**Modern Cinderella**

The metal rack was crowded; pumps, ballerinas, mules, loafers, and moccasins, all stood tightly against each other. But a pair of black patent stilettos with crimson soles stood out from the rest.

Placing her powder brush next to the small mirror on her dresser, Leila walked towards the shoe rack at the other side of the room. Under the sunset’s light coming in from the windows, the stilettos gave off a matted shine, unlike the cheaply flamboyant sheen that synthetic leather shoes have. The dark surface contrasted against the vivid soles, yet the hem between the two parts was done so delicately that the entire shoe seemed to be made from one piece of leather. Mesmerized by those shoes, she knelt down on the carpeted floor and held out her right hand hesitantly. Slowly stroking the calfskin leather with her index finger, she indulged in its velvet-like softness. Even the texture *felt* expensive. The more she looked, the more the quietly radiant leather and boldly red soles enchanted her. She took the stilettos off the rack and gently placed them on the floor next to her. Her legs were numb from kneeling on the ground, so she stumbled slightly as she tried to stand up. Admiring the shoes from above, she wondered if she should wear them to the Winter Formal tonight.

Finally, she stepped into the pair of stilettoes, which were a bit small for her. She did not mind; she could always curl her toes up a bit more firmly. The calfskin enveloped her feet tightly, and her calf muscles tensed up as the heels arched her feet into a crescent. She savored the sensation. Leila scuttled in excitement towards the full-length mirror that hanged on the door and examined herself in it. The curvature of the shoes fit the soles to form a smoothly elongated S shape and the slim heels bolstered the feet securely at the perfect angel from the floor.

Leila wished that the pair of Christian Louboutins was hers.

One thousand two hundred and forty-five dollars. One thousand two hundred and forty-five dollars—this was how much the pair of stilettos worth. Leila remembered from the official website she had browsed over and over again. This was how much she earned the entire summer by tutoring science to elementary school kids. It was more than what her entire wardrobe cost. However, the Christian Louboutins were only one of many pairs sitting silently on the metal rack, as if abandoned by her roommate. The shoe rack was filled with Jimmy Choos, Manolo Blahniks, and other brands that Leila had seen at Barney’s New York when she went window shopping with her mother.

Window shopping in the City was something that Leila’s mother did with her every holiday since she had been in elementary school. They would amble down the Fifth Avenue from 68th Street, passing by the Plaza and the large Tiffany flagship store. Her mother would point out the clothes, shoes, and bags meticulously displayed in the windows to her, asking if she thought they looked gorgeous. She would just nod in silence, for she didn’t understand what these things carried with their price tags as a second grader at the time.

One thing she knew was that they did look gorgeous. The first time she had seen those Christian Louboutins was on the fourth floor of the Barney’s New York next to Central Park. Sitting proudly on the spiraling glass display shelf, they had a brassy sheen that the ones her mother wore—bought at DSW—didn’t have. Leila imagined herself growing up and wearing those shoes, like one of the ladies coming out of the lounges, walking so confidently and steadily as if they were on flat ground.

However, by fifth grade, Leila had realized they were never actually going to own anything they browsed, anything she longed to have. Every time, her mother would tell her that if she really wanted them, she would have to study hard and get into a good school so she could get a well-paid job. After all, her mother was a nurse at the community hospital and her father taught history at the local high school, where she would have attended if she had not won the scholarship to Stowe. She spent her life being told to work harder and look for something better. She did. She was now at the boarding school meant to be a spring board to that better life, but also a place where girls casually wore what she had been denied her entire life.

As Leila continued to observe herself in the mirror, a sudden surge of defeat inundated her. She had expected herself to look more different in those Christian Louboutins, more like the other full-tuition girls at Stowe. The black satin slip dress she was wearing, which she found at a Goodwill store in her neighborhood over thanksgiving break, seemed especially gaudy now. She had thought the dress beautiful when she first bought it—it was the best one she could get considering the monthly allowances her parents had given her. However, the glossy fabric was dimmed by the lustrous surface of the stilettos. Her ruby lipstick, which she had received for her sixteenth birthday and only used for special occasions, seemed a bit too dull compared to the vibrant soles.

There was a knock on the door. Before Leila had time to open it, a girl in a lace embroidered dress also worth more than Leila’s entire wardrobe pushed in. She caught Leila looking at herself in front the mirror. “Oh, that’s a nice dress. Where did you get it?” She exclaimed with an air of appreciation that almost allowed her to sound as if she actually thought it was a nice dress. It was Saskia, one of Leila’s best friends at Stowe. She had been boarding at the school since sixth grade, but she did not mind the fact that Leila was a scholarship student like some of the other girls who started off as sixth graders did.

“Just at a local boutique, you probably never heard of it,” Leila mumbled, wiping her hands on her dress uncomfortably.

“Oh cool, it really suits you,” Saskia complimented as she squeezed out a saccharine smile.

Leila walked away from the mirror with her back to Saskia, towards her dresser. “Which one do I wear, Hermès or Chanel?” Leila picked up two bottles of perfume from the tabletop, one in each hand, and presented them to Saskia like when she used to proudly show her report cards to her parents.

“It doesn’t matter not gonna lie, nobody will notice anyways,” the casual carelessness in Saskia’s voice made Leila feel belittled more than an insult could have had. It was this carelessness, which people at Stowe possessed, that annoyed her sometimes. Saskia strolled around the room, occasionally picking up a bottle from Charlotte’s make-up shelf on her desk and reading the tags on it. “Actually, Charlotte’s got some good ones, too bad that Charlotte isn’t here,” she suggested after a while.

Leila’s face twitched slightly upon hearing her roommate’s name. Charlotte wouldn’t mind that she’s wearing her high heels to Winter Formal right? Perhaps, she wouldn’t even notice if a pair of shoes disappears from the shoe rack altogether. And anyways, she wouldn’t come back until the following Monday, so she would never know what happened as long as no one else noticed and told her. Leila reassured herself. She decided that she was simply *borrowing* her roommate’s stilettos for the night.

“Yeah, she’s got a family wedding in the City,” Leila commented casually, as she felt the back of her neck heating up.

“Where at?”

“I heard it’s at the Rainbow Room,” Leila replied in a tone that was a bit too flat, too indifferent to disguise her desire to be there. “She must be having fun.” Leila had never been to the Rainbow Room herself, but she knew it is where she wanted to have her own wedding.

“That place’s ok, a little clichéd, my cousin had his wedding there too.” Saskia remarked, fiddling with her hair nonchalantly.

Looking at herself in the mirror once again, Leila thought her legs looked longer and slimmer in the pointed shoes. It no longer mattered if the material and cut of her dress were cheaper than everybody else’s, nor did it matter whether her the red of lipstick was pure. The pair of Christian Louboutins was enough. As she turned around to see the scarlet soles, the corners of her lips curled upwards. She could now see herself as one of the women inside Barney’s New York, as one of the girls who went to Stowe since sixth grade. “I’m ready,” Leila finally announced. Inside the under-fitted shoes, Leila’s little toes were pushed into the soles and the edge of the leather pressed into her heels. She peered at Saskia to see if she had noticed the Christian Louboutins. As she tried to walk in those high heels, her toes thrusted forward, as if they were going to break out of the leather, and her body was leaning forward too. She bent her knees to keep her balance and made sure that for every pace she took, the heels touched the ground before the soles.

On their way to the Schoolroom, where Formals and all-school celebrations were usually held, Leila allowed her feet to sink into the stilettos. Although they were small for her, she luxuriated in the feeling of being embraced by them. She wanted to remember this feeling, to replace her memory of the synthetic leather that smelled of plastic with this one. The winter air was crisp, and the pavement, covered by a thin blanket of ice crystals, sparkled under the street lamps. Leila proceeded each tread with some extra care, not only because she was scared to slip herself, but also that she did not want to scar the crimson soles by grazing them against the ice with too much force. Saskia was shoveling the thin layer of ice with the tip of her high heels to build a little mound of frost in front of her shoes. She then kicked into the pile as she stepped forward, so the crushed ice would land on top of her velvet shoes. The ice melted on the downy burgundy surface, leaving a dark mark, yet Saskia did not seem to be aware. Watching Saskia’s carefree figure, Leila sighed and followed behind in her stilettos.

A wave of stifling heat hit Leila and Saskia as soon as they entered the Schoolroom. The hall, twice as big as the gym at Leila’s previous school, was packed with students, all glimmering in their evening dresses. Leila’s eyes swept around the rectangular room fleetingly. The only source of light in the hall came from the few mellow sconces on the walls, but she was able to discern what everyone was wearing—a skill that she has developed after coming to Stowe. The Radcliffe twins, Margaux and Daphne, had a pair of suede Jimmy Choo sling-backs and a pair of Manolo Blahnik d’orsay pumps respectively. Leila lowered her head and glimpsed the reflection of herself on the patent surface. Her face was blurred at the edges and it looked as if she had merged into the background of people. She held Saskia in the arms and ambles towards the photobooth; she made sure that she was going slow enough so the others would recognize her shoes. They cut through a dense thicket of people, but Leila did not change her pace. She meandered forward, as if she had designated a path in mind, disregarding the jostling crowd around her.

As they waited in the queue, Leila placed her weight on one leg and stretched the other one out. Glancing suavely at everyone who passed by her, she raised her chin up and tilted her head slightly. She deliberately turned her back to where the crowd stood, so she could flaunt the blindly crimson soles. In the periphery of her eyes, she caught sight of the Radcliffe sisters glaring at her Christian Louboutins. They seemed to be conversing about something, but they covered their mouths with their hands and their voices were indistinctive in the bustling chatter of the School Room. However, when she turned around, the twins were looking nonchalantly at opposite directions. They both stood arms akimbo and had a trail of smirk at the corners of their mouths. Leila felt her face growing numb and her toes curled up inside that pair of shoes. Her feet were sweating, and she thought they must have been swelling as well, for the under-fitted shoes felt even tighter now. “Sorry, I’ve got to get some water,” she muttered under her breath and scuttered towards the water fountain at the other side of the hall.

Saskia followed after her. She seemed to have realized what Leila had been preoccupied with, as she shifted her gaze from Leila’s face, down her dress, and onto the pair of stilettos. “You know that you can always borrow mine, right?”

“What do you mean?” Leila raised her head from the metal sink, frowning.

“The shoes. Where’d you get them?”

A tingling sensation spread across Leila’s skull. Retracting the hand that was resting on the water fountain, she stood up straight suddenly. “In the store,” she blurted out hastily and gave a nervous chortle. “Where else could I get them?”

How was it possible for Saskia to recognize these shoes? So many other girls owned Christian Louboutins at Stowe, and Leila was certain Charlotte had never worn the pair to any sit-down dinners so far this year. How did Saskia know that she was wearing Charlotte’s shoes? Leila thought the air felt denser, more difficult to breath in.

Meanwhile, the Radcliffe twins passed by, chuckling as they sauntered past. “The color of the soles is a shade darker than they are supposed to be,” Leila heard Margaux say. “And the leather shouldn’t be that shiny,” Daphne added. “I mean, if you have to buy fakes, at least get better quality ones.” Leila caught sight of the two sisters glimpsing at her as they went ahead, as if they wanted to ensure that she had heard what they were just talking about.

Saskia was staring blankly at the ground to try to avoid looking at that pair of stilettos. “You see, that’s what I meant.” A crease of concern appeared of her forehead as she raised her head cautiously to check Leila’s expression.

Leila’s palms, which had clasped into a fist, relaxed after she realized that Saskia had not been suspecting her of stealing after all. Now a greater sense of disgust rose in her. She was certain that the stilettos were real Christian Louboutins; she had seen and felt so many pairs on her window shopping trips that she could tell if they were fake right away. She squinted at the girl across her. “I bought this pair of stilettos at a Christian Louboutin store,” she pronounced every single word slowly and loudly, as if she was worried that the other people around would not be able to hear it. “They must be real,” she asserted.

There was a short silent. “Well, we aren’t stupid, Leila. I don’t think anyone believes that a scholarship student can afford Christian Louboutins,” she murmured in a tentative voice at last and squeezed Leila on her shoulder. “We know your situation is different and it must be weird coming from a public school, but we are friends with you cause we like you as a person not for what you wear. You really don’t have to dress like us.”

Leila nodded. The way that Saskia pronounced *us* and *you* sounded especially piercing to her. Her cheeks felt faintly scorching, like she had just been slapped. Her toes were itching now because they were pressed against each other so tightly inside the pointed toe box, and the stilettoes had arched her soles into a morbid bridge-like shape. Her heels had turned red as they chaffed against the leather, and she felt a piercing strain from her heels, along her calves, to the back of her knees. She turned her back to Saskia, expecting her to pull her back, but Saskia simply allowed her hand to slip off Leila’s shoulder. Leila shrugged, ran her fingers through her hair, and walked away defiantly. Saskia stood motionlessly beside the water fountain, as if she was still ruminating on what had just happened. For every step Leila took, her heels burnt and her soles ached. However, she knew that she could not let anyone else notice this pain. It would either consolidate other people’s belief that the Christian Louboutins are fake or pique their suspicion that she was wearing somebody else’s shoes. She curled her toes even more firmly and tightened her calf muscles even more

She passed by the Radcliffe twins once again, gaudily gesturing their hands, as they described their holiday house in Cyprus to the Bradford sisters. Antonia, the head prefect, or levée as they called it at Stowe, surrounded by a circle of lower school girls, was complaining about how the ‘quality’ of new students at the school had deteriorated over the years. As Leila shuttled through all these people, their voices became more and more indistinctive. She swallowed and took a deep breath of the air. It was a nauseating smell of sweat mingled with perfume. Everything around her seemed to be melting into one haze of sound and light. She was at the center of the humming vortex, yet she felt detached from everyone else in the hall. All the other girls seemed so at ease in their well-fitted high heels as they glided gracefully in between each other, while she scuffled on her swollen feet, struggling to repress her pain, and squeezed her way through the throng awkwardly. Why couldn’t she be like the rest of them? At one point, Leila stopped and turned around to check if Saskia was still at the water fountain; she saw Saskia giggling garishly with a group of sixth form girls. One of the girls flashed a flicker of red under her soles when she shifted her weight from one foot to another. Leila snorted at the sight and headed towards the exit.

Outside the schoolroom, the chatter and laughter turned into a monotonous muffle. The winter wind pierced Leila’s face, blowing strands of hair, which she had carefully moussed for the Formal, across her forehead. She shivered in her slip dress as a gust swept past, and her cheeks, warm from the suffocating heat inside the hall, was becoming chapped. Leila pulled her feet out of the stilettoes—the Christian Louboutins that never belonged to her. The crimson soles looked duller under the dim sconces and the patent surface no longer gave off a matted shine. She seized the pair of shoes in one hand, even the calfskin felt stiffer than it used to be. Leila slowly stretched out her toes on the brick pavement covered by frost. There was a clear red line around her feet where they had been engulfed by the leather, and scratch marks ran across her heels. She stood there in silence, perceiving the coolness and substantiality of the ground with her own feet for the first time. Occasionally, a group of students would come out from the hall, but everyone was so engaged in their own conversations that nobody noticed her. After a few sporadic flows of strange faces passed by her, Leila decided to head back to her dorm.

This time, she did not curl her toes up, nor did she feel any strain in her legs. She laid her feet flat on the ground and walked unrestrained. Her feet soon grew numb on the icy path, but she did not mind. She continued to stride ahead, away from the boisterously lit-up schoolroom, with the pair of stilettos that she never owned in her hands.