

Mother

My mother's mouth has been a hard slash of a line for as long as I can remember. Never happy, always judging, I shrank before it every time it was turned toward me. I know that slash, know the sharp words that would tumble out of it, telling me I wasn't good enough—a million little barbs that tore at my heart as I grew from ugly child to awkward teen to unremarkable woman.

I fidget with the pleats of the black skirt, my hands brushing the rolls at my waist. No matter how many hours I spent twisting, squatting, torturing myself into the shapes my mother wanted, I couldn't erase the rolls that always had her eyes pointed narrowly toward them. She'd notice...today of all days, I had to be perfect. I suck in those rolls, shrinking myself even further than the shapewear had done.

Glancing in the mirror, I can't see the rolls. My skirt stops a respectable distance, just kissing below my knee. Proper, a real lady who wouldn't remind anyone of the girl arrested while having sex with her boyfriend in the back of his mom's rusted out, green, station wagon. My mother's slim nostrils had flared as the cop delivered me to the door, my brown hair falling into my eyes as I focused on her black kitty heels polished to perfection. But it didn't save me from the sharp word slipping from her thin lips, "Slut."

But not a slut today, Momma. The boy from the station wagon placed his hand on my arm and I turned to him, reading the worry in eyes now aged with laugh lines. *At least I did something right, I* thought, but what choice did I have when those rolls had merged into the large lump I could no longer hide from her judgment. It wasn't the worst decision; we'd had years together where laughter was more common than the years of my childhood where my father spent his hours working or whittling away in his workshop—projects amounting to nothing but an avoidance of time—an avoidance of her.

She didn't shape those sharp words at him. She cowed him with her gray eyes, hardened into glittering stones filled with disdain. She only hated one other person more than she hated him and that was her daughter standing here, shuffling from foot to foot, blinking back the tears threatening to tarnish the makeup I'd applied so carefully today. I had to be perfect.

“It’s going to be okay,” my husband, Chris, searched my face before focusing on the hard slash of a line my mouth had become. His fingertips touching the corner of my lips, a reminder he’s done a thousand times...I’m not my mother, my mouth could form into different shapes—laughter, sadness, excitement—satisfaction as we reached for each other in the night, our soft sighs no longer echoing around the dusty vinyl of a family vehicle. “You aren’t her,” he whispered, reminding me of that fact. After all, she wasn’t here.

But she was out there, beyond those white doors where I could hear people whispering, knew they would be craning their necks to spectate the imperfect daughter who is nothing more than a disappointment in the flesh.

I nod. Take a breath. Nod again.

Chris reaches for the door—opens it.

Like a snapshot, my focus instantly zooms to the black coffin at the other side of the room. I don’t notice the dozens of people standing around. All I see is the shiny sides and the white satin of the open lid. I know I am in there. All the parts of me that is nothing but a disappointment to her. My hand slides down my sides, looking for those imperfections the audience will see. I purse my lips, teasing at the bottom one with my teeth, reminding me to not let it rest into that harsh line.

I move forward, my flat black loafers creating a swishing sound on the carpet, no kitty heels for me much to her ire. I don’t feel Chris but he navigates me by my elbow to stand before the casket. My head drops like the string holding it up is suddenly cut. My vision blurs and I try to recognize the woman at rest on the white satin.

Fingertips touching the corners of her mouth, which is no longer a hard slash. I trace her full red lips over the softened cupid’s bow I’ve never noticed and cup the soft skin of her cheek dusted with a rosy youthfulness before pulling my fingers away, the coldness of her body a reminder of the coldness of her tone. My eyebrows crease...my mother looks like a stranger...someone I’ve never known. My mother looks...happy.

“She was such a kind woman.”

“So gentle.”

“So loving.”

“She helped me when I thought I was going to lose everything.”

The words flowing around me as people passed us. My peaceful mother, my sad husband and I...the confused daughter...realizing I didn't know the woman resting in that casket like all those around me, tears shining in their eyes at their loss. She had been loved, even if that love hadn't come from her imperfect daughter. She'd been a woman I had never even asked to know.

Fingertips touch the corner of my lips, Chris reminding me that her and I were both much more than a hard slash of a mouth.