

Loveless Woman, Segment 1

“What do you think?” she says, shoving her phone in my face. It’s a picture of a shirtless man with distinguished abs, a chiseled jaw, and bright blue eyes accentuated by his fluffy brown hair.

“What do you think?” Mavis repeats. “Isn’t he so hot?” she pulls the phone back to herself so she can revel in his apparent beauty.

I shrug. “He has a face,” I say, turning back to my biology homework. *Which layer of skin is the deepest?*

She frowns. “You always say that. Why are you so boring?”

“I just don’t see people as hot,” I use my monotone voice. Maybe she’ll get the hint and stop talking about it.

She doesn’t. “That’s sad. You’re really missing out.”

*Subcutaneous tissue*, I scribble in the blank next to the question.

“Here, look at this one,” she says as she launches her phone at me again, this time with a picture of Zendaya on the screen.

“She’s pretty.”

“Pretty? You just called one of the hottest women on the planet ‘pretty’!”

“Mavis, you know I can’t tell the difference between someone being hot and being pretty.”

She continues scrolling on her phone, settling further into my couch. “It’s your sheltered childhood.” It most certainly was not. I was not that sheltered. I just had more important things to worry about than if the boy stupid enough to fire pepper spray in the back of the study hall was attractive.

“Don’t worry,” she chuckles. “You’re only 19. You’ll find someone before you graduate. I just know it. Heck, I’ll wingman for you!”

Now I make direct eye contact with her. “But what if I don’t want to find someone?”

“Oh don’t be silly, Nat! Everyone wants to find someone! That’s what makes you human!”

Trapped in a cage, a carnival barker beckoning people to view the loveless woman, an apparent oddity. Men jeer, women scowl, and children stare in awe at the monster.

"Let's just get back to work. I have a GPA to maintain and no lover is going to help me do that." I push the circus image out of my head and return to my worksheet. She rolls her eyes and keeps scrolling.

"What do you *mean* you're going on a date with him?"

Doris flaps her arms hysterically in an attempt to shush me. It doesn't work.

"You can't go out with him. I won't let you!" My overprotective instinct is kicking in. I sound like my dad.

"You're just jealous," she pouts.

"Oh please. You know that's not anywhere near the truth."

"But Stuart is really nice. He said he likes my eyes."

"I guarantee you he has tried that line on several women before you. Doris, please. He's not worth it."

"Nat, would you stop being so cynical for five seconds? You're not the one going out tonight!"

"But I will be the one who will have to console you after he inevitably breaks your heart." I'm not cynical. I'm practical. And, practically speaking Doris, dating this man is a bad idea.

"Well, part of life is getting your heart broken. That's a risk I have to take to find a person who loves me." But I love you. I love you and all our friends. Deeply, passionately, steadfastly. Isn't that enough?

I look into her eyes, and they clearly show she is smitten. Her logic has given way to hopeless romance, and nothing I say will change that. Love, you didn't do right by me. Rosemary Clooney, *White Christmas*. Count your blessings instead of sheep.

I sigh. "If it starts going south, I'll bail you out."

She throws her arms around me and jumps with a gleeful smile. "Thank you!" She'll never listen to me. But my love for her will stay regardless.

I unlock my dorm door, set my stuff on the living room table, and why is there a man on my couch what is he doing here?

"John, this is my roommate Natalie. Nat, this is John, my boyfriend," Clara says with a smile. She's sitting next to him on the couch. His arm around her shoulder. A smug grin

on his face. I can tell. I always can. His smile would look genuine if his eyes weren't filled with mockery. He's laughing at me. *I stole your friend. Your love is now worthless to her. Now you can't even rest in your own home without the reminder of how broken you are, you loveless woman you.*

"Nice to meet you John." My monotone voice greets him. To her credit, Clara catches it. She frowns at me. *Please be civil*, her eyes say. I nod and decide to make a tactical retreat to my bedroom.

When I hear our front door open and close three hours later, I pop back out.

"Is he gone?"

"Yes, Mom." Ignore it. Push past it.

"I thought we had agreed to alert each other when we had guests over, especially male guests."

"I'm sorry, he kinda just showed up. I opened the door and he was there with flowers and takeout."

Huh?

"Did you tell him where you lived? Did he stalk you? If he doesn't live in this building how did he get in here?" How is she okay with this?

"He didn't stalk me. A friend of his lives here and crossed me in the hall once, so he let John in when he'd said he wanted to surprise me."

A tall man cloaked in shadow slinking in the hall in the dead of night. Hiding in the closet. *Our* closet. A Cheshire grin, he's got a knife, it's in the air, I push Clara out of the way and—

"How long."

"A week now."

A week?!

"And you thought that gave him clearance to be in our apartment?"

"Like I said, he snuck in."

"And you don't see that as creepy? A red flag?"

"It was cute!"

"There are people out there who believe Jeffrey Dahmer was cute!"

We argue. I've never had an argument with any of my friends like this. I'm actually angry. That's not normal. But my anger is born of fear. Fear for her. Clara says once I get a boyfriend, I'll understand. I retort that it will be a cold day in hell before I let a man put his hands on me. Her horrified face puts an end to my anger, and I'm back in the circus cage.

I run to my car and cry for forty-two minutes. I come back inside and apologize. She doesn't need to apologize—I forgave her immediately, because that's what I do for people I love.

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