

FLUFF

1.

Mia's hands are on my hips, her red nails sparkling like rubies under the Hollywood lights. Someone else might say they look like blood-soaked teeth, sharp and pointy as they press into my skin. Not me, though. To me they are rubies.

'This dress is perfect, Ella. You have to wear it.'

I nod at her in the triptych mirror. Our skin is cast in red light. The carpet and walls of the dressing room are the same blood red as Mia's nails. We glow as we look at my body in the pink dress on the circular raised platform in front of the mirrors. Mia wears red. Red is her colour. She says my colour is pink and so I wear pink.

'Don't you think?'

'Yes, I do think.'

And I do. Mia knows what's perfect and I trust her. Someone else might say that the dress, which is a size too small and clingy on my fleshy body, is not perfect. Someone else might say that Mia chooses clothes for me so that I don't look perfect. That she chooses them so that I demonstrate my trust, that I am not the Ella I was before. Not me, though. I think the dress is perfect.

'You can take it off now,' she says with a squeeze of my hips; the pink around the rubies expanding like kneaded dough.

I take the dress off and put it back on the hanger. Change into my pink tracksuit. It was a gift from Mia like the dress is a gift. I am not supposed to prefer privacy when I change, but it is hard not to turn when I know that she watches me. She is sitting on the red sofa when I face her again. The sofa is velvet and curved into a U, facing the racks and shelves filled with Mia's red. Her legs are crossed, and she smiles her soft smile. Her eyes are hungry and sharp, so I don't look at them. I look at her bright white teeth that are cast in that same red glow as her skin. Like the red comes from inside of her, and not the walls.

She pats the sofa next to her, her white teeth say *come here*. So, I do. I sit next to her, both feet flat on the red carpet. I look at her and those teeth smile at me. She pats my hair, holding the ends in her fingertips.

'You're going to look so beautiful.'

'Thank you,' I say.

'Do you think you're going to look beautiful?'

'So beautiful.'

She leans over and hugs me from the side, her body faces mine while I am still facing the mirror. Her mouth is near my ear, and I feel her breath like it is my breath going in and out of my body. This body that in a lot of ways is also her body. Mia's red skin embraces mine, her breath like the sound of the ocean in a seashell. I see it all from the mirror.

Looking into my own eyes, I see the thing I do not like to see. The thing that Mia and the others try to keep far away so that I can stay nice and soft and pink. I look down, to her arm around my waist. Her arm and her hands which are always holding a piece of my body like property. Holding pieces of me I can never touch myself. Touching them makes the thing behind my eyes angry. If I was honest with myself, which I try not to be, I think the way Mia touches me makes it angry, too. But that thing is not me, because I'm Soft Ella, and Soft Ella is everyone's favourite Ella.