

I'm taking a pepperminty sip
savoring the warmth traveling into my belly
when I feel a persistent tap on my shoulder.

*Hey, you're in my grade. The new kid?
June, right?*

I break away from Moms
turn to face the voice.
*It's Juniper, I say, before I
grasp who I'm speaking with.*

*Right, sorry. Juniper. Well, I'm Lyric.
I think we have English together.
I need a favor.
Would you mind helping me for a minute?*

*We actually have
two other classes together,
I blurt out.*

Lyric raises an eyebrow
as she checks her face in a compact.
We do?

Chemistry and fifth-period study hall.

*Right! Yeah, sorry. It's been a long day.
Brain fart I guess. I've got a lot going on.*

*No worries, I say.
What do you need my help with?*

*I'm trying to promote these lashes
on BeautyStarz,
Lyric starts, batting her eyes at me dramatically.*

*Uh-huh, I manage.
As if I could miss
the luscious lashes
framing her
almond-brown eyes.*

Lyric looks like she stepped out of *Teen Vogue*
or something, and I—
I look like

a walking Eddie Bauer ad
in a maroon puffer coat
a pair of black fleece-lined joggers
snow boots and a matching
knitted hat-mittens-scarf situation.

*The solo shots I've been taking
are not reading the way I want to,
Lyric continues, gesturing to a whole
influencer setup nearby.
I think the shot would be better
if there was more "romance"
or whatever in it.*

She says *romance* as if
it's a bad word using air quotes.
OK, so—where do I fit in?
And what is *BeautyStarz*?

Lyric laughs. *Right, sorry.
You don't strike me as a BeautyStarz user.
It's basically a social media platform—
but for the beauty community.*

The beauty community?
I am truly lost.
My beauty routine consists of face wash, moisturizer
and lip balm.

*Yeah—makeup artists, content creators, and
other beauty enthusiasts, she continues.*

*Anyway, I create content on BeautyStarz—
I've got a following of about 20K and growing
and sometimes brands pay me to promote their products.
Like these lashes for example.*

I nod slowly
OK . . .

*Lyric sighs. Look, with your consent
I'd like to get some shots of us together—
as if you're my date. I want you to pose with me
like this is the best damn tree
we've ever seen and isn't it all lovely
and magical and shit to be
"in love."
Trust. It's going to be a great shot.*

There she goes again
using air quotes.

*Um . . . I'm not sure
I'm the right person for this . . .*

*You look adorable in that hat and scarf set.
And your skin is glowing—seriously
I need your skin-care deets after this.
And look, we're coordinated—it's gonna look
so festive and on brand. Just humor me, OK?*

*You think I'm adorable? I say out loud.
There go my ears again, flushing with heat.*

I do, Lyric confirms
and that's all it takes.

In an instant

I'm in front of Lyric's ring light
and tripod.

Lyric wraps her arms around my waist
and then tilts her face down at me ever so slightly
so that I can feel her breath on my cheek.

I'm just a little shorter than her
so when she tells me to turn my head up
to look her in the eyes
our lips are so close they almost touch.

Like this? I whisper
hoping she can't feel my heart
knocking around my chest
through the layers of our coats.

Yes. Now
just give me a little smile.

I obey.
I hear the sound of the camera shutter
as Lyric clicks a remote.

The snow begins to fall harder
around us.

I forget for just a moment
that I am not in fact

