wanted a daughter she could show off. It was just another example how even though April and I were basically a pair of social outcasts, I was the kind of leader between the pair of us. I may have been quieter, and less outspoken, but I was still the one that had my shit together out of the two of us.

"Hmmm," April muttered. She stewed for a second, but then she eyed the stockings another time. She reached out, stroking a finger along the delicate material, and her eyes seemed to glass over as she was transported some place else. I was just standing there, quietly watching as she stared into space, lost in the fantasy of wearing those stockings, likely in some scenario where she was considered the coolest and sexiest of women. I really did want that for her, even if it wasn't a realistic possibility for us kind of girls. Still, if it made her happy to post some photos online and be admired by the occasional sex-starved twit, then I was all for boosting her confidence. As long as she was safe and careful, then I supposed it was good for her to feel sexy and womanly. I glanced down towards her legs, and they weren't all that bad. Perhaps a little on the skinny side, and her skin was chillingly pale, but I figured they'd look decent enough in the stockings.

"I insist," I said while she was still daydreaming, and I brushed her hand aside and slid the stockings from the rail. "I'll get them for you."

"Really?" she said as reality came back to her. "What about all of that stuff about me getting a job?"

"I want to get them for you," I said, way more assertively than I thought myself capable. "You can stave off getting a job for at least another day."

April remained quiet, and she was considering me from behind her glasses. Finally, she adjusted them on her button nose, before she nodded her head and seemed to make peace with the whole thing. "Okay," she said, and then her teeth were shining through a huge smile. "I would love that. It'll make me very happy. Buy them for me."

There was a little flutter in my tummy at being the source of April's happiness, and it felt damn good to be able to do that for someone, especially my only and bestest friend in the world. I didn't say another word, but simply smiled myself, before heading over to the cashier to pay. Once all done, I handed her the little bag, and she swiftly took it and began dancing merrily.

"Yay," she said. "I can't wait to try these on later. Thank you so much." I didn't have a chance to brace myself before she'd caught me with a clumsy hug. "You're the bestest friend ever."

I blushed while she was embracing me, and I couldn't help but feel all woozy, and like I was some kind of heroine in her story. "I better be off," I said while freeing myself from her wiry arms. "I have a shift to get to."

"Go for it," she said teasingly, and she waved the little bag at me. "You have to fill the hole that these just made."

"Pfft," I said, before I rolled my eyes. "It was only \$10." I momentarily glanced towards her legs, and then smiled. "I'm sure they'll look amazing on you." I gave her a final wave, and then I headed off for another exhaustive shift.

That night, after I'd returned home and showered off. I settled in my room and tried to wind down before sleep. I usually snuck in a little light reading. Nothing too testing, but just some material I needed for the upcoming week. I'd make notes, so I'd be ahead in the lectures, and I could understand the lecturer, rather than busy noting down everything he was saying.

It wasn't an exaggeration that I was always doing *something*. That was why I appreciated April's company so much, because it was the only time my mother didn't bother me, with her not wanting to give a bad impression of herself. She'd be devastated if April's mother knew what she was really like, and mortified if it was further gossiped throughout the community. Her entire life was focused around preserving her image, which is why she pushed me so hard. I was a facet of that image. In some ways, she saw me as a possession. Maybe even an object or commodity. I was

basically just an extension of her. I was a means to impress others. The worst part was that she constantly interfered in my studying too, thinking she knew the subject better than anyone else. She had only a high school education herself, which was apparently why I had to achieve as much as possible.

While I was sitting at my desk and underlining a few important details in the book, a notification popped up from April on my phone. It was one of those cute stickers of a bunny looking very excited, with love hearts replacing the eyes. A couple more stickers followed, all as equally cute. I rolled my eyes, as she was often sending me stupid, childish stuff like that, particularly when we had a planned comic book store visit. I was just about to close the notifications and resume my reading, when a message came up:

April: thanks so much, Jing, you're the bestest friend eveeeeer

I smiled, and once again felt a little flutter in my tummy, just as I'd done earlier in the day. I cherished how wonderful it felt to be acknowledged, and to an extent: praised. All I'd done to impress my mother over the years and I'd received nothing but criticism, and yet, a simple act of buying April some stockings had rocked her world. I was truly beaming and I didn't even care how much the stockings had cost because it had made April so happy. I'd literally made her day and provided her with something that she couldn't have bought herself. That just made me feel so capable and it was like I was being charitable to my less fortunate friend. Sure, she could have got a job herself, but I understood that she was anxious about that kind of thing, so it was nice to be able to provide a treat for her and relieve her of the pressure involved in actually having to afford it herself.

I was just typing out a reply, gushing over how it was no problem and that I was happy to do such a thing for her, when my thumbs were interrupted as a photo popped up in the chat.

What the hell? I thought, barely believing what I was seeing. It was something that April had never sent me before, the likes of which appeared completely at odds with her reserved personality. She'd often sent me the occasional selfie when she was

playing around with different outfits, but this time, she'd taken a photo of her legs while wearing the stockings. She was sitting on her bed, with her legs stretched out and pointing towards her desk. Even though I was alone in my room, I blushed, tracing my eyes along the length of her legs and right up to her pale thighs. Thighs thicker than I expected. I'd always assumed she had thin little sticks for legs, but then, I'd never seen them so up close. I adjusted my glasses and squinted, and the tiniest and subtlest glimpse of her pink panties was just visible in the corner of the photo. I looked towards my door, concerned Mother was nearby, as I felt oddly dirty and guilty, like I'd just witnessed something I shouldn't have.

My mouth became dry as I stared again at the photo, analysing every detail as I became a mixture of confusion and curiosity. I felt somewhat squeamish and uncomfortable, like I was looking at something I shouldn't; a most intimate glimpse into my best friend's private areas. Why had she sent me something so revealing and, in many ways, lewd? Was that the kind of thing she was planning to post on some page?

I was happy that she was thankful for the stockings, but I hadn't expected to receive a photo of her wearing them, especially one taken in a most provocative and inappropriately revealing way. It was just so sexy and feminine and not at all what I'd associate with April in all of her nerdy character. I mean, if her head was visible in the photo, then likely I would have laughed, but, with just her legs, it was rather striking. Why had she taken such a photo and sent it to me, though? Had she completely misunderstood why I'd bought the stockings for her? Or perhaps it was a mistake, and she hadn't meant to send me the photo at all. Maybe she hadn't realised that her panties were visible. All sorts of thoughts were swirling around my head as I tried to process such a strange development in our friendship.

I thought about replying, but I honestly didn't know what was appropriate to say. I was completely disrupted from my studying though, so I slapped the book closed and rested my chin on my palm. *What the hell were you thinking, April?* I wondered, and then, another message arrived from her:

April: don't they look great on me? thank you so much, I love them!

I blinked as it was confirmed the photo was intentional, and April had meant to show me her legs so revealingly. Still, despite me feeling it was an inappropriate exchange between friends, I couldn't deny that the stockings actually did look great on her pale legs. If I hadn't known they were attached to April in all of her dorky glory, I would have assumed it was a sneaky glimpse of some pin-up or lingerie model. I was so confused by the whole thing, because I was looking upon April in a way I had never considered before. We'd always just been two friends with the same goofy interests. But, I quickly realised that we weren't just two friends living in some fairy-tale, comic book land. We were both adults, and despite appearances on some occasions, April was a grown woman. She was perfectly capable of not only having an aura of sexuality, but flaunting it too.

Though my instinct was to ignore the message, it was obvious that April was fishing for a compliment. Even though I was uncomfortable, I didn't want to leave her on 'read' and risk bursting whatever bubble of new-found confidence she was living in. So, despite feeling like I really shouldn't, I replied:

Me: yes, they look great. i'm glad you're happy

Straight after I'd sent the message I was back to looking at the photo of April's scrawny legs in those womanly stockings. Not by choice, but it was right there in the chat screen. I should have closed it, but something compelled me to just look for a few seconds more. It was so strange, to be gazing upon my friend and seeing her in a whole different light. There was a tingling on my skin as I found myself entranced by an image that I knew I really shouldn't be looking at. It was odd, but I felt somewhat invested in her excitement, because I was the one who had bought the stockings for her. When my phone buzzed again, I opened the new message from April, strangely eager to see what she'd said.

April: im very happy! thank you so much, jing!

A warmth tickled my skin and though I was all alone at my desk, I suddenly felt quite shy and bashful, knowing that April's legs were looking so feminine and sexy thanks to my hard work at the coffee shop. It was so weird, but, I was being thanked, and praised for something I'd done. It was almost like a first for me.

I felt so needed, and appreciated. She literally couldn't have afforded the stockings herself, so, if I hadn't stepped up in my charitable act, then she most definitely wouldn't have been feeling as good about herself as she was. It was rather fulfilling to know that I had contributed to my friend's happiness in such a way, and I was beaming inside. After the year of our friendship, and the way we got along so well, it was probably the happiest and most excited I'd ever seen her, and it was all thanks to me. I knew she had certain insecurities about the way she looked, with her encapsulating the whole unattractive and dorky nerd-girl, so, to see her able to rise beyond that caricature was most rewarding as her best friend. Obviously, I wanted the very best for April, and if all it took was a couple of dollars then it was definitely worth it.

I nodded to myself as a little smile crept onto my lips, and then I opened the book and resumed my study, working through the next part of my revision. However, I'd barely made it onto the next paragraph when my phone came to life once more, vibrating upon my wooden desk and completely distracting me all over again. Creaking floorboards soon followed outside my door, and I swiftly hid the phone beneath the open book.

"What are you doing in here?" Mother asked as she entered without knocking. "Are you wasting time on your phone when you should be studying?"

"No," I said, while nodding towards the book. "As you can see, I'm studying, Mother." I then gestured towards the notes I'd been making, and after the praise I'd just received from April, and the recognition of my worth, I felt somewhat emboldened and filled with courage. "I would be on the next paragraph if you hadn't interrupted."

I doubted myself for a second as I saw the fury ignite in my mother's expression, especially when she pointed at me. "Careful with the smart mouth," she said. "You might be studying for a master's, but you're not as clever as you think you are."

Remember who raised you. Speak to me like that again, and I'll give you a reminder of who the parent is around here." She reached for the door handle and saw herself out.

I blinked as she disappeared, relieved that the reminder could wait until another day. I slipped my phone back out, ready to excitedly tell April about my mother being her usual controlling self.

The notification was still there, unopened:

April sent you a picture message.

I hesitated as I looked upon the notification on the top of the screen. My chest tightened, and there was a deep, warm throbbing at the centre because for some bizarre reason I was nervous. There was an anxiety plaguing me with the suspense of what April may have sent me, especially after the previous picture. Was it going to be just one of her normal selfies, or something from a game that she wanted to show me? Or...was it going to be another photo of her legs in those pretty stockings? I wasn't sure which of the outcomes I was hoping for, but it was like in the past few minutes the entire dynamic of our friendship had shifted. I'd never before had to worry before opening a photo from April, but, I was a mixture of excitement and terror all of a sudden, curious about what lay inside the notification. As a result, I couldn't find the courage to actually click it, fearful that I would be disappointed, or perhaps, shocked by the contents. So, instead, I just left it there next to me, my phone open while I tried to focus on my note-taking.

It was difficult to concentrate however, and nothing I read was really registering. Instead, I just kept peeking over and eyeing the notification, as if to check it was still there. Each time I caught sight of it, I'd squirm from a little butterfly in my tummy, feeling all special that there was something waiting for me. Perhaps it would be a nice, smiley selfie, with April expressing how thankful and happy she was. The suspense and tension were really building up, yet, I didn't want to click it because then it would all be over. It was as if as long the image remained unseen, well, then my mind could wander and guess about what was awaiting me. Not so much

fantasise, but, just savour the moment of excitement, like cradling a gift that hadn't yet been unwrapped.

But, it was like that unopened gift was taunting me too. As much as I tried to focus on my studying, I simply couldn't keep my attention, knowing there was something like that waiting for me. As the minutes passed by, and I was making no progress in my studying, I realised that I had no other choice other than to open it, otherwise the remaining minutes before I slept would just be a waste. So, I scooped up my phone and moved over to my bed, settling in softly against the cushions as I rested the phone against my knee. It was like I wanted to be comfortable while I looked, and still, it felt so naughty and strange. I leaned down, as if I was hiding it and keeping it all to myself. Even though I was alone, I kept flicking my eyes to the door, worried that my mother might barge right in again as I opened the picture. I mean, imagine it was another picture of April's stockinged legs and feet, posed on her bed, and my mother caught me looking at *that*. What ever would she think? She'd probably lock me in my room for the rest of my life, or send me to the temple to live as a nun so my soul could be cleansed of all untoward thoughts.

But then, I blinked as reality hit me, and I couldn't help but giggle. It was only April, after all, so why was I making such a big deal of it all? She was hardly some pin-up model, was she? She was as much of a shy dork as I was. No, correction, she was way more of a dork than I was. So, there was literally nothing to be feared. At that, the tension eased, and I realised I was making way too much of a big deal of the whole thing. After another giggle, I opened the picture with a tap of my finger.

I gasped, and instantly, I was feeling embarrassed all over again. April had taken a photo in her wall-length mirror, and she was posing in those stockings while standing on her tip-toes. It was so jarring to her see with the usual frizzy hair and thick-rimmed glasses, but then, those obscenely sexy and alluring white stockings, with the little kitty faces on the knees, led right up to her thick thighs. She'd covered her pink panties with her hand, and she was wearing a blouse, but still, I blushed, and looked away from the phone.

That's April? I thought. Dorky little April?

Yet, I couldn't help glancing back for occasional peeks through my shyness, as if to confirm that what I was seeing was actually legit. *What do you think? Do I look*

sexy in these? she'd written beneath the photo, and I was perplexed by how she was expecting me to respond. She did, in a bizarrely composited way, like from the hips down: she looked seductively enticing, using what feminine charms she possessed. Though, everything from the waist up was kind of the usual, nerdy April that I was familiar with. As a result, I was terribly confused, and I didn't know how I was supposed to respond. Was she asking me as her friend, or something else? Her willingness to send me such photos blurred the lines. I hadn't even been expecting any photos in the first place. That wasn't *why* I'd bought them for her. My entire investment in those stockings had ceased the moment I'd left the store. So, why did she feel the need to send me such a thing? It was the revealing, intimate snaps that should have been reserved for a boyfriend. Even though I was her best friend, I didn't exactly want to be seeing her like that, even if she was only after my opinion. But then, a thought occurred to me, and I immediately felt ridiculously self-conscious and embarrassed: had April misunderstood the reason why I'd bought the stockings for her? Had I been incredibly naïve and careless or something?

I thought back over what had happened at the store, and the more I considered my actions, the more insecure I became. I questioned every word I'd uttered. I doubted every expression she'd given me. I had been quite insistent about buying them for her. Had I pushed her into accepting? Had she felt pressured? My final throwaway line 'I'm sure they'll look amazing on you' had begun to haunt me the more I thought about it and the enthusiastic way in which I'd said it, all while she'd waved the bag around and I'd foolishly shifted my eyes to her legs. Had April sent me the pictures because she thought she had to? Did she think this was some sort of exchange, and she was keeping her end of the deal in return for me having paid for them? I gulped as I contemplated: did April think I only bought her those stockings because she thought I wanted to see her wearing them? Had I backed into a corner? I was older after all. Yes, only a few years older than her age of 19, but I was older.

I began to feel light-headed as I feared April had the complete wrong idea of me. She didn't think I was into that sort of thing, did she? I glanced at the photo again, and she had one leg forwards and slightly bent at the knee, deliberately posing it in a way to show the shape and texture of the stocking off. It was obscene, and inappropriate, but she'd sent it to *me*. I couldn't imagine her ever sending such a thing to anyone else, especially with the way her face was visible, so that must mean that

she completely trusted me, right? I read back over her question, asking how they looked, and whether they were sexy, and I blushed and felt so damn shy and embarrassed. But, she did look sexy. She may have been my dorky little friend, but in that photo, she absolutely looked sexy. Well, her legs, anyway. Her legs looked sexier than I ever thought her capable of. So, despite being nervous, I felt it was right to tell her that. It would probably send her self-esteem through the roof, and I genuinely wanted that for her, even if I was feeling all weird.

Me: yes, April, you look very sexy. the stockings look great on you

Simply writing that out hit me with a warm rush, never having imagined I would ever say such a thing to April of all people. The past moments were such a bizarre head-fuck for me, and strangely, it made me feel less of myself. I'd always seen April and I as equals, or perhaps, rather selfishly, myself as not just the leader, but the better looking of the two of us. We were both rather forgettable in terms of our appearances, but still, I honestly believed that I was more attractive. Like, marginally so, but, maybe, a couple of percent more attractive. April's hair and glasses just made her look like such a geek, so, it was a real eye-opener to me that she was capable of being so alluring, and I found my impression of her completely shifted. I certainly didn't own any stockings like that, and I most definitely didn't have the confidence to wear them.

I was about to put my phone on charge, and tuck down to sleep while I dwelled on the odd exchange, when April messaged me again!

April: thaaanks, I feel so confident right now. Thanks for buying them for me, you're the best!

April sent you a picture message.

The picture appeared before I even had a chance to close the chat window. As a result, there was none of the same tension as before, and I was immediately hit with the sight of April's foot up close. She'd placed it on top of a stool to pose and her toes were spread beneath the material, and splayed apart under the weight of her leg. I was terribly confused, because why the hell had she sent me a photo of her foot up close? The rest of the stockings up the length of her leg was out of the shot, and she'd deliberately focused on her foot. But then, I found out when another message came through:

April: imagine how good they'd look if i painted my nails

"Thanks April," I said, as I put my phone on the nightstand, clicked off my lamp and settled down to sleep. The last thing I wanted to be thinking about as I drifted off was April's feet, but thanks to her excitement, that's exactly what was in my head, as I imagined how those stockings would look with a variety of colours on her little toes.

The next morning, I lingered by the door, peeking through the spyhole and checking if April's mother had already left for work. I'd never before been hesitant about leaving the house, but I felt weird. I didn't want to walk out, just as her mother too departed, and find myself having to speak to April. I felt like I'd seen something I shouldn't have; private, intimate glimpses of her body that should never have been shared between two respectable friends. And yet, I'd seen them, and I didn't want to have to face her. I'd even woken up imagining which colour nail polish would suit April best, and that shouldn't have been my morning thought.

"What are you doing?"

I flinched from my mother's voice, and then turned to her.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she said. "Why are you acting all weird? What are you up to? Are you planning to sneak away and do something without my approval? You know you need my permission for anything."

"Ummm," I said in confusion, before I saw the coat rack behind her. "I was just wondering whether it's too cold to go out without a jacket."

She squinted. "It's November. Of course you need a jacket."

"Right," I said. "Yes, of course." I leaned past her to snatch up a jacket, then after slinking my arms inside, I zipped it up and opened the door.

"Where are you going? Did you just not listen to a word I said?"

"College, Mother," I said, and while I was facing away from her, I felt safe enough to roll my eyes.

"It's Sunday," she said accusingly. "Where are you *really* going? Who are you meeting? Is it a boy? You know you're not allowed to do that."

I narrowed my eyes, and then stared at the sidewalk in confusion. Was it actually Sunday? My head was such a mess after those messages from April that I was bundle of nerves. I swivelled around, then offered my mother a fake smile. "You're right. I got my days mixed up." I wiped my forehead with my sleeve. "I've been studying so much that my head is all over the place."

My mother tutted, and she wagged her finger at me. "If you think that kind of excuse will be accepted for failing, then it most definitely will not. Perhaps if you spent less time with that misfit girl next door, then you could focus and concentrate on what actually matters." She huffed, and there was an uncomfortable clicking sound as she sucked in her cheek repeatedly. "Do you not realise the opportunity you have been given? The sacrifices I have made for you? Your grandmother took so many risks moving here from the mainland, and this is how you repay your family's courage? You are to squander the chances we've given you? You should be ashamed of yourself. What kind of daughter are you?"

"Mother, please," I said. "I made a simple mistake. I got my days mixed up. It's not a big deal."

"I'll determine what is a big deal," she said as the wagging finger transformed to an accusatory point. "And you'll listen to me when I'm talking to you, young lady. I am your mother, not your maid, or your chef, or your chauffeur. I am your mother, and you will listen to and obey me. You should have been thanking me since the day you left my womb."

"Mother, okay, I'm sorry—"

"Hey Jing." April's voice was like a lightening strike as it zapped me from behind. My back straightened, and all the hairs stood up on the back of my neck. "Hello, Mrs Chan," she continued, and I felt her cheek press against my arm as she wedged her face past the doorframe.

"Hello, April," Mother said with as fake a smile as her strict face could muster.

April smiled, but then she immediately withdrew her head. The next thing I knew, she was tugging on the back of my jacket. "Where are you going?"

"Ummm, I'm not sure," I said while still looking at my mother; her face now having returned to its usual stern thunder.

"Let's go shopping again," she said in a whiny voice.

Mother raised an eyebrow, and was clearly perturbed by that revelation. "Shopping?" she mouthed, without saying a word. "Again?" she continued, her mouth dancing around in silence.

I'd told her the previous day that I had to sort something out at the bank before my shift. "Yes," I lied. "I needed some new socks. So, I bought some yesterday."

"Socks?" Mother asked, unable to resist whispering. "And how much were these socks?"

"Only \$10," I said, and I crouched to lift the leg of my pants. A white sock was visible, one I'd owned for well over a year. "It was a necessity."

Mother still didn't appear to approve, but she wasn't about to throw a fit with April so close by. Meanwhile, April was still busy yanking on my jacket, and while I was crouched, I lost balance and stumbled out of the house.

"Yes," April said excitedly. "Let's go shopping again."

"Ummm," I muttered while steadying my feet. I was a bit scatter-brained with everything going on, especially the disapproving looks of my mother. Then there was April's apparent excitement: did she not realise the previous day was a one-off? I wasn't about to go buying her things whenever she wanted.

I looked towards my mother, and while April had proceeded to yanking on my sleeve, I almost felt like I needed a rescue. Mother had dropped her arms to her sides, her hands balled into fists of frustration. Yet, as she made eye contact with April, she suddenly relaxed her posture and a smile of utter contempt appeared. "That sounds lovely," she said, struggling her way through each word. "Have fun." She then animatedly spun around; her smile dropping while in motion. She stomped her way down the hallway and disappeared into the lounge.

"Yay," April said euphorically as she effortlessly got her way. I knew for a damn fact if I'd been talking about going shopping on my own then my mother would never have allowed it. The simple threat of her perfect, untarnished public image being at risk had resulted in me being left to fend for myself. "Let's go," she said, and then I found myself being led down the path as April continued to pull on my sleeve.

"What are we shopping for?" I asked in bemusement.

"I dunno," April said. "Let's see what's there."

I really didn't want to go, because it almost felt like some kind of precedent was being set. But, she hadn't mentioned all of the weirdness of the previous night, and I didn't want to refuse her wants, just in case she did.

On the bus ride, April wouldn't shut up about all of the clothes she was planning to try on. There were blouses, and pants, and stockings, and boots, and sandals, and that's before she went into all of the accessories. She was always enthusiastic, but I'd never seen her more excited, and I found the whole thing bizarre. For the first time, she wasn't sunk into her seat during the bus ride, making herself as small as possible so she wouldn't draw the attention of any negative comments. She was beaming, and full of life, and it was hard not to be drawn into the atmosphere. I barely said a word, simply

nodding along with bemused smiles as I marvelled at the difference a pair of stockings had made. It was as if her spirit had been revitalised. She'd always been spritely, but in a sheltered, safe space. The change in her confidence was remarkable.

As we entered the mall, April made a beeline for one of the higher-end stores; the kind of place I'd never actually been in before. It was a brand that had mind-blowing prices, and was not something I could ever afford. I wouldn't even want to wear the clothes as I'd spend the whole time worrying about damaging them.

As April bounced her way up to the entrance, a staff member immediately blocked the door way. "I'm sorry," he said, while looking April up and down, snarling at her clothing choices and then finally squinting at the state of her hair. "We're full. You'll have to try somewhere else."

I thought what Mother would do in such a position. She'd politely smile, even though she was furious. She'd step aside and go somewhere else, to just avoid causing her scene. She'd wish to leave the impression that she was dignified and above confrontation.

I didn't want to be like Mother. I'd *never* wanted to be like mother. Though, my instincts were telling me to follow suit; to remain civil and encourage April to head somewhere else. The staff member's intervention was actually a saving grace. I mean, I didn't want to go in the expensive store anyway. However, when I looked at April, I was moved by how distraught she looked. She felt utterly insulted and as if she wasn't good enough to enter the premises. With a single action, the staff member had erased all of the confidence boosting of the previous night, and despite being utterly terrified and overwhelmed with social anxiety: I couldn't let that go. I wanted to be a good friend to April. I wanted to be her best friend and make her happy, the same way I had when I'd bought her the stockings and I wanted to revel in her thanking me afterwards.

"Is it because I'm Asian?" I muttered, and I barely believed the words that had left my mouth. I looked at April in confusion, and her jaw dropped open, before it rapidly disappeared behind her hand. I darted my eyes back to the staff member in panic, terrified of the beehive I may have just punted. My cheeks began to warm, as I feared that I'd just ignited a confrontation that I wasn't at all capable of riding. I looked off to the side, ready to escape and drag April with me. I most definitely wasn't a fighting kind of girl.

"W-what?" The staff member asked, and it was obvious from his expression that he was rattled. "Of course not." He visibly swallowed a lump in his throat. "I'd never judge—"

I dipped my head slightly, taken by surprise that his composure had apparently been dented. I looked towards April, and she seemed in awe. She was so impressed. "You worried I'm going to spread Covid around?" I added, and again, I was surprised by my own courage. When I noticed April giggling behind her hand, something inside me came to life. I let out two fake coughs. "Are you worried I'm going to infect the whole store because I'm Asian? Is that it? Are Asians forbidden from your premises?"

The staff member was so visibly uncomfortable that he was squirming. He was looking around, over our shoulders, worried that others were listening in. He was acting exactly like Mother whenever she feared her reputation was on the line. It spurred me on to strike where it would hurt and get April what she wanted: access to the store. It wasn't fair that she was excluded just because of the way she looked. It shouldn't matter that she couldn't afford the items in there. How the hell did he know that? Simply because she wore glasses, had hair like tumbleweed and a wardrobe straight out of a charity bag: she wasn't allowed in?

I dipped my head slightly and squinted through my own geeky glasses. "Are you profiling me?" I glanced up towards the name of the store and flicked my hand up. "I'm not allowed in here because I'm Asian?" I huffed. "I imagine the media would *love* to hear about this."

The staff member's lips quivered, and he kept shooting glances between the pair of us. "Geez, woman," he finally said in an agitated voice. He clumsily stepped aside, and then waved his hand. "Stop this already and just come in. Alright?"

"Humph," I said, still maintaining the act, and I held my nose in the air before stepping past him. April swiftly followed and then suddenly we were in a store well beyond our means and fashion tastes.

"Wow," April said as she clutched my arm. "That was amazing, Jing. You're amazing. I'm so lucky to have a friend like you."

I was beaming. I lapped up the praise and continued to savour the moment of being complimented. A most rare moment in my life. However, as we headed over, a

number of the female staff looked at us in confusion, particularly towards April. They darted their eyes back to the guy on the door, and he shrugged and put his finger to his lips. Instantly, the women were all smiles, and one approached.

"Is there anything I can assist you with, ladies?" she said, and she was almost like a model. She towered over the pair of us, and her limbs were extraordinarily skinny.

"No," I said, as adrenaline was beginning to wear off; my heart pounding so brutally in my chest that I felt like it was going to burst out. "We're just looking."

The woman's eyes slowly moved between the pair of us, and then she smiled awkwardly. "As you wish," she said. Her grey eyes lingered a little longer on April. "I'll be nearby if you need anything," she added, as she slowly slinked away; her attention remaining on us the entire time.

And so, while the assistant watched us the whole time, we walked around the edge of the store together. April pointed at a few things she liked, yet every time she reached out to touch, I'd notice the assistant step a little closer, as if she was checking that April didn't slip anything in her pocket. It was horribly uncomfortable, and I was sweating all over. I seriously just wanted out of there, but April was so focused on the pretty items that she hadn't even noticed.

"I want to look at the shoes," she said, and she abruptly skipped her way over to that section.

We both stopped in our tracks as there was a pair of girls already over there. The slightly shorter, yet more beautiful of the two was holding up a pair of heels while she squinted and tugged at the leather straps. She had her blonde hair tied into a ponytail, and was wearing the same sort of pleated skirt that I'd sometimes seen April bumbling around in. The difference was it looked magnificent on the stranger; especially with the toned curves of her legs. She must have been athletic, as her calves were so defined. Her top was similarly classy, and though she was wearing sneakers, and they appeared particularly beat up, there was a gold chain around her ankle that just seemed to pop. It was a simple touch, but it worked, and I looked towards April's gangly legs and thought how ridiculous it would look on her; more likely being mistaken for a prison or hospital tag.

The gaggle of female assistants near the cashier station were paying no attention to the blonde girl at all. Whereas they were watching April and I like hawks, the blonde girl was swanning from item to item, picking them up freely and then not even putting them back in the correct places. It was so damn annoying, and ridiculously unfair. I looked at April. and could tell she was jealous, and I wasn't about to let those women take away her happiness.

I placed my hand gently on April's back. "Let's see if there's anything you like," I said with a smile. "At the very least, it'll be cool to try them on, huh?"

April smiled too, and then she stepped towards the section. However, we both paused when the blonde girl let out a loud tut. Immediately, my first reaction was like I was back in school, and that one of the popular girls had locked her attention on me. My instinct was to flee, and I could sense the same within April as she remained rooted to the spot. However, the blonde girl hadn't appeared to notice us, and instead, she was tutting at the expensive shoe she was eyeing.

She grimaced slightly as she traced a finger along the sharp heel, before she shrugged and tossed it carelessly towards the girl at her side; an older red-head struggling not to fumble and drop it to the floor. "I want these," the blonde said in a most bratty tone. "Go see if they have them in my size."

Both April and I looked at each other in surprise, and then I quietly mouthed, "Wow, that was rude."

April nodded animatedly, and then the pair of us were engrossed.

The older, red-headed girl seemed a little staggered and she held the shoe against her chest. Her shoulders were sagged, and her head slightly dipped, as if this sort of thing was a common occurrence. The blonde one, though shorter, just had something about her posture that communicated authority. She immediately leaned towards the feebler girl and screwed up her face. "God," she sneered in a rather snotty and annoying voice. "Don't act like you're not desperate to see my feet in them. You're practically drooling all over the floor." Her expression was so intense, that even though she was obviously beautiful, I was terrified by her without even being party to the exchange.

I took an instinctive step back, fearful that she may notice us and pepper us with the same hair-dryer treatment for eaves-dropping. "What the..." I whispered in confusion. April didn't respond, because she seemed mesmerised by what was playing out. She wasn't staring at the blonde girl in the same fear, but almost in awe. In actuality, the pair of us were both entranced by the oddness of the exchange, though seemingly for entirely different reasons. I was so intimidated by the blonde's attitude, that it took me a few seconds longer to register exactly what she'd said. I dipped my head towards April, and then asked in the lowest voice, "Did you just hear that?"

"Uh huh," April whispered back without even turning away, clearly captivated by whatever was playing out.

The older girl mumbled something back, but it was in such a low voice that it wasn't intelligible from where we were standing. However, from the way her eyes were lowered, it definitely felt deferential. She took a step towards the assistants, but then paused as she noticed the two of us spectators. She immediately became all flustered and sheepish; her cheeks blossoming until they were a similar shade to her hair. She dropped her eyes and stared at the floor, before she awkwardly shimmied towards the store assistants while clutching the shoe. As she passed, we momentarily made eye contact as she slyly looked up, and it was obvious she was embarrassed as hell by whatever was going on.

"Good," the beautiful blonde girl said over her shoulder without even looking back, and then, while her attention was on a different pair of shoes, she huffed rather loudly, "And don't take all day. I'm not done spending your money yet. I still have plenty of your inheritance to get through."

The older girl flinched, and then she paused, looking back at me, clearly terrified that the odd comment had been overheard. I was just standing there open-mouthed, while April had cocked her head and seemed lost in wonder.

"Umm, sorry," the older girl said.

My mouth hung open, and I was about to tell her that everything was okay. That she had nothing to apologise for, but no words came out. I was just too shell-shocked by everything I was seeing.

The girl looked distraught, and almost dropped the heel, but then she held it tightly and continued on to the statuesque assistants and showed them the shoe. I turned to April, and whispered, "Did you see that—"

"What are you looking at?" I heard in a viciously bratty voice, and my heart skipped a beat as I hesitantly looked over and saw the blonde was staring straight at me. She was holding another expensive heel, yet, her attention was fully on me. I glanced at her hand as it clutched the shoe, and I noted that her nails were painted an immaculate, shining white. "I said what are you looking at?" she asked again, this time with a tut, and I flicked my eyes from her fingers. Seeing her face straight on for the first time caused me to gasp. She was strikingly pretty, with completely symmetrical features. Her eyes were an intense blue, and along with her blonde hair, she was truly a sight. Yet, at that moment, her nose was wrinkled, and her lips curled into a snarl. I saw the logo on the vest-like top she was wearing, and instantly recognised it as a rival college to the one I was attending. "Didn't your parents ever teach you not to listen to a stranger's conversations?"

"Umm, sorry," I said without even thinking. It was an instinctive reaction when being spoken to by a girl that looked like her. But then, I blushed, as I realised I'd said it in the exact same sheepish way that the older, red-headed girl had done with me. "Umm, come on," I said while turning to April. "Let's go look somewhere else."

"Huh?" April asked, clearly infatuated with the girl that was glaring at us with such piercing intensity. Such girls usually terrified her, as they did with I, but April was almost staring at her like she was lost in total hero worship. Even as I began to drag her out, she struggled against my arm, turning to look back and absorb as much of the scene as she could.

"Yes, toddle off," the blonde called out as I frog-marched April away, and then I swear, as she turned back to the shelves of shoes, she muttered under her breath, "losers."

Once we'd awkwardly left, having to avoid the amused glances of the staff member outside as departed empty-handed, April tugged me towards another store. I allowed her to drag me a couple of steps, but then I turned a final time, just out of curiosity, only to see that the older girl was kneeling before the blonde while helping one of her feet into the expensive, designer heels. A sneaker was at her side, with a

stained sock dangling from its opening, and I wondered: had she made the girl remove her shoes and socks too? As the older girl fastened the strap on the sandal, I caught a glimpse of the blonde girl's feet, and her toes were painted the same brilliant white as her fingers. But that wasn't what struck me the most, it was the way the blonde was sneering down at her, clearly annoyed by how long it had taken her to bring back the shoes.

"My God," I whispered as we were standing back out in the safety of the open mall. I wasn't able to take a step further, as my limbs were shaking all over. I was completely mesmerised by the whole exchange and confused as hell by what I'd just witnessed. I looked back into the store, and wondered if we'd stumbled into a movie or some kind of hidden prank show. There was just something about the blonde girl's confidence and control that was infatuating; especially since she was so evidently younger and shorter than the girl she was so casually bossing around. I'd encountered many girls like her throughout my life, especially during high school and college. They were the conceited, stuck-up terrors, the cheerleader types, that preyed on girls like April and I; girls that they considered far below themselves in the social hierarchy. Yet, that blonde who had an older girl meek and submissive at her feet, while helping her into her shoes; she came across like the ultimate, end boss, similar to the baddies in the comics we regularly read.

After I managed to calm myself, and finally breathe normally, I turned towards April as she continued to tug on my sleeve. "What was that all about?" I muttered, and I was still blushing over the whole thing. It was such strange behaviour, especially in public, but it was like an understanding existed between them. There was only one person in control the whole time, and that was most definitely the pony-tailed blonde. "That was so weird," I added.

April abruptly turned and looked at me in surprise. "Weird?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "That was...that was so cool."

"Yeah, it was really weird..." I trailed off as her words hit me, and then my mouth dropped slightly open. "Huh. Cool?"

April animatedly nodded, like she was a bobblehead on a dashboard. "The way she was doing whatever that girl told her. How cool was that?" She giggled. "Buy me those shoes!" she squealed in a forceful voice.

"That..." I blinked, and wondered whether she was having me on. "April, that is not cool. She was basically bullying her."

April squinted at me through her glasses, her beady eyes tiny through the lenses. "Well, I'd love to be a princess and have someone doing whatever I said. That's like...the dream life." She then let out a little giggle. "Did you hear what she said too?" She then stood up straight, and tried to make her voice sound as serious as possible, "I'm not done spending your money yet." Her sunken posture returned, and she chuckled. "How awesome is that? She was buying whatever she wanted and that other girl was paying for it." She then flinched, and looked at me with curiosity. "Kind of like when you bought me the stockings yesterday, isn't it?"

"What?" I almost shrieked. "April, it was not at all like that and you know it. I bought you those stockings as a gift and I was just being nice."

"Well, yes, but I just think it was cool. I'd love to have a friend like that, one I could just tell to buy me whatever I want."

I hesitated, and I was slightly concerned. I thought about keeping my thoughts to myself, but I couldn't let it go. "April," I said softly. "You...you wouldn't treat someone like that, would you?"

She thought for a moment, and I waited for the obvious response. "Hell yes, I would," she said, much to my surprise. "Having someone doing whatever I said and buying me whatever I wanted? That would be awesome." I was speechless, because I hadn't been expecting that answer at all. I looked her over, and she was such a dorky specimen of a girl, that I could never envision her in the position of that gorgeous, bitchy blonde. She stared at me for a second longer, and then she shrugged. "Anyway, did you notice the collar and little dog tag around her neck?"

I'd been so baffled by the whole slanted dynamic between them, the blonde girl having such natural authority over the senior of the two, that I hadn't even noticed whatever April was talking about. A shiver ran down my spine, as it all sounded so kinky. "Ummm, no," I whispered. "I did not notice that." I looked back into the store, but the red-head was still kneeling with her back turned to the entrance. "Are you being serious?"

“They’re probably just cosplaying or doing a role-play or something,” April said with a shrug. Her attention was then captivated by the same store across the walkway she’d been dragging me towards. “I wanna go in there,” she said with a pointed finger, and just like that, she’d completely moved on, apparently just mildly amused by the odd interaction we’d just witnessed.

I, however, was way more curious and I followed April into the new store while still dwelling on what I’d just seen. The blonde cheerleader type was clearly in charge, and she appeared to spit out harsh orders without any consideration for the feelings of the girl shuffling at her side. While April was already busy running around the aisles, and scooping up various items she wanted to try on, I lingered by the entrance; my gaze totally focused on the high-end store opposite. Even though I was quite far away, when I squinted, I could just make out the two of them in there. The blonde was near the entrance, and playing around on her phone, while the red-head was at the cashier and appearing to pay. Was she actually paying for the other girl’s shoes, for real? That was baffling to me, as the price was in the thousands. When they left, I noted that the blonde strutted along, holding only her phone while she led the way. Meanwhile, the older girl shimmied behind her, clutching the bag and following with her eyes down. It was startling, and my breathing became heavy, because I was mystified by the sight I was seeing. Everything about it just screamed domination and submission. I even had to wipe my forehead as I was building up a sweat. I couldn’t believe that a relationship like that could exist between two girls, where one was completely subservient to the other.

They circled around, but then the blonde inexplicably turned and marched across the walkway, heading straight for me. I ducked behind a rail of sweaters, and peeped out as they walked past the store we were in.

“Come along,” the confident, stunning beauty said as she breezed past the entrance. “I want to get my nails done.” She cruised briskly along while the timid girl waddled behind her, still carrying the bag.

I stepped out when I felt the coast was clear, and watched as they headed out into the mall. The red-head obediently followed the cheerleader type until they disappeared inside a salon.

I turned back towards the rail of sweaters, and I tugged at the collar of one, trying to look like I was browsing and not completely rattled by what I'd just witnessed. The blonde's nails had already looked flawless, and so my mind was racing. Was she expecting the shy girl to pay for her nails too? Was that the arrangement she had going on between them? The blonde had looked so radiant and together. Her hair, though tied back in a ponytail, was smooth and sheening, her makeup was expertly applied and everything was pristine down to every detail: even both her finger and toenails looked pampered. Meanwhile, the other girl appeared quite frumpy; her body drowned beneath a loose sweater and jeans. I hardly had an idea of how she looked, as she'd spent most of the time shamefacedly looking towards the floor while she was bossed around.

With them long gone, I was finally able to relax, and although the entire situation kept rolling around my head, I ambled up towards April. She was holding a pair of cute, pink slippers. At the front of each, there was a little soft attachment that was shaped like a pig's face. As I stepped down the aisle and stopped at her side, she turned and showed them to me; excitement all over her dorky little face. "Aren't they the cutest?" she said while jiggling them around. "They're so damn cute."

I touched the material, and traced my fingers along its softness. "I guess," I said, before I squeezed the bobbly pink head on the end. "I can imagine you tripping over wearing these though." The words were leaving my lips, but it was like my head was somewhere else, still back in the other store with that blonde-haired girl and her snotty attitude.

"True," April said with a shrug. "They're not really practical, but they're damn cute. I guess it's the kind of thing you just wear for show." She dipped her head, then lifted the price tag hanging from the rear of one slipper. "Ouch," she said. "They're \$25. What a bummer." She chewed her tongue, before looking at me, almost expectantly.

"Yes," I said. "That's kind of expensive for what they are." We'd been through that sort of thing so many times that I didn't even know why April bothered looking at the price tags anymore. She couldn't afford 10 cents, never mind anything a dollar and above.

April bit her lip and nodded, and then she continued to lift the slippers, moving them around so she could get a better view. An awkward silence followed, as I was

just standing there, watching April while she analysed and scrutinised every inch of the slippers. It was so damn uncomfortable, as every second I thought she was done and was going to put the slippers back, she simply turned them over, giving another look. Finally, after minutes had passed by, she tutted, before whispering. "It's too bad I can't afford them, huh?"

"Yes, too bad," I said, and I thought back to the stockings and how I'd been a good friend and bought them for her. She'd been so excited while trying them on, and she appeared equally excited about the stupid pig slippers. Part of me was tempted to offer to buy them for her again, but it had only been a day since I'd bought the stockings, and I didn't want to set a precedent and make some sort of routine. Besides that, her comment comparing me to the red-headed girl had hit a nerve, and I didn't like the connotations of it. I was most definitely not like that passive girl. I may have been a shy, studious nerd, but I wasn't like *that*. I fled from girls like the blonde, as I'd just done mere minutes before. I didn't let them take advantage of me as had just played out.

April was still squeezing the slippers, and she tugged on the jiggly pig heads. She turned and looked up at me through her thick glasses, and her mouth parted. However, she didn't say anything, seeming to think better of whatever was on her mind. So, she just resumed caressing the slippers. A few seconds more passed, and again, she looked at me. As like before, though her tongue was perched on her teeth, she didn't speak, as if whatever was on her mind she didn't have the confidence to say. She adjusted her position, relaxing slightly more, and then through the sides of her glasses, I noticed that she'd closed her eyes.

I cocked my head, wondering what she was doing as she squeezed the slippers harshly. She almost appeared like she was meditating, or concentrating on something intently. She squeezed the slippers a final time, and then she whispered something. I was about to lean closer, but then I flinched as her eyes shot open and she turned and looked at me. "I want these," she said intensely, as if she'd had to spit it out before she changed her mind. I stared back at her in confusion, because I already knew that she wanted them. She couldn't afford them, that was the problem. While I looked on, she pressed one of her shoes against the heel of the other and eased it off. The slippers dropped to the floor with a light bounce, and then I only saw a blur of April's foot before

she stuffed it inside the fluffy hole. She turned, and then presented it before me. "What do you think?" she asked, and I could see that her toes were flexing beneath the plush material.

"They look alright, I guess," I said with a shrug.

April looked at me with hesitation, her lips quivering, then she rolled her eyes back down to the slippers. I followed, and her toes twitched inside again. When I looked back up, April was staring at me, lost in thought. She eased her head closer, and then she whispered, "Don't act like you're not desperate to see my feet in them." She cocked her head. "You're practically drooling all over the floor."

I felt a sharp hotness inside me, which fizzled its way up from my tummy until it eventually lit my cheeks up with an embarrassing fire. "W-what?" I muttered in astonishment, and my social anxiety flared up intensely. *What the hell was she talking about?* I awkwardly wiped my mouth with my sleeve, inexplicably panicking that maybe I was indeed drooling. Even though I had no reason to be drooling, I was still panicked that I may have been. Drooling over April's feet? Did she know that I'd given some thought to which colour would best suit her toenails? I glanced back down at the slipper, and when her toes twitched again, I looked up at her distraught. April grinned, and then I swallowed nervously as a horrid thought startled me. I'd spent so much time the previous night looking at the stocking pictures she'd sent me, that I was worried that somehow April had known and was now teasing me about it. Was there some part of the application that I didn't understand? Maybe April could see how long I had a particular photo open. Did the app do that kind of thing? How long had I been looking at it? I'd even zoomed in at one point, trying to see the shape of her big toenail through the material of the stocking. Did...did she know I did that?

April began to giggle, and she twisted her ankle, the little piggy head atop the slipper jiggling around, almost as if it was mocking me. "I want these," she said merrily. "I *want* these."

I was still on the defensive, and I began to splutter. "What do you mean?" I leaned in closer and lowered my voice. "I'm not desperate to see your feet. I'm not drooling. Why would you say that April?" I gulped, while thinking about that one photo of her stockings where she was laying on the bed, and the slightest glimpse of her panties had been visible. She'd done that on purpose, obviously, and it wasn't fair that I was

being made to feel like I'd done something wrong. "You sent me that photo of your foot in the stockings," I fired accusingly. "Was I not supposed to look at it for too long or something? You asked me to imagine how good they'd look painted. Was I not supposed to imagine?" I baulked, and narrowed my eyes. "If you didn't want me to look at it, then you shouldn't have sent me a photo of your damn foot."

April immediately stopped twisting her foot, and then she straightened her posture. The giggling disappeared and instead was replaced by a perplexing silence. Behind her glasses, her eyebrows arched; through the thick lenses appearing more like discarded eyelashes above tiny marbles, and it was obvious she was completely confused by my outburst. I was still shaking, almost terrified that she was accusing me of being a pervert or something. She cocked her head, and then dropped her eyes to her foot in the pink slipper, before she looked at me and squinted. "Jing," she said softly. "I was kidding. I was just repeating what that girl said in the store earlier. You know"—she straightened her head and spoke in a monotone—"Don't act like you're not desperate to see my feet in them. You're practically drooling all over the floor." She softened her posture, and then whispered quietly, "Why are you getting all worked up? It was a joke." She looked to the side, and appeared uncomfortable.

Instantly, I felt like a complete fool, and I was overwhelmed with the blissful feeling of relief. "Oh, yes," I said, and then I put-on a forced chuckle. "Of course. I knew it was a joke." I shrugged and tried to appear nonchalant. "I was just joking too." I then looked away from her wide-eyed, cringing all over at having reacted in such a hostile way to a most obvious joke. The blonde girl had said those words only minutes earlier. How could I have overlooked that the childish April was just goofing around? I reached out and poked at another boring pair of slippers. "Oh, aren't these nice?" I said, running a finger along the patchwork design.

"Okay," April muttered in a timid voice, and it was like all of her joy and excitement had swiftly evaporated.

It was bitterly awkward, and I most regretful as her radiant smile had been replaced by a grimace. "Ummm, I'm sorry," I said, and I felt so damn guilty for my obvious lack of humour.

"It's okay," she said again, but then, she blinked, and I could sense the tip of her tongue was perched on her lips once more. She angled her head up towards me, and

though I could only see her eyes through her comically thick lenses, I could tell she was intuitively curious by what had just happened.

"Anyway," I said, trying to steer the conversation in a safer direction, but April appeared unmoved.

"Jing," she asked, which caused my back to tense. "Why..." she trailed off before clearing her throat. "Umm, why did you just say that?"

"Say what?" I asked apprehensively, worried my miniscule amount of relief was about to be snatched away again.

"That you were looking at that photo of my stockings for too long? That photo of my...foot?" She dipped her head to the side, then scratched her chin. Her lips quivered as the confusion seemed to interfere with her ability to speak. She spluttered a few incomprehensible words, and then, after momentarily trapping her tongue between her teeth, she looked me dead in the eye. "How..." She dipped her head slightly forwards, before looking up to me with hesitance. "Jing," she said. "How long were you looking at that photo of my foot?"

"So," I said, while standing up straight and rubbing my hands together. "Shall we get these slippers for you? You said you wanted them, right?" The sweat was already trickling down my cheeks as April continued to stare at me in confusion.

She flinched slightly, caught off-guard by the abrupt change of direction. "Ummm, yes, I want them," she answered hesitantly. She then leaned slightly closer to me, peering up at me with curiosity. "Are you going to buy them for me?"

"I guess," and I looked back towards her uneasily. "Is...is that what you want?" My face was still burning with embarrassment after the way she'd inquired about the photo of her foot.

April didn't answer immediately, and I could see her tongue swirling around the inside of her cheek while she thought things over. I was just standing there, while she seemed to take her time to analyse the whole situation. Finally, she shrugged, and then she wiggled her foot free from the slipper. After she'd slipped it back into her shoe, she lightly kicked the slippers towards me. "Sure," she said. "I want them." She then looked me straight in the eye with a confidence I'd not thought her capable of. "Go buy

them for me.” She was standing with her legs slightly parted, and her arms crossed over her chest. She made no other motion to move, and then her tiny eyes rolled down towards the slippers.

I squirmed, and writhed in place while I tossed and turned between what I should do. When I finally crouched and scooped up the slippers, April bit her lip, trying with all of her might not to release a giggle. As I skulked my way to the cashier, she couldn't hold it in any longer, chuckling to herself as she watched me buy her exactly what she wanted.

She waited for me outside the store while I paid. Even though it was just myself and the cashier, everything felt so hot and stuffy. I constantly felt as if I was about to vomit, because something felt off. Something didn't feel right, and I was completely out of my element.

And yet, when I timidly left the store, and offered the bag towards April, she kept her arms crossed. “Thanks,” she said, while making no effort to take it from me. “You're such a good friend,” she said with a knowing smile. “Thanks for making me happy.”

And just like that, once I'd received that kind of praise, it no longer felt wrong. Worryingly: it felt right. I carried the bag for her, just as the red-head had done the blonde. Neither of us commented on it, but it was like we both understood what was happening. I carried that bag, right up to April's front door. Only then did she take it, gleefully heading inside so she could wear her new slippers.

That night, I couldn't concentrate on my studying. I just kept dwelling on the day's events. The odd situation within the high-end store, and how our witnessing it had shaped what came after. How April had seemed to feed off of that horrid girl's behaviour, and somehow, that had resulted in me buying her the slippers. I hadn't set out to buy her anything; I'd even consciously convinced myself that I *wouldn't* be buying her anything out of principle. And yet, I had bought her the slippers. Those ridiculously childish and dorky slippers. I'd bought them, because she'd told me to buy them, and then when she'd thanked me, and told me what a great friend I was, it had all felt worth

it. It was as if a sprinkling of praise from April, made up for all of the years of criticism and ill-treatment by my mother. It didn't matter that April was younger than me, or that she was a total dork, all that mattered was my worth had been recognised, and that tickled me somewhere deep inside. I had value, and my best friend had acknowledged it. I wasn't a let-down or a disappointment. I was good at *something*, and that something was making April happy.

Obviously, Mother hadn't been happy when I returned home, barely giving me time to take off my jacket before she announced her disapproval at having wasted the afternoon with April. I didn't mention the purchase of the slippers. Instead, I chose burying my head in the sand and waiting until a month's time when she'd inevitably confront me about it with bank statement in hand. Thankfully, she'd backed off somewhat, seeing how out of sorts I was; my attention fragmented along with my hot and sweated body. I could barely process much of her complaints, and when she recognised that my eyes were focusing on nothing in particular, she'd told me to have a shower and go to my room to study. For the entire shower, I'd just kept recycling one thought over and over: the praise had meant so much to me from April, but I was worried about what I'd had to do to receive that praise.

When I was about to finally give up on studying, my heart pulsated when April sent me a message. I looked at the notification, terrified and excited by its arrival, and I was hesitant to click it, in case it both was and wasn't what I suspected. After a courageous breath, I closed my eyes, tensed my arms, and then blinking my eyes back open: I tapped the notification.

April sent you a picture message.

There it was, exactly what I'd been dreading, or maybe, what I'd been hoping for. April had sent me another picture message, just as she'd done the night before. I'd bought her the stockings, and she'd sent me pictures. I'd bought her the slippers, and now I'd received a picture again. Part of me wanted to click it and instead see a selfie, or something completely unconnected to what had played out at the mall. But, the other

part of me wanted the confirmation: that perhaps, I was receiving a reward for making April happy. I was receiving further recognition for being such a good friend.

I had to close my eyes, and really gee myself up again, before I clicked the notification and opened the chat window. When I did, a photo popped up from April's view. She was sitting at her desk, just as I was, but she had one of the comics I'd previously bought in her lap. That wasn't the interesting part of the photo though. It was the fact that her feet were crossed up on the corner of the desk, and that she was wearing the pink, piggy slippers. I stared in fascination. It was strange to see April again wearing something that I'd bought for her, especially with the way her legs were crossed and she was flaunting her newest position.

She must have noticed that I'd viewed the photo, as another message came through from her:

April: how do they look?

It seemed like an innocent enough question, and the slippers did kind of look cute. Unlike the revealing stocking photo, there was nothing at all inappropriate or sexy about the image; pink piggy slippers were as far away from sexy as possible. Her pale legs were visible, but it was mostly just her knees and shins since the comic book was open across her lap. So, it felt safe to just give her a compliment and boost her esteem a bit more.

Me: they look great, good choice!

April responded instantly:

April: thanks for buying them for me. u made me so happy

I was touched, and to be honest, a little relieved. There had been some tension when I'd suggested buying them. I'd basically done so to escape that awkward moment where April had been questioning me about looking at the photo of her foot. I'd certainly not wanted to discuss that further. But then, she'd almost sounded forceful, telling me to go buy the slippers for her, like she was channelling the bratty blonde girl with the ponytail. I'd felt uneasy, and like I didn't recognise her at that moment, and, it had scared me. It had scared me in the same way that the blonde girl had terrified me. Because, I hated confronting girls like that. I was always so weak and cowardly in their presence. Thankfully, the April I was familiar with was still present, and it was obvious she was just playing around after the odd situation we'd witnessed.

Me: happy to be of assistance, I'm glad you like them so much

I sent over the message, and was happy the exchange was pleasant. It definitely put me at ease after the day's events, and I continued to read my book, finally being able to concentrate on the material. But then, it appeared April wasn't finished with me, as she sent another message through:

April: great, bcos im not done spending ur money yet!!!!

I had to read the message a couple of times before I could believe what she had written. It was just so bratty, and selfish, and frankly an awful way to message someone that was her friend. Not just a friend, but someone that had just bought her a gift. I was honestly shocked, and it felt odd, because it left me feeling like I was mistaken. The way she'd acted in the store, telling me to buy her the slippers in such a commanding and entitled way: that message completely reeked of the same. I was always spending money on April, a little bit at a time of course. With the occasional comic and graphic novel, and more recently the stockings and slippers, but, that was the first time she'd ever sounded so greedy. So entitled and bratty. I wanted to object, but the weakling

inside me; the shy girl that cowered from confrontation: she wanted to make my friend happy.

I was at a loss with how to respond, and my teeth began to chatter a little as I became nervous. If April was going to act like that from now on, I wasn't sure how to be her friend. I thought back to the store, and how she'd looked so commanding, legs parted and arms crossed, just after she'd nonchalantly kicked the slippers towards me. It was almost demeaning, waiting for me to crouch and pick them up. She could have politely handed them to me, but it was almost like a show of dominance. She'd been waiting for me to wilt, and scoop them up from the floor at her feet. I was horribly embarrassed while recalling how I'd done so.

Before I could even think of a suitable thing to write, another message arrived:

*April: jk, before u get all worked up again, i was just repeating
what that girl said again*

Just like that, instant relief washed over me. Once again, I was overthinking things, and April, in all her goofy wonder, was indeed just goofing around. I actually managed to giggle, because I'd fallen for the same stupid joke as before. I rolled my eyes at my apparent foolishness, and began typing out a response. However, before I could hit send, April messaged again.

April: but yeah, do u like how my feet look in them?

April sent you a picture message.

As had occurred the night before, the picture came up while I still had the chat open. Therefore, April saw that I'd viewed it straight away. The picture was a similar angle, though, only one foot was still up on the desk. The other foot was curled over her lap, and her fingers clutched the soft slipper as she'd pulled it slightly off her foot.

The pale wrinkles of her arch were visible, and there was a slight sheen across her skin, as if her feet were sweaty from having worn the slippers so much. Perhaps she'd been so excited, that she'd had them on since we'd both arrived home. That was hours ago, and I could only imagine how the soft, fluffy interior of the slippers had kept her little feet warm. Near the opening of the slipper, there was the slightest glimpse of her toes, though the nails were still hidden inside. It would have been terribly teasing if I was into that sort of thing. I was most perplexed by why she felt the need to send me such a photo, but also, kind of thankful that she had done so. I mean, it meant she was happy and excited about her new slippers, didn't it?

Therefore, I tried to be diplomatic in my response. To somewhat compliment her without being overly so:

Me: *umm, yes, I suppose*

I thought that was that, but then April again kept the conversation going:

April: *good, bcos I can see u drooling from here!*

Instantly, I was panicking again, re-reading my message and worried that I'd given her the wrong impression. Had I seemed too enthusiastic? Did I make it sound like I'd wanted to see how her feet looked in the slippers? But, as I trawled through the chat, there was nothing from me that gave the impression that's what I wanted. Still, I was fretting, and my anxiety caused my skin to pimple slightly. I scratched my arms as it felt like a rash was developing, and I picked at my hair as my scalp became itchy. I tried to think of something to say that would convince April she'd got the wrong of the stick, but then, thankfully, she put me out of my misery.

April: *jk again, anyway, night night!*

Feeling foolish once more, I realised that April was just repeating what she'd heard in the store, again, just like she'd done when she was trying on the slipper. Why she kept bringing up that weirdness and making it a joke was a mystery, but I certainly didn't like the way such words left me panicking and out of sorts. I was supposed to be the older and wiser one. I was the leader that had taken April under my wing, and it was unnerving that those stupid jokes were able to get under my skin so easily. I turned my phone off before she was able to send another message, and then I headed to bed and struggled to get some rest. As I tossed and turned, I just kept thinking about all of the photos she'd sent me over the past two days. The slippers had looked nice and comfy, especially the way her soft, pale feet had looked all warm and sweaty. As I lay awake, I wondered which colour polish would suit April's feet best. Which shade would look eye-catching whenever she slipped her toes from the hot interior of her slippers. Such thoughts were baffling to me, and I knew I needed to stop things before they got any further out of control. I couldn't lay awake every night, thinking about April's feet and the things I'd bought for her. That simply wasn't a normal thing to do.

As the fresh week began, I was careful about leaving the house. I made sure that April's mother had already left for work, so I wouldn't be accosted by April while she was waving her off. Whenever I did finally venture out, I scurried down the pathway at a quick pace and dashed to the bus stop. I felt ridiculous, trying not to be seen by a girl my junior, but the recent conversations with April had left me feeling uncomfortable.

Over the next days, she messaged me a few times, and though I'd seen the notifications, I just swiped them away, not wanting to read the messages and have her know I had done so. Frankly, I was worried that she'd been sending me more pictures of her stockings, slippers, and worst of all, her feet. I didn't want to see that kind of stuff, and I certainly didn't want it on my phone. I didn't want those images floating around my head every night.

Of course, I was aware it was going to be damn awkward when I eventually did bump into her, but I figured I could just play it off that I was too busy with college,

studying and my part-time job. I didn't have an open schedule like she did, where she spent most of her day messing around, watching anime and reading comics.

Mother certainly approved of my hurried attitude when it came to going to and coming home from college and work. I spent the evenings in my room, studying and trying to get as much work done as possible. April came to the door a few times, as I heard her talking to my mother downstairs. Much to my relief, Mother didn't even bother coming to ask if I was free, she simply told April that I was busy while I crouched and listened from the top of the stairs. It was kind of pathetic, cowering and hiding from a girl three years my junior, but there was something unsettling about the recent direction our friendship had been steering towards. It was a direction where I was less in control, and where April was the one seizing the initiative. She was saying and doing things that left me lost for words, and I'd found myself out of sorts, embarrassed and increasingly flustered. It scared me, because where April had been demanding with me, it had felt right to adhere to her wishes, and, it had felt good when she'd praised and thanked me afterwards. That fear had made me not want to be around her. Not because I didn't trust April and what she may further ask of me, but rather, I didn't trust myself in how I'd respond.

"Jing Chan," I heard in a whiney tone just as I was stepping out of the coffee shop. My head was buried in my phone, and I flinched as I recognised the voice. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Oh, umm, April," I said, completely caught off guard. "How have you been?" I was still wearing my uniform, and along with being surprised, I simply wasn't at all prepared to deal with her at that moment.

"Obviously your phone is working," she said while pointing at it accusingly. "So, you've been ignoring my messages." She crossed her arms with a bratty humph, then scowled with her messy eyebrows from above her glasses. "That's so mean. I thought you were my friend?"

"Ummm, I'm sorry," I said before swallowing down the awkwardness. "I've been so busy with college, and studying." I then tugged on the sleeve of my work shirt. "And of course, I've been working here a lot. I don't have a minute to spare."

April appeared unconvinced, and she pointed at my phone again. "How hard is it to reply to a message? You haven't even read any of them! You say you don't have a minute to spare, well, it only takes five seconds to reply to a text!"

I shifted from foot to foot. "Like I said, I've been busy."

"That's not good enough," she said defiantly, and she pointed at my phone. "You're holding it right now. Open my messages."

I glanced at her in surprise. "April," I said. "Right here?"

"Yes," she said forcefully. Right here. She spread her feet slightly in the same way as before; her arms crossed with determination. She was wearing some odd, maiden like outfit, as if it were a costume straight out of Austria. It had a fake corset, and she'd buttoned it right up to her neck. "Open them."

"Ummm, okay," I said, while feeling all weird, but the way she appeared so cross and unwilling to be defied, I felt pressured to do what she wanted. I tapped my thumb, opening the chat and then finding a flurry of messages come through. A lot of them were pictures, and it only took me a second to recognise that most were of her feet. She'd posed them in various positions, either wearing the stockings or slippers, and it was obvious she'd gone to a lot of effort.

"See," she said while nodding at my phone. "How hard was that?"

"Not very," I muttered.

"Do you know how long it took me to take those pictures?"

"No." I instantly felt bad, and embarrassed, because I *had* been ignoring her. Even though it was only April, I could barely look her in the eye because I felt so damn guilty. Maybe in her head she hadn't even done anything wrong. She had been joking after all, well, sort of joking. I had been the one to offer to buy her the stockings, and it was also me that had offered to buy the slippers, due to my own anxiety more than anything. Maybe she was as confused as I was because I was giving her mixed signals. From the pictures, she really seemed to have gone to some effort. She'd taken a couple

of snaps in the mirror, and in one, she'd even worn both the stockings and slippers together. All of that had been for me? She'd gone to all of that effort because she was excited and grateful? I suddenly felt so damn bad for ignoring her, but as I scrolled through the photos beneath her watchful eye, I increasingly felt strange and bashful. She appeared so sultry and confident in the way she was posing, and it was unsettling, because she seemed less like the dork I knew well, and more like a sexy and confident woman.

"You should apologise," she said. "Best friends shouldn't treat each other this way."

"Umm, I'm sorry," I said timidly, and I closed my phone, before looking away and towards the floor; my eyes drifted to April's shoes, and she was wearing her usual slippers. They were so old, and beaten up, and I noticed her toes twitching inside. The last time I'd seen her toes twitching inside those slippers, I'd turned to a bumbling mess and rapidly offered to buy them for her. I immediately blushed, recalling my foolishness, and I averted my eyes, looking towards some uneven paving stone instead.

It felt so damn strange being so nervous and placid around April, but I honestly felt bad too. As she grilled me, I felt like I did whenever Mother was telling me off for something. I felt guilty and shamed for not meeting expectations. I hadn't communicated well with her at all. All week I'd been careful, trying as best I could to escape from the odd development in our friendship, but, it appeared, I'd underestimated how much April wasn't willing to let me go. I hadn't wanted to read her messages, but she'd insisted I did anyway, and April had gotten her way. She was demanding an apology too, and as I stewed before her, I gave her what she wanted once more. "I'm very sorry, April."

"You should be," she said, and I almost felt like I was being scolded by Mother right there in public, something Mother would never do, not wanting to tarnish her image. April had no such restrictions however, and she appeared totally comfortable to tell me off for being such a bad friend. That left a sinking feeling in my tummy, which I didn't like at all. I honestly just wanted to go home. I was tired enough from college and work, and I didn't really have it in me to deal with April and all of her energy, especially when she was in such a bad mood. "I think you should make it up to me," April added, clearly emboldened by my deference.

I popped my head up, and she was still standing with her arms crossed. She'd subsequently tilted her head back and had her little nose pointed towards the air; an obvious display of pettiness. I was somewhat worried about what she considered as making it up to her. "What would that entail?" I asked hesitantly.

April dropped her head back down, and then she smiled. "I want to go shopping again. Just like last week."

I really didn't want to, especially with what had happened last time, and the way I'd been feeling ever since. Though, perhaps because I was so exhausted, and with me increasingly feeling like I was losing the initiative in our friendship: I couldn't find a reasonable explanation for why I couldn't do that with her. "I need to study," I said quietly, already knowing she wouldn't except that excuse.

"You can do that afterwards," she countered straight away. "You've told me enough times how your mom makes you study all night. You're not at home right now, and I want some of your time."

It was astonishing to hear her growing sense of entitlement, especially considering it was my time she was demanding. "I'm kind of tired," I said, trying another strategy.

"So, have a coffee," she said, while glaring towards my workplace. "Are you telling me you work in a coffee shop and don't drink coffee?"

I'd literally just drank one, and the scent of roasted coffee beans was likely still fresh on my breath. "I...I don't think my mother will be happy if I go out again without her permission though."

April snorted. "Are you a child?" she asked. "Just tell her you had to work extra to cover for someone."

"Yes, but you don't—"

"Do you want to make it up to me or not, Jing?" she asked accusingly, and then, to my surprise, April slightly raised her voice. "I want to go shopping." She petulantly stamped her foot. "So, take me shopping. You owe me!"

I was taken aback by her tone, because it was just so assertive and bratty. She almost sounded like the girl we'd seen in the high-end store. There was the same

vicious venom within her words; the kind of which expected to be obeyed. There was no room for debate or compromise. April was demanding my time and attention, and she was apparently unwilling to settle for anything other than her own wants. I turned and looked back towards the coffee shop entrance, fearful that one of my colleagues, or even worse, my boss may have heard the way April was speaking to me. I looked back to her shamefacedly, and then, without even considering the mistake I may be making, I blushingly dropped my eyes, and muttered, "Ummm, okay. If that's what you want."

"Good," April said, and then she smacked her hands together in celebration. "It is what I want. So, let's go." Without even waiting for me, she turned and began skipping her way to the nearby mall.

There didn't seem any other option available to me other than to follow her. April wanted to go shopping, so, it appeared I was going shopping.

As we entered the mall, April immediately marched over to a store we'd been to a number of times before. It had some quirky fashion designs that she seemed quite taken with, and she always enjoyed trying on the various outfits and looking at herself in the mirror. Of course, the employees were a little sick of us, considering we'd been there countless times and never actually bought anything. With April's distinctive look, we weren't hard to remember either, so they probably sighed whenever we entered the store. It didn't have the same cliquey, exclusive style of service like the higher-end shops, and there was no one standing at the door. That meant there was no way to stop April from going in there and trying on whatever she wanted. They'd even stopped asking us if we needed any assistance after the first few times.

She headed straight for the shoe section, and without even hesitating, she plucked a pair of yellow heels from the shelf. Within seconds, she was sitting and removing a slip-on shoe. By the time I'd walked up to her, she was struggling to fasten the straps around her ankle. She grimaced as I approached. "How do I do this?" she asked. "It's all fidgety."

"Let me see," I said, and I dropped to my knee and tried to help her thread the metal through the little hole. As I did so, April sat up straight and looked over my shoulder. It really was fidgety, and I had to crouch right down to fasten it properly. The shoes were open-toed, and as a result, April's bare little foot was mostly visible, all

except a strap across the top. She wiggled her toes, and I noted that they weren't what I would have expected. In the photograph she'd taken in the stockings, her foot had been obscured by the material, but while kneeling before her: everything was clear and visible. With her awful hairstyle, her glasses, and her eyebrows which were in dire need of a pluck, I'd expected something a lot worse. I can't even be sure what that was, but I'd envisioned over-sized feet with jacked up nails and hair on each of her toes. However, her feet were dainty and actually well-groomed. Her nails were unpainted, but they were clipped and filed down neatly. It was such a surprise, and for a second, I wondered what her toes would look like painted, and which colour would look best in combination with the yellow material. I stared at her toes for a few more seconds, and I was surprised by how feminine they were; not at all as I would have expected when considering her dorky facial looks.

As I finished fastening the strap, I turned and flinched as I saw April staring at me with a slight grin. She was looking at me in a mirror to our side, and then I blushed while seeing myself, kneeling and attending to her. I looked exactly as the red-head had done while helping the blonde into her heels. Immediately, I stood up, blushing and feeling all weird about having assisted my friend in such a way.

April wasn't similarly bashful, and she hopped to her feet, before gyrating and admiring the heel in the mirror. "What do you think?" she asked, and she turned towards me before outstretching a foot. Again, I looked upon her toes, though that time while she was fully aware I was doing so. They did look cute while just peeping beyond the yellow strap of the shoe. I may have looked in silence for a bit too long, as when I eventually gathered my senses, and became abundantly aware that I was staring, I rapidly darted my eyes up. April had cocked her head and seemed most confused by the delay. "What?" she asked. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Right," she said with a nod. "So, what do you think?"

"They're nice," I said. "They suit you well."

"Great," she said with a smile, and then she sat back down and tried to take the shoe off. Again, she struggled with the straps, until eventually she growled with

frustration. “Ugh,” she said. “It’s so difficult.” She looked to me expectantly, before extending a foot. “Could you help?”

I didn’t say a word, I simply blushed; the colour of my cheeks enough to communicate my feelings as I kneeled and helped remove April’s heels.

“This is so cool,” she said as I unfastened the straps. “I’m like a lady being attended to.”

That only caused me to dip my head and blush further, and I fumbled with the straps as my bashfulness got the better of me. Once the heel was loose, I began to rise, but then April lifted a foot and pressed the toe against my shin. “Could you help me take it off, please?” she asked sweetly, and there was something about her tone that felt irresistible, as if my willingness to help further would make her really happy.

“Umm, okay,” I whispered through a hot breath, and it was so odd that something so simple as removing her shoe was making me so nervous. But, as I peeked at the mirror, I just kept being reminded of the scene we’d witnessed the week before, especially as I held her ankle and eased the shoe from her wiggling toes.

I rose and felt a little flustered, my lack of confidence perhaps giving the service more significance than it merited. She was still barefoot when she stood up too, and then she casually pushed the shoes into my chest. “I want these.”

I instinctively cradled them as she let go, so I wouldn’t drop them to the floor. I looked down to the shoes in my cupped arms, and then I looked back up at her and wrinkled my forehead. “Umm, okay,” I muttered in confusion.

April’s face was a picture of stern determination. Even with her dorky glasses and uncontrollable frizzy hair, she seemed totally in control and intimidating. It was nothing to do with her appearance, but everything with her attitude. “Buy them for me,” she said forcefully. “I want them.”

I looked at April in astonishment, and I was completely speechless. What was happening? Was she actually serious? It wasn’t at all like the previous stockings purchase, where I’d actually had to convince her to accept. It wasn’t like the slippers where I’d made the offer in order to avoid my own embarrassment. She’d flat out just told me to buy them, and not at all in a polite way. As I looked at her stern, unrelenting

expression, I feared she was deadly serious. I swallowed nervously, feeling put on the spot, and after having just kneeled and attended to her in such a servile way, I was a mixture of confusion and curiosity. Part of me wondered if April was still joking, and she was just giving me a hard time after I'd been avoiding her all week. But, the longer I stared at her, and as more time passed where she remained unmoving, I increasingly felt pressured to act. To do *something*. Something that would define our friendship going forwards, because I couldn't decipher whether April was being serious or not in her demand. I was older, and I was wiser, but at that moment, I felt out of my depth. As I remained cradling the shoes she'd rudely shunted into my breast: I felt like a complete fool.

After another awkward gulp, I relaxed my posture, and though I was deathly uncomfortable, I tried to appear all care-free. "Very funny," I muttered, and then I forced a strained laugh. "Just like those girls last week." April frowned, and at that, I finally gathered my wits. I held the shoes out, and clutched the price tag between my fingertips. "They are cute," I said. "But they're \$50, April. It's too bad you can't afford them." I looked towards the shelf, as she was still unmoving. "Maybe you can ask your mother to get you them for you for Christmas or something?" I finally looked at her, hoping she'd understand that she'd have to be patient. I couldn't buy them for her, because what would that tell her? That if she acted a little bratty around me, she'd get her way every time?

Instead of being patient, April momentarily appeared petulantly miffed. She bit her lip and then loudly hmphed. With her hands balled into fists, she let out her frustration with a stamp of her foot. I flinched at the bratty performance, and almost dropped the shoes in the process. April had always been childish, but she'd never been a veritable tantrum-throwing brat. It was made all the more pantomime-like with the nature of her matron style attire. The corset in particular appeared comical, as it was supposed to reveal and show off her chest. Perhaps due to her self-esteem, she'd buttoned it high and hidden any sight of her cleavage. She'd done that ever since I'd known her, always choosing outfits that completely swamped and hid away her breasts. She could have had a bulging bosom, for all I knew, but more likely, she was flat as a pancake; that seemed more in line with her dorky persona. Regardless, the nature of her appearance settled me, as I was reminded once more that it was only April, my dorky friend, that was throwing such a pissy strop.

"April," I said in surprise. "There's no need for that."

April ignored my reasonable grilling, and she looked down at her feet. She swung her leg up towards me, the bottom of her foot almost brushing my leg, before she placed it back on the floor.

I looked her in the eye confused, and then she lifted her heels, flexing her toes against the carpeted floor of the store. Despite better judgement, I looked down, right at her little unpainted toes. While I was doing so, April muttered with tempered zeal, "Don't act like you're not desperate to see my feet in them." Of course, I blushed, and rapidly snapped my head up. That wasn't why I was looking at all, but, there was already a playful grin on her face as she noted my surprise.

"No, wait, hold on, that's not why—"

"You're practically drooling all over the floor," she interrupted before I could finish, and then she crossed her arms with a certain level of smugness. My face felt like it was on fire, such was the uncontrollable bashful response of my body. I hadn't done anything wrong, and I certainly wasn't looking at her foot because of *that*, but in some kind of betrayal, my body was communicating to April that I absolutely was! I knew that she was parroting the blonde bitch from a week previous, but in that moment, it felt like her words totally applied to me.

"I want them," April said again, and she reached out a hand and pushed the shoes back against my breast. "Be a good friend and buy them for me." She then scrunched her lips, before fluttering her eyelashes hilariously behind her thick lenses. "It'll make me really happy."

The lump in my throat was so huge that my entire head shifted as I struggled to swallow it down. Everything was hot, and stuffy, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. I almost felt like I didn't know who April was at that moment, like she wasn't my closest friend, but instead, some kind of adversary that was exploiting a weakness. "But...but...but..." I stuttered, and April only seemed more amused and assured the longer I struggled to muster a comprehensible sentence. I paused and took a deep breath, before I considered my words. "April," I said while tilting my head with patience. "I appreciate you like these shoes, but this isn't—"

"I'll send you a photo of me wearing them," she said before I could finish, and for the first time, there was evident nervousness in her voice. She leaned closer towards me, before looking from side to side, checking that no one else had wandered in close. "I'll send you a photo for being such a good friend, and you can look at it for as long as you like."

For a second, I looked April in the eye, but when I noticed her tiny eyebrow raise through the thick lenses of her glasses, I was overcome with intense embarrassment. She thought I wanted to look at photos of her wearing shoes? She thought I wanted to look at photos of her *feet*? How the hell had I gotten myself into such a position? It had been one thing after the other. I was a fool for buying her the stockings, and I was even more of a fool for buying her the slippers. I'd bought her two items that were specifically designed for her feet! No wonder she'd gotten the complete wrong impression of my intentions. She was as naïve as I was when it came to things like that. Neither of us were experienced in that department, and having witnessed that other awful girl bossing her friend around to get what she wanted, April had somehow figured it was a good way to get what she wanted too. Things that were completely out of her reach because she had no money and no way of making any.

She must have realised that I was flagging from her suggestion, because she was grinning in victory. "I want them," she said again. "I want these shoes, Jing." She then pouted. "Be a good friend and buy them for me."

It was all becoming a bit much, and I was a bag of nerves. I didn't know what was the right thing to do, and I felt like a complete imbecile while I was standing there and cradling the shoes against my chest. I didn't want to buy the shoes for her, but I did want to see her happy. But, even so, I didn't want to buy the shoes, yet, I wanted the whole thing over with so I didn't have to feel so awkward and ridiculous any longer. I wanted April to stop saying those weird things to me, because they were provoking the oddest response.

"Be a good bestie and make me happy," April said, really pushing the point home. "Just like with the stockings and the slippers." She then cocked her head, and it was so weird seeing her trying to act all cute, especially with her dorky appearance. "You did say you were going to make it up to me, right? Well, this is how I want you to make

it up to me. I can't get these shoes without you, Jing, so, buy them for me. I need you to be a good friend."

Instantly, I was overcome by the same feelings of pride I'd earlier experienced when buying April the stockings, and later the slippers. The way that I was the only one between us that was in a position to do so. April didn't have a cent to her name, but I was the working girl, and I was able to provide. That made me feel good, in a bizarre way, because April had just recognised and admitted it. She wanted those shoes so badly, but she couldn't get them without *me*.

"Please?" April said in the sweetest of voices, and then she was clutching her hands together beneath her chin; the biggest, toothiest smile across her face. "Please, Jing," she added, really pushing the point home. "Buy these shoes for me because I want them."

I was trembling all over, and as I looked at her, and her words cycled around my head, I wanted April to be pleased and satisfied with me. I wanted to hear that I'd done a good job. "Ummm, okay," I whispered timidly, feeling rather overwhelmed by the whole thing. I blushed, and looked off to the side.

"Yay," April said, and she slipped bounced on the spot while throwing her arms around me. "You're such a good friend."

At that, I was beaming. I *was* such a good friend.

April calmed down, and then she asked, "Are you ready to pay now?"

"Don't you want to try them both on first?"

April shrugged. "No, I don't think so," she said, and then she coyly smirked. "Are you just wanting to see my other foot?"

"No," I said, completely mortified, and while tomato red, I turned and headed towards the cashier in a fluster, all while I heard April giggling as she slipped her dainty foot back into her shoe.

"And don't take all day," she called out, causing me to flinch and almost stumble as I walked.

I'd never felt like I had such little control while around April, and I didn't like it at all. It felt strange, as if the expected dynamic of our friendship had become unbalanced. I was older, and smarter, after all, yet, increasingly, April seemed like the one that was leading. Meanwhile, April appeared to be rejoicing in her ability to so easily make me blush and turn all bashful. It didn't even make any sense either, because I hadn't done anything wrong, other than ignoring her the previous week. Why had I done that? To protect me from the very same situation I was experiencing at that moment. I'd feared that I was growing weak, and that April was bizarrely taking charge. I'd feared that if pushed, I'd buy her something she wanted again, and that was exactly what I was doing.

April was standing a few paces behind me while I paid, and that in itself made me feel uncomfortable. We weren't two friends lost in conversation, gossiping and giggling to ourselves while we collected our goods. I was there, with my bank card, buying her the shoes while she was watching over my shoulder with a smug grin. It almost felt like I was working for her, and as a result, I remained embarrassed, blushing at the cashier, even though I was simply buying some shoes.

As I held the receipt, I felt instant regret. It was another \$50 I was going to have to explain to Mother, and I reasoned that the whole thing was getting out of hand. I didn't know what excuse I was going to have to come up with justify an order that large, especially since Mother didn't even know about the slippers yet.

April waited for me by the exit as I headed out, and I handed her the bagged shoes. "Awesome," she said, and then she smiled. "You're such a good bestie, Jing. What would I do without you?"

She wouldn't have the shoes without *me*, and for that reason, I blushed, and I squirmed, and to my shame: I shone with pride. The praise almost made the expenditure worth it. If she'd pulled me in for an embrace, I'd have been so damn happy for the affection. For the recognition. For the confirmation that I was indeed doing a good job. "Shall we head home?" I finally asked as my emotions settled.

"Really?" April said, and then she bit her tongue in the corner of her mouth. She considered me for a second, as I hovered in place. I could have easily led the way towards the mall's exit, but I didn't. I waited to hear what else April had to say, as if we couldn't leave until she confirmed she wanted to. As if I needed her permission or

something. She looked me up and down, almost as if she was preparing herself; as if she was searching for the courage to try something else. Her eyes danced all over me, like she was analysing her opponent. But, I wasn't an opponent, I was her friend, and that left me worrying. Through the silence, I could feel she was about to eventually say something. She held the bag securely in her hand, and I looked at it and felt all funny, for it was hers now. My money had bought it. My hard work had funded it. But, those shoes belonged to April, there was no questioning that. As I stared at the bag, and she followed my eyes, we both must have together realised how easy it had been for her.

"You really want to go already?" she asked, and then, I saw it. Behind those nerdy glasses. Even though her eyes appeared tiny through the comically thick lenses: I swear I saw them sparkle. "Because..." she continued, with almost a hesitant, nervous twang in her voice. She adjusted her position, and moved one slip-on shoe towards me. "I'm not done spending your money yet."

I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience while those words hung in the air. They floated around me, wrapping tight and constraining me until I could no longer breathe. I was choking, my throat going into overdrive as I felt like I was chugging down a gallon of saliva. It was such a selfish and bratty thing for April to have said, and her entitlement was astonishing. She actually thought she had the right to spend my money? I knew she liked shopping, and she never had any money of her own, but still, I'd never thought she was like *that*. She was always so cute, self-conscious and harmless.

But then, a thought occurred to me, and I suddenly relaxed. An awkward chuckle escaped my lips. "Oh, I get it," I said with a smile. "You're just copying that girl again, right? The one that was bossing that other girl around?"

I expected April to drop the act and laugh along with me, but instead, she remained deadly serious. "Maybe," she said, but then she parted her legs, and placed her hands on her hips; the bag still clutched at her side. "But, what if I'm being serious?" She looked me straight in the eye. "What if I'm not done spending your money yet, Jing?"

I held her gaze for a second or so, but I wilted under the pressure, and suddenly my eyes were completely rooted to the floor. I felt so uncomfortable. I felt attacked. I felt like I didn't have a clue how I was supposed to respond. It was only April, so, why

did I feel so tiny and embarrassed while she said such things? It was like I was being interrogated or something, and I didn't know what the correct answers were. "What...what else do you want?" I asked hesitantly.

I saw April's feet shuffle, and her posture became more relaxed. "Well, I'm not sure yet," she said with complete confidence. "What do *you* think I need?"

My head was scrambled. My eyes twitched as I searched for the answer she was looking for. What were we doing there? It almost felt like a test. The change in her confidence and demeanour was so unsettling that I was all over the place. I knew I should have taken control and brought things to an end, but with all the tension, and the pictures she'd been sending me, I felt like I was in the wrong. Especially having ignored her, it felt justified that she was grilling me in such a way.

She sighed impatiently, and dropped her hands from her hips. I noticed her fingers wrapped around the handle of the shopping bag; her unpainted nails rather bland. The girl with the blonde ponytail a week before had beautiful white nails. She had beautiful white toenails too. April's toenails were as bland and boring as her fingers. They'd looked like that while I was kneeling, and while she'd taunting me before I'd wilted and bought her the heels. She'd wondered what they'd look like painted, and to my shame, I'd wondered it too. Her feet weren't ugly, as expected. They were well-proportioned and dainty. They'd probably look pretty with the right polish, right? Pretty feet for those pretty shoes I'd just bought her. "Would you..." I glanced up at her shyly just as April watched me inquisitively. Seeing how serious she appeared to be, I immediately began to doubt myself.

"Would I what?" she asked.

I shook my head, definitely thinking better of it. I'd spent the past week avoiding her after reacting without thinking and saying something stupid. Maybe it all really was just a joke, and I'd only be getting myself into more trouble. "It...it doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," she said. "Would I like what?"

As the seconds ticked on, she seemed in no rush to put me out of my misery and reveal it was a joke. I peeked a look at her fingers a couple more times, and then I said it, "Would you like to get your nails done?"

"My nails?" April asked, and she held her other hand out. She spread her fingers, looking at them closely. "I've never painted my nails before." She then scratched her frizzy haired scalp. "Do you think I should get them done?" Her toes twitched inside her slip-ons.

"Well, you know, like that other girl last week," I said shyly, and I dropped my eyes again, in the same way the red-head had constantly done. "Her hair, her makeup, her outfit, her nails...everything looked perfect." I then shrugged towards the shopping bag. "You have nice, pretty shoes." My cheeks were throbbing. "Maybe they'd look better with pretty nails?"

"Well, I guess," April said in thought, and she placed a finger to her chin. "I suppose it might be cute. But..."

"But what?" I asked while snapping my head up. I was so nervous, and I wasn't even sure what I was suggesting, or why I was doing so. I knew it was weird, and I was completely apprehensive about how April was going to respond. I was praying she didn't start droning on about me drooling over her feet again. I then squinted through a cringe, as I realised, once again, I'd suggested something that was associated with her feet. Painting her nails to look pretty in the new shoes I'd bought her? How could I have been so foolish?

"But, you know I have no money," she mused while coyly looking me in the eye. "You know this, Jing." She cocked her head. "So, why would you suggest it, if you know I can't afford to pay?"

I was quiet, and I bit my lip, because the answer was obvious. Yet, I felt so stupid, because I was just responding to what she had suggested. I was trying to crawl out of the corner that she'd back me into. The pressure was obscene. Even though we were just two friends, it felt like there was so much on the line. "Well," I said, and I had to gulp before I could continue. "You said that you weren't—"

"Done spending your money?" she said, and then she smiled gleefully. "Well I guess that means then, that you'd like to..." she trailed off, before stepping closer to me. There was a visible lump in her throat as she swallowed down her own anxiety, or rather, excitement. Her voice dropped to a whisper; a secret kept for the two of us away from the rest of the mall. "Pay for me to get my nails done?"

There was a warmth inside me, and inevitably it led to an obvious, powerful blush. My lips became dry, and I had to lick them before whispering, "I don't know." I flicked my eyes to her briefly with shyness, before I kept my head down. She was still standing there in her slip-ons, and I stared down while imagining her plain, unpainted nails. They'd looked nice in the stockings, but, they'd look even better painted, wouldn't they? "I guess," I whimpered. "I guess I could do that for you."

"It would make you such a good friend," she said with a nod of her head.

"Yes," I said, thankful that it could be steered in that direction, and away from the unnerving weirdness. "I want to be a good friend."

"Of course," she said. "It's only right that I get both my hands and feet done, yes?"

"I suppose," I said, before I grimaced at what that may cost.

"I thought so," she said with a smirk. "Like you said, just like that girl last week, and of course, you'll want my feet looking nice and pretty for the photo, later?" She cocked her head. "Right?"

For the umpteenth time that afternoon, my eyes were locked on the floor while April giggled.

April was sitting in the pedicure chair as if it were a throne. She seemed so excited and, in her element, while trying out the experience of being pampered for the first time. As the pedicurist dipped April's dainty foot into the bubbling water for the first time, April let out a gasp and sank back into the plush, leather seat. "Wow," she called out while looking over at me. "This is so cool."

There were a bunch of pretty, fashionable girls along the row, each receiving their own foot pampering. April stood out like a sore thumb; her frizzy hair so voluminous that I couldn't even see the face of the girl immediately next to her.

For the next ten minutes, I remained seated and feeling completely ridiculous. It was like I was a servant, sitting by and waiting for my lady to finish her beauty treatments. She appeared so smug as her feet were washed and caressed, while I felt

defeated. She had teased that she wasn't done spending my money after all, and there she was, enjoying a service that she had no intention of paying for herself. I suppose I could have joined her and enjoyed my own pampering experience, but, April had made no mention of me joining her and I felt like I'd be intruding; as if I'd be taking something away from her and making it all about myself. Besides, I didn't want the extra expense anyway, and I'd never been into the whole nail painting stuff. I imagined that if I returned home with my fingers covered in polish, Mother would only demand I immediately scrub it off. She saw such things as distractions, and intended to attract boys, and I wasn't to do any of that until she found me someone suitable.

After the washing, clipping, and filing, April picked out a colour and the girl began to paint her nails. I noticed that April had her phone out and directed towards her feet. She appeared to be taking photos or recording or something. When she put it back on the arm of the chair, I flinched as I felt my own phone vibrate in my pocket. I looked over at April, and she was smirking back at me. She hadn't sent me another photo of her feet, had she?

When she flicked her head, as if giving me permission to look, I took out my phone and then cringed as the reality was much worse. She'd indeed recorded her feet while her toes were being polished, but rather than sending it to me, she'd uploaded it to her story. She'd selected a bright purple, which really stood out against her pale skin. To make it even worse, she'd tagged me in it. Why the hell had she done that? But then, I felt a sizzle of pride as I read the accompanying caption:

*getting my nails painted for the first time thanks to my bestie.
she's so generous and cool! thankieees @jingchanxo*

With that simple phrase, all of the weirdness was erased. I sat up straighter, and I wasn't cringing or feeling embarrassed anymore. I held my purse across my lap, and I felt all dignified. There was nothing to be ashamed of, because no one else knew about the pictures April had sent me. They didn't know about the stockings, or the slippers, or the way I had basically dropped my eyes in submission when she'd coyly teased me about spending more of my money. All everyone else would see was that I

was an amazing friend. I was the bestest friend ever. When I eventually paid, every other woman in the salon would just assume that I was a nice girl and I was doing something caring and wonderful for my friend. Maybe they'd even be jealous and wish they had a friend like me. As I looked at April, it was obvious she needed some feminine pampering, and I felt so filled with worth that I was able to give her that experience.

Once both of her feet were painted, and then her hands too, I waited while April talked a little with the girl attending to her. The girl appeared very friendly, and at times, she reached out and caressed April's frizzy hair. She even leaned over her and was tracing her finger along her eyebrows while nodding her head. April was nodding along too while they were deep in discussion, and I was somewhat envious while sitting there all alone. I knew for a fact that if I was in that chair, I wouldn't have said a word. I may even have been uncomfortable with a stranger touching me in that way.

Once finished, April hobbled from the seat, and I had to admit that her purple nails looked fantastic, especially against her extremely white skin. Her feet had quite an acceptable aesthetic when they were unpainted, but once adorned in that gorgeous purple, they really did look dazzling. The same went for her hands, with her fingernails appearing really eye-catching as she moved them around.

I pulled my purse out, and made a move to head to the cashier. However, April went over to the other side of the salon and climbed into a chair. I wrinkled my forehead in confusion, but, I didn't want to speak up with everyone else there. I'd never been in that kind of place before, and I didn't want to embarrass myself with my naivety; interrupting the process. Perhaps she had to sit there for a while as her nails were drying.

I played around on my phone a bit while waiting for her to finish up, and I kept discreetly re-watching the story she'd uploaded. Her feet did look really good with the purple polish, and I was beaming seeing my name on there, announcing how I was such a great friend. When I'd graduated from high school, and even my bachelor's my mother had made a post on her social media, showing off my achievement. Yet, she'd made it all about herself, basically pushing the narrative of how she'd pushed me to achieve such a thing. She'd commented on how she'd been right in making me study and attend extra classes. There was no praise for myself, and there was no pride extended in my direction. She was proud of herself, not of me. She didn't see it as my

achievement, she saw it as her own, and it had always been that way. When all of her similarly-minded friends had commented, they'd congratulated *her* for being such a great mother.

When I looked up, I was confused for a second, as April was nowhere to be found. There was some other girl sitting in the chair and having something applied to her hair. Another girl was leaning over her and doing something to her face. "April?" I whispered, while looking around the salon. I stood up and walked around, looking for her, but then I realised as I entered the other area that it was April being tended to.

"What's...what's going on?" I asked shyly as I approached, conscious not to disturb the women around her.

"I'm having my hair straightened," she said merrily. "And my eyebrows tidied up."

"Right..." I muttered softly, and then I looked at the woman who was lathering something into her hair. "How much does this all cost?"

"Does it matter?" April interrupted. "I really hate my frizzy hair. It looks so messy and I literally can't do anything with it."

"Okay," I said, as I felt an uneasiness in my tummy. "It's just, we didn't agree—"

"You said I could look like that girl from last week," she said with a glare. "Remember? With the pretty nails and the pretty hair?"

"I didn't mean—"

"I want pretty hair," April griped, and her face screwed up in the most brattiest display.

"We're chemically straightening it," the stylist behind her said. "It'll last about three to six months." She then smiled down at April. "You're going to be free of this frizz for a while."

"Finally," April said while rolling her eyes. "I've hated it for so long."

I glanced between the two of them, and I was nervous since I hadn't received an answer to my question. "Ummm, how much is it?" I asked again.

"It'll be \$300," the stylist said. "It's worth it though, trust me."

"Wait a minute," I said as I became all flustered again. "April, we didn't agree to this."

April looked at me while her eyebrows were being plucked and shaped, and she merely shrugged her shoulders. "It's too late now," she said. "They're already doing it."

I looked at the stylist, and she gave an awkward glance, shrugging while she averted her eyes.

"But..." I said, and I didn't know what else to say.

April glared at me, as if she was annoyed I was embarrassing her or something, and it succeeded in making me feel self-conscious and aware of my surroundings. I was never the kind to kick up a stink, and even the week before, when I'd used my ethnicity as a weapon, I'd only done so because I was torn by April being mistreated. I'd rose in courage to defend her, not myself. While she was smugly having her hair and eyebrows done, she wasn't at all being mistreated. It was I that was being taken advantage of, and I had no allies to support me because my best friend was the one doing it!

So, I stepped aside, feeling foolish and weak. I tried to reason that her hair was already covered in the chemicals, and her eyebrows were half-done. What was I supposed to do? April had completely taken advantage of me, and I cursed myself. With a face of thunder, I returned to the seating area and sat down with crossed arms. I was steaming with fury, because I knew what a fool I'd been. I should have known better. Just like the time when I'd given her the money to buy a comic, and she'd bought more than one and given me no change. April was the sort that when given an inch, she'd grab a mile, and I should have known better. She didn't appreciate the value of money because she'd never had to spend all day working for it. She wasn't able to convert cash into the hours spent exhausted in a coffee shop, because all she did was stay home and enjoy her hobbies.

I thought about just leaving her there, but when we'd first entered, April had made a point of mentioning that I would be the one paying for her nails. Obviously, they'd be expecting me to cover the hair and eyebrows too. She deserved to pay for it all herself, but I knew she had no way of doing so. Therefore, I had the grumpiest look on my face

while I waited, not so much because of the expense, which was going to be bad enough, but because I'd been taken for a fool.

For an hour I was sitting there, waiting in scorn while they continued to mess around with her hair. However, when she finally hopped from the chair and came rushing over, I found myself paralysed with a strange emotion, because I didn't recognise her. I squinted, and really had to look hard to see any recognition of the friend I knew. Her hair was gorgeously straight and hanging well over her shoulders. There was a real sheen to it, the likes of which had never before adorned the frizzy mound to which I was familiar. Her eyebrows were almost a work of art, and all of the straggling hairs had been plucked away, with the brow itself curved and shaped to perfection. It was only when she put her glasses back on, that my brain accepted that it was indeed her.

"Wow," I said, as everything else was pushed to the back of my head. "You look amazing." I reached out and touched her hair. "I can't believe how beautiful you look."

"Right," she said with a snicker. "I told you it would be worth it. I've been wanting to do this sort of thing for so long. I've watched so many videos about it. I could just never afford it. It's so damn expensive."

"Yeah," I said, and then my mood shifted at being reminded of that fact. She still couldn't afford it, and she didn't seem at all bothered about saddling me with a massive bill. As long as she was happy, that was all she seemed to care about. How she'd been able to take advantage of me so easily I still didn't fully understand. I mean, I'd been so weak and timid, just because she'd spoken to me with some kind of conviction and authority. It made no sense, and yet, there I was standing at the cashier, about to pay for April's complete makeover.

It was like a punch in the gut when the total hit me. "That's \$300 for the hair, \$25 for the eyebrows, \$60 for the full nail service," the cashier said as she hit a few buttons. "With taxes and tip, let's call that a round \$520."

I just stared straight at the cashier and blinked multiple times, as if my brain couldn't comprehend such an amount. It took my head to start shaking uncontrollably before I turned to April at my side. She wasn't paying any attention at all, as she was too busy admiring herself in a nearby mirror. She was twirling her beautifully

straightened hair around a polished finger, while occasionally tracing another finger along the curves of her eyebrows. She wasn't at all concerned by the ridiculous balance she'd run up without my permission, because she had no intention of paying it.

She finally pulled herself away from the mirror to take a seat, and then she glanced down as the nail girl placed her slip-on shoes nearby. April grimaced, and then she looked at me. "I'm not putting those back on," she said snottily. "It'll totally ruin my new nails."

"Right," I said, and then she pointed at the bag at my side.

"I think I'll wear the heels."

"Okay." I handed her the bag, but April just looked confused.

"Ummm, you'll need to help me," she said while pushing the bag back towards me. "You know the straps are all tricky."

Wow, did I blush. I blushed so damn much, because it wasn't a request. It was a command, and while everyone in the salon was so nearby, I shrivelled up and shied away from being spoken to in such a way. I felt watched, and under pressure, and I had no courage to question or defy her.

I removed the heels from the box, and then quietly kneeled down to help put on them on her feet. My fingers were trembling as I cradled her foot, looking all pretty with the fresh purple polish. It really seemed to highlight just how pale and white her skin was. As her toes slipped under the straps, she wiggled them merrily; the purple really contrasting with the yellow of the heels. I fidgeted with the straps, conscious that every woman in the salon was likely watching me. I could feel their eyes in my back as I served my friend; assisting her with her shoes after she'd just so ruthlessly spent my money at will.

Once they were fastened, she stood up, and as I joined her, I gulped while realising that April was taller than me. She was usually an inch or two shorter, but in the heels, I found myself slightly looking up at her. April grinned as she too noticed the difference, and there was definitely a level of smugness as she peered down her nose at me. I crumbled beneath the intense stare, and she smirked.

"What do you want to do with these?" I asked, crouching and fumbling with her slip-ons as I put them into the box. Once inside the bag, I held it up to her.

"I don't know," she said, and she cocked her head. "Do you want to keep them?"

I gave an awkward chuckle. "Why would I want to keep your old shoes?"

April shrugged, and then she giggled. "Maybe you're one of those weirdos that likes to sniff them?"

"April," I said, looking around in panic. The cashier raised an eyebrow, and I was distraught that she may have heard the whole thing.

"Geez," April said before pursing her lips. "I was only kidding. No need to act like you've been caught with your hand in the cookie jar." She pointed at me, completely in control. "Shall we go already?"

"I haven't paid yet," I said, and I looked sheepishly towards the bemused cashier clerk.

April rolled her eyes as she looked down at me, and, even though she was still wearing the glasses, her face took on a fresh haughtiness. Maybe it was the hair, maybe it was the eyebrows, maybe it was the manicured nails as she pointed at me. Whatever it was, for that split second, I didn't see April looking at me; I saw a bitch of a girl I didn't recognise. "So, like, pay it already," she said, and then she lost interest in me, looking back at her own reflection in the nearby mirror. "We don't have all day." She adjusted her glasses slightly, sliding them down her nose, before she huffed and sighed. "I want to hit the opticians before we head home." She then stepped away from the mirror with a click of her heels. "I'll be outside," she said. "So, hurry up."

My eyes widened, and I could feel my skin was about to blister from the intense heat. It was damn annoying to witness how selfish and entitled she was being. I had visions of taking April over my knee and smacking her ass for the way she was treating and speaking to me, but, I knew I didn't have that sort of thing in me. Besides, with the way she looked, and how she seemed right at home peering down at me, it didn't seem at all a realistic resolution. If anything, the new, improved April would probably spank my ass while demanding I bought her something else. That possibility caused me to shiver, and then I was spooked from that thought as the cashier cleared her throat.

"Ma'am," she said. "How do you intend to pay?"

"Do you accept card?" I asked sheepishly, and I handed it to her right after she nodded. For a second, I even raised my finger, about to dispute the included tip, however, she'd rung it through before I had a chance, and I felt even more taken advantage of. While holding the receipt, I was trembling all over, because I knew it was going to get me in so much trouble. I may have been in my 20's, but I lived under my mother's rule, and she was going to go ballistic over such an expense, especially when she saw it was at a salon. What did I have to show for all of that money? Mother was going to rip me a new one.

I stepped outside, still clutching the bag with her old shoes, and I knew that despite feeling uncomfortable, I had to have an adult talk with April. What she'd just done was not acceptable. She'd somehow manipulated me into the nails, preying on a growing weakness within me, but the whole hair and eyebrow thing was way too far.

I couldn't see her outside, not until she turned around, and then I was reminded that she didn't have that frizzy bush on her head any more. From behind, she blended in with all of the other attractive girls that were walking around the mall. It was only the comically dorky glasses that gave her real identity away. She was greedily eating a donut as I approached.

"Where you'd get that?" I asked, for a second assuming it was a freebie or something from the salon. After what I'd just spent, I was damn well going to take whatever freebie I could get my hands on. I wanted a donut too.

April pointed towards a stall at her side, and then she took another bite of the glazed ring, while the guy at standing at the stall looked at me expectantly.

"Huh?" I asked, and then April casually turned away. She waltzed over towards the window of another store, leaving both myself and the guy behind the donut stall staring at each other in confusion.

"Umm, that'll be \$5," he said, directing the question towards me. He then flicked his thumb towards April's direction. "She said you'd be paying."

Again, I blushed as I contemplated the logic behind April's actions. The way she'd just nonchalantly walked off, assuming that I was going to pay. I didn't want to

pay, and I shouldn't have had to pay, but she'd completely put me on the spot. I looked over at her as she was chewing through the donut, and I realised she was looking through the window of the opticians. There were various glasses lined up, and there was no way in hell I was going to buy her a cooler pair. She certainly needed a cooler pair than the dorky ones she had, but I'd already spent enough.

"\$5," the guy said again. "That'll be \$5, Ma'am." He looked almost as awkward as I did, especially as I clumsily stuffed my hand into my purse and gave him a crumpled five. I looked him in the eye sheepishly, and I was convinced he was as embarrassed as I was because of the way April was treating me.

As I came up to April's side, she grabbed my arm before I even had a chance to say what I was thinking. "Come on," she said, and her heels clicked against the floor as she pulled me inside the opticians.

"April, can we go home," I said as the door closed behind us, and I sounded so pathetic. I wasn't asking, but instead, I was pleading. Pleading with a girl younger than me when I should have been the authority between us. "I've already spent so—

"I want contact lenses," she said firmly, and again, there was just something about the absolute finality in the comment that caused butterflies to float around in my tummy. It wasn't a question. There was no hesitation or apprehension. She spoke decisively, and with authority. "I want to be pretty like that girl last week," she said, "and you said you want it too, remember? It was your idea."

April knew exactly what she wanted, and she was no longer afraid to say so. It wasn't a matter up for debate. I was so envious, because I wanted to be like that too. I wanted to be hot, and in control like that blonde girl, but I wasn't like that. I wasn't a popular girl, and I never could be, because I was a nerd. April had been a nerd too. That's why I'd always been so comfortable in her company, because we were both shy introverts, but it was like I was watching April blossom and break away from me, and it was as tragic as it was mesmerising. April wanted contact lenses, and as she turned and squinted at me, I knew April was going to get them. Oh, I'd try to resist, but while she was standing there with her beautiful hair and perfect eyebrows, I felt like I'd been knocked down a few pegs at her side. It didn't help that she was looking down on me thanks to the heels, so I was literally standing in her shadow.

My voice was but a squeak as I aimlessly tried to free myself from whatever tidal wave I'd been caught in. I tried to cling to my position as the leader amongst us, the wise one, the one that had her shit together. The older and in charge one. "April, please," I said in a tiny, strained voice, not wanting the optician to overhear and think less of me. Almost like my mother, I was suddenly conscious of the opinions of strangers, and I didn't want him to realise that April was bossing me around so easily. "This...this is too much."

April wrinkled her nose, then she stood up straight. The heels had elevated her so much, that when she straightened her back, my nose came level with her mouth. Her warm breath bounced off my face as she spoke, "Well, you've already paid for my nails, hair and eyebrows." She tugged at the corner of her glasses. "What's the point in spending all of that if I still have to wear these?"

"Well...I..."

"Exactly," she said. "It totally makes sense that I get contacts too."

"Umm," I muttered, and I looked towards the optician for a rescue. He was just standing there though, totally confused and not at all privy to our discussion. Well, it was less of a discussion, and more a verbal assault.

"You shouldn't do a half-ass job," April said. "You should know that. Isn't that what your mother is always telling you?" She chuckled to herself. "I thought that's what you Asians were like. You give it your all."

"What the hell, April?" I asked in horror, as she'd never muttered anything like that before. It was like a few beauty treatments had given her a complete personality transplant, and the April I knew well would never have resorted to such comments. I waited for her to show some remorse, but she only responded by prodding me harshly in the middle of my chest.

"No half-assing it, Jing. I want contact lenses. I'm going to look so beautiful and pretty, so buy them for me." She then bit her lip, before leaning slightly towards me so her mouth brushed my ear. "Just like the comic books."

"What?" I asked while backing away slightly. "What do you mean by that?" I was still annoyed, and possibly upset by the comment about my ethnicity. I'd never thought

she was like that, but before I could even express my feelings, she'd made me feel even more self-conscious for a whole other reason.

"You've been buying me what I want for the past year," she said with a nod. "I've only just realised it now." She then cocked her head. "Every time I wanted a comic, you bought it for me. Graphic novels? You got me those too, right?"

"For us to read together."

April rolled her eyes behind her glasses. "Sure, if you say so. I'm not buying that." She then chuckled to herself. "Actually, I'm not buying anything at all. Well, unless you're paying for it.

"April?" I asked with exasperation. "What has happened to you? It's like I'm dealing with someone else right now?" I reached out and brushed my fingers against her gorgeous, shining hair. "You've looked like this for five minutes and it's already gone straight to your head, hasn't it? Did the chemicals poison your brain or something?"

"I think you actually like buying things for me, right?" She said while completely ignoring my question. "Wow, haven't I missed out? I settled for the occasional comic book, when I could have had whatever I wanted." She eased her glasses down her nose, then batted her eyelashes at me. "Remember when you asked if I'd use someone like that blonde girl did? If I'd be comfortable having them buy things at my demand?"

I swallowed deeply, before slowly nodding my head.

"Do you have your answer yet?"

"April..."

"I have a question for you too," she sneered. "How long have you known you liked being used? Is that why you asked me that day? Have you enjoyed buying those comics for me for the past year? You like buying things for a bratty girl, huh?" She raised her voice slightly, and I was terrified that the optician was going to overhear. I cringed, and cowered, while April remained resolute in her posture. "Well, I'm happy being your brat, and I'm happy with you doing whatever I want, just like that girl in the store."

"No," I said defensively, and I was blushing so much that the optician had to have noticed that something was up. "It...that wasn't why I asked. It...it...wasn't like that at all." I looked around, and though the air conditioner was on, I felt so damn hot. I most definitely wasn't like that red-head in the store that day, and April was nothing like that blonde. But then, as I looked at her, with her new hair, eyebrows, hot high heels and painted nails, suddenly, she wasn't far off. The dress that had earlier looked ridiculous on her; suddenly it worked. She didn't look dorky, she just looked quirkily fashionable. The only thing blighting the image was the glasses. But still, I wasn't the kind of girl that followed some pretty, popular girl around and paid for whatever she wanted, was I? I wasn't the sort that kneeled at her feet and helped her on with her shoes, was I? I thought back to the nail salon, and then cringed, while realising that's exactly what I'd done. "That...that...that isn't why asked," I said, sounding more confused than convincing. My fingers gripped the handle of the bag tensely, and I looked down, realising I was still carrying April's old shoes around.

"Okay," April said, and then she looked over towards the optician. "I want contact lenses," she yelled over. "How much are they? My friend will be paying." She then turned back towards me, and smirked with such smugness that I was lost for words.

"Really?" the optician said in response, finally stepping forward after he'd remained politely out of distance during our heated discussion. "Well, that's nice of her. What a good friend."

And with that careless comment from him: I was finished. I was once again backed into a corner. How could I refuse paying after he'd said that? I'd look like a total asshole. If I said no, it wouldn't have surprised me to see April burst into crocodile tears. I'd never before thought her to be the bratty and manipulative type, but it was like the more she seemed to recognise it worked, the more she was willing to indulge herself.

"Step this way," the optician said while pointing to some device. "We'll get your eyes checked out and then fix you up with the correct lenses."

"April..." I said, but she wasn't even listening. She was already on the way to the chair.

While she was being checked and measured, I felt like a fool once more. I looked towards the door, and I knew I should have just left. I should have just got the hell out of there and safely back home. But, being a thinker, it just wasn't that easy for me because I had to second-guess everything. I had all kinds of scenarios floating around my head. April's mother banging our door, wanting to know why I'd upset her daughter. My mother being confused, then horrified once the details of the day's events were revealed. How I'd spent so much money on our teenage neighbour. I shuddered just thinking about how that would look. We weren't that far apart in age, and April was most definitely legal as she neared twenty, but still, it was damn weird, and I knew it. Everyone would find it weird because I had no way to explain it. Stockings? Weird. Slippers? Passable, but when combined with hundreds of dollars of beauty treatments and high heels, it was too strange to be overlooked. Mother would be furious, I knew it. There would be nothing but scandal in our household. She'd mark me as having shamed the family, and I was already envisioning my future as a temple nun.

"What do you think?" April asked, and I flinched and almost slipped from my chair.

I'd been leaning back with my head against the wall, lost in my imagination as I dreaded what lay ahead for me. Over and over I spun tales and excuses that I was going to feed to my mother but none of them seemed believable. She hardly believed me when I was telling the truth, and she most definitely wouldn't believe me when I was spinning a web of lies. It would certainly take a web, such was the magnitude of trouble I'd gotten myself into. Well, what April had shoved me into. "What's going on?" I looked towards the device across the room. "Have you been checked yet?"

April smirked, and dipped her face slightly. She then popped her hands up; flashes of purple-painted nails directed towards her eyes. "Ta da," she said joyously. "What do you think? They really bring out the colour, don't they?"

I was still sort of slumped down, and I pulled myself up while rubbing my fists in my eyes. I'd spent the past however long lost in a daydream, and I was still sort of confused at being so abruptly disturbed. "Where are your glasses?" I asked, and then as I adjusted my own, I realised that what I was seeing, a face free of dorky spectacles, that would be April's face from that point forwards. Her eyes were so brightly green since they were no longer being shrunken behind her thick lenses. Being frank, her eyes were gorgeous, and without any hindrance, they almost seemed to shine and

sparkle, and, my jaw-dropped in response. The beautiful girl in front of me was how my best friend was going to look from now on, and, my oh my, she really did look like a stunner. Without the goofy hair, the comical glasses and the unkempt eyebrows: April was attractive. She was actually attractive. I almost felt bad for her, because she'd been through so much shit in her life, being bullied and picked-on because of her looks, and it was all just a fallacy. It was just a consequence of her own financial misfortune. She'd had the capability of being beautiful the whole time, she'd just never had the resources to accomplish it.

At that moment, my anger and frustration sort of dwindled, because, as I looked at her, and while she stepped back and began dancing around all giddily: I finally understood. She'd spied an opportunity to break from the shackles that had always held her down, and she hadn't hesitated. She'd recognised the tiniest inkling of weakness within me, and she'd taken advantage to get what she wanted. Not just what she wanted, but what she'd longed for her entire life: to be seen. To be looked upon and thought attractive. To not have to be shy and cower away, but instead confidently stand tall and be lavished with attention.

As she turned in front of a mirror, and crouched to look at herself up closely, the change was remarkable. It wasn't so much her looks either, though she was indeed striking. It was the shift in her entire attitude. She was comfortable in her own skin for the first time. I was still annoyed, and I'd have been brainless not to be, but, at that moment, I almost felt like my own feelings didn't matter. It was like I'd be stepping out of place if I rained on her parade, because she seemed so happy and euphoric at that moment. Even though some of her words had been truly hurtful, and it was clear she was taking advantage of me in a way no friend ever should, I did sympathise with her a little. Maybe a lifetime of judgement and rejection could push someone to that? To do whatever it took to finally be considered beautiful, and afforded all of the advantages that it brought.

April turned back to me. "What do you think?" she asked again.

"I think you look fantastic," I said, and I sort of managed a half-smile. "It really makes a difference. I can see the green in your eyes."

"Doesn't it just?" she said. She then whipped out her phone and pretended to blow a kiss while taking a selfie. "I'm going to get so many more followers now," she said. "I'll finally be popular now I'm beautiful."

I looked on, and the sympathy I'd just felt began to dwindle. I looked at April, and I saw someone else. I was in the company of a stranger. A stranger that suddenly seemed so obsessed with shallow, trivial things that weren't actually important. Impressing other people? Impressing strangers? That was the way my mother traversed through life.

I noticed her post to her story, and as she resumed checking herself out in the mirror, I slyly checked my phone. She hadn't tagged me that time. There was no recognition of my part in everything. There was no gratitude. There was no praise, and I felt like I'd felt all my life with my mother all over again. I felt like a resource. I felt like an object, a possession, a commodity, to be used and exploited. As my mother pushed me to achieve so she could show off to others about what a great parent she was, April was pushing me to provide for her so she could show everyone how beautiful and popular she could be.

I sighed, and with resignation, I pulled my card from my purse. I was exhausted by that point, and I prayed that April was as tired as I was.

"How much?" I asked as I approached the optician.

"That'll be \$400," he said with a smile.

My hand dipped slightly while I was clutching my bank card, and my mouth hung open as I waited for the punchline. "How much?" I asked again.

"All in all," he said. "The total, with taxes, is \$400."

The glasses I were wearing had only cost a hundred, and I had a prescription. "Umm, why so expensive?" I asked. I looked over at April, and she was taking more selfies, not at all concerned with the financial sledge-hammer I was being walloped with.

"Well," he said, and he pointed to a few things on the itemised bill. "They're a prescription, and a strong one at that. Her vision is very poor. She also requested a year's supply."

My mouth dropped open again, and I was standing there astonished. Who the hell did she think she was? "April," I called out, but she was so engrossed in taking her stupid selfies that she didn't hear me. Maybe, I was being naive, and she did actually hear but instead chose to ignore me. Whatever happened, I was left alone to settle up and April showed no interest in explaining herself.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I...I just wasn't expecting it to cost so much," I said. "Is it possible to reduce it somewhat?"

"I've already put the prescription through to the manufacturer. She'll have the rest of this month's set, minus the pair she's wearing right now, delivered in the next few days. They'll be delivered monthly from then on. Delivery is included in the total."

I clutched my cheek, and I was biting my lip so hard that I tasted blood.

"I'd just like to say what a lovely friend you are," he said, and I dropped my hand and sighed. "This is probably one of the kindest things I've seen in a while. You have no idea what those contacts are going to do for your friend's confidence." He looked over at her and nodded her head while she was giggling to herself as she took photo over photo. "That right there is why I do this job. It feels so good to make a difference in someone's life."

I gave a final look towards April, and the way she was posing and showing off her new looks. Should I feel good for making such a difference to her life? I handed him the card. "Just run it," I said. "Pay for it."

He nodded, did so, and I forced an uncomfortable smile. I knew exactly what it was going to do for April's confidence, as I'd already witnessed what everything else she'd bought with my money had done. The more she had, the more she wanted, and more worryingly, the more she believed she was entitled to.

"Let's go," I said, wanting to get out of there.

"I'm not done yet," April called out, not even bothering to look at me. She took a few more photos, and even asked the optician to pose for a selfie, thanking him for the difference he'd made to her life. I got no such photo, which once again, hurt.

Once outside, I informed April that I needed to use the restroom. It had all become too much, and there had been so much happening in such a short amount of time that it had caught up with me. I was tearful, and emotional, but I didn't want her to see me weep. Even though everything I was feeling was because of her, the empath within me didn't want to take anything away from her. She was my friend, after all, regardless of it she was temporarily acting like an ungrateful brat. I just put that down to the excitement of her getting things that she'd desired for so long. Clearly, from the way she was behaving, changing her hair and ditching the glasses was a big deal for her.

I looked at myself in the mirror in the restroom and adjusted my own glasses. I wasn't ugly, but I wasn't pretty either. I was the definition of plain and average. My specs made me look geeky, and I removed them, staring at the mirror in hope of imagining how I'd look with contacts. Of course, I saw nothing but a blur. With glasses back on, my hair already looked neat, and I did pluck my eyebrows, so I doubted what a difference contacts could truly make. Perhaps I was just plain, and there was nothing holding me back, as had occurred with April. Maybe she'd always been better looking than me; it had just taken some grooming for her to show it.

I must have been over a grand down though, and that was terrifying, because it was a huge chunk of the money I'd saved up. I had a lot more, of course, but it was still a sizeable amount that was going to be noticed. That left me panicking, and I felt queasy and like I was about to vomit. Mother was going to be outraged, and if she discovered that it had all been spent on April, the girl next door that Mother didn't even like, well, there would be hell to pay. There would be a scandal, because Mother would probably assume something unthinkable, that perhaps I was gay and that we were in some kind of relationship. What other reasoning could there be for me to spend so much on a *friend*?

I wiped the final few tears away, then tried to steady myself before heading back outside. There could be no more. She had spent enough. I had spent enough.

Once I stepped outside, April was leaning against the fence that overlooked the open mall, with the very many floors below visible. As I approached her, my eyes dropped to her feet, almost out of instinct. The arches of her feet were exemplified by the shape of her new heels, and her purple painted nails really stood out against her pale skin. Even though it was just her bare feet, visible within the heels, I felt

embarrassed, because it symbolised so much. I'd paid for those heels, and I'd paid for those purple nails. As I traced my eyes up her body, I just kept falling upon more things I'd paid for. Her flawless, shining hair, that was swishing around each time she craned her neck as she looked around. Her beautifully shaped eyebrows, and of course, I could see them clearly, along with her gleaming green eyes, because she wasn't wearing her dorky glasses anymore. She looked like an entirely different person. She actually looked older, and not at all like a dorky little girl, but instead, a sexy, alluring woman. It caused me to shiver, because all of it was a result of her selfishly spending all my money on herself. I no longer even felt like I was a participant in the process, or that it was a display of generosity, as it was like I'd been steamrolled throughout. I'd been dragged from place to place, while April hit my purse hard before I could even contemplate what was happening.

I knew I should have put a stop to it, but I hadn't, and I was suddenly looking upon a thousand dollars that I'd never get back. As I approached her, I played over in my head what I was intending to say. How I wouldn't be spending anymore, and how the whole thing had left me feeling used and taken advantage of. My lips danced as I silently spoke the words over to myself with every step, practising and rehearsing what needed to be said.

Just as I almost reached her, April spread her arms and grabbed onto the rail of the fence. She leaned slightly backwards, and in the process, I noticed that she'd unbuttoned the frilly, corset-like top of the matron style dress she was wearing. I paused, mid-stride, because I caught a glimpse of April's cleavage, and it was far deeper than I'd ever realised. She always worn clothes that obscured her chest, and though I'd sometimes noticed the shape from the outside, I'd never really considered that such an ample bosom lay within because it was April. It was another reminder that April wasn't a young girl, she was a grown woman, and she was blossoming further the more I looked at her.

A few guys walked by, and they were clearly ogling her. A couple came from the other direction, and the girlfriend steered the guy's head from April's direction. Meanwhile, April was basking in it; truly soaking up the attention and enjoying the gawping as more and more guys looked over in her direction. When she noticed me, she lazily looked in my direction, before tucking her straightened hair behind her ears.

Her green eyes were almost intimidating as I approached her, and that was when I noticed something else. April's nose was also gorgeous. It was button-like, and a wonderful shape. I'd simply never recognised it before because it had always had the clunkiest of glasses atop.

Everything I'd planned to say was lost as I stuttered and stumbled over my words, because I felt out of my depth. I felt like I was hanging out with one of the cliquey, popular girls that I had no business being around. A very real fear was growing within me, that no longer would I look forward to being in April's company; I'd instead feel like I didn't belong in it. I wouldn't feel comfortable being around her, I'd feel fortunate.

"Are...are you ready to," I said, and I couldn't finish, because I had to swallow and clear my throat from the saliva that was tickling me. Was I drooling? I hoped not, but I was definitely out of sorts.

"Ready to go?" April finished for me, and then she raised an eyebrow. A carefully plucked and fantastically crafted eyebrow that communicated so much mischief. "I don't know," she asked. "Are *you* ready to go, Jing?"

"I guess," I whispered with little conviction. "I should get home and shower and..." I trailed off as I looked down, and it was only at that moment that I realised I was still wearing my work uniform. There were stains all over the shirt from spilled coffee, and my pants were creased and wrinkled. I glanced back to April, and she looked such the sight, especially compared to myself in my service worker clothes. "So," I continued. "Shall we?"

"You know?" April suddenly said, and she stood up from the fence. While still in the heels, she looked down at me, and then she glanced over my shoulder towards something. "I was thinking," she said, and then she stepped behind me, before circling around and coming back to the front. I felt so tiny in comparison, even though I was only an inch shorter than her in her heels. But it was her attitude and newfound confidence that was reducing me in stature. "I'm really thinking," she said, while tapping her finger against her mouth. "I need some lipstick, right?" She then puckered her lips, before blowing me a pretend kiss. "What do you think? Would my lips look nice with some lipstick?" She leaned slightly down, and looked me straight in my nervous eyes. "Something to really contrast the green in my eyes?"

I swallowed anxiously, as I feared where she was going with it. "I really need to go, April," I said. "I have to get home and study."

April screwed her face up and shook her head, appearing annoyed and disinterested with my pleading. "Enough of that," she said. "You've had all week to study. This is my time now, and I want some lipstick." My shoulders dropped, and my head was about to follow, but it was stopped by April's finger beneath my chin. She stared straight through me with those dazzling green eyes; green eyes that had awakened and were now finally free. Green eyes that were seeing the world from a whole different perspective now they weren't hindered by abject dorkiness. "I want lipstick," she said with a cocky grin. "And what happens when I want something from now on, Jing?"

Even though she was right in my face, I had to avert my eyes, looking over her shoulder at nothing in particular. "I don't know," I said while in the height of discomfort.

April tutted. "Yes, you do, Jing," she said. "You know what you do when I want something." She then giggled to herself. "The same thing you've been doing all afternoon." She then released my chin, and leaned slightly closer; her breath tickling my ears with the lightest scent of sugared donut. "Don't pretend you don't like doing what I tell you to do," she said astutely. "I can practically see you drooling all over the floor."

I gasped, and doubted myself. I recoiled back, and instinctively wiped my lips. I'd been swallowing so much as my nerves were getting to me, that it wouldn't have surprised me if I was indeed dribbling all down my chin. April giggled as I panicked, and then she bit her lip and nodded knowingly.

"But," I whimpered. "You've already spent so much."

She tutted again, and squinted at me. "Don't worry about the money," she said. "Just think about how much you like doing what I tell you, because right now, bestie, I'm telling you to buy me some lipstick." She fluttered her eyelashes. "It'll make me so happy," she said, and her sweet voice suddenly sounded rather patronising. You *do* want to be a good friend for me, right?"

When I continued to mumble my refusals, she sighed deeply, before rolling her eyes. "Would it make you feel better if I wanted a comic book? How many of those have you already bought me?"

"It wasn't—"

"Like that, I know," she grunted. "You said that already. You bought me the comic books, and the graphic novels, and the"—she began to tug on each of her manicured fingers as she worked through the list—"stockings, and the slippers, and the nails, and the hair, and the eyebrows, and the contact lenses." She released her finger and then tapped her chin again. "What was the reason you gave me? For the both of us, right?"

"The comics," I said in a squeaky voice. "They were for the both—"

"Enough talking already," April said with impatience. "You're buying me some lipstick, because I want some lipstick. You can afford it, and I can't." She coughed, and then inexplicably raised her voice, "And like I said, I'm not done spending your money yet."

I instantly cringed, ducking slightly as a few passers by looked over. "April," I said. "Don't say stuff like that so loudly." She was so damn casual about it, just as the blonde had been a week earlier. I thought about fleeing. Just running off and getting as far away as I could, but April seemed to sense my instincts rising up and she grasped my wrist. She knew me well enough to know that when given the choice between flight or fight, my personality was far more comfortable going airborne.

"Why?" she asked, full of confidence, as a few of the guys were blatantly checking her out. "It's the truth, isn't it? I'm not done spending—"

"Okay, okay," I said, waving my free hand at her in surrender. "I'll buy you some lipstick, alright? Just stop yelling stuff like that out."

She jiggled her head slightly as she smirked all smugly. "Well, that's nice of you," she said, before sarcastically adding, "you're such a great friend."

I followed her towards the store with my head lowered, totally in shame. I could barely keep my footing as my knees felt bizarrely weak, especially as I watched April's thin calves flex with each step in her new high heels. I kept my eyes on those heels, a

few steps behind, the same damn way that the red-head had done for the girl she followed. The girl clearly in charged who so effortlessly bossed her around.

Barely minutes later, we were in the beauty department and I was so out of my depth it was comical. How could that have happened? It was only April. Little, dorky April, but she was running rings around me.

"I want this," she said casually while plucking a makeup brush from the rail. She didn't even acknowledge me before she nonchalantly tossed it into the basket I was holding, along with the three shades of lipstick that she'd already picked out. "And these," she added, while snatching various tones of blusher. She offered me a pleased, victorious grin as she flung it all into the basket, before her smile disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. On and on we went, with April acting like it was some sort of pick 'n mix. She threw all kinds of items in the basket, most of which I didn't understand because I had hardly any knowledge about beauty products. I hadn't thought she had either, but apparently, she just hadn't previously had any use for them.

"Come on," she said hurriedly, and she moved towards the cashier without even looking me in the eye.

Once at the queue, she stepped off to the side, arms crossed and with eyebrows raised. I timidly moved past her, my own eyes lowered as I placed the basket on the counter. April didn't even pay attention while I was paying. She simply took a few more selfies, admiring herself in each picture.

Once outside the store, April abruptly paused, and then she turned and glanced down at the bag I was carrying; bulging with everything that she'd just rapidly picked out in the store. I awkwardly held it at my side, along with the bag containing her old slip-on shoes. The newest haul had set me back another \$100, and by that point, I'd actually been relieved it wasn't more. "Why did you buy all of that?" she asked, and she raised an eyebrow while pointing at it with her purple-tipped finger.

"What?" I asked while looking down at the bag, and I wasn't sure what she was expecting as an answer.

"Why did you buy all of that stuff I just threw in the basket?"

Again, I squinted; confusion causing my head to wrinkle. "You...you said you wanted it?" I asked tentatively, unsure why she was questioning me that way. After the whole performance of pushing me into the store, and all the drama about the damn lipstick, I couldn't understand why she was suddenly grilling me for doing exactly what she wanted. I was becoming further stressed with each passing second, because I no longer knew what the correct course of action was. Should I buy stuff for her? Shouldn't I?

"I did," she said with a resolute nod. "But, why did you just go and pay for it?"

"Because...I had to," I said while scratching my head. "You don't have any money."

April cocked her head, and she bit her lip while slightly nodding. "Interesting," she said, and then she glanced over my shoulder towards something. "I'm thirsty," she said while shaking her head in a most bratty way. "I want a bubble tea."

I blinked and stared straight at her. "Okay?" I asked, confused by the sudden shift and apparent erratic nature of her attention.

April crossed her arms across her cleavage, and then she looked at me sternly. As I stared back at her, lost for words and unsure how to respond, she raised both eyebrows, and then jolted her head forwards towards the stall. She tutted impatiently as I failed to gather whatever she was implying. "I want a bubble tea," she said again.

"I know," I said while clutching the bags at my side. "You just said that."

She groaned with frustration. "Well?" she asked expectantly, and then she uncrossed her arms and gestured towards the stall.

I slowly turned and looked towards the stall, before I darted my eyes back towards April. She was still standing, her arm stretched towards the stall with intention. As we made eye contact, hers widened, and she looked so much different without her usual nerdy glasses. I could fully see the way the her eyelashes curled and how the greenness really shone when it wasn't impeded by a thick lens. I consciously became aware of myself, and how I must look next to the new, improved version of her. I was still wearing my scruffy work clothes and bookish glasses, while April was truly radiant. I was still trapped in my dorky life, whereas she had broken free. I felt so damn out of

place and self-conscious in her presence, convinced that people were staring and judging me, wondering why a girl like *her* would ever hangout with and talk to a girl like *me*.

"I'm thirsty, Jing," she said. "I want a bubble tea." She crossed her arms again, and then wiggled her head in the brattiest of ways. "What are you going to do about that?"

I felt a warm rush inside me as I realised the meaning behind her words, and I suddenly felt exactly like that red-headed girl we'd witnessed. April was so confident at that moment, that she felt like she didn't even need to demand anything of me. It was a significant moment, and instead of rising to it, like the shy little weakling I was, I caved. My lips were trembling with nerves as I whispered, "What flavour would you like?"

"Matcha," she said, and her eyes sparkled as I cowered to her will. "With plenty of bubbles."

"Okay," I said shyly, and I could no longer meet her gaze. "I'll be right back."

April played with her hair again as I slinked away, and she was standing in place, watching in fascination as I ordered and paid for the beverage. The whole time, I felt ridiculous, and embarrassed, fearful that the cashier would know what was going on. I barely understood what was going on, but it certainly didn't feel anything like it had when I'd bought the stockings. Buying her a tea wasn't a friendly gesture of kindness between friends; it was like an order, and bizarrely, one that I was obediently fulfilling.

I couldn't even look April in the eye as I brought the green tea back to her.

"Great," she said, without even bothering to thank me, and then she giggled and stuffed the straw between her lips. "Mmmm," she said after taking a big slurp. "That tastes great."

I had nothing to say. I lowered my eyes, and just waited for her to be finished. Part of me felt increasingly uncomfortable in her presence. She was giving off real bitchy, popular girl energy, which didn't sit well with the nerdy nature of our friendship. The other part felt ashamed of what I was allowing her to get away with. I mean, she was pushing me, that was much evident, but I was capitulating every step of the way.

“Jing,” she asked thoughtfully.

I was still keeping my eyes down as I played over what had just happened. I couldn't even explain why I'd bought her the drink, but it almost felt like I didn't have any choice in it. April had expected me to do it, and so, I'd done it. It wasn't about me feeling good, or recognised, or praised anymore. Maybe it had never been about that and I was just using it as an excuse. I thought back to the opticians, and I was terrified by a possibility. Was April, right? Did I actually *like* buying things for her? Did I *like* doing what she told me to do? Did I *like* being used for my money by a friend that had none of her own? Had it been that way for the entirety of our friendship? I'd always bought the comics and graphic novels because I could, and April had enjoyed them. At times, I'd even looked forward to seeing her little smile when I paid for the newest issue that she picked out.

“Look at me,” she said with complete authority, and it was like I couldn't even recognise her voice anymore. There was no timid unsureness, but instead absolute confidence and authority. It was truly amazing the difference a makeover could make for such a shy and self-conscious girl like April.

I looked up at her insecurely, and once again, I didn't see a familiar girl looking back at me. Her physical appearance was so different that she was striking. She truly looked a vision. An in-control vision, and it was all thanks to the way she'd so ruthlessly been spending my money for her own benefit. There was no way she could look the way she did right at that moment without me. It was almost as if she'd been plotting since seeing the way the blonde girl had ordered around and taken advantage of her friend. All week April had been plotting, using that situation as inspiration, and when I could no longer successfully avoid her: she'd pounced. Perhaps she'd immediately resonated with the blonde, and she'd known that she was capable of treating a friend in such a subjugated way too. Maybe that was why I'd really been avoiding her in the first place, because I feared that I was like the red-head. I was the kind of girl that could be bossed around and taken advantage of. Maybe I'd always been that girl. I'd just so far successfully avoided the kind of girls that would take advantage of me. Unbeknownst to me, I'd foolishly befriended one of them.

It all left me feeling totally conflicted. I liked how she looked, and I was mesmerised by the change in her confidence and comfort in her own image, but, it had cost me. I'd been spending money that was supposed to be for my future.

While I looked at her, April took another big slurp of the tea, and I watched in fascination, as it was like she was sucking up my money through the straw. My money had paid for that icy cool beverage, because April had said she wanted it. She hadn't even told me to buy it, she'd just bluntly stated she wanted it, and I'd actioned the purchase myself. I'd reacted to the whims of my confident, assured brat, the same way the red-head had done. She chewed through the bubbles, and I was entranced by the whole performance.

She closed her eyes, and moaned slightly as she enjoyed the intense flavours, before she popped her lips free and then casually wiped her mouth with her wrist. She then squinted at me, and a mischievous smirk appeared; a smirk that made me feel all scratchy. It was the same sort of smirk that the cliquey girls from high school wore as their arsenal; the kind of girls I went out of my way to avoid. "I like when you buy me things," she said. She then flicked her eyes towards another nearby stall, and then she looked back towards me. I stared into her calculating eyes, and, it was like we could understand exactly what we were both thinking. "I want an ice cream," she said, and then she just smirked, allowing the statement to hang in the air. "What are you going to do about that, Jing?"

I felt so damn vulnerable before her. I felt like I had no choice. "Okay," I said, glancing towards the straw. I licked my own lips, before timidly looking her in the eye. "Which flavour would you like, April?"

"Strawberry," April said, her posture completely unmoved. "I want some strawberry ice cream." She cocked her head; and her eyes were gleaming with fascination. "I really want a strawberry ice cream," she said in a whiney and complaining voice, before she dropped the act and grinned with mischief. "But I don't have any money for it."

"Okay," I said, and I turned towards the ice cream stall in embarrassment, her long, drawn out way of demanding the damn ice cream humiliating me all the more. "I can get it for you." There was a tingling all over my body. April was my friend, my closest friend, but it was like our friendship was rapidly veering off in some strange

direction. I almost felt like I was being pulled along, whether I wanted to be on board for the ride or not. She had me basically whipped to her wants, like she understood me better than I understood my damn self.

As I stepped over to the stall, I shuddered while hearing a snort of laughter from April. Instantly, I blushed, and I muttered the order to the worker, convinced she also understood what was going on. As the ice cream was presented, and I paid, I chewed my lip, wondering how long this was going to go on. When would April finally be satisfied? The expenditure was racking right up, and April appeared almost experimental in her wants.

As I came back with the ice cream, I held it out to her. I couldn't look up, keeping my eyes down, as my arm began to tremble under the stress of its own weight. April just let me stew, casually sucking up the remainder of her bubble tea, before eventually, she took the ice cream cone. The empty plastic cup was shunted into my hand, and then she calmly mused, "Throw that away for me, will you?"

"Okay," I said, and I found the nearest trash can and tossed it in.

April began to lick the ice cream, and she moaned slightly while enjoying it. I felt awkward just standing there, but I also couldn't help sneakily watching the way her tongue was working its way over the flavourful surface. Her fingers gripped the cone, and I was transfixed, noting how good the purple polish looked against her pale skin. I stared at her nails, and my heart thumped in my chest. I'd paid for those, and as they remained wrapped around the ice cream cone, I shivered while acknowledging I'd paid for that too. I looked beyond, at her straightened hair, another payment of mine, and finally her eyes, closed in bliss as she savoured the strawberry flavour; no longer behind a pair of glasses, as my money had freed her from the shackles of nerdiness too.

"Let's go," she said, and the decision was made.

We meandered towards the exit while April licked the trickles of strawberry along the cone, and as we were about to head out to the bus stop, I paused while looking April over, barely recognising the girl before me. It wasn't just that she appeared so physically jarring with the beautiful straightened hair and the lack of glasses, but rather, it was as if her whole posture had been altered. As she plopped the last of the cone

between her lips, she wasn't hunkering as usual, and she wasn't shyly trying to avoid peoples gazes in the way we both always did. Instead, she was standing with her legs parted and hands on hips, almost as if she was basking in it all.

Her hands weren't buried in the pockets of her dweebish clothes as was almost her trademark, but instead, bared to the world and showing off her prettily crafted nails. I looked upon her in awe. I looked upon her...almost in pride, knowing that all of that was thanks to me. All of her beauty, and the detail in which she was now so physically appealing was thanks to me. Was thanks to my hard work at the coffee shop, and as a result, I was a complete mixture of emotions. There was a tinge of regret as I thought about how much I'd spent that day, but as I looked upon April and witnessed the difference I'd made to her confidence, well, it almost seemed like it was worth it. It was almost like she was a project, and the result, was, well, she truly did look stunning. It was barely believable what a difference my money had made, but it had pretty much turned her life around.

"I'm kind of tired," she said. "That was exhausting."

And I felt the exact same way. Not physically exhausting as she was talking about, but mentally so. I felt like I'd been completely beaten and broken down.

"I guess I'm done spending your money," she said with a patronising wink, and I almost breathed a sigh of relief, that was until she turned and muttered, "for now." I had no witty retort. I simply felt panic rush over me, because she'd already demonstrated how much of a pushover I could be for her. "Let's go then," she finally said, and then she turned and began strutting her way outside; the heels of her new shoes clacking while they showed off her feminine calves. There was no discussion. No consideration of my wants. April wanted to leave, and I was expected to follow.

Without any question, I did exactly as she wanted.

On the bus ride home, April was completely engrossed in whatever was going on in her phone. While I felt as if I was sitting next to a stranger. Such was the disparity in our appearances, that part of me felt like I should have been sitting somewhere else. Like I was offending her by being seen with her in public.

She was so clearly excited in whatever she was doing, that apparently, the same concerns hadn't occurred to her. I glanced over, noticing she was chatting to someone I didn't know.

"Who is that?" I asked softly, feeling a little jealous. She was sitting with me, but talking to someone else. It shouldn't have bothered me, but considering I'd just bought her whatever she wanted, I found it all rather hurtful. She hadn't even bothered to thank me that time, and I'd received no recognition in her stories at all. Even though I'd proven my worth to her all afternoon, without any subsequent praise, I'd been left feeling worthless.

"Just one of my new followers," April said dismissively without even looking away from her phone. "I've been getting lots of new followers today," she said excitedly. "This guy slid into my DM's. I've never had that happen before."

"H-how?" I asked, myself also never having had that happen before either.

She shrugged. "I guess people like what they see now."

I stared straight ahead, solemn and thoughtful. The money I'd saved was supposed to grant me a better future. Instead, it had apparently granted April access to a world to which I remained excluded.

That night, I was laying in bed, a mixture of confusion and fascination. The whole day was such a head-fuck to me. All of it seemed so related to what we'd witnessed a week before. Why had the older girl allowed the younger one to boss her around in that way? Why had she just accepted whatever she was told to do? Why had April witnessed that whole thing, alongside me, and then figured she could treat me in the exact same way? She'd apparently recognised the same weakness in me before I even realised it was there.

April being such a brat didn't fit well with the quiet, shy girl that I knew so well, and yet, when she'd arrogantly demanded I buy her those heels, it was like the straw had broken the camel's back or something. It was all downhill from there, and she'd

mercilessly plundered my bank account for her own benefit. Despite us being friends, she'd been ruthless in taking advantage of me and buying whatever she wanted. During the bus ride home, there hadn't been any guilt or remorse. She was happy with how things had panned out, and throughout the evening, she'd flaunted her makeover all over her social media, lapping up all of the congratulatory compliments she'd received. I'd been almost as invested as she was, refreshing her photos and reading each subsequent comment.

One comment in particular had stuck with me. April had attached all sorts of hashtags to her photos, made up of various brands, makeups, and other beauty tags. A beauty page with quite a large following had reposted an old, shy selfie from her page, along with one taken that afternoon. They'd celebrated her makeover with the caption: you go girl! Everyone was liking and sharing it, and leaving their own complimentary comments. I'd even been refreshing her profile every few seconds at one point, and watching the followers go up. I kept staring at that comment too, and thinking, how there was so much more to it that no one else knew about. It wasn't just, 'you go girl', it was, 'you go girl, rinse your friend's bank account and get what you want!'

Why had I allowed her to do that to me? I may have been acting like a fool, but I wasn't dumb, my education level proved that. Even so, I'd allowed her to stray way beyond the boundaries of our friendship. It wasn't about me doing a nice thing for a friend; it was all about being exploited by her. The more I thought about it, and replayed the events of the day, the more I wondered whether April was right? Was I like that girl in the store? The one who kneeled to the dominant blonde girl and bought her shoes with her own money? Was I going to be like that for April going forwards? Was April the brat I'd secretly been longing for; a brat to be submissive towards? She was correct, I had been buying her comics for a year, and she'd never paid a cent towards them. Did I like providing her that unrequited service?

Despite already being in bed, I couldn't sleep, so I shuffled to my desk, opened my laptop, and I began searching for an answer. I looked all over the net, typing in various prompts as I tried to unearth what the hell I was feeling after my day with April. I looked up collars, and dog tags, and girls shopping while making others pay for it, and, quickly, I found myself tumbling down a rabbit hole of filth that I'd never imagined

would have existed. There *were* people into this stuff, and it seemed rampant all-over social media. I found pictures, and videos, and comment after comment, where some people were financially submissive to others. There were all kinds of bratty girls demanding that they had their bills paid for. They posted pictures of coffees and told others to pay for it, and, inexplicably, random strangers did so! It was like an online fantasy of exactly what had played out between April and I for real. Perhaps we'd stumbled upon something that day in the high-end store that we shouldn't have seen. A world to which we were oblivious, yet a world that April had embraced. A world that neither of us had known that we'd belonged in. The whole thing terrified me, but, the more I thought about what April had done to me, and looked at it in a sexual way, the weirder I felt about it all.

I then grabbed my phone and headed to April's profile again. She'd posted a bunch more stories, and I felt a warm fuzziness inside as she'd taken selfie after selfie, showing off her new hair and contact lenses to all of her follows. While she was playing with her hair, she twirled the straightened locks around her manicured fingers, and I was just sitting there, enamoured and having the oddest reaction.

"I did that," I whispered to myself, as I replayed through the stories again and again. "She looks so beautiful, and it's all because of me." I gave a love heart reaction to each of them, though, for a second, I was momentarily put out. April was lavishing up the attention, and I noted that a bunch more people had followed her. Yet, she still hadn't sent me anything; not even a thank you. She'd been so busy showing off, that she hadn't even spared a thought for me: the person who had made it all possible for her. She'd brutally enforced her wants upon me the entire afternoon, but once she had what she wanted, I apparently wasn't worth another thought.

But then, April 'liked' one of my love heart responses, and suddenly, I noticed she was typing something out. I waited for the excited flurry of text to follow, likely filled with gratitude as she thanked me for everything I'd done for her. Where she reassured me that it wasn't serious. That she'd only manipulated me like that to feel good about herself, and that we could go back to being friends. But instead, when the message came, I found myself confused all over again:

April: how did my shoes smell? have u had a good sniff?

I looked over towards my bed; the empty bag containing her slip-on shoes leaning against the frame. When we'd arrived home, April had happily taken the bag filled with makeup products. However, when I'd offered the bag with her old shoes, she'd giggled before telling me I could keep it. I should have thrown it away, but for whatever reason, I'd brought the bag home with me and hadn't thought about it since.

However, now April had suggested, for the second time, that I should sniff her shoes, it made me feel all weird and icky. Did she think I was the sort of person that would do something like that? I slowly stepped over towards the back, and fished my hand inside the loose shoe box. I pulled one of her slip-on shoes out, and the white material was all stained and weathered. The bottoms were worn right down until the rubber appeared as if it were about to disintegrate. As I turned them over, I saw that the interior was dark and sunken; the shape of her foot having left an impression.

As I stared at the shoe, a sudden thought occurred to me, and I immediately felt all flustered. She hadn't thanked me for the shopping spree, as she had on the two previous occasions when I'd bought her something. There had been no praise or acknowledgment. There had been no reward. I twisted the shoe in my hand, then peered inside its opening; the shape of April's toes stained into the insole. Was that shoe my reward?

I shuddered while considering the possibility. Did April think I was into such things? That I'd appreciate the chance to smell her stinky old shoes? I'd spent over a thousand dollars on her, and all I got in return was a sweaty old shoe to sniff? A chill ran down my spine as I shivered at the offensive connotations of it all, and I felt so damn pathetic. So much of the past week or so had been focused around April's feet, almost as by accident, and I held in my hand the culmination of it all. I knew I should have tossed it in the trash, but as I spun it around, I was deadly curious. I couldn't even explain why, but after the selfish way April had treated me, and the entitled and conceited attitude she'd developed, I had a sudden feeling of inferiority. Perhaps she wouldn't want to hang with me anymore, because I could match her newfound looks. Maybe the closest I'd ever get to her was that damn shoe.

With that thought, I inexplicably held it to my nose, and while looking at the message from April, asking me how it smelled, I took a deep breath and found out. Instantly, I gasped from the sharp, damp, cheesy odour. I stumbled backwards and dropped the shoe; it bouncing along the floor and hitting my desk. "Oh my God," I whimpered while rubbing my nose, and I felt so damn pathetic and humiliated. I'd actually sniffed April's old stinky slip-on, and I'd done it voluntarily, within the safety of my own bedroom.

Was I her friend, or was I nothing but a weirdo that would jump at the opportunity to sniff her shoes? I looked at it on the floor, and I almost felt like I deserved to suffer that smell for the way I had pathetically done her bidding again and again. I kneeled, and cradled it, and then, I held it to my face and sniffed again, gasping and wheezing as the pungent odour hit me hard. I moved it away, but then I went in for another sniff, cringing and shaking from the putrid stench while I imagined all of the times I'd seen April running around in her slip-ons. I deserved to suffer that dorky funk for caving to her greedy wants over and over. A forth time I sniffed it, and a fifth, inhaling as much as that stink as my lungs could handle; my body tingling all over as thought about all of the new attention April was getting, while I was hunkered there on the floor and breathing through her grotty old slip-on. It almost felt appropriate, because I wasn't pretty like she had become. I was still a nerd. I was still trapped in my nerdy world, and there I was, breathing through April's nerdy old shoe.

After the sixth breath, I was so disgusted with myself, that I tossed the slip-on aside, and then, the self-loathing kicked in. "Ugh," I grunted, while squeezing my nose. "Why the hell did I even do that?"

As if on cue, my phone vibrated as another message came through from her:

April: are u ready to see my pretty feet? that's what you want, isn't it?

It was such an absurd message to be receiving from my best friend, especially following the one that had mentioned sniffing her shoes. Is that what our interactions would be shaped like from that point forwards? If the past weeks hadn't occurred, then

I never would have received such a weird message at all. Yet, somehow, due to my nervous fumbling and inability to speak up properly for myself: I'd fallen into a situation where April thought such a message was appropriate. Despite still recovering from the despair of sniffing her shoe, I still had a massive urge to reply and find out where she intended to go with it. Truthfully, I didn't know what I wanted, but, after what had happened the previous time I actually responded to her messages: I wasn't foolish enough to reply.

I glanced down at her shoe, and I was filled with disgust in myself. I'd sunken to a pathetic low, and I couldn't even fathom why. To my own surprise, I held firm, closing the chat and, with that show of strength, I struggled my way to sleep.

The next morning, I awoke with hangover-like dread. I'd never had a hangover, with Mother forbidding alcohol, but I'd seen enough guys and girls slumping into class to know the symptoms. I rubbed my head and felt a deep, unnerving sensation of regret. It was truly horrid, as if I'd done something monumentally embarrassing that would follow me around for the rest of my life. As I thought over the way I'd spent so much on April, I honestly felt sick. If Mother hadn't come to drag me from bed, I'd likely have stayed there the entire day, burying my head beneath the pillow and wishing I could travel back in time. How could I have been so spineless? All of the treatments had been bad enough, but by the time of the opticians: she was straight up goading me. She was teasing me right to my face about spending my money however she pleased, and inexplicably, I'd gone along with it. Even after all of that, I'd willingly sniffed her horrid, sweat-soaked shoe? What the hell had I been thinking.

It made me so damn worried about how our interactions would proceed in future. I mean, would April expect such treatment every time we hung out? If we were watching a movie, would she just order herself a pizza and expect me to pay? Would she toss me a stinking sock as a reward, expecting me to be satisfied with a sniff?

Overcome with guilt, and feeling ridiculous at the weak way I'd allowed April to stomp all over my resistance, I quickly dumped her slip-ons in the trash, just in case I found myself crazily overcome with another urge to sniff them again. Why the hell had

I even done that? It had smelled awful, and yet, I'd kept going back for more, breathing in more of that stale, cheesy odour and suffering under its potency. Each time I'd done it, I'd known it was wrong and weird, and yet, I hadn't been able to resistance going back in for more punishment.

So, freshly ashamed of myself, I went into hiding again over the next week. It was cowardly, and not a worthy representation of myself, especially considering I was older, but it was the only way I felt comfortable. I literally ghosted her for real, as I'd done the previous week. I just felt so damn pathetic that she'd blown through my savings so easily, and the more photos she uploaded to her social media throughout the week, the more I cringed and realised I'd been taken for a fool. She'd spent over a grand of my savings, and she thought sending a photo of her feet was a fair pay-off? She thought giving me her shoes to sniff was somehow comparable? It was as comical as it was insulting, and yet, part of me was dwelling on not having replied. I wondered if I should have, because, at least then, I would have had something. With the foot picture, maybe there would have been thanks and gratitude as had occurred the previous two times? Maybe April had just been toying with me, and I'd chickened out before she'd revealed it was all a harmless joke. As a result, the last memory of our shopping day was the scent of her damp slip-ons.

As the days passed by, and I successfully dodged April on the way to work and college, I kept thinking about what may have occurred if I'd sent her an enthusiastic message asking to see her feet. If I'd confessed and embarrassingly admitted that I had, indeed, sniffed her shoes and that it had smelled stifflingly pungent. What would she have sent in return? The previous photos of her stockings had been almost explicit, and that was when she had the confidence of a dweeb. She'd actually become hot, there was no denying it, and that made me so curious about the kinds of photos she may have sent me. Did I want such photos? The way I kept thinking it over made me really wonder.

Of course, each time I thought about such things, I'd eventually become disgusted with myself and thank the stars that I hadn't actually responded that night. With the way things had played out last time, more likely she would have seen any response as a show of weakness, and a confirmation that she was right about me. Perhaps she would have pounced again and I'd have found myself with nothing left in

my bank account while I lay on the floor, sniffing April's stinky shoes while she gleefully bought herself whatever she pleased. The thought was enough to send shivers right along the length of my spine.

During the start of the week, especially the two days immediately after our enforced shopping spree, she had knocked at the door, though, as always, my mother had sent her away, declaring I was busy with study. She didn't try again, and though I was hesitant leaving the coffee shop after my shift, she didn't accost me outside as before. As the Friday came around, I figured I was safe. Perhaps April didn't care anymore. Maybe she had everything she wanted, and she wasn't bothered about our friendship. Maybe I'd become a means to an end for her, and she was more than satisfied with her ending where she was growing ever popular online. Unlike the previous ghosting, she didn't bombard me with messages. She didn't send me any photos, and yet, whenever I checked her profile, I saw that she was posting and interacting with all of her new followers.

However, on the Saturday night, after I'd just come back from my shift at the coffee shop and showered off, I was surprised by my mother opening my bedroom door and marching in with clear intention. Thankfully, I'd just thrown a night dress on, otherwise she would have burst in and caught me in the nude. That had happened many times in the past, and though I'd always cower and try to cover myself, Mother would proclaim it wasn't anything she hadn't seen before.

"Get dressed," she said while already pacing towards my closet. "You're going next door to visit young April."

I was about to start brushing my hair, when I paused, and stared at her completely mystified. "What?" My legs actually began to quake a little bit, because I definitely didn't want to see April, especially with her recent tyrannical attitude. Mother was annoying as hell, all day long, but her stubborn ways had actually acted as a last line of defence in keeping April away from me. I knew I could rely on Mother to send her off and keep me focused on my studies. So, the sudden turnaround was most unnerving. I'd been relaxed, but that state rapidly abandoned me.

"Come on," she said while swinging open the closet, and she pulled out a shirt, some pants, and underwear, and threw them on the bed. "Dress up nicely."

"Mother," I asked, still confused as hell. "What ever are you talking about?" My teeth had begun to chatter, and I couldn't help but show how unsettled I was. "I don't want to go next door and see April." The wheels were turning in my head, but I couldn't think of a single reason why Mother would push me to go over there. "You don't even like her."

My mother stepped towards my desk, and then she pulled out some sheets of paper and a pen. One of my law books was open, and she closed it and placed it atop the paper. "April has just been at the door," she said. "You are going to go next door and tutor her. She has shown an interest in the law." She smiled. "Take this opportunity to impress and demonstrate the wealth of knowledge you've acquired via the prestigious education I've steered you through. It is time for you to pay back all that I've done for you."

My jaw dropped open. "What? No!" I said desperately. "Mother, April has no interest in the law." I immediately knew confiding in April all the details of my previous struggles with my mother had been a mistake. April knew my mother was basically a narcissist, and she wouldn't hesitate to show off how well she'd raised her daughter. Tutoring April wasn't about showing off my educational wealth, it was about showing what an amazing daughter I was. All thanks to having the most wonderfully, amazing and greatest mother in the whole wide world, or something similarly self-indulgent to whatever was driving Mother's insistence. "She's manipulating you," I said, hoping to appeal to Mother's ego as she hated to be made a fool of.

My mother paused while she was about to step back outside. "Why would she do such a thing?"

There was no way of convincing her I knew exactly why without admitting I'd been badmouthing her for months on end. "Mother, don't believe her," I said while proceeding to give my hair a brush; my arm still shivering as the thought of having to be in a room with April honestly scared me. I simply didn't trust myself around her anymore, as she seemed to manipulate me so easily. She seemed to be aware of weaknesses I didn't even know I had. Hell, she'd seemingly manipulated my mother which was no easy task. "She's been trying to see me all week and I've been avoiding her. This is just some scheme to get me over there." I tried to appeal to something that

Mother would understand. "I have studying to do. This will interrupt it. You *do* want me to graduate top of my class, right?"

"Nonsense." Mother flapped both of her hands at me. "This is a chance for you to make everyone appreciate my parental qualities. That girl is idle, and now she's shown an interest in bettering herself, just like I've instilled in you. Perhaps she's realised that her own mother's parenting has been inadequate. You will tutor this girl, and you will give a good impression of me."

"Mother," I pleaded, but she put a silencing finger to her lips.

"I won't hear another word. I'll expect you downstairs within five minutes. You will go over there and show them what an intelligent and educated family we are."

By that point, I was trembling all over.

I'd never been so quiet and sheepish while standing entering April's home. I'd been in there so many times before, to watch anime or some other goofy series together. Yet, I was like a mouse after arriving at their house. Usually, I would have just walked straight in, as April's mother wasn't as strict as my own. She'd told me the first time I ever went there that I could treat it like my own home, so whenever I came over, I'd usually just walk straight in. I didn't feel like doing that anymore though; part of me hoping that April's mother would answer and tell me it had all been a mistake. That she'd send me away without having to see her daughter.

I barely said a word once shown in, and her mother was quite confused by the lack of conversation. She tried to initiate, but I'd simply given her one-word answers throughout, especially since most of her talk was based around April's sudden glow-up. I don't know what bullshit April had fed her mother, but she seemed unaware that her angel's blossoming looks were thanks to my hard work at the coffee shop. I didn't know whether to be upset or relieved at that. Eventually she just gave up and headed back downstairs to the kitchen, which left me standing outside of April's door, clutching my law book; an absolute bag of nerves thanks to a girl three years my junior.

I knew April didn't give a crap about the law, but Mother had been duped all the same. Evidently, I'd underestimated April's mischievous brattiness and ability to manipulate. Perhaps it had grown with her confidence, and she'd been consumed by her own inflating ego. It certainly was brave of her to trick my mother, and that made me fearful of what lay in store for myself.

I took a deep breath, and then, while knowing no good could come from my being there, I tentatively knocked the door.

"Come in," April called out in an extremely cheery way, and I was already cringing as I turned the handle and stepped inside.

"Hi," I said quietly, and I closed the door behind me. The law book was held against my chest as if a shield, and I damn well needed it. After last time, I was sure April was going to be pissed that I'd ignored her all week again.

She was sitting at her desk, and she swivelled in her chair to face me. I noted she was wearing the pink fluffy piggy slippers. Her cleavage was visible from inside a frilly blouse, and she was wearing a similarly pleated skirt to the pony-tailed blonde we'd seen two weeks ago; almost cheerleader like in its design. She'd worn it before, and I'd thought she'd looked like a clown, but it certainly fit her new aesthetic and showed off her deceptively thick thighs. I hadn't seen her since the day at the mall, though, to my shame, I'd watched her social media religiously. It was striking to see her in the flesh again, and accept that it hadn't been a fluke. Her hair still looked gorgeous, and she was wearing the contacts. She'd obviously been experimenting all week with the beauty products I'd bought her too, as her makeup looked well-applied and she had a deep, ruby lipstick on. If we'd been transported back in time two weeks, April and the stuck-up blonde would have looked like best friends. That would have left me to be friends with who...the subservient red-head?

She leaned back and relaxed with her hands behind her head. "Well, look who it is," she said smugly. "What a surprise to see you here."

"Yes," I said, and I couldn't help but be ashamed. Even though she'd treated me terribly that day, it was like an instinct within me to feel like I was in the wrong. That too, was likely thanks to my mother. Whenever a girl had been mean to me in school, Mother had always insisted it was my own fault and I should stop causing problems.

On one occasion, she'd even marched me down to the school to apologise to a bully's parents, just so Mother could keep face. I'd cried myself to sleep that night, but Mother had cared little, satisfied that her own image remained pristine and that her daughter wasn't a source of disruption. "I'm sorry, April," I said, and I felt so damn guilty and at fault. Her lips pursed, and I could sense she was amused at my unprompted apology. I could only hold her gaze for a second before my shyness got the best of me. When my eyes landed on the floor, a cute little giggle hit my ears hard.

I took a step towards the bed, and was just about to sit when April dropped her hands and clicked her fingers. "Nuh uh," she said, while pointing downwards. "Sit on the floor."

"W-what?"

"You can sit on the floor," she answered. "Right here." She moved one of her slippers forward; the little pig head jiggling around.

I turned and looked towards the bed. "Can't I just sit on the bed? You know, like we always—"

"No," she said. "My friends can sit on my bed. But, you've been avoiding me all week, haven't you? I guess that means we're not friends anymore."

"I'm...I'm sorry about that," I said. "I've just been—"

"Busy?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "Busy doing what?"

I rolled my tongue around the inside of my mouth. "You know," I whispered. I was already beginning to sweat from the tension. I'd never felt so out of place in April's room before, but it was like things had dramatically changed so much. I usually floated in with a magnanimous sense of superiority, like she was lucky to have a friend like me. Being older, well-educated and responsible, I'd always interacted with her in a patient, almost guardian-like tone. I'd subtly roll my eyes whenever she said something ill-educated or naïve, before politely correcting her. I looked after her, indulged her interests, and I always saw myself as doing a service when visiting her. Like I was generously spending my time with the younger, friendless girl next door in order to make her feel better and show her that she wasn't alone. It was hard to admit, but thinking back, it was the truth. I had looked upon April in that way. Maybe I'd even

friended her to make myself feel better, with her being even more of a dork than I was. However, at that moment, I felt like she was the noble one, and I had to explain myself to her. "I've been stud—"

"Studying," she said with a wispy tone while rolling her eyes. "Studying, working, going to college. You know. That sort of thing."

Without her glasses, her eye rolls were way more prominent, and her impression of my voice was so accurate that I was momentarily taken aback. "Umm, yes."

She let out a deep breath. "You're not a very good liar, Jing. You know that, right?" She crossed her arms. "You could try telling the truth instead."

"Okay," I said, and I stepped to the side, placing a hand on the corner of the bed. I dropped the book down with a thud.

"No," she said. "I already told you. You can sit on the floor."

"April," I said timidly, keeping my eyes lowered from hers. "Please, can we be reasonable about this? I said I'm sorry." I felt like I was walking on eggshells around her, and I had to keep reminding myself that this was April. Little, dorky April, but there seemed to be no semblance of that girl left. The girl sitting before me was cold, and calculating. She was completely in control and she knew exactly how to make me feel nervous as hell. Why was that? Because I'd submitted to her wants in the mall, there was no other way of framing the entire debacle. Maybe in her eyes, she'd taken my place as the one in charge. The leader within our twosome.

She didn't say a word back. As the tension grew, and eventually I looked up, she simply raised her neat eyebrow, before nodding towards the floor. I didn't object a third time, and I quietly slinked to the floor, before sitting cross-legged. I felt like a pre-school student, who'd been made to sit at the feet of my teacher while she was about to lecture me for misbehaving.

April crossed her ankles, and then kicked the top slipper rhythmically; its patterned sole waving before me. "So," she said rather smugly. "Did you have fun last week? We haven't really had a chance to catch up, have we?" She turned her head sideways while acting like she was lost in thought. "I wonder why that is?"

As I was sitting on the floor, it felt very strange to be looking up at her as she lazed in her computer chair. "I'm sorry," I said. "I just felt weird after it all."

"That makes sense," she said, and I was surprised by her insight. "I'd certainly feel weird if I'd let a younger girl spend so much of my money. Why would you allow that to happen?"

"I...I don't know."

She snorted. "Anyway, I certainly had fun. I really like telling you what to do."

I blushed at her bluntly stating what had happened, and I couldn't help but drop my eyes to the floor. The way I'd behaved was so embarrassing, and yet, I'd kept doing it again and again. I couldn't even explain why, but it was like the way April was suddenly so striking and attractive, well, it left me feeling intimidated. It made me feel out of place in her presence, and, it just felt right to appease whatever she wanted. It was like being back in high school, where I'd just let the cliquey girls get away with bad behaviour if it meant I was left alone. The more attractive and feminine April was becoming, the less comfortable I felt in her presence.

"Do you like when I tell you what to do?" she asked with curiosity.

"I don't know," I said truthfully while keeping my eyes on the floor. She uncrossed her feet, then began to swivel from side to side in her chair. I was taunted by the sight of the pink, piggy slippers; the snouts dragging along the carpet with each rotation.

"I like how you always look down now too. It's kind of cool. It's like you know I'm prettier than you now."

At that, I immediately looked up, almost feeling like I was being attacked. Yet, the jealousy that had been growing inside me revealed it was true. April was prettier than me, and I felt in her shadow as a result. Neither of us had been stunners, but I'd always felt that I was *slightly* better looking. That wasn't true anymore, and that's why I'd shoved my face into her stinking, sweaty old slip-on and sniffed its intense odour. I'd done so because I felt like I was beneath April and I was secretly acknowledging her newfound elevation way above me in the social hierarchy. It was like I needed to suffer in such a way to acknowledge her rise, even if she wasn't aware. Perhaps I'd just done it to settle things with myself, breathing in that intoxicating stench and accepting how

far apart we had grown. Obviously, I'd never confess to having done such a thing, but inside, I was conscious of that humiliation I'd willingly put myself through.

April frowned, and it was obvious she was displeased by my show of defiance. "Keep your eyes down," she said snottily. "I just said I like it when you can't look me in the eye."

"Umm, okay," I said in a fluster, and I returned my eyes to the floor, just lingering on her slippers as they rotated back and forth. I shyly glanced at the opening where her ankle disappeared inside, and I wondered if those slippers already smelled as bad as her shoes had.

"Much better," she said, and again, there was a little giggle. "I like you being like this." She stopped rotating, and then reached out one of her pink, slippered feet to poke me in the knee with the snout of the jiggly pig's head. "I like you doing whatever I tell you to, and buying me whatever I want."

At that moment, I felt like the weirdness of the whole thing needed to be addressed. I'd avoided her all week to avoid that very conversation, but since it was being forced on me, I knew I had to try and control it. Even though I was nervous, and scared of talking about something so embarrassing, I knew deep inside that it needed to be discussed. "April," I muttered, while keeping my eyes down. "Don't you think this is weird? I mean, we're friends."

There was quiet for a second, before April sat up in the chair. "It is weird, yes," she said. "But, I'd be a fool not to take advantage of it, wouldn't I?"

"But we're friends," I repeated in astonishment.

"Even so," she said. "I'd be a fool not to take advantage of it, friends or not. How would you feel if someone was just buying you whatever you wanted? You'd be a fool not to say yes to it all, right?"

"I guess," I said with a shrug. "I feel more like the fool though."

"Well," she paused while giggling to herself. "You said it. Maybe you are being a fool, but that's hardly my fault, is it?" She let me stew with that thought for a second, but then I flinched as I felt the rough sole of her piggy slipper settle on my knee. "Why

didn't you reply when I asked if you wanted to see my pretty feet?" She raised an eyebrow. "Were you too busy sniffing my old shoe?"

Did April know what I'd done with her putrid slip-on? I glaringly blushed, and tongued the inside of my lips, darting my eyes from side to side while feeling immensely uncomfortable with her slipper on my knee. I didn't push it aside though because I still felt like I was apologising for something. I still felt like I was in the wrong. She rocked her slippared foot back and forth, and it was obviously a show of control; her revelling in the fact that she could freely do so without any objection.

Her slipper then abruptly stopped rocking, and she pressed down. "I asked you a question, Jing. Why didn't you reply when I asked if you wanted to see my pretty feet? Don't you think my feet are pretty?"

"I...I don't know," I muttered. "I felt weird. I didn't want to give the wrong impression."

"What impression is that?"

"That I'm obsessed with your feet or something."

April let out a little humph. "Are you not?"

"I...don't think so," I said while squinting, completely unsure since so much of my life seemed to be focused around April's in the past few weeks. Even when I'd been avoiding her, I'd still found myself thinking about them with the pretty, purple polish, and how such feminine, dainty feet had made those slip-on shoes rancidly stink.

"So, why did you offer for me to paint my nails? I thought you wanted to see my feet all polished in my new heels. That is why you bought them for me, right? You know, just like that girl in the store."

I closed my eyes in an extended blink. I was getting fed up of hearing about those girls in the store, and April seemingly trying to wedge us into their roles. That's what she was doing, wasn't she? Or were we naturally falling into those roles? "I...that wasn't why I bought them."

"Oh," she said, and in the corner of my eye, I saw her scratching her chin. "So, you weren't expecting anything in return? You just bought me all of that stuff because you like buying stuff for me? That's even better."

"That's not..." I gasped, feeling like whatever I said, she was going to spin in a different direction. April had always been immature, but it was like she was playing some stupid game and I was losing each time I opened my mouth. "Can I leave? I don't feel comfortable here."

April leaned back on her heel; the toe of the slipper rising from my knee. "You can leave whenever you want," she said confidently. "I'm not keeping you here, Jing. It's not like you're tied up or anything. Obviously, you want to be here." She cocked her head. "Friends hang out together, right?"

"Yes, but I don't feel like your friend right now," I said without thinking. "Especially having to sit on the floor."

"Really? What do you feel like then?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I don't even want to be here right now."

"Oh, I know," she said. "You made that obvious all week, but, here you are. Why? Because I wanted you here."

"Because you lied to my mother," I said accusingly.

"You don't lie to your mother though, do you, Jing?" She let me stew on that for a second, before she continued. "Have you told her what happened last week?"

"No," I said sheepishly. "I haven't."

"What will you tell her when she finds out?" April was aware that Mother checked over my bank statements, since I'd naively told her back when we were just normal friends.

"I...I don't know."

"You could tell the truth."

"How can I do that?" I asked while lamenting my fate. "She'll disown me."

April scoffed. "I guess you'll need to lie to her then."

I looked up at her and felt utterly trapped. "Okay," I said. "You've made your point."

"Actually, the point is, I wanted you here, and now you're here. But, you don't have to stay." She glanced towards the law book on her bed. "I have no interest in

studying or whatever. You know I find that stuff boring. I'm all about having fun. That's why I invited you over."

"Invited?" I repeated in a petulant way.

She then snickered. "Very funny, but anyway, if you stay here, then I'm going to expect you to keep doing whatever I say. Otherwise, you can just go home."

"I can't do that," I said. "Not this soon. Mother will want to know why I've only been here five minutes."

"I guess the decision has been made for you then."

"Can't we just hang out and watch a movie or something?" I asked hopefully, wanting to steer things away from the awkwardness. "We still have the rest of that series to get through?"

"I don't want to watch a movie," she snapped back immediately. "Maybe we could have watched a movie Monday, or Tuesday, or even Wednesday. Saturday though? A whole week later? I don't think so."

"Okay," I whispered in resignation, which caused another chuckle to leave her lips. Then, her other foot moved, and suddenly she was resting both slippered feet on me; one for each of my knees. She rocked them back and forth a couple of times, and I could feel she was watching me, even as I kept my eyes lowered.

"Why aren't you moving?" she asked eventually, and there was obvious curiosity laced in her tone. "You're not bothered that I'm putting my feet on you?"

"I...I don't know," I whispered back. Obviously, it was embarrassing to have her feet resting on me in that way, but, I didn't know what I was supposed to do or say. I felt trapped.

"Humph," April said, and then she let out a sigh. "Well, if it's not bothering you, I guess I'll make myself more comfortable." She bent her knees, lifting her legs, and then shook her ankles until both of the piggy slippers tumbled free. Her toes, gleaming in the same purple polish as her fingers, wiggled playfully, seemingly enjoying the freedom now that they had escaped the hot, stuffy insides of her slippers. A light odour tickled my nose; nothing particularly offensive, and nowhere near as bad as her slippers, but it was the obvious, distinct fragrance of sweaty girl feet. My nose involuntarily

wrinkled and twitched, which caused April to huff from the comfort of the chair. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Do my feet stink or something?"

"They smell a little," I said in honesty, but then I baulked as she looked somewhat offended. "It's nothing bad," I said, figuring I was saving myself from further trouble. How angry would she have looked if I confessed how badly her slip-ons had reeked?

April giggled, and then she playfully extended one leg, spreading her toes right in my face. "Oh, it's nothing bad, is it?" she asked, and then she jolted her foot forwards, causing me to flinch. "They don't bother you? My pretty feet don't bother you?"

I was still sitting there, squirming and feeling absolutely uncomfortable, especially with the way she was casually waving her foot around in my face. Each time she wiggled her toes, my nose would wrinkle from the odour, but there was something beyond the scent that was grating me. We were friends, after all, yet, there she was, just casually teasing me with the stink of her foot, and, to my utter bafflement, I was just sitting there and allowing her to do so. I honestly didn't understand why she wanted me there at all.

April suddenly flexed her foot back and widely spread her toes. Her leg hovered, with her foot mere inches from my face, and I found myself staring straight into the smooth, pinkish tint of her pale sole. Strangely, I felt like I was staring upon something I should never see, especially up so close. We'd been friends for a year now, and hung out most days, but, I'd never had her foot right up in my face in such a way. It felt completely wrong. "My nails really do look good," she said, peering at her toes as she deftly moved her foot around. "That was a brilliant idea to get them painted." She moved her foot slightly, before looking towards me from around it. "I think from now on, I'll always want them painted."

I gulped, and then just shrugged. "If that's what you want."

"Yes," she said without any hesitation. "That is what I want."

"Okay," I answered timidly.

April cocked her head, and then looked down at me quizzically. "I'll expect you to pay, of course," she said. "No objections, right? I obviously can't pay for it myself, and we have to keep my feet looking pretty, don't we?"

"Ummm," I said shamefully while dropping my eyes again. I moved my face around, wrinkling my nose as she continued to wave and flex her foot so close. Each time I turned my head in a particular direction, she deliberately steered her foot there.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "I thought you said the smell didn't bother you?"

I clamped my mouth closed, all while trying to dodge her foot as she deliberately goaded me. "April," I eventually whimpered. "Please, stop this."

"This is my room," she said. "If I want to air my feet, then that's my right to do so."

"But not right in my face," I grunted. "You can't just do whatever you want all of the time."

"Why not?" she asked with a snigger. "This is what I want to do right now. I also want you to pay for me to get my nails done again next time. They look so pretty. So, I want to keep them looking pretty. It was your idea, after all, so now, my nails are your responsibility." She bit her lip and thought for a second. "Actually, keeping all of me looking pretty should really be your responsibility too. So, I want you to do so, from head to toe."

At that, and the casual way she was talking about making me pay for even more stuff, something tweaked inside me. It was like finally, reality had burst through whatever foggy haze I was trapped amongst. I was already a grand down. It couldn't become a regular thing. Even though I felt ridiculous while she was freely tormenting me with her foot, I had to finally stand up for myself. "April," I said, moving my head to the side so I could see her clearly from around her hovering foot. "This is getting really weird now. I don't think we should do whatever this is. Can we just go back to being normal friends and stuff? None of this money stuff?"

At that, April frowned. "What do you mean? You want me to go back to my messy hair, dorky glasses and my ugly nails?" She pouted. "Is that it? You don't want me to be pretty anymore? Are you jealous?" She scowled. "You should be supporting me. What kind of friend are you?"

"No," I said. "Of course not. It's not about that. It's just—"

"You're not happy that I'm feeling so good about myself?" she pushed. "Because I feel really good about myself right now."

"I know, and...and...I'm happy you do," I said, while trying to be diplomatic and appeal to a sense of reason within her. Even though I was older, I still felt like I had to talk to her politely and try to communicate my discomfort in a rational way. If I started yelling and screaming, there was nothing stopping April from sharing all of the embarrassing details about our little shopping trip with her mother, and by-proxy, my mother. I definitely didn't want that happening. I was already dreading the day Mother was going to find out, and I needed to be able to control my explanations. I hadn't even come up with a suitable excuse.

"So, why do you want to take that away from me?" she pushed.

"I don't," I said, and I looked up at her confused. "April, that's not what I'm saying."

"It's exactly what you're saying," she said defiantly. "You're just jealous of how good I look now, and you want me to go back to being a dork like you, right?"

That shocked me into silence, because it was just so damn mean. Maybe it's what I'd been quietly been fearing all week; maybe it's why I'd so willingly stuffed my face inside her gross slip-on. Because she was prettier, and because she'd been getting loads of attention on her social media all week, April thought she was better than me. That's what it all boiled down to. She didn't consider herself a dork, like me, anymore. She considered herself one of the beautiful, popular girls, the kind of which didn't hang around with girls like me: they picked on me and made fun of me instead. They made me do embarrassing things like sniff their stinking shoes. "April," I said timidly. "That was kind of mean."

"Don't make this about you," she said without a hint of sympathy. "I don't want to be unseen anymore. I like people looking at me. I like the attention, and I want to keep it." She twirled a strand of hair around her finger, and then leaned forward slightly to look at herself in her wall-length mirror. In the process, her toes accidentally brushed up against my nose. Without thinking, I instinctively slapped her foot away. "Hey," she said, scowling down at me. "What are you doing? Don't lose your temper because you're still a dork." She suddenly gripped my nose between her biggest and second toe. I gripped her ankle, and instantly tried to shuffled backwards and away, but I found myself pressed up against the base of the bed. April giggled as I squirmed, flushing with embarrassment at the feel of the sweaty texture right in the middle of my face.

"What are you doing?" I asked while consciously breathing through my mouth. I flapped my hands at her ankle again, which only prompted her to roll the chair forwards and keep me more securely pinned against the bed. She tensed the muscles in her leg; pressing the back of my head against the hardwood board.

"That's for thinking you can hit me," she said, and then she mockingly rotated her head back and forth. "Dork."

"Ugh," I groaned, as the back of my head began to hurt, "April, stop."

"Make me stop," she said. "Come on, Jing. Make me. You think you can lay a hand on me because you're older and in college? Well, stop me." She then poked her tongue out. "Dork."

Without thinking, and perhaps because I was in a panic, I took in a breath through my nose, and then I shivered while realising that I'd just inhaled the stink right from between her toes. It was just so strong and vinegary, as if it had really been building up in those stuffy slippers all week. It wasn't as stale as her slip-on, but instead, it had a warmth to it, like it was far riper. The odour itself was bad enough, but it was the fact that it was April's toes that my nose was clamped between that made it all the worse. Even though I saw a beautiful girl looking down at me, I couldn't shake the memory of the dork she also used to be. It made no sense, and I shouldn't have been where I was.

"You're not going to take this away from me," she said, and while gripping my nose, she began to roughly shake my head around. "You're going to keep providing me with it, got it?" She cocked her head again. "Dork."

"April, stop calling me that," I mumbled, but then she adjusted her leg and squashed my lips beneath the fleshy ball of her foot. As I grimaced, she lifted her other foot, before inexplicably slapping me across the cheek with its toes. Instantly, I stopped writhing around, and instead, I just stared up at her in surprise.

"How do you like being hit?" she asked. "It's not nice, is it? Especially when you thought that person was your friend."

I couldn't believe that she'd struck me across the face. I'd tapped her foot without thinking, but she'd deliberately hit me across the cheek. It hadn't really hurt, but it was

degrading as she'd used her foot. I couldn't even stop her either, as she had me held down in place with her other sweaty foot. I was struggling to still view myself as the leader between us, even though April was going nowhere in life. I'd taken her under my wing, recognising my vulnerability within her. So, for her to treat me in such a dehumanising way, rubbing her foot all over my face while calling me a dork, it was as if she was throwing everything back at me. "April," I pleaded, and I clutched at her ankle hopelessly, unable to wedge away the strength of her leg. Her toes scrunched and gripped around my nose, and as I kept suffering under the vinegary stench, I'd never felt so helpless in my life. I honestly felt like the dork she was labelling me as, being bullied by one of the hot girls. "Please—"

"Be quiet," she said with a sneer. "You've always had this superior thing about you. I've always felt it. You were only my friend because you think I'm more of a nerd than you are, right?" She cocked her head. "Because of my hair and glasses? Well, look at me." I stared up at her beautiful, straightened hair and green eyes. "Where are they now? Who is the real nerd now, you stupid foot-sniffer?"

I blushed so hard. I cringed so much in boiling shame that I felt as if I was about to pass out. I was going to pass out with April's toes wrapped around my nose, and then, to make it even worse, there was a knock on the door.

"April," her mother called from outside. "Is everything alright in there with you girls? I thought I heard a bang or something?"

April appeared momentarily unsure, and she looked towards me, almost as if she was seeking advice. The same advice she always sought from her older and more educated friend. However, with her sweaty toes gripped around my nose, I merely stared back at her with wide-eyes. My heart was thumping in my chest, and I was terrified at the idea of her mother stomping in and finding us in such a compromising position. Especially since April hadn't released the pressure on my face.

She wrinkled her forehead for a second, and then she called back, "Sorry, Mom. Everything is fine. Jing just dropped her book."

"Oh, okay," her mother called back. "Well, have fun you two."

April turned back to me and grinned. She squeezed my nose extra tightly, marking how I was still trapped. I was still in a state of panic, the close call having

almost sent me to an early grave. At least her mother had knocked the door. My own mother would have just barged straight in and who knows what would have happened. I couldn't even contemplate my mother's reaction to seeing me down on the floor while April had her sweaty feet pressed against my face.

"Anyway," April said. "As I was saying before you decided to hit me, I like you buying me whatever I want, and I want to keep doing it."

"But, April," I grunted, almost pleading for some sense to enter her head. "I can't keep doing this. I only have that money because I worked for it. I can't just keep spending it all on you."

April squinted, and then she roughly shook my head around again, keeping her toes gripped on my nose. "Huh?" she asked, before she pointed at me accusingly. "Why not?"

"Because, those things aren't a necessity."

"Feeling good about myself isn't a necessity?" she asked, and I instantly regretted my choice of words. "This is your own fault anyway," she said spitefully. "You were the one that was desperate to buy me those stockings."

"Yes, the stockings," I said. "and I wasn't desperate. I was just doing something nice for you. I didn't plan on buying everything for you whenever you want."

"So why did you buy me the slippers then?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "Why would you tease me like that? You know I have no money of my own, and then you buy me something I couldn't have ever bought myself? You say I'm mean, well, teasing me like THAT is mean!"

"I...I...I..." My eyes were almost crossing, struggling under my inability to talk my way out of her bizarre logic. It didn't help that I was also struggling with her foot stink wreaking havoc on my nose at the same time. "I don't know," I said. "You wanted them, and I wanted to make you happy." I then looked at her with soppy eyes. "April, I was just trying to make you happy."

"Exactly," she shrieked, and she forcefully gave my face a final shove. I gasped as I finally breathed without her toes around my nose. However, before I could move, she placed a foot on each of my shoulders. "So, keep making me happy! Otherwise,"

she added spitefully while leaning right down in my face. "I won't want to be your friend anymore, because, you're not cool enough to hang with me."

"What?" I asked in bewilderment. I had been the one avoiding *her*, so it was confusing to declare *me* too uncool to hang with. "What do you mean by that? You...you made me come over here."

"I'm not a dork like you anymore," she said snottily, and she grabbed her phone and turned it towards me. "Look, I'm outgrowing you." I stared at the screen, and she was rolling her finger down all of the messages and compliments she was receiving in response to her new look. "Hanging out with you has been holding me back," she said. "Think how popular I could have already been if you bought me something useful instead of comics."

"You wanted those comics?" I asked while staring up each of her legs, right beneath her pleated skirt.

"And you were happy to buy them for me because it kept me trapped as a dork like you, right? You didn't want me to be who I should have been." She shoved both of my shoulders, and the back of my head hit the bed again. "You know what?" she suddenly asked, and then she lifted her foot and slid the arm of my glasses between her toes. "These glasses are really kind of dorky. You should probably consider contacts, like me." Just like that, she whipped her foot away, and suddenly, all I could see was a blur.

"April," I pleaded. "What are you doing?" I reached my arms out around her legs, but I could barely see anything at all. There was just a blurry motion as she teasingly moved her foot around while clutching my glasses with her toes.

"It's too bad you're such a dork that needs glasses," she said, and with that, she abruptly dropped her other foot away. Even though I could hardly see, I noticed a pink blur as she shoved her feet back into her slippers, and she swung the seat around so she was facing her desk again. "You can go," she said snottily. "See yourself out."

"How can I go?" I asked as I tried to stand. I gripped the bed with one hand as I tentatively took a step. "I can't see at all. Could you give me back my glasses, please?" Though the lenses weren't as thick as April's had been, I was basically useless without my glasses. I held my hand an inch away from my face, and I could just make out the

texture of my skin, but anything beyond that distance was a massive blur. There was no way I'd be able to walk down her staircase without likely tumbling. I couldn't even make out where the door was, as the wall had all blended into one big blur. "Please? I need them."

"Oh really?" April asked, and I couldn't even see where she was. "Why do you need them?"

"Come on," I said, growing tired of it all. "You know I can't see without them."

"Sounds like they're a necessity," she said snottily. "It must suck being denied something you really need, huh? Something that can make your life a lot better."

I was about to reply, but instead, I just kept schtum. I knew there was nothing I could say that would stop April going around in circles. I was never going to win whatever argument we were having. Instead, I leaned on the corner of the bed, and I just waited for her to tire of the stupid game and give me back my glasses. I could hear her moving around, but I couldn't really see her, except for the odd blurry motion. It was only when I looked down, and saw two pink blobs that I realised that she still sitting in her chair. She must have had her legs stretched outwards from the side of the desk.

I slinked from the bed to my hands and knees, and then crawled towards the pink blurs, wiping my hands along the carpet in hope that my glasses were down on the floor somewhere. I moved slowly, waving my hand around in front as I neared the pink blobs. I didn't know whether April was watching me, because she was quiet throughout. It was only when my hand bumped into one of her slippers that I heard her shuffle in her seat.

"What are you doing?" she asked, and then both of the pink blurs lifted and abruptly disappeared.

"I'm looking for my glasses," I said.

"They're right in front of you," she said. "Can't you even see? How blind are you?"

Again, I thought about retorting, since her glasses had been comically thick, but I thought better of it. I just wanted my damn glasses since I felt almost paralysed. It was so debilitating without them. I swept my hand another time, then I shunted forward, before grunting as I hit my head against the drawers of her desk.

April burst into laughter, while I settled on my heels and rubbed my head in frustration. "Careful," she said. "You might hurt yourself."

"This...is...just...so...so mean," I said in disbelief. "April, what's got into you? Why are you being like this?" I was missing that frizzy-haired nerd more than ever. "You're just like the girls from school that we both used to hate. Picking on me because I need glasses?"

I must have tickled what was left of her empathy, because I heard her tut. "Fine," she said. "I'll give you back your glasses."

I let out a deep breath of relief. "Thank you." I held my hand up, waiting for them.

"But first," she added. "You'll need to do something for me."

"What?" I asked impatiently. "What is it?"

"Bow down and admit I'm prettier than you."

I immediately dropped my hand. "Why?" I asked, and I could already feel myself brushing. "Why do you want that? You obviously think you're prettier than me."

"I know it," she said. "But I want you to admit it."

"Fine, I admit it," I said, and I lifted my hand again. "Can I have my glasses now?"

"No," she said, and I heard her chair creak. She must have had her feet crossed up on the desk or something, and the two pink blurs floated down and landed on the floor before me. "You can bow down, here, and admit it."

I stared at the pink blobs for a second. I'd already let her boss me around enough, and she'd humiliated me with her foot in my face. Hadn't that been enough? She was expecting me to bow down at her younger feet and admit she was prettier than me? There was no need for it other than to satisfy her own ego. I huffed, but it was like I had no other choice. I didn't know where my damn glasses were, and it seemed pathetic to go crying to her mother for help. That would probably only make it worse anyway. I was supposed to be the senior of the two of us. "If I bow down and admit it. You'll give me my glasses back?"

"Maybe."

"No, April," I whined. "That's not good enough. Promise me, please."

"You're not really in a position to make demands, Jing." She was quiet for a moment, while she must have been thinking. She then giggled lightly. "But, okay. I promise. Do that, and I'll give you the glasses."

"Okay," I said apprehensively, and I felt like a complete fool as I dropped forward, placing my palms against the floor. Once my forehead joined them, and the carpet felt coarse against my skin, I immediately regretted doing it. It was just such a humbling position to be in, especially while at the feet of my friend. Her slippers were just in front of me as I prostrated myself before her.

"Come on," she said. "I want to hear you say it. Tell the truth."

I was chewing my lip while still stretched out in the embarrassing position. I wanted my glasses back, of course, but it was sheer torture having to say something like that. Of course she looked good after all of the money I spent on her. We both knew it, so why did she need me to humiliate myself? It was so unnecessary, especially since we were supposed to be friends. Only a week of looking beautiful, and popular, and her ego had inflated so much that she'd turned into a total bitch. There was none of the enthusiastic and giddy girl that I knew well.

"Now," she said impatiently, and then I felt something soft press against the back of my head. Something else soft joined it, and then that softness became rather heavy and pressed down; forcing my forehead against the floor. It didn't take a genius to figure out that April had placed both of her slippered feet on the back of my head. "Say it," she said, and then she twisted her legs from side to side so my head was rubbed against the rough floor.

"Okay," I whimpered. "You're prettier than me."

"I can't hear you," April called out in way too cheery a voice, and she continued to twist her slippers on the back of my head. "You'll have to say it louder."

"You're prettier than me," I said again. "I admit it. You're prettier than me."

April snorted, and then giggled to herself, before thankfully, she removed her slippers. "That was perfect," she whispered, and I immediately climbed back up onto my knees.

"My glasses, please?" I asked, and then I was relieved when she kept her promise and shoved them into my hand. "That was so childish," I said as I put them back on. "What was the point of..." My words caught in my mouth as I realised I still couldn't see. Even with the glasses on, my vision was completely blurred, perhaps even more so than before. "What the hell?" I asked in panic, and I rubbed my forehead, confused by what was happening. "Why can't I see?" I gasped, and I wondered if her grinding my head down into the floor like that had somehow done permanent damage. "What the hell, April?" I gushed. "What did you do?" April was giggling to herself, which was only winding me up further. "What have you done?" I asked, and I gripped the frame of my glasses. However, as my fingers explored each of the arms, I realised the frame was much thicker than before. I made my way around the front, and then I eased them from my face, testing the size of the lens between my finger and thumb. "These aren't my glasses?" I asked. "These are yours."

"It's okay," April said while still giggling. "I feel really bad after everything you've spent on me. So, I figured since I don't need them anymore, you can have them. They're my gift to you."

The frustration returned with a bang, and I threw her glasses at her. They landed in her lap with a clatter.

"Hey," she said. "That's not cool. Did I do that with any of the gifts you bought me?"

"This isn't funny," I said, and my skin was beginning to tingle all over. The longer I was having to see the world as a blur, the more helpless I was feeling. "Why are you being like this?" I asked again. "Why are you being so cruel?"

Again, April was quiet, and through my blurry vision, I could see she was tapping the side of her head while relaxed in the chair. "Isn't this what you want though?" she asked as if it was an obvious question.

I wrinkled my sore forehead. "What? Why would I want to be treated like this?"

"I'm just being a brat," she said. "I thought you liked that."

"Why would I like that?"

"Because," she said. "That's what it says online." She then swivelled her chair towards her desk, and I heard her tapping on the keys of her laptop. She clicked her mouse a couple of times, and then she swivelled the chair back towards me. "It says paypigs love bratty princesses."

I suddenly became quiet, and I felt a deep, pulsating twinge in my chest. That was one of the terms I'd stumbled upon during my own internet research. I glanced up at April's blurry figure and suddenly things made so much sense. The way she'd been so forthright and, on the attack, since I arrived. I hadn't been the only one doing research after our weird day in the mall, April had been having a peruse online too. Clearly, she'd been as weirded out and curious as I'd been after the events at the mall. I guess she'd gone searching, wondering why her best friend would allow her to spend so much of her money. It seemed there was only one difference though: whereas I was embarrassed and disturbed by what I'd found, apparently, April had been inspired. But, I was horrified, because she'd read all of that crap about paypigs and stuff, and she'd associated that with *me*? I'd long recognised that she was immature for her age, and she often misunderstood things, but it was incredibly naïve of her to just think she could play some role and that I'd apparently go along with it. I wasn't a damn prop, I was a person.

"I was reading about it online," she said. "After everything that happened last week, and it really got me thinking. It's so fascinating, Look." At that point, she rudely dragged her laptop towards the edge of the desk.

"April, I can't see," I muttered in a sarcastic tone.

I heard her breathe heavily, then she leaned forward and put something on my face. I blinked, and since I was still blind as hell, I knew she was just tormenting me further by giving me her glasses again. "Any better?"

"Obviously not," I said through gritted teeth.

"Well, would you like me to read it to you then?"

"Or you could give me my own glasses back?"

"I could," she said, but then she giggled. "But I'm not going to. It's so damn funny seeing you wearing my old glasses. You should see how tiny your eyes look right

now.” She then grabbed something from her desk, and shoved it in my face. I flinched as there was a flash, and I feared the worst. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll send it to you. You can see it later.”

“Don’t...don’t post that anywhere, please.”

Everything became quiet, all except for April’s chair creaking slightly. The longer it went on, the more unnerved I was feeling. While wearing her glasses, I couldn’t see her expression. She then shifted in the seat, and I flinched as she pushed her slippered foot against my shoulder. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I just mean, don’t post that on your social media, please.”

“Why not?” she asked, and I could tell how serious she was from her tone. There was no giggling or playfulness. Even when she’d been tormenting me earlier, she’d been laughing and apparently enjoying it.

“Because I don’t want to be made fun of for looking like a fool,” I said, and then, I realised what a complete fool I was already being. “No, wait,” I said, and I swallowed awkwardly. “I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t mean *you* look like a fool when you’re wearing these glasses.”

She shoved me in the shoulder again with her foot. “Shut up,” she said, and then under her breath, she muttered. “Stupid piggy.”

“Don’t...don’t call me that,” I said, and I could already feel my face flushing.

“Why not?” she asked. “It’s exactly what you are. A paypig. You fit the definition I read online perfectly.” She tapped her desk. “It says so right here.”

“No, I don’t,” I said. “I’m not like that.”

She then lifted her foot and rested it on my shoulder; her soft slipper pressed against the side of my face. “Funny, because you’re going all pink right now,” she said. “Your cheeks are practically the same shade as my piggy slippers. I’d say you’re a little piggy too, Jing.” Of course, that only made me blush further, and I could feel the temperature rise in my skin. “Wow, now you’re even more piggy pink than my piggy slippers.”

"Stop it," I said, and I tried to lift her foot from my shoulder. As I did so, she simply did the same with my other shoulder; the softness of her slipper once again pressing against my face.

"Here piggy, piggy, piggy," she said, and I was utterly mortified. I'd never cringed more in my life. I couldn't see her face, but I could feel how cocky she was being.

"I'm not a piggy," I said, and then I tried to remove her leg again. She only responded by tensing her muscles and deliberately holding it in place. Then, she lifted the second foot and suddenly I found my face sandwiched between both of her piggy slippers.

"Oh, look," she said, and I flinched as there was another flash. "It's the three little pigs." She then made an obnoxious snorting sound, which was obviously intended to mimic a pig's grunt. She ground both of her the slippers into my cheeks. "Or maybe, it's actually two pigs and a paypig."

"I'm not a paypig," I said petulantly, and I tried to move away from her feet, bashing my hip against the desk in the process. I grunted from the pain, which only caused April to giggle.

"Was that a piggy snort?"

"No," I said while rubbing my hip. "I'm not a piggy."

"Well, I think you are," she said. "You were my little paypig last week. Whatever I want, you bought for me. That's the definition of a paypig. I even read that online. They may as well have included a photo of you next to the meaning. You, Jing, are a paypig." She took another photo as the camera flashed. "Maybe I can upload this picture to the page?"

"Don't call me that," I said defensively. "And don't you dare do that. I'm not a paypig."

April chuckled, and then she made an annoying pig-like grunt again. Despite the beauty of her new look, apparently somewhere beneath her ego, the nerdy character remained. "Well, too bad, paypig," she said, and then she sat up straight, yanking me closer as she steered the toes of her slippers behind my head. "But don't worry," she

said as she inexplicably tapped the top of my head with her fingers. "Like I already told you, I'm happy to be your brat."

"I don't want to be a paypig," I said again, and I sounded completely hopeless and pathetic while looking up at her blurry shape as her piggy slippers sandwiched my face.

From her blur, April appeared to shrug. "Well, too bad, because that is what you are." She then deliberately shook her feet against my cheeks, and I felt the little piggy heads jiggling around. "You look just like my slippers," she said with a giggle. "Like a little piggy."

"No, I don't," I gasped. "April, stop being so mean."

Even though I was clearly distressed, April continued to giggle while wiggling the slippers against my face. "Yes, you do. With your little piggy nose." She reached with her hand and squeezed the tip of my nose painfully between two of her knuckles. "Oink, oink," she said, and then she sat back cackling to herself. It was so humiliating that I didn't even have a chance to steady myself and respond, and then she was pressing the front of one of her slippers against my mouth. "Come on, give it a little kiss, piggy. I want to see my piggies kissing."

I clamped my mouth closed and forcefully tried to turn away again. I was horrified by the way she was behaving, and it was like her ego had gone through the roof. For the first time, people were actually complimenting her appearance online, and apparently, that had resulted in her just turning into a conceited arsehole.

And then, as she was provoking me, rubbing her slippered foot against my mouth, and with the way the round, piggy head kept brushing against my lips, it all became too much. Wearing her glasses, and not being able to see: I felt completely helpless and overwhelmed. To make it even worse, April leveraged her grip on my neck with both slippers, and then she must have pushed her hand against the desk; rolling the chair slightly away. When she straightened her legs, my back and head pressed against the drawers of her desk, and there was nowhere for me to go. She leaned and craned a finger into the opening of one slipper, pulling it off before she tossed it aside. In the blink of an eye, she'd shoved her foot into my face again, and

the back of my head ricocheted off a drawer handle as she sunk my nose between her toes.

"If you won't kiss my slipper, then you can kiss my foot instead," she cackled to herself, and while her toes gripped my nose, she mashed the ball of her foot against my lips. "Kiss it, piggy," she shrieked while giggling. "Come on, little piggy, kiss my foot."

My teeth were clamped together as I tried to twist my head away from her foot.

"You can keep pretending you don't like them, but I know you do. Buying me stockings, slippers and heels? You're so obvious, piggy. You love my feet. You love them so much that you even paid for my pedicure. That was your idea." She then jiggled in her seat as she was overcome with laughter. "It said online that paypigs often love feet, and you're the proof!"

At that moment, while she continued to goad it was like I couldn't fight it anymore. It was just so damn demeaning and humiliating, especially coming from what was supposed to be my friend.

"Come on, oink for me piggy," she goaded again, and her sweaty toes were slipping and sliding all over my nose.

I became limp, and my head dropped down, all while April kept rubbing her foot right into my face. The other slipper continued to jiggle against my cheek, and it was like I was completely dominated by her feet. At that moment, the sweaty feet of my bratty friend owned me.

"I want to hear you oink," she said again in a harsher tone. "I'm your brat, and you'll oink for me piggy." When I didn't respond, she adjusted her position in the chair, and then pressed harder with her foot in my face. My nose slid into the sweaty groove beneath her toes, and I was instantly inhaling nothing but vinegary foot stench. It hit me hard, and my hands dropped to my sides. Before I could blink, she kicked off the other slipper, and then shoved that foot in my face too. Those toes gripped my chin, and then she was forcefully tugging down and opening my mouth. "Come on, piggy," she said. "Oink for me, piggy. Oink for me, piggy." With her lower foot, she kept forcing my mouth open, before pushing it closed, over and over. "Oink. Oink. Oink."

She held something in front of my face, and from its blurry shape, I could tell it was her phone. She continued to squeeze my nose under her toes while simultaneously tugging and pushing my mouth open and closed. "Come on, piggy," she said. "Oink for me, piggy." She dipped her blurry head and nodded. "You were a good piggy for me last week, weren't you?" Her voice raised to some god-awful high-pitched shriek. "Are you going to be a good piggy for me again? Come on, be a good paypiggy for my feet. I know you love them. I want to spend more of your money, my paypig. Do as your brat tells you!"

The whole time, I was just sitting there with my legs spread out, my head pushed against the desk drawers while April's feet were pressed all over my face. Occasionally, I lifted an arm and gave an aimless swat at her ankle, but with her leverage, I couldn't shift them. I was forced to just sit there and listen to her awful goading, over and over, as she called me her paypig relentlessly. As she taunted me, and tormented me, teasing and making fun of me for being in love with her feet, all while freely rubbing and smearing their sweat all over my face: I broke down. While I had no means to escape, and the more I had to listen to her mocking voice, the greater my frustration became. I felt totally worthless as the sound of her voice was ringing in my ears, all while the stink of her sweaty teen feet annihilated and ingrained themselves within my entire being.

"Oink for me, piggy," she said again, and she held her arms out with her phone right in my face. "Come on, piggy. Oink for me like the paypig you are. Stop trying to fight it, we both know you want to be my paypig. Just give up and be my little piggy." Her big and second toes were slipping and sliding all around my nose, and the more overwhelmed I became by the whole thing, the more I was breathing in the vinegary stench between them. "That's it," she urged. "Take a good sniff. I know you love my feet. You're a little piggy for my feet, aren't you?"

I tried turning my head again, and squinting away from her phone, but it was like I was under siege from all sides. I didn't even know if what she was saying was how she really felt, or if she was just parroting some crap she'd read online. Did she really believe I was into that stuff, and that dominating me in that way was the best method to make me spend even more on her? Whatever the reasoning, it was succeeding in completely dehumanising me and reducing me to a pathetic slump.

I was staring up into her blurry face, while breathing in the stink from her toes, and listening to her annoying voice tell me to oink over and over. Oink. Oink. Oink. I just kept hearing piggy, and paypig, and feet, and oink round and round. Oink for her feet, she urged, as those feet gripped and tugged at my nose and chin. Oink for them. Oink for April's feet. The words were cycling around in my head as I became all hot and flustered, unable to escape the musk of her sweaty toes. My skin was prickling all over from the dire need to get the hell out of there, but there was nothing I could do. When her giggle rang out loudly, and I realised what a good time she was having in comparison to me, my tongue was perched. "Oink for me piggy," she demanded a further time, and then she squeezed my nose between her biggest and second toe. "Oink for my pretty, bratty feet."

"Oiiiiiiiink," I finally screeched in frustration, as she forced my mouth open another time. "Oink, oink, oink, oink," I grunted over and over again into the bottom of her demanding foot. April burst into laughter, and then she began wiping both of her grimy feet all over my face. I gasped and wheezed, but continued moaning, "Oink. Oink. Oink."

"That's it, piggy," she screeched as one of her big toes pressed against my nose and forced up into a painful piggy snout. "Oink for me."

"Oiiiiiiiink."

April cackled even louder, and then I was surprisingly free as both of her feet dropped from my face. She excitedly rose from the chair, and stepped past me, while pressing a few buttons on her phone. She wiggled her feet back into her piggy slippers, and then hopped over me and climbed onto the bed. The entire movement was insulting in itself, as if I wasn't even worth any thought after what she'd just put me through.

I was still sitting there against the desk, feeling truly exhausted by the whole thing. I rubbed my face, and found that I was smeared in sweat. Whether it was my own or from April's feet: it didn't matter. It had probably been all mixed in together. "April," I mumbled through a hoarse, sore throat. "You've had your fun. Please, can I have my glasses now?"

"Mmmm," she said in thought, and then I noticed her blurry image was shifting on the bed. Even though her figure was all obscured, I could tell that she was sitting with her slippers crossed at the end. "Come here, piggy," she said, completely ignoring my desperate pleas. "I want to see you begging me to use you as my paypig again first. Maybe if you do a good job, then you can have your glasses." I flinched as I heard something, and then there was the distinctive sound of my own voice, loud and strained, while I oinked over and over. April giggled, and a huge wave of dread washed over me.

"You recorded that?" I wailed in horror.

"Of course," she said with glee. "It was hilarious. Oink! Oink!"

I couldn't bear the thought of people seeing me oinking loudly while April's feet were rubbing all over my face. I was still cringing while hardly believing it had actually happened. "You won't share that, will you?"

"Mmmm," she said again. "It depends. Maybe. Maybe not. I guess we'll see how good of a job you do while begging to be used as my paypig again."

Even though I was no longer painfully pushed against the desk, I was trapped more than ever. I was trapped by that tiny moment where I'd let it all become too much, where I'd caved through the frustration of being ruthlessly humiliated and loudly oinked like a piggy. April had captured that moment, and as long as she had it, I was hers. Even though I ached all over, I flopped from the desk, and began crawling towards the blurry shape of her bed. I could just make out the round, pink blobs of her slippers as they merrily bounced about at the end of the bed.

I didn't know exactly what she wanted, but I kneeled at the end of her bed and began nuzzling my face against the sides of April's pink, fluffy piggy slippers. She rotated her ankles and rubbed them back against my face, all while I cringed through the shame of it all.

"Give them some piggy kisses," she said with a giggle. "I want to see my piggies kissing each other."

I didn't resist on the second ask, and much to my shame, I began to pucker and smooch my lips against the jiggly pig heads at the end of each of April's slippers. She

even made it more difficult for me, deliberately twisting her ankles and moving her slippers around so I had to dart my head in pursuit and stretch up high on my knees.

"Come on, piggy," she said. "You kiss your fellow pigs."

While I was doing so, I felt tears trickling from the corners of my eyes as I strained and grunted, smacking my lips against the soft material as April's jarring cackles rang in my ears. Her blurry figure was wiggling about on the bed, and she was seemingly rejoicing at my abject destruction at her feet. I couldn't believe that she could be so cruel, and that she was capable of treating me in such a way, but at that moment, it was my reality.

"Now, I want to hear some begging," she said. "You're my paypig, Jing. So, be a paypig."

I sniffled and buried my face into the sole of one of her slippers. As she pressed it back against me, I crumbled. "Please," I whimpered into the treaded material. "Use me as your paypig, April." The temples of my forehead were throbbing and pulsating as the blood pumped around my body. My bank account had already been brutalised, but I felt as if there was no other choice. Imagine my mother saw that video of me oinking and grunting while April rubbed her feet all over my face. That certainly wasn't the type of tutoring she'd encouraged. "Please, use your paypig."

April moved her slipper aside, and I saw the shape of her figure leaning close. "Does that mean you accept you're my paypig?"

"Yes," I grunted. "I'll be your paypig, alright?"

"Ugh," April said, clearly disgusted. "What was that? I want to hear it in your piggy language." She then flicked her slipper against my cheek. "Come on, piggy. Oink and convince me that you want to be used."

I took in a deep breath, bracing myself for the shame that was being inflicted. "Oink," I wailed, and then I began to make awful, grunting snorts as I tried to imitate the sound of a pig as best I could. Throughout, I buried my face into the side of her soft slipper, desperate to hide from her, even though I couldn't see her through the thick lenses of her glasses anyway. From the way she was bouncing around on the

bed, she was having a real hoot at my expense, giggling throughout my entire pathetic performance.

"Well, I'm afraid, I can't understand you, piggy," she said. "Since I'm a princess, and not a paypig, I don't have a clue what you're saying."

I groaned, closing my eyes and sinking my face in deep against her slipper. It was obvious that whatever I did, April was going to find some way of making it all so much worse for me. "April," I pleaded, and then I winced as she growled.

"Did you not just hear me?" she said while flicking her slipper against my cheek. "I'm a princess. I'm your bratty princess, piggy."

"Okay," I said, and I sniffled again while trying to catch my breath. "Princess April," I asked again. "Will you please just use me as your paypig already?"

Instead of putting me out of my misery, she chuckled again. "You look like such a dork," she said. "Especially in my glasses. You won't believe how much I used to hate those glasses. It's so awesome I don't have to wear them anymore."

Meanwhile, there I was, being forced to wear them. It was even worse for me, as at least the prescription matched her eyes. I felt dizzier and queasier the longer I had to wear them, and at that moment, I had enough. I lifted them from my nose, and was about to take them off.

"Umm, what are you doing?" she asked.

"I feel sick," I pleaded. "I can't see. They're making everything so much worse."

"Welcome to my world," she said unsympathetically. "Now you know how I felt."

"Geez, April," I growled. "You're making it sound like I forced you to wear them. It's not my fault that your eyes are that bad."

"Umm, shut up already, dork," she said, and then she angled her foot and pushed the glasses back down my nose with the slipper. "You keep those dorky glasses on so I can enjoy the fact I don't have to wear them anymore. It's a nice reminder that thanks to your money, I'm no longer a dork like you. I'm finally the princess I was born to be. How does that feel?" she asked. "You could have improved

yourself with that money, and instead I did. I guess you're not as smart as you think, huh? So much for a college student."

I thought for a moment, processing her words, and then I suddenly perked up with an idea. What she was saying was true. There had been a complete turnaround in her appearance, and to her joy, the perception in other people's eyes. She'd shifted from being a social pariah, like myself, to the kind of girl that guys actually lusted after. All it had taken was a couple of beauty treatments, and April was considered a hottie. Why couldn't the same work for me?" I'd already blown through a load of my savings, so what was the harm in a little more if it improved my self-esteem? Perhaps we could both enjoy the improvement in our fortunes.

"Shall I do it too?" I asked hopefully, and already I was envisioning replacing my glasses with a pair of contacts. I could even get a new hairstyle, perhaps even dye it. I could change up my choice of clothes, and just generally put an effort into how I'd look. My mother had always instilled in me that such matters were a waste, and that the contents of my brain was all that mattered. Yet, April had proven that appearances really did matter, and the way her confidence had taken a boost was inspiring. It wouldn't hurt to improve my own confidence.

"Do what?" April asked while shifting on the bed and likely resting back on her elbows.

"The same as you," I said. "I can get a makeover and stop being a dork."

April snorted, and then she muttered rather patronisingly, "Umm, no. I think you're good as you are." She giggled to herself again. "I quite like seeing you like this. It kind of reminds me of where I came from, especially with those thick lenses making your eyes look so small. I even kind of get why people used to laugh at me." The mattress shifted as she shrugged. "I never want to return to being like that. So, I'd prefer that you stay exactly as you are."

"April," I wailed, distraught that she would say something so cruel to me.

"What?" she asked with another shrug. "It's true, isn't it? Look at you," she said while her blurry shape pointed at me, before she lazily directed her thumb towards herself. "And now look at me. We're so far apart it's insane now." She then screwed

her face up in thought. "Actually, I don't think we can be friends anymore. It won't do my reputation any good, hanging around with such a dork."

"Don't say that," I whimpered.

"It's true. I'm your princess now," she said. "I'm the princess I was always supposed to be, and I'm claiming you as my paypig. That leaves no room for you to be my friend, but it doesn't matter. I'm the bratty princess you need."

"I already told you, April. I'm not like what web site says—"

"Call me princess," she ordered angrily, brushing my cheek with another slap of her slipper. "Right now, I want to hear you accept I'm your bratty princess."

"April," I grunted, but before I could muster another word, she'd slapped me with her slipper once more. Then, before I could say anything else, she'd bent her knees, and mashed my face into the mattress as both of her feet pressed against the top of my head.

"Call me your princess," she said with determined effort. "I'm your bratty princess, and I'm claiming you as my paypig."

"You're my princess," I mumbled into the mattress, the words completely muffled. I had to wail out my surrender three more times, at increasing volume, until she eventually removed her feet and allowed me to rise.

"Good," she said, and then she flicked her leg and I watched as one of her pink slippers bounced from the bed. I then flinched as, from the vinegary scent, her foot approached my face. "Now kiss your princess's foot. I know you love my pretty feet, so don't even try to deny it."

I knew there was no point trying to resist anymore, and while I couldn't see her foot properly, it almost felt like I wasn't actually confronted with it. I wrinkled my nose from the strong odour, but then quickly placed a soft peck on the base of her heel. Just like that, it was over, as if it had barely occurred at all.

"Good piggy," she said joyously. "This is just natural evolution or something." She then casually wiped and smeared her sweaty foot all over my face. I was kneeling there, squirming and groaning under the humiliation of it all, barely believing that I was just allowing it to happen, but I'd been through so much already, that it scarcely

seemed to bother me. "It's a dog eat dog world, Jing," she said. "To get to the top, you have to clamber over everyone on the bottom, and I guess that's what happening to you right now. It was only a matter of time before this happened. I want to get to the top, and if it means trampling all over you, well, then that's what it'll take."

"But," I grumbled. "We're frien—"

"I don't care if we're friends," she said. "Now, you're my paypig. So, just be my paypig."

I grimaced as her sweat was forcefully wiped all over my face. I grunted and desperately figured I could still reason with her at least. Despite her fully embracing the bratty princess persona that she somehow thought I wanted, there had to be some part of my friend still in there. "Don't you feel guilty?" I asked. "How can you do this to me? We've been friends for how—" I couldn't finish what I was saying as April deliberately pushed her clammy, wrinkled sole against my lips. She scrunched her toes over my nose, and I gasped while breathing in the heady stink that had seemed to be rejuvenated from another spell in her piggy slipper.

"Are you already so much of a pig that you're stupid? It doesn't matter that we were friends," she said. "All that matters now is I'm your princess, and you're my paypig."

"But I don't want to be your paypig," I mumbled from beneath her foot.

"Really?" she asked in surprise, and then she casually picked up her phone. She was quiet for a few seconds, all while she continued to scrunch and spread her toes above my nose. Even though nothing was keeping me held in place, it was like I was unable to pull myself away from April's feet. Why? I couldn't really tell, but it was like she had some kind of hold over me. She was one of the pretty girls, not a dork like me, as she'd said, and that carried so much weight in the balance of our friendship. She was my only friend after all, and I couldn't bear the thought of being discarded and left all alone. "Here," she said, and she turned the phone to face me. "Take a look."

I lifted the glasses, and squinted, leaning right in so the screen was barely an inch away. Even then, it was still blurry, but I could just make out that the page was open on some shopping cart, and April had added a single item. I squinted even more,

and saw that it was a pair of designer sliders in her size, and the price was a whopping \$150. "I want these," she said, and she grunted with effort while clutching her pale toes tightly around my nose. "And I'm going to use my paypig to get what I want. Do you hear me, piggy? Your princess wants to use her paypig. Just think how pretty my feet will look in those sliders. You want to see your princess's feet looking all pretty, don't you? Won't it feel good knowing you've worked so hard at your boring job so your princess can be happy?"

Her toes continued to grip and scrunch over my nose, and my head was all over the place. I could hardly think properly while inhaling the funky stench from between her toes, and the way she was so casually rubbing and smearing the sweat all over my face made it clear that April had ascended beyond our friendship. There was no way we could ever be friends anymore, especially with any kind of equality. After having demeaned me in such a humiliating way, I knew there was no going back. The budding duo of Jing and April was long gone. It was dead, and from then on, the only possible dynamic between us would exist as princess and paypig. It wasn't something I'd hoped for. It wasn't something I'd craved. It was something I'd clumsily stumbled into, and April had taken it upon herself to ensure I could never escape from the hole in which I'd tumbled.

"Give me your bank card," she said. "Your princess wants to use her paypig."

"But I don't want to be a paypiiiiig," I wailed, and it sounded so pathetic, that it could closer be described as some kind of piggy screech.

"Shhh, paypig," she said, and then she roughly slapped my cheek with the ball of her foot. "If I say you're my paypig, then you're my paypig. Give me your card already."

"I don't have it," I said, and then I realised that however much she humiliated me in that moment, she couldn't extract a further cent from me. "I only brought the law book."

April suddenly growled, and then her blurry foot slapped me across the cheek again with greater force. I caressed my tender flesh, and despite her feet being all dainty, they were starting to leave an impression. "Then what are you waiting for?"

she grunted impatiently, and she scooted back and removed her feet from my face. "Go home and get it."

"But I can't see," I said. "How am I supposed to get it?"

"Figure it out," she said with a chuckle. "Blind people manage, don't they?"

"But I need my glasses," I pleaded. "Please, just give me my glasses." I was already planning everything out. Once I had the glasses, I was out of there. I'd sprint home, dive beneath the covers of my bed and just pretend none of it had happened. It didn't even matter that April had the video, because I'd just never go online ever again. I'd delete all of my profiles, and just keep a low profile for the rest of my life. No one would likely recognise me anyway, because I was as unseen as April used to be. I was bland. I was a dork, just like she'd bluntly stated, and with her glasses, my eyes appeared so small behind the lenses that I probably looked like someone else entirely in that video. It totally made sense in my desperation, and all I needed was my glasses so I could escape once and for all.

I heard April sigh. "Do you think I'm stupid? I'm not giving you your damn glasses until you come back here with your bank card. You think I'm going to let you go home and disappear for another week? You're my paypig, Jing, whether you like it or not." She then placed her foot against my hip and shoved me towards the door. "Go and get your bank card for your princess. I'm feeling extra bratty right now, and I want to use my paypig." She then tutted. "You have fifteen minutes to get back here with your card. If you fail, I'll come looking for you. I'll knock your door, and when your mother asks what I want, I'll tell her: I've come to find my paypig."

I cringed in absolute horror. My whole solution had a spanner in the works. Who cared about whatever April put online, when she could go directly to my mother? Mother would probably send me to Asia, stuffing me away in some temple as a nun for the next forty years so I couldn't bring her any further shame.

The next few minutes were a complete calamity. I walked along the hallway while my fingers traced the shape of the wall, and within seconds, I'd knocked a painting from

its hinge. I stumbled at the top of the stairs, almost tripping and tumbling down. All the way, I tried to take slow and measured steps, conscious not to bump or knock anything else over so that I wouldn't draw her mother's attention. I crept along the downstairs corridor, at times closing my eyes as the constant blurry images were making me feel a little nauseous. As I reached the front door, I breathed a sigh of relief, before opening the latch and stepping out.

"Everything okay, Jing?" April's mother asked from behind me, just as I was about to step out of the door. She must have heard me stumbling around, or perhaps the bump of the painting bouncing off the floor.

"Yes," I said, slightly turning my head, but not enough to reveal I was wearing her daughter's glasses. "I just have to nip home and grab something."

"Okay," she said. "I'm about to head for a bath, so just let yourself back in."

"Thanks," I said, and I'd never been more grateful to be left alone.

Outside, I immediately tripped over a bush, crashing into a mound of dirt and soiling the palms of my hands. I tripped again along the pathway to my front door, and then I almost fell flat on my face as I entered. With April's thick glasses, I simply lacked all perception of my surroundings. Taking them off wasn't any better, and the toe of my shoe caught on the first step as I tried to walk up the stairs.

"Back so soon," Mother asked, and I deliberately dipped my head before continuing to climb.

"I have another book I want her to see," I said. "A spare that I can leave with her."

"Wonderful," Mother said, and thankfully, she didn't follow me as I clumsily climbed the stairs; my fingers gripped to the handrail the entire ascent.

Once in my room, I tried to remember where my purse was. I searched everywhere, hands pushed out in front of me as if I was a zombie. I knocked over most of the stationery on my desk, until I finally laid hands on the familiar material of my purse. As I held it, I felt sick knowing that I was going to have to buy April those shoes, and, part of me just wanted to stay home and hope it all blew over. I clumsily found my way to my bed, and then I sat down and thought over my options.

Before I had a chance to plot, my phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out and squinted closely to see that April was calling me. It was a video call, and I was hesitant to answer. But, remembering her threat about coming over and talking to Mother, I reluctantly accepted.

"Where's my paypig?" she immediately said, and I held the phone close and squinted at the screen while I slyly lowered the volume. April must have been using the back camera, because all I could see were her purple-painted toenails. "Look how pretty my feet are," she said. "Look how pretty *your* princess's feet are. That's all thanks to you, piggy. You paid for these beautiful nails. Aren't you proud? Aren't you proud of being such a good paypiggy for your princess? You're such a good little piggy, you know that, right?"

I was immediately conflicted, and I suddenly became damn confused, because, despite me being intensely humiliated, something tweaked inside me with the way she was being so patronisingly complimentary. It tugged at the part of me that craved affection and recognition; the part that had been neglected my entire life by my emotionally absent mother. I could feel my resistance waning, and my desires almost reshaping to meet April's expectations.

"Do...do you really think so?" I asked, and I still felt so damn confused.

April giggled, and then she wiggled her toes. "I do. You're such a good little piggy, Jing. You're so much better as a piggy than a friend, you know that, right? Look how happy you've been making me recently. Look how pretty I am." She switched the cameras and I was looking at her stunning face. She played with her hair, and then held the camera close so I was looking right into one of her green eyes. "I'm so beautiful now, aren't I?"

"Yes, April. You're so beautiful now," I whispered, and I felt a warm rush as I accepted it as fact. She did look stunning; not a trace remaining of her old, dorky self.

While I was still holding the phone close enough to see clearly, she bit her lip and shook her head. "Princess April," she said slowly and pronounced. "Come on, let me hear you say it, my good little piggy."

"Princess April," I whispered quietly.

"Do you have your bank card for me?"

"Ummm, yes," I said, and I momentarily replaced my face with my purse. "I have it."

"Good piggy," she said quite delicately. "Come back and be a good little paypiggy for your princess. You're making me so happy recently, and it'll make me even more happy if you buy me those sliders. I'll be so happy, that I'll even let you kiss my feet while I'm wearing them. I know you love my pretty feet, don't you?"

I scrunched and wrinkled my face, confused as hell as I listened to my best friend say such weird things. They were odd, and weird as hell, but the way she was saying them so softly and almost seductively; my thoughts were tangled in knots. Everything she was saying was making me feel strangely good. It was making me feel like I had some worth; worth that someone in my life actually recognised. I'd been sexually repressed my whole life, as Mother had forbidden anything of the sort, but April's feet were reaching me in an odd way, especially the way she was softly cooing while showing them to me.

"Tell me you love my pretty feet," she said.

I felt all hot and weird inside. It was so strange, and my fingers were shaking as I clutched the phone. That was April on the other end of the phone, and she wanted me to say I loved her pretty feet? But, they did look pretty, didn't they? Because of me. Because I'd paid for her to get her first ever pedicure. Her pale little feet looked all sparkly and princess like. "I...love your pretty feet," I said. "They look good with the purple polish."

April smugly grinned, then she flipped the camera back to her feet. "Come and kiss them, piggy," she said. "They're waiting for you. A nice reward for being such a good friend."

Just then, Mother rudely stepped into my room. "Did you find it?" she asked.

I almost dropped my phone, such was my surprise as I turned it away from her. "Ummm, find what?"

"You foolish girl," Mother said. "The other book that your friend wants. Do you need me to help you with everything?" She then tutted, before stepping towards my

desk and looking at the mess I'd made in my blind stumbling. "What did I tell you about keeping your room tidy?" She huffed loudly. "Maybe one day you'll actually be a daughter I can be proud of. I can only hope," she said. "Your father and I prayed and prayed for a son, and instead, we were given you. No wonder he abandoned us. You've been nothing but a disappointment since the day you were born." She then picked up a book, and threw it on the bed. "Is that what you're looking for?" she sniped. "Maybe use your eyes for something other than wasting time on your phone."

When Mother stepped out of the room again, I was shaking all over. I was hurt, and humiliated by her words. I was absolutely traumatised more than the past hour that had just occurred. April had humiliated to get something she wanted, whereas Mother had humiliated me for no reason at all. I gasped, and wiped a tear from my eye, and then I turned the phone back over. April had ended the call, and partly, I was thankful for that. Even after the way she'd just been treating me, it didn't compare in the slightest bit to the cruelty of my mother. Her words were precise and cut like daggers. I'd always known she'd wanted a son, but her blaming me for my father's leaving? That was a cruelty she'd never stooped to before. And all because I hadn't found a book? She cared so much about me giving a good impression of her, that she'd sought to tear me to shreds for taking too long.

I wiped my nose as I sniffled, and then my phone shook in my hand as April messaged me. I held it up close, and squinted my way through each word:

April: your mom wants u to be a lawyer. do u think she'll tell u what a good daughter u are if u keep doing what she says? she wont, jing, and u know it, but i'll tell u what a good girl u are, if u accept ur place as my paypig. ill tell u what a good girl u are. every. single. day.

I trembled in need as I read her message. She'd listened to every word my mother had cruelly spoken. I read the message back again, and I felt warmth, even through the weirdness of it all. Because I was a good daughter, and I was a good girl.

I'd give anything to hear that for once in my life, and for that experience, the price of those sliders was nothing.

I stumbled back over to her house, almost falling down my own staircase, and then tripping up hers. But once I returned to her room, purse clutched tightly in hand, I was determined to be a good girl for April. With my mother's horrible words fresh in my mind: I wanted to be Princess April's good girl, and if that meant being her paypig, well, who gave a crap what my mother thought of my spending? She wasn't the one that had worked all those hours at the coffee shop, had she? All she did was pull me down every day.

As I stepped back into April's room, her blurry figure was still on her bed. "Here," she said as I hesitantly approached, and I felt her pressing something into my hand. As I closed it, I recognised the shape of my glasses. "You deserve these back," she said. "For being such a good girl."

I shivered, and after replacing her old glasses with my own, I looked at her almost fondly. At that moment, I realised that April was way more astute than I'd ever given her credit for. Just like that, after hearing my mother's needless rollicking, she'd adapted her entire approach to me. She was laying on the bed, and it was such a relief to see her clearly. She was still wearing the blouse and pleated skirt, but she'd kicked her slippers off; her legs crossed behind her as she clutched her phone with both hands. Almost in a foolish act, I immediately look towards her wrinkled soles; her toes scrunched as she waved them around behind her.

"Like what you see, do you, piggy?" she asked with a teasing smile.

"Sorry," I said, and then I stepped closer and handed her my purse.

April didn't take it, and instead she waved a hand at me. "What am I supposed to do with that?" she asked. "Take the card out."

"Oh, yes," I said, while feeling like a total fool. "Sorry." It was so odd, but it was like since I'd gone back home, April had been elevated a couple of levels in my eyes.

My mother had driven me right down to my lowest, for no damn reason at all. And yet, with a few simple words, April had dragged me back up. I didn't even care that she clearly just wanted to use me to get herself a new pair of sliders, because at that moment, I just wanted to be told that I wasn't worthless. That I was indeed a good girl.

I removed my bank card, and then, without even being prompted, I dropped to my knees, and slid it towards her on the bed.

"That's a good girl," she said while patronisingly patting the top of my head with her manicured fingers; and I was beaming at the recognition. "I want to hear you oink while your princess spends your money."

"Oink, oink," I grunted, feeling utterly ridiculous while doing so. I blushed, but then, as April giggled, she sounded so adorable, that I kind of felt good about making her laugh. I thought about things from her side, and how she'd really struggled with her looks through the years. Finally, she was comfortable in her own skin, and she was exploring the power that granted her. I was just collateral damage in her journey it seemed.

She shifted, and climbed up into a sitting position, before stretching a foot out towards me. "Here you go, my good girl," she said sweetly. "Have some of my pretty feet. They're only looking so pretty because you were such a good paypig for me, right?"

I didn't resist, I just focused on what she was saying; the praise she was lavishing me with as her delicate, soft toes gently nestled around my nose. After a deep breath, I was completely intoxicated by the scent of April's sweaty toes as they remained gripping on my nose. I kissed the ball of her foot without realising I was doing so.

"Keep doing it," she said. "Keep oinking while I use my paypig."

I continued to pathetically oink, and grunt, and make that familiar snorting sound that only a pig can make. Because, at that moment, I really was a pig. I was April's paypig, because that's what she'd decided I was, and I wanted to be a good girl for my friend. As soon as I'd shown the first stem of weakness around her, the first clue

that, maybe, perhaps I was beneath her in the pecking order, she'd swooped and firmly caught me, and it seemed, she knew exactly how to keep me down there.

April was giggling to herself while typing in my card details, and she kept gesturing with her other hand as encouragement. "Oink for me, piggy," she demanded, and then she was tooting with amusement as I rapidly did so. "Yes, oink. That's my good girl. Oink." she added excitedly, until she'd typed in all of my details. She then turned the phone to show me that she was about to hit the buy button. "Are you ready to have your princess spend your money? Won't these sliders look great on my feet?"

While I looked at the phone, and the extortionate price of the shoes, and with April's stinky, sweaty feet completely owning and dominating my existence, I thought back to the two girls in the store, and the way the one had teased the other about her wanting to see her feet in the shoes. Was that what I now wanted too? April's feet were pretty after the pedicure I'd paid for, and she wanted those sliders. Did she deserve them? She'd definitely look pretty while wearing them, especially with her cute purple polish.

"They will," I muttered as I struggled to breath from between her slimy, dominating toes. "They'll look great with your purple pedicure, April."

"Princess," she grunted, and she held my nose in place with the toes of one foot while gently slapping me across the cheek with the ball of the other. "I'm your princess now, and you will address me as such, just like a good paypig. Just like a good girl."

"Princess," I whimpered, shivering while being called a good girl. When April's smile returned, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good girl," she said, nodding her head emphatically. "And, since you think these shoes will look great with my purple pedicure, it's better I buy them straight away, right?" Before I could even respond, she casually hit the buy button, extracting another \$150 straight from my account as if she had every right to. She then burst into laughter, pressing her foot right into my face as she pushed me away from the bed. "Brilliant," she said. "I've been wanting these sliders all week."

I gasped at having been shunted away so thoughtlessly. April giggled with delight while rolling onto her belly again. She clutched her phone, and I could see that

she was scrolling with her index finger; her eyes lit up as she evidently searched for the next item she wanted to buy. Her feet lifted behind her again, and I was entranced, especially with how petite and soft they looked; how had such dainty feet been able to completely subdue me to the point I could barely think straight? Being a good girl for her had felt so damn right.

"Was I a good girl?" I asked hesitantly.

"Uh huh," she said without even looking up. "And now, you're mine." She scrunched her lips to the side while she did something on her phone. "Maybe this is why we became friends in the first place? I mean, how much older than me are you? You're in college, and you're hanging out with a girl just out of high school because you're so much of a loser that you can't make any friends your own age?" She chuckled to herself. "And now you're buying me designer sliders. You've got it bad for my feet, huh?"

Instantly, I recoiled, and I shook with confusion. "I thought...I thought I was your good girl?"

"You were," she said without even looking up. "And you will be again soon. The next time I want to use my paypig."

Every word was hurting and cutting deeper, and I gasped, on the verge of tears because I felt so much of a damn fool. She'd manipulated me, exploiting the one area that I was most vulnerable.

"You can leave now," she said with a giggle. "You have my permission."

I hesitantly rose to my feet, and I stepped towards the door, before stopping and looking at her. "April?"

"Princess April," she said, still totally concentrating on her phone.

"Princess April," I repeated, and then I nervously asked, "Did you mean what you said?"

"About what?"

"That message you just sent me." I gulped with embarrassment, then I dropped my eyes. "About you telling me I'm a good girl. You know, every single day."

"I did," she said with a shrug. "So, I'll expect you to be a good girl for me. Every. Single. Day." She chuckled to herself, closing her eyes while shaking her head, then she looked at me, those green eyes of her dazzling. "I'll drop you a message later and tell you what I want to buy next," she said, and there was a calm confidence in her words, as if she knew that I wouldn't oppose her again. "Then you can show me what a good girl you really are."

Of course, once I was back home alone, I was buried beneath the covers of my bed and regretting every moment. I was tangled up into the foetal position, completely traumatised by the events that had just occurred. She'd been so callous and cold once she had got what she wanted. How had I been such a fool? She'd humiliated me ruthlessly, and documented it on her phone, and just because she'd seized upon my mother's cruel words: I'd fallen straight into her trap? April was way brattier and more manipulative than I'd ever realised. I didn't even know who she was anymore. She wasn't the dorky, awkward nerd that I knew well; she had transformed into a total, greedy, insatiable brat, that appeared to rejoice in humiliating her one and only friend. She was monstrous, and was willing to push my buttons and exploit my weaknesses to get exactly what she wanted. Had she always been like that and I'd just been too much of a fool to notice? Had she been using me the whole time we'd known each other? I thought back to the comics, and how she'd always pled poverty so I'd buy them for her. Was that her manipulating me too?

I didn't hear from her for the next few days. She must have received the sliders, because she uploaded a story while wearing them. They did look great on her feet, but I resisted reacting or commenting. Instead, I just watched quietly, not wanting to poke the beehive in case April pounced.

I gave Mother a wide berth too, spending most of my time either at the college library or taking extra shifts at work. It made sense, since I had a massive hole in my finances to fill. I figured if I worked extra, then I could make up the huge dent that April had put in my savings.

Gradually, as the days passed by, and I spent more time at college and work, I began to reflect on how much of a fool I'd been. April was supposed to be my friend, but she'd used me for my money. That was the gist of it. Regardless of whether she fed me much-needed praise, she was using me. Friends didn't do that to each other, and she'd already benefited from my money enough. I avoided her profile, despite my curiosity, and I tried my best not to cross paths with her. She didn't reach out at all, which only confirmed to me that she valued our friendship little, and she was satisfied with having gotten what she wanted.

Of course, with us living next door to each other, it was impossible for me to avoid her completely, and about a week or so later, I returned from college to see April sitting on her doorstep. I'd noticed her too late, and it was impossible to avoid her once she'd seen me. She was still looking her new, radiant self and immediately she stood up when she spotted me walking up the path.

"Hi," I said shyly, while clutching my bag over my shoulder. "How are you?" I noticed that she was wearing the new sliders, and that made me feel all funny inside. As I looked her over, I acknowledged that so much of my money was visible on her. Everywhere I looked, I saw something that I'd funded. It was only her skirt and sweater that hadn't come from my pocket, and it felt so damn weird. To see your neighbour wearing a load of stuff you'd paid for, and then recalling how she'd extracted the funds from you? My eyes dropped to her purple toes, and I swallowed nervously while remembering how they'd stunk while smearing their sweat all over my face. I'd oinked for those feet. I'd oinked loudly and desperately, and that was devastating to accept. I cringed and was about to step to my door, when April moved closer.

"Hello," she said, rather civilly. "How have you been?"

"Busy," I said, as I rapidly raised my eyes. "You know, college..." I trailed off as I saw her smirk.

"You've been avoiding me again, haven't you?"

"No," I said, and then I licked my lips.

"Come off it," she said. "Tell the truth. It's alright. I get it. I'd probably avoid me too if I'd done the things you'd done for me." She snorted to herself. "Kind of got

carried away in the moment, didn't you?" She pressed her fingertip against her nose, then lifted it slightly into a piggy snout. "Oink, oink."

I winced at her saying that, and glanced towards my front door. I didn't know where my mother was, but I definitely didn't want her to overhear such things.

"Do you like my sliders?" April continued, and she pushed one of her feet forwards. They were glittery, and sparkled a lot more in person, and they were definitely high quality.

"Yes, they're nice," I said, and then I made a move towards my door again. "I should be getting in."

"Really?" April said, almost surprised, and then she lowered her voice. "I was hoping you'd fancy being a good girl for me again. How does that sound?"

I paused while I was mid-step towards my door, and a little shiver ran down my spine. I felt torn, and my hips actually twisted as I tried to shake off the strange way those words made me feel. Especially in April's soft voice, they were just so powerful. "No, please," I said, dipping my head slightly without turning around. "Can we forget about all of that?"

"Ummm, no, I don't think so," April said in a slightly louder voice. "That doesn't sound like something that's of any benefit to me."

I abruptly turned. "April," I said, and my younger friend immediately raised an eyebrow. She crossed her arms with absolute authority, and slowly looked down at the foot that was still posed towards me. Her pale toes, along with the purple pedicure, were brazenly visible beneath the strap of the expensive, glittery sliders.

"That's Princess April to you piggy," she said with a bratty cock of her head. "And, you still haven't kissed my feet after buying me these sliders, have you? Wasn't that the deal?"

"Geez, April," I said, not believing she would say something so obscene in public; right in front of our freaking houses. Either of our mothers could have heard. "Would you keep it down?"

"Princess," she said again, and I realised that her ego had grown out of control. She'd become a complete liability, and she seemed willing to shout out our depraved activities loud and proud.

"Princess April," I said very quietly, trying to gain some control of the situation before we were overheard. "I don't think we should be doing this anymore. I've been spending so much, and I'm terrified my mother is going to notice. This money is supposed to be for my future, and the balance keeps going down. It was fine at first, almost fun even." I smiled, trying to act like we were two friends that over-indulged in something. "But this is too much. Can we stop?"

"What are you asking?" April said as she looked at me lazily from her pathway. It was so jarring staring at what I knew was my dorky friend, but seeing the pristine and pampered beauty instead. Everywhere my eyes traced over her I felt a sinking in my stomach, recognising all the ways she was so obviously better than me. From her contact lenses, to her gorgeous hair, her flawless nails, and right down to her designer sliders.

I stepped closer to her, and whispered, "I'm asking..." I then swallowed, before lowering my eyes in total submission. "No, I'm begging you. As my friend, can we please stop?"

April let out a snotty huff, almost as if she was annoyed at the suggestion. An eyebrow raised, and I was aghast at her unreasonable behaviour. It was like every inkling of my friend had been buried beneath the veneer of this arrogant brat, as if I'd played a part in building this conceited monster. "Are you asking if you can be released as my paypig, is that it?"

Just the mere utterance of that wretched term was enough to cause my posture to wilt. I cringed, there in public. "Please," I said as I kept my eyes lowered shamefully. "Don't call me that, Princess April, please. Not here."

"Well, to answer your question. No, I will not release you as my paypig. That would be counter-productive for me, as I actually like buying things with your money." The way she so nonchalantly said such a thing caused me to duck my head and look towards my front door.

"But, we're friends, don't you feel—"

"*Were* friends," she cruelly corrected. "Now, you're my paypig." She then let out a tired sigh. "Anyway, let's go up to my room. I know you got paid recently, and I feel like spending some of your money right now."

"April, stop this," I said with a pained huff. "Can we just go back to being friends? You know, like normal friends. Like we used to be? No more of this nonsense."

"Ummm, how can we do that?" she said, offering me a baffled expression that was filled with an infuriating haughtiness. "I mean, look at me now. I'm pretty, and I'm popular. I'm most definitely your princess, and you're lucky I still hang out with you at all."

Again, that cut me deep, but, instead of wallowing in my own misery and surrendering, I tried to hold firm, brushing off her tactical insults which seemed to be delivered as a way to shut me up. "Don't you think this is weird though?" I pleaded. The whole thing just wasn't a normal arrangement between two women.

"I guess," she said. "For you. I suppose it is weird. For me, I'd be a fool not to run with it. I don't know why you let me spend your money like this, but you keep doing it, so, I'd be a fool not to keep spending it, wouldn't I?" She shrugged with such cocky confidence. "You can try to argue all you want, but I already know I'm going to be spending some of your money again today. I can see it in your eyes."

I blinked, and I felt so damn vulnerable and at her mercy. I did, after all, keep allowing her to spend my money. I couldn't even explain why, but it was almost an infatuation on my part, for various reasons. I wanted to keep April as my friend, and it seemed keeping her happy was the best way to do that. I wanted to be recognised as a good girl, and only April had given me that confirmation. Ever since I'd bought her those stockings, she'd seemed to think that my purse belonged to her, and I should have stood my ground long ago and stopped her greed in its tracks. Perhaps, it was all a problem of my own making, and I had no one but myself to blame. "I guess," I said sadly. "Maybe I am weak. But, if you were a good friend, maybe you wouldn't take advantage of me anymore."

April snorted, and she began giggling to herself. "Oh, poor you, Jing. Listen to you sulking. You're saying this is all my fault? You're the one that's a fool for allowing

me to take advantage of you in this way. I know you *want* to be my paypig, and I know you *want* to be a good girl for me.”

“Stop it,” I said. “Please, don’t say that. You know how that makes me feel.”

“It makes you want to be a good girl for your princess, right? It makes you want to be a good piggy?”

I felt a little twitch in my tummy.

“You want to be a good friend, huh? My bestest friend? The kind of friend that takes care of me? You want to be a good girl? You want me to pat you on the head and tell you that you’re not a disappointment, that you’re a good girl?” She was speaking in that awful, sweet voice again. She then grunted. “I’ll be up in my room,” she said. “I’ll be waiting for my good girl to come and show me how useful she is.” She then gave me a snotty smirk, before she turned and headed inside her house.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and I was most thankful that she wasn’t spitting out embarrassing obscenities in public anymore. Once I stepped through the door, Mother was on me in seconds. “What was that all about outside?”

Instantly, I cringed, and my face turned a bright red. “Mother,” I said shyly. “Were you listening to my private conversation?”

“Privacy is not a privilege afforded to my daughter,” she said. “You can have your privacy when you can afford to pay for your own home. While you live under my roof, you will obey my rules and remain an open book.”

I ignored all of her usual, boundary-crossing drivel. “What...what did you hear?” I asked timidly

“Nothing, unfortunately,” she said. “I arrived too late, but I saw that you were talking to young April next door. Was she showing an interest in further study? I noticed you have not been tutoring her since that first night. What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said. “She’s young, and she’s not really interested in law.”

“That doesn’t sit well with what she told me. She told me she had a great interest in the law.”

"Well, she's changed her mind. That's what girls like her do, Mother. She'd rather read comic books than books that exist only to put her to sleep."

"Is that how you feel?" she asked. "Is that the appreciation you're showing for me pushing you towards a career of prestige?"

"Mother, not right now," I said. "It's been a long day and I'm tired."

"I'm not a fool," she said. "If she's no longer interested in the law, it's because you were a terrible tutor."

"Okay," I said. "I'm a terrible tutor, Mother. I apologise." I raised both of my hands, and was about to step up the stairs when she blocked my path.

"You think this is the end of the matter. That you can shame me as your mother? That you can embarrass me in our community."

I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes.

"Don't you sigh at me," she grunted. "A don't you dare roll your eyes."

"Mother," I said tiredly. "Not everything is about you, alright? Even when you try to make it so."

"Oh, really?" she said. "You think because I'm putting you through college that you're smarter than me, do you?"

"No," I said while scrunching up my face. "That's not what I said at all." I then sighed again. "Mother, I can't be dealing with this right now. I'm under enough stress as it is."

"What do you have to be stressed about?" she asked while stamping her foot. "Do you have a daughter that's an embarrassment to you? That shames you in front of the whole community? That can't do something as simple as tutoring the dumb girl next door?"

"She's not dumb," I said. "She's smarter than you. She wrapped you around her little finger, don't you get that?"

Mother's face immediately soured, and for a second, she briefly seemed unsure of herself. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing." Even though seeing my mother looking so flummoxed was worth it, I obviously didn't want her delving into things any deeper. "Can I just go upstairs and study?"

"No, you may not," she said. "Not until you explain yourself."

"So, I'm not allowed to study? How am I supposed to become this big, amazing lawyer that you can show off to everyone about if I'm not allowed to study?"

My mother paused again, and then she raised both eyebrows. "Are you mocking me?"

"No," I said, while lowering my eyes slightly. "Of course not."

"Apologise," she said. "Apologise for speaking to your mother in that way."

"I'm sorry, alright?" I said, and I was about done with another needless grilling. "I'm sorry for ever having been born. Does that make you happy?"

"No," she said. "All you do is disappoint me." She then curled her lip in disgust, before snorting. "You're incapable of making anyone happy. Why can't you just be a good, obedient daughter?" She then groaned in frustration, tensing her fingers as if claws. "Why can't you just be a good girl?"

The sentence hung in the air for a second, and then I tongued the inside of my cheek. My skin was prickling all over as my mother senselessly tore me apart once more over nothing. It was like I was incapable of ever doing something that would please her, and there was no way I could ever live up to her expectations. "You're right," I said. "I won't ever make you happy."

"You won't ever make anyone happy," she said cruelly. "Not even the poor husband that will eventually have to marry you."

"Maybe you're right about that," I said, and then I shrugged before stepping back towards the front door. "But you're wrong about everything else, Mother, and you don't even realise it. Maybe I'm not a good daughter." I let out a sigh as I opened the door. "But I'm capable of being a good girl."

I'd been standing in April's room for the past few seconds; my eyes lowered to the floor. She'd looked so damn smug when she'd let me in, and as she relaxed at her desk, she was viewing me as if a predator about to feast.

"That was quicker than expected," she said with a giggle. "I was expecting you to hold out for at least a couple of hours. I was planning to send you a couple of feet pics to bait you back over here. I guess my paypiggy is more desperate for my feet than I realised."

"It's not about that," I said. "You have my mother to thank for me being here."

April shifted in her seat. "Well, that's interesting."

"She said I can't make anyone happy, ever," I said, and it took everything inside me to stop the emotions from spilling out. "Do you think that's true?"

I expected April to desperately reassure me, but instead, she scratched her chin. "Well, I don't know," she said snottily. "You weren't exactly making me happy outside, were you?"

"April," I said, and as she raised her eyebrow, I sighed. "April. Princess April. Whatever you want to be called. I just need to hear that I'm not completely worthless right now. I just need to hear I'm not a complete failure." I dropped my eyes; my gaze lingering on her purple-polished toes in the sliders I paid for. "I just need to hear that I've made you happy." I sniffled slightly. "I just need to hear that I'm a good girl."

"Okay," she said gently, and then she rolled her chair back slightly. She carelessly kicked off her sliders, as if they weren't worth so much, and then she gestured beneath her desk with one of her feet. "Remember how we used to watch movies together? Our favourite anime series?"

"Yes," I said, and I perked up hopefully. "Can we do that?"

"Yes, I can," she said. "I'll watch my movie up here, and you, you can be a good girl for me"—she nodded beneath the desk—"down there."

I gulped while looking beneath the desk. "What...what do I have to do?"

"Nothing at all," she said. "Just lay down and give me a nice, soft place to rest my pretty feet. I'll rub them all over your face. It'll make me so happy." She narrowed her eyes. "I'll tell you what a good girl you are. Over and over."

"Okay," I said with embarrassing haste, and I swung my bag from my shoulder. Even though it was going to be hella cringe, it was way better than having to listen to my mother. At least April showed some appreciation when I obeyed her wants. My mother did nothing but criticise me. I'd give April my entire savings if it meant I never had to listen to my mother's grating voice again.

I dropped my bag to the floor, and was just about to crawl beneath her desk when April stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "I just have one condition," she said. "Give me your bank card. I want to use my paypiggy."

I paused, and became slightly hesitant. "How much are you going to spend?"

April narrowed her eyes, and she looked so pretty. "That's for me to know, and you to find out," she said with a giggle. She then smirked. "Doesn't that sound fun, my little piggy?" She then bit her lip, and she nodded beneath her desk again. "Go on. Get under there, be a good girl for your princess."

I didn't say anything. I was filled with shame, because such a weird, humiliating experience was exactly what I needed at that moment. I needed to be taken advantage of and made to feel useful, just so April could reassure me that I was indeed a good girl. That I could make *someone* happy. I took my purse from my bag, then, after handing her my card, I blushed, and lay on my back beneath her desk. I'd watched so many movies on the top of the desk, and it was odd to be viewing it from underneath. It was so cramped and awkward, with little room to move around.

April made a cute, almost excited squeaking sound, and then she rolled her chair back in making the whole experience for me even more claustrophobic. Her feet crept beneath the desk, tip-toeing their way either side of me. As they neared my face, she ducked her head beneath the desk. "What are you?" she said.

"April—"

"What are you?" she asked again in a slightly louder and more forceful voice. While my eyes were lowered to my tummy, I could just see her flexed heels intruding

in my view. Her skin was so pale, but everything looked so womanly as her gorgeous face stared down at me.

"I'm your piggy," I said shamefully.

"My pay piggy," she corrected.

I gulped, and I was trembling all over from the humiliation of it all. But, while lying there under her desk, it was like a calming acceptance overwhelmed me. "Yes, your pay piggy, Princess April."

"Oink for me," she said while looking down between her legs. "I want to hear you oinking, piggy."

"Oink," I said, and with that, April slipped her feet forward and placed her fleshy soles upon my face. "Mmm," I whimpered, and I suddenly felt like I could just rest. Like all of the stresses of my life didn't matter at that moment. All thoughts of my mother faded, and I just lost myself in the warm, moist flesh of April's feet. Perhaps it was because of the rubber footbeds of her sliders, but the bottoms of her feet felt particularly grimy. As she began to wipe them around, I felt as if bits of lint were being rolled up and spread all over my face.

Part of me felt, ashamed, but then another part of me almost felt like I was rebelling against my mother. She'd pressured me my whole life to making something of myself, so that she could boast and announce to the world what a fantastic mother she was. That even though she'd had to settle for a girl, instead of a boy, that she'd successfully pushed me to do something of significance. That weight had existed upon my shoulders my entire life, and while laying beneath April's sweaty feet, it was like I was throwing it all back in my mother's face. She'd pushed me hard, and she'd failed, because I didn't want any of it. I'd rather lay beneath April's sweaty feet and be her good girl.

"Mmmm," April said from above the desk as she continued to grind her clammy soles all over my face. She rubbed them back and forth relentlessly, smearing my skin until it stung with soreness, and it was like my entire being at that moment was consumed with the fact I was my younger friend's paypig. April then abruptly lifted one foot and thudded her thick heel against my chin. "I want to hear you oinking,

paypig," she sneered from above the desk. "You're my paypig, and you oink while I'm spending your money."

I was suddenly engulfed by both of her sweaty, slippery soles once again, and she forcefully mashed my face into the thick, fleshy padded bottoms of her feet. And, while feeling like less than nothing, and completely dehumanised, I gave in. "Oink," I grunted into her soles. "Oink. Oink. Oink."

"Mmm," she said as she casually wiped her feet back and forth across my face, knocking my glasses around in the process, all while I was embarrassingly grunting and oinking into the bottoms of her feet. "I think I'll buy myself this." Her toes gripped my nose, and while I was oinking, I had no choice over than to take gasping, deep breaths, inhaling the intoxicating stink that had been festering in those designer sliders all week. "And this, and woaaahhh. I'm definitely buying this."

"April," I muttered through the sweat of her grimy soles, as I realised that she was buying more than one thing. I'd been so relaxed, losing myself to the feel of her soft soles as they slipped and slid around, but my ears were still working well. "What are you buying—"

"Shhh, paypig," she snorted, and she leaned forward, increasing the weight as the padded bottoms of her feet completely squashed my face. "I want to hear nothing but oinking. What I spend your money on is none of your concern. You're my paypig," she said with a snort of laughter. "And I can spend your money on whatever I want, isn't that right, my good girl?"

"Ugh," I groaned, as those words were music to my ears. "Yes," I whimpered. "I'm your good girl, Princess April."

"Yes, you are," she said. "So, stop your questions, and let your princess shop in peace." Her feet returned to smearing, and I settled back, keeping my eyes closed while April enjoyed herself above the desk. Everything happening up there seemed irrelevant to me, because at that moment, I was just a place for her to wipe away the grime from her bratty, princess feet. I was an object. I was a resource. I was a commodity, and April was exploiting me for her own benefit. She was using my weakness and need for praise and recognition. She was taking advantage of my depraved desperation to be her good girl. Yet, at that moment, I wasn't stressed. I

wasn't traumatised, and I wasn't on the verge of tears as I'd been with Mother. I was calm, and relaxed, and I was comfortable in my role as April's paypig.

As she playfully gripped my nose between her toes, and then flexed them back as she explored my face, I could hear the sound of her mouse clicking up above. Occasionally she'd tap a few keys on the keyboard, and then there would be a joyful squeak or giggle as she enjoyed herself doing something I wasn't even privy to.

"How are you doing down there, paypig?" she asked with a chuckle, not even bothering to look down as she continued to browse for things she wanted to buy. "Does it feel nice being a good girl for me?"

"Yes, Princess April," I mumbled into her soles, hardly believing that my former dorky friend was rubbing her feet all over my face. I wasn't even sure if I could call her my friend anymore. She was so much more than that, and so far above me, and she'd climbed to those heights off of the back of my hard work. It was devastatingly tragic, especially being the one that had fallen victim to exploitation, but, while lying there and breathing in the vinegary stench from between her toes, I accepted that it couldn't have happened any other way. I didn't have it in me to take advantage of April, but she most definitely had it in her to take advantage of me. I grunted as her heel squashed my lips, as if confirming my status beneath her as I dwelled on my fate.

"I guess this is just the natural progression of our friendship," she said, and I felt her shrug as her feet momentarily lifted and then squashed back down; pinning me to the floor before her toes had their way with my nose all over again. "Eventually, one of us was going to grow up and blossom. I suppose every friendship has a leader and a follower. I just never realised, until now, that I liked being the leader."

She pressed her big toe on the tip of my nose, then relaxed the weight of her leg, painfully pushing it back and forcing my nose into a piggy snout as my nostrils were stretched wide. "Let me hear my paypig," she said in a cute, high-pitched voice, and she dropped a hand beneath the desk and waved it with encouragement.

"Oiiiiink," I groaned, and when she giggled and released my nose, I snorted up a fresh load of her pungent foot stench.

"You like being the follower, don't you?" she asked curiously, and my thoughts were a complete mess. While I was down and completely subjugated beneath her feet, I felt helpless and so needy.

"Am I a good girl?" I wailed, gasping and grunting as her toes vinegary toes spread and scrunched all around my face.

"Yes, you're my good girl," she said, but then I flinched as April began thumping the desk with her fist. She grunted with frustration, before she then harshly stamped a foot, catching me painfully on the cheekbone and knocking my glasses off. "Your stupid card isn't working," she said. "It keeps declining."

I was momentarily in a haze due to the foot-slap, but then I squinted while looking up, as I fumbled to put my glasses back on. She pressed her toes into my cheeks while widening her knees, and then she rolled the chair back slightly and peered down at me. "W-what?" I asked, while staring up at her annoyed face. "That can't be possible."

"Well, it's not working," she said. "Take a look for yourself." She rolled the chair completely back, and I shimmied along the carpet, until I was free of the desk and could clamber to my knees.

I squinted at her laptop screen, and saw that there was a red message saying the card had been declined. "Did you try it again?"

"Three times," April said. "It's not working."

"What did you buy?" I asked fearfully as a dreaded thought came to me. I wiped my face, as my cheeks were completely smeared with her stinging foot sweat. "How...how much did you spend?"

April looked back at me blankly and then shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she said. "I wasn't exactly keeping track. I was just buying whatever I wanted."

"April," I said, pausing to take a gulp of fresh air. "I'm serious. How much did you spend?"

April huffed, and while lost in thought, she gripped her toes together while stretching out her legs. She then lifted a hand, and began tugging on each of her

perfectly manicured fingers. “Well, there was the phone, then there was the laptop, and the—”

“April!” I almost shrieked in panic. “How many things did you buy?”

Her pretty face turned to a scowl, and she swivelled in the chair and shoved me in the shoulder with her foot. “I was literally just telling you before you rudely interrupted me.”

I was trying to catch my breath, but the whole thing was getting the best of me. I was in total fear that April may have clumsily emptied my entire savings with her shopping spree. It was barely comprehensible that I had allowed things to get to such a level. How could I have been so foolish? Was I really that screwed up? Did I honestly have such mommy issues, that I was willing to allow my friend to empty my bank account as she plundered her way through years of savings? Just to prove some sort of point to my mother? A point that the old hag wasn't even aware of.

I gulped, and there was a sharp pain in my head as the stress returned. I looked at April while beginning to sweat, and she screwed up her face, somewhat bemused by how agitated I was. I thought back to the stockings I'd bought her and how they had barely cost anything. How had things escalated so much? Things had suddenly become deadly serious and I knew that I was going to have a lot of explaining to do. It wasn't as if I could claim fraud either, because if they traced everything to April, and she told them the truth...I gulped, not even able to finish imagining that horrifying and humiliating scenario.

“There was the brand-new phone,” she said again quietly. “And the brand-new laptop, and, um, the wireless ear buds, and the gaming keyboard, and of course, the gaming mouse, and...ugh...oh, some cosplaying stuff, and then the boots, and the”—she dipped her head to the side, lost in thought, while she tried to remember—“eyelashes! And the makeup, and of course, there was the lava lamp, and I ordered some coloured contacts, I think? Oh, and some bows for my hair, and...” She shrugged, before appearing rather pensive, and for the first time, she was the one looking sheepish as she whispered, “You know, just a few little things.”

I blinked at her continually. “April, a few little things? How much was the phone and laptop?”

She shrugged, before screwing up her face petulantly. "How am I supposed to know? I didn't really read the details. I just bought the ones I wanted. Oh, and I paid extra for speedy shipping too, so they'll get here tomorrow." She suddenly growled, and then pointed at me accusingly. "Anyway, this isn't the point. The point is that I had to stop shopping earlier than I planned because your stupid card stopped working. Do you know how annoying that is?"

I scrambled, scurrying from the bed and shuffling over to my bag so I could check my balance on my phone. I was so nervous that my hands were trembling, and such was the sweatiness of my hands, that it took a load of attempts for me to actually unlock it with my fingerprint. Then, I was frantically pressing my thumb again to open my banking app. The blood drained from my face while looking at the account. Not only had April emptied it, but she'd ploughed through my overdraft too. She'd literally put me in the negative with her greed, and I felt as if everything suddenly became stuffy. It was like the world was closing in on me and I was being slowly crushed. I couldn't look away from the screen. I just kept staring at it, blinking, and swiping my finger to refresh, hoping that there had been some kind of mistake. I wasn't April's good girl. I was April's fool!

I looked through the transactions, and they were all made within the last few minutes, and all on the same shopping site. To make matters worse, it wasn't even a credit card. I only used debit, and it was my actual money that she'd just so casually spent.

I gazed up the bed in shock, just to see that April was absent-mindedly twirling a strand of hair around her finger while she was checking the nails of her other hand. She then narrowed her eyes, squinting, before she lifted her hand and tutted. "I think I chipped my polish when your stupid bank card was annoying me." She rolled her eyes down towards me. "I guess that means you'll have to take me to get my nails done again."

My blinks became rapid, my eyelashes fluttering in bafflement as I tried to comprehend the depth of her selfishness. "April, are you serious, right now?" I asked. "Do you even know what you've done?"

She blew a raspberry at me, then lifted her foot and wiggled her toes at me, as if she naively thought that would make all of the problems go away. That time, however, I quickly swatted it away with my hand.

"Hey," she said accusingly, and she scowled. "Don't touch your princess like that. Who do you think you are?"

"I'm the girl whose life you've just ruined," I spat back with venom. "This isn't a game anymore, April. You've just crossed the line with what you've done." I dropped the phone to the bed, and then cupped my head in my hands. "Oh my God," I whimpered. "What the hell am I going to do?" I looked up at her distraught. "My mother is going to be furious. How do I even explain this? I don't even have anything to show for it." I flicked my hand up towards her in frustration. "I've been working since I was eighteen. There was years of my savings and you've spent it all on a bunch of crap in about a month. How is that even possible?"

"Well," April said with a tut. "I would have spent more if your stupid bank card was still working." With a petulant huff, she then crossed her arms and rolled her eyes up towards the ceiling, deliberately looking away from me while she chewed her lip. It was the kind of childish behaviour that a brat would resort to when they couldn't get their own way. She lifted her nose towards the air; her soft, flowing hair coming to rest over her shoulders. "I think you should apologise, to be honest," she said. "You've been a lousy paypig and you've ruined my fun." She let out a pronounced humph, and then she again looked towards the ceiling while twirling her hair.

I was so taken aback with the way she was behaving, especially while I was having a meltdown before her, that it completely stupefied me into silence. My hands balled into fists, and then I pounded the bed. My teeth were grit, and I scowled over at her, yet, I didn't know whether I was angrier with her or myself. After all, I'd willingly gone along with the whole stupid thing because it made me feel strangely tingly and it made me feel needed and recognised. Being used by my best friend in that way was riveting. It was intoxicating, especially when she humiliated me at her feet. The way she constantly teased me and lured me to spend even more on her. It had started so innocent, but, it had obviously progressed to dangerous territory. Couldn't April grasp that things had gone too far?

"April," I said.

"Princess April," she sneered, without even bothering to look my way. She scoffed with frustration. "How many times am I going to have to correct you? You really are a fool, aren't you?"

"No, actually," I said coldly. I then looked towards her current laptop, and the shopping page was still open on the screen. Hope sprang within me. "Cancel the orders," I said. "We can still cancel them." I made a move for her desk, but then April reached over and slammed her laptop closed.

"Nuh uh," she said. "That's my stuff now. It's too late. I spent your money, and you can't have it back."

"Are you serious?" I asked, and I opened the laptop, just to see that the password screen was up. "What's the password?"

"I'm not telling," she said, and she pretended to close a zipper across her lips. "I told you I was going to buy whatever I wanted, didn't I? I told you I was going to use my paypig, and you came over here anyway! I didn't force you to come here. You knocked MY door and you lay beneath my desk to be my paypig!"

I was about to say something, but reality hit me, and I realised she was right. Still, I was so mortified, that I couldn't hold my devastation in. "April, what the hell has gotten into you? Why have you become so selfish and greedy? You aren't the same girl I befriended."

April immediately dropped the act and looked straight at me. Her mouth was contorted into a furious grimace, and her eyes were projecting nothing but contempt. "You," she said accusingly while pointing a finger at me. "You made me this way, so, grow up and deal with the consequences! If you didn't want me to be a selfish princess, then you shouldn't have bought me things that I couldn't pay for myself? Do you realise how cruel you're being? You give me a taste of the high life, and now you want to snatch it away and blame me? You should be grovelling at my feet right now and apologising for letting me down, not insulting me straight to my face!" She then growled with frustration, and rolled her chair towards me. Her nails gripped the collar of my shirt, before she violently shook me. "Get down on the floor and apologise right now! Apologise to your princess for letting me down. Grovel at my feet and beg for forgiveness, you pathetic fool! Apologise for being a useless paypig!"

Despite feeling aggrieved, and knowing I was in the right, I suddenly felt all self-conscious and vulnerable because April was talking in the exact same aggressive way as the awful girls at school used to. The popular, cliquey girls that did whatever they wanted and got away with it. She wasn't being sweet, or teasing, or preying on my vulnerabilities; April was manifesting the same energy as those bullying bitches, and as a result, I was abruptly intimidated by her and my natural defence-mechanism kicked in. "I should be going home," I said while clutching my head in my hands again. "I need to...figure this out...before my mother finds out."

April's fingers were still holding my collar, and she gripped tighter. "Nuh uh," she said in a childish way. "You're not going anywhere until you apologise and make up for the fact that you ruined my shopping spree."

"April," I said. "That's not—"

"Princess April," she screeched while shaking me. "How many times will it take to get into your head? I'm your princess!"

"Princess April," I muttered back instantly, all while my face was beginning to redden. She was being so relentlessly mean that my anxiety was kicking in and I just wanted to be away from her. "I'm sorry, but please, can I just go—"

"No," she said bluntly. "You can't go. You're not going anywhere until you apologise."

I was beginning to shake while kneeling near her desk and every time I made a half-hearted movement to stand, April simply yanked me back down via my collar. "I...I don't know what to apologise for," I said while dropping my head and looking at the floor. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Yes, you have," April said with a tut. "You've been a bad paypig."

"I had thousands in that account," I said. "I had, like, years' worth of savings. It's not my fault—"

"Yes, actually, it is," she said, and then she reached down on the floor and grabbed something. "You should have saved more."

"But, that's—" Before I could finish what I was saying, April muffled my words when she pressed her pink, piggy slipper against my face. Despite them being fairly

new, she must have been wearing them a lot, as already there was the familiar scent of her feet. As I was nervous as hell, my breathing had quickened, and as a result, I found myself gasping and breathing in the stink from her slipper. It was nowhere near as bad as stale cheesiness of her slip-ons, but it was still incredibly funky. The slippers were so thick and fluffy that she must have sweated up a bucketload in them.

"You should have saved more," she repeated, and then she made a point of mashing the slipper against my face so that my nose was buried right in deep. "Right? You should have saved more so your princess has more to spend." I was too busy struggling through the stench of her slipper to speak. However, April was unsatisfied by my silence, and demonstrated so by shifting her fingers from my collar to a bunch of my hair. She shook my head cruelly, before she pressed the slipper so hard against my face that it squashed my nose to the side. "Answer me," she said in a growly voice. "You should have saved more so that I can buy whatever I want, right?"

My eyes were fluctuating between widening and narrowing as I listened to her absurd demands. Each breath was tainted by the stench of her dainty feet, which must have been sweating up the material of her slippers throughout the past weeks. She held my hair so firmly with a thin, little arm and it was so strange to be man-handled by a girl so petite. While I was breathing through her slipper, my eyes looked her over, and she was almost angelic with her makeup, the contact lenses and her straightened hair flowing over her shoulders. Yet, there was nothing angelic about April anymore, and it was like the slightest attention for her looks had transformed her into some kind of egotistical tyrant. All she seemed to care about was herself, and it was as if I'd been relegated from the status of friend and served as nothing more than her purse.

April shook my head again with impatience, and she grunted; her cute face screwing up into some vile creature. "Answer me, fool," she said. "It's not a difficult question. God, just say what I want to hear already." She shook my head another time, before she pressed the slipper in, then abruptly removed it and tossed it to the floor. I gasped a breath of fresh air, just for April to lean slightly back and inexplicably shove her foot right into my face. My eyes widened once more as her toes clutched my nose, and my nostrils flared while inhaling through the stickiness of her grungy toes. With that, as we looked into each other's eyes, she abruptly shoved me away.

I collapsed back on the floor, and pressed my hands against my face as I whimpered. "I'm such a fool," I said, before repeating, "I'm such a fool."

"Yes, you are," April giggled without any sympathy. "You're totally a fool, but, you're MY fool. So, you should be proud of that."

"What is there to be proud of?" I asked. "I have literally nothing to my name after working in that stupid coffee shop for years. Do you know what hard work it is in that awful place? Annoying customers barking orders at me all day, while I'm having to rush around and work myself to exhaustion?"

April had dropped her hands onto the arms of her chair, and she paused while looking at me thoughtfully. For a second, her mouth dropped slightly open while her eyes narrowed, and there was almost a hint of sympathy within her expression. However, she then simply shrugged, before muttering. "Yes, it sounds awful," she said. "Which is why I refuse to do any kind of job like that."

I gritted my teeth in frustration, and then, unable to stem the tide any longer, it all came pouring through. "That's not the point I was making," I said. "I have nothing! I have nothing, because you've spent it all. You've wasted it on shit you don't even need."

April baulked for a second, almost as if she was momentarily fearful, but then as she watched me wave my arms around in frustration; the shimmering emerald of her eyes communicated her amusement. She adjusted her posture, placing one foot forward and a hand on her thigh, before she majestically gestured up the length of her body with the other. "Ummm, excuse me," she said. "Are you saying I'm not worth it? Are you saying I don't look good right now?"

"No," I said, exhausted from her inability to understand the point. "That's not what I'm saying. You look gorgeous, April. You're stunning, okay? And I'm happy your self-confidence has gone up. I'm happy those treatments have made you feel better about yourself, but, you didn't have to turn into such a bitch along the way."

"Ummm, what did you just call me?" she asked with a raised eyebrow while shaking her head. "That's not a nice way to talk to your princess, is it?"

"Please, I'm just venting," I shrieked. "Just let me vent, okay? Without responding to everything with a stupid question!"

"You're not venting," she continued. "You're insulting me, in my own home, and that's not cool."

"I'm not insulting you," I said. "I'm just...I'm sinking right here. I'm drowning! I know I've been a fool. I'm just letting out my frustrations with everything."

"So was I," she said with a shrug. "Now you're making me out to be the villain."

I blinked, and through teary eyes, I looked at her in confusion. "What frustrations?" I asked. "You didn't work hard for that money, and now you're the one reaping the benefits. What do you have to be frustrated about?"

"A lifetime of being unseen," she said, her expression muted. She sighed, and then rolled her eyes. "A lifetime of never getting what I want. Finally, I had a chance to be seen and to get whatever I want. So, I took the opportunity. I never made you do anything. It was all your own choice. You allowed me to spend your money, apparently because you have some kind of thing for my feet, and, because you like being my good girl."

"I do not," I said while dropping my head. "Not anymore."

"Sure," she said with a snort. "Keep telling yourself that. You offered to buy me the stockings. You offered to buy me slippers, and shoes. You offered to pay for a pedicure to show those shoes off." She shook her head with a pondering smirk. "And you're telling me you *don't* have a thing for my feet? Who are you trying to convince? You came crawling back here again, and you jumped at the chance to get beneath my desk and be my paypig. You loved it while I was rubbing my feet all over your face, and now you're acting like I forced you. You loved it!"

I thought over her words for a second, and then after a gulp, I looked down at her foot, still posed towards me. Her pale skin looked gorgeous in contrast to her purple toenails, and especially the way her toes were tensed as they gripped the carpet. So much of the initial payments had been focused around her feet, and, I had always felt strangely hot whenever she'd sent me a photo showing off her legs and feet. It had felt good to be involved in April's transformation, and see the progress

that my money was funding. But, that was when it was safe, and that was when I still had something to fall back on.

"I want some new shoes," April said in a rather, high-pitched baby voice from nowhere, as if we weren't in the middle of a serious discussion. "Don't you think my little princess feet will look all pretty in some new shoes? I guess you'll have to work some overtime to get that balance back up for me."

I was still staring at her little toes, but then I shook my head and gathered my thoughts as I processed her words. "What?" I asked while looking up at her grinning face. "What are you talking about?"

"Have you lost the ability to hear or something?" she sniped cattily. "I said I want new shoes."

"Are you being serious?" I asked. "Everything that just happened? After everything you just spent?"

"Yes," she said. "I want more. I'll always want more. You'll need to get used to that, Jing. I've had a taste," she said while biting her lip and nodding her head. "And now I'm greedy. You have a greedy, bratty princess, you little paypig. I know you want to be a good girl for me, don't you?" She fluttered her eyelashes, before lifting her leg and scrunching her purple toes.

"Well, too bad," I said as the serious, blunt reality of my predicament was puncturing through April's attempts to manipulate me again. "You can't afford any shoes, and neither can I anymore."

"But you have a job," she said while dipping her head to the side. "You can work extra. You can take more shifts, right?"

I only tolerated that job because it was great seeing how much my savings were building up. Those savings were gone, I had literally no motivation to ever step foot in the place again. "I think I'll quit actually," I said while looking away from her, and then I took a deep breath. "And..." I said, while trying to build up the courage to say what needed to be said. "I don't think we should be friends anymore, April."

"We're already not friends," she said with a snotty air of superiority. "We stopped being friends the moment you became my paypig." The words were cruel, and harsh, but it was like they bounced right off me.

"If you say so." Finally, I managed to find the strength to stand, and once I was looking down at April in her diminutive stature, I assured myself that it would be the last time I ever saw her. I didn't care that we were neighbours. I'd find a way to avoid her.

April sneered, and seemed intent on pushing the knife deeper. "Why would I want to be friends with such a dork, anyway?" she asked, clearly annoyed that she was rapidly losing her control of the situation. "Is that why you're being such an ass? You're jealous because I'm hot and you're not?"

"You can keep all of the stupid shit you spent my money on," I said, ignoring her pathetic insults. "I'll consider it a lesson learned for myself. I'll put it down as a mistake that I'll make sure to never make again."

"Kiss my foot," she said with determination, and then she pointed downwards forcefully. "Kiss your princess's foot right now," she said. "Grovel and swear you'll be a better paypig for me. Promise"—she gulped, as it seemed to dawn on her that she'd pushed me too far—"that...umm...that you'll be a good girl, for me?"

I refused to look down at her pretty foot, and instead, I just rolled my eyes and let out a huff. As oddly enticing as it was to submit to my former friend's pretty feet and be called her good girl. As strangely intoxicating as it was to be used by her, at some point, reality had to hit, and that moment had certainly arrived. Having April plunder my savings wasn't at all sustainable. "You overstepped," I said as I brushed past her. "If you hadn't been so greedy, maybe we could have kept doing this." I shrugged. "I don't even know why I keep allowing you to do it, but if you hadn't been so greedy, maybe it would have happened again."

April seemed surprised as I grabbed the door handle, and then she relaxed her posture. I looked back at her, just to see that she was petulantly pouting. "Humph," she said, clearly annoyed that she was no longer getting her way. "Whatever," she added spitefully. "I am greedy, and I'll always be greedy. I'm not ashamed of that." As I opened the door and began to step out, she raised her voice. "Don't even think about

speaking to me again unless it's to apologise, you hear me? You're literally useless to me unless I can spend your money."

Even though I was trying to be the bigger person, I couldn't deny that her words hurt me deeply. They were vile, venomous and intent on cutting deep, and in that regard, she succeeded. At that moment, I knew the nerdy girl with the goofy glasses and frizzy hair was long gone. She'd been replaced by an obnoxious creature that only cared about herself. There was no trace of my friend left at all.

As I lay in bed that night, ravaged by worry and out of ideas with how to solve it all, I thought over words that I'd read somewhere during my studies, about how a slave begins by demanding justice, and ends by wanting to wear a crown. Apparently, that idea applied to dorky friends too.

Obviously, my mother was furious once she saw the most recent statement. She hollered up the stairs, and demanded I come down at once to explain myself. I knew there was no way that I could explain away everything that had happened. I mean, she'd been brought to the USA to make something of herself. She hadn't quite succeeded, so that burden had fallen upon me. Evidently, in her eyes, I was failing, big time.

How was I supposed to communicate to her that all that money was gone because it felt so good having April take advantage of me while cooing and telling me what a good girl I was for her? A younger, lazy friend that had neither my intelligence or work ethic? A friend that had become increasingly greedy the more I'd allowed her to take. My mother wouldn't understand any of that, because frankly, I too didn't really understand it. My mother was part of the damn problem. She was the reason I'd gone to April again, craving praise and recognition. Now, she was torturing me for seeking what she'd never given me as a mother?

What was I getting out of the whole thing? It had felt good to know that I was able to fund April's happiness, but things had gone way beyond that level. I didn't want to be like that red-haired girl we'd seen in the shop, following around my master like a mindless drone and doing whatever I was told. Just like her, I was older than April, and that in itself was humiliating enough.

So, I lied while Mother endlessly grilled me. I lied big time, as April would have done, and as April had mockingly predicated that I would do. I told my mother that the phone and the laptop were for myself, and that I needed them for my studies. I had to jump through hoops justifying the phone, whereas she accepted the need for a laptop a lot easier; my own was pushing ten years old. I told her I needed the phone for video calls to attend meetings and seminars, as well as taking down notes during class. Eventually, after a week of shrieking, she bought that too, and then I bluffed my way through the ear buds by saying I needed them for relaxing music to help me concentrate while I studied. That didn't go down well, so I fed her a story about needing them for the gym too, and how physical health was as important as mental health during academia. When she pushed, I even found some peer-reviewed journal articles, focused on studies around that point. Thankfully, that subdued her protestations. Most of the other items I brushed off as gifts to friends and lecturers who had been imperative in aiding my studies, which my mother was satisfied with, especially as we came from a culture where teachers should be respected and looked up to.

The biggest problem was the initial treatments that April had benefitted from. The contact lenses were an easy sell, though my mother did query why I wasn't wearing them. I still had my overly nerdy glasses, but I just lied how the contact lenses make the eyes dry and took some getting used to. The hair-straightening treatment was the real issue, because I'm Asian, and we don't have curly hair. So, with no other option, I declared that to be a mistake, and I assured my mother I would visit the salon and have it corrected. In turn, she assured me that she'd be checking up and watching my bank statements closely. I was so exhausted after the whole thing with April, that I didn't even care. My mother was controlling, and possessive, and she overstepped boundaries constantly; and just dealing with her was exhaustive enough. I'd gone to April when vulnerable, thanks to my awful mother, and April had destroyed my future,

and she hadn't seemed to spare me a single thought. If anything, she appeared annoyed with me that she hadn't been able to take anything more.

I assured Mother that I would work hard, and that I would make back the money I had spent on necessities. I even cowered and prayed at her ugly feet, begging for forgiveness as she touched my head with her fingers and lapped up my grovelling. I told her what a great mother she was, and how I wasn't worthy of her. From the look on her face, my empty savings had been a worthy price to pay for finally having me in such a servile position as her daughter.

Despite hating it, I returned to the coffee shop and continued with the same hours every week. I even asked for more, taking whatever overtime I could get my hands on in order to pump my savings back up. I wasn't hanging with April anymore. I wasn't wasting time reading comics or watching anime, so I used that time to work extra and earn more. I did see her once, lingering by her doorstep, but she swiftly put her nose in the air and headed inside once she caught sight of me.

Gradually, I put money away, and I convinced myself that it was a fresh start. Yes, it sucked that I was starting from zero all over again, but I tried as much as I could to write it off as a mistake I'd never make again. I'd begun to hate April with a vengeance, because she'd totally made me look a fool. She'd turned me into the literal definition of the adage: a fool and their money are soon parted. I'd certainly been a fool, and my money was long gone. I'd been April's fool, just as she'd declared me so, and whenever I thought over that fact, I'd be overcome with feelings of shame and regret.

And yet, to my utter indignity, I'd been checking her social media religiously. Why? Because I was lonely. After all, she'd been my only friend, and, there was a huge, April-shaped hole in my life. Even after everything that had happened between us, I couldn't help but dwell on how things had been before. How we'd got along so well and had so many shared interests. How we were the two outcast nerds in our lives, and how we would make fun of the popular girls and be thankful that we weren't a part of their shallow crowd. Perhaps I was pathetic, since I couldn't find any friends around my age who shared similar interests. Maybe April was justified in calling me a creep since she was younger than me. But, I had no romantic interest with her. We were simply friends, so I couldn't fathom why our ages made a difference.

Anyway, the day I'd walked out, April had uploaded a selfie looking cute as hell. She was smiling and offering a peace sign, and she'd attached a bunch of sparkly stickers to it. That immediately had made me feel bad, as whereas I'd been worn down after everything, she'd apparently plodded along with her life as if nothing had changed.

Over the next days, I then had to watch her bragging about her new phone, laptop and various other crap that she'd bought with my money. Throughout that first week, she'd uploaded various stories from her bedroom of her looking cute or whatever, and I'd see some reminder of my empty bank account. Maybe the laptop or ear buds were visible. Mostly it was the phone in her hand while she was taking a selfie in her mirror. Of course, she looked hot as hell in each photo too, showing off the hair, eyelashes, her contacts, and various other items I'd paid for. Cosplaying outfits and bows. Everything was a reminder of my savings. The savings she'd so ruthlessly spent on herself.

Two months passed by, and I'd fallen into a routine where I was either attending class, working in the coffee shop or studying at my desk. When I was at home, I often had my phone propped up with relaxing music playing, so I could study without distraction. During breaks, I'd peruse social media a little, often checking out April's profile to see if she'd uploaded anything new. It was definitely a guilty pleasure, especially with how we'd parted ways, but it was like I couldn't stop myself from doing it. Even though, at times, I'd convince myself I wouldn't go for another look, I'd still do so. I even blocked her on a few occasions, though each lasted only a couple of hours before I caved and unblocked her again. It was like I was an addicted voyeur, especially noticing how her photos and videos were gaining increasing popularity. They had so many likes, and there were all kinds of thirsty guys on there. When she posted some photos in the cosplaying outfits she'd bought herself, that's when her profile completely blew up, and every day I'd checked it, I'd find her followers had gone up by a few more thousand.

And then something shook me. One day, while I was snooping, I noticed that April had added a tip-jar to her profile. The day I noticed, I clicked without hesitation, and to my annoyance, I discovered that she'd already received a few tips, each of which had some cringey message attached, commenting on how pretty she was. It filled me with resentment, but in the strangest way. I was jealous, but not of her receiving tips, but rather, that she was getting them from other people. It was probably a dream come true for her, receiving even more money without having to get a job, and yet, to me, it was devastation. It erased the parts of our interaction that at first had felt special to me, how I'd been able to buy her the stockings and pay for her to get her nails done, spoiling my friend who was incapable of getting such things for herself. Back then, I'd actually felt proud and like I was needed. It had filled me with joy to see the transformation in April's personality as she'd finally felt comfortable in her looks. Sadly, that transformation had led too far, but still, April was receiving the attention she wanted thanks to her new looks. I did think about tipping a dollar, perhaps as a means of extending an olive branch, but, I recalled how callous and cruel she'd been, and that was enough to think better of it. I knew that ultimately it would be a mistake to bring April back into my life.

But then, one day, April uploaded a new story, and it was of her nails. She'd held a hand out, but she'd covered all of her toenails with little emojis of crying faces. There was a caption attached, and she'd written: *I need to get my nails done, they're so fugly*. She still had the same colour that I'd paid for on her hands, that delicious purple that contrasted with her skin. However, her nails had grown out and she'd chipped the colour in a few places. It had been over two months since that day at the salon, and April had the same nail colour. That made me feel good, because it meant without me, April wasn't being as pampered as she felt she deserved. She was desperate, reaching out to her followers for someone to step up. Some thirsty guy was likely going to jump on it and tip her, and I figured that was the whole point of her story. She was simply posting bait and hoping that some fool was going to bite.

The next day, she posted another story, and that time, she was holding her hand up with fresh, brightly painted red nails. They appeared to be gel, and they were flawless, especially with the way her pale, ivory skin just popped in contrast. At once, again, I was filled with resentment, which I found totally perplexing. I assumed someone else had paid for the manicure for her, and that just made me

feel...confused. It was like she wasn't missing me at all, not as a friend, and not as her designated purse. She didn't need me. No one needed me, and that was utterly devastating. I was still invisible, as I'd always been, whereas April was glowing and truly lapping up all of the attention. Why couldn't I have that too? No one seemed to care about me, especially my mother, and I realised that I had to care about myself before anyone else ever would.

I checked my bank account, and I'd gradually been filling my savings again. It was nothing to gloat over, but the balance was heading in the right direction. I nodded and it was decided. A makeover had done wonders for April's attractiveness and self-esteem, and it would surely do wonders for me too. If April had fresh, polished nails, without even having a job, then why couldn't I?

After college, I arrived at the salon with a plan. Firstly, I was going to get my nails done, then I was going to get my hair restyled. Finally, I was going to go to the opticians and have my glasses replaced with contacts. It was the exact same process that I'd gone through with April, and she'd never looked back since. I didn't even have to shell out the same amount as with her, because my hair wasn't frizzy. I mean, it was just straight and down to my shoulders, nothing spectacular, but nothing terrible either. Even my eyebrows were plucked and neat.

For the nails, I selected a blue that I felt would really complicate my skin tone, and, the entire experience was heaven. I'd never felt so pampered in my life. My feet were washed and cleaned, then I received a slight massage. My nails were clipped, filed and then painted to perfection. I went through a similar routine with my hands, and then afterwards, I was dazzling. I was so proud of the result that I uploaded a photo to my social media story, showing off how perfect my nails looked. I couldn't resist a dig at April, and I added a caption, just in the hopes that she might be snooping on me too. *You don't need to be a princess to be pampered. Been working hard at my job, earning my own money, and I needed this,* it said.

"Very pretty," one of the other customers said while she was still receiving her own manicure.

I was beaming, and at that moment: I got it. I totally understood the difference such pampering could make to self-esteem. I'd never felt as pretty and feminine as at that moment, and I understood why April had undergone a real boost in her

confidence after transforming from nerd to hottie. Once my hair and glasses were sorted out, I too was going to be considered attractive, and maybe I'd even receive the same attention as April. I'd been so invested in my studies, thanks to the influence of my mother, that I'd completely neglected my own physical well-being. There was no reason why I couldn't look good while I was studying for a better future, and I fully intended to give off the best impression of myself.

I didn't even care that Mother would likely stick her beak in. She was so horrible all the time, that she'd probably snipe and comment on how awful my appearance was, but I didn't care. Once I'd graduated, I'd decided that I was moving out and I was going to make it on my own. I didn't need the wretched woman in my life, dragging me down and insulting me every chance she got.

The salon had a little tea station, so I enjoyed a cup while I was waiting for my nails to dry. While I was sipping, a notification popped up on my phone, and I was amused to see that not only had April viewed my story, but she'd replied to it too. I couldn't believe my little plan had worked, and when I clicked it open, she'd simply replied with a vomiting emoji. It was typical April, so immature and pathetic, but I was satisfied that I'd managed to get under her skin for once. She could beg her followers for money all she wanted, but I was capable of earning my own.

I finished up my tea, and then after gawping over my nails a little more, I headed over to the front to settle up. As I was paying, the teller looked confused, before she handed my card back. "Sorry," she said. "Your card has been declined."

"Huh?" I asked as panic set in. I swallowed nervously, and then nodded to the card. "Run it again, please."

The girl huffed, but did so, and then, once again, she frowned. She handed the card back to me. "It's been declined again," she said impatiently. "Do you have another means of payment?"

"Ummm," I said, and I was becoming flustered as I searched through my handbag. "How much was it again?" I asked frantically.

"It's \$50," she said, and her expression was completely blank. "Excluding any tip."

"Right, okay," I said. "Ummm, let me think. I don't really carry cash. Could I hop to the bank a second?"

"I'm afraid not," she said unsympathetically. "The banks all closed at five. You'll need to settle payment before you leave the premises."

I gulped, and then I looked around, noticing how I'd drawn the attention of every other woman receiving service in there. A few were raising their eyebrows, looking rather uncomfortable while I squirmed at the cashier. My once elated mood rapidly soured. "Ummm, I...I don't know what to do," I said, and then I held out my card again. "Could you try it one more time please?"

The girl let out a deep sigh, and then she snatched the card from my hand. She ran it, and once again, the card was declined. "Gosh," I said in a fluster. "I'm so sorry. Could I just check something, please?"

I stepped to the side while the girl rolled her eyes, and my hands were a trembling mess as I opened my banking app. To my utter horror, my balance was down in the low figures, and there were a bunch of hidden, pending payments. When I opened them, each was from the same shopping store that April had previously used and they were all made in the past few minutes. One payment in particular was for almost five hundred dollars, and my jaw dropped as I realised the audacity of her. She must have saved my debit card in her account, but, why did she think she had any right to use it? That was my money, not hers, and she was committing fraud. It was outright theft.

"Is there a problem?" the teller asked, noting how agitated I was becoming.

"I...ummm...I think someone has cloned my card or something," I said while holding up my phone and showing her the low balance. "There's a bunch of charges on here that I didn't make."

The girl appeared unmoved. If anything, she seemed even more impatient and annoyed by me. "You'll need to contact the police then," she said. "But, you still need to find a way to settle payment here."

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked, looking around flabbergasted. "I just told you, someone has spent all of the money in my account. I have no way to pay right

now.” I looked at some of the other patrons for assistance as sweat was trickling down my cheeks, but they were all averting their eyes and not getting involved. I sighed, before flicking my hand up. “Can I leave my ID or something and come back to pay when I’ve sorted all of this out?” I then perked up. “I get paid in a couple of days actually. I’ll have more than enough by then.”

“That won’t be acceptable,” the cashier said, and her attitude was really getting to me. “We’ll need payment to be settled today.”

“You can’t wait a couple of days?”

“Did you wait a couple of days for your new nails?” As soon as the words left her lips, I immediately felt embarrassed and put in my place.

“Okay,” I said, and then I started to dial the police, but as I was doing so, I had second thoughts. What was I even going to say? How would I explain it all? I’d willingly given April my card details, hadn’t I? And in the past, I had been fully on board with her spending my money. I thought back to those moments, and I felt like such a fool. I mean, what kind of spell had I been under? If I went to the police, and they approached April, all she had to do was tell them the truth. What if she was extremely detailed and transparent about that truth? I couldn’t handle that level of humiliation. I mean, she had pictures and videos of me doing incredibly embarrassing things. She had a video of me oinking, while she freely bought whatever she wanted with my bank card. How would I explain that to a police officer? I shuddered at the mere thought of such embarrassment.

I thought about phoning Mother, but that seemed like a worse idea than the police. All of my lies would be unravelled, and then I’d be in an even worse situation. I still needed to live with her until graduation, where I could finally begin my career and leave the nest for good.

A small Asian woman suddenly came up to me, and she was standing with her arms crossed, tapping her foot while she waited for me to finish with my phone. I was still just standing there, baffled with how I was supposed to deal with this all. She was patient for a minute, but then she eventually stepped closer and cleared her throat. “Excuse me, Ma’am,” she said. “I’ve been made aware that there is a problem with you making payment?”

"I'm trying to fix it," I said, but I was simply staring at the police's number on my phone. My head was scrambled, and I struggled to keep a coherent thought. I couldn't think of any way to climb out of the predicament that April had forced me into.

"If you are unable to make payment," she said. "Then I will have to insist upon labour in exchange."

I darted my head up. "Excuse me?" I asked, my cheeks reddening as a bunch of the other customers were clearly listening in. I stepped towards her, and then I smiled, trying to benefit from the fact that we were both clearly Asian. "Are you Chinese?" I asked hopefully.

"Japanese," she said without showing anything close to a smile. "And you will need to work off your debt."

"I...I can't do that," I said rather timidly, and I was consciously aware of how embarrassing it was in front of the other customers. "Is there another way?"

The manager shrugged. "You can pay for the service you received."

"But my card isn't working," I said. "And I have no cash on me."

"So, you will provide labour," she said. "Or else, I will be forced to call the authorities."

"What? No, don't do that," I said, already fearing how that would go down with my mother. It was the pettiest of reasons for calling the police, but still, I knew my mother wouldn't view it like that. "Don't call the police, please."

"You will provide labour then?"

My voice dropped to a whisper as I sheepishly muttered, "If I have no other choice?"

"I pay \$15 dollars an hour to my staff, so that'll be four hours of labour in exchange."

I blinked, and I suddenly felt incredibly small. My throat became constrained, even as I tried to remain defiant against the injustice. "Fifteen times by four is sixty," I squeaked out. "I only owe fifty, right?"

"You must cover the tip and extra for this inconvenience," she said matter-of-factly.

"Okay," I whimpered, my defiance completely shot while the eyes of the other customers looked on. The whole confidence boost from my pretty nails had rapidly been erased. "What do I have to do?"

She crooked a finger towards me, before she turned and walked towards the back. I followed with my head sheepishly ducked, my eyes locked on the floor as I simmered under the glare of judgement from those being pampered. It was like I was running the gauntlet, and no one stepped in to help me through it.

And so, the next four hours were spent dusting, sweeping the floor in the back room and emptying the trash. That was the easy part. The horrid part was when the salon closed and all of the customers were gone. The Asian nail girls were particularly pleased that they could go home early, and they all giggled at my expense while I was on my knees, sweeping up the remnants of clipped nails and foot scrapings. There was not a sprinkling of Asian comradery, and they all abandoned me to my enforced labour. I had to wash out each of the pedicure bowls, and then wipe down the seats where the clients had been relaxing. The whole thing was a complete head-fuck, and I felt smaller than I ever had before. The worst was the manager, who watched my every move, standing at my side in her flip flops and impatiently pointing out spots that I'd missed.

Thankfully, she eventually left me be, and I cleaned up the rest of the salon while she worked on the books in the back room. When the allotted time was up, I found my back was aching like hell, along with my knees from having been down on the floor so much. I headed to the back room to check if I was free to leave, and then I was embarrassed further when she offered me nothing but a sneer and a dismissive flick of her hand. I took that as my cue to leave, and then headed home exhausted.

I scowled at April's window as I walked up the path, and I already began plotting over how I'd make her pay. It had always been me paying in our friendship, but no more. The little pipsqueak was finally going to pay.

Once alone in my room, after Mother had chewed my ears off while I hid my nails in my sleeves, I was filled with resentment towards April. We weren't even speaking, and hadn't done so in over a month, and yet, her greed had put me in a shitty situation again. Not only her greed, but her sense of entitlement. Did she really think it was her right to use my bank account as she pleased? I huffed, and then I punched my desk in frustration. I'd worked so hard the past months to try and top my savings back up, and April had come along and plundered it again. Why? Because I'd treated myself to getting my nails done? She'd punished me for that? Mother was going to be furious once the monthly statement came in again, and I already knew that I wasn't going to be able to explain away that extra load of hundreds of dollars that had magically disappeared.

I checked April's profile while filled with bile, intent on sending her a message, and to my utter ferocity, she'd uploaded a new story. It was actually a screenshot of the purchases she'd made with my card, along with a series of annoying, cute animal stickers that were euphorically dancing around and celebrating. She'd bought a few cheap things, but then there was a whopping purchase of a pair of expensive, brand-name gladiator sandals that were almost five hundred dollars. My thumbs went turbo as I bashed out a frantic response to her story:

Me: what the hell do you think you're doing? i know you bought these with my card. how dare you think you can just use my card whenever you please. you did not have my permission!

April must have been online at that moment, as I saw she was typing a response straight away. I waited in anticipation, waiting for her show of remorse where she'd likely apologise and be begging for forgiveness. However, when her message popped up, I was astonished at the audacity of her:

April: i told u i wanted new shoes, so i was using my paypig, its not rocket science u fool

The answer was so matter-of-fact and blunt that I was completely flummoxed. She wasn't even apologetic. She didn't scramble or try to talk her way out of it, as I would. She just flat-out admitted what she'd done, and threw in an insult for good measure. I gasped, and then rapidly typed out a response:

Me: im not your paypig anymore, april! you cant just do this kind of thing when you feel like it.

April again fired straight back:

April: yes, u r my paypig, and anyway don't u want to see how the shoes will look on me then? i just got a pedicure and my nails are all red and pretty. u will be drooling, ur supposed to be my good girl, so stop complaining and be my good girl! its ur own fault anyway, i saw u were wasting money on ur ugly nails so that told me u had some in ur account again. i decided to spend it on something better!

I was holding my phone with both hands, staring at her message in disbelief. How could she be so callous? How could she be so selfish and greedy? How could she offer no empathy at all? She wasn't at all guilty or regretful about spending my money as she pleased. If anything, she was gloating about it. She was taunting me. She was mocking me straight to my face and it was really riling me up. I groaned too with regret, as I realised that once again, I'd been a fool in posting that stupid story. I'd tried to wind April up, and I'd only succeeded in luring her back. I figured the one way I could teach her a lesson was to scare her, and make her feel as bad as I felt.

Me: you know what you did is a crime? i can go to the police about this

There was no instant response that time. The minutes ticked by, and I was overcome with a sense of self-satisfaction as I realised I'd finally taught April a lesson. She'd realised that she wasn't some princess that could do whatever she wanted. She must have actually been spooked by my threat. She was probably crying to her mother for help.

I headed back to her social media to check, but then was perplexed to find that she'd uploaded a new story, especially since it was one of her feet. She was boasting about her new pedicure and how her new sandals were going to look. Much to my annoyance, I had to admit that the red did look good on her little toes, and for a second, I couldn't help but imagine how her pale legs and feet would look amongst the brown, leather straps of the gladiator sandals. But then, I stopped being a fool, and instead wondered why she was even posting such a thing. I'd just threatened her with the law, and there she was, boasting about her illegal purchase. I wondered if she hadn't realised the magnitude of what she'd done.

Me: did you read what I said? I'm going to the police about you. you have committed fraud by using my card

My phone buzzed with a new notification:

April: go on then, tell the police. ill just tell them ur my paypig and I had ur permission. ill show them the evidence of what a paypig for my feet u are

April sent you a photo.

I clicked the photo in panic, and at once, I was morbidly cringing while looking upon myself beneath April's desk. My hair was spread all over the place, and I appeared all cock-eyed as she'd knocked my glasses aside while rubbing her feet all over my face. All of that was bad enough, but the fact April's pretty toes were scrunched over my nose, while the other foot was dominantly pressed against my cheek; my confidence was instantly obliterated. I felt tiny. I felt irrelevant and I felt completely foolish. I hadn't even realised she'd been taking photos while I was under the desk, or how pathetic I'd looked during that whole ordeal. Since I didn't have my glasses on properly at the time, it made the whole thing look even worse, as if I was experiencing such extreme pleasure that my eyes were rolling all over the place. There was enough of my face visible that it was indisputably me, and, just like that, all of my righteous anger dissipated because I had nothing. I had no arsenal to overcome that reminder of what I'd allowed April to do to me. If she showed that photo to the police, hell, if she showed that photo to anyone: I'd never live it down. I couldn't even explain why I'd allowed her to do that to me, to rub her sweaty feet all over my face while she'd shopped with my card, but during the moment: it had felt right. It had felt like I was where I'd needed to be after Mother had been so unnecessarily cruel to me. It had felt like the only way I could ever be considered a good girl. That was the worst part of it all. I hadn't even been forced beneath that desk; I'd climbed under there willingly.

There was nothing I could say to talk my way out of that. So, I just left the message unanswered and put my phone aside. I was still distraught over what she'd done, but I had no way of getting out of it. All I could think to do was change my bank card so that she couldn't do it again, and that I'd have to write off another loss and somehow explain it to my mother.

Instead of dwelling, I tried to focus on studying instead. Of course, it was a fruitless endeavour, because despite my best efforts, my thoughts kept wandering to my battered bank account and the ruthless way April had stopped my justified complaints. It was so damn frustrating because I knew I was in the right, but she'd got me into such a bind that I was literally afraid of messaging her again, just in case she sent that photo to someone. She hadn't even threatened me either. It wasn't like she was blackmailing. She'd basically said, call the police, and she'd tell them the truth. She'd show them the evidence that she *hadn't* committed a crime, and that I'd willingly allowed her to use my card in the past. The photo was even time-stamped, with her

previous transactions matching that very moment where she was rubbing her pretty, though sweaty feet all over my stupid face.

So, I simply buried my head in the sand, trying to study and hoping that April would move onto something else. However, my phone buzzed again, and despite fearing what was awaiting me, I opened the message from her:

April: don't have anything to say paypig? was that a good enough reminder of what u r? r u ready to stop threatening me and be a good girl?

I was infuriated by the gall of her, but what could I say in response? After seeing that photograph, I'd been defanged. I tried to think of something I could say that might make things better, but nothing was coming to mind, and then another message came through:

April: here have another reminder PAYPIG!!! OIIINK!

April sent you a video.

With a trembling finger, I opened the video, and I cringed again while seeing myself leaned up against her desk. Her toes gripped my nose, while the other foot pressed down on my chin. I looked comical while wearing April's thick glasses; my eyes appearing like tiny raisins. I looked so helpless while submissively sitting in place, not resisting at all, and just accepting her sweaty feet as they danced all over my face and her toes latched over my nose possessively. I had to look away as I listened to myself oinking loudly, all to the sound of April's shrieking laughter.

I couldn't watch the video a second time, and I was clueless with how to respond once more. I thought over a number of different retorts, but none of them could upend the way that video tipped the balance in her favour. It was documented evidence that

I was April's paypig. Her pathetic, oinking paypig, and what did a paypig do? They allowed their princess to spend their money. April was my princess, and I was her paypig, and I'd just been brutally reminded of that fact.

Another message came through while I was still struggling to get that awful video out of my head:

April: *what r u?*

My cringing became constant, and I was trembling and sweating all over, feeling like an inevitably was slowly consuming me. I knew exactly what she was expecting me to say, and though I didn't want to admit it, after what she'd done, I knew there was nothing to overcome the power she held over me. I typed the reply out a number of times, deleting it each time I thought of a solution, before retyping it once I realised that said solution would never work. April had become ludicrously greedy and selfish, and she appeared not to care at all about how I was feeling. I couldn't recognise her anymore, at all, and I was learning there was little way of appeasing her tyrannical entitlement other than to do exactly what she wanted. So, much to my chagrin, I told her exactly what she wanted to hear, cringing in shame as I sent the message through. I felt so pathetic and weak, because she hadn't spent my money while rubbing her feet all over my face and telling me what a good girl I was, she'd done so without me even knowing about it. She'd condemned me to four hours of unpaid labour, and still, I felt like I had no other choice.

Me: *im your paypig, princess april*

The chat showed me that April was typing, and I could almost see her smirking, victorious face through the screen as I imagined her joy at my capitulation.

April: *yes, u are!*

April: and u still owe me an apology, so be a good girl and apologise!

The audacity of her infuriated me once more, but I knew I was on tenterhooks with how opposing her might only make it all the worse for me. I was a victim of such an injustice, upon an injustice. She'd rinsed my bank account while I'd foolishly laid beneath her desk, and two months later, she'd rinsed it again without my permission. Having to apologise to someone who had done that to me? It was bizarrely humbling and a reminder of how powerless I was. In some ways, it reminded me of all the times I'd had to apologise to Mother without even having done something wrong, just to satisfy her ego and belief that she was always right.

I read April's message back again, and she was mocking me, pushing me to apologise to her for her having committed a crime against me. I was studying to be a lawyer, and she was rubbing it right in my face, and yet, while reading how she was telling me to be a good girl, I thought of her bratty little feet, and wished she was rubbing them in my face at that moment as I was forced to embarrassingly grovel. She'd demanded I was a good girl, so, because Princess April wanted it, I was her good girl.

Me: im sorry

The moment I sent the message, I was overwhelmed by a tingling feeling of disgrace. It was so mortifying to have to apologise to someone who had just literally stolen from me. Someone whose greed and entitlement had condemned me to four hours of servitude. I looked at my nails, and they were already ruined. My scrubbing in the nail salon had chipped them in a number of places. I headed back to April's page, and saw that her previous story was still available. I looked at her own nails, and they appeared so perfect and unblemished. Of course, they would be, she hadn't done a day's work in her life, and she was parasitically leeching off of me. Getting the luxuries she wanted by spending the money I'd earned through my hard work.

It was so odd as I was sitting there, staring at the photo of her perfect nails. It was especially grating to see the state of her white, little feet, and the way they looked so soft and pampered. She'd become so damn spoiled, she was acting so bratty and completely out of line, and I had to apologise to *her*. It made me feel like I was back in high school, where I'd cower and shy away from the popular girls while they hung out and flicked disconcerting glares in my direction. How I'd instinctively apologise to them if I ever got in their way in the hallways, or how I'd submissively duck out and leave whenever they came into a room. It was almost as if I'd known I didn't belong in their presence, and I'd apologise for breathing the same air. All the years later, and I was feeling like that all over again, though, it was no longer due to a bunch of mean, catty girls, but rather, my best friend. Well, what used to be my best friend, and had now become my princess.

I shivered as I felt a tingle in my spine, and then I blushed while feeling all weird inside. April had become my princess, hadn't she? The dorky and unseen little April had ascended above me and become my princess. But, simply being attractive and popular hadn't been enough for her: she'd claimed me as her paypig too. I was for sure jealous of all of the attention she was receiving due to her new, polished self, and I longed to be desired too, but April had basically stepped on my face and pulled the ladder up behind her. She'd deliberately kept me down while she rose higher and higher.

I kept dwelling on the fact that I'd had to apologise to her. I'd apologised to the girl that used to be my best friend. I'd apologise to the girl who had been cruel and mean to me. I'd apologised to the girl who had spent my money without a hint of remorse. I'd apologised to the girl who had rubbed her sweaty feet all over my face and demeaned me. I'd apologised to the girl who had stolen from me. As I wracked up each of her slights against me, I found myself growing hot and flustered. It was a whole new level of humiliation I'd never before experienced, and despite all of the bullying and cruelty I'd endured in my life, I'd never felt so low and helpless in all my years.

And then, to make it all worse, April messaged me again:

April: not good enough, i told u to kneel and kiss my feet the last time i saw u, i told u to grovel. ur not forgiven until u do that u fool, ur not forgiven until u crawl back and beg to be my paypig

There was a sinking in my stomach again, because April was outright mocking me still. She was pushing me until I was going to pop. It was bad enough that I had already apologised to her, but, she was demanding I kneeled before her, kissed her feet and grovelled. I squirmed uncomfortably, distressed by the level of humiliation I was being forced to endure, and especially at the behest of my one and only friend. Despite my best efforts, I just kept imagining her pretty little feet, toes flexed as she posed them while I bowed before her, lavishing her feet with kisses while I apologised over and over for being such a bad paypig for her. Apologising for her having to use my card without my permission because I was such a terrible paypig and hadn't made it easier for her to spend my money. Begging for forgiveness at her bratty feet while she freely spent my earnings on whatever she liked.

I had to close my mouth as I realised I was panting; drool trickling from the corners of my lips. I was actually drooling at the thought of having to submissively kiss April's feet after her selfish crime. I was drooling, just as she'd joked previously.

I blinked multiple times, and realised that I'd been completely lost in the fantasy of actually submitting to April once and for all. Condemning myself to being my former friend's paypig so she could spend my money as she pleased. There was just something so hot and bothering about throwing myself at her feet and kissing them all over, especially as she was the one that had done something wrong. And yet, the idea kept playing itself over and over again in my head, tempting and intoxicating me. She wasn't a little nerd anymore, like me, but rather she was hot, and her arrogant, entitled attitude only made her all the more like the princess she had proclaimed herself to be. I'd already had her sweaty little feet smeared all over my face, and I'd already looked into her conceited face while she made me sniff her toes over and over. It was the kind of thing that should never occur between two friends, but it had happened to us, because, as April had so bluntly stated: she didn't view me as a friend anymore. I was simply nothing but a paypig in her eyes. *Her* paypig.

I was trembling and squelching my thighs together as I writhed, looking at the story of April's polished toes over and over. I cycled back through my photos, right back to the one of her thick thighs in the stockings. I flicked through the photos she'd sent me of her feet just peeping out of the slippers, and I was bizarrely regretful that I hadn't taken her up on the offer of seeing her purple toes with the yellow heels I'd bought her. And then, I was back in her stories, and everywhere I looked, I just saw my own money. Her hair, her eyes, her makeup, her nails. I looked in the background of each photo and I could see the laptop. When she was smirking for a selfie in her mirror; there was the brand-new phone my money had paid for. She was enjoying herself in life finally. She was no longer the dork she once was, and it was all off of the back of my hard work at the coffee shop. When she'd seen the opportunity to get what she wanted, she'd taken it, regardless of how it impacted me, and there was something so intoxicating about her ruthless greed. I almost felt admiration for the way she was so callously using me, as if our friendship hadn't existed at all.

"I'm April's paypig," I whimpered to myself, while clicking through her stories and seeing everything she'd bought with my earnings. "I'm Princess April's paypig."

While I was brimming with the most self-deprecating arousal, I clumsily sent April another message:

Me: ok, ill do it, ill kiss your feet and apologise. i swear, i'll be a good girl for you,

At that moment, I was so needy that I couldn't help but send another message:

Me: i can come around right now

I was already getting my things ready, when April replied a few minutes later:

April: lol calm down, u can come around my house tmrw after u finish ur shift at ur crappy job, got it? ill have my new sandals u paid for :D

I oddly felt disappointed that I had to wait. Perhaps I hadn't just turned April into a monster, but I'd turned myself into something completely pathetic too. My thumbs were twitching, and I could resist sending her another grovelling message as my sex was still hot between my thighs.

Me: yes, princess april, im so sorry

From her reply, April seemed as pleased as I was needy:

April: thats a good paypig! such a good girl! :D

Seeing April all pleased with my response left me feeling all giddy and recognised: I was such a good girl. The threat had disappeared, and I felt good that I'd appeased her enough that she was no longer angry and vengeful. Instead, she was offering me praise, and that only made me hungry for more. So, despite her seemingly being done with me until the next day, I felt compelled to please her even more, to lay down and admit that she had won.

Me: your welcome, princess april, yes, im your paypig

It took her slightly longer the next time she replied. I stared at the chat screen for the first few minutes anxiously, before I began cycling back through her photos again, zooming in and trying to catch any glimpse of her red-polished toenails. In a few of her mirror selfies, she was wearing the designer sliders, and her pretty little

toes were just creeping out of the front. When a notification popped up, I was back in the chat immediately:

April: mmmhmmm and r u going to be a goooood paypig for me? r u going to be a good girl?

I didn't know why I was prolonging the conversation, but it was like I couldn't stop myself. There was something growing inside me, something that wanted to continue chatting to my former friend, despite the way she was constantly taunting and belittling me. It didn't matter that my bank account was at zero, because it almost seemed like an abstract problem that I could deal with later. Besides, I was going to be paid the next day anyway. It was only a couple of hundred dollars, but it was better than nothing. While my juices were flowing, it was like I couldn't think with any logic, and I was fully investing in being April's paypig. In being her good girl. It was terribly exciting, feeding into her bratty ego, and I found myself wanting to indulge her arrogance even more. There was just something about how she'd acted so shamelessly, using my card without my permission and then gloating about it. Demanding I kiss her feet and apologise after that? It was an intoxicating level of egoism. I knew as I was typing, that my words were wrong. That it was gross, and seedy, and totally embarrassing, but it was like I couldn't stop myself:

Me: yes, princess april, ill be an obedient paypig for you, ill kiss your feet and apologise so much

I waited and waited but she didn't reply. Eventually, I became so needy that I did the unthinkable, I actually begged for feet pics.

Me: please could I see your pretty feet

However, April had simply stopped replying, as if she'd found something more interesting to satisfy her attention. When I checked her stories, I saw that she'd taken some new selfies in her mirror, smiling and flicking peace signs at herself while she sampled a variety of cosplaying outfits.

I lamented being ignored, and I finally understood how she'd felt in the weeks I'd deliberately ghosted her. Perhaps it was a taste of my own medicine, but whatever it was, I most definitely didn't like it. Still, I comforted myself with the knowledge that I'd be seeing my princess again the next day. After months without her presence, I'd finally have the chance to show her how generous of a friend I could be. Well, maybe not a friend, but most definitely a piggy.

I spent the next day at college unable to concentrate or register anything that the lecturer was saying. I was still bizarrely aroused, having been left hanging the previous night and I just kept thinking about bowing down at April's bratty feet and kissing them. My skin tickled as I savoured the humiliation that such an act would put me through; having to do something so humbling at the pampered feet of my former best friend. I wasn't even looking at her as my friend anymore, she was Princess April and no one else.

When I eventually came home, I veered straight for April's house. I didn't even bother dropping my stuff off, and I couldn't handle Mother dampening my mood. As a display of commitment to being April's paypig too, I'd even called in sick to work and cancelled my shift, something I'd never, ever done before. It was just another show of the influence April's wants had over me. She'd told me to come over to her place to apologise, and I was doing what she wanted.

April's mother showed me in, after commenting that it had been a while since seeing me. I blushed and muttered some of the usual excuses, wanting to get it all over with quickly so I could go upstairs and throw myself at the feet of her daughter. She asked me a few other mundane questions about college and work, and I either grunted or responded with single words. Eventually she waved me to head upstairs.

When I knocked April's bedroom door, I could hear that she was listening to music or something and likely dancing around. There was the distinctive thudding of feet inside, and having opened the door many times before, I turned the handle and eased it to a crack. Through the gap, I could see that April was already wearing the gladiator sandals, and she was gyrating in front of the mirror while recording herself on her phone. She was likely making some annoying content that she intended to share with her ever-growing follower base, intended to bring more thirsty guys in her direction and inflating her ego even further. Perhaps it would even lead to more tips for her.

And, as if one of those thirsty guys, while I watched through the crack of the door, I found my eyes glued to the sight of her bouncing feet. Her red-painted toenails were truly popping, especially in contrast to her white skin. The gladiator sandals made an enticing aesthetic, particularly the way they zipped up to her knees, with the straps clinging to her pale flesh. They looked so damn good on her, making her come across as extremely cool and fashionable; a far cry from the little nerd of a girl she used to be. I was in awe, watching her twirl, especially with another of her pleated skirts she was wearing, and the low-hanging blouse that offered a glimpse of her pronounced cleavage.

I blushed as I witnessed the extent of her femininity, and I was surprised by how I'd overlooked it before. She'd obviously had those breasts and the slender physique the whole time, but it was like I'd been blinded, along with everyone else, by her scruffy hair and dorky glasses. She was free of those shackles, thanks to the escape my savings had provided her, and she was finally able to be recognised for the beauty she truly was. As I watched like some voyeuristic sleaze, I acknowledged the disparity in our places. I was beneath her, most definitely, especially since she was a few years younger than I. Her breasts jiggled with every step as she danced around with the expensive phone documenting every second. As she pouted her lips and blew kisses into the camera, narrowing and widening her pretty eyes, I nodded my head and realised that every cent of mine she'd spent had been worth it; the delight on her adorable face something to truly treasure.

"Wow," I said, and in comical, perfect timing, I chose the exact moment there was a break in her music.

Instantly, April darted her eyes to the door, and she strode over with such elegance and confidence. It was even as if her walk had received an upgrade, and she boldly swung the door open and exposed me for the peeing tom I was. "When did you get here?" she asked accusingly. "Have you been watching me this whole time?"

"I just arrived," I said; my throat already feeling as if it was dried out. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to disturb you."

"Mmmm, maybe I need to lock the door from now on," she said while glaring at me. "I don't want to be creeped on."

It was rich considering the way she was treating me, and I thought about saying so, but then, remembering how I had framed her as my princess, I kept quiet. April was always in the right from that point on, regardless of how selfish and unreasonable she was being. Merely considering that made me tingle with excitement; the reality of submitting to her entitlement still remaining exciting.

"I'm sorry, Princess April," I said while dropping my eyes. "I apologise for being a creep."

April was quiet, apparently surprised so much by my deference that she was momentarily speechless. Eventually she tutted. "Well, good," she said. "At least you finally understand how things are going to be."

"May I come in, Princess?"

"You may," she said, and she returned her attention to the mirror, raising her nose in the air all snootily.

As I stepped into the room, I heard her tut, and then she was staring at my reflection in the mirror. "Ummm, down on your knees," she said. "If my piggy has come crawling back to beg for forgiveness, then I want to see you actually crawling."

Whereas previously I would have been offended, after the strange feelings that had developed the evening before, I actually felt as if my heart skipped a beat. From there, it began pounding in my chest as an excitement traversed through my veins, bringing every part of my body to life with a tingle. I dropped down onto my knees and I felt so damn submissive. Crawling forward towards her, I kept my eyes solely on her

red little toenails within the leather straps of her gladiator sandals. The sexy, fashionable sandals that had been bought with money stolen from me.

I expected April to turn towards me, but instead, she continued looking at the mirror. So, as I crawled up to her, I brushed her ankle with the tip of my nose, wedging it in between the leather straps. "That tickles, piggy," she said. "But I like it. Keep doing that if you want my attention."

I blushed each time she called me that denigrating name, imagining my cheeks turning a piggy pink as I traced my nose around the curves of her ankle. I dragged it over the rough straps of leather and darted it in the gaps in search of flesh. While I was moving around, I breathed deeply, desperately in search of her foot scent, but disappointingly only recognising the overbearing fragrance of fresh leather.

"I want to hear some piggy grunting," she said nonchalantly, and up above, she seemed to be applying lipstick. "If you're my paypig, then act like a piggy."

Having settled in my mind that I was to obey April's every whim, and especially while my sex was oozing in need, I began to grunt as I imagined a pig would. Despite feeling incredibly foolish, I grunted, snorted and oinked repeatedly. It was difficult, forcing that ugly and clunky snort from my nose, imitating a piggy as best I could, and while kneeling at her feet, I truly felt like a dumb animal. April found it hilarious of course, and she was snorting to herself with giggles while she arranged her straightened hair in the mirror. She didn't look down on me at all, remaining more interested in her pretty reflection while I wallowed in my own pathetic performance. I crawled around her feet while she adjusted her position, and I could feel she was bending her knees while she posed and blew kisses to herself. It was incredible how she'd suddenly become so confident and vain in her body; the shy girl of old having long disappeared. And, while down at her feet, I felt like the new, improved version of herself deserved to be celebrated and worshipped.

So, while still hunkered on all fours, I crawled around and began to prod my nose around the leather straps on top of her feet. I nuzzled my nose into the gaps, brushing the tops of her toes while I sniffed loudly in search of her foot scent. When that vinegary stink hit me, rather than being disgusted, I breathed in deep, shivering with pleasure as I fully inhaled its sharp odour. Instantly, my eyes narrowed, and tendrils of regret seeped in as I appreciated that I was openly sniffing April's feet. My

younger best friend, who for over a year had been my equal in dorkville. There I was, now submissively sniffing the stink from between her pretty little toes.

“Kiss my sandals,” she said, as she giggled. “Show them some appreciation. You paid for them after all.”

My eyes widened as I began to pucker my lips all over the leather straps of her sandals. I'd been furious that she'd purchased them behind my back, yet, there I was, down on my knees and smothering them with adoring kisses. “They look so good on you Princess April,” I muttered between kisses, and I was whole-heartedly speaking the truth. The dark, leather straps looked incredible while wrapped around the ivory muscles of her calves. Her little white feet, along with the perfect crimson polish on her nails, appeared like a sweet treat within the wrapping of her sandals, and I wanted to peel them off and kiss her feet too. Each time I considered what I was doing, I felt a wave of both humiliation and excitement flow through me. I'd been so angry, but surrendering to April and putting that anger aside felt so damn good for some reason. Doing something as mindless as kissing her feet put all of the important, adult responsibility stuff to the back of my mind. It felt good to just give up and stop trying. Stop trying to impress everyone. Stop trying to live up to Mother's impossible expectations.

“I want to hear you apologising while you kiss, paypig,” she said, emphasising the final word with a husky sneer. “You made me so mad, and you need to grovel and beg for my forgiveness.”

“Yes, Princess April,” I said, shivering as the submissiveness aroused me. I continued to pucker my lips against the top of her foot, trying to wiggle them between the straps and kiss as much of her flesh as possible. “I'm so sorry for being a bad paypig for you.” I shuffled backwards slightly, and then dropped down further so I was able to caress the tips of her toes with my worshipful mouth. “I'm so, so sorry. Please forgive me for being a bad paypig.” My lips puckered against the red toenail on her biggest toe, and I'd never felt more pathetic in my entire life. My mind kept wandering back to the fact that I'd had thousands in my savings, and April had pillaged through it in record time. She'd basically emptied the account buying herself all kinds of stuff while not extending a single ounce of remorse. I'd tried to recover, and she'd greedily emptied it all over again, erasing my hard work of the previous two months. So, to be

down kissing her feet and apologising having been so brutally rinsed by what I thought was my best friend; it was truly intoxicating. I knew it was wrong, and that I'd likely regret it once sense returned to me, but while in the height of submission, I couldn't resist humbling myself. The fact April was younger than me too, and she didn't have a clue where she was heading in life, that only made it all the more powerfully demeaning to smother her feet in desperate, grovelling kisses. "I'm so, so sorry Princess April," I whimpered again. "I'll be a good girl for you."

"How much do you earn every week anyway?" she asked while looking at me in the reflection of her mirror. She'd tied her hair off into the cutest pigtails, all while pouting and batting her eyelashes. It was almost as if she was flirting with her sexy reflection. Meanwhile, I had to crane my neck to see her with one eye, while ensuring my lips remained puckering against her toes.

"About \$400, if I have four or five shifts. It depends really," I mumbled between kisses. "Depends how much studying I need to do."

April sprung up onto her tip-toes, almost knocking me over as her shin clattered against my forehead. "So, I have \$400 to spend every week then?" Her teeth were showing as she grinned, and then she empathically nodded her head. "If you can do the five shifts, then you definitely should. I want as much as possible to have my fun." She then cocked her head to the side in thought. "What's stopping you from doing more? There's seven days in a week after all?"

I gulped, and rather than feeling rage or anger that time, it was like there was a fire burning inside me. Obviously, I didn't have that much disposable income every week. I had to use the money to actually live too. Despite living with Mother, I used my own earnings a lot to stay out of the house as much as possible. However, the way she spoke about me as if I was a commodity, as if I was a resource to benefit from and exploit: it was as fascinating as it was exciting. Instead of yelling or marching out, I was just kneeling in place, hands pressed to the floor while I bit my lip and tried to stem a moan. Being used my former friend was just so damn arousing, especially since her greed appeared insatiable. The callous way she was treating me, at first, I'd found abhorrent, but after having surrendered to her pretty little feet and smothered them with submissive kisses, I found myself craving more of her entitled wants.

In desperation, and tiring of the fresh leather scent, I tickled my nose against the tips of her toes. April immediately dropped back down on her heels, and with the momentum of the roll, her toes lifted slightly from the base of the sandals. Seizing the opportunity, I crammed my nose in the space, lodging it beneath her toes as they came to rest. Without hesitation, I gasped in a huge breath, and then I felt all dizzy as the heady, vinegary stench from within the sweaty, stuffy groove of her toes hit me hard. Again, my eyes widened, as I contemplated the pathetic nature of my descent. Never in my life would I have expected to have my nose crammed beneath April's sweaty toes in such a way, willingly breathing in their pungent funk while I savoured the experience. It was as if we were both going through transformations, whereas while April was going up, I was plummeting to an unthinkable low.

"I want to hear those piggy oinks," she demanded, scrunching her toes so they gripped my nose and held me in place.

My breaths were laboured as I inhaled her stench, the vinegary fragrance from between her sticky toes having somewhat combined with the fresh leather of her sandals. I breathed over and over, my eyes closing as the odour overwhelmed me; her toes becoming increasingly moist as they possessively gripped my nose and held me in place. "Oink," I whimpered, while I lay lifeless on my side, settled and content as I willingly intoxicated myself with the smell of my former friend's feet. "Oink, oink, oink."

"That's a good pay piggy," April chimed merrily, and she bent her knees in a crouch. Her delicate hand tickled my ear, before she patted my cheek affectionately. "This is the correct way to appreciate your new princess. You're such a fool, you know that, right? I rinsed your card again, and here you are, begging and grovelling at my feet." Despite having my eyes closed, there was a bright flash, and when I opened, I saw that April had steered her phone right in my face. It was a hellu expensive brand, the price into the thousands, and was the kind of which I could never afford. Well, since she'd bought it with my savings, actually, I could afford it. I was just careful with my expenditure, whereas April was completely reckless. I suppose that was a luxury she was afforded since she didn't understand the value in my balance. When I looked at the thousands in my bank, I saw the hours of labour that had gone into it. April saw nothing but a budget that needed to be ploughed through.

April gave my nose a final squeeze, and then she swiftly pulled her foot away. As she turned and strutted, her peachy little bum just visible from beneath the frilly, pleated skirt, I was mesmerised that this was the same friend I once considered an equal. The same girl that had been labelled as much of a dork as I was. She was dressed so sexily, and displaying a confidence in her body that had always evaded girls like us.

Strangely, I felt exhausted from having been breathing beneath her sweaty toes, as if I was just awakening from a deep sleep. It had been somewhat calming there, like I was embracing my place beneath her and I had nothing else to worry about. I blinked a number of times while pulling myself up to a seated position.

April suddenly pouted, and then she thumped her thighs with her fists. "But I have to wait until you're paid again, right? That's so damn unfair."

"Yes, Princess April," I said while dropping my eyes, and I was fully engrossed in the submissiveness still. The more unreasonably demanding and bratty she seemed to be, the more I was intoxicated. Even though I knew everything was wrong, and that my mother would be furious that I was partaking in a seedy and financially-detrimental activity, I couldn't stop myself from going all-in. It was like something else was controlling me; something that existed within the heart of my sex and was able to suppress the logic of my intelligence. "I'm so sorry you have to wait."

"You should be sorry," she sneered, and though I couldn't see her face fully, I knew she was scowling. She took a step towards me, and when her pretty little sandaled foot came into view again, I was jolted to attention by a snap of her fingers. "Grovel and apologise again," she said arrogantly. "Apologise for being such a useless paypig for me."

I didn't even hesitate. I was actually so enthusiastic that it was embarrassing, and my eagerness took April so by surprise that she somewhat stumbled backwards and emitted a cute squeak. I dropped from my sitting position and planted my lips against the top of her foot; desperately trying to kiss through the leather straps. Those designer gladiator sandals were worth close to five hundred dollars and I'd spent the last two months working hard so April could prance around her room in them. "I'm so sorry, Princess April," I mumbled while smothering her dainty foot with kisses of both surrender and reverence. "I apologise for being such a useless paypig for you." As I

heard the words I was speaking, I felt embarrassed and degraded all over again, yet it was like the words were coming from someone else. A new version of myself that had been carefully moulded and crafted by the greedy girl that sought to prosper from my servitude. The young, conceited princess that no longer looked upon me as her friend.

I whimpered as April wiggled her foot from beneath my lips again, but then grunted as she carelessly steered my attention to her other foot with a prod of the sandal's firm base. Again, my lips were furiously pressing through the leather straps of her gladiator sandal, desperate to kiss her foot and demonstrate my submission. I even slipped my tongue between my lips, and lightly grazed the top of her foot. That caused her to giggle, but then she lifted her other sandaled foot and thumped it against the top of my head; pinning me down so my lips were painfully flattened against the edges of her sandal straps.

"How much do you have left in your bank account, piggy? I know there isn't much, because your card declined on me again," she said in a dominating voice. She rotated her ankle, grinding my head down harshly and causing me to squeal as my lips were pushed and pulled all over the leather straps. "Answer me, paypig," she demanded after a few seconds, and then the weight on my head slightly lifted.

My eyes had widened as she referred to me as such a thing, the same way they did whenever she labelled me that awful, degrading word. It was like a reminder, and each time, a little voice would ring out in my head and confirm, that, yes, I was indeed my former friend's paypig. A ripple of humiliation would flow through me every time, but since the previous evening, that shame was being followed by a burning pulsation deep inside my sex.

"About...about..." I muttered through aroused gasps. "About \$8, Princess April." I awaited the snotty, whiney complaints that were likely to be thrown my way; such a small amount being useless to her. It didn't matter that it was her fault since she'd already blown through my previous two months of savings. Such logic was irrelevant to a greedy brat like her. She just wanted more, and more, and more, having neither the patience or reason to understand that I wasn't an endless financial resource.

I heard her sneer above, and then she pressed down the weight of her leg once more. She was a petite, slender girl, and short in stature, yet, beneath her foot, it felt

like the weight of the world was upon my head. "You useless fool," she said. "What kind of paypig are you? You only have \$8 for me to spend? What am I supposed to buy with that?"

"I'm sorry," I whimpered against the top of her sandal. "I haven't been paid yet."

"You better work harder this week then," she said cruelly. "Because you have some making up to do. I want extra next week to make up for the shortfall this week!" She lifted her foot, and then stamped it down on the carpet. The thud caused me to flinch, but then I was cradling my hands around her heel while delicately kissing the straps of her leather gladiator sandal. Even with the newness of the material, if I sniffed hard enough. I could just about detect the slight whiff of April's sweaty toes within my nostrils; lingering from when I'd buried my face into that moist, sweaty groove. I tried to force my nose between the straps for a better sniff, craving that intoxicating stink with a renewed vigour.

"I will, Princess April," I pleaded, and as I was about to kiss her foot, I whimpered as she snatched it away.

She hopped back onto her bed with a thump, almost in playful way, and then she casually kicked her heels against the wooden base. "Come here," she said with a hooked finger. "Come to me, paypig."

I shuffled up onto my knees, then clumsily waddled towards her. As soon as I was within reach, she gripped my chin with her little fingers and cruelly sneered right in my face; her lips contorted to the point her teeth were visible. "You're not my friend, you get that?" she reaffirmed needlessly. "You're just my paypig."

Words that would have once cut me deep, only seemed to invoke a greater submission. I'd already accepted that our friendship could never return to what it once was. Her blunt statement only confirmed my inferiority before her, and I nodded my head amongst her grip, acknowledging that she had ascended so far beyond me that I was nothing more than dirt at her pampered and spoiled feet. "Yes, Princess April," I mumbled as her fingers stemmed me from fully moving my mouth.

"I want to hear you say it," she said. "Admit what you are."

I rolled my eyes up and everything felt so hot and intense. "I'm your paypig, Princess April," I breathed in a husky voice, and I believed it with everything inside me.

"Good," she said, and then she smirked right in my face. She held her other hand before me, and the red polish looked so immaculate and striking at the end of her thin, creamy fingers. She curled them back into a fist, and for a second, I braced myself to be struck. However, she dipped her hand slightly, and offered the top towards my lips. I didn't even need any instruction, and I kissed her hand with acceptance. "Good," she said again. "That's how to treat your princess." She released my chin, and seemed to joyously jiggle in place as she writhed with excitement. "It's wonderful to hear you're my loyal paypig, because I want that last \$8 as well." She then rested back on one elbow while she unzipped one of her boots. As the leather straps parted, I noted the indentations all along the length of her calves. She followed the same process with the other sandal, and then she slid both off her feet and threw them aside; discarding the expensive footwear with little care or consideration. A second later, she scooted back further on the bed and rested both feet upon the edge.

There, I found myself looking up at her soles, and though her feet were small in size, from my angle, they appeared huge. I stared up in wonder, and noted that her soles were no longer a pinkish pale, but instead, they'd somewhat been stained a light yellow. Perhaps it was from the new leather in her gladiator sandals, and there were some traces of black embedded into her wrinkles where the fresh material had likely bled from her sweat.

"Look at the state of you," she said with a giggle, wrapping her hands around her knees as she peered down from above. "It's like you're about to drool." She then rocked her head back and let out a loud cackle. "What a loser you turned out to be, Jing. If you're wondering why we can't be friends anymore, then this is why. You're just like that girl we saw in the store. It's only right I have put you where you belong."

Again, I dipped my head, accepting the insults as if they were compliments. I'd fought against that comparison with the red-head so much, but while staring up at April's stained soles: I knew it was true. No self-respecting girl would ever have found herself cowering beneath her former friend's filthy soles. "Yes, Princess April," I said,

and I shivered with arousal as I recognised her view of things. "I belong at your perfect, princess feet."

April gleefully nodded her head. "Yes, they are perfect, aren't they? That's what happens when I have a paypig to pamper my feet like they deserve." Her smile suddenly turned to a scowl though. "However, you were a bad paypig, and someone else had to pay for this pedicure. I most definitely expect you to reimburse."

I gulped down a thrilled swallow as April's entitled greed took a step further. The pedicure had already been paid for, but she wanted me to cover it anyway? She was basically demanding being paid for having had her feet pampered. "Yes, Princess April," I muttered, a clear tremble in my voice as my arousal heightened.

"Well, since you sucked as my paypig, you're going to have to make it up to me in another way." She thought for a second, before she wiggled her toes. "I know, you're going to lick my feet clean," she said joyously, and her smile was as big as I've ever seen it. "I know they're sweaty from wearing these sandals, and they need to be perfect again since I'm such a princess. Since you couldn't pamper them with your money, you can do so with your dorky mouth." She lifted one hand from her knee and pointed at her feet as she flexed her toes back. "Lick my feet, piggy," she said, and she couldn't help but giggle. It was almost as if April too recognised the absurdity of the whole thing, but just like had occurred at the mall, she was pushing me to see how far I'd go.

As I stared up at her clammy soles, I was momentarily hesitant. It was a huge step, and though I was riveted with submission, licking her feet clean wasn't something I'd foreseen as happening.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked impatiently. "Your princess gave you an order. Lick my feet clean!" When I still continued to stare at her grimy, stained soles with apprehension, April growled in the most petulant way. She reached over on the bed and grabbed a bath robe she'd messily thrown aside. She fished the soft belt from its loops then stretched it tense between her hands. Before I could even contemplate what was happening, she'd flicked it over my head, and then I panicked as she pulled it tight and began tying a knot near my throat.

"What are you doing?" I asked while gripping at the tightening noose around my neck.

"Leashing my pig," she said bluntly, as if it was an entirely normal way to treat someone. "My piggy isn't behaving itself, so I guess I'm going to have to train it properly." Once she'd tied the belt off, she yanked it so it tightened taut; a strained gasp choking from my throat.

"April, please," I whimpered as I tried to slink my fingers beneath the loop.

"It's Princess April," she corrected, and she gave the belt another merciless tug, causing me to cough and choke once more.

"Princess April, please," I said. "I can't breathe properly."

"As soon as you start licking my feet," she said. "I'll ease up on the leash. It's all in your hands. Be a good piggy, and you can breathe. Use that nerdy brain of yours."

Despite still feeling overly constrained, I blushed while acknowledging the position she had me trapped in. It was hard to believe that only months ago we were the best of friends. Two nerds that were completely in our element, gossiping and chatting about our shared interests in our tiny, exclusive bubble. Yet, April had burst out of that bubble with a bang, and she'd declared herself a nerd no longer and instead captured me as her pet dork. She could have encouraged me to pursue the same course of glow-up as her; to invest in my own looks. However, she'd denied me such a luxury, her greed wanting everything for herself, and when I had tried without her presence, she had disrupted my beauty experience without even realising it.

It was almost as if she enjoyed rubbing it in my face, that she'd blossomed into an attractive, lusted-after princess, while I was still languishing within the hell of total geekdom. It was like she was using me as an outlet, and punishing me for the life of invisibility she'd spent so many years trapped within. None of that was my fault, and, it was only thanks to my financial astuteness that she'd managed to ascend from dweeb to desired belle. Yet, not a morsel of gratitude was extended my way, and instead, she was only interested in grinding me down further while she squeezed me for every cent I had. She wanted to keep me as a dork, as it highlighted her change all the more.

"I told you to lick my feet," she said, and she gripped the belt with both hands, fishing it between the arches of her feet. As I lurched forwards with a grunt, she tugged it tightly between her ankles. "Lick them right now, piggy," she demanded. "I want to feel that dorky tongue all over my perfect feet."

After another tug, my face was forced right into the bottoms of her feet. Despite their small size, they easily smothered me; the soft, fleshy soles squishing my facial features and saturating my skin with their sweat. I gasped and wheezed, inhaling a load of her fresh foot stench and feeling as if my eyes were watering from the heat.

"What are you waiting for?" she grunted. "It's not difficult. Just lick my feet, you fool. You're good at studying and stuff, so this should be easy for you."

While I was still trying not to choke as she ruthlessly yanked on the belt, I tentatively slipped my tongue between my lips. As the tip touched against her wrinkled arch, I instinctively recoiled it back into my mouth; the salty taste having taken me by surprise. It was to be expected an expected reaction of course, having never tasted the flavour of a foot before.

April wasn't sympathetic however. "What the hell was that?" she said, and then she parted her feet and abruptly slapped me across the cheek with her toes. She began to jiggle the belt as she bobbed with immaturity, throwing a temper tantrum while almost strangling me in the process. "You can do better than that," she said in a whiney voice. "I told you to lick my feet clean, not tickle them, you fool."

I was blown away by her demanding and bratty attitude, not at all recognising her as the girl that I'd once adored. Her face was contorted with impatience, and it appeared at such a contrast to the cute pigtails that she'd tied off with little bows. The frilly sleeves of her low-cut blouse, and the pleats of her skirt made her seem so girlish and cute, but there was a monster beneath the surface, and she appeared to be delighting in having me completely at her mercy.

"I'm sorry, Princess," I whimpered, and then I winced as she slapped me across the face with her toes again.

"Do better, piggy," she said, and then she shoved her foot right back into my face with a thud; my nose squishing as it crashed into the curve of her arch. "Lick my feet right now!"

I grunted, but then twisted my neck as I extended my tongue and dragged it along the edge of her arch. “Ugh,” I grunted, and I shivered from the toxicity of the salty flavour. Her sweat was truly acidic, and it caused a tremor to run through me.

“Taste good, does it?” April goaded, and she pulled the leash even tighter; my tongue involuntarily popping from my mouth as if I was about to lose consciousness. She peered around her foot, and then rubbed it against my hanging tongue. “Lick it,” she said excitedly. “Lick it!”

Despite barely being able to breathe, and feeling as if my head was about to pop off, I desperately dragged my tongue over the bottom of her foot again and again. Each time, the flavour of her sweat caused me to shiver; the saltiness zinging my taste buds with its sharpness. My eyes widened as I realised I was actually licking a foot, and my arms pulled in tightly to my ribs, as if I was shrivelling up in shame from the disgrace of it all. Despite my emotional torment, I continued to lap my tongue along the bottom of her foot, slurping up and swallowing down the sweaty moisture that clung to her skin. I even pressed the tip of my tongue into her wrinkles, wiggling it enthusiastically as I attempted to cleanse the leather stains.

“Yes,” she said in response to my probing tongue, and her eyes closed while she bit her lip. She seemed to be savouring the feel of my tongue as it slurped and squirmed all over the salty, stained skin of her soles. “Mmmm,” she said as her fingers loosened on the belt. “That’s it, lick my perfect princess feet, you pathetic loser piggy.”

I froze, and there was a tingle down my spine as a dose of reality hit me: I was indeed a loser, wasn’t I? Our sort had been called losers many times by the popular crowd in school, but there I was, licking feet like the loser of all losers. I was a whole lower level of loser, and I began to gasp and cringe as the magnitude of my position overwhelmed me.

“What are you doing?” April asked, and she lazily parted her legs so the outside of her knees rested against the bed. “Did I tell you to stop licking, you fool?” She cocked her head. “No, I didn’t, did I? You’re my piggy now, so you do as I say! Stop being so stupid. I thought you were college educated?” She gave the belt another symbolic yank, and then she pressed the bottoms of both feet together; pointing her ruby-painted toes towards my mouth. “I want you to suck my toes now,” she said. “I want to know if it feels as good as when you lick the bottoms.”

I stared at her toes, and though they were pretty, it still felt weird, like another huge step was about to be taken. I leaned in, and gave her big toes a symbolic lick.

April grimaced, and then she let out a tired sigh. "Ummm, what was that? Did I tell you to lick my toes? No, I didn't, did I? I told you to suck them, so be a good piggy and suck them!"

My skin was prickling all over with the disgusting, arrogant way she was speaking to me. It was like she didn't even view me as a human anymore, I was just an object that she could bark orders at. It was if she expected me to act in automation, like she could just feed me some instructions and I'd immediately perform to her expectations. But, she was right, because to my utter shame, I opened my mouth wide and engulfed her two biggest toes. It was awkward, and my tongue was pressed back into my throat, but I clumsily sucked and slurped as best I could.

"That feels weird," April said with a disgusted look on her face. "Is this how you were planning to make out with a boy some day?" She then cackled to herself. "Oh, wait. That'll never happen, will it? Not for an ugly dork like you."

That time, it hurt, and she actually broke through my arousal with such a vicious taunt. It was ironic too, because I knew that when it came to boys, April was as inexperienced as I was. Sure, she was attractive now, but she was likely still apprehensive around the opposite sex. There was a big difference between flaunting yourself online and actually cosying up to a boy in real life. Boy of us were amateurs when it came to that, but April still felt like she was in a position to mock me all the same. With her toes lodged deep in my mouth, I was in no position to defend myself anyway. So, I just continued to suck as best I could, until April eventually lost her temper and pushed me away.

I fell back onto my hands and knees, and at once, she'd leaped from the bed and swung her leg over me.

"Princess?" I asked while she was clambering onto my back. "What are you doing?"

"I'm riding my piggy," she said, and she dropped her full weight into the arch of my back. I grunted, and tried to keep my arms and legs tensed, though my back bowed beyond my control. It wasn't even that she was heavy or anything, I simply

wasn't used to having someone sitting on my back. "You're useless at sucking toes. So, maybe there's something else you're better at. You're my piggy, so be a piggy." She bucked her hips, and then grabbed the belt and wrapped it around her knuckles. "Make some piggy noises."

I grunted, and then wheezed as she pulled the belt too tight.

"That doesn't sound like a piggy," she said, then she reached forward and shoved her index and second finger into my nostrils. I gasped in surprise, and then she painfully pulled back, forcing my head to an awkward angle as she stretched my nostrils upwards.

"Owww," I squealed as it felt like my nose was about to be ripped off or something.

"That's it," April said approvingly, and she slapped her other hand against my butt cheek. "Come on, squeal for me, piggy," she demanded while bucking her hips. "I want to hear my piggy squealing."

Through the pain, my eyes were fluctuating from being open and narrowed as I struggled to process the extent of the humiliation she was inflicting upon me. It was worse than anything she'd done before, and tears began to trickle from the corners of my eyes, as my body seemed to recognise the degradation more than my brain was capable of doing.

April didn't recognise my turmoil at all, she was completely absorbed by her own enjoyment. She continued to buck her hips, slapping my ass and keeping my nose painfully pulled back with her fingers. "Squeal piggy," she said. "I want to hear my paypig squealing from your piggy snout before I rinse you down to zero."

"Owww," I grunted again, and my shriek prompted another flurry of giggles from the brat riding me like a farm animal.

"Squeal," she encouraged, and to make it worse, she began tugging on the leash still around my neck. "Squeal as loud as you can, piggy. I'm going to rinse you so hard like the little paypig you are."

Even though some part of me was aroused in the most non-sensical way; my mind kept dwelling on the disbelief of it all. *How can she do such a thing to me?* I

thought. *We were friends. How can she treat me so cruelly?* There was no hope of an answer, and in desperation, I began grunting, snorting and shrieking for all I was worth. "Oiiiiiiink," I wailed. "Oiiiiiiink." I tried to imitate a pig as best as I could, which only caused April to laugh all the louder.

"That's it, piggy," she said with delight. "Keep making those pathetic noises."

And I did, right there in the middle of her room. While she remained perched on my back, I squealed and snorted for all I was worth, terrified that her mother was going to come upstairs, or even worse, that somehow my own mother would hear from next door. April spared no such thoughts, and she was entirely consumed by her own amusement. She rode me hard, as if she was taming a bucking bronco as I writhed and flailed beneath her, my body responding to the painful stretching her fingers were inflicting upon my nose.

It was all becoming a bit much, as April was acting as if she was playing with a new toy. Her attention span was short, and she was jumping between ways of tormenting me so quickly that my mind could barely keep up. As if on cue, she slapped the top of my head. "Stay still, piggy," she said. "I want to try something else." I didn't even have time to catch my breath before she continued. "Let's go in circles," she added. "I need to train my beast how to walk properly." Despite the harshness of being called a beast, I embraced the relief when she finally removed her fingers from my nose. With her full weight still on my back though, I couldn't even lift a hand to caress my throbbing nostrils.

She leaned back, and then her calves rested against my shoulders as her feet popped into view before me. "Do you want these feet?" she teased. She spread her red-painted toes right before my face, and then enticingly wiggled them. Her big toes were still covered in a sheening layer of my spit, and she taunted me while flexing them back and forth. "Come on, piggy," she said. "Don't be shy. I know you want those toes."

Despite the pain I was in, her goading piqued my arousal, and once again, I was engulfed by a need to submit to April's bratty whims. "Yes, Princess April," I whimpered while cringing at my own pathetic resolve. "I want your pretty toes so badly."

"You want these toes do you, piggy?" she said gleefully. "You want these toes? You want these toes?" She exemplified each word with another cute wiggle, provocatively moving them closer to my mouth and then swiftly steering them out of reach the moment my lips parted. "Oink for them if you want them so badly."

"Oink," I screeched as my entire head warmed and reddened. "Oink. Oink. Oink."

"That's it, piggy," she said through shrieking laughter. "Oink for my toes."

"Oink. Oink. Oink." Her toes were pretty, especially pedicured, but still, it was so damn tragic to oink for them in desperation. It was just the humiliation of it all driving me forwards, as if April had awakened some kind of masochist within me. At that moment, regardless of my own sexual preferences, I wanted her toes more than anything. I wanted them because she was teasing me so ruthlessly with them and I was settled in the mindset of performing for the whims of such a selfish brat.

While she was still sitting upon my back, she stretched her legs straight so her feet were lofted about a foot ahead of me, almost like she was dangling a carrot and baiting me. "Come on piggy," she said. "You want those feet, you better work hard for them." She then slapped my ass with a stinging smack. "Go get 'em, piggy."

I groaned while lurching forwards, and my arms were shaky as I struggled under April's weight. I had to concentrate, and move one arm, and the opposite knee, at the same time, in order to avoid keeling over and tossing her to the floor. My movement was almost robotic as a result, as if none of my joints had been properly greased.

She was bucking and gyrating on my back as I tirelessly crawled forward, my tongue snaking and desperately flailing from my lips though remaining just out of reach of her miraculous, tempting feet. "I wanna hear you squeal," she demanded while in the height of jubilation. "Squeal for me piggy and beg to be rinsed by your princess!"

And then I was squealing in the most pathetic and strained way. I was grunting and groaning as I struggled to crawl around, my arms and legs tiring beneath her weight. The skin on my knees had begun to blister from being dragged along the carpet, and yet, while I was intensely suffering, April cared not one bit. She was hooting and hollering while having the time of her life at my expense. She continued

to tug on my ears and goad me onwards, demanding I work extra hard and finally reach her feet.

"Rinse me please, Princess April," I groaned in agony. "Please, rinse me." I was longing for her to finally put me out of my torment and extract that final \$8 from me. I didn't even care that it would put me back to zero, because I had a renewed motivation to work harder the next week. I'd accepted my place as April's paypig, and I knew that from that point on, I'd do whatever it took to bring her extra money so she could enjoy herself off of the back of my labour; just as she was literally enjoying herself on my back at that moment.

"Uh, uh, uh," she said with a giggle, and she lifted and dropped her butt on my back. "I'm not ready to rinse you just yet, piggy. You're going to have to keep going until I feel like it."

"How much longer?" I grunted, and I felt like I was on the verge of collapsing.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," she said in her cute and relaxed voice; not a hint of a heavy breath as she spoke. "Just keep going until I feel like rinsing you."

"Ugh," I groaned, and then I continued circling around her bedroom; my eyes completely focused on her bratty feet as they hovered in front of me as bait. I was exhausted all over, yet I kept staring at her dainty feet with the red-painted toes, watching as they freely spread and wiggled without any strain or effort.

As I grunted and carried her past the end of her bed again, April bucked and urged me to continue. She pulled one leg back slightly, and then she teasingly giggled over my shoulder, "Is this what you want, piggy?"

"Yes," I wailed, and I found a renewed energy, marching onwards while her wiggling toes remained inches out of reach. I grunted, and groaned, and gasped in frustration, until April relented and wiggled her foot back a little more. Immediately, without even thinking, I engulfed her pretty toes right in my mouth. My tongue plunged between them, and I frantically probed deep, basking in the salty flavour of the sweaty crevice. The tip wiggled hungrily, and I grimaced while realising that I could feel a jammy substance between them.

“Eat what you find,” April cheered merrily, and then she yanked extra hard on the leash. “Just like a good little piggy.”

Like the piggy I was, I chewed through whatever the crap was between her toes, and then I darted my tongue between the rest of them, savouring the salty flavour as she remained sitting up proudly on my back. I'd given up carrying her around, my hands and legs locked in place, and my entire focus was on sucking her toes and cleansing whatever filth was between them. I felt like a disgusting animal. I felt like a pig, and April bounced around as my tongue tickled her toes, reminding me of how far I'd sunken. “Good piggy,” she giggled as I hoovered up all of the crud between her toes. “Such a good little piggy.”

When she moved the other foot back within reach, I rolled my head over, mindlessly taking those toes in my mouth as I claimed the reward for giving her such a fun ride. The jam between each toe was flavoursome, and I greedily consumed it all, fatigued and parched after the physical strain she'd put me through. When she leaned slightly forward, bending her knee so her greasy sole was presented; I licked that with the same enthusiasm, tonguing the stains of leather and wiggling the tip of my tongue to remove the grime that had sunken into her wrinkles. I could feel April resting her hands on my head as she watched, leaning down and enjoying every second as I diligently licked the filth from the bottom of her foot.

When she offered the first foot again, bending her knee so that yellowy sole was within reach; I cleansed it slavishly without her even need to utter a word.

Finally, April dropped her feet back down at my sides, and a second later, I collapsed to the floor in a heap. She squealed with amusement as she was sitting upon my crumpled form, and then she casually climbed off and stood at my side. I opened my eyes and looked up at her in total exhaustion, but from the glee in her face, it was obvious she hadn't finished with me yet.

Both of her little feet were side by side, with her perfect red toenails shining beneath the light of her desk lamp. The same toes that had been gyrating in my face for however long while she rode me in circles around her room. The same toes I'd just hungrily feasted upon.

“Please, Princess April,” I whined. “Please, rinse me of all I have left.”

April smirked, then she rolled her eyes to the ceiling while digging her fingertip into the corner of her lips. "Hmmm," she said. "I'm not sure if I'm ready to do that. I'm having so much fun."

"Please," I begged again; my entire body completely ravaged and depleted of all energy.

April giggled, and then she bent her knees and crouched down. She reached out and cupped my chin, before cradling my hot, sweaty cheek with her thumb. I looked at her in hope, just to see her bite her lip and lightly shake her head. "Nope," she said. "If you want me to rinse you of your last \$8, paypig, then you're going to have to really convince me that you deserve it."

"Please," I said, and as her fingers slipped from my chin, I struggled up into a bowing position. I shuffled forwards, and then I began to kiss her bare toes in desperation. "Please, Princess April," I whimpered through pathetic, grovelling kisses, and it felt as good as I'd imagined it would the night before while we were texting. My body was exhausted, and yet it was still bubbling with the blissful feeling of submission. Bowing before my former friend and worshipping her for the gorgeous woman she had become was truly riveting.

"That's a good piggy," April said, and she lightly patted the back of my head as I grovelled and smooched her gorgeous little toes. "Such a good girl."

Hearing that caused me to blush, and the past minutes of humiliation were worth it. I loved being her good girl, especially since April was younger than I. That's what made the whole escalation all the more humiliating for me; being ridden, financially drained by and having to kiss the feet of a brat who was my junior. I was on the verge of graduating soon, and yet, a girl who didn't even know where she was heading in life was treating me like a total fool. There was no other way of describing it, and the fact I was allowing it to happen most definitely painted me as a fool.

"Easy, piggy," April said in a bizarrely affectionate way, and she cupped my ears while easing me away from her feet. She dropped right down to her knees; her cute little butt resting against her heels. With a gentle hand, she encouraged me closer, until my head was resting against her thighs and I was staring straight up at her.

"I'm your paypig," I muttered without encouragement.

She bit her lip again, and closed her eyes in an extended blink, nodding her head knowingly as I confirmed what she already knew. "I know you are, you fool," she said while delicately stroking my matted hair. "You're my little paypig, aren't you?" She giggled and then danced her fingers down my cheek before playfully squeezing my nose. "Come on," she said. "Give me a little oink from that piggy nose of yours."

"Oink," I whimpered half-heartily. I was so exhausted, that I couldn't muster anything resembling an animal.

"That's a good piggy," she said, and then she reached for her phone back on the bed. While I was looking up at her and catching my breath, her phone clicked as her thumb danced around. Her face then lit up, and she burst into laughter. Turning the phone, she showed me a pair of piggy ears attached to a hairband. "Aren't they perfect? And they're only \$8!" she squealed. "You can wear these the next time you're paid. We can make a whole fun day of it. You'll be my little piggy while I spend your money, bit by bit? How does that sound?"

I let out a strained, "Oink."

April smirked, and then she made a show of hitting the buy button. "Enjoying being broke, piggy," she giggled, before carelessly tossing her expensive phone back on the bed.

"Mmmm." I bit my lip, and then I trembled slightly as a wave of pleasure rushed through me; April mercilessly reducing me to zero for the sake of it really hitting the spot. I couldn't explain why it suddenly felt so arousing, but it was like her arrogance about stealing from me had changed something within me. It just felt so damn good to be used and exploited by her. Drained of every cent I had, just because my feckless former friend was so ruthlessly selfish and greedy.

April then looked down at me, watching me shiver before she sternly wagged a finger. "I want you to take as many shifts as you can this week, piggy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Princess April," I grunted, completely exhausted and broken, yet eager to work all the harder to give her something to spend. To provide for her, so my bratty little princess could buy whatever the hell she felt like.

April smirked, but then, she suddenly had a weird look on her face. "You...you said you make about \$400 a week, right?"

"Yes?" I answered, the weird look on her face invoking confusion within my own.

"That doesn't make sense," she said, and she placed a finger to her lips. "If you earn that every week, and you've been working since you were eighteen...why do you have so little in your savings?" She scowled down at me. "Have you been hiding money from your princess?"

"No," I said. "That's all I have left over after living expenses and paying rent to my mother."

The weird expression returned, and then April raised an eyebrow. "Your mother charges you rent?" She giggled to herself. "Is that a thing? Wow, she's more annoying than I realised."

"Yes, she does," I said, unsurprised that April's mother had never bothered asking similar of her daughter.

"Well, that's money I don't want you wasting anymore," April said, lost in thought. "I'm sure there's something we can do about that."

A year later, and I was laying on my tummy; April's toes buried in my mouth as I greedily sucked and slurped my tongue all around them. Her heel had sunken into the soft mattress, while her toes merrily twitched and flexed as my tongue tickled in its efforts. I was a greedy piggy after so much training, and I hungrily plunged my tongue in deep, extracting every morsel of crud that I could find between my princess's toes. Occasionally, I'd feel a little flutter in my tummy, as I eyed the French pedicure adorning the toes of her other foot. Her nails always looked flawless, and I was sure to alert her the moment that changed. She adored her regular salon

pampering sessions on my dime, especially when they involved extended massages and full skin exfoliation, things I'd never experienced myself.

I blushed while feeling the hairband moving amongst my hair as I bobbed my head rhythmically. The two pink, piggy ears pointed up proudly, constantly reminding me of what I'd become whenever I caught sight of myself in her wall-length mirror. I'd shyly blush, with the ears bouncing around as I lapped eagerly at the bottom of April's little feet. It was almost therapeutic after a long day at work, partaking in something that required little thought instead of researching and preparing for court.

April was sitting with her back against the headboard, and she moved her pursed lips around while rolling her own tongue inside her cheeks. She was lost in thought, one arm crossed over her thighs while the other was holding her phone just before her immaculate face. She'd had her hair chemically straightened twice since the first time, and I knew the moment she'd notice a single frizzy strand, she'd immediately demand I work extra hard to fund another session. It was worth it though, and I swooned while looking up at her as I delicately slurped around her succulent big toe once more; her pretty brown hair tied off in bunched pigtails. She was such a sight to behold; a true beauty that had left her nerdy life behind her and never looked back. "I don't know what to buy," she muttered aloud. "There's just so much to pick from and I feel like I have everything already." She shrugged. "I suppose I'll just get myself some more diamond earrings."

I knew she wasn't talking to me, but instead merely airing her thoughts aloud. Her forehead was wrinkled as she struggled to decide what to spend my most recent earnings on. Things had really ramped up since I'd graduated, and as I was working as a junior solicitor at a local firm, April had found herself with a larger budget to enjoy herself. It was an immensely boring job, and I hated every moment, but I couldn't quit, because of my commitment to being April's loyal purse.

Despite my healthy salary, we lived pay cheque to pay cheque, since April plundered whatever arrived in my bank every month. It was hard enough keeping her away from the funds I set aside for the necessities, most of which went to paying rent to her mother. April's mother really appreciated the extra income, and she'd even begun taking less shifts at her job. When I returned from work, I'd sometimes see her relaxing downstairs with her feet up, enjoying a book and really appreciating the extra

free time. There'd been no talk from her about April having to go to college or get a job either, since her daughter had so cleverly found a way to fill the hole in their finances.

Having me move in hadn't been an easy sell, of course, with April's mother not wanting to cause any problems with my own. Yet, April had nagged and nagged, explaining how it made total sense since we were such good friends. She lied about wanting to have me tutor her, amongst other fruitful tales which were only designed to deceive.

Mother had been furious when I broached the idea, obviously enraged that she was losing her grip on both myself and my monthly rent. She tried to instil her will, but unbeknown to her, I was already helplessly devoted to the will of another. She'd stamped and yelled, proclaiming loudly I was a terrible daughter as she screeched and told me I did not have permission to leave. Yet, when April's mother had come by later to check everything was okay, Mother had been all smiles and supportive, not wanting to shame herself publicly and lose face. She was the bestest and most amazing mother ever, after all, and she was so encouraging of seeing her daughter move in with her one and only friend.

I hadn't spoken to Mother in the months since I'd moved my stuff next door, though I did occasionally see her scowling at me from the window whenever I returned from work. She'd planned for me to give her a share of my earnings since my success was all her doing. In her warped head, I was an investment, and once I had graduated and began my career, I was supposed to show how grateful I was to the mother that had made it all possible. I was supposed to provide for *her*. I was supposed to be a good daughter and pay her back for having been born and raised by her.

But I was a terrible daughter, because I was too busy being an incredible paypig instead. Not that leaving Mother had changed that feeling of constantly looking over my shoulder, knowing that every action I took was being scrutinised. April had taken over that position in my life, and she watched me with a careful eye, making sure I had no possible escape from under her bratty feet. I was her pet dork, as she liked to gloat, and feeling particularly generous one month, she'd even saved some of my earnings to buy me a new pair of extremely dorky glasses. The frames were extra

thick, and she loved taking selfies together, where I'd look like such a nerd next to her perfect princess beauty.

I'd been given the empty, smaller room in their house, but I spent little of my time there. Most nights I'd find myself sleeping on the floor at the foot of April's bed, staying in her room under the guise of us having fallen asleep while watching anime together. Thankfully, her mother never intruded at all, and it was such a relief to not have Mother breathing down my neck and barging in my room. It was quite peaceful sleeping at the foot of April's bed anyway, especially with one of her stinking, soiled piggy slippers tied against my face. I'd breathe in her hypnotic scent all night, enjoying that stale cheesy odour that reminded me of exactly where I belonged. In the mornings, I was careful not to wake her as I crept out for a day of work. My princess usually didn't rise until way after lunch, especially since she had little to do. I'd taken over her share of the chores, just to make sure that April's day was filled with nothing but fun.

April, of course, spent her most of her time posing in front of her mirror and taking sexy and suggestive photos. She had a steady income from her profiles, and she'd even branched out to streaming while watching her favourite anime. Her uploads were surprisingly popular, especially whenever she kicked back and crossed her feet on the corner of her desk; her polished toes wiggling as she giggled and reacted to whatever movies or series she was enjoying. Guys in particular love tipping her excellent work, and more recently, she's even made noises about going on dates. Her confidence has risen so much, after all, that it's the next logical step in her evolution from nerd to bombshell.

I suppose I do have my mother to thank for how things have turned out, in a way at least. I mean, she was the one that pushed and pressured me to pursue a career I have no interest in. A career that paid well, and served as bragging rights amongst her circle of friends, boasting over how great of a mother she was for raising such a driven daughter. If only she'd known, I'd only fully embrace a successful career in law once I was free of her meddling. Though, I'd done so not to please her, but instead, to provide for my princess. That was the ambition of a collared and owned paypig, wasn't it?

Perhaps that makes me a fool, but every day, after many tiring hours of the law, at least I get to return home and be April's fool. While she pats my head and tells me I'm such a good girl, especially as I devotedly grovel at her feet and beg her to spend everything I have: I'm complete. That's all I've ever wanted after all: to be praised and recognised for my worth.