

The Decision

“So, what do you think? The blue one or the black one?”

“Mmmm?”

“The blue one *is* a bit...well, librarianish... makes it look as though I’ve got Geography teachers in my ancestry, but I always think the black one makes my bum look big. What do you think? Emma?”

Emma glanced up, very briefly, from the magazine. “‘S cool.”

“School? What, like a uniform you mean? Oh God, now you come to mention it...”

The girl sighed, a sigh which combined fifteen years experience of clothes-wearing with a hundred years of opinion. “No. Cool. Like, you know, cool?”

Fifteen, spread out on the bed as though this was her room, wearing a face which was mostly paint and a dress which was mostly skin; pointed little bones jutting everywhere; Emma had never had so much as a fat five minutes.

“So then, which dress do you think your dad would prefer?” I tried again, more slowly. Hoping that something would penetrate her ‘Cosmopolitan’ brain.

“He liked Mum in red.”

She didn’t even glance up. Didn’t need to, she could *feel* my reaction, sense it in the air like a vulture senses death - riding the current, waiting for the last breath.

My teeth gritted so hard I could hear the bones in my ears cracking. The retort fought its way from my heart to my throat ‘yeah, but your mother was an unfaithful cow who took off the moment you were old enough to leave, and, right now, I think she had a point’. Words which burst just behind my teeth and stained my mouth, words which tasted like a thousand small victories, burning. I would not utter them. I would absorb sentences like this, take them back into my own body rather than let them seep out to poison my relationship.

But... just, *sometimes*...

“Well then, I think I’ll wear the black.” Her mother, after all, had been the kind of blonde on whom bloodshed would look good. *I* had the colouring which looked better at the funeral.

“Yeah, right.”

She'd put her feet up on our bed now. Tiny, perfect feet wearing huge, ugly sandals like something Dr Frankenstein might consider appropriate for a female creation. Her toenails wore the latest shade, expensive, pearlised... *mine*. She saw me looking. Licked her finger and flicked the magazine page, her ragged fingertips visible only for a moment in the breeze of passing 'Your Hundred Best Orgasms' on her way to the fashion. Although the pictures remained in front of her face, her eyes were on me as I slipped my dressing gown off and pulled the black dress over my head. Women constructed, not born, gazed from the gloss, blank-eyed as I smoothed the fabric down.

"How's that?"

An eyebrow twitched, the fine line of manicured hair eloquent in its condemnation of thirty-something women who wear anything other than full-body coverage. Another page cracked and turned.

"I think it's a bit short," I continued the monologued critique. "But if I wear heels it's not too bad. Right. Lipstick."

Not for me the Dior pout of the models or the sticky varnished shine of the watching teenager. I turned to my make-up bag.

"Emma, have you seen my red lipstick?"

"What're you saying? You saying I stole your lipstick? It's not in your bag so, right, must be Emma, must have stolen it? Probably flogged it to her slaggy friends, yeah, some tart who wants to wear stuff like she's been sucking blood?"

"I'm just asking..." careful now ... "Just asking if you'd seen it? Maybe borrowed it? Or maybe it rolled out, in the bathroom... you might have noticed it somewhere?"

The model faces crumpled like crying babies as the magazine hit the wall. The bed rocked, the cruise-liner shoes slammed the floor and a whirlwind of 'Impulse' left the room. The duvet held her imprint like a vampire's photograph, little pocks of elbows and knees, creases of shoulders; I hovered my hand above it for a second, wanting to smooth it out, rub her out of the room, but then the door flapped again and she was back.

"*There's* your fucking lipstick!"

The metal canister hit the bed; bounced, flew like space-debris to land at my feet.

"Thank you." No questions. That was the deal. No questions, no provocation. My decision.

"Fuck you."

She sat back on the bed, not bothering to pick up the magazine. Watched me, head juttled forward and fingers in her mouth.

Over-slow, over-careful, I smoothed my mouth with the lipstick. Outline. Top lip. Lower lip. Together.

“Mum always said that red lipstick makes you look like a whore. *She* wore pink.”

“Mmmm?” Together. Bite together.

“Kind of frosty. It was expensive too, not that cheap crap from Boots.”

“Long memory you’ve got, Emma.” No, no! Keep biting together! Don’t let...

“Sorry? What did you say?”

“Nothing.” I could do it, I really could.

“She was beautiful, my Mum.”

I looked at her in the mirror. Despite the adult pose, the adult magazine reading, the reflection I could see was that of a little girl; uncertain eyes and nervous fingers, feeling her way through something she'd never wanted.

“I’m sure you’re very like her.” It cost me not to add 'a spoilt selfish bitch', but I'd decided hadn't I? No sniping, no points-scoring – what would it be worth, getting one up on a fifteen year old girl – and my reward was her refocussed eyes, sliding off my face and onto the reflection of her own, the beginning of a smile.

“Yeah...”

I heard her stand and leave the room but kept my eyes on the mirror. Pressed my lips together again, watching the red stain leaching into my skin. Black dress, red mouth. Like a wound.

“Here.” She was back, behind me. I hadn’t heard her. She’d kicked off the big shoes and her bare feet looked innocent, untouched.

“What?”

Her head jerked. “It’ll go. With the dress.” A liquid sound, like water being poured, a coolness in my hand, and she left, walking soft-footed to her own room; a gentle closing of the door.

Between my fingers, cheap but pretty, coiled a black necklace on a beaded chain.