

“Rule #1: The only thing holding you back is yourself...and that massive crush on your father’s best friend.

Amelia

Most girls my age have vision boards. I imagine they’re covered in things like wedding dresses, elaborate tropical vacations, attractive age-appropriate partners, maybe even a few kids and a white picket fence.

But I don’t have a vision board. I have a pile of unfinished sketches, scraps of mismatched fabric, an espresso-stained crop top, an Adderall prescription, and a lifelong crush on the one man I cannot have.

The speaker in the corner croons a lo-fi hip-hop station, the only sound that lets me focus, because the one thing worse than music with lyrics is complete silence. But the sultry slow melody and calming synth beat is just the right combination of sound.

The club is still hours from opening, and the view from my window displays a hazy orange glow over Paris. I don’t know if any of the other owners are in yet, but I assume at least a few are. Most of the internal workings of owning a sex club can take place during regular business hours. “The only ones who really need to be here late are Weston, since he runs the bar, and Elizabeth, who manages the performers. Jack and Julian are both out of here by dinnertime most days now, especially since they’ve settled down and found themselves a loving partner. Or partners in my brother’s case.

Then there’s Phoenix. But she intimidates me a little, so I try to avoid her.

With one knee perched on a rolling chair, I hover awkwardly over a floral spring line. I feel as if I’m swimming through ideas—or drowning in them, rather.

This isn’t for the club, of course. Nothing about these floral chiffon sleeves or empire waists screams sex club, but I’m working on more of a side project right now. My best friend, Freya, has been pushing me to submit for a designer’s fashion program where they take young ducklings and grow us into full-fledged designers.

Which I guess has always been the dream.

“The only problem is Freya is focused, hardworking, disciplined, and brilliant. She just opened her own restaurant to astounding success.

Whereas I forget to eat most days, still live with my parents, and probably only got this job because my dad was the one handing out the positions.

My best friend believes in me, which is amazing, but she doesn’t really understand. She doesn’t get so overwhelmed with choices she shuts down. She doesn’t look at mile-long to-do lists and crash out in tears.

And her love life isn’t completely stalled out by a useless crush on someone twenty-eight years older than her.

But I digress.

Instead of having an office upstairs like the rest of the team, I have a large studio at the end of the hall. It’s not the most inspiring room in the world. With white plaster walls and ancient

hardwood floors, I find it to be a little drab. However, it has the best view in the building, so I stare out of it a lot, watching the sunset and trying to gain inspiration from the City of Lights itself.

City.

Spring.

Floral.

Jardin du Luxembourg...

"What about palm trees?" I whisper to myself as I drop the pastel-pink pencil and grab a more muted green instead. "Is that too summery?"

My knee bounces as I bite my lip and deliberate over the new color palette scribbled onto the white paper. Practically leaping over the table, I grab the color swatches of fabric on their metal ring and play with some new ideas.

Before long, I'm second-guessing my vision and going right back to the boring but safe floral designs. It feels so cheap and soulless, but floral designs work. Floral designs sell.

I hate floral.

Practically lying across my desk and sketching on a pad of paper like a kid, I hear a pair of heavy footsteps coming down the hall. At first, I don't think anything of it. It's probably my brother or Jack.

But then that husky French accent greets someone in a distant office and I tense.

Matis Moreau only has two sides—charming and more charming.

One is reserved for his day-to-day encounters with friends, his dentist, and nuns, probably. He smiles, laughs, flirts, compliments.

The other is when I see him in the club late at night, wooing some lucky patron, man or woman, to a room in the back.

And sometimes not in a room at all. I've walked into the club before to find him with his arms stretched across the back of a booth and a pair of eager lips wrapped around his dick.

On more than one occasion.

And he's my godfather.

Again...I digress.

The point is that Matis is irresistible. And he's aware of it.

I've known him my whole life, but he spent much of it out of my presence. When he wasn't working at the club, he was touring Europe, spending entire years in Monaco and Ibiza. He wanted nothing to do with his best friend's young, bratty kids.

But then, at some point, I started to see Matis differently. He was no longer some elusive and flighty family friend. When compared to every bumbling, self-centered, immature guy I dated, Matis was worldly and sophisticated and funny and kind.

And so handsome it hurts to look at him.

For seven years now, I've been—and I don't use this word lightly—obsessed. I would *never* act on this crush or expect him to ever see me as more than the hyperactive, disorganized, grown-up version of the girl he once knew.

But I'm twenty-five, for God's sake. If I'm still daydreaming about my godfather at thirty, someone better drag me to a convent. Or an orgy to get it out of my system.

Whichever works faster.

"Bonjour, Amelia."

I scramble down from the table, fabric swatches and colored pencils falling to the floor. My heart pitter-patters in my chest, mostly from his presence, his voice, and the natural way he says bonjour with a smile, only emphasizing the second half of the word.

*So goddamn charming.*

“Oh, hey,” I say awkwardly as I try to tuck my blond hair behind my ear, but it’s too short and falls right back out of place. I got this chin-length bob and bangs in an attempt to keep my hair out of my eyes, but most days I just look like a wild mess. “Bonjour, I mean.”

He chuckles at me. “Working hard?”

“Umm...yeah. Just a little side project actually.” I prop my hip against the table, crossing my arms over my petite breasts, letting my crop top lift in an attempt to draw his eyes to the exposed skin of my midriff. God, I’m desperate.

His eyes don’t stray from mine for even a second.

“Don’t work too hard,” he jokes. As he leans against the door, I drink in the sight of him like I’ve been parched for days. With mostly dark hair—lightly dusted with gray around his temples, I swear it must be a crime to get this much better looking with age. Has anyone considered reporting him? Surely it’s witchcraft and frankly a major threat to all other men on the planet who might one day even hope to compete. They should be concerned.

Yeah well...” I say, clearing my throat to try and make a joke back at him. “Not all our dreams include leather and whips.”

He laughs again, those dimples in his cheeks so prominent they could start wars. “Pity.”

I know from the naked eye, it would appear as if Matis is flirting with me. Unfortunately, I’ve learned with time that this is just how he is. It’s how he speaks to everyone—with alluring sarcasm and dripping sex appeal.

Again...he’s so charming it’s quite dangerous.

“Are you here for a meeting?” I ask, trying not to sound too desperate. Every day, I dream the same thing: that Matis has decided to come out of retirement and will attend all our board meetings. And since we’re out of office space upstairs, he’ll just have to share this one with me since it’s the biggest.

I can share.

“You six don’t need me anymore,” he replies with a wink. “I think you have it all under control.”

“That’s not true,” I reply as I blow some stray bangs from my eyes. “I mean, don’t tell anyone I said this, but Jack and Julian are falling apart. This place is in shambles without you.”

Clutching a colored pencil between my fingers, I roll it back and forth, rubbing each individual ridge as I grin up at him sheepishly. Matis laughs and shoves his perfectly aged hands into his pockets with so much swagger, I nearly faint on the spot.

“You’re just saying that,” he quips back.

To that I can only shrug. Then he takes a slow step into the room, sucking every ounce of air from the space as he does. I gaze up into his eyes, wondering if today is finally the day he starts to see me as a real woman and not the little girl I once was.

“It’s true,” I whisper, my eyes locked on his.

Standing just a foot away from me, the rich aromatic scent of his cologne—bergamot and sandalwood—drifts to my nose, and I inhale it as if I could store it and keep it forever.

His sultry expression suddenly melts into a playful smile as he reaches out and taps me gently on the tip of my nose. I flinch as I stare at him with confusion.

"And that's why you're my favorite," he says as if I'm an ice cream flavor or a well-behaved pet.

I swallow down my disappointment. I mean...at least I'm his favorite.

But then the guillotine strikes. With an air of casual confidence, he leans against the table and adds, "No, I'm not here for a meeting. I'm renting the playroom with that beautiful woman from last week. The one with the colorful tattoos."

My heart plummets to the floor like a water balloon, bursting when it meets the hardwood. And it's a struggle to hold a fake, enthusiastic smile when your heart is soaking the rug. But I do it anyway.

"A little early, don't you think?" I stammer awkwardly.

"It's never too early for sex," he laughs. If he notices my devastation beneath the bubbly facade, he doesn't let on. Instead, he shrugs. "Besides, I was thinking...maybe I'll take her out for drinks first. Get to know her."

When I swallow, bile rises in my throat.

"How romantic."

"Or...maybe not." He winks again, and I think for a moment the building might actually be careening to the cobblestones. In fact, I wish it would.

To some, it might be strange that my godfather talks so openly about his sex life with me. Trust me, I wish he didn't sometimes. But Matis has never had a modest view of sex or any semblance of inhibition. I could count on two hands the times he's tried to openly discuss my own parents' sex lives in front of me and Julian. I wanted the earth to swallow me whole just as much then as I do now.

"Well..." I say casually, not knowing how on earth to end this torment. "Have fun."

It's not a genuine sentiment. I don't actually want him to have fun. I'd actually prefer he take one look at that woman and decide that he's not attracted to her and in fact only has eyes for me. Then I'd like him to rush up the stairs to my office and take me right here on top of this messy table.

In my fantasies, that's what happens every time.

In reality, he sees right through me.

"I will, Trouble," he says with a coy smirk as he stands from my table and moves to the door, using a nickname he gave me years ago when he used to joke that I always seem up to no good. The truth is I've never gotten in trouble in my life. But he calls me that, almost as if he wishes I would.

Then, with that, he retreats from my office and walks back down the hall to the staircase. I collapse pitifully against the table, my cheek pressed against a swatch of crushed blue velvet.

One day, I'll look at Matis Moreau and feel nothing. It sure as hell isn't today, but I have to believe in my heart that I'll get there. I mean, how long can I really go on like this? Not dating? Not even having very much sex. I'm twenty-five. I should be in my prime of getting good and laid as often as possible. Instead, I'm too busy crushing on a guy over twice my age.

It's time to move on. It *has* to be time. One way or another, I will get over him. I'll build my brand as a designer. I'll carve out a place for myself in the world. I'll finally be free of this relentless obsession.

Coco Chanel once said, "In order to be irreplaceable, one must also be different."

And that's what I have to be...different. Different from this lovesick, pathetically obsessed young woman.

So with that, I grab the palm green and start to sketch. I decide that I will be different. I will no longer fixate on one man. I will no longer create designs for others.

I will be me, uniquely and irreplaceably me, whatever the hell that means.