

I think you can imagine that I didn't arrive at Social Studies in the most chipper of moods. My scowl didn't seem to faze Howie in the slightest.

"Why are you so thrilled to see me?" I said, walking up to him, "You just saw me at lunch, and I feel like killing people."

"You'll have to tell me what happened this time, but anger looks good on you."

"What? Anger is my glory?"

"It becomes you, in any case."

Before I could pursue this tidbit more, I saw the sign on my chair.

There was a "Beware of Dog" sign stuck to my seat. At least, my seat as of yesterday, since now I wasn't sitting with Bitchy McAsswaffle.

I stopped and stared at it for a moment. I heard a few chuckles. The classroom was only half full, but obviously the people already there had seen the sign. Someone pushed past me and laughed and pointed.

Howie swiftly sat down in my seat, covering the sign.

"You can sit here today," he said, pointing at his usual chair. I sat, my face hot with shame which I quickly transferred into the more comfortable emotion of "fucking pissed off."

"Where is the worthless bag of beaver dung?" I asked him, turning in my seat. "I don't see her."

"One of her buddies probably did it. Stella, let it go. It's just high school drama stunts. It doesn't mean anything."

“It doesn’t mean anything GOOD. I’m trying to make friends in a new school and I’m quickly becoming a pariah. That’s ASSTACULAR, HOWARD.”

“I don’t even understand it. Why call you a dog?”

“They’re implying that I’m ugly, Howie, and/or a bitch.”

“But you’re beautiful, and intelligent, and I think that underneath all your brash talk, you’re kind and caring, too.”

I looked at him. “You’re making me into the person you want me to be.”

“No, I can sense it. It’s sort of a vibe. You can debate with me point by point, but I’d win.”

Kelly arrived. She glanced at the chair, looked surprised to see Howie in it, and then glanced at me. I ignored her, hoping that she’d think that Howie had sat in the chair before I even had a chance to see her little sign. I didn’t want her to get the satisfaction, although someone would probably tell her soon enough.

When the bell rang at the end of class, I motioned Howie out of the chair and waited until Kelly passed us, sending me a disparaging glance. Then I whisked the sign off of the chair and stuck it to her bag as she went by.

For about two seconds, her book bag said “Beware of Dog” and she didn’t notice and it was great. Then it clattered to the floor and she turned around.

“Pathetic, Stella,” she said. “I think you dropped something.”

“Let’s go, Stella,” said Howie.

“Yes, Stella, go with the freakazoid. He’s clearly your soul mate,” said Kelly. “He’s almost as big of a loser as you. But then, no one’s bigger than you.”

“Is your family a happy one?” I snarled, “Or do you go home at night?”

She took a moment to think about that one, and I swept out of the room before she had untangled its complexities.

I struggled to get my binder into my bag as I walked, fighting the burning sensation behind my eyes. I knew it would be like this. I knew I’d end up at the bottom of the social strata. But that didn’t make it easier to deal with. I slowed down and stood against the wall, taking deep breaths.

Howie reached out his arm, as if he was going to put it around me. I stiffened, and his hand paused in mid-air, then changed direction, reaching for my bag instead.

I hitched the bag onto my back and started walking again.

“I don’t need you to carry things for me.”

“I know. I want to.” He followed me along the hall and down the stairs. He tried to open the school doors for me but I pushed through myself.

“I don’t need you to do stuff for me! Look, I don’t know if you’re trying to suck up or what, but I don’t need to be treated like a delicate princess, okay? I’m far too aware of the irony.”

“Why is it ironic to be treated like a princess?”

“Because I’m big, and tough, and I could probably kick your ass.”

“Stella, I don’t think you’re weak. If anything, I admire your strength. I just want to be helpful to you. Tell me what you’d like me to do, and I will do it.”

“Why?”

“Because I like you. Because you, you’re...” he held his hands out wide.

“Fat?”

“No, you’re... amazing. I want... I want you to be useful to you. I want to become someone you want in your life, even if it isn’t in a romantic way.”

“Are you telling me that you’d settle for being *used* by me?”

He shrugged his lean shoulders. “Yes.”

“That’s seriously messed up, okay?”

How could I have considered dating this guy, even for a minute?

Yes, okay, his attraction for me was attractive, but this guy had issues. You can’t date someone with issues. It’s a bad plan. I started to feel better about being completely unable to be nice to him.

I grabbed Howie’s arm and pulled him aside, out of the crowd of students all heading to their cars or down to the bus. Part of my brain squealed girlishly with the thrill of actually touching him but I shut that down fast.

“Listen,” I said, “I don’t know anything about dating or romance, but I’m pretty sure that it’s not

normal to just tell someone, 'I'll do whatever it takes to make you like me'. It comes across as a little desperate, you know?"

"You do like me," he replied frankly, and his eyes looked steadily into mine, "I know that. We have a lot in common. You can talk with me. If I eat often enough I can keep up with you intellectually, and I'm the closest thing to a friend you have here so far. I know all of this. But I can't make you feel more for me than that, and I don't want to force you into anything you aren't comfortable with. I just want to be helpful to you, to be useful to you, to make you more comfortable, and not less. I want to make your days better, and not worse.

"So I am telling you now – tell me to jump, and I will ask how high. Tell me to carry your books, fetch your lunch, sort your notes, and I will do it. Tell me to leave you alone and never talk to you again, and I will do that too. Anything you ask... and I will do it. It's not a plea, it's not a bribe. It is what it is."

He was so calm. Not desperate or crazy or anything, just serene and still slightly monotone. He held me with his eyes and I was transfixed. His hands closed over my arms, gently drawing me in until our bodies were almost touching. I thought I felt a tingle where we touched, as though there was a current running through us. The burble of voices around us and the whoosh of traffic going by all seemed to fade into the background as he held me.

"Tell me," he whispered. "Tell me what you want, anything, and I promise I will do it."

*This is the moment, I thought.*

I could tell him, “Kiss me,” and he’d do it. I paused, trying to work up the words. I was trying to reconcile who I was with who I could be.

No, Stella Blunt had never been a sap for soppy romance. No, Stella had never done the kissyface stuff. Yes, Stella had always been the “ugh, get a room” type.

But Stella could change, right?

I opened my mouth, and I seriously thought I was going to be able to do it. My whole sense of self was about to change. This would be a moment I’d remember for the rest of my life.

My first kiss.

Then I felt a spasm of panic and instead my mouth said, “So, what, like if I asked you to step in front of a speeding car, you’d do it?”

And the moment broke, and he smiled and stepped back, and while I was wishing I could grab those words and stuff them back into my mouth, he took another step off of the curb and

BAM.

A car appeared where he had just been standing, and there was a shout of shock from all the people around us. I heard a wet thud as Howie’s body landed on the pavement.

Oh, *shit*.