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**DUSTY ROSE IS** a color I like to use when I paint. It's subtle and earthy, great for undertones. Like many colors, though, dusty rose doesn't pair well with everything.

A prime example is the floor-length taffeta dress I'm wearing, handpicked by Amy, my stepmom as of this afternoon. The fabric is stiff, the silhouette suffocating—and the ruffled collar? Atrocious. My stepsister, Josie, is equally unlucky in a teal monstrosity that makes her look more like a butchered fish than a mermaid. When hosting a summer wedding at an orchard known for its apricot jam and succulent peaches, you'd *think* a person would want to dress their bridesmaids in pastel tones and airy chiffon to combat the July humidity. But no.

I wipe sweat from my brow and pluck an ice-cold glass of water from the tray of a passing server. As tempting as it is to pour the contents of the glass over my head, I politely sip my drink instead. The reception hall—or outside tent—is massive, sheltering nearly two hundred guests and staff on this scorching day. The pearly white fabric draped high above us is a respite after languishing under the

five o'clock sun for the ceremony. What truly tested my patience, however, was the hour-long photoshoot that preceded it.

Amy hails from an overgrown family tree. The photographer wanted a variety of group shots with all her relatives, no matter how distant. Many flew in from Singapore and Taiwan to attend. I'd never met any of them until today. In fact, over half the guests at the wedding are strangers to me. Contrary to the bride's inflated guest list, Dad mostly invited his friends and workmates. His extended family lives in Taiwan and everyone was either too busy or elderly to venture to the States. Since his parents passed away years ago, the only immediate family he has left is Aunt Mindy, his sister.

Cheers ripple throughout the hall as Amy and Josie step onto the raised platform in the center of the tent for their mother-daughter dance. I reluctantly join everyone around the dance floor to watch the pair as they waltz along to a symphony I've heard one too many times, their movements synchronized and rehearsed.

Dad emerges from the crowd to stand next to me, and I notice the patch of foundation blended into his jawline, concealing the old scar he acquired from a shaving accident. For the sake of photos, he traded his glasses for contact lenses despite having a chronic case of dry eye. He also grew his hair out to achieve a sideswept look I've never seen him sport until today.

"You look lovely," he says for the umpteenth time.

I snort. "I look like I'm wearing a paper bag around my neck."

"Don't say that. The dress suits you."

"Sure, if I were a PB&J sandwich wearing an Elizabethan ruff." I sent Aunt Mindy a selfie after I got my makeup done this afternoon. She told me to wear the dress and suck it up for one day, but even she acknowledged how unflattering it is.

Dad claps a hand on my shoulder. "Relax, today's a special day. You should enjoy it."

"Easier said than done," I murmur, tugging at my collar, my skin suddenly prickly.

"Lynda." He's whispering now. "Be a team player."

It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes.

Let's not forget who designed, printed, and mailed the wedding invitations, and correct me if I'm wrong, but bridal showers don't plan themselves—and that welcome sign outside with the watercolor lilies that says *Amy & Brian* in flawless calligraphy?

That was also me.

Happy bridesmaid I may not be, but I've certainly been a team player.

I met Amy last spring. She'd been dating my dad for five months by the time he introduced her to me. The news wasn't particularly shocking. He'd been single for over a decade, after Mom passed away. It made sense for him to put himself out there.

Four months later, though, he proposed.

Now, *that* caught me by surprise.

The news razed the ground beneath my feet, plummeting me into a hole I'm still clawing my way out of. I was a high school freshman when I met Amy. Now, the summer before junior year, I have a stepmom and a stepsister. How is one supposed to cope?

You grin and bear it, according to my dad.

Don't get me wrong. Amy and Josie are perfectly nice. Anyone would be glad to have them as family. If the wedding weren't for another year, maybe I'd be in a more comfortable place, but who can really say? Sadly, I had absolutely no say.

There's a smattering of applause as Amy and Josie clear the dance floor to make way for me and my dad. I spot Aunt Mindy among the crowd. She and her husband, Uncle Ben, are the only ones here I'm excited to see. They used to live within walking distance from me until they traded Fallbank, Virginia, for Chicago, Illinois.

Aunt Mindy gives me a thumbs-up, as if to say *You've got this!*

Unfortunately, I don't.

Piano music begins to play from the speakers overhead. Dad and I sway, our hands slippery with sweat as we try to match each other's pace. Although the pointed-toe heels Amy gifted me are a size 6, every step I take is like walking barefoot through a cactus field. My feet are begging to be released from their prison; yet, somehow, the awkwardness of this moment surpasses the pain. While Josie might look like a fish in her dress, I feel like I'm flopping around on land,

unable to tell left from right. Maintaining eye contact with my dad during a slow dance is ... embarrassing, so I focus on his bow tie, wishing I could be anywhere but here.

Then I hear him snuffle.

Dad's teary-eyed, just as he was when Amy walked down the aisle. He's looking at me as if I *am* lovely, as if this moment is precious and he wants nothing more than to share it with me—even though I'm waiting for it to be over.

I suck it up and finish the dance.

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In his speech, Dad's best man, an old college friend I haven't seen in ages, prattles on about how overjoyed he is that Dad found love again while avoiding all mentions of my dead mom. After a climatic toast to the bride and groom, dinner is served, and a cacophony of clanging cutlery and drunken laughter descends upon the reception hall. I'm seated at a table with Aunt Mindy, Uncle Ben, his sister, Aunt Elle, and her son, Peter.

"When Brian told me they were hosting a big wedding, I wasn't sure what to expect," Aunt Mindy confesses as we all tuck into our first course: a peach and spinach salad. "They certainly outdid themselves. The venue is gorgeous."

We have Amy's wedding planner to thank for that. Once you strip away the tent and decor, the orchard grounds themselves are quite bare. Amy's first choice was a private estate that had been fully booked for the year by the time she phoned them. If she'd had her way, the wedding would've gone from semiformal to black tie.

From the photos I've seen, Mom and Dad had a backyard wedding with no more than thirty guests. Mom wore a white tea-length dress and a handmade crown of daisies on her head, a glaring contrast to Amy's bejeweled ballgown.

What would Mom have thought about all this?

I don't have any memories of her—breast cancer took her when I was four—but if I had to guess, she would've found this wedding to

be a bit ... much. Just to be clear, I have nothing against lavish weddings. If you can afford to splurge, go for it. Except, Dad's always been frugal. I guess, if you didn't go all out for your first wedding, you compensate for it at your second. ...

"Lynda." Aunt Elle taps her champagne flute to get my attention, short of snapping her fingers. "You're going to be a junior this year?"

With a mouthful of peaches, I reply, "Yup."

Junior year is *the* year colleges care about most, as every adult likes to remind me. Aunt Elle loves to talk academics, and nothing is more impressive to her than Ivy League status. Peter goes to UPenn. He and I aren't close, but we have this running joke where I pretend to think he goes to Penn State. Just to piss off his mom.

"Still thinking about art school?" she asks, twirling her fork between her fingers.

I push some spinach around on my plate. "Yup. My first choice is RISD."

Aunt Elle stares at me like I'm speaking gibberish.

"The Rhode Island School of Design," I say.

"Brian's okay with that?"

Dad prefers I leave art as a hobby in favor of a more stable and lucrative profession. He doesn't want to shell out thousands of dollars for a degree I'll never use, and I get that. The art world is competitive. Not everyone can make it to the top, much less break into the industry. But Dad knows I'm committed, so he's willing to help pay for art school under the condition that I keep my GPA above a 3.8 and apply for scholarships.

"We've talked about it," I finally say. "He supports me."

"Hmm ..." Aunt Elle squares her elbows on the table and squints at me.

I sense an incoming lecture.

"Well, Lynda, I for one hope you're applying to SAIC," Aunt Mindy cuts in. "You're welcome to stay with Ben and me."

She gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, and I match her smile with my own. I can always count on Aunt Mindy to have my back.

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago isn't my second or third choice, but I can't deny the appeal of free housing.

“The guest room is yours to decorate,” Uncle Ben adds. “I’m almost done renovating the basement. Feel free to use it as your art studio.”

Aunt Elle gives him a withering look before turning back to me. “Why not stay close to home? UPenn isn’t too far. Assuming you get in—”

“I’m not interested in UPenn,” I tell her.

*Or staying close to home.*

She huffs with indignation. “You should keep an open mind. It would be such a shame to leave the nest so soon after Brian remarried. You’re not an only child anymore. Think about your new family. You need more time to bond.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, just to appease her.

“Please do.”

I sweep my eyes toward the front of the room, to where Dad and Amy are sitting alone at the sweetheart table. He feeds her a slice of peach before leaning forward to whisper into her ear. When he pulls back, they stare at each other adoringly, oblivious to everything around them.

I want to be happy for them, but when I envision the future, all I see is an art school anywhere but here.